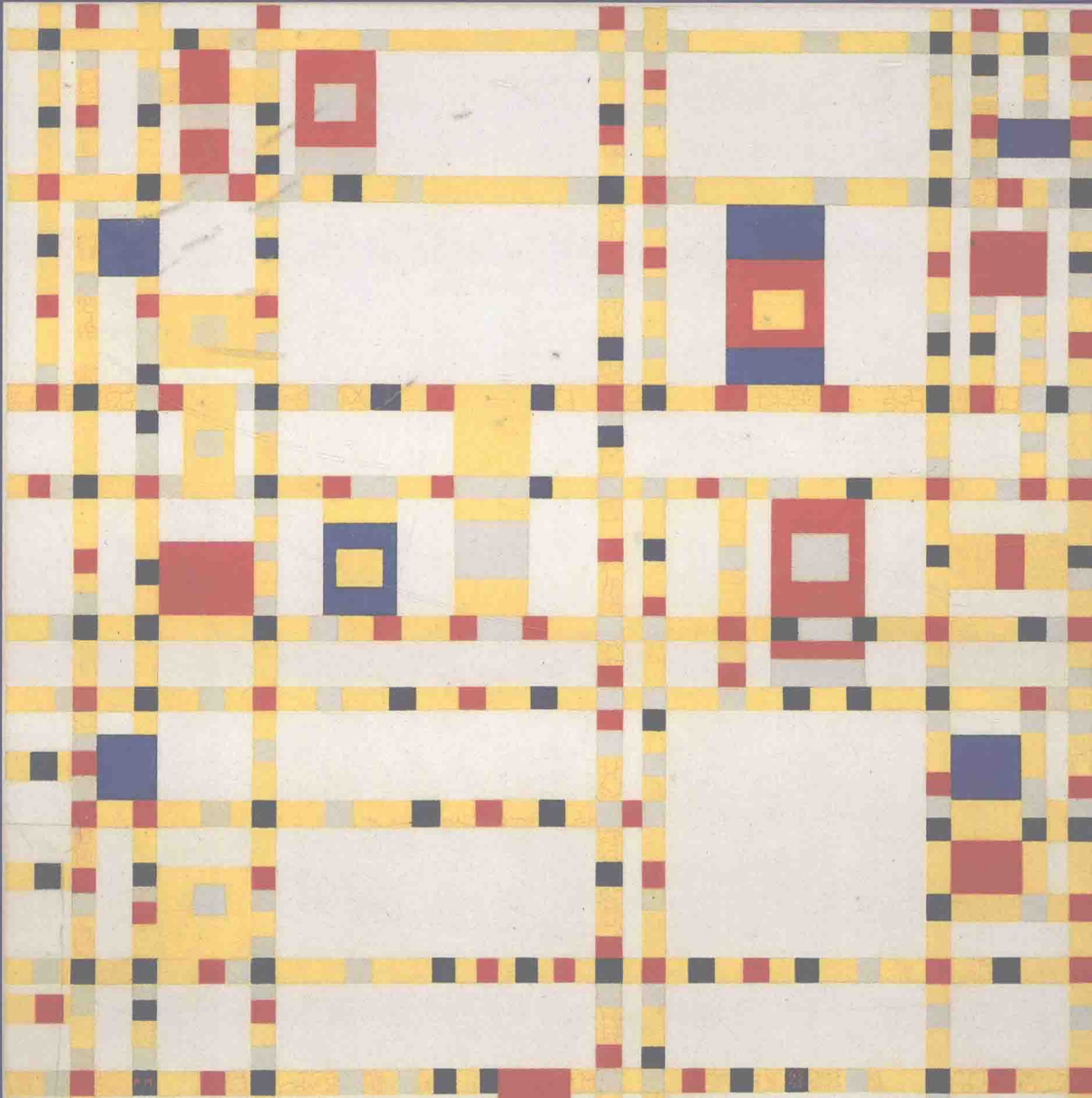


Organizational Communication

Approaches and Processes

Katherine Miller





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Katherine Miller
Arizona State University



Wadsworth Publishing Company

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Preface



Depending on who is recounting the history, the field of organizational communication has now been around for 30 to 50 years. Its infancy was marked by struggles for survival and nurturance from other disciplines. The teenage years saw a questioning of identity and fights for autonomy. Today, most would agree that organizational communication has reached a maturity few would have envisioned 30 years ago, and the field now encompasses a healthy eclecticism in that a variety of theoretical approaches provide contrasting accounts of the ways in which communicating and organizing intersect.

