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CHAPTER 2

Defining Organizational Communication

CHAPTER SUMMARY

Chapter 2 begins by introducing the four most prevalent definitions of organizational communication: (1) communication as information transfer, (2) communication as transactional process, (3) communication as strategic control, and (4) a balance of creativity and constraint. Information regarding each theory includes definitions, assumptions, advantages, and limitations. The chronological list of perspectives closes with the authors' view of organizations as dialogues. The chapter places emphasis on four features of dialogue that reveal respect for different worldviews: (1) dialogue as mindful communication, (2) dialogue as equitable transaction, (3) dialogue as empathic conversation, and (4) dialogue as real meeting. The chapter concludes by examining the role of dialogue in working with integrity and ethics.

TEACHING GOALS

- Emphasize the importance of definitions.
- List the prevalent approaches of communication.
- Provide the basic history and assumptions that guide each of the preliminary theories: information transfer, transactional process, strategic control, and a balance of creativity and constraint.
- Discuss the benefits and critiques of each model.
- Identify the contributions of communication scholars such as Buber, Berlo, Berger and Luckmann, Giddens, Wentworth, and Mead.
- Explain the situated-individual model of organizational communication.
- Define *dialogue*, and describe the four basic levels of collaboration that are possible through this process.
- Explain what it means to work with integrity and speak ethically as well as the relevance of these concepts to organizational communication.

TEACHING CHALLENGES

This chapter introduces new material to instructors who have never taught organizational communication. Students who are not communication majors might find the new concepts confusing. Students taking their first communication class may find the theories hard to keep straight. Table 2.1 is a useful summation of the preliminary theories of organizational communication. Working with the whole class, guide students to create a chart

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summarizing the theories in their own words. Discover concrete examples to illustrate these theoretical premises. It is important to emphasize that even as new theories emerge, they rarely replace older ones. New ideas are often built on previous work with fresh perspectives and questions. These new ideas expose and explain previous theoretical limitations.

CLASSROOM EXERCISES AND ASSIGNMENTS

Exercise 1

Have students work with the concept of situated individuals by making a list of the multiple contexts or organizations that they have encountered in the past or are currently a part of. These organizations could include almost any situation that requires working or interacting with a group of people. After completing the lists, have students reflect on the following questions:

1. How many of the contexts have similar norms about communication and behaviors and how many have conflicting ideas?
2. Do the multiple contexts and varying expectations lead to any complexities or conflicts in your life? How do you manage these situations?

Exercise 2

Have students imagine that their lives are organizations in which each person is part of the business. For example, their parents are the finance department, their professors are the research and development department, their friends are the human resources department, and they are the CEO. Have each student create a unique theory of organizational communication for their organization by extracting features from each of the models discussed in the chapter. Have them name the theory and then provide a brief description of why certain features and assumptions were included and how they enhance this unique organizational atmosphere. Is it possible to run the entire organization by using only one theory? What advantages do multiple theories have when trying to manage diverse groups and departments?

Exercise 3

As an individual writing exercise, ask students to compile a list of elements that constitute an ethical speaker. Likewise, have students compile a similar list of elements that make up an unethical speaker. Then, in small groups, ask students to share stories of ethical and unethical speakers that they have encountered. How do your students really "know" that these individuals are ethical or are not? As an alternative, show students a clip from Netflix's *House of Cards* (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EvGL42rywPM) and discuss the ethics of Frank Underwood. See other clips in Classroom Media Resources.

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Exercise 4

The *What Would You Do?* box in Chapter 2 provides a timely example of how strategic ambiguity can lead to problems with organizational policy. The story focuses on a meteorologist who was fired from her position at a Louisiana news station for responding to comments about her hair on the station's Facebook page. Have students consider how they would have responded if they were the meteorologist. Then, take the discussion a step further and ask students how they would have responded if they were the meteorologist's boss. Also, ask them to make connections between the strategic control perspective and the increased need for dialogue in communication contexts.

Exercise 5

The *Everyday Organizational Communication* box in Chapter 2 offers a nice way to connect issues of organizing, structuration theory, and the management of self with a set of cultural artifacts that many of your students might be familiar with—Facebook, Hulu, Snapchat, Pinterest, and Twitter. Be prepared to give a brief overview of online meeting places. Encourage students to share the newest social media venues, and ask students to talk about their experiences with these websites. Encourage your students to make connections between these websites and the practices of dialogue discussed in this chapter. Help them consider how Facebook and Twitter accomplish some similar but mostly different goals when it comes to dialogue. For example, Facebook tends toward social networking and building relationships, while Twitter has been identified as a power news aggregator. Finally, ask them to identify the challenges of balancing creativity and constraint when it comes to constructing an online profile.

