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Sensemaking and the distortion of critical upward communication in organisations

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Abstract

Most research into feedback has focused on communication from managers to non-managerial staff. To a lesser extent, it has more recently addressed upward and 360 degree appraisal systems. In contrast, the role of informal upward communication continues to be largely neglected, especially when it concerns the transmission of opinions critical of managerial orthodoxy. There has been little examination of the sensemaking heuristics employed by both managers and non-managerial staff that stimulates the former to disregard much of the already muted critical upward communication they receive, and the latter to suppress its transmission in the first place. We therefore suggest that managers often over commit to particular courses of action, irrespective of whether they bode ill or well for the organization concerned. In so doing, they frequently demonise those who belong to stigmatised outgroups or who hold contrary value systems. We argue that the consequent elimination of critical upward communication (henceforth, CUC) leads to iatrogenic phenomena – i.e. organizational problems that are derived from the treatment regime that has been prescribed, rather than from a pre-existing condition. Implications for practice and further research are considered.

KEYWORDS

Critical upward communication; iatrogenic organisational interventions

INTRODUCTION: UPWARD FEEDBACK IN CONTEXT

Feedback can be defined as, ‘messages conveyed to a receiver about his, her, or its (group) performance’ (Cusella, 1987, p.626). It is an intrinsic aspect of communication processes, and hence is thoroughly integrated into the fabric of organizational life. Feedback may be positive, neutral or critical in nature. This paper is principally concerned with feedback that is critical of organizational goals and management behaviour (i.e. critical upward communication, henceforth CUC), and which is transmitted by those without managerial power to those with such power. Our argument is that, consistent with a tendency to overlook power imbalances and/or underestimate their effects, managers often resort to behaviours which, intentionally or otherwise, discourage the transmission of CUC. These processes have been under-researched. In particular, previous research has had relatively little to say about how organizational actors themselves understand these processes. Perspectives drawn from sensemaking can usefully supplement previous research, which suggests that managers deprived of sufficient CUC develop inaccurate perceptions of the communication climate within their organizations.

Most previous research has tended to visualise influence as flowing from managers to subordinates, rather than the other way round (Tourish and Pinnington, 2002). Where research into upward communication has occurred, it has tended to reflect this orientation. An earlier and influential review of the literature in the area noted that, ‘communication upward from subordinate to superior is reported to take four primary forms: (a) information about the subordinate himself/ herself, (b) information about

co-workers and their problems, (c) information about organizational practices and policies, and (d) information about what needs to be done and how it can be done' (Jablin, 1979, p.1202). This suggests that, although information about organizational practices and policies is highlighted, upward communication is rarely conceived of specifically in terms of the transmission of information that is openly critical of declared organizational priorities. It tends to be explored from the perspective of feedback that deals with job performance, or neutral information about organizational performance that can enhance the implementation of a predetermined management agenda.

Thus, little of the research into upward communication/ feedback that has taken place in recent years has flowed from a concern with CUC. Most of the research has been spurred by the growing popularity of upward appraisal systems in organizations (e.g. DeNisi, 1996; Atwater et al., 2000; Hargie et al., 2004). The bulk of this work suggests that, in the contemporary organization, upward feedback itself seems to most often occur as part of the formal appraisal process, rather than informally and through the communication channels used on a daily basis (Atwater et al., 1995). In terms of upward feedback, the research has tended to be quantitative in nature, and driven by an imperative to explore what makes appraisal systems more effective, in the sense of improving organizational effectiveness from a management perspective.

Thus, empirical investigations have sought to establish that upward feedback, upward communication and open door policies deliver significant organizational benefits (e.g. Hegarty, 1974; London and Wohlers, 1991; Moravec et al., 1993; Reilly et al., 1996). However, significant problems have also been reported with the delivery of feedback.

