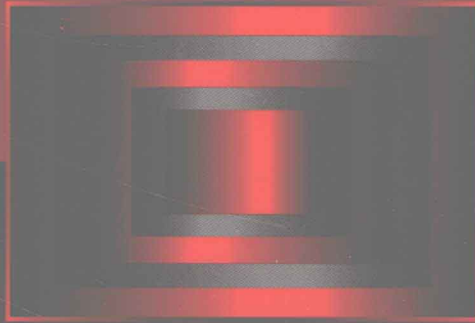Second Edition

Organizational COMMUNICATION for SURVIVAL

MAKING WORK, WORK

VIRGINIA P. RICHMOND
JAMES C. McCROSKEY

Organizational Communication For Survival

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SECOND EDITION

Virginia P. Richmond

West Virginia University

James C. McCroskey

West Virginia University

Preface

Whether we like it or not, most of us must go to work every day. Organizations are a fact of life for most people in modern societies. People spend most of their adult lives working within and for some type of organization. Even before one joins the workforce on a permanent basis, life in organizations has become commonplace—the elementary school, the secondary school, the college or university. Organizations are such an omnipresent facet of our lives that we usually take them for granted and never recognize the impact they have on our behavior.

A relatively small proportion of the population ever studies what it means to be a member of an organization; and those who do are generally people who hope to assume some managerial role in an organization. Hence, universities have entire schools, colleges, and departments devoted to such topics as business administration, public administration, educational administration, hospital administration, sports management, and hotel management. Unfortunately, most such programs focus on how to *manage* other people, not how to *be* managed.

We have titled our book *Organizational Communication for Survival*. We have chosen to focus on communication not only because it is our area of professional expertise, but also because communication is the vehicle by which management occurs—for good or ill. In short, it takes effective communication to make our work experiences work for us.

Our working subtitle was "A Peon Perspective." That early subtitle emphasizes our orientation: We shall direct primary attention to the roles we play in organizations as subordinates, since we are all subordinates of someone else and will be even though some day we may rise to a high supervisory position. There are always more "peons" than there are "bosses," and we are all "peons" before we become "bosses" unless our parents have the questionable sense to will us a wholly owned business before we take our first job!

As you read through this book, you may conclude that we have a pessimistic view of both organizations and people in organizations. Some of our colleagues who have read portions of the manuscript have labeled us "cynical." Although the distinction may be only a play on words, we prefer to describe our orientation as "realistic."

Many organizations indeed are dismal places to exist. Many managers would starve to death if they had to depend on their managerial skills to provide sustenance. And many subordinates couldn't care less about either the quality of their own work or the survival of the organization. If such observations justify labeling us as cynics, so be it. But our experiences with a variety of educational, business, and governmental organizations suggest such views are realistic. Certainly, not all organizations are dismal, all managers incompetent, or all subordinates uncaring. But these circumstances prevail a sufficiently large proportion of the time so that we cannot approach organizations with rose-colored glasses firmly in place. Were we to do so, our survival in the organization might be very brief.

This book, therefore, may be typified as a "survival guide for subordinates." Understanding and applying everything we discuss in this book will not guarantee that you will rise to a position of "boss," or even guarantee your survival in a given organization. But we think it will improve your chances of both. That is why we wrote it.

Many individuals have contributed to our thinking about communication in organizations and, hence, to the present book. We would particularly like to express our appreciation to Jerry Allen, Vernon Miller, Michigan State Universityand Tim Sellnow, North Dakota State University who reviewed the first edition of this book and made excellent suggestions for improvement. Finally, we wish to say a word of thanks to several managers under whom we have worked for making us understand the need for this book. It is never too late to learn.

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V.P.R.

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Contents

13 *Introducing Change*   *155*

14 *Disagreement, Conflict, and Groupthink*   *164*

15 *Effective Supervisory and Subordinate Relationships*   *179*

1

The Nature of Organizations

This is a book that proposes to talk to you about communicating competently in organizations. Although some people believe "competent communication" is "competent communication" no matter where it is practiced (whether you are trying to get a date, sell a car, teach a class, or get a job makes no real difference), we are of a mind that what makes a person a competent communicator in one environment may not make that same person a competent communicator in another environment. This is seen as a "contextual" view of communication competence.

