

Culture and Communication in Organizations

Chapter Learning Objectives

- Understand that organizations are *discourse communities* being defined and structured by the patterns of communication of individual members.
- Understand the *rhetorical* processes that communities use to create stable processes for choosing and implementing a collective course action.
- Understand the unique characteristics of *business* organizations in terms of communication patterns and practices.

Understanding Business as a Culture

Whether you are a college student anticipating your first job or a seasoned employee looking for ways to get ahead, this course is designed to provide a set of *road maps* for success. The road map analogy is appropriate because business organizations function a lot like separate countries or towns each with a unique *geography* and *culture* (Pepper; Deal and Kennedy; Conrad and Poole; Schein). Even though there are many behaviors in common—everybody is in the basic business of buying or selling something—things are actually done in very different ways from one company to the next.

Understanding business communication is thus a matter of learning the specific behaviors that conform to the expectations of a unique business organization. To add some complexity to the situation, though, most individuals work for several businesses over the course of a career. For most people, success really doesn't come from being a great communicator in just one culture. Learning the roads of one country isn't enough to get all the way around the world. The successful traveler must know where to get a map when arriving in new territory and how to read maps, even when they are written in an unfamiliar language. The really stellar explorer even learns how to create maps that guide others through a new region—a little like learning to supervise, train, mentor or manage others within an organization.

This course is designed, therefore, to introduce someone to the principles of *how* an organizational culture creates specific communication expectations. It isn't enough to learn specific communication procedures and formats and rules. With a job change, a change in supervisors, or a change in the business needs of the company, those procedures, formats and rules might be obsolete. It's much more important to understand how to learn *why* certain kinds of procedures, formats and rules might make sense in a particular situation.

One further note about travel is probably important. Successful travel through foreign lands involves learning to eat, talk and behave the way the natives do. Similarly, success in business involves acting, communicating, and thinking “like a businessperson.” No visitor to a new country can ever become a native, though, no matter how long the stay. A person's home culture is always an important part of the way he or she thinks and feels, no matter how long it's been. In the same way, no one becomes a completely different person just by embarking on a career in business. Both traveler and businessperson will have an easier and more successful trip when they understand the expectations of the cultures they are visiting, becoming increasingly comfortable the new habits and language, but remembering as well the important values and perspectives that come from home and family.

Organizations as Discourse Communities

Organizations can be understood from several different angles, but a common management perspective is to start in a very pragmatic way, defining organizations as groups of people who are “engaged in cooperative action, trying to reach a purpose” within a framework of social, authority, and incentive structures (Champoux 6). From this point of view, an organization is a *thing*; it’s an entity in the world that can be observed, studied and managed. Specific parts and pieces of the organization—its levels of administration, work distribution, paperwork processes, and so on—are also things that can be studied. By understanding how these structures and processes work, researchers can discover the most effective methods of achieving managerial goals (Taylor and Van Every ix).

Although this can be a very productive way of looking at organizations, understanding the communication rules of an organization requires a somewhat different focus. Instead of thinking about *what* an organization is, we will be paying more attention to *how* a group of people exists as an organization. In particular, we will study how communication—the interactive process of sharing or making meaning—works as it causes an organization to stay intact *as* an organization. The objective is not merely to understand how organizations work, but how communication is used to make them work the way they do.

The Organization as a Culture

The road map analogy that introduced this chapter comes from one of the earliest attempts to understand how communication creates organization in the same way that families, tribes and language groups create any human culture. The first step in understanding the concept of culture is to recognize that it includes far more than local customs and practices. A country’s culture is more than its costumes and dances and foods. Those might be symptoms or outcomes of cultural values, but the culture itself is

“the accumulated knowledge, experience, meanings, beliefs, values, attitudes, religions, concepts of self, the universe, the self-universe relationship, hierarchies of status, role expectations, spatial relationships, and time concepts acquired by a large group of people in the course of generations through individual and group striving.” (Porter and Samovar),

While the depth of what culture really means can seem obvious with just a little thought about how different countries (and organizations) can be, it brings up an important question: how does a community *maintain* its culture from one generation to the next? How do people learn to respect the king or the priest or the television news anchor as the ultimate authority on certain topics? How do individuals come to consistently believe the same things about the universe or gender roles or status? How do parents in a community teach the next generation how to *be* proper members of that community, who will in turn teach their own children the same rules?