This book attempts to reflect the eclectic maturity of the field of organizational communication. My first decision in conceptualizing this textbook was to *not* advocate a particular approach to the field. Instead, I try to show that both traditional and emerging perspectives provide potentially illuminating views of organizational communication processes. For example, a critical theorist, an ethnographer, and a systems researcher may all look at a particular organizational communication phenomenon—say, socialization practices—and see very different things. A systems theorist might see a cybernetic system in which the goal of organizational assimilation is enhanced through a variety of structural and individual communication mechanisms. A cultural researcher might see socialization as a process through which the values and practices of an organizational culture are revealed to—and created by—individuals during organizational entry. A critical theorist might see socialization as a process through which individuals are drawn into hegemonic relationships that reinforce the traditional power structure of the organization. All of these views of the organizational socialization process are partial in that each obscures some aspects of organizational entry. But each view is also illuminating. Thus, the first half of this text covers a gamut of academic *approaches*—from classical through human relations and human resources to systems, cultural, and critical—as lenses through which organizational communication can be viewed. The strengths and weaknesses of each approach are consid-

ered, but no particular approach is privileged as an inherently superior theoretical approach.

My second important choice in creating this text was deciding how to organize the burgeoning research literature on organizational communication. To date, most textbooks have taken a “levels” approach, considering, in turn, organizational communication at the individual, dyadic, group, and organizational levels. I have been frustrated by this approach, both because there are some things that happen at *multiple* levels (e.g., we make decisions alone, in dyads, and in groups) and there are processes that are not easily linked to any of these levels (e.g., where does communication technology fit in?, at what level do we consider stress and burnout?). Thus, the second half of this textbook involves a consideration of organizational communication *processes*.

My goals in the “processes” portion of the book were threefold. First, I wanted the processes considered to be up-to-date in reflecting current concerns of both organizational communication scholars and practitioners. Thus, in addition to looking at traditional concerns such as decision making and conflict, this textbook highlights communication processes related to cultural and gender diversity, stress and burnout in the workplace, and new communication technologies. Second, I wanted to be as comprehensive as possible in describing relevant theory and research on each topic. Thus, each “process” chapter highlights both foundational and current research on organizational communication processes from the fields of communication, management, industrial psychology, and sociology. Third, I wanted students to understand that each of these communication processes could be viewed through a variety of theoretical lenses. Thus, each “process” chapter in the second half of the book concludes with a section on the insights of the “approaches” considered in the first half of the book.

Organization of the Text

This textbook, then, explores the world of organizational communication in terms of both scholarship and application. It is divided into two major sections. Part One reviews approaches to the study of organizational communication, while Part Two considers research and theory related to specific organizational communication processes. The chapters included in each of these sections are considered below.

In the first chapter of Part One, I introduce students to organizational communication by exploring the notions of “organization,” “communication,” and the intersection of these constructs. In the next six chapters that make up Part One, I take students on a historical trip through the study of organizational communication. Chapter 2 takes readers back to the early part of the 20th century in an exploration of classical and bureaucratic approaches to the understanding of organizational communication processes. The text considers three separate classical approaches and looks at the “machine metaphor” undergirding them. In Chapter 3, the focus moves to the middle part of this century when human relations approaches to organizational study took hold, and Chapter 4 examines the human resources approaches that gained prominence in organizational study in the 1960s.

The final three chapters of Part One deal with relatively contemporary approaches to the study of organizational communication. Chapter 5 introduces students to the systems metaphor for organizational operation by looking at several specific systems theories and at general systems concepts. Chapter 6 examines the culture metaphor, looking at the evolution of this metaphor and its application to the study of organizations. Finally, Chapter 7 considers critical approaches that emphasize organizational power and aspire to emancipate marginalized voices within the organizational context.

Part Two of the textbook shifts the focus to a consideration of how these various approaches to the study of organizational communication have been used to understand specific organizational communication processes. Eight organizational communication processes are considered. Chapter 8 looks at socialization, with special consideration of employment interviewing, information seeking, and role development. Chapter 9 investigates the communicative processes involved in controlling the performance of individuals within organizational settings by reviewing research on motivation, compliance gaining, goal setting, and feedback. Chapter 10 discusses the rational and nonrational ways in which communication influences organizational decision making by individuals and groups. Chapter 11 introduces students to one of the most critical problems facing today’s organizations— stress and burnout— by considering the ways in which communication serves as both a cause and a coping mechanism for burnout. Chapter 12 presents theory and research on the role of communication in organizational conflict, and Chapter 13 moves the analysis to the interorganizational level by considering relationships among and between organizations. Finally, Chapter 14 and Chapter 15 consider two critical ways in which organizations have changed during the last

20 years by looking at the increasing reliance on computer and communication technologies and the management of cultural and gender diversity.

