

MAHMOUD M. GALANDER

## Distinguishing Organizational Communication

### Introduction

Academic controversy over the relatedness of organizational communication to management has never ceased since the emergence of organizational communication as an independent field of study following the famous behaviorist shift of the 1930s (Poole, Putnam, and Seibold, 1997; Mumby and Stohl, 1996; Rentz, 1993; Shelby, 1989). Since its inception, the field has always been treated as closely associated with management and, consequently, it was considered an academic area that complemented business, managerial, and corporate communication studies. Pedagogically, some of the issues discussed in classrooms that taught the four fields overlapped, and thus created the illusion of the existence of what some scholars termed a "symbiotic" relationship (Mumby & Stohl, 1996) between these fields. Teaching organizational communication for business and management students has become a fashion in many universities and schools, thus adding to the illusion of the relationship.

As part of a scholarly attempt to establish an academic distinction between organizational communication and these other related fields, three communication scholars wrote, two decades ago, a book on the issue (Forace, Monge and Russel, 1976). They called for the conceptualization of organizational communication from an entirely communication-oriented perspective through the analysis of the organization itself as a communication entity. This article revisits the position of these three scholars, and argues for the conceptualization of organizational communication from a sociological perspective that analyzes organizations as information entities. The article

provides a brief outline of business, managerial, and corporate communication, and underlines the nature of the relationship between organizational communication and the three management-related fields. The rest of the article is devoted to the substantiation of the position that, in organizational communication, organizations should be regarded as information entities, and that the field should be conceptualized as an entirely communication-oriented one.

### **Distinction between Business, Managerial, Corporate, and Organizational Communication**

The field of business communication is well established as a basic academic tributary of management (Daniel, 1983, Dulck, 1993). As they consider the invention of writing an early form of business-oriented communication endeavor, some scholars even boast that business communication is the essence of all human communication (Costouros and Stull, 1986). More modest scholars however, relate the field to Greek and Roman rhetoric practices. The conviction of ancient Greeks and Romans that philosophers, politicians and businesspeople, in order to succeed, needed to develop their oratory abilities was seen as a proof of the presence of an early business communication training (Kennedy, 1963).

Historically, business communication outdates organizational communication. The latter is only a product of the post-Great Depression research activities that provided administrative answers to the overwhelming economic failures of the 1930s (Luthans, 1995). Though it did not emerge as a distinct discipline of its own at the time, the socio-psychological determinants of communication behavior were the focus of attention of scholars for a considerable time. The pervasiveness of the issue and the increased interest of a number of researchers and scholars led to the gradual evolution of organizational communication as a distinct and separate field of study.

By its very name, business communication focuses more on utilizing communication to promote business. The focal issue in the pedagogy of the field is skill-oriented. In a nutshell, the aim of business communication is to equip its students with the necessary skills of business-oriented writing,

to enable them to communicate effectively with clients, agents, and customers (both potential and actual), and to generally develop their language mastery (Bennet, 1971). The underlying theme here is that business demands persuasive capabilities in the undertaker, who must continuously attend to the development of these activities.

With the development of business-oriented communication training and education, new academic branches started growing. The training of managers in various written and verbal communication skills led to the evolution of "managerial communication". The emphasis of this branch is more on the communicational roles of managers as organization leaders. Thus issues of negotiation, persuasive dialogue, presentation of ideas and positions, and control of communication situations became the focus of this branch.

On the other hand, the increased growth of businesses into global dimensions, and the extension of the concerns of these businesses into social and political issues of the societies they serve have led to the emergence of a recent and new branch of communication-related field, corporate communication. This new branch concentrates more on the issues of multiculturalism, globalization, management of crisis, change and development as well as corporate issue advocacy.

The underlying theme of these three areas of knowledge is the efficiency of the organization. Defined as producing the most, with the least cost, efficiency is an economic concept that well suits the profit-oriented nature of business, corporate and managerial communication. All three fields focus on providing business personnel, especially those at the managerial level, with faculties and skills that enable them to achieve their organizations' profit-oriented goals.

In the following pages we argue for the different nature of organizational communication and provide an information- and communication-oriented conceptualization of the field.

### **Communicating to Organize**

If the basic aim of business, managerial, and corporate communication studies is to utilize communication to promote organizational efficiency, organizational communication stands as distinct in its treatment of organizations as social, rather

than economic, entities. The underlying theme in this field of study is to understand any organization as a social system that exists and interacts with the other social systems available in the environment around. In other words, organizational communication does not provide answers to functional questions of the sort of how to improve the efficiency of the unit. Rather, it seeks to answer such questions as how the members of the organization interact, and what facilitates their interaction. The focus in organizational communication is on understanding social reality, and on providing scientific explanations to the intricacies of the relationship among the components of the organization, and between the organization and its environment. This is not to say that the field is not concerned about the social effectiveness of the unit under study. What is being said here is that, even when the aim is economic efficiency of the social unit, the focus of attention is on the dynamics of human interaction.