The answer, rather obviously, is communication, but not in the superficial sense of communication as the transmission of messages from one person to another. Any teenager will tell you that a parent can’t simply tell the next generation how things ought to be. Instead, groups of people *transmit* culture in a process of *socialization*. Those responsible for socializing children include parents, of course, but also teachers, pastors, and others who might be described collectively as the “elders” of a community (Brislin 95). Many communities in the United States rely on Boy Scout troop leaders, for instance, or summer camp counselors and soccer coaches, to assist in the socialization of children.

Clearly, a great deal of communication goes on within a scout troop, during a Sunday school class, or at the family dinner table, but the conversation is very seldom *about* cultural values. Instead, the bulk of the communication is embedded in activities, conversations, and observations occur as children learn how to participate in their own society. Employees are similarly socialized into the rules of their new organization as they communicate with supervisors, co-workers, mentors during their normal, day-to-day participation in the work of the organization.

The Organization as a System

Organizations can also be thought of as systems, a perspective that emphasizes the way in which the various parts and pieces of an organization interact to create the whole. Rather than focusing on the efficiency of specific parts of an organization—the departments or regional divisions or subsidiaries—the successful manager must always consider how the various parts interact and interrelate (Ackoff). Further, the organization is an *open* system, meaning that its various parts also interact with the external environment, bringing in resources and expelling production to maintain itself (Daniel Katz and Robert L. Kahn; Miller).

Needless to say, the next question, how do these interactions occur, leads us once again to communication. An organizational system is a collection of interacting parts operating through an “exchange of information and transmission of meaning” (Daniel Katz and Robert L. Kahn), depending on communication with co-workers and colleagues as well as communication across the boundaries of departments, regions and even the organization itself. Some recent theorists have argued that contemporary global corporations can no longer be envisioned with real boundaries at all. Instead, we must talk about a corporation as a “connected network of stakeholder interests” that only exists as a consequence of strong communication relationships that are collectively management by everyone who is a “legitimate partner in the dialogue” (Freeman and Liedtka).

The Organization as Structured Communication

Finally, communication can be directly studied as the mechanism by which structures and processes create an organization. It is only through conversations, documents, meetings and memos, after all, that people actually coordinate their activities. All this communicative behavior, often referred to collectively as the “discourse” of a group or community, is thus recognized as “the principal means by which organization members create a coherent social reality” (Mumby and Clair 181). If it weren’t for the on-going communication among the members, they would never even be able to think of themselves as an organization, much less act together in any kind of effective way. The ongoing talk of telephone calls, meetings, sales talks and corridor conversations are the mechanisms that create organization (Boden).

This perspective emphasizes the relationship between communicating and organizing as “two sides of the same coin” (Pepper 7). Not only is communication the mechanism by which an organization comes into being, but the structures and processes of the organization also determine the kind of communication its members will have. Even random behavior can become organized as unique, individual people fall into a pattern of communication, which then causes them to think of themselves as part of an organizational entity. At the same time, an individual who doesn’t communicate in a way the others consider “normal” won’t be accepted by the group. The result is a complex relationship between communication and organization (McPhee; Pepper 10; Poole, Seibold and MCPhee). The organization is created and sustained by the communication of individuals that make it up, but the organization also expects its members to communicate in a

particular way, structuring their behavior with expectations and habits. The result is that the organization can continue to exist, even after those individuals leave and are replaced by new members.

How Rhetorical Processes Build Cultures

However it is theorized, communication is clearly an important component of organizational existence. Communication is not merely a set of tools—memos and reports and meetings—that are relevant to achieving managerial goals. Virtually any communication among members of an organization or with its external stakeholders has the potential to impact the ability of an organization to accomplish its goals! With such a breadth of activity, communication is too big to study as a single process.

Instead, communication activities and processes are broken up in different ways for closer examination. Some scholars focus, for instance, on the ways in which communication functions to create power relationships within a contemporary organizations (Deetz; Mumby). Others might make distinctions among various uses of communication, specializing in team processes, for instance, or on the motivational or leadership functions of communication (Champoux). Often courses in communication focus on just one kind of communication technology, teaching the components of just written documents or team dynamics or visual advertising.

All of these perspectives and specialties can provide useful information about communication, but learning about all the pieces and parts is a bit like studying road construction techniques and street sign manufacturing methods as a way of getting around in the new country. The information is certainly useful when you get into the nitty-gritty work of managing road construction, but the newcomer to the country still needs to understand how to read the maps in the first place.