In an everyday occurrence, ‘...people often have to make decisions about whether to speak up or remain silent’ (Morrison and Milliken, 2003, p.1353). Articulating a voice in the workplace has been variously conceptualised as employee voice, issue selling, whistle-blowing, championing, dissent and boat rocking (Dutton and Ashford, 1993; Miceli and Near, 1992; Parker, 1993; Saunders et al, 1992; Kassing, 2001; Withey and Cooper, 1989). However, many people decide not to provide feedback in any form. 85% of respondents in one survey indicated that that on at least one occasion, ‘they had felt unable to raise an issue or concern to their bosses even though they felt that the issue was important’ (Milliken et al., 2003, p. 1459). More fundamentally, feedback tends to mainly flow from persons in authority to their subordinates, rather than the other way round (Luthans and Larsen, 1986). Despite the fact that communication is a central theme in the leadership literature, it is conceived, ‘almost exclusively in terms of managers doing the talking. With few exceptions, listening is not addressed in the literature’ (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003, p. 1439). Moreover, where upward feedback occurs it tends to be more positive than critical in nature (Baron, 1996). We are therefore left with a paradox. On the one hand, it is increasingly recognised that organizations now suffer from information overload, sometimes termed *infoglut* or *data smog* (Edmunds and Morris, 2000). On the other hand, motivating truthful upward communication, and so ensuring more of it, is widely recognised as a serious problem (Chow et al., 2000).

Overall, relatively little research into feedback has been performed by organizational communication scholars (Cusella, 1987). A gap in the literature therefore exists. This paper seeks to outline a research agenda from a communications perspective, and one that is essentially interpretive and critical in nature. The absence of systems designed

to institutionalise CUC into the management decision making process is often rationalised by the assumption on the part of managers that most members of an organization should share a common set of values, have the same appreciation of events, display a common commitment to managerial goals, and accept that managers are the people most capable of accurately understanding the organization's external and internal environments. We argue that none of these assumptions can be sustained. Rather, we suggest that sensemaking perspectives can illuminate more precisely the role of supportive or dissenting voice in upward communication.

Figure 1 illustrates how the argument is developed in this paper. It suggests that employees broadly face a choice of articulating a supportive or a dissenting voice to managers. Supportive voice, to which low risks but high rewards are attached, generates a strong flow of communication to managers. It is in turn reinforced, encouraged and rewarded. Such a scenario helps produce managerial perceptions of organisational climate at odds with those of other key organisational actors. Mismatched perceptions therefore have iatrogenic consequences – i.e. problems arise that are caused by the treatment regime prescribed by managers, and which flow from misdiagnosis, rather than from a pre-existing condition. On the other hand, where employees choose to articulate dissent, they tend to do so mildly, since dissent carries high risks and attracts low rewards. Dissent is therefore expressed in a weak flow of communication to management. But even this can elicit a strong flow of communication from managers to the dissenters, in the form of messages and actions which penalise dissent. Alternatively, with a dissenting voice, employees may elect to remain completely silent. However, *both* dissenting voice scenarios produce the

same iatrogenic organizational interventions that result from the ingratiating communication witnessed when a voice supportive of managers is articulated.

Insert Figure 1

We begin a detailed discussion of these issues by further exploring the role of dissent in organisations, how it is demonised or penalised, and the contribution which such processes have been found to make to organisational outcomes.

FEEDBACK, THE DEMONISATION OF DISSENT AND ORGANIZATIONAL OUTCOMES

The absence of CUC contributes to the development of different mindsets and perceptions on the part of employees and managers, on such issues as the nature of the organization's communication climate and the supportiveness of communication received from and transmitted to managers. In turn, such dichotomous approaches are linked to the emergence of major organizational problems. This becomes clear when we consider the relationship between organizational failure, on the one hand, and the feedback available or unavailable to those at the top on the other. A number of studies have been conducted into organizations facing serious crisis or failure (e.g. Starbuck et al, 1978; Starbuck, 1983; Sull, 2003). In general, it has been found that senior managers often have views of their firms and their market environments that differ greatly from what outsiders consider to be realistic. Other studies have found that the perceptions of senior managers may differ markedly from those of their more junior colleagues, with those at the top typically seeing fewer and milder deficiencies in their

organizations (Payne and Pugh, 1976; Mezias et al., 2001; Mezias and Starbuck, 2003).

