

Organizations are Communication

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Organizational Communication is a topic that has been around for many years, and numerous specialists have studied the various components of these complex structures aiming to best understand the true workings of said communication systems. However, for years, these specialists have been looking at communication as its own separate system, acting apart from the organizations of study. It wasn't until Matthew A. Koschmann, associate professor in the department of Communication at the University of Colorado Boulder began his research that a new way to relate communications to organizations was uncovered. In his research, Koschmann focused on organizational communication and collaboration with an emphasis on the civil society sector and nonprofit organizations. Koschmann took an approach that opposed traditional container theories of his constituents, but rather focused on the organization as an embodiment of communication. This approach allows for better understanding of the complex natures of not just civil society sectors or nonprofit organizations, but all organizations which have a communication structure—essentially every organization. Koschmann's unique theory proves organizations should be seen as communication rather than a container for communication because organizations are far too complex for communication to just mean the transmission of information.

Many people believe that traditional views of organizational communication are sufficient and in depth looks at communication structures are unnecessary. However this is what Koschmanns calls a “flat earth” approach, meaning “a perspective that seems correct from a

limited vantage point because it ‘works’ for much of our day-to-day lives, but ultimately it fails to account for the complexity of a situation” (Koschmann). To best understand this complex theory on organizational communication, and to understand these structures as a whole, we must break down the two approaches to communication, informational and constitutive approaches. With this foundation we can better understand the conventional and sophisticated approaches to organizational communication as a whole, and how both are pertinent in understanding organizational communication.

Communication at its surface level seems mundane, and for many people communication will never amount to anything more than the simple sending and receiving of information, also known as the transmission model as explained by Robert Craig (Miller 12). This model of communication is the basis of what the majority of people understand communication to be. It “describes communication as a one-way, linear process where the sender encodes a message and transmits it through a channel to a receiver who decodes it” (Miller, 11) This model is extremely important in our lives and especially in organizational communication. Without this simplistic communication data and ideas couldn't be shared, products wouldn't be ordered, and the entire world as we know it would not be. Much of our lives are accomplished through transmission models of communication. However, when we begin describing organizations as simply the container of these simplistic communications we begin to run into issues.

When we are discussing the complex structure of an organization we must begin to challenge our thinking of communication. We can adopt a more indepth approach of communication called constitutive communication. “Scholars call this a constitutive view of communication because communication literally ‘constitutes,’ or ‘makes up’ our social world”(Koschmann). This constitutive approach adopts the idea that when transferring

information, you aren't just transferring words. You are transferring a message which has impacts and effects in the real world. A way to conceptualize this idea best is to think of yourself as a startup company. You are pitching your product to an investor and can go about pitching your message in many ways. However, in your head, you have a motive which is likely for your investor to invest. As such, you will go about your communication in ways which reflect your motive. Your words or communication are not just words; they have so much more meaning in this situation. Failure to appropriately communicate through constitutive models could result in company failure which becomes a perpetual spiral of real world effects.

In understanding these two approaches to communication—transmission and constitutive—we can better understand the respective conventional and sophisticated methods of organizational communication. “Craig doesn’t think we should stop at the simple choice between a transmission model and a constitutive model. Instead, he suggests we complicate our thinking” (Miller 13). The conventional approach to organizational communication stems off of the transmission communication model. The transmission model or conventional method of organizational communication describes an organization as being a container with communication within it. This approach treats communication and organization as separate things and often is referred to as the container metaphor. The organization being the container, and—like a container—it shapes its internal components, thus shaping the communication within. This model is simplistic and in terms of transmitting communication models, it is a flat earth approach to a far more complex situation.

If we look at organizational communication through a more sophisticated approach, we can see organizations as communications themselves. This approach does a much better job at representing the complexities of an organization and explaining the overall structure. If you think

about the core of an organization, it is a group of people all coming together with a purpose (Cambridge). Now, if we think back to our constitutive communication model, we can relate these two models. Our constitutive communication model describes communication as purposeful conversations or interactions—an organization of people who all come together for a purpose. It only makes sense that the foundation of an organization is its people and their purpose as without it an organization is nothing. That being said, it is only appropriate to describe organizations, in a very in depth way, as the communication which make up that organization.

Through understanding the fundamentals of two extremely important communication models as well as the differences between conventional and sophisticated organizational communication models, we can begin to grasp the complex nature of these communications and Koschman's overall unique theory. The simplistic nature of transmission communication fails to accurately represent the complexities of organizations and their communications. However, the transmission method is still a crucial part of organizational communication. Koshmann's unique theory allows us to do just that. By adopting a more sophisticated view of organization communication—organizations as communication—we are able to best represent the complex nature of organizations and the conversations and interactions that constitute them.

Citations

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