

The Increasingly Indispensable Role of Communication in Organizations

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Introduction

There are many widespread views with regard to the nature of communication and interpersonal competence within organizations. At one end of the spectrum, there are those who tend to see the ability to communicate effectively as something innate, that cannot be readily improved upon through education and training. At the other end of the spectrum is the view that skills in interpersonal competence can be developed just as one can learn motor skills, or a foreign language (Kogler-Hill, 1982). Nowadays, few adhere completely to the former view. Indeed the pendulum has swung so far the other way, that now there are those who make the claim that the terms communication and organization are virtually interchangeable (Smith, 1993; Taylor, 1995). From this point of view, improving communication within organizations leads directly to improvement in organizations and vice-versa.

This paper identifies three themes that emerge from a review of relevant selection of the literature on organizational behavior, and provides an overview and a synthesis of the findings of these studies. Taken together, these three themes all point toward an even greater need for communication in organizations, in terms of both significance and sophistication. In this way, this paper provides more concrete evidence to support the observation that “The emphasis on communication in organizations is growing rapidly” as seen by the fact that in 1992, there were already 72 associations of organizations concerned with organizational communication in the United States alone (Haney, 1992, p.3).

The first theme looks at the inter-relatedness of organizational components. A review of the literature suggests that it is becoming apparent just how complex modern organizations are, and how the various aspects of such organizations are inter-related in mutually interdependent ways. Making adjustments and changes to any one part of the organizations seems to have repercussions throughout the rest of the organization—sometimes without much apparent effect, but at other times with considerable effect.

The second theme looks at the uniqueness of each organization. Here, it appears that it is becoming more and more difficult to develop general axioms of organizational behavior that are free of contextual exceptions and qualifications. It is becoming increasingly apparent that each organization is as unique as each of the individuals it is comprised of, and thus general principles that might be expected to apply to many

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organizations, have to be tempered by the particularities of each organization.

The third theme looks at the often-ignored role of politics in organizations, and suggests that it can no longer be realistically overlooked. It is as real as any other aspect of the organization and needs to be taken into account accordingly, despite the significant obstacles this may present for organizations.

The studies reviewed in this paper were selected on the basis of two criteria of representativeness. First of all, they are representative of studies undertaken in the field of organizational development the more highly researched areas of selection, training, performance appraisal, job redesign, and teamwork. Secondly all the studies reviewed here have taken place since 1990, and most of them within the last few years or so, and are thus representative of the field at present.

The Inter-Relatedness of Organizational Components

Perhaps there is no more appropriate place to begin this review of studies that demonstrate inter-relatedness within organizations than with the individual's first contact with the organization through the selection process. The basic idea behind the selection procedure is that certain individuals will be better suited to an organization, or a specific role in an organization, than others. This is often referred to as person-organization fit. On the one hand are the various ways in which an individual can be assessed, such as personality and bio-data, and on the other hand are those aspects of the organization that have been identified as most relevant for the person-organization fit. However, the situation is not static, but dynamic. Once a person actually enters an organization, the socialization process they undergo, and the training they are likely to receive play a significant part in determining how well the person does finally fit into the organization, and how well he or she is able to meet the objectives the organization has in mind for the individual.

Thus, in order to understand more fully, what determines a suitable person-organization fit for any particular person and/or organization, more information is needed. For example, it is not only a matter of determining what kind of person is going to best fit into the organization, but it is also necessary to determine what kind of person is going to benefit from what kind of training in order to make the greatest contribution to the organization (Baldwin & Magjuka, 1991; McManus & Kelly, 1999). And one of the main issues related to training is the means by which value judgements on its relative worth are made (Alliger, Tannenbaum, Bennet, Jr., Traver, & Shotland, 1997). Related to the issue of what is the most appropriate way to evaluate a training program, is the issue of what is the most appropriate way to evaluate the performance of employees within any given organization—performance appraisal, because one of the most relevant criteria for evaluating training has to do with the subsequent on-the-job performance of the trainee (Gist & Bavetta, 1990). Thus performance appraisal in effect is closely related to determining the relative benefits of a training session as well as determining how well any given individual in an organization is performing in general.

