

Unit One

The Social Construction of Organizations

Lesson 1.1:
What is Organizational Communication?

Welcome to the social construction of organizations at unit one lesson one.
What is organizational communication?

What is organizational communication?

You've taken a few classes at this point in the Bachelor of Professional Studies degree, so you have an idea of what it is we mean when we say organizational communication, and what we mean by communication being intricately woven with other things that we do in organizations including leadership. And, what we're going to do today is work on that definition a little bit and get it such that you really can wrap your hands around that and very articulately answer people when they ask you what is it that you're studying and what can you do with that.

Today, you will proudly:

- Define organizational communication
- Discover the power of interaction, and the role of self, identity and context
- Decide which model of communication you believe best explains how meaning is made
- Understand structuration theory and how it applies to life
- View organizations as dynamic and discursive in nature

So after today's lesson, you will be able to very clearly and plainly define organizational communication. You'll see just how powerful interaction is and how every time we have an interaction, every time we communicate there is a role that ourselves, our identity, and the context that we're in play. You'll decide which model of communication we're going to talk about, best explains how you believe meaning happens. You will understand what we mean when we say structuration theory and how it does actually apply to life and you will have a view of organizations as dynamic and discursive in nature.

Organizational communication

The interaction required to direct a group toward a common goal.
The act of creating and adapting effective messages for all stakeholders.

There is a text definition for organization communication and that is the interaction required to direct a group toward a common goal. If we look at that definition, we can see just how broad that is and how many different facets of organizational life it encompasses. A better way, I think, to understand what we mean when we say organizational communication is to think in terms of what we do with it, and what we do with it is we create and adapt and change and alter effective messages for all of an organization's stakeholders. And that would include internal stakeholders such as, employees and external stakeholders such as the community, shareholders, anyone involved with, in anyway with the organization and its operation.

When we talk...

- We shape our identity and our sense of self
- As our sense of self develops, our **worldviews** are created
 - The habitual ways of viewing the world that are unique to individuals

So, let's start off talking about what happens when we talk. We actually shape our very identity and our sense of who we are when we talk to other people. It's very difficult to define our sense of identity and who we are without reference to other people. So, when we talk about our identity, we talk about being a sister, or a brother, or a mother, or an aunt, or a child, or whatever it is that is in that is relative to other people, and that is because we develop that sense of self through interacting with other people. And, as we develop our sense of self, we're developing what we call world views, and world views are basically the habitual ways that we view the world and these are unique to individuals and changing. So, our world view, the way we view things in the world has a historical element, in that obviously we bring to every interaction a history and mental frames and ways of viewing the world and those are changing, so our world views from five or 10 years ago are certainly different than our world views today.

Talk consists of:

- Self
- Other
- Context (Relationship and situation)

So, when we think about interaction and we think about what does talk mean, we have to look at the elements, and the elements are ourselves, the other person, and the context. So, when we communicate, we are simultaneously communicating on a number of different levels. We're communicating a meaning through what we're saying, but we're also communicating what our relationship with other people is. And, you know that if you talk with a supervisor or someone that you manage, that relationship alters the way that you communicate with that person.

Major approaches to organizational communication

- Communication as:
 1. Information transfer
 2. Transactional process
 3. Strategic control
 4. Balance of creativity and constraint

Viewing organizations as dialogues borrows from all four approaches!

Today, we're going to talk about actually five major approaches to organizational communication to give us a foundation to work from as we work through this class. So, we're going to look at communication as information transfer, as transactional process, as strategic control, and as a balance of creativity and constraint. And the fifth way that we're going to view organizational communication is to view that organizational communication or organizations rather as dialogue, which is an approach that borrows from all four of the other approaches.

1. Information transfer

- Communication is linear, or one-way.
- Meaning is carried entirely in the words we use.
- Others are capable of interpreting our thoughts and feelings exactly as we intended through our words.

The first model of communication that we're going to look at is communication as information transfer. Think of a telegraph wire, in the early days when that was our main method of communicating across distances, people would simply take a, usually a written message, to a telegraph operator who would tap that out and it would be received on the other end by someone else. This model assumes that that's how communication happens. That communication is essentially linear or one way, and that there is no feedback loop that alters the way the words were intended or the meaning on the receiver's side. So, using this model of communication as information transfer, then we are assuming that meaning is carried entirely in the words that we use and that others are capable of interpreting those thoughts and feelings that we have exactly the way we intended just by reading the words that we write or the words or hearing the words that we say.

