

COMMUNICATION & ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE

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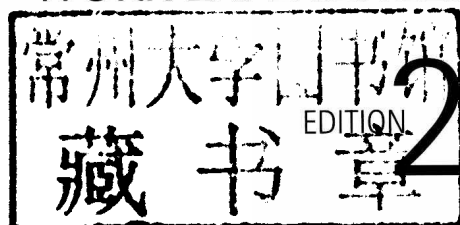
A KEY TO
UNDERSTANDING
WORK EXPERIENCES

JOANN KEYTON



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UNDERSTANDING
WORK EXPERIENCES



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Los Angeles | London | New Delhi
Singapore | Washington DC

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1

Positioning Organizational Culture



❖ INTRODUCTION

If asked to do so, you could name many organizations. It is likely that you would first name the school you attend, where you work, and companies that manufacture products or provide services that you purchase and use. You might also name government institutions at local, state, and federal levels, nonprofits like the American Cancer Society, and civic and religious institutions such as neighborhood associations and churches. Each type of organization contributes to our collective economic, civic, community, and social lives in some fundamental way.

Each organization has a culture, and that is the focus of this book. *Organizational culture* is the set of artifacts, values, and assumptions that emerge from the interactions of organizational members. Although it is often difficult to describe, as employees we *know* what it's like in our organization. Whether we buy into them entirely or not, we are intuitively aware of values and beliefs that our co-workers, subordinates, and superiors hold about the work they perform in our particular organization. You may have even decided to join a company because it *felt* like an environment in which you could be successful. As

a customer or client, we encounter an organization's culture through our interactions with organizational members. Perhaps you return to a specific store—even though you have many other choices—because the service is good and the employees are friendly and personable. Or, perhaps you vow “to never return” because the store's return policy distinctively advantages their rights over yours. As an employee or a customer or client, you are exposed to the culture of every organization you encounter.

Managers and executives are particularly interested in organizational culture, often as a means for improving productivity, effectiveness, or efficiency. Other managers pay attention because they believe their organization's culture is unique and can be an effective tool in attracting quality employees or distinguishing the organization from competitors.

Employees can be interested in organizational culture, particularly when they make employment choices. Most of us need to work, and we want to work in environments that resonate with our values and ideas.

Trainers and consultants are interested in organizational culture. A web search for *organizational culture* conducted August 2010 using the Google search engine (www.google.com) resulted in over 4.2 million hits (up from 1.5 million hits in 2004). Clearly, organizational culture has become part of the business lexicon, and stories about organizational culture are regularly reported in the business press. Many commercial websites promote trainers' and consultants' strategies for implementing, changing, or improving organizational culture. Obviously, scholars who study management and organizational communication view organizational culture as central to their interest in organizations. In addition, psychologists, sociologists, and anthropologists also study and explore organizational culture.

With this level and type of attention from practitioners, trainers, consultants, and scholars, one would think that we know all that we need to know about organizational culture. To the contrary, interest in organizational culture exists and continues to be stimulated because organizational culture is both changeable and complex, as it emerges from the interactions of organizational members. As organizational structures continue to morph in response to changes in economic, business, and social climates, our understanding of organizational culture is challenged.

Based on the research literature, this book treats organizational culture as a complex, communicative, and multidimensional process and introduces differing research and practical perspectives. The text

reveals conclusions that scholars have drawn from different research approaches. The text also has a practical side by drawing realistic applications from research findings. The primary objective of this book is to help you make sense of organizational culture and thereby help you to make informed work and employment decisions. Thus, this text encourages you to develop answers for four questions:

1. What is organizational culture?
2. How is organizational culture created?
3. Why does organizational culture matter?
4. What is my role in creating organizational culture?

Material in the text is presented in five sections. This first section—Positioning Organizational Culture—answers four questions: (a) What is an organization?, (b) What is organizational communication?, (c) What is culture?, and (d) What is organizational culture? This section concludes with the argument that understanding organizational culture is a primary means for understanding organizations and their communication practices.

The second section—Unpacking Organizational Culture—explores five core characteristics of organizational culture. These are the following: organizational culture (a) is inextricably linked to its employees; (b) is dynamic; (c) can hold competing values and assumptions; (d) is emotionally charged; and (e) is both the foreground and the background of the organization's communication system. This section also explores how organizational members communicate (and create) culture and how communication among organizational members reveals cultural elements. Central to the exploration of organizational culture are subcultures. Thus, this section also addresses subcultures: how subcultures are both a part of the culture yet also distinct and how subcultures are identified and structured relative to one another. This section closes by addressing what organizational culture is *not* and some common myths about organizational culture.