Exercise 6

Table 2.1 arranges the main points of organizational communication theory. Divide students into working teams to create a visual representation of this chart. Students may use infographics, slide decks, Prezi, or any instructional tool to help other students visualize communication as information transfer, transactional process, strategic control, and a balance of creativity and constraint.

Exercise 7

Place students in research teams and allow them time in class to find examples of organizations that use the balance of creativity and constraint as part of the company's culture. Leave time for students to report findings.

Taking exercises online: Many of these suggested exercises can be made digital for those teaching hybrid or online classes. Simply conduct discussions on your online forum, discussion boards, or course management systems. In particular, Exercises 1, 4, 5, 6, and 7 lend themselves to this conversion.

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CLASSROOM MEDIA RESOURCES

The Big Short (2015, 130 minutes, Rated R). This is the true story, or three separate but parallel stories, of the U.S mortgage housing crisis of 2005. The movie's complicated plot is threaded with banking language. Examine the communication and banking language used in the movie. According to the textbook, "[D]efinitions are shorthand terms for situations." Students can make a list of words they do not understand. Consider how these organizations depend on this language to communicate with efficiency.

Chopped (2009, Season 1, Episode 1, 42 minutes, Not Rated). This reality show offers an excellent example of balancing creativity and constraint in professional settings. Four trained chefs must compete through three rounds of cooking. During each round, contestants are given a mystery basket of ingredients. They are given a set time to construct a tasty dish, which is reviewed by a panel of judges. After each round, one chef is eliminated. The show illustrates how the chefs work in creative and innovative ways, based on the wacky ingredients found in their mystery baskets. This particular episode features octopus, duck, and animal crackers as key ingredients.

Food Stamped (2010, 60 minutes, Not Rated). If you did not show *Food Stamped* as part of Chapter 1, the documentary provides an excellent illustration of balancing creativity and constraint. This documentary follows a nutritionist and her filmmaker husband as they attempt to eat on a budget allotted to recipients of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (formerly and still popularly known as the Food Stamp program). The film shows how individuals who eat on a food-stamp budget are bound by certain rules and limitations of the program and how the filmmakers were forced to get creative in constructing healthy meals.

House of Cards (2016, Season 4, Mashup, 12:17 minutes, Not Rated). Observe the dialogue in these Season 4 clips. Frank Underwood has used unethical dialogues throughout his career to get him to the presidency.

Iconoclasts (2006, Season 2, Episode 6, 47 minutes, Rated TV-14). This television series features iconic individuals interviewing each other in an effort to "break down" their iconic status and engage in real meeting. Although any of the episodes are great examples of dialogue at different levels, the conversation between Dr. Maya Angelou and Dave Chappelle in this episode from Season 2 does a particularly good job of illustrating points about dialogue and social construction.

Scandal (2013, Season 2, Episode 16, 43 minutes, Rated TV-14). This fictional television series focuses on the work of Olivia Pope, a crisis communication expert. In this particular episode, Olivia and her team work to manage a crisis surrounding the CEO of a corporation, her extramarital affair, and its relevance to the corporation's morality clause. The episode opens up a conversation about working with integrity, moral policy, and the line between our workplace and personal lives.

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The Wolf of Wall Street (2013, 240 minutes, Rated R). Leonardo DiCaprio plays real-life stockbroker Jordan Belfort who spent twenty-two months in prison for defrauding investors. Consider the role ethics and integrity played in the organization Belfort built.

ONLINE RESOURCES

Dialogos (http://www.dialogos.com). This is a site for a business that was started by William Isaacs, one of the founders of the Center for Organizational Learning at MIT and director of the MIT Dialogue Project. Have students navigate the site to gauge how it defines dialogue and its importance to organizational communication.

Harvard Business Review (http://www.hbr.org). *Harvard Business Review*, published by Harvard Business Publishing (a wholly owned subsidiary of Harvard University), provides professionals around the world with rigorous insights and best practices to lead themselves and their organizations more effectively. Ask your students to look up concepts such as organizational communication and dialogue to examine how this high-profile periodical addresses these issues.

Inter-American Dialogue (http://www.thedialogue.org). The Inter-American Dialogue, founded in 1982, is an organization that brings together 100 of the most influential citizens from throughout the Americas to discuss important political, business, academic, and community issues in Western Hemisphere affairs. The site focuses on some of their conversations.