The road maps of interest to students of business communication are those that draw a picture of how a community makes its decisions. When any group of people wants to act together, it uses a set of cultural shortcuts that we can call its *rhetorical* rules. These are the cultural shortcuts that define how people ought to make decisions and work together. Should they sit around and discuss an idea until everyone agrees? Should they drink a few beers and do whatever the most sober one decides? Should they pray silently about a question and wait for a sign? A group could use just about any method at all, but unless the individuals agree on what constitutes a good way to decide, they'll never get around to taking any collective action.

Perhaps you've experienced the frustrations of organizing a project when a new team spends the first three meetings arguing about who is in charge, then takes the next few meetings trying to agree on what the project should include and the proper way to do it. Half the members are pouting silently because the rest are "shouting" all the time. The other half are angry that the quiet members "refuse to contribute." A group feels more cohesive and works more productively when it shares a set of expectations and rules to govern their decision-making process. We would then say that the group has functional rhetorical rules when it able to make decisions effectively. With the transmission of its culture to new entrants, a consistency of rhetorical rules across multiple processes in the system, and structuring documents and protocols to ensure that the rules are followed even by new members, we would begin to call it a *rhetorical culture* with a stable system of decision-making rules that extend across multiple decision situations over time.

Rhetoric The methods considered acceptable and effective by a group to collectively decide on a course of action, act in concert or determine its shared perception of reality. The term rhetoric was coined by Plato, an ancient Greek philosopher, to describe methods used by the persuasive politicians in his own community (Schiappa). It has been used since to describe the methods and tools that are deemed “acceptable and effective” methods of persuasion (Aristotle) by a decision-making community now known, very generally as Western culture.

Although the process of creating a rhetorical community is complex, the widely varying rhetorical rules actually conform to a relatively simply overarching structure that solves the straightforward problem of creating a consistent system of efficient and productive decision making. Imagine three complete strangers suddenly stranded on a desert island; the sooner they can figure out how to cooperate, the sooner they can build a raft and get off the island. If they spend too long fighting over *how* to work together, they’ll never get anything done. Different sets of individuals could come up with different specific rules, but any group that is going to work together will have to come to agreement on only three basic issues:

- *who* gets to make the decisions,
- *what* information is valuable in making those decisions, and
- *how* communication should happen during the decision-making process.

Rules about relationships: Who gets to decide?

Whenever larger groups of people must solve a problem together, there must be some rules to govern who will make the decision. In a small face-to-face group it might be possible for “everyone” to participate in the decision-making process, but as the size of the group grows, decisions will become slower and slower. Problem-solving efficiency in a larger community usually requires that some smaller subgroup take over the decision-making responsibilities. A fraternity with several hundred members might elect certain individuals to as officers, giving them the right to make all the decisions. A group on campus might put all the girls in charge of party arrangements. The floor of a dorm might post a sheet on a bulletin board and allow anyone who signs up to become part of the decision-making group.

Different groups divide up the duties in different ways, but in every community there will be rules about who is allowed to talk to whom, who gets to tell others what to do, who has to listen, and when and why interaction happens in the process of deciding on the group’s collective action.

As a group develops its rules about *who* ought to participate in the decision-making process, it develops an entire set of relationship expectations and rules that are often referred to as social or organizational ***roles***. Performing an organizational role is like taking a part in a play, the person who learns the part learns to speak, look, and act as the audience expects. An individual might play a number of roles in life—as parent, boss, neighbor, and soccer coach, as well as multiple roles within his or her work organization. Each role is successfully performed by conforming to the “norms” the group holds for acceptable behavior within that role. The norms, in turn, are enforced with a characteristic style of interaction that reinforces the group’s decision-making culture. Group members’ talk, non-verbal reactions, physical artifacts, and social structure all work together to create powerful influences on individual behavior. A group’s “performance norms” for example, are “capable of significantly modifying a performance prediction that was based solely on the employee’s ability and level of personal motivation” (Robbins 229).

The interaction rules are can be understood from a number of different perspectives, focusing on the rules that govern how men and women ought to behave (Tannen), for example, or on the function of roles to create organizational power or loyalty (Rousseau and Schalk). For a new communicator within an organization, the most straightforward approach can be to start with the specific language that people use to indicate roles, and role violations: *association*, *status*, and *power*. The specific cues will vary from one organization to another, but the new employee must learn the verbal and non-verbal communication signals of proper interaction with others.