Organizational Communication: Approaches and Processes also includes several features designed to enhance students' abilities to integrate and apply the material. As noted earlier, all of the process chapters include a concluding section that takes readers back to the approaches considered in the first half of the book. Thus, students can see the ways in which each approach would speak to the process under consideration. Second, the textbook is liberally sprinkled with tables and figures designed to illustrate and expand on crucial concepts. Third, each chapter concludes with a case study specifically designed to enhance understanding of relevant chapter material. Each case study includes a set of discussion questions, but there are no "right answers" in analyzing the cases. Finally, the textbook is accompanied by an Instructor's Manual (written by myself, Marifran Mattson, and Christina Stage) that includes sample syllabi, paper assignments, key terms, chapter outlines, true/false, multiple choice, fill-in-the-blank, and essay test items, and suggestions for effective use of the case studies. The instructor's manual can be obtained by contacting your local International Thomson Publishing Education Group sales representative.

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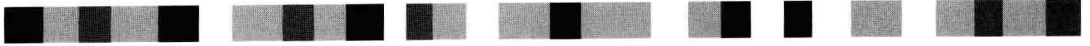
The writing of this textbook was made much more effective—indeed, even enjoyable—by the efforts of a great many individuals. First, it is hard to imagine working with a more skilled team of individuals than those gathered by Wadsworth Publishing. I'm grateful to Holly Allen for convincing me to undertake this project, and even more thankful that Todd Armstrong, Josh King, Merrill Peterson, and a host of others saw it through to completion. The comments of a number of organizational communication scholars were instrumental in shaping the direction, content, and presentation of this textbook. These include my ASU associates, Steve Corman, Bob Krizek, Chris Stage, Marifran Mattson, and Katherine Nelson, as well as colleagues from around the country who commented on the project at various stages. These individuals included Jim Dillard, University of Wisconsin-Madison; Eric G. Zook, then at Pennsylvania State University; Vernon Miller, Michigan State University; Alicia Marshall, then at Michigan State University; Renee Meyers, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee; Eileen Berlin Ray, Cleveland State

University; Louis P. Cusella, University of Dayton; and Joann Keyton, Memphis State University. My students were also helpful in fine-tuning the textbook for meeting student needs.

Finally, my most heartfelt thanks go to my family for providing an environment in which writing this textbook was a pleasurable challenge. Mickey Stanley (crown prince of cocker spaniels) slept under the desk for much of the time I was writing and sensed when I needed a restorative face-licking. Kalena Margaret Miller had the good grace to take long daytime naps during her first few months of life and has been a constant joy that keeps my head on straight. Finally, Jim Stiff provided the inspiration to get started, editorial assistance to stay on track, and motivation to bring the project to completion.