Far from always providing reliable objective data on employees, performance appraisals have been found to be sometimes significantly influenced by their purpose, in particular whether they are to be used for research purposes (perhaps training evaluation) or for administrative purposes that relate directly to the employee's career (Harris & Smith, 1995; Jawahar & Williams, 1997). Thus, it is not surprising to find that some researchers have considered the possibility of including subjective self-ratings in performance

appraisals as well (Atwater & Ostroff, 1998; Williams & Levy, 1992). Given the intensely personal nature of performance appraisals, it is also not surprising that they represent a highly controversial and politicized aspect of modern organizations. And it should be noted that competing metaphors for performance appraisals have been put forward—employment tests, and due process (Williams & Levy; Werner & Bolino, 1997)—as organizations grapple with the task of determining just how and where they fit into the modern organization.

Another aspect of both the selection process and subsequent performance appraisals has to do with the degree of fulfillment that employees are likely to experience in their role within the organization. Indeed, this is one of the cornerstones upon which the entire organizational development approach is built (Argyris, 1997; Clement, 1992; Fagenson & Burke, 1990). And one of the more promising ways to foster such individual fulfillment in organizations has been through the development of self-directed work teams (Argyris; McMahan & Woodman, 1992; Yeatts & Hyten, 1998). Yet without considerable organization-wide commitment to the building of such teams that includes senior management being committed as well, integration with other key business and human resource systems, appropriate training and resources, and consideration for the degree of support for an organization's business strategy, and the culture of the organization, teams are unlikely to fulfill the expectations most organizations have of them (Recardo & Jolly, 1997). In fact a review of the literature shows that some of the reasons why teams do fall short of expectations has to do with such diverse issues as "overly high expectations, group compensation, training, career development, and power" (Sherman, Bohlander, & Snell, 1998, p.112).

Another way of approaching the issue of individual fulfillment in organizations—related to one of the interventions favored by the organizational development approach—has to do with job design and redesign (Hackman & Oldham, 1989; Sherman, et al., 1998). Yet, again, the degree to which job design is inter-connected with other aspects of the organization becomes clear in the way that so many studies in this area focus on the connection between job design and such things as compensation (Campion & Berger, 1990), unions (Garen, 1999), health (May & Schwoerer, 1994), and effort (Walsh & Tseng, 1998) to name but a few. Indeed, there are those who suggest that merely making adjustments to jobs alone without also making systematic organization-wide changes to those parts of the organization most related to job redesign is unlikely to provide either greater efficiency for the organization, or greater satisfaction for those in the jobs, in the long run (Montebello & Kunin, 1991).

It is not surprising that Argyris (1997) sees more than a semantic similarity between organisms and organizations. He uses the model of the interdependence of the constituent parts of any organism as a very real way of describing how inter-related all the aspects of organizations are whether this be by accident or design. On this basis, the growth of organizations and the individuals they comprise becomes more or less symbiotic to the extent that it is not really meaningful in the long term to discuss one without the other.

Whatever might be the practitioner's particular philosophy in terms of implementing change within an organization, one point that all these studies would appear to agree on is that making changes in one place will almost inevitably have repercussions in other places as well. They may be large or they may be small. They may be beneficial, or they may be a hindrance. Thus, although there may be questions over just how welcome such repercussions are, and hypotheses and predictions over their nature, their existence should be in little doubt. Taken together, this points toward organizations being made up of many inextricably inter-related components that exercise mutual influence on each other, and hence on the organization as a

whole. Essentially, whether this mutual interaction has a positive or negative effect on the organization is determined by the quality of the communication that is involved in such interaction.

Organizational Uniqueness

Once it is clear how inter-related all the components of an organization are, it is easier to see why every organization must be distinct from all others. While they may be made up of similar components, the components themselves are unlikely to be related to each other in quite the same ways. Many studies point to the situation-specificity of organizations, and thus acknowledge the limitations to the generalizability of their results.

McManus and Kelly (1999), for example, in a study on selection processes were interested in “the extent to which a theoretically based set of personality measures can add incremental validity to an existing biodata instrument in terms of predicting both traditional (task) and expanded (contextual) dimensions of performance in the life insurance industry” (p.137). Not only is generalizing beyond the life insurance industry problematic, but even generalizing within it could be problematic as well. McManus and Kelley base their study on representatives from five different insurance companies. While such breadth surely adds to the overall representativeness of the life insurance industry, the fact that they were not at liberty to randomly select them, detracts from their ability to be a representative sample of that population. Although his study was not directly related to selection processes, Dyer (1997) argued convincingly for noting the many and significant differences between the kind of large Fortune 500 companies that are the focus of several studies (McMahan & Woodman, 1992), and the small entrepreneurial firms that are in the numerical majority.