In organizational communication, the organization is sociologically defined as a social system that involves a number of people who share certain common goals, and who work collectively, towards the realization of these goals. In other words, an organization exists when a group of people identifies certain shared interests or common goals, and starts organizing the efforts of its members towards the achievement of these goals. This definition distinguishes the unit of analysis, for organizational communication purposes, from that of the profit-based business or managerial communication. A management-based definition of the organization may emphasize the economic nature of the human endeavor involved, and hence it may highlight the profit-orientated nature of the organization's goals in the definition. For example if we take Lamar Reinch's definition of business communication, we realize the emphasis on the profit-based nature of the activity. Reinch defines business communication as "the scholarly study of the use, creation, and adaptation of languages, symbols, and signs to conduct activities that satisfy human needs and wants by providing goods and services for *private profit*" (Reinch, 1994, p. 29, emphasis added). Compare this to Gerald Goldhaber's definition of organizational communication as "The process of creating and exchanging messages within a network of interdependent relationships to cope with *environmental uncertainty*"

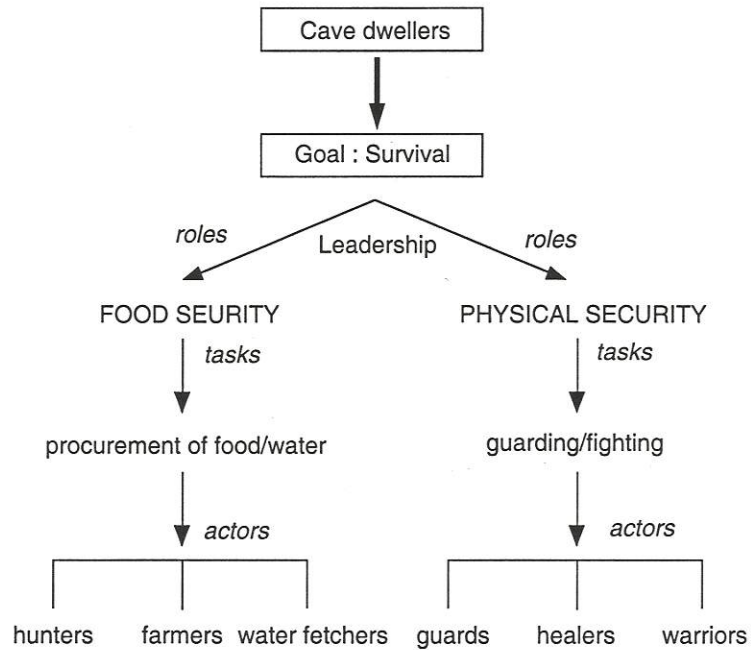
(Goldhaber, 1994, p. 4, emphasis added). The difference between the two definitions is obvious, the former emphasizes the functional aspect, the latter underlines the interaction between the actors. Furthermore, the former definition highlights what a scholar called "the how-to" nature of business communication (Daniel, 1984), a nature which characterizes all the three fields of business, managerial and corporate communication.

As a sociologically oriented field, organizational communication focuses on interaction and, as a result of such orientation, "organizing" rather than the organization, is the focus of intellectual attention and investigation (Pepper, 95; Forace, Monge and Russel, 1976). Organizing can be seen as the basic human behavior that enables people to accomplish tasks and achieve goals. Any act of organizing must involve, at least, the following steps (Goldhaber, 1994):

1. The identification of shared goals and interests,
2. the collective desire to achieve these goals and interests,
3. the agreement of the social unit members on the outlining of roles and the arrangement of tasks and positions of all members of the social entity,
4. the establishment of a mechanism for the coordination, evaluation and follow-up of the accomplishment of tasks and the fulfillment of roles,
5. the collective engagement in the achievement of these goals and interests.

These steps render organizing a fundamental human experience. It can be seen as a natural human behavior through which the earliest human communities practiced survival. When early cave dwellers began sharing a community life for example, they organized themselves to achieve that basic goal of survival. We may visualize the organizing activity of cave dwellers in the following diagram.

FIGURE 1  
Organizing in a  
community of  
cave-dwellers



As the main concern of cave dwellers was survival, organizing their effort toward the achievement of this goal was basic. To this early human community, survival basically meant securing food and maintaining physical security. Food security demanded a continuous effort to procure food and water in an environment in which both were scarce. Physical security required continuous communal alertness against environmental hazards of the time, especially attacks from beasts, unfriendly human communities, sickness and other natural dangers. These two roles were translated into tasks that were assigned to individual members based on their individual abilities (for example physical abilities). As the assignment of roles to group members needed a person or few individuals who would coordinate and make decisions, leadership emerged as an important element of organizing. Later, with the passage of time and the growth of the social unit, the goals, roles, and tasks developed into a more complex set of activities that led to the development of a comprehensive system of relationships between the

cave dwellers. This system was basically a system of communication between the different members in their capacities as actors and performers of roles. It was a system for the facilitation of activities, the coordination of relationships, and the solution of problems.