LunchBox (http://www.voicenet.asia/category/lunch-box). This website provides readers with a series of case studies regarding how individuals and organizations are challenged to act ethically and with integrity. They focus on issues of voice and dialogue as part of the process.

Markkula Center for Applied Ethics: Business Ethics (https://www.scu.edu/ethics/focus-areas/business-ethics/). Santa Clara University hosts the Markkula Center for Applied Ethics. According to their website, the mission statement for the Ethics Center includes helping individuals make ethical choices that serve others and shape character. In addition, the Center offers a framework of practical and ethical questions.

National Coalition for Dialogue & Deliberation (http://www.ncdd.org). This website offers unique resources for individuals and organizations as they attempt to promote changes within society. Have your student examine how this website advocates conversation as a method of social change.

Siegel Institute for Leadership, Ethics and Character (SILEC) (http://siegelinstitute.kennesaw.edu/index.php). The Siegel Institute exists to promote study, research, reflection, and understanding of ethics and leadership through workshops, teaching, events, and scholarly teaching. SILEC was formed in 2000 by Kennesaw State University president emeritus Dr. Betty Siegel.

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ESSAY/DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Discuss the model of communication as information transfer. Provide a brief definition, basic assumptions, potential problems, and criticisms.
- Why is leadership an important arena for the transactional-process model?
- Explain the concept of strategic ambiguity. Provide an example from an organizational setting in which this strategy could be beneficial and an example in which it might be problematic.
- Explain the dichotomy of balancing creativity and constraint in organizations.
- What is meant by the term *situated individual*? Why is this concept important to our understanding of organizational communication? What role can the situated individual play in constructing organizational reality?
- Define what dialogue is, and outline the four levels of increasing collaboration associated with this concept. Explain the advantages or disadvantages of each level when considering organizations as dialogues.
- Explain the difference between mindless and mindful forms of dialogue. Offer some examples of each form.
- Discuss the importance of dialogue as equitable transaction. To what extent should this perspective of dialogue be encouraged within a business organization?
- What makes dialogue as real meeting so difficult to achieve? What practical limitations keep us from developing authentic relationships and dialogues with others?
- What does it mean to work with integrity and speak ethically as we engage in organizational communication practices?

KEY TERMS

information-transfer approach	Defines communication as "the exchange of information and the transmission of meaning" and views communication as a metaphoric pipeline through which information flows from one person to another.
transactional-process model	A model of communication that does not differentiate between the roles of message sender and receiver, but instead asserts that people play both roles simultaneously.
strategic-control perspective	An approach that regards communication as a tool for influencing and shaping the environment in which a competent communicator may have multiple goals and therefore must choose effective strategies to achieve the desired outcome.

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strategic ambiguity	Part of the strategic-control perspective of communication that describes the ways in which people may communicate unclearly but still accomplish their goals.
balance of creativity and constraint	A definition of organizational communication that recognizes the tension between thinking and acting innovatively, while working under the constraints of social realities, rules, and norms.
duality of structure	Focuses on the creative and constraining features of the rules, norms, and expectations that we face as we act on a daily basis. These rules and norms can be reproduced or transcended and changed.
theory of structuration	A theory that sees human behavior as an unresolvable, productive tension between creativity and constraint.
self	A term to describe who we think we are, our self-concept, formed in part from the social relationships we have with others and from others' responses to what we say and do.
situated individual	Recognizes that all individuals are situated in multiple contexts. The situated individual is a person constructing and maintaining the social realities in which he or she lives.
mindless	Communication without conscious intent or purpose.
mindful	Communication that is purposeful and strategic and occurs on both mental and relational levels.
equitable transaction	A communication perspective in which all participants have the ability to voice their opinions and perspectives.
voice	The ability of an individual or group to participate in the ongoing organizational dialogue.
empathic conversation	Dialogue in which the communicators have the ability to understand or imagine the world as another person understands or imagines it.
real meeting	A genuine communion that is made possible through communication in which people transcend their differences in role or perspective and find a common ground.
integrity	A mindful state of acting and communicating purposefully to fulfill the promises and commitments you make to others.

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ethics	The systems of rules, duties, and morality that we use to guide our everyday practices and behaviors.

LECTURE NOTES

Open the discussion by emphasizing that whereas most groups have a practical interest in organizational communication, the definitions and assumptions that they ascribe ought to remain diverse.

- This is in part due to the varying needs and functions of communication in different situations.
- Definitions are important, because they "sum up" what needs to be done and provide directions for the best way to do it.
- Definitions are important foundations for learning how to talk about communication in business settings.