Rules about knowledge: What information will be used?

Any sort of problem-solving requires that people use certain information to decide what is “true” about the situation. Obviously, looking carefully at every bit of information available would take an infinite amount of time. Further, if several people have differing opinions about which information is most useful, considerable conflict can arise before the group can get down to the business of using the “best” information. One task force on employee benefits might decide that empirical data is required, setting up surveys of each company unit to survey the amount of money employees currently spend on day care, health benefits, and dental services. Another might depend on interviews with a group of experienced human resources professionals in the area. Some task forces might rely exclusively on the personal experiences, coming to conclusions after discussing members’ own history with benefits packages at this and other companies.

A group creates patterns of communication that serve to enforce its rules about what information ought to be used for decision making. Formatting and structuring mechanisms guide the responses to context cues, guiding communicators toward the content and form that characterize the appropriate *genre* of communication for the situation. A genre is not a “fixed form” of communication, but rather the “shapes and patterns of texts” that characterize a discourse community (Beaufort 7), and reflects the group’s understanding of “the action it is used to accomplish” {Miller, 1984 151}. As members of a group communicate regularly, some habits and patterns become “forms so expected that readers are surprised or even uncooperative” when their expectations are not met {Bazerman 1994 82}. Not only does the format of the communication fail to deliver the information the group wants for a given purpose, but the communicator is judged to rhetorically inept.

An individual’s success within a discourse community thus depends on his or her “genre knowledge,” the learned “repertoire of situationally appropriate responses to recurrent situations” (Berkenkotter and Huckin ix). These basic formats must then be adjusted, however, to meet the needs of the immediate situation. It is not enough to know, for instance, what a memo is supposed to look like and include, the competent communicator must also know when a memo is the expected communication—and what kind of a message would be sent by substituting an email or a phone call or a formal letter. The end result is that style of a group’s expected communication genre will structure the group’s collaborative action on six dimensions: *purpose*, *content*, *participants*, *form*, *time* and *place* (Yates and Orlikowski).

Rules about communication: How are decisions made?

Human beings have a wide range of communicative capabilities, ranging from looks, gestures, and physical barriers to jokes, stories and parables to essays, books and paintings, to Morse code, American Sign Language and poetry. With so much to choose from, the group must narrow the range of communication it will use for problem solving and see that everyone involved in the process knows how to use the chosen methods. Often communities will recognize the value of

many forms of communication, but choose some of them for the “private” tasks of interpersonal intimacy or “artistic” expression, and use others for “public” decision making.

Most groups in the United States will simply assume that talking in a face-to-face group setting is the only sensible way to make a decision. Western culture puts a high value on interpersonal communication as the ideal method of decision-making, but it is not universally used. A committee that is scattered all over the country, for instance, might choose to set up a website, post a series of questionnaires, and vote on each of the possibilities without ever talking to each other. In some groups, it would be appropriate to pray together until everyone simply seems to agree on a particular course of action.

Organizational discourse style extends to the media choices as people use technology to meet the group’s expectations of effective and appropriate communication. It is tempting to think of communication method as a purely technical selection: one might choose email software, for instance, on the basis of storage or sorting features or select email instead of a letter “simply” because it is faster. In reality, the choice of communication method reflects a host of assumptions and expectations about how communication works in the decision-making process. Choosing a technology that meets organizational expectations will play a role in the effectiveness of the task (Rogers et al. 383), but that effectiveness is caused more directly by the group’s expectations than by any technical advantage inherent in the communication medium.

Media choice has been studied in terms of the large impacts on a community’s culture and economy when a particular kind of technology becomes common. The institutions of Western civilization have been traced to the adoption of written communication for virtually all official decision-making (Goody; Clanchy; Ilich and Sanders; Olson) and the subsequent invention of the printing press (Eisenstein). Many argue that equally significant changes are currently taking place as civilization moves into an age of electronic, visual decision-making (Ong; McLuhan; Jamieson). (Innis). Media choices have also been studied on the level of organizational structure, demonstrating that much of the success of the modern corporation was made possible when the oral traditions of craft work were replaced with written documentation (Yates), and on the individual level where the characteristics and familiarity of a technology will have major impacts on both media choice and its ultimate effectiveness (Short, Williams and Christie; Daft and Lengel, "Organizational Information Requirements, Media Richness and Structural Design"; Daft and Lengel, "Information Richness: A New Approach to Managerial Behavior and Organizational Design"; El-Shinnawy and Markus). At each level, media choices reflect the relative values placed on *timeliness* of the message and any feedback it generates, *permanence* of the message form and content, and the level of *ambiguity* the communication method allows or enforces.