The place of communication in any organizational activity is well documented in the literature (Goldhaber, 1994; Bormann, 1990). Some scholars consider organizations "*communication events*" that are constructed through the interaction of their members (Pepper, 1995; Forace, Monge & Russel, 1976), whereas others understand the structure of the organization as a product of communicated perceptions of the places and functions of people in the social system (Bantz, 1989; McPhee, 1989). Communication is, therefore, the essence of organizing. Only through communication can members of the social unit become aware of their shared interests, and only through communication can they interact and cooperate toward the realization of these interests. It is also only through communication that leadership of the social unit can coordinate, evaluate and control. In short, communication is the very element of organizational activity, and without it no organization would ever exist. This statement is diagrammatically depicted in the following model that reflects the centrality of communication by envisaging it as the bonding element of all the components of the social system.

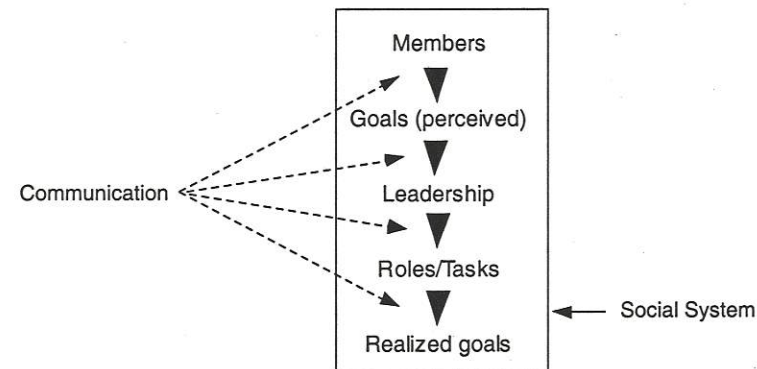


FIGURE 2  
Role of  
communication  
in organizing

### Information and Organizing

Conceptualizing organizations from a communication, rather than an economic, perspective necessitates the introduction of the concept of information. Information is the "substance" that is exchanged in any communication behavior. This statement is too simple to reflect the intricacies involved in the exchange of information in any organizing activity, for information is not only the substance of communication exchange, but also the goal of the behavior.

Viewed as communication activities, organizations may be labeled as forms of information. An organization exists only as bits of information which, when exchanged, gain a perceived meaning that the communicators share. In a famous book on communicating and organizing, three communication scholars have conceptualized information as the patterned flow of matter or energy between communicators, and used this conceptualization to explain the centrality of information in the activity of organizing (Forace, Monge & Russel, 1976). They depicted that repetition in the flow of matter or energy in a social setting leads to the rise of information. Information exists when a patterned or repeated activity is noticed and perceived by the members of the social entity. This repeated activity then gains meaning and becomes part of the information generated by the social unit.

Taking this depiction in mind, one may further add that information, or the patterned flow of energy, is omnipresent in any social system that one may logically conclude that information *is* the totality of the social unit. An organization consists solely of information, some of which is currently relevant and necessary for the functioning of the system, and is therefore exchanged in a form of communicated messages. The rest, which is not currently directly involved in the functioning of the system, remains in the environment unused until a need for it arises. Part of the environmental information may decay and wither, as a result of history, but another set of information will replace it. Viewed from this perspective, organizations are information entities whose members use the information to establish social relations, coordinate efforts, and achieve shared goals.



### **Communication, Information and Uncertainty**

Having established an understanding of the two concepts of information and communication, we may now proceed to connect the two by introducing the concept of uncertainty. The two terms of "uncertainty" and "equivocality" have been used interchangeably by scholars (Weik, 1979, Daniels et al. 1997, Pepper, 1997) to reflect the state of ambiguity, turbulence and indecisiveness within which organizations live and function. It was Karl Weik who introduced the concept of organizational equivocality, and proposed a theory of organizing to which the concept of "equivocality reduction" was central. Daniels and his fellow authors saw this concept as an important addition to the literature of organizational communication and they therefore, suggested "equivocality reduction theory" instead (Daniels et al. 1997, p. 49).