Staying with the issue of selection processes, it should be noted that when dealing with the distinctiveness of organizations, this refers to more than narrowing the focus down to one specific industry, or one specific size or type of organization, or even to the one organization itself. Westphal and Zajac (1995) were able to show that the process through which a new CEO is selected has very little in common with the way that most other people are selected to work for any given organization. And once we acknowledge the increasing globalization of organizations then it becomes apparent that even the selection processes for the same positions in the same organizations can differ markedly when they are carried out in different countries with different cultures (Ryan, McFarland, Baron & Page, 1999).

When it comes to training, the demand for relevance virtually demands situation-specific training sessions. The typical pattern for developing a training program begins with a needs assessment (Lewis, Lewis & Souflée, 1991; Sherman, et al., 1998). This lack of uniformity creates a complex task for researchers interested in making comparisons between the relative effectiveness of training programs, and explains why there is such a paucity of such comparisons in the literature (Morrow, Jarret & Rupinski, 1997).

Perhaps the clearest examples of how it is the specificity of organizations and the particularity of their situations that play such a large part in determining the effects of interventions can be seen in the use of work teams. Attempts to implement teams by following the same procedures that have proven successful elsewhere have not met with the same results (Sherman, et al., 1998; Yeatts & Hyten, 1998). Even when all else is equal, the very fact that the particular individuals involved are different plays a highly significant role in determining the outcome of teamwork (Yeatts & Hyten). In one study of a rather problematic implementation

of teamwork at a garment manufacturing company in the United Kingdom, Ezzamel and Willmott (1998) found that there were very mixed results amongst the various teams depending largely on their make-up, and on the influence of certain key individuals in some of the teams.

One of the main reasons for conducting research in organizational behavior is to discover more about how organizations operate in order to predict future outcomes with greater accuracy. However, such knowledge is becoming increasingly organization- and situation-specific in order to meet the demands of reliability. While this is also necessary in order to meet internal validity demands, the degree of generalizability of the knowledge obtained, and hence its usefulness to practitioners engaged in a broad range of organizations becomes limited. Thus the importance of approaching each organization with a similar degree of openness is matched by the importance of how relevant information about organizations is gathered. Once again, the role of communication is paramount in determining the relative success or failure of that process.

The Political Dimension

According to Bolman and Deal(1997):

Managers frequently learn that getting ahead is a matter of personal “credibility,” which comes from doing what is socially and politically correct. Definitions of political correctness reflect tacit forms of power deeply embedded in organizational patterns and structure (Frost, 1986). Because getting ahead and making it to the top dominate the attention of many managers (Dalton, 1959; Jackall, 1988; Ritti and Funkhouser, 1982), both organizations and individuals need to develop constructive and positive ways to master the political game. The question is not whether organizations will have politics but rather what kind of politics they will have. Will political contests be energizing or debilitating, hostile or constructive, devastating or creative? (p.174)

The tone of the authors in this passage suggests that the role of politics in organizations is not always openly acknowledged or spoken about. They go to lengths to make the point that politics in organizations is inevitable and ignoring that fact is done at the peril of all those who are subject to its influence—essentially everyone in the organization. The depth to which politics comes into play in organizations can be seen in this quote in a publication on performance appraisal, reviewed by Summer and Scholtes (1999),

“...it would be rather naïve to think of performance appraisal as anything other than a political process. Pating accurately is not always the goal of appraisers and there are many situations where providing inaccurate appraisal data is sound management.” (p.177)

What is perhaps even more revealing, however is the way that Summer and Scholtes preface this quote, describing it as “an extraordinary admission” (p.177). There is a suggestion here that while the reality of politics in organizations is not really news to anyone, admitting that publicly, is. However, as evidenced by the quote from Bolman and Deal above, this is changing. Now, it would appear that acknowledging the

enormous political influence on decision-making in organizations is becoming a growing trend.