The absence of CUC has therefore been increasingly identified as a causal factor in organizational problems. Seeger and Ulmer (2003) argued that the collapse of Enron was partially caused by a failure on the part of its senior managers to maintain adequate communication systems capable of transmitting information about organizational problems. There is ample testimony from former employees that the organisation promoted an internal culture of 'no bad news' (e.g. Cruver, 2003; Swartz and Watkins, 2003) and that it used a punitive system of internal appraisal, known as 'rank and yank' to penalise those seen to be dissenters (Tourish, 2005). For example, when one internal critic drew her concerns to Chairman Kenneth Lay's attention, his first response was to seek legal advice about the possibility of securing her dismissal (Watkins, 2003). The paradox is that managers have often declared a preference for empowerment, involvement and open communication. However, employees still, 'feel that speaking up about issues and problems is futile, or, worse yet, dangerous' (Milliken and Morrison, 2000, p.721). Thus, top managers in crisis ridden organizations have been observed to frequently receive accurate warnings and diagnoses from some subordinates, but to then pay them little or no attention (Harrison, 1991). In a study of 20 firms facing crisis, Dunbar and Goldberg (1978) found that many top managers surrounded themselves with yes-sayers. Such people screened those at the top from signs of trouble and diluted warnings from middle managers when they attempted to report problems. The consequence is that when managers do not notice, or they ignore, suppress or even scorn warning signals from their internal or external environments they end up insouciantly 'driving through a red

light' (Wissema, 2002, p.522). This might be described as a crisis of over-optimism, a frequent precursor of business disaster.

Thus, top management openness encourages further expressions of voice (Premeaux and Bedeian, 2003). However, in contravention of this, managers often create systems which ensure that only a certain kind of information is brought to their attention. What they then attend to is filtered through their cognitive biases and values (Hambrick and Mason, 1990), producing a distorted grasp of reality, and managerial decisions which are inappropriate or harmful. It is our contention that management interventions framed in the absence of CUC are especially prone to such problems. Moreover, they may lead to interventions that are almost invariably well intentioned, but that produce unexpected negative consequences due to the flawed perception of the internal and external environment from which they have sprung. Researchers have therefore argued that organizations should encourage the presence of 'contrathinkers', keen to take on a devil's advocate position and criticise prevailing managerial orthodoxy (e.g. Wissema, 2003).

On first inspection, this sounds a straightforward proposition. The problem is that when people have radically different perceptions of what constitutes reality they are also inclined to think that their perception of it is more widely shared than it is. Given this, a key argument in this paper is that they are unaware that they discourage the expression of critical opinion. People are especially sensitive to negative input – what has been termed the automatic vigilance effect (Pratto and John, 1991). This reflexive action is consistent with threat-rigidity theory, which postulates that, 'a threat to the vital interests of an entity... will lead to forms of rigidity' (Staw et al., 1981, p.502).

One of our most fundamental needs, in most relational contexts, is to present a positive face to others, and to be reassured that the positive light in which we see ourselves is widely shared (Hargie and Tourish, 1997). Critical feedback may appear to threaten face needs, and hence be perceived as an attack on vital interests. Thus, when managers are faced with CUC, they are more likely to retreat into well worn patterns of behaviour than they are to stay open to new ideas or encourage challenges to existing practices. It is therefore likely that their less than enthusiastic, or outrightly punitive, response to critical feedback will discourage members of the organization from offering more of it. Moreover, rigidity effects are reinforced by information insufficiencies, and a desire to avoid blame and confusion (Barnett and Pratt, 2000). Accordingly, the retreat into rigidity further curtails the flow of CUC, reinforcing the original problem.

The implications for organizational functioning are profound. The absence of CUC reinforces the view of those at the top that their opinions are more widely shared and accepted than they are. What has been variously defined as the principle of social proof (Cialdini, 2001) or consensual validation (Zebrowitz, 1990) is then likely to come into play, in which the assumption people hold that their views are more widely shared than they really are encourages the parallel fallacy that they must be correct. With such a conviction in place, it is yet more likely that dissent will be viewed as resistance to be overcome rather than useful feedback (Lewis, 1992). The conviction takes root that there is one truth which explains most of the organization's problems, that a few key people (i.e. its Senior Management Team) have a particularly deep understanding of this truth, that those who dissent are either misinformed or do not have the welfare of the organization at the forefront of their minds, and that such

dissenters need to be silenced and conquered rather than persuaded (Tourish, 1998). The implied unitarist view of organizations challenges the notion that they can best be viewed as coalitions, in which, 'there is no requirement for the participants to share vested interests or singular, paramount goals' (Pfeffer and Salancik, 2003, p.26). Clearly, a 'coalitionist' perspective is more likely to favour multiple viewpoints, open communication systems, and hence CUC. A unitarist view is more likely to stress homogeneity, conformity and downward communication rather than CUC.