The Source of the Businesslike Style

Successful living within a community requires more than a road map, of course. Just learning *about* business communication in terms of organizational culture and rhetorical norms is not enough when it comes to career success. Employers don’t expect their employees to answer test questions about communication; they want to hire a person who can communicate in a *businesslike* way. In fact, most employers decide whether a person will be a good employee by observing his or her communication habits. After all, it’s the rhetorical rules that govern how decisions get made, and it really doesn’t make much sense to hire someone who didn’t appear able to make proper decisions.

If the group is going to listen to an individual's ideas, it has to have some confidence that the person will act responsibly toward the other members of *that* group, that he or she will pay attention to the *right* information, and will contribute *appropriately* to the decision-making process. Ultimately, successful communication means using the tactics that work to create the proper relationships, insure the use of proper information, or demonstrate fluency with the techniques of communication that are appropriate to a given organization. Taken together, the patterns of "proper" decision-making behavior create a unique organizational style that involves everything "from word choice and sentence construction to communication distribution systems" (Rogers et al. 374). The successful employee will learn to communicate in the style that reflects his or her organization's rhetorical culture.

Even more important, in the long run, is that the group's decisions also create economic, social or psychological rewards for those who follow the rules. The result is an internal system of controls that insures that individuals will, by and large, play by the group's decision-making rules. These discursive control systems have been called "discourse formations" (Foucault), "policy regimes" (Preston and Windsor), and "organizational sense-making narratives" (Weick), by some scholars, but they are often described more simply in terms of a community's *rhetoric* or its *discursive style*.

A company that relies heavily on "customer feedback" as the proper information for decision-making, for example, can only use that information if it somehow rewards its members for collecting the feedback in the first place. Over time, salespeople who exhibit "great customer relationships" might be promoted, giving them a social reward for creating good feedback channels. Similarly, email, which creates a paper trail, might become a more "proper" way of contacting customers than by phone, so that feedback can be more effectively collected for later use.

Goals of the Business Sphere

Any community will necessarily create a rhetorical style as it creates its own unique patterns of relationships, knowledge use, and communication method. The more relevant task for students of business communication is to understand how the community's rhetorical goals have shaped the relatively stable set of communication practices that are characteristic to U. S. businesses (Beaufort) and might be called the "businesslike style."

Creating a Place to Trade

From a historical perspective, the first goal of business has been the creation of a neutral marketplace where people from various cultures could meet together and make trades. Groups that could maintain a process for exchanging goods, regardless of their disagreements on other matters, would have a better chance for prosperity, both individually and collectively. Clearly, some discursive adjustments need to be made to accommodate language differences and set common standards of exchange, but the creation of a market requires some common rhetorical norms as well.

- A stable market requires that participants agree on *who* should participate in terms that make continued trading behavior possible. Such personal characteristics as fairness and honesty come to mean more, for example, while social rules about gender behavior or political power might have little bearing on the exchange of goods. Over time, the rhetorical rules of the

marketplace create a set of social rules to insure that participants will “deal fairly” with each other, but ignore signals of class or ethnicity that have no bearing on business goals.

- Similarly, agreements over *what* information should be used will tend toward sources that can be commonly accessed and discourage reliance on information that is available to only one community. A good decision would be made on the basis of objective data, for instance, so that all parties can verify the “facts” of the contract as they set aside “subjective” opinions based on their own group’s perspectives or cultural assumptions.
- Finally, the business goal puts restrictions on *how* the communication can occur. A trade must take place with a communicative technology that allows the trade to happen, which traditionally favored face-to-face situations where goods could be inspected and exchanged, with traders dealing with each other as equal partners to the exchange. Business goals might further favor “open” transactions so that all parties can see that the exchange is honest and equitable, although such openness might also be limited to just those who have been admitted to the business community.

The end result is a rhetorical sphere that favors transcultural accommodation, using discourse to signal a neutral trading space for any who are willing to deal fairly, relying on objective and explicit data as the basis for decisions, and using communicative methods that emphasize open interaction between peers.