The information transfer model: What is problematic?

- Receivers are passive.
- Communication is simple.
- Everyone interprets a message the same way.
- Nothing is communicated nonverbally.

Obviously this is problematic in a few ways. First of all, it assumes that the receivers of our messages are passively receiving what we're saying, they're not interpreting our words in anyway using their own mental models or their own views of the world or their world views or with any feeling other than what we intended. This model assumes that communication is a simple process, and as anybody who's been alive for any amount of time knows, communication is not a simple process. The information transfer model also assumes that everyone interprets a message the same way. Again, we know that we can say one thing to 10 different people and there can be 10 different definitions of what we meant, or interpretations of what we meant from each person. This model also assumes that nothing we communicate is communicated non verbally, and we know that there are estimates that range anywhere from 80% upward that that calculate the amount of our meaning that is actually communicated non verbally, or in other words some estimates are that we communicate 80% or more of what we mean through nonverbal communication.

2. Transactional process

- People are continuously sending and receiving messages.
- Meaning is entirely created and maintained in our heads.

The second model of communication we're going to look at today is communication as transactional process. When we view communication as a transaction, we are assuming that people are continuously sending and receiving messages all the time. And that meaning happens in our head. So, I have something that I want to tell you and you are going to hear me and understand me in your head. We aren't, in other words, we aren't going to create any meaning, we aren't going to change any meaning, we aren't going to create any meaning outside of what exists in our own minds.

The transactional process model: What is problematic?

- People share the same meanings and interpret things the same way.
- Communication is clear and not ambiguous.
- People do not communicate with ulterior motives.

So, again, there are some challenges with this model. Communication as transactional process assumes that people share the same meanings and interpret things the same way, similar to the first model, information transfer. In the transactional process model, communication is assumed to be clear and not ambiguous, and we assume that people don't communicate with ulterior motives. So let's look at each of these. Clearly, people don't share the same meanings and they don't interpret things the same way. Communication is often ambiguous and people, sometimes deliberately communicate in ways that are less than 100% clear to achieve their own end. And, sometimes, this is not a completely negative thing. Sometimes it's essential to us not to be clear in our communication. People obviously do have ulterior motives when they communicate with us, things are not as simple as what they appear to be on the surface. So, these are the problems with the transactional process model of communication.

The strategic control model of communication

- Communication is a tool for controlling people and the environment.
- Situations present constraints that people need to consider in communicating.
 - This requires adapting multiple goals
- Organized action, not shared meaning, is the primary goal of communication.

The strategic control model of communication assumes that communication is a tool for controlling people and the environment. Looking at this from an organizational point of view, communication viewing communication as strategic control puts the power in the hands of those who control the company. So, this is a very top down sort of view of communication, although communication can certainly be the meaning of what particular message has can certainly be distorted from anyone at any level in the company, it can happen upward as well. But, when we talk about strategic control, we usually mean how a company strives to control its employees strategically. So, situations then present constraints that people have to consider in communicating. Obviously, there are multiple goals. People aren't that simple as they, we don't view people as simple as we did in the first two models. So, people have multiple and different and sometimes competing goals and we have to consider those in order to achieve the control that we desire under this model. Under the strategic control model then, shared meaning is not the primary goal of communication, rather organized action is.

The strategic control model of communication: What is problematic?

- The role of the individual is privileged over the organization.
- The role of ethics is minimized.
- Interpretive abilities are overemphasized.

Obviously, this too is problematic in the strategic control model of communication, individuals carry more power, and so the role of the individual tends to be privileged over the organization's goals or needs. This means that the role of ethics is sometimes minimized and that our interpretive abilities are over emphasized. So, we assume that people can understand what very ambiguous messages mean and interpret those in the way that we want them to.

The balance of creativity and constraint model of communication

- Organizations operate within two competing perspectives: micro and macro.
- Our behaviors represent an unresolvable tension between creativity and constraint. This is dialectics theory.
- Communication is not something that happens in organizations; it is HOW people organize.