The third section—Lenses for Understanding Organizational Culture—starts with a description of the development of the organizational culture construct to show us how to position different lenses, or perspectives, for investigating and understanding organizational culture. Subsequent parts of this section explore the reflexive relationship of communication and organizational culture from the lenses of symbolic performance, narrative and textual reproduction, management, power and politics, technology, and globalization.

The fourth section—Developing, Managing, and Changing Organizational Culture—addresses the pragmatic issues of communication's constitutive role in developing and managing organizational culture. A significant part of this section explores the ways in which organizational culture can change, intentionally or not. The role of formal and informal leaders and the role of ethics are explored for their influence on organizational culture.

The final section—The Culture Toolkit—concludes the book by providing descriptive and analytical tools to use in the exploration of organizational culture. The toolkit provides methodologies for conducting basic research studies of organizational culture or for use in applied studies with pragmatic consequences.

❖ WHAT IS AN ORGANIZATION?

Ordered and Purposeful Interaction Among People

One way to define *organization* is to identify its common elements. First, an organization is composed of people. Without people and their interaction, an organization could not exist. Whether as salaried, hourly, or contract employees or volunteers, these organizational members interact with one another and the organization's clients and customers in purposeful goal-directed activity. Interaction in organizations is purposeful because people interact with organizations with a goal in mind. For example, cashiers at the grocery store expect that they will scan the products that customers bring to their checkout lanes. Customers visit the grocery store to buy items and expect products to be on the shelves in a reasonable order. Whether you are the cashier or the customer, you have an expectation about the communication that will occur as you engage in these organizational roles of store clerk and customer. The point here is that people in organizations do not act randomly. Rather, organizations are sites of controlled and coordinated activity. As Taylor (2006) describes, "the modern organization is a universe of endless talk, occurring both simultaneously and successively" (p. 147) across place and time. As a result, an organization "is always in the communication" (p. 156) and always being reconstituted by ongoing conversation in the social reality talk creates.

Our organizational role provides us with expectations and structures for our behaviors while we are engaged in that role. Admittedly, there may be occasional variations in expectations, but when I take on the role of professor at my university I expect to teach students in a

prescribed set of classes for a specified period. Communicating with others at the university (i.e., administrators, faculty colleagues, staff members, and students) helps me to both understand and enact my role. My set of interactions combined with the sets of interactions of other organizational role players (e.g., the department chair, the dean, other faculty, the computer technician, the librarian, and students) become the purposeful and ordered interactions that facilitate the university's achievement of its organizational goals.

Despite the organization's overall goals and ordered patterns of interaction, it is very likely that not all organizational members are directly connected to one another. It is possible even in small organizations that some employees will never communicate with each other. However, the patterns of ordered activity and the communication channels that support that activity in and of themselves create links among organizational members, so that despite the lack of direct connection, employees are indirectly linked through some type of network structure (Stohl, 1995).

Communicating Within and Across Structures

In most organizations, what we label as organizational structure is the way in which organizational activities are organized into functional or operational units. For example, employees who provide services to other employees are often part of a human resources or personnel department, while employees who create the goods an organization sells are part of the production or manufacturing unit. This type of deliberate structure is based on functional expertise. It is common for organizational structures to be delineated in this way. Common structural labels include *manufacturing*, *research and development*, *client services*, *accounting*, *information technology*, and so on. However, an organization's structure could also be delineated by time frame or geographical region. Manufacturing plants that operate 24 hours a day, seven days a week, are structured by shifts (e.g., the first shift starts work at 7:00 a.m. and is relieved by the second shift at 3:00 p.m., which is relieved by the third shift at 11:00 p.m.) Alternatively, an organization's structure could be geographically determined. For example, a construction management firm is organized by regional offices (New England, Delaware Valley, New York, Mid-Atlantic, Southeast, Central, Midwest, Southwest, and West), with its corporate office in Rhode Island. Of course, some organizations are so large that their structures are organized and identified by function, time frame, and geography (e.g., reservation clerks who work the overnight shift at the Phoenix

call center). In all organizations some type of hierarchy is created, and the power associated with hierarchical levels is distributed through the organizational structure, with some members having more rights, responsibilities, and power than others. Traditionally, there is a distinction among the organization's executive, supervisory, and employee levels. We can identify the power and responsibility associated with each by examining the messages communicated among levels, as well as by looking at how those messages are communicated. Executives administer the organization and are responsible for its overall direction and strategy. Supervisors facilitate groups of employees in the day-to-day work that supports this direction and strategy, and employees engage in the work to create and deliver the organization's product or service. Even alternative organizational forms that include greater employee participation or are team-based have some type of organizational structure that creates and maintains power (Harter, 2004). These structural elements are so powerful that, real or perceived, they become "the architect of organized participation" (Stohl & Cheney, 2001, p. 359).