Transcultural Accommodation in the Contemporary Workplace

Any language, images or symbolic communication is inappropriate if it can create a hostile work environment, and thus discourage or prevent diverse people from doing business with each other. This means that anything that is demeaning to any cultural belief should be avoided, including sexist or derogatory language, profanity, and actions that might be frightening or offensive to any religion.

Workplace law has determined that profanity can constitute sexual harassment, and profane words used in the context of race, age or religion can be considered a form of verbal abuse (DuFrene and Lehman), resulting in appropriate legal consequences (Wah). That determination ought to come as no surprise, however, since it meets the business community’s need to maintain a transcultural space where no potential trader will be uncomfortable. What might seem a trivial use of common popular words could be offensive to a member of a strict religious sect or an elderly person. The point is not to discover what can be tolerated by others, but to insure that any potential business relationship will be productive.

Separating the Economic Sphere

In Western culture, the uniqueness of business discourse has been further supported with philosophical arguments that can be traced back to the Enlightenment understanding of economic activity as lying within the realm of “natural” law (Freeman and Gilbert; Hauser). While political and social decisions required the discussion of citizens, the economic theory initiated by Adam Smith relied on a market that was “freed from control by institutions of church or state” and thus

able to function “in a self-regulating manner” [Hauser, 1999 #2803 22]. In fact, given the propensity for demagoguery and corruption in the political sphere, the economic health of a community is best protected by insuring that business decisions rely exclusively on the a purely objective measure of shared value, monetary profit (Friedman).

- Those who ought to make business decisions, from this perspective, ought to be only those with an economic interest in the decision outcome. Entertaining the views of “disinterested” stakeholders creates a decision-making group that cannot be trusted to put the group’s economic health at the forefront.
- Decisions ought to be based on the completely objective basis of monetary profit, a measurable unit of data that can be translated across multiple business decisions without risk of subjective personal or cultural contamination.
- Finally, the process of making business decisions can be best protected from the contamination of political corruption or social fads by separating its activities from those realms, disallowing both business participation in the political process and political control over market processes.

A number of political, social, and management theorists have come to question the philosophical bases for these rhetorical norms, noting that a separation of economic and moral spheres serves to make “moral” business decisions a logical and practical impossibility (Freeman and Gilbert; Cyphert and Saia) Rhetorical norms are durable, however, and these philosophical presumptions remain an important influence on the day-to-day communication of business organizations.

Focusing on Outcomes

Perhaps because the collective mandate has been so practical—the trading of food, cloth and spices was often important enough to set aside warfare for a time—the business of business has been focused on accomplishing concrete tasks. Set outside the philosophical realm of pure thought, the merchant class created an ethic of pragmatic implementation {McClosky’s new book}, and developed a set of communication practices that emphasize and facilitate practical problem solving. The focus on practical outcomes means that business organizations can be somewhat more willing than social or cultural groups to adjust their rhetorical norms to facilitate a changing decision goal or environment.

- As they took advantage of the complex processes made practical with the industrial revolution, modern business organizations have tended toward larger size with the highly structured hierarchies that allow the efficient coordination of behavior. This has created a premium on social relationships that respect and maintain a hierarchical organization, with less emphasis on the broad, egalitarian relationships that can introduce delay and ambiguity into a decision-making process. As the post-industrial business environment creates a greater need for a broad networks of relationships, the business norms are also moving away from tightly controlled communication paths toward an emphasis on relationship building (Cyphert and Saia).
- The traditional reliance on objective, rational data and systematic analysis has been enormously effective in reaching clearly defined goals, and the success of the Western industrial economy is often traced to its reliance on objective, rational data (Scholtes; Drucker). Coupled with the successes of

the “scientific management tools of the 20th century (Daft and Marcic), business has a tradition of basing decisions exclusively on objective, measurable, and, ideally, numerical data. In the more complex global environment of the 21st century, many businesses have begun to develop ways of utilizing implicit and subjective sources of information as well, attempting to develop decision-making methods that capitalize on the characteristics of complexity and adaptive systems (Gharajedaghi; Stacey, Griffin and Shaw).

- Although business had never lost some of its traditional reliance on the signals of trust associated with face-to-face communication, the large institutions of the industrial revolution required the more permanent and distributed communication techniques allowed with written documents (Yates). As the information age develops, businesses have been willing to take advantage of technical tools that facilitate asynchronous and distributed communication as well, reflecting the use of narrative, visuality, and self-disclosure that mark the electronic era” (Jamieson).

