

Communicating Who We Are

The Theory of Organizational Culture in the Workplace

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The following material comes from a presentation at the American Library Association's Annual conference held on June 27, 2010 in Washington, DC entitled "Communication at the Crossroads: The Theory and Practice of Connecting Effectively Within and Without the Organization." It was sponsored by the Library and Leadership Association's Library Organization and Management Section. My part of this program involved a focused discussion on internal communication and various theories as they might apply to this type of communication in the library workplace.

In a nutshell, communication can be broken down into four components: encoding, transmission, decoding, and feedback. It is also affected greatly by noise which can either be actual or metaphorical. When we encode a message we typically do so unconsciously based on our own unique experiences, perspective, etc. We then transmit the message using a variety of different mediums (more on this in a moment). The receiver in turn decodes the message, again, based on their own perspective and experiences. Finally, a feedback loop occurs whereby a listener may indicate that they understand the message or need clarification. One of the challenges that we don't think of on a daily basis is the effect our unique perspective and the unique perspective of others has on altering the message. That is, we often make assumptions in crafting our messages. Furthermore, noise, again actual or metaphorical (e.g. "noise" could be that either the encoder or decoder has a sick child at home), can also alter how messages are delivered and internalized.¹

In moving beyond basic communications theory, organizational culture can impact how we communicate in profound ways. One guru on organizational culture is Edgar Schein. His work is cited extensively and found virtually anywhere the topic may arise. Essentially, Schein defines organizational culture as including what we do, don't do, say, decide, etc. based on a *specific* cultural context.² So, within our respective organizations we might find similarities but also widely varying differences in how we communicate. You might ask yourself how *you* communicate. Do you use email extensively? How about the telephone? How about newer technologies such as blogs, Twitter, Facebook, etc.? How do you know when face to face communication is necessary? If you manage others, how do you communicate with them? How do you communicate with your supervisor? How about communicating with others outside the organization? Obviously, each medium has its various merits and drawbacks but we tend not to think too consciously about this on a daily basis. Our society has perhaps degraded communication to some extent by lessening the value of face to face contact and simultaneously putting new technology utilized for communications on a pedestal. What do we lose when we don't communicate face to face anymore? A secondhand report of a recent study in Time magazine has indicated that the lack of face to face contact can have a fairly serious negative impact on trust, a key component of any good working relationship.³

Intertwined with organizational culture is the idea of socialization in the workplace. According to John Van Maanen, we seek to reduce our anxiety when we find ourselves in a new

environment. We look to the environmental cues communicated in our direction primarily by those already within a given organization. While we always do this to some extent we do so with especially focused intent when we first join an organization. This makes communicating with new employees in our libraries of great importance. Van Maannen has posited seven dimensions to consider when socializing new employees. A few that are especially pertinent to communicating will be mentioned here: formal versus informal, serial versus disjunctive, and investiture versus divestiture.⁴

Formal socialization processes are much more planned or mapped out. They often entail a strict or set process whereby an individual is introduced to the organization. Informal socialization by contrast could involve a new member of the organization simply chatting informally with members of the team or library. Again, thinking about what we wish to accomplish and what we wish to say about the organization is important. Neither is good or bad. Rather, context is all important. If our organization has a formal culture then a formal socialization process may make sense in order to set expectations. Likewise, an informal culture might lend itself better to an informal socialization process.⁵

In a serial socialization process we would allow current or even outgoing employees to communicate considerably with a new hire. If we have model employees or perhaps a specific model employee in our library this might be a great route to take to get the new team member acclimated. If, however, we have a disgruntled employee or we simply want to infuse new ways of thinking into a given role then we should consider a disjunctive process. In this case, as a manager we might work more directly with the new hire and allow for less contact especially with outgoing or disgruntled staff.⁶

Lastly, we might consider what aspects of investiture and divestiture matter to us most or which way we lean. A couple of examples will help illustrate. At Harvard University the overwhelming emphasis in hiring faculty is on investiture. That is, there is an expectation that faculty will come in with fresh ideas and shake things up so to speak. At McDonald's the emphasis is on divestiture. That is to say that the emphasis is overwhelmingly on *not* doing things in a rogue manner but rather following specific procedures and mannerisms. Of course, there is an oversimplification here. In our libraries I suspect we lean towards investiture but also have both professional and institutional norms that we look to instill. What we are trying to accomplish needs to be considered in our communication.⁷

One last piece related to communication I'd like to address or get back to is the feedback loop because it is critically important when working internally. Research on communication indicates that feedback is most effective when it contains the following elements (most of what I have here comes from an excellent workshop I attended at the Lilly Conference on College and University Teaching held in 2010 in Greensboro, NC):

- Respect and an established relationship between parties
- Solicited (versus unsolicited)
- Credibility/knowledge
- As soon as possible
- Accurate and irrefutable
- Limited
- Behaviorally-focused
- Appropriate for developmental stage⁸

In closing, I would just like to reiterate a few points I have made. Be aware that your message is affected greatly by your own experiences. Also, consider the possible experiences

of others when you communicate with them. Culture, both broader, and in our libraries affects communication. Don't become over-reliant on technology. Face to face communication is still of great value. Lastly, when we bring new people into the organization we need to be conscious of how we bring them in and how we communicate who we are.

Recommended Reading

Bolman, L. G. and Deal, T. E. (2008). *Reframing organizations: Artistry, Choice and Leadership*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

- Bolman and Deal highlight communications as incorporated into various frames utilized by managers for problem solving.

Goldstein, N. J., Martin, S. J., and Cialdini, R. B. (2008). *Yes! 50 Scientifically Proven Ways to Be Persuasive*. NY: Free Press.

- These authors/researchers incorporate some of the latest findings in areas such as behavioral economics that highlight how we actually make decisions and how framing our communications can impact what others do.

Kouzes, J. and Posner, B. Z. (1995). *The Leadership Challenge: How to Keep Getting Extraordinary Things Done in Organizations*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

- Kouzes and Posner, in this classic leadership text, integrate in their discussion the critical importance of communications in all that leaders do.

Schein, E. (2004). *Organizational Culture and Leadership*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

- A master on organizational culture in the workplace, Schein integrates and explains the vital role of communications in the workplace as a facet of culture throughout.

Van Maanen, J. (1979). People processing: Strategies of organizational socialization. *Organizational Dynamics* 7, no. 1 (1978): 18-36.

- A classic journal article, this work by Van Maanen highlights seven dimensions affecting socialization in the workplace. Communication plays a critical role in these dimensions.

¹ Anne Maydan Nicotera, "Constitutive View of Communication," *Encyclopedia of Communication Theory*. 2009. SAGE Publications. 1 Jul. 2010. http://www.sage-reference.com/communicationtheory/Article_n69.html.

² Edgar Schein. *Organizational Culture and Leadership* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004).

³ Belinda Luscombe, "Why E-Mail May be Hurting Offline Relationships," *Time* (June 22, 2010), <http://www.time.com/time/health/article/0,8599,1998396,00.html> (accessed June 23, 2010).

⁴ Jon Van Maanen, "People Processing: Strategies of Organizational Socialization," *Organizational Dynamics* 7, no. 1 (1978): 18-36.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Kathleen Brinko, "What Research Tells Us, Principles for Making Feedback More 'Hearable'," from Lilly Conference on College and University Teaching 2010.

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