Regardless of how an organization is structured, organizational members are distributed across space and time in different units, shifts, or locations by division of labor and by position or hierarchical level. While most organizational members regularly communicate with others within their unit, organizations cannot survive without their employees communicating across units as well. For example, the interdependence required to achieve continuous plant production demands a shift change meeting so that the operators on the first shift can describe how the equipment is working to those on the second shift. The organization's vice presidents, each responsible for a specific organizational function, will need to meet periodically as an executive team to discuss how functional goals of each area integrate to influence the success of their organization's long-term strategic goals. And, even though sales reps are responsible for different geographical territories, periodic sales meetings will be scheduled at the home office so that home office and field employees can address procedural issues to create better working relationships and serve customers more effectively. Thus, communication interdependencies within and across organizational structures create and maintain organizations.

A Superordinate Goal

Interdependent interaction is required because organizations are created to achieve superordinate goals. A superordinate goal is one that is

so difficult, time-consuming, and complex that it is beyond the capacity of one person. By bringing together people with different strengths and skills, an organization is able to achieve its goal. Few organizations can operate effectively using the resources of only one person. Even small or family businesses are dependent on the skills and talents of several organizational members, or contract employees, to achieve their goals.

Whether for profit or nonprofit, an organization must have its economic viability as part of its goal. For-profit organizations, like Target, McDonald's, and Visa, have superordinate goals of selling general merchandise, fast food, and financial services, respectively. However, these goals are intended to accomplish another superordinate goal, that is, to make money to pay operating expenses and deliver profits, which are then distributed to the organization's owners and perhaps the stockholders or employees. In a capitalistic society, making money is always an underlying organizational goal regardless of what type of product or service the organization manufactures or provides.

Even nonprofit organizations, whose purposes might be to provide services to children who have been abused or to protect the oceans and forests, must be concerned about their economic viability. While nonprofits typically do not make money by selling products or services, they cannot operate without capital. In the case of nonprofits, capital and operating expenses are raised through donations, earned from invested monies, or provided by institutional grantors or individuals who want the nonprofit to continue to provide services. The United Way and your local animal shelter are examples of nonprofits. Other nonprofits are more dependent upon cash received for services. Hospitals are a good example, as those that operate as nonprofits bill patients and insurance companies for services provided. However, regardless of its income source and the nature of its mission, whether it is charitable, religious, scientific, or educational, a nonprofit organization cannot legally make distributions to organizational members, officers, or directors. Rather, any surplus monies must be spent on providing the services for which the nonprofit organization was initially formed.

Government institutions and agencies at all levels must also raise monies to pay employees to provide us with our public services, such as trash collection, fire and police protection, emergency services, public school education, and highway maintenance. These institutions and agencies levy taxes on the people who use or benefit from their services, or they raise money through fees, such as the fee you pay to obtain your driver's license, register your car, or use a campsite.

Accordingly, economic viability is a part of any organization's superordinate goal. While it may appear that an organization's goal is to provide a service or sell a product, the unstated part of this goal is to make a profit. If a municipality's goal is to provide quality K–12 education, the unstated part of this goal is to provide the best quality of education that the municipality's educational budget will allow. Even if we were to remove the monetary aspect, the superordinate goals implicit in running a computer manufacturing or retail operation, for example, are so complex that no one person could efficiently and effectively achieve them. Regardless of the size of the organization, a superordinate goal implies that two or more individuals will work interdependently and cooperatively to facilitate the achievement of the organizational goals, which, in turn, serve as a vehicle or purpose for obtaining monies or the other resources required to sustain goal-directed activities.

A Dynamic System

Considering these first three characteristics of organizations—organized and purposeful interaction, communication within and across structural units, and a superordinate goal—it is easy to see that organizations are dynamic systems. Despite the ordered and purposeful interaction employees pursue in achieving a superordinate goal, communication within and across structural units is not predictable. An organizational system is dynamic because an organization must be responsive to and interact with its customers and clients, suppliers, and regulatory and economic environments. Although an organization has a target audience, or public, for its products and services, other stakeholders interact with and influence the organization. For example, Ford Motor Company expects suppliers to deliver components as they are needed in the car manufacturing process, rather than stockpiling parts and warehousing them until needed. This type of just-in-time manufacturing creates interdependencies between a Ford auto assembly plant and the organizations in its supplier network. Likewise, Ford, whose employees are members of the UAW (The International Union, United Automobile, Aerospace and Agricultural Implement Workers of America), must manufacture cars that meet emissions control standards set by governments in the locales where Ford vehicles are sold. Working with these organizations, the suppliers, the union, and the government agency, Ford is part of a dynamic system through which it influences other organizations, and at the same time is influenced by them.