According to Clement (1992), researchers in organizational development up to the late 1970s tended to ignore organizational politics in their formal research, even though he surmises that researchers must have had to confront issues related to power and politics in the regular course of their work. Clement is able to show that this is no longer the case—citing studies that show researchers taking organizational politics into consideration in their studies and findings. In some cases there are even suggestions that practitioners “be capable of both (1) playing the politics and power game when necessary and (2) recognizing when others in the organization are doing so” (Clement, p.9). Clement does not go as far as suggesting that consultants should become political advocates or activists. Rather, he suggests, by way of example that:

the consultant might “manipulate” the design of a survey to make sure it is compatible with the situation within which the survey will be used. The resulting survey might not be exactly what management originally intended, but employees will respond openly to it. The overriding point here is that, over the course of an OD effort, able consultants do need to deal willingly with political issues. (p.9)

A key issue related to power and politics is conflict. According to Bolman and Deal, taking a political perspective on organizations means “that in the face of enduring differences and scarce resources, conflict is inevitable and power is a key resource. Scarce resources force trade-offs. Enduring differences ensure that parties will disagree on both what and how to decide” (p, 164). While the issue of conflict is not restricted to work-teams, much of the research in the area of conflict is related to the kinds of conflicts that take place there. And theorists have not arrived at a unanimous decision on the relative benefit or harm that can result from intra-organizational conflict (Jehn, 1995). In general, there has been a swing away from the view that it is harmful, toward the view that under certain circumstances, it can be beneficial. In his study of intra-group conflict, Jehn found mixed results that only somewhat supported this latter view. Indeed one of the key findings was “that conflict is a complex phenomenon that, in an organizational context, can be interpersonal or task-focused, destructive or productive, and can be managed, ignored, or barely tolerated” (p.269).

Perhaps another reason that political issues have been forced to the fore has to do with some of the practical realities that have accompanied such interventions as teamwork. For example, Sherman, et al. point out that one of the difficulties of supervisors of newly created workteams has been dealing with the perceived threat that accompanies the increased power that teams often obtain. Watson and Bossley (1995) were able to investigate such difficulties and found some line supervisors having difficulties with the duties associated with becoming team advisors and facilitators rather than carrying out their usual duties of giving directives and administering discipline.

However, it still seems likely that the issue of conflict is more apparent and open to be studied in workteams because of the somewhat egalitarian model that most teams are based on. Where organizations remain pyramidal, conflict is usually much more subtle and played out through less overt political games (Argyris, 1997) often involving factions and coalitions as well (Sherman et al.). And given that decisions in this situation still tend to be made and implemented in a top-down way, Argyris contends that they also tend to be less rational. Thus, while Clement may be right in his observation that the role of politics in organizations is increasingly coming under scrutiny, it would appear that there is still much to be done in this

area before the real extent of its influence is fully acknowledged and appreciated.

Conclusion

Each one of these three themes suggests that modern organizations are becoming increasingly more difficult to study in any kind of piecemeal fashion, such as trying to isolate relevant variables, manipulate them and then measure the outcomes. The very act of manipulation alters so many other variables, that it could be argued that it is not really possible to say that once the manipulation is carried out, that it is the same organization any more. And given the uniqueness of each organization, the utility of such generalized knowledge would appear to be rather limited as well.

Against that background, the methodological problems associated with attempts to account for the political dimension of organizations are no longer enough to provide sufficient rationale to ignore this dimension. This is a direct result of the increasingly widespread recognition of how important the political dimension is to understanding how any given organization operates. On the basis of Putnam et al. (1997) making the case for the mutual interdependence of the shape of organizations and the flow of communication within them, it could be reasonably argued that the willingness to tackle political issues in organizations has emerged along with the communication and research tools that are adequate for the task. As training and education in interpersonal competence and communication has developed and begun to take effect, the task of taking on political issues in organizations has become more realistic and manageable. Along with that, research techniques that are more holistic and less invasive have allowed for confirmation of the effects of innovations in communication and interpersonal competence.

One constant that emerges from all of this uncertainty for organizations is the increasing need for improving communication systems and competency. For today's post-modern organizations, improving the flow of communication in organizations can no longer realistically be considered an option; it is a fundamental necessity. It needs to be widespread and it needs to be integrated. Without it, organizations make themselves vulnerable in ways that will almost certainly challenge their long term viability, if not their very existence.

Recent research strongly suggests that the role of education and training in improving individual's communication competence and skills has never been more vital and relevant than now. Thus a view that was considered radical when it was first posited by such people as Smith (1993) and Taylor (1995)—that communicating and organizing are isomorphic, that is, that communicating is organizing, and organizing is communicating—will in all likelihood soon become a central tenet of the field of organizational communication.

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