STRATEGIC ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION
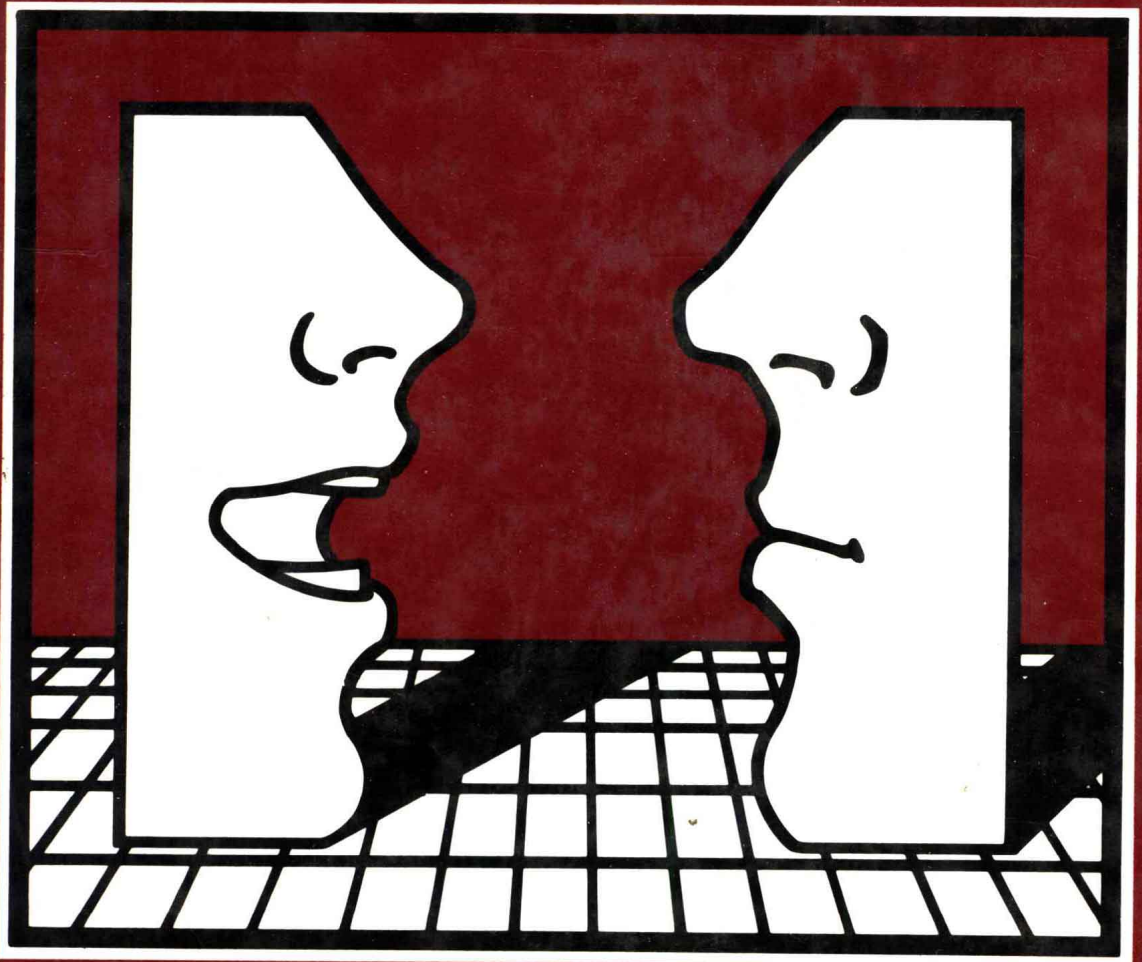
AN INTEGRATED PERSPECTIVE

Second Edition

CHARLES CONRAD

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An Integrated Perspective

Second Edition

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Preface

When I started working on *Strategic Organizational Communication* in 1983, my goal was to create a unified book that reflected the state of the art in our rapidly expanding field. Responses to the first edition continue to be gratifying. Readers have been complimentary about the concentrated focus on organizational structure and its related effects—the impact that an organization's design and operation have on its communicative processes.