Because we intend to use the concept of uncertainty to argue for our point of contention regarding the centrality of information and communication to organizations, we will summarize uncertainty reduction first. Based on Weik (1979), the concept may be summarized as follows:

1. All organizations live in, and experience, uncertain situations and times. The major environmental political, economic, and social variables are constantly changing and unstable. Thus it is impossible to predict to maximum accuracy, what is going to happen in the far, or even the near, future to an organization.
2. Organizations living in such uncertain environments must strive to reduce the level of uncertainty. Members have to act upon these turbulent realities if they want to accomplish the goals of the organization. The possible courses of actions are as follows:
3. In routine situations where uncertainty is usually very low, rules and regulations may suffice to cope with the situation. Uncertainty may be reduced by such communication activities like reference to regulations, procedural rules, manuals etc. helps in coping with equivocality.
4. When uncertainty is on the rise, members need to engage in an "interlocked behavior cycle," a continuous communication activity among the actors to reduce

- uncertainty. This activity could include any of the ordinary forms of the behavior, such as asking questions, reading documents, or browsing through web pages.
5. To reduce further uncertainty, members need to engage themselves in a "double interact," a behavior in which information is exchanged between the receiver and the source in a seesaw-like activity. Double interact is a reflection of the role of interactive communication in the reduction of uncertainty. It is this continuous engagement in information exchange that enables the actors to bring down the level of their equivocality and indecisiveness about the organizational situation.
  6. "Retention" must follow out of this interlocked behavior and double interact. Retention is a mental activity by which the important information that has succeeded in reducing uncertainty is selected and stored for future use for reduction of new uncertainties.
  7. When retained communication is used for reduction of new uncertainties, it is called "enactment". Enactment is simply the application of retained communication for reduction of newly arising uncertainties.
  8. The continuous enactment of retained interlocked behavior will result in the transformation of these communication messages into rules and regulations that will help in explaining routine situations. However, when (new) equivocality occurs, a new behavior cycle will be needed.

As described above, the concept of uncertainty clearly establishes the relationship between information and communication. An individual is uncertain about a situation when information about that situation is not sufficient, and when communication of relevant information about the situation is not possible. An example may suffice to explain this point. A fresh student coming to the university campus for the first time has a very high level of uncertainty about the situation. Very little information about how to start campus life is available to the student, and hence uncertainty of the situation is very high. The remedy of the situation lies in the availability of enough information, and this can only be accomplished through some sort of communication. For example, the student may resort to the reading of signs, or

may acquire some university manuals and brochures and leaf through them. Alternatively, the student may engage in verbal communication and ask other students.

Since we have described organizations as information-rich environments, uncertainty may therefore be understood as a reference to unused information in the organization's environment. Uncertainty increases because information that is needed to explain an organizational situation has not been provided or used, despite its availability in the environment of the organization. To reduce uncertainty, more information from the environment must be used to explain situations and events. Information is therefore, the essence of any organizational activity and it is only when organizations members use information that communication takes place. Environmental information that has not been used, remains in the environment to be used when need occurs, i.e. when uncertainty increases.

Studying organizational communication should, therefore, focus on the analysis of the informational realities of the organization. The relationship between the members can be seen and studied from the perspective of their informational and communicational roles. The leader may be identified by his or her central position in the communication network, and by the amount of information pertained to the functioning of the social system that he or she possesses. Obviously the leader of the organization will possess the highest amount of information related to the functioning of the organization. Other members' positions can also be determined by their place in the communication network, and by the amount of information they possess as well as their communicational roles. A job can be evaluated and analyzed by evaluating the amount of information involved in it. The level of the job is relative to the amount of information known to organization members about it. The less information is available about the job (to other members in the organization), the more professional and specialized the job is. The structure of the organization may be seen as a reflection of the various levels of communication networks available in the social system. An organization with a simple structure is one in which the amount of information exchanged is very limited and hence communication is simple and direct. In such organizations the levels of uncertainty is very low and the activities are easy and

predictable. On the other hand, organizations with complex structures possess complex communication networks and have a high amount of information that is not available to the members. In other words the level of uncertainty in such organizations is very high because a large portion of the information is unknown and unused by the members. Predictability of tasks and results of activities is very low in this situation.

### **Conclusion**

In this article we conceptualized information, communication and uncertainty as the three most important variables in organizational communication. We have argued for the position that organizations are information environments, and that organizational communication is the use of some of the information available in the environment of the organization for the purpose of achieving its goals. As a prelude, we established a distinction between some communication- and business- related disciplines on one hand, and organizational communication on the other. Business, managerial and corporate communication fields were identified as more business-oriented functional fields that establish the role of communication in achieving the profit-oriented goals of the economic enterprise. Organizational communication was identified as a sociologically oriented field that understands organizations as information-laden social systems whose members have to use the information available in the environment to achieve their shared goals. Communication is used for uncertainty reduction purpose, a purpose which in its finality, helps in achieving the goals of the organization. Whereas it is identified as one of the several independent variables in the three functional fields, the concept of communication is the basic dependent variable that organizational communication focuses on.

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### **Authors**

Mahmoud M. Galander is an Assistant Professor at the Department of Communication, KIRK-HS, International Islamic University Malaysia.

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