The conviction that there is an abundant understanding for the ideas of senior managers, combined with the manner in which the automatic vigilance effect and threat rigidity effects discourages genuinely open communication, is then expressed in narratives that demonise whatever critical opinions that do surface. Accordingly, the managerial mindset that results from the discouragement of CUC is often characterised by an ideological commitment to particular courses of action, irrespective of whether they bode ill or well for the organization concerned, and a tendency to demonise those who belong to stigmatised outgroups or who hold contrary value systems (Tourish, 2000). Theories of feedback must take into account the fact that different individuals and groups in any organization will have conflicting perspectives on what is important, what is happening and the contribution that each makes to the organization's goals. Sensemaking perspectives thus have much to offer, and indeed have been increasingly popular in organization studies (e.g. Patriotta, 2003; Tomlinson and Egan, 2003).

SENSEMAKING PERSPECTIVES ON CRITICAL FEEDBACK

Even when people are confronted by straightforward data, dealing with seemingly verifiable empirical facts, they often form impressions that are either inaccurate, or which differ (sometimes dramatically) from those of fellow observers. Perception is, 'shaped by the needs and prior beliefs of the perceiver, rather than the 'objective facts' presented' (Winter, 2003, p.40). Despite this, most of us trust our memory implicitly, believe that our sense of recall is more accurate than that of most other people, and prefer to rely on the stories that we construct to depict our sense of reality, rather than statistical evidence or the impartial counsel of other observers (Dawes, 1994).

The problem of contested perceptions of reality becomes ever more apparent when we consider human communication. Interaction is inherently subtle, shaded, and ambiguous in both form and content (Hargie and Dickson, 2004). It can be argued that, despite their best efforts, managers therefore struggle to grasp how other people view the organization concerned, the role of the managers within it, and the efficacy of its communication systems. Given this, they therefore fall back on their naïve, interpretive constructions of the social world – constructions that are founded on both distorted feedback from others, and inherently deficient powers of recall.

Thus, organizations can be viewed as, 'collections of people trying to make sense of what is happening around them' (Weick, 2001, p.5). It follows that equivocation, and hence conflicted understandings of how others behave, is central to organizational life. These efforts at sensemaking are expressed in stories, shaped either as interior monologues or exchanged with others, and hence refined through a process of collective dialogue. Narratives are ways of talking about organizations and hence they

depict perceptions that different people and groups have of organizing (Weick, 1979). Indeed, narratives and storytelling have been regarded as the basic organizing principle of human cognition (Boland and Tenkasi, 1995). Cognitively, they help us to simplify the world by providing some set of understanding that guides action, and which help us to monitor our behaviour as we do so (Weick, 1995). In particular, they can be viewed as, 'emotionally and symbolically charged narratives. They do not present information or facts about 'events', but they enrich, enhance, and infuse facts with meaning' (Gabriel, 2000, p.135).

Accordingly, interpretation is central to sense making. The interpretive approach to organization studies assumes that we must consider the meanings which people attach to varied social situations (Hatch and Yanow, 2003,). It is impossible to assume that individual members of groups or whole organizational systems embrace a unitaristic perspective, or share a common grasp of reality, and to suggest that one group's understanding of that reality should be privileged above that of another. Thus, interpretivist perspectives in organizational communication research explore the communication processes whereby these rival cognitive sets are developed, shared with others, and reinforced as a result of such sharing. Stories are therefore constructed and told both as a means of trying to control the behaviour of others, and also as a means of resisting the attempts by others to control the behaviour of those telling the stories (Gabriel, 2000). The problem is that disparate groups often construct such stories in isolation from each other, and hence with a propensity to build rival narrative systems that diffuse a common sense of organisational purpose. In particular, it is likely that without systems in place that institutionalise CUC, the

stories which guide the behaviour and strategies of senior management teams will increasingly diverge from those constructed by non-managerial employees.

Such conceptions have been downplayed in most research into feedback processes. Research into communication within organisations generally has been concerned with the mechanics of feedback systems, the ‘accuracy’ or otherwise of the feedback received by either managers or non-managerial staff, and the means by which the accuracy of such feedback can be improved (see Fletcher, 2001, for an overview). This neglect fails to recognise that feedback always reflects the deliverer’s and the receiver’s position in densely embedded social networks that condition his or her perception of reality. On many issues, particularly on the dynamics of interpersonal communication, there is no objective standard to which one can appeal in determining the accuracy of the feedback transmitted.