However, readers also have been quite open about four directions that they wanted me to take in this second edition. As a result, I have written what is virtually a new book (one reviewer of both editions estimated that 80 percent of the first edition has been changed or strengthened in one way or another).

RESPONDING TO READER SUGGESTIONS

First, professors indicated that the more work experience their students had, the more they liked the first edition. The subtext of these comments seemed to be that many traditional students (who usually have had limited work experience) found many of the concepts too abstract. To help students dismantle and "get inside" any necessary abstractions, the second edition includes two new tools: the inclusion of a wide range of case studies and a new chapter design that allows a preview of the most important concepts and terms within each chapter.

Increased from eight in the first edition to twenty-three in the second, the case studies vary from relatively brief to in-depth examples. None is contrived: each case study is drawn either from my research and consulting experience or from the published scholarly work of other professionals. The topics, and the discussion questions that follow, complement the concepts under discussion and illuminate situations ranging from those we all face (such as buying a car), to scenes most will face (adjusting to the politics and culture of a new job), to pressures many of us will never encounter (attempting to regain control of a power plant that's headed for nuclear meltdown). As a group, they provide a representative sampling that allows comparison among the possible, the probable, and the actual.

Each chapter opens with a brief list of "core concepts" and "key terms." The concepts are bulleted for easy reading and the key terms are displayed in bold type, then defined within the paragraph that introduces them.

The next improvement indicates how rapidly our field has changed during the past five years: readers asked for an expanded treatment of organizational culture, even though pre-publication readers of the first edition cautioned against spending too much time discussing this "new and radical concept." Unit I deals extensively with the concept, which now provides a context for the entire book.

Third, readers asked that this edition be more tightly integrated—a welcome request, one that relates to the concept of organizational cultures and provides a unifying theme. I believe the **central dilemma organizations face is that the organization's need for control and coordination is in continual tension with the individual's need for autonomy and creativity.** Simultaneously, each desire stability. This dilemma is the core principle organizing the book.

The final suggestion was to expand my treatment of decision making, specifically to add a major section dealing with communicative processes in decision-making groups. The new material makes up the first half of Chapter 10.

ALLOCATING SPACE WHILE MAINTAINING AN INTEGRATED PERSPECTIVE

Adding new material means trimming the old. Neither readers, editors, nor students wanted the book to mushroom to an 800-page opus. I have not added a chapter on communication theory: I have a great deal of faith in my colleagues' abilities to present this material in class, thereby adapting the book to better fit their own theoretical orientations. I have omitted the chapter on communication and stress. Although an important topic, it is one that most professors, including myself, had difficulty integrating with the rest of the book. Third, I decided against a lengthy discussion of radical-critical views of organizational communication. Readers familiar with my research on power may be surprised by this choice, but I realized space limitations prevented developing this perspective in sufficient detail. However, the discussions of unobtrusive control in Unit I and of de-skilling and power relationships in Unit II are central to this perspective and will provide a framework for professors who wish to pursue this tack.

Similarly, I have not included chapters on Management Information Systems or communication consulting. Research in the former area is so new that little can be said beyond the conclusion reached by Spiker and Daniels (p. 140) that "although little research has been conducted to assess the effects, some theorists believe that these contemporary technologies will change the character of human interaction in organizations." I have omitted a chapter on consulting because it is largely irrelevant to all but a tiny percentage of our students, although many of them labor under the mistaken impression that they will receive their degrees one day and step into $1,000-a-day consulting jobs the next. Including a chapter on this topic, I've found, tends to support this misconception.

Finally, I have avoided the tendency to portray various perspectives on organizational communication as competing and mutually exclusive. I think we often underestimate the value of thinking in "both/and" terms and overestimate the value of making

"either/or" distinctions. I have tried to indicate explicitly how the results of traditional and cultural research enrich one another and to avoid making artificial distinctions among "cultural," "information-processing," "interpretive," and other perspectives.