In the view of communication as a balance of creativity and constraint, we view organizations as operating under a whole set of dialectical tensions, or things that are unresolvable different needs. So we look at organizations as operating within two competing perspectives, a micro perspective and a macro perspective. And the micro perspective looks at things like what are an individual's employee an individual employee's needs and the macro perspective would say would look at how does this organization need to compete in order to be successful? And these things can often collide. So, for example, let's say that an individual employee really would like to or needs to or deserves to make more money. An organization has to also look at the macro perspective of that micro issue. The macro perspective might be that the organization is not faring well competitively and needs to cut back somewhere in order to stay alive. So, those two needs are competing. In addition, our behaviors represent what is an unresolvable tension between creativity and constraint, so again, this is dialectics and it's actually a theory, the dialectic theory, which grew out of interpersonal work that said that when we're in relationships we have a number of these competing needs and desires as well. So, if we're in a relationship with a significant other, we have simultaneously a need to be connected to that person and a need to maintain our anonymity and those needs sometimes conflict. And, what this dialectic theory says is that those tensions are not resolvable, we shouldn't try to resolve them, we just need to try to manage them. So,

when we look at an organization and dialectics and what this means and what it has to do with communication is that companies and company leaders have to figure out a way to communicate and to operate that simultaneously allows people to have those differing needs. One of those is creativity. We need to have people we need to give people an opportunity in organizations to be creative, but we can't just say, go ahead and spend today the entire day just sitting around coming up with great ideas for us, because we also have to weigh that with the organization's need to constrain what employees do in order that they can make money. So, under this model of the balance of creativity and constraint, communication isn't something that happens in organizations, it is literally how people organize.

The balance model: What is problematic?

- How do we define good balance? It is not possible to define it for everyone.

So, darn it, there's a problem with this model. And the problem is, we're assuming, under this model, that there is such a thing as good balance and that that thing is something that can be determined for everyone. And, what is good balance for one person is not necessarily good balance for the next. So, it's really too difficult, it's really impossible to define, in one way, what good balance means.

Organizations as dialogues: A structuration model

- Structuration theory (Giddens, 1984)
- We both shape, and are shaped by, the organizations of which we are a part.
- Organizations are talked into being.
- Meaning happens through talk.

So, we bring up our last, a fifth way of viewing organizational communication, a communication model that says organizations are dialogues, organizations are literally talked into being. An organization is not a place that we go and spend eight hours, it is something that we have the agency or the power to shape and create and alter. This is what we mean by structuration. Structuration theory which was got from Anthony Giddens in 1984 tells us that we both shape and are shaped by the organizations of which we are a part. And in this model of communication then we look at meaning as something that happens through interaction, it doesn't happen in our heads, it doesn't get exchanged through simple words, it happens when we interact with other people. So, when we think about organizational communication this way, and when we think about organizations as dialogues, it gives us tremendous power as individual employees in that organization. It takes away this notion that we are simply there to be acted upon by the powers that be, it gives us more power, it makes us understand that part of our experience of work is shaped by ourselves and that if there is an organizational policy that is unfair or not good, every time we follow it without questioning it or doing something about it, or making it better, we are perpetuating the system the way that it is. So, the structuration theory says the organization is not something that we just go to and are acted upon by. It says the organization is something we help create, which gives us agency. So, again, organizations

are literally talked into being using an approach to communication or the communication model of organizations as dialogue and that is the structuration theory and you can apply that to your organizational life in a number of ways.



You are empowered!

So, we'll end the first part of unit one with this idea that, yes, while we do have certain constraints and certain rules to follow and certain ways that organizations control our lives, we also are agents of change and we are also partly responsible for what happens in our organizations and our interaction is a powerful and dynamic force that helps shape and change the organizations of which we are apart. So, there were five models today that we talked about in communication. Communication as information transfer, as transactional process, as strategic control, as a balance of creativity and constraint, and as organizations as dialogues using the structuration theory. Each of those models carries certain assumptions about people, about how meaning is made, about interaction, about the nature of individuals, and each one of those models has certain limitations. So, it's important to see how different people view communication within organizations, how you view communication in organizations and what part we play as empowered individuals as part of our organization.