Ask students to consider how different organizations might use different languages. For example, businesses rely on things like accounts payable (sometimes called AP) and accounts receivable (known as AR), but other organizations might have different phrases and jargon that they rely on. Why is it important to know this language?

- When you work with an organization, you are expected to know the language.
    - It is "expected" because the ability to use those terms in everyday conversation is part of what it means to work effectively in an organization.
    - Communication or business graduates who have had a course in organizational communication are expected to have a general knowledge of these terms and definitions.
    - The ability to use these terms in everyday conversation is part of what it means to work effectively and add value in any organization.
    - Without this knowledge of basic terms and definitions, you would be less of an asset to your employer because you would lack the basic language of business to inform your choices and actions.

Ask students to reflect on why we need an assortment of approaches to organizational communication. How might the communication needs of an advertising firm differ from those of a church? How would the definition of *organizational communication* vary for these groups?

- An advertising firm might require strategies put forth by the information-transfer approach in the way that they obtain information from their clients. At the same time, a project director might embody a definition of organizational communication that looks like the balance of creativity and constraint when working with his or her design team.
- A church might rely on strategies from the strategic control perspective to manage their membership on a large scale. At the same time, a pastor might adopt a balance of creativity and constraint when working with specific members of the church's leadership.

Provide a summary of the information-transfer model. Include a basic definition, assumptions, potential

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problems, and critiques.

- The information-transfer approach typically defines communication as "the exchange of information and the transmission of meaning."
    - This approach views communication as a metaphoric pipeline through which information flows from one person to another.
    - In this model, communication is a tool that people use to accomplish their objectives.
- This theory rests on the following assumptions:
    - Language can transfer thoughts and feelings from one person to another.
    - Speakers and writers insert thoughts and feelings into words.
    - Words contain the thoughts and feelings.
    - Listeners or readers extract the thoughts and feelings from the words.
- "Miscommunication" occurs when no message is received or when the message that is received is not what the sender intended. Typical problems include:
    - *Information overload*. Occurs when the receiver becomes overwhelmed by the information that must be processed. Is based on the amount, rate, or complexity of the information.
    - *Distortion*. Occurs when noise affects the receiver's ability to process the message. This noise can be semantic, physical, or contextual.
    - *Ambiguity*. Occurs when multiple interpretations of a message cloud the sender's intended meaning.
- There are several criticisms of the information-transfer model.
    - Some argue that it is simplistic and incomplete, therefore limiting the scope of communication to a linear and sequential process.
    - The model devalues the receiver's involvement in constructing the meaning of the message by assuming that the receiver remains passive.
    - The theory does not account for any nonverbal communication.

Discuss the overall principles of the transactional-process model.

- The transactional-process model does not make clear distinctions between the sender and receiver of messages. Rather, people play both roles simultaneously.
- The model highlights the importance of verbal and nonverbal feedback.
- It differs from the information-transfer model because it assumes that:
    - The meaning of the message is not in the words but in the people.
    - The focus of the message is on how the receiver constructs the meaning of the message, rather than the need for the sender to transmit the meaning to others.
- Leadership is one area that provides an interesting arena for application of the transactional-process model.

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- Experts often criticize the transactional-process view of communication for the emphasis that it places on the creation of shared meaning.
    - The idea of shared meaning generally implies consensus, while ambiguity, conflict, and diverse viewpoints are more typical characteristics of organizational communication.

Provide a summary of the strategic-control perspective of communication, and emphasize the role of strategic ambiguity within organizational communication.

- The strategic-control model regards communication as a tool for influencing and shaping the environment. Some of the basic assumptions of this model are:
    - Greater clarity is not necessarily the only or main goal of interaction.
        - In fact, communicators may have multiple goals and therefore must choose the most effective strategies to achieve them.
    - Although people may have reasons for their behavior, they do not always communicate in an objective or rational way.
    - "Effective" communication is focused on goal attainment through rhetorical sensitivity of the situation.
    - Shared meaning is an empirically unverifiable concept and therefore not a primary motivation for communication.
    - The primary goal of communication should be organized action.
- Strategic ambiguity is an important organizational communication tool that rises from the strategic-control perspective of communication.
    - Strategic ambiguity refers to the ways in which people may communicate unclearly but still accomplish their goals.
    - In an organizational setting, strategic ambiguity accomplishes the following:
        - It promotes unified diversity by taking advantage of the diverse meanings that different people can give to the same message.
        - It preserves privileged positions by shielding those with power from close scrutiny by others.
        - It is deniable; that is, the words seem to mean one thing, but under pressure they seem to mean something else.
        - It facilitates organizational change by allowing people to change their activities while appearing to keep those activities consistent.
- Limitations of the strategic-control model include:
    - The minimization of the importance of ethics.
    - Its emphasis on the behavior of individuals in controlling their environment through communication while clouding issues related to cooperation, coordination, and interdependence of individuals and groups.