Communication Expectations of the Business Community

The traditional place of the market as a separate trading community and the impact of its pragmatic orientation toward accomplishing that task have caused the development of certain rhetorical norms: sensitivity to the organizational hierarchy, a reliance on objective evidence, and a willingness to adopt advances in communication technology. These influences, in turn, are manifested as a characteristic style of business communication.

The Assumption of Trade: The Value of Reciprocity

The fundamental role of business is to facilitate trades between those willing to sell and their counterparts who are willing to purchase. The overall success of a business obviously requires providing goods, services, and concern at a price the customer finds reasonable, and much business communication involves interacting with prospective, current and former customers in a way that makes them feel doing business is “worthwhile.” Even within the business organization, the notion that every relationship is built on a fair trade forms the basis to value most of the communication that takes place. Everyone’s work contributes to the work of someone else, somewhere else in the company; appraisals and career advancement don’t depend on how good a person thinks his or her work is, how much is done, or how quickly you get it done. What matters is whether the people who use the work find it useful, sufficient and timely enough to meet their needs. The result is a concern with **reciprocity** as a measure of value.

One of your first acts in a new job should be to find out who your “customer” is. What is that person’s name at the other end of the paper trail? What is the value that some other department puts on your work? More importantly, what is it about your work that makes it valuable? What could make the “price” of your work go up or down? Over time, you’ll discover what trades are being made. Maybe a co-worker who receives your report simultaneously provides you with figures to create the next one. Maybe the value you add to the audit team comes back to you as a nice lunch with the boss once in a while. This is not to say that you preface every request with “here’s what I can do for you in return,” but a fundamental truth of business culture is “what goes around comes around.” Everyone involved in the game of business is in the business of trade, and you can expect others to reciprocate, for good or ill, in however you treat them.

Valuing reciprocity means, in the terminology of a communication course, that good business communication involves audience analysis—determining what people need, expect or want from your communication.

- A communicator in the business world will never assume the audience’s needs or interests, but will craft each message for a specific audience.
- Word choice is determined by the audiences’ need to use the communication, putting a premium on information clarity, brevity, and consistency.
- Standard, predictable organizational structures and formats allow a reader or listener can find exactly what he or she is expecting.
- Efforts to create feedback loops, engage in active listening, and paraphrase are used to determine the audience’s previous knowledge, desires and interests.

Goal Orientation: A Bias for Action

Probably the most fundamental characteristic of the business culture is its “bias for **action**” (Peters and Waterman). There simply is no reason for the business organization to exist without producing something, and effectiveness as a business requires that social relationships, knowledge use, and discourse all support the task at hand. Business thus places a high regard on pragmatic, hands-on, real-time, common-sense problem-solving, often at the expense of theoretically, analytically inclined “pointy-headed” staff positions (Mintzberg). In fact, a decision isn’t even considered complete until abstract values and goals are translated into the concrete implementation step that “alone enables a business to be managed for performance” (Drucker 94).

“...in the workplace the purpose for writing is to take action rather than to leisurely reflect on thought processes or on artistic expression (the latter are qualities usually valued by English teachers), and this difference is reflected in the content, form, and tone of much business communication” (4).

Every business message is constructed for a strategic, active purpose; there no place for “busywork” and the communicator is expected to understand how his or her message fits into the overall goals of the organization (Rieke & Sillars). Further, virtually all the strategic decisions made while creating effective business communication involve selecting the best way to accomplish a goal.

- Standard communication formats and procedures always include a section to indicate what action should be taken or is being taken as a consequence of the communication
- The tone of messages is expected to convey a dynamic willingness to get the job done. An “active” language style is characterized by “simplicity, brevity and clarity” in its support of active efficiency and profit (McGuire).
- An action orientation is expressed non-verbally with immediate responses to requests for information, straightforward graphic designs, effective use of technology, and positive communication signals in conversations, telephone calls and meetings.

An action discourse displays a problem-solving, risk taking attitude, and a “willingness to engage” in whatever tasks the organization finds valuable. Success within a business environment depends on communicating the desire to get a job done.

Organizing the Group: Sensitivity to the Hierarchy

In spite of recent advocates for more diffused responsibility, most businesses retain a conventional hierarchical organizational structure. A few highly trained, highly educated, or highly talented people set policy, strategize its implementation, and communicate their wishes to a much larger cadre who are held accountable for their fulfillment of the assigned tasks. The model was adapted from the Prussian Army as a way to create clear lines of authority and hold individuals accountable for the work they were assigned to do, and has been, by and large, a hugely successful way of coordinating work in large, complex organizations (Scholtes 4).