I also have discussed extensively those topics that will be directly relevant to students in their organizational lives: organizational symbolism, socialization and assimilation, and decision making; power and politics; communication and conflict management; and communication and sex roles. No other organizational communication book treats all these topics at length—many do not even mention them.

ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

This edition is divided into three units. Unit I introduces the concepts of organizational communication and organizational cultures. Chapter 1 explains the "central dilemma," introduces the concept of social/communicative constructions of reality, and shows how the formal/structural, personal/interpersonal, and power/political dimensions of communication are inherently interrelated. Chapter 2 uses explanations of socialization, acculturation and identification to expand on the concept of organizational culture. Chapter 3 focuses on organizational symbolism and explains how interpreting certain symbols can give insight into the "taken-for-granted" assumptions of organizational cultures. Chapter 4 examines the role of communication strategies in organizations.

Unit II analyzes the three dimensions of organizational communication. Beginning with a brief introduction of general systems theory, it moves into formal/structural communication (Chapters 5 and 6), personal/interpersonal communication (Chapters 7 and 8), and power/political communication (Chapter 9.)

Unit III develops three topics that involve all employees at some point in their careers: decision making, conflict, and sex roles. Chapter 10 compares "rational actor" models with contemporary analyses of "nonrational" dimensions of organizational life. Chapter 11 widens the scope to conflict situations, particularly the processes of escalation and negotiation. Chapter 12 returns to the concept initiated in Chapter 1, that of organizations in cultures, and examines the interplay between our cultural assumptions and sex roles in communication.

THANKS

To be effective, all communicative acts must be interactive. This dictum includes the writing of books. Consequently, my greatest vote of thanks goes to the many readers of the first edition who made thoughtful and invaluable suggestions for improvement.

Of the advice I received on the drafts of this edition, the comments of eight colleagues were exceptionally helpful: Stephen P. Banks, Arizona State University; Peter Ehrenhaus, Portland State University; Lawrence W. Hugenberg, Youngstown State University; Sandra M. Ketrow, University of Rhode Island; Marshall Prisbell,

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November, 1989

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Unit I

DIMENSIONS OF ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION: COMMUNICATION AND CULTURES

1

Cultures as Communicative Creations

CORE CONCEPTS

- People interpret events and take actions according to the taken-for-granted assumptions of their cultures.
- Different types of organizations emerge in different cultures.
- Organizations face a central dilemma: They must simultaneously meet their own needs for control and coordination and their employees' needs for creativity, autonomy, and stability.
- Organizational cultures emerge through the communication of all employees, not just the communication of upper management.
- Organizational communication has three interrelated dimensions: formal-structural, personal-interpersonal, and power-political.

KEY TERMS

Interdependence	Externalization	"Type J, A, and Z"
Objectification	Internalization	organizations
Chain of command		

The reality of the [social] world hangs on the thin thread of conversation.
    —PETER BERGER AND THOMAS LUCKMANN in *The Social Construction of Reality*

Don't ask me. I just work here.   —ANONYMOUS

At one time or another almost everyone has responded to the question, "How did this [disaster] happen?" with a statement such as, "Don't ask me. I just work here." In some cases the excuse is legitimate. The organization does not allow the person giving the answer to make even simple decisions required by his or her job. "I just work here" sometimes means that the person knows the answer or is aware of a solution to the problem but has too little power to make the necessary changes. In other cases someone else failed to inform the person of the policy, problem, or procedure in question. "I just work here" may mean that the speaker simply does not have the information needed to answer the question. Sometimes the person offering the excuse caused the problem, however. Although viable excuses often are available, in the final analysis an employee's own choices create the situations he or she faces.

This book is about the choices and choice-making behaviors of members of formal organizations. It concentrates on **communication** in organizations because it is through communication that employees gain the information on which they base their choices and translate those choices into action. The goal of this book is to give readers a sense of how employees can use organizational communication **strategically,** that is, how they can analyze the situations they face at work and choose appropriate communication strategies. The book assumes that all employees are goal oriented and that if they understand how communication functions in their organizations, they will be better able to achieve both their objectives and those of their organizations. It explains when it is appropriate to use a variety of communication strategies, including the denial of responsibility and the claim of ignorance ("I don't know; I just work here."), and more importantly, when not to use them.