Katherine Miller
Tempe, Arizona

Contents



Preface ix

Part 1 Approaches to Organizational Communication 1

Chapter 1 Introduction and Definitions 3

Defining Organization and Communication 4

The Intersection of Organization and Communication 16

In Future Chapters 19

Chapter 2 Classical Approaches 21

The Machine Metaphor of Organizing 21

Henri Fayol's Theory of Classical Management 23

Max Weber's Theory of Bureaucracy 28

Frederick Taylor's Theory of Scientific Management 31

Communication in Classical Approaches 34

Classical Management in Organizations Today 38

Summary 40

Case Study: The Creamy Creations Takeover 41

Chapter 3 Human Relations Approaches 43

From Classical Theory to Human Relations: The Hawthorne Studies 44

Theories of the Human Relations Movement 48

Communication in Human Relations Approaches 55

The Human Relations Approach in Organizations Today 58

Summary 60

Case Study: Motivation at HealthTime Fitness Club 61

Chapter 4 Human Resources Approaches 63

Impetus for the Human Resources Approach 64

Three Human Resources Theories 67

Communication in Human Resources Organizations 75

Human Resources Organizations Today: Team Management 78

Summary 81

Case Study: Teamwork at the Marshall's Processing Plant 82

Chapter 5 Systems Approaches 85

The Systems Metaphor and Systems Concepts 86

Two Systems Theories 92

A Systems Methodology: Network Analysis 98

Summary 104

Case Study: A Systems View of Tonya and Nancy 105

Chapter 6 Cultural Approaches 107

Prescriptive Approaches to Culture 108

Descriptive Approaches to Culture 111

Schein's Model of Organizational Culture 114

Methods for Investigating Organizational Culture 121

Summary 123

Case Study: The Culture Detective 125

Chapter 7 Critical and Postmodern Approaches 127

Critical Approaches 128

Postmodern Approaches 136

Two Examples from Organizational Communication 141

Summary 143

Case Study: Talking Turkey 145

Part 2 Processes of Organizational Communication 147

Chapter 8 Socialization Processes 149

Models of Organizational Socialization 150

Communication Processes during Socialization 156

Summary 165

Case Study: Letters to Sigma Chi 167

Chapter 9 Performance Control Processes 169

Two Theories of Motivation 170

Communicative Processes of Performance Control 173

Summary 184

Case Study: The Performance Appraisal Meeting 186

Chapter 10 Decision-Making Processes 189

Models of the Decision-Making Process 189

Small-Group Decision Making 194

Participation in Decision Making 199

Summary 204

Case Study: Too Many Majors 207

Chapter 11 Stress and Social Support Processes 211

Basic Terminology and Distinctions 211

Communication as a Cause of Burnout 216

Communication and Coping with Burnout 221

Summary 226

Case Study: Kid-Care 229

Chapter 12 Conflict Management Processes 231

Conceptualizing the Conflict Process 231

Managing Organizational Conflict 235

Influences on the Conflict Management Process 243

Summary 246

Case Study: The Problem with Teamwork 249

Chapter 13 External Communication Processes 251

The Organizational Environment 251

Interorganizational Relationships 256

Organizational Boundary-Spanners 259

Summary 264

Case Study: Service Coordination for the Homeless 267

Chapter 14 Technological Processes 269

Types of Organizational Communication Technology 270

Theories of Communication Media Usage 273

Effects of Organizational Communication Technology 280

Summary 283

Case Study: High-Tech Gardening 286

Chapter 15 Diversity Management Processes 289

Women and Minorities in Today's Organizations 290

The Multicultural Organization 295

Managing Cultural Diversity 301

Summary 303

Case Study: Diverging Perspectives—Encouraging Cultural Diversity vs.
“How do you solve a problem like Maria?” 306

References 309

Index 335

Part **ONE**



***Approaches to
Organizational
Communication***

Introduction and Definitions

While writing this textbook, I gave birth to Kalena Margaret Miller. From the first moments of her life, Kalena was surrounded by organizational communication processes. She was born five weeks early, so the birth itself was made possible only through the intense coordination of a team of four doctors and as many nurses in the operating room. For the next two weeks, she lived in the neonatal intensive care unit, where more health care professionals interacted around her—and with her—in order to provide optimal care. All of this care, of course, was made possible by the larger hospital organization and insurance companies. After several weeks, we brought Kalena home, where her first few months of life were eased by diapers, formula, and clothes bought at retail outlets; information from the local breastfeeding support group; and visits to the health maintenance organization. By the time she was six months old, Kalena also had the pleasure of charming flight attendants for several national airlines, cooing for grocery store clerks, and beginning regular attendance at a local day care center.

As Kalena's first months of life illustrate, throughout our lives we are sustained by and engage in organizational communication. Think about your own life. You may be an employed member of an organization. As employees, our communication ranges from trying to synchronize activities with coworkers, receiving orders from the boss, giving instructions to subordinates, interacting with customers, and coordinating with other organizations. Or, you might be a client of an organization, communicating to receive goods or services. Other roles are possible as well. You might be a volunteer with a service organization, a member of a church, or a relatively passive consumer of media organizations. If you spent even a single day keeping a diary of all of your contacts with organizations, two facts would become very clear. First, we cannot avoid contact with organizations while functioning in today's complex world. Second, though our contact with organizations might take a

variety of forms, the contact will invariably involve communication. Thus, an investigation of organizational communication involves the study of processes that are ubiquitous in the modern world.

The goal of this textbook is to introduce you to the processes of organizational communication that we experience every day as employees, employers, volunteers, clients, members, and consumers. Understanding these processes of organizational communication will involve a consideration of a wide range of theory and research that has been conducted over the past 80 years in the fields of communication, management, industrial psychology, sociology, and anthropology. Full understanding will also involve an application of this theory and research to our daily experiences with organizational life. However, before we can delve into what has been learned about organizational communication, it is necessary to set the stage by defining what we mean by the concept. Thus, our first step will be an exploration of definitions for two critical terms: *organization* and *communication*.

Defining Organization and Communication

Often, when we are asked about the definition of a term, we turn to the dictionary for assistance. The dictionary provides information about the popular usage of terms and thus is a guide to what most people mean when they use a particular word. For example, if we look up the word *communication* in a dictionary, we may find several definitions, including “an act or instance of transmitting” and “a process by which information is exchanged between individuals through a common system of symbols, signs, or behaviors.” We would also find many definitions provided for the word *organization*. Our dictionary search highlights several important points about the process of defining terms.

First, multiple definitions may exist for any word. The dictionary points us to common usages of words, sometimes known as “denotative” meanings. However, we know that people don’t always have the dictionary meaning in mind when they use a word. It has been said that “meanings are in people” and not in words, indicating that words can mean very different things depending on who is using and interpreting them. These “in people” meanings for terms are sometimes called connotative.

A second issue raised by the multiple definitions found in the dictionary is the notion that we cannot say that one definition of a term is the “right” or