In particular, people use social networks to reduce interpersonal uncertainty – what Granovetter (1978; 1985) has characterised as an ‘embedded’ view of behaviour, economic transactions, interpersonal perception and decision making. Granovetter’s (1985) concept of embeddedness endeavoured to find an intermediate course between what he referred to as ‘under-’ and ‘over-socialized’ views of social action. In relation to CUC, membership of such networks, and the amount of information available to them, helps shape people’s perception of the quality of communication they receive and transmit. Within this framework, it is important to recognise that those who receive CUC perceive it as accurate or inaccurate based on their own position in the power saturated hierarchies in which they reside. In particular, self efficacy biases predispose us to believe that we personally are better on various positively rated

dimensions of social behaviour than most other people (Gioia, 1989; Pfeffer and Cialdini, 1998). Positive feedback therefore feels intuitively valid while critical feedback that conflicts with our idealised self image feels erroneous (Tourish and Hargie, 2004a). Accordingly, managers are inclined to view positive feedback favourably and critical feedback unfavourably, irrespective of any 'objective' merits that may be perceived by others. They also construct stories which claim that they make valiant efforts to promote CUC, only to be regularly thwarted by the unyielding and uninterested attitudes of others. Their embedded position in networks of other managers then ensures that such stories become common currency among groups of managers, and indeed often assume a canonical status in the folklore of such groups.

This does not mean that organizations are wholly conflicted, or lacking in any unitary focus. For example, it may be possible for disparate organizational actors to agree on some principle or proposition, such as the primary mission of the organization or the need for and usefulness of CUC. But they may diverge about what these propositions mean in either theory or practice, about how they are being actualised in their own organization against some imaginary ideal, and about the respective commitments of managers and those that they manage to what is held up as 'good process'. In addressing these issues, both managers and non-managers also construct sensemaking narratives that address questions of power – an issue of central relevance to the issue under discussion.

SENSEMAKING AND POWER

Sensemaking perspectives are particularly appropriate when the issue of power is considered, as it must be when we address the question of CUC. Power exists as a key variable on both the surface and deeper structures of organization, while communication plays a vital role in how power relations are developed (Frost, 1987). However, power itself is a frequently unacknowledged variable in organizational science (Clegg, 2000).

A corollary is that important issues involving information transmission from those without managerial power to those with such power have been insufficiently explored in the literature. Indeed, whatever other changes have occurred, 'corporate organizations have remained largely autocratic in form' (Deetz and Mumby, 1990, p.19). In such a context, it is unlikely that much emphasis will typically be placed on the necessity of senior managers securing CUC from 'subordinates' on their strategies and plans, as opposed to questions of operational implementation.

It has been noted that one important manifestation of power is, 'the capacity of an actor in that relationship to prevent the emergence of, for discussion and decision making, of anything other than "safe", uncontroversial issues... Actors who have power in this sense are able, without protest from fellow actors, to leave contentious items off the agenda of decision-making meetings' (Frost, 1987, p.506). Agenda setting is thus a useful index of power, and a commonly used tool when bringing about strategic change (Hardy, 1996). Sensemaking perspectives can help us to understand how both managers and non-managers interpret this process, so that one side has more ability than another to define the range of permissible topics for discussion, repress the transmission of CUC and so shape the wider organizational

agenda. Consistent with the terminology of Simon (1976), managers (as with all of us) tend to make decisions and adopt opinions based on limited information (i.e. they are 'satisficing'), rather than by evaluating all available information. When they use their power to keep items off the agenda, and neglect to institutionalise CUC into the decision making process, they further constrain the amount of information that is available to them. As Mumby (2001, p.595) has noted, '[s]ensemaking is not simply the product of mutually shared assumptions and interpretive procedures, but rather is shaped by the political context in which it occurs.' Organizational power is largely a matter of how individuals or groups shape dominant interpretations of what is occurring in the organization. When managers limit their own access to information, by constraining CUC, they reinforce their tendency to construct narrative accounts of organisational life that conflict with those of other actors. In turn, this has important implications for the wider organisational climate that is constructed.