THE STUDY OF ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION

One of the most significant recent developments in the way people look at organizations has been the increasing amount of attention paid to different aspects of communication. Managers and researchers alike have recognized that businesses must maintain at least an adequate level of communication effectiveness to survive and that raising this level contributes to productivity and eventually to profitability. Perhaps more important is evidence that people who understand how communication functions in an organization, who have developed a wide repertory of written and oral communication skills, and who have learned when and how to use those skills seem to advance more rapidly and contribute more fully to their organizations than people who have not done so.[1]

As a result the number of college courses and professional training programs

concerned with organizational communication has mushroomed. Of course, employees cannot function effectively unless they possess the technical skills that their positions require. But more and more, it appears that being able to recognize, diagnose, and solve communication-related problems is vital to the success of people in even the most technical occupations. Accountants must be able to gain complete, accurate, and sometimes sensitive information from their clients. Supervisors of production lines must be able to obtain adequate and timely information on which to base their decisions. Managers of all divisions must be able to give their subordinates clear instructions, be sure those instructions are understood, create conditions in which their commands will be carried out, and obtain reliable feedback about the completion of the tasks they have assigned. In a recent survey of 700 middle managers, almost 85 percent of the respondents reported that their subordinates' communication skills (or lack of them) determined their success or failure in critical situations. Although these managers noted that factors such as loyalty and job-related skills also were important, it was their subordinates' abilities to communicate effectively that were most crucial.[2]

Being able to communicate effectively in organizations requires two kinds of knowledge. First, employees **must understand the relationship between effective communication and the successful operation of organizations.** Since communication influences the way an organization operates and is simultaneously influenced by key features of the organization, neither organizations nor organizational communication can be understood in isolation from one another.

Employees also **need to understand how to choose the most appropriate communication strategies in different organizational situations.** For more than 2,000 years, communication scholars have believed that people communicate most effectively if they adapt their communication strategies to the situations they face. Plato's intellectual rival Gorgias argued that knowing how to adapt to different life situations was the only kind of knowledge available to human beings. Some equivalent of Gorgias' concept of adaptation (which he labeled *kairos*) has been important to the study of communication since his time.[3] This book is intended to provide readers with an understanding of **strategic** communication—the ability to **analyze** a situation, **select** appropriate communication **strategies** from a number of available options, and **enact** those strategies effectively. It focuses on the two kinds of knowledge, mentioned above—understanding the features that make up organizational situations and the processes that create them and choosing among available responses to those situations.

Unit I examines the key concepts of culture, organizations and communication. Unit II takes a more detailed look at the nature of organizations and organizational communication. Unit III uses the ideas developed in the earlier units to examine three major organizational challenges—making effective decisions, managing conflicts, and dealing with issues related to sex roles. The remainder of this chapter introduces the key concepts that underlie **strategic organizational communication:** organization-culture relationships and the multiple dimensions of organizational communication.

ORGANIZATIONS IN AND AS CULTURES

The word "culture" is a little like the word "love"—almost everyone has experienced it and knows what it means, but almost no one can explain what it is. However, most definitions of "culture" have the following elements: (1) systems of shared meanings (2) that are expressed through a number of different symbolic forms—symbols, rituals, stories, and myths—and (3) that function to hold a group of people together. Cultures differ from each other in an almost infinite number of ways and differ from themselves at different times. Cultures evolve constantly to respond to the pressures of their environment.

Cultures also are similar in important ways. Cultures are human creations. They are sustained only as long as they allow people to fulfill their needs for **auton-omy, creativity,** and **sociability.** These needs are not unlimited; in fact one of the paradoxes facing cultures is that their members also need **structure** and **stability.** Cultures provide that needed structure and stability by limiting members' autonomy, by directing their creative activities toward ends that meet the needs of other members of the cultures, and by guiding the members' interpersonal relationships.