The dynamics of these interdependent systems are further enhanced when Ford considers its customers, the auto-buying public.

Simply because Ford manufactures certain models does not ensure that these are the cars people want to purchase. Customers have preferences that may or may not be satisfied by Ford's current car designs. Moreover, the economic environment (e.g., the cost of living or the unemployment rate) can make it more or less likely that people will have money to spend on a major purchase such as a car.

Just as the needs of its external public contribute to the interdependencies and dynamics of the Ford organization, the internal public (Ford's employees) contributes to its dynamic nature. Organizations lose (through firing, layoffs, and retirements) and gain employees (through hiring and acquisition) on a regular basis. Although job functions and the number of employees may remain fairly stable across a period of time, the people who hold jobs in the organization can have different levels of skill and motivation. A successful employee can be promoted or transferred, temporarily or permanently, to another position. Employees take vacations and other types of leaves of absence. New employees take on the responsibilities of those who quit or are terminated. While the job functions are arguably the same, the people performing them are not.

Because organizations are dynamic, different people can perform the same functions, but the communication experience will not be the same.

Thus, an organization is an open social system (Weick, 2001), which creates a dynamic as it develops and maintains interdependencies with both internal and external stakeholders. Internally, an organization is dynamic because employees move in and out of the organizational structure as they are promoted, hired, or fired. The relationships among employees can also differ based on which employees are promoted and which are scheduled for a particular shift or task. Because the contingent of employees is not stable, an organization's relationships among its external stakeholders are also dynamic.

Organization Defined

Thus, an *organization* is a dynamic system of organizational members, influenced by external stakeholders, who communicate within and across organizational structures in a purposeful and ordered way to achieve a superordinate goal. With this definition, an organization is not defined by its size, purpose, or structure. Rather, an organization is defined by the linguistic properties that reside in its internal and external communication interdependencies (Deetz, 1992; Weick, 1979). An organization can change its physical location and replace its members without breaking down because it is essentially a patterned set of

discourses that at some point were created by the members and codified into norms and practices that are later inherited, accepted, and adapted to by newcomers. Because an organization emerges through communication, it is always being constituted; it is “a property of communication” (Taylor & Van Every, 2000, p. 37).

An organization is also a real and practical place (Boden, 1994; Kuhn & Ashcraft, 2003). Several streams of communication through multiple channels in multiple contexts continually constitute the organization. Face-to-face informal conversations among a group of co-workers, a written performance evaluation of a subordinate by a superior, phone conversations between customer service agents and clients, a formal meeting among executives with others in a video conference, and a persuasive plea by an employee to a boss for an extra day of vacation prior to a holiday—all constitute ongoing moments of the organization. It is a flexible, interactional system composed of layers of ongoing conversations. Although it is common to reference *the* organization, it is not necessarily a monolithic or unified actor (Martin, 2002; Trice & Beyer, 1993; Weick, 1985). It is a symbolic and social construction of the ongoing and overlapping conversations of its members (Taylor & Van Every, 2000).

Assumptions About Organizations

In any study or discussion of organizations, two assumptions about them must be addressed (Weick, 2001). First, organizations are open social systems. Everything an organization does is done through its members who process and communicate information from both internal and external sources. Yet an organization does have a memory of sorts. “Individuals come and go, but organizations preserve knowledge, behaviors, mental maps, norms, and values over time” (Weick, 2001, p. 243). When information is shared among organizational members and codified or captured in some way, an organizational interpretation exists beyond that of its individual members. These interpretations get passed from employee to employee, creating a “thread of coherence” (Weick, 2001, p. 243) even though there may not be full convergence. The interactions of individuals create an organizational-level interpretation that can be passed on to others and acted on by others.

Second, organizational-level interpretations more commonly reflect the views of upper-level managers or owners. Charged with the strategic operation of the organization, executives (e.g., vice-president level and higher) have multiple opportunities to purposely direct or unintentionally influence what the organizational-level interpretation will become. In most organizations, top-level executives are a relatively small