Since we have adopted a contextual view, we are committed to the assumption that, to a major extent, what can be described as competent communication behavior is influenced by the context in which that communication behavior is performed. To understand competent communication behavior in organizations, then, you must first understand the basic nature of the context created by the presence of an organization. Although you have existed in organizations all of your life, you may never really have stopped to think about the characteristics of those organizations around you or how they function. To begin your examination of organizational communication, then, we think it important to take time for that consideration.

What is an organization? A simple definition of an organization is "a group of people working together to achieve common goal(s)." Although this seems very simplistic, it is a workable definition for many purposes. It clearly fits most work groups. However, most social groups, service groups, and religious groups also function very much like formal work-oriented organizations. They usually work together with some common goal in mind.

For definitional purposes here, let us also consider a more formalized definition of an organization. We may define an organization as "an organized collection of individuals working interdependently within a relatively structured, organized, open system to achieve common goals." The key to this definition is that people are *working together* in some organized fashion with a goal in mind. For example, in a major business corporation, although each unit may have various assignments, many of which do not overlap with other units, all units are still working to meet a common goal (produce a product or service). All units are assessed as to whether or not they can meet their individual goals as well as help the organization achieve its overall goals. In manufacturing systems, for example, there are many departments (design, production, marketing, shipping, etc.), but all work to achieve a common goal (to produce and sell a product). To work together within any organization requires communication. Communication provides the connections which keep the organization together.

Types of Organizations

Although most organizations have many things in common, they definitely are not all alike. There are basically two types of organizations: profit and nonprofit. Profit-based organizations have a "bottom line" that is concerned with how much money the company nets in a given period of time. You probably are familiar with some of the larger profit-based organizations in the United States, such as General Motors, IBM, Ford, United Airlines, General Mills, and General Electric. You have seen their advertisements since you were a child. Profit-based organizations must make a profit from selling the goods or services they provide or they will cease to exist. They must have a profit margin that keeps them "out of the red" or they will be bankrupt or be swallowed by some larger corporation. Although they may have many goals, the overall goal of these organizations has to be to "make money" or they will be in big trouble. Corporations such as Robert Hall Clothiers, Studebaker, and Underwood Typewriters—very large corporations that prospered in the past that you may never even have heard of—ceased to make the profits necessary to maintain themselves; hence they ceased to exist.

Nonprofit organizations have goals that are concerned with providing products or services also, but they do not have to make a profit while doing so. In fact, many nonprofit organizations are specifically designed to provide products or services for free or at a price below the actual cost of providing those products or services. Some common nonprofit groups are organizations such as churches, most educational institutions, the postal service, the social security administration, public hospitals, government-owned utilities, the military, and many charitable groups. The economic foundation of these

organizations is drawn from taxes, fees, and/or contributions. These organizations survive based on the number of persons they serve and the quality of the service provided. If a college has a continuing decline in enrollment, it will have to cut back on the number of personnel it employs. Eventually, if the decline continues, the college might cease to exist, as many did across the United States in the 1970s and 1980s. If the product or service is no longer needed, the organization providing that product or service is no longer needed.

Nonprofit organizations perpetuate themselves much like profit-based organizations do. They try to create or define a need among people and provide the means to satisfy that need in order to survive. Why are some branches of the government so large? Because they have managed to convince government officials and/or the general public that they are necessary to satisfy some need(s) of the people. Further, they continue to convince those same people that they are satisfying those needs.

In recent years, a new type of organization has developed in the United States—primarily as a function of tax laws and regulations. This type is known as "not-for-profit" organizations. This type of organization often is a spin-off from a non-profit organization. When a non-profit organization is able to provide services or products for which people are willing to pay amounts well beyond the needs of the non-profit organization for survival, it can run afoul of the tax regulations which do not permit making such profits without paying taxes.

When these organizations reorganize as not-for-profit organizations, they can avoid the taxes. They can "donate" their profits to non-profit organizations of their choice. They can also pay members of their Board of Directors and other employees very high salaries and bonuses, if they choose. Many of these organizations function essentially like for-profit organizations. They can buy property, including other similar organizations, and expand into extremely large organizations. Many medical systems have followed this pattern. Although these organizations are considered not-for-profit organizations by the Internal Revenue Service (IRS), if the income (what people other than the IRS would call "profits") stops coming in, the organization will cease to exist. Hence, for our purposes here, we will consider "not-for-profit" organizations as just a special case of "for-profit" organizations. They are very much like one another, and very different than truly "non-profit" organizations.