The exact nature of communication within such a structure can vary, but the highly structured, multi-layered nature of a hierarchy virtually guarantees *heightened sensitivity* to the organizational *hierarchy*. The implicit communication of a person’s place in the chain of command can be more important than any information being explicitly communicated in the message.

- Show deference and respect with organizational superiors. A concern for “politeness” and “deference to persons of higher rank” are communication expectations that are common across nearly any business (Beaufort 52). For example, businesslike messages include full names, titles, and honorifics except in private conversations with close co-workers.
- Communication with organizational peers and subordinates should also indicate respect and a cooperative attitude. Polite words such as “please,” “thank you” and “excuse me,” are expected, as are more complicated listening and conflict resolution communication techniques.
- All communication is created from within the organizational mission and goals. Rather than using communication to stake out an individual identity, message “ownership” for workers, defined as “the writer’s ability to view his or her tasks (including assignments given by the superior) as member of the group rather than as an individual working alone” (Rogers et al. 382).

Objective Information: Reliance on the Evidence

Objective, measurable data permeates the business culture to the point where business people will sometimes describe the decision-making process as “running the numbers.” Not everything can

be counted, of course, but communicators rely heavily on information obtained by examining how things actually work, statistically analyzing the results, and making conclusions that are framed in terms of numbers. Statistical analysis is the backbone of much business decision making, and the assumption is that quantifiable facts will yield the best answers, and incomplete data or disagreement about how to interpret it are problems to be solved with better communication.

The ability to maintain a consistently *objective* style of communication has been identified as an issue for new workers (Rogers et al.), and many subtle characteristics of communication are based on the presumptions of objectivity.

- The content of messages should be focused on the measurable, verifiable data used to make or justify a decision, removing or minimizing references to such sources of evidence as intuition, feelings, or gut reactions.
- The evidence is presented within a complete and equally objective explication of the logical train of thought that bases a decision on the evidence.
- All parties to the communication are presumed to be objective, and cues of open-mindedness convey a willingness to change a position on the basis of new facts and figures.

Embracing Change: Taking Advantage of Technology

The pragmatic, action orientation of business implies that *embracing change* is an important skill in any situation. This translates to a pragmatic willingness to take advantage of whatever communication technology works “best” to get the job, but it also means that communication methods are used to convey progressive attitude. Reliance on very traditional forms of communication or message formats conveys an unwillingness to adopt new business practices. Except at legal and accounting firms where compliance with legal tradition is highly valued, business communicators are expected to stay on the cutting edge of whatever methods are available.

Changing Norms

“The traditional, stand-and-deliver business presentation is withering toward nostalgia” (Lindstrom) in favor of multi-media shows that have the look and feel of the media culture. Email is replacing the traditional memo in most organization, bringing the informality of electronic communication with them. Much of what you learn about communication in your new organization will change as new people join, new technologies emerge, and new communication goals arise.

Clearly, the importance of innovation means that the communication rules are subject to change. The expectations and advantages of literacy influenced the bureaucratic discourses of European merchants (Goody), and the telegraph and telephone changed the face of business in the twentieth century (Yates). Today, contemporary society appears to be entering an electronic era that values narrative, visuality and self-disclosure (Jamieson), and business discourse increasingly reflects those elements.

With the affluence and technological advances of the twentieth century came a new focus on aesthetics. Standards of design in products, environments and communications have all risen so that utility and consistency have given way to style as the mark of quality (Postrel). “What was polished enough a decade ago is no longer acceptable,” and the contemporary audience of consumers, customers and users expects “thoughtful, well-balanced graphics” even as it demands “novelty, variety, emotional resonance, and personal expression” (Postrel 54).

Questions for Discussion

Think about a typical assignment in one of your business courses. What information is being explicit requested? What are the implicit expectations—what does the professor “really” want, but thinks is too obvious to mention? What is the professor hoping to accomplish by having you provide this information? Is there anything else you could do to better or more completely accomplish that goal? How different is this action from the action would have to take to simply “do” the assignment?

1. Do different on-campus groups use different rhetorical rules to determine who, how and when decisions will be made?
2. Do the rhetorical rules of business produce decision outcomes that are particularly useful or effective for business organizations?
3. What are the advantages of disagreement over rhetorical rules within a multi-cultural decision-making group?

Chapter Notes

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