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Discuss the view of communication as a balance of creativity and constraint.

- This perspective sees organizational communication as a dichotomy between how employees communicate to create and shape organizations (the micro perspective) and how the constraints that organizations place on that communication impact employees (the macro perspective).
- Giddens's theory of structuration contributes to this line of thought by adding that the communication process is not viewed solely as what employees say to one another inside organizations but instead as how people organize real and symbolic resources, deal with conflicting goals in relation to those resources, manage multiple meanings, and contend with an ongoing stream of information, ambiguity, and change.
    - Structuration theory focuses on the duality of structure, which looks at the argument that structures are products of communication practices while also being bound by the rules that constructed them in the first place.
- Communication is seen as the moment-to-moment working out of the tension between individual creativity and organizational constraint.
    - Out of this balancing act, creativity often emerges as the strategic response to organizational constraints.
    - The main advantage to this approach is the ability to consider enabling and constraining aspects of communication simultaneously.

How do these preliminary theories of organizational communication have an impact on our approach today?

- By using the best concepts from each of the four main perspectives, we can develop a new model of organizations as dialogues.

Describe how the self operates as a primary element of communication relationships and provides a foundation for dialogue.

- The self is who we think we are.
    - It is based on our social relationships with others and others' responses to what we say and do.
    - The self consists of two interrelated features:
        1. The "I"—the creative, unpredictable part of a person.
        2. The "me"—the socially constrained, consistent part of a person.
    - The self is necessarily dialogic, or made in concert with others, because our identity only makes sense in relation to others.

Summarize the situated-individual model of organizational communication. Explain the connection between this model and the idea of multiple contexts.

- With regard to dialogue, the self is also related to the concept of the situated individual.

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- This concept refers to the notion that individuals are situated in multiple contexts, and the situated individual is the person who conducts the social constructing.
  - The individual is an actor whose thoughts and actions are based on the interpretation of contexts.
  - There is always more than one context that can be used to guide an action or interpretation.
  - Communication is a practice that includes both interpretation and action and thus can reveal sources of creativity, constraint, meaning, interpretation, and context.

Discuss the concept of dialogue. Address the differences between mindless and mindful forms of communication as well as the styles of dialogue.

- Within the model of communication as a balance of creativity and constraint, dialogue is balanced communication, or communication in which each individual has a chance to speak and be heard.
- There are four features of dialogue, each representing an increasing degree of collaboration and respect for the other.
  1. *Dialogue as mindful communication*. Communicates a sense of consciousness and purpose with which we act in organizations and participate in dialogue.
     - Becoming more mindful in organizations requires us to:
       - Analyze communication situations and develop strategies for accomplishing goals.
       - Think actively about possible communication choices (especially those that don't seem like choices) as well as the potential organizational, relational, and personal outcomes of those choices.
       - Adapt messages in a timely and thoughtful manner when seeking to inform, amuse, persuade, or otherwise influence listeners and audiences.
       - Evaluate the feedback or responses we receive as an indication of how successful we are in accomplishing our purpose.
  2. *Dialogue as equitable transaction*. Requires all participants to have the ability to voice their opinions and perspectives.
  3. *Dialogue as empathic conversation*. Requires communicators to understand or imagine the world from others' perspectives.
  4. *Dialogue as real meeting*. Uses communication to achieve a genuine communion between people that transcends differences in role or perspective and recognizes a common humanity.

Address the roles that working with integrity and ethical communication play in organizational communication.

- Working with integrity is a mindful state of acting and communicating purposefully to fulfill the promises and commitments you make to others.

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- Speaking ethically refers to dialoguing according to the systems of rules, duties, and morality that we use to guide our behavior.
    - Trust one another.
    - Treat each other with respect.
    - Recognize the value of each individual.
    - Keep your word.
    - Tell the truth; be honest with others.
    - Act with integrity.
    - Be open to change.
    - Risk failing in order to get better.
    - Learn; try new ideas.

Summarize the relationship between dialogue, integrity, and ethics, especially as they relate to our participation in modern organizational communication practices.

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