ORGANIZATIONAL CLIMATE, 'SUPERIOR-SUBORDINATE'

COMMUNICATION AND THE DISTORTION OF CUC

Organizations with systems which constrain people's opportunities to transmit CUC are likely to have a hierarchical, punitive and ultimately dysfunctional communication climate. Organizational climate consists of the values or characteristics of an organizational environment, and influences the behaviour of those within it (Tagiuri, 1968). Within this, communication climate consists of such issues as supportiveness, participative decision making (or the lack of it), levels of trust, confidence and credibility, and levels of openness and candour (Redding, 1972). It is influenced by forces both external and internal to the organization (Falcione et al., 1987). The

question of openness between managers and non-managerial staff is pivotal to any consideration of organizational and communication climate. Such openness is generally conceptualised in terms of how open people are to both message sending and message receiving (Dansereau and Markham, 1987). However, it has long been recognised that employees are prone to distort the messages they transmit upwards, with deleterious effects on general climate issues and overall organizational functioning (Athanassiades, 1973). Consequently, managers and those they manage often have different perceptions on even such deceptively straightforward topics as subordinates' basic job duties (Jablin, 1979) and whether and to what extent people are involved in decision making (Harrison, 1985). In particular, organizational silence has been viewed as 'a collective phenomenon where employees withhold their opinions and concerns about potential organizational problems' (Van Dyne et al., 2003, p.1364). What has been considered less frequently are the sensemaking approaches managers and non-managed alike bring to bear on this issue, and by which they construct narratives to explain and justify their conceptions and misconceptions to themselves and each other.

Moreover, the stories that emerge, from both senior managers and those who might be charged with providing feedback from other organizational levels, become key elements in the systems that encourage or discourage further efforts at CUC. We can illustrate the point by considering how punitively people may behave in the face of CUC, and the narrative consequences that flow from this. The choice to remain silent is often made because those managers 'who do not wish to hear about problems can punish people for speaking up' (Milliken and Morrison, 2003, p.1563). And many

organizations do indeed send the message that those who express concerns will be severely punished (Perlow and Williams, 2003).

However, non-managers also engage in sensemaking of a self serving nature. Researchers have found that the establishment of influence is one of the most powerful impulses that drive much upward communication (e.g. Kipnis and Schmidt, 1988). In particular, those with lower status attempt to ingratiate themselves with those of a higher status by exaggerating how much they agree with their opinions, rather than by stressing areas of disagreement and contention (Jones, 1990; Rosenfeld et al., 1995; Kassing, 2001) – a form of influencing characterised in the literature as ‘soft’ (Falbe and Yukl, 1992). Non-managers may be more or less open in their efforts to influence managers, and vary the extent to which they are open about their desired outcomes (Porter et al., 1981). It is unlikely that those involved fully acknowledge to themselves that they have embarked upon a self serving course of action. Self efficacy biases would lead us to expect that people wish to project a more idealised self image, in which they are willing to embrace the role of organizational dissenter and wish to speak up against what are perceived as the excesses of managerial power. Managers, meanwhile, do not wish to present themselves as autocrats who subvert discussion – despite the fact that assertiveness, rather than ingratiation, tends to be the single most commonly employed tactic when they attempt to influence subordinates (Kipnis et al., 1980). Managers, therefore, speak of Herculean efforts at encouraging discussion and increased frustration at the unwillingness of people to do anything other than ‘delegate decision making up’ (Tourish and Robson, 2003). It is a narrative of power refused, despite managers’ best efforts to nurture a hospitable communication climate.

Non-managers, on the other hand, tend to speak of heroic efforts at dissent, which perish beneath an artillery bombardment from managers.

Thus, there is some empirical evidence to suggest that how top managers respond to CUC, and the stories that are communicated about it, helps to determine how much of it they will receive in the future. In particular, evidence suggests that top managers have a tendency to over-critique negative feedback, while instantly agreeing with positive feedback (Tourish and Robson, 2003). Moreover, the narratives that are constructed to explain this focus on the indeterminacy of the data (applying stringent criteria that are set aside when positive findings are at stake). This is often rationalised as a concern for the public image of the organization, depicted as vulnerable to the predatory attentions of a media pack obsessed by bad news stories. Negative results for the further transmission of CUC are likely to result. This analysis is consistent with the data on groupthink (Janis, 1972), which has long suggested that when group leaders over-critique dissent one of the key effects is that people tend to respond by concealing dissident opinions, fearful of a punitive response. The effect is compounded by our preference for group cