Case Studies

for

ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION

Understanding Communication Processes

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UNDERSTANDING COMMUNICATION PROCESSES

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> **Note** to Instructors: A comprehensive
> **Instructor's Manual** is available on request.

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The Case Study Method as a Pedagogical Technique

Case methods have been employed at least since the 1920s to encourage reflection, integration of theory and practice, and problem solving. They have been widely used because they illustrate the nonlinear, complex, and context-specific reality of organizations (Kitano & Landry, 2001). Well-developed cases can offer insight into organizational practices, procedures, and processes that are not otherwise available for classroom use. Case studies allow students the opportunities to analyze critical incidents, translate their knowledge into practical applications, and develop strategies for their own organizational communication practice.

Literally all of the undergraduate organizational communication textbooks now include cases as an in-text pedagogical technique. The cases here support and extend the use of cases in teaching organizational communication as they are longer and more complex. As a result, the cases will provide you with a richer set of assignment options. There you will find:

1. A one-paragraph case overview (including type of organization, key actors and issues in the case).

2. A one-sentence learning objective that identifies the central communication problem in the case.

3. A list of keywords and their glossary definitions.

4. A series of questions for written essays and potential/probable answers.

5. A series of discussion questions.

6. Other teaching ideas including assignment alternatives, audio-visual materials, and websites that support the case.

7. Short paragraphs describing any conceptual analysis that could aid in understanding and teaching the case.

8. Bibliography of resources for the instructor.

9. Bibliography of resources for students.

10. Epilogue of the case (if appropriate).

Discussion of cases can foster students' reasoning, enhance development of theoretical and practical knowledge, and increase awareness of personal beliefs and values (Lundeberg, 1999). We believe this happens most effectively when students are encouraged to develop multiple alternatives as case solutions. Critical learning occurs when students analyze each solution, compare and contrast multiple solutions, and then choose one believed to be most effective at improving communication or sustaining effective communication.

We believe cases are most effectively used when there is both independent and interdependent learning. Not only should students be assigned to independently analyze the case and make recommendations, students should also learn to listen and respond to other students' ideas about the case. Cases can augment or extend content presented in class or in the text you use.

Because cases are complex and realistic depictions of organizational communication, the same case can be approached from a number of perspectives. Consider assigning different groups of students to take the roles of different characters, or to make recommendations based on competing theories or perspectives.

We believe that instructors should be actively involved in the case analysis process. Here are some methods for using cases to create interdependencies with your students:

1. Let students generate questions about the case for you to answer in class.

2. Help students generate criteria for deciding if the recommendation or alternative chosen will be effective.

3. Cases can be used to improve critical thinking skills. Ask students: What's the evidence for your claim? What are your assumptions? Biases? Emotional responses?

4. At the end of case discussion, give closure by summarizing:

- What was learned?

- What communication skills would students need to implement recommendations?

- To what other contexts would recommendations apply?

There are a variety of methods for using cases as a pedagogical technique. Here are some of our favorites:

1. To enhance the communicative aspect of the case, ask that students practice effective communication in their case discussions. You could assign students to practice a particular communication skill (i.e., a specific listening or speaking strategy) during their discussions with one another.

2. Cases can be used as the basis for oral presentations. Assign two students or two groups to debate alternative recommendations and then take questions from other students.

3. Assign students to write a one-page position paper describing the overarching communication problem that needs to be addressed in the next 3 to 4 hours. Next 24 hours? Next week?

4. Use the case as stimulus for a test. Given the case beforehand, the exam can be a test of the degree to which students understand and apply communication principles and concepts.

5. As a group assignment, each group is responsible for delivering the following as written or oral presentation:

   - A statement that defines/describes the communication decision, dilemma, or problem.

   - A procedural statement for addressing or solving the problem.

   - A list of resources (physical, monetary, human resources) needed for implementation of the proposed solution to the problem.

   - A timetable for implementation.

   - A statement of expected benefits or expected impact of the proposed solution.

6. Assign students to one role in the case and have them develop a communication plan for themselves, their team, or their organization.

7. Assign students to develop a training program to respond to the communication problem or challenge in the case.

8. Use the case as a stimulus for students to design an organizational communication assessment.

9. Based on the organization presented in the case, assign students to develop a selection or recruitment interview for one or more of the jobs described in the case.

10. Use the case as a basis for developing a team meeting procedure.

11. Using the key character as the stimulus, assign students the project of designing a leadership development program (e.g., training, coaching, counseling, mentoring).

12. Use the case as a basis for developing a code of ethics for the organization or a profession.

13. Use the case as a basis for developing a public relations or external communication plan.

References

Kitano, M. K., & Landry, H. (2001, June). Instructional cases: Learning from the dilemmas of practicing teachers. *Roeper Review, 23,* 206–218.

Lundeberg, M. A. (1999). Discovering teaching and learning through cases. In M. A. Lundeberg, B. B. Levin, & H. L. Harrington (Eds.), *Who learns what from cases and how? The research base for teaching and learning with cases* (pp. 3–23). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum. ✦

Using Cases to Learn About Organizational Communication

Nearly everyone who works can tell at least one story about his or her work experiences. Funny, disgusting, sad, motivating, amazing—some stories are about the mundane day-to-day events at work; other stories are about pivotal events, or turning points, in a person's work life. The cases in this book are stories, or narratives, about the work experiences of individuals and teams in a variety of organizational settings. As you learn about organizational communication, you can use cases to (a) broaden your perspective on what it means to work, (b) gain an understanding of work settings or occupations with which you are unfamiliar, and (c) develop greater understanding of the ways in which communication is central to getting work done. Cases are also useful as a guide to identifying and developing your competences to determine actions appropriate for a variety of work situations.

What Are Cases?

Cases are examples or illustrations of organizational problems or challenges. A case gives information about the organization—its people and its performance. By itself, a case is a good story. A case becomes a learning experience when we apply the theories we study in an effort to determine the best solutions for resolving the issues presented in the case. The case study approach to organizational com-

munication provides an opportunity to blend theory, analysis, and practice in our efforts to better understand how communication processes create and shape organizational events. Case studies provide rich opportunities to apply theory to organizational practice. They bridge the gap between reading about organizations and theory and knowing what to do in actual organizational situations. They also expand our analytical and critical capabilities as we examine dynamic and complex events for their impact on organizational behavior. And they help us develop strategies and approaches for application to real organizational problems or challenges. The primary purpose of the case study approach is to develop our abilities.

Cases are presented in story or narrative form with enough detail so you can use your knowledge and analytical skills to develop and test alternatives for satisfying the problem presented in the case. The cases presented here reflect real communication situations and problems, and were developed based on real organizational experiences. Although the cases are authentic with respect to the portrayal of communication in organizations, authors were required (in most cases) to fictionalize some aspects of the communication, individuals, and organizations described to maintain the anonymity of the individuals and the organizations.

The purpose of a case is to focus on social actors in an organizational context to examine the role of communication. You will not find this focus limiting. To the contrary, you will find that each case describes the messiness associated with organizational communication practices. For example, if the case is predominantly about an organization's culture, you will find that threads of the case also pertain to leadership and team behavior. A case about an organization's use of technology will also reveal issues about intercultural communication issues, politeness norms, and respect. A case about individual decision making will also reveal aspects of strategic planning and customer service. As such, cases reflect the nonlinear, complex, and embedded practices of organizational communication. Your role as a student is to examine each case for patterns and anomalies of communication practices.

Using cases, you will have the opportunity to

- View communication in its organizational context, with all of its complexity and messiness.

- Be drawn into what really happens rather than be told what should happen.

- Understand the effects of history as well as watch history unfold.

- Identify problems that participants may not recognize.

- Discover communication exemplars as well as inefficiencies or ineffective practices.

Using Cases in the Study of Organizational Communication

Although not wholly generalizable, the situations described in the cases can provide you with a realistic preview of how communication actually is practiced in organizations. The cases can also provide you with a preview of the communication situations and dilemmas you will likely encounter in the workforce. Each case concludes with a communication problem, dilemma, situation, or question that needs resolution. Thus, the cases will test your analytical reflection, theoretical analysis, problem analysis, generation of alternative solutions, and solution selection abilities.

Throughout the collection of cases, you will find that some of the case characters communicate effectively, whereas others display communication problems. Some of the communication issues are verbal, whereas others reflect communication issues that surface in the use of nonverbal, electronic, and written channels. The cases explore formal and informal organizational communication at all levels—individual, supervisor to subordinate, team, and organizational. Some cases focus on communication within an organization, whereas other cases include situations in which employees communicate with constituencies outside the organization.

The cases provide rich descriptions of different types and sizes of organizations—for profit and nonprofit, service and manufacturing, public and private, family-owned business and large conglomerate. In addition to these rich organizational descriptions, the cases present characters in a variety of occupations and jobs—colleagues and coworkers, supervisors and subordinates, employees, volunteers, and all levels of management.

After reading each case, you should be able to make recommendations about the communication problem or challenge described in