For cultures to be sustained, they also must have their needs fulfilled. Essentially cultures need **coordination** and **control.** Cultures exist because their members' lives have become sufficiently complex that they must cooperate with one another. Their **independence**—the ability to be completely self-sufficient—is replaced by **interdependence.** In modern societies very few members have the skills, experience, or opportunities to personally do everything that is necessary to live productive lives. The vast majority of people in Western societies can actually do very little—we are constantly at the mercy of electricians, plumbers, appliance repair technicians, auto mechanics, and so on. What we can do we do very well. We have traded independence for **specialization** and have become far more efficient as a result. However, our efficiency depends almost wholly on successfully coordinating our activities with the activities of others. Different cultures vary in the degree of interde-pendence that exists within them. So do organizations and the units therein. For example, research and development (R&D) divisions usually have low interdepen-dence, relying only on computer operators, purchasing and receiving department personnel (who order and deliver the raw materials the R&D people need), and physical plant personnel (who keep equipment secure and functioning). Coordination within the R&D division is crucial; coordinating its activities with those of outsiders is less important. For other divisions, coordination is a more complex and critical problem.

Coordination is achieved through mechanisms of control. All cultures need to influence the behaviors of their members. Control often is thought of in overt terms—supervisors openly ordering, threatening, promising, or negotiating with subordinates to persuade them to act in particular ways at particular times with particular people. However, as Chapters 2 and 9 explain, the most important avenue of control is not overt but covert and unobtrusive. It involves persuading people to accept the values of the culture, of creating a context in which people will choose to act in ways that are consistent with the needs of the culture. All cultures also need to control the

interpersonal relationships of their members. Some version of the military command that "*officers cannot fraternize with enlisted personnel*" exists within all cultures, including organizational cultures. Often the command is never spoken aloud, because it need not be. Associates (usually recent graduates) in law firms learn by observation not to initiate conversations with senior partners but to respond immediately when partners do the initiating. Assembly workers at Dana Corporation learn that they are expected to have lunch with upper management, and members of upper management learn that they are expected to have friendly but relatively superficial interpersonal relationships with rank-and-file workers. In both cases the culture of the organization subtly controls the kind of interpersonal relationships that employees form and maintain. Again, for cultures, organizations, or units in which there is relatively little interdependence, exercising tight control is less important than in those in which interdependence is greater. All cultures place people in interdependent roles, however, and for all cultures, control is necessary for survival.

Communication and the Creation of Social Reality

In something of a paradox, cultures covertly control their members partly by meeting our human need to live in an ordered, sensible, predictable world.[4] At a basic level we are afraid of chaos. Unfortunately, the natural world seems anything but stable— babies are born into a "blooming, buzzing confusion" of sights, sounds, feelings, and other people. Growing up consists largely of making sense of the world around us. Although humans have a profound cognitive ability to discover sensible patterns in the events and actions surrounding them, we need some guidelines to help us make sense of our worlds. We obtain these guidelines, these "starting points," through communication with other people.

The Functions of Learning a Culture   Once we begin to learn language, we very rapidly discover how our culture makes sense of conditions, events, and the actions of people—others and ourselves. A common language allows members of a culture to share meanings. We can therefore label and define an event and know how to respond appropriately to it. In turn, we discover that we really can both control ourselves and influence events. By acting in socially acceptable ways, we also signal to others that we know how to behave and are legitimate members of our culture. In many traditional societies a solar eclipse was a cause for alarm. Attaching a shared label to the event could reduce the fear. If the eclipse was defined as a "magical" event, members of the culture could consider it as evil and know that the appropriate response is to engage in ritual acts designed to eliminate that evil (dances, prayers, sacrifices of virgins, and so forth). If the eclipse was defined as a "natural" or "scientific" event, people could evaluate it as neither good nor evil and know that the appropriate responses are to accept it or study it. Although our "scientific" culture has taught us to prefer the latter definition, the process is essentially the same in both it and traditional cultures. Language allows us to define events and orient ourselves toward them. Through communicating with other mem-