Common Characteristics of All Organizations

All organizations have some common characteristics. Let us consider a few of those.

System.   All organizations are systems. By "systems" we mean that all units or parts within the organization are interrelated and interdependent and depend on one another to make the whole organization functional. For example, to make the total organization a success, a clothing manufacturing organization depends on subsystems of designers, cutters, machine operators, packagers, sales persons, distributors, and so on. If one subsystem within the total system fails, it can impact the overall system. For example, if the cutters go on strike, the work of the machine operators might be forced to stop. If the sales persons are unable to sell the clothing, the production subsystems must be shut down. In other words, each of the parts of the overall system must work well or the larger system may fail. Your car is a system. If the fan belt in your car fails, the entire car stops, not just the fan. Any change in a system has the potential for impacting the total organization. The magnitude of the change will determine the magnitude of the impact on the system.

 Systems vary in the degree to which they are open to outside influences. Closed systems tend to have limited interaction with the environment; open systems have more. The more open an organizational system is, the more communication it has with those outside the system. Closed organizational systems center their communication on the people within that system. Each organization is a system with relative degrees of openness. Some organizations are clearly more open than others. Most of the major corporations in the United States have to maintain very open systems. If they do not, they won't survive. They depend substantially on interactions with people and organizations outside their formal organizational boundaries for success, or even survival. Some organizations, however, can be more closed and still maintain themselves. For example, the Amish in Pennsylvania have been able to establish and maintain a nearly closed system while at the same time not suffering what they see to be any significant losses. They attempt to sustain a self-sufficient community that does not depend on interactions with people and organizations outside their own boundaries for success or survival. Whereas General Motors must maintain an open system in order not to suffer, the Amish do not need to do so. Thus, although there are exceptions like Amish communities, organizations generally must communicate effectively with individuals and organizations beyond their own boundaries to prosper.

Rules.   Organizations have routine patterns established through formal or informal rules which they expect members to follow. Organizations usually have a high value for the written word, particularly when it comes to formal rules. Hence, formalized routines often are distributed to new employees in an "employee handbook." These routine rules are usually well-defined policies and procedures, such as the time the workday begins or ends. Every organization has routine patterns or procedures members are expected to

follow. Some organizations require that personnel file certain forms if they are sick, take a vacation, or need a day off. Other organizations require that people wear certain types of clothing while at work and not appear in other environments in their work apparel. Routine patterns may change as a person's status changes in the organization. For example, policies and patterns for a new person might not be the same as for one who has been in the organization for several years. There might be different policies for supervisors than for their subordinates. However, some routine patterns will be the same for all. The rules vary depending on the organization. The formal rules usually are explained to you when you first enter an organization. It usually is easy to learn the less-formal rules by watching others at your same level or by asking your supervisor if you are in doubt.

Roles. Every employee in every organization has assigned duties or roles he or she is expected to perform. In fact, this is usually one of the reasons a person is hired by an organization Engineers are hired because they can perform engineering roles, salespersons are hired because they can sell, teachers are hired because they can teach, and so on. As an employee, you are likely to be evaluated in large part on your ability to perform your assigned role. Managers examine your performance periodically to determine if you are accomplishing your assigned duties (roles) in an acceptable manner. If you are not, you may be given a warning or be terminated by the organization.

Hierarchy. All organizations have a chain of command—an established hierarchy of authority levels. This structure determines who reports to whom and who is in charge of what. Usually the chain of command is very clear in an organization. In fact, many organizations provide all incoming employees with a flowchart that outlines the various levels in the organization and how they are related. Such "organizational charts" specify the formal chain of command in the organization. A representation of the formal organizational structure often is included in the employee handbook.

It is very important that you know who is your immediate supervisor, and most organizations take care to make certain that information is available to everyone. When that is not the case, major problems can result. We recall consulting with the leadership of a technical organization that believed it had a major communication problem. After interviewing employees at several levels of the organization, we found the employees thought the major problem was that no one ever knew who was in charge of what. There was a manager on paper, but in an effort to increase employee participation in decision making (certainly a desirable objective), he had delegated so many duties, without informing those below him who was delegated what, that most people did not know whom to go to when they had problems. When we asked individual employees who their immediate supervisor was, many couldn't say. The head secretary was the only one who seemed to

understand most of what was going on, and she was irritated because she had "too many bosses." The organization needed a clear cut, precise breakdown of hierarchical levels. Effective organizational communication is virtually impossible in a "disorganized organization."

Norms.   It is not unusual to find norms (both formal and informal) in all organizations. Norms are established patterns or standards accepted by most members of the organization. They are what people in the organization do and what they believe is the "right" thing to do. Some norms exist for such a long time they become formalized into rules—such as men wearing ties while working. However, many norms are not formally expressed. You, as a new employee, have to learn about these norms as well as you can. You may not be told about some of the norms because everyone else simply takes them for granted. It is not that they are "secret," but just that adherence to norms becomes habitual behavior that is performed regularly without much thought or reflection. For example, employees in one organization in which we consulted liked to have "bag lunch sessions" each Friday (rather than going to a restaurant, as they did the rest of the week) so they could talk frankly with their supervisor. This was done so often, it became a formalized norm. A new supervisor started off on a very bad footing when he went out for lunch the first Friday he was there. No one told him about the bag lunch norm. In the same organization, the norm was that older, more-established employees occasionally could wear bluejeans to work, but the newer, less-established employees could not. No one told this to one of the new employees. He noticed that some of his co-workers wore jeans to work, so one day he did so too. He was very surprised when he received several rather derogatory comments about his dress from co-workers, and his supervisor suggested he dress more appropriately in the future. Because he violated a norm he did not even know existed, he communicated a "superiority" attitude to his co-workers.

There are many informal norms in all organizations—all employees need to know the norms so they don't inadvertently violate them. For example, in one organization we worked with, the manager would put a "do not disturb sign" on her door when she was working on the budget. Although she generally maintained an "open door" policy, all the older employees knew the sign meant "budget time" and to leave her alone. Some of the new employees didn't, but were quickly informed about the sign so they wouldn't get in trouble. Many norms can be learned only by being in the system and listening and watching what other, more-established personnel do. Although it is not fair to you as a new employee, you are expected in most organizations to adhere to the unwritten and unspoken norms from the day you join the organization. The norms exist because the people think they are "right" and that "good" employees follow them. If you do not, you are seen as doing things "wrong" and as not

being a "good" employee. The best rule to follow when you are uncertain what is considered appropriate is to ask someone who has been in the organization for some time. "When in doubt, check it out."

Many progressive organizations recognize that new employees engage in inappropriate behaviors simply because they do not know any better. Sometimes the effect of such inappropriate behaviors is so negative that the new employee has little chance for long-term success in the organization. Hence, the organization tries to prevent such problems from occurring by appointing a "mentor" for each new employee. A mentor usually is a person with experience in the organization to whom the new employee can go for advice with regard to what behaviors are appropriate and what ones are inappropriate. Unfortunately, most organizations do not have mentoring programs. Hence, it is important that you try to make friends with one or more experienced people in the organization so that you can turn to them for such mentoring assistance. In the absence of such mentoring, you are highly likely to make serious mistakes that will jeopardize your position in the organization.

Similarity. Organizations create pressure to achieve similarity among their employees. They have a need for their employees to be similar in attitudes, beliefs, values, and goals. This is not just a form of bias that permeates organization; increased similarity among people makes for better working relationships and better communication. Although neither the leaders of the organization nor the rank-and-file employees may have read the results of the research that has demonstrated these facts, they both are likely to be intuitively aware that people who are alike get along better with one another. Hence, if you do not fit the norms of the organization or seem deviant in some significant way, you are likely to be encouraged to leave the organization and seek work elsewhere.

Managers want people who "see eye to eye" with them on most issues. As employees, we want co-workers who think like us and have similar goals because it makes communication easier and more open. It is more difficult to communicate with someone who has goals and values that are different from your own. The principle of similarity can be succinctly stated: The more similar two communicators are, the more likely they are to interact with one another, and the more likely it is that their communication will be successful. If you wish to survive in any organization, it would be wise to emphasize your similarities with others around you and deemphasize your differences.

Status. Organizations usually create clear-cut status distinctions between levels of employees. As we noted previously, there is a chain of command in most organizations that defines formal status in the organization. But there also is informal status. There may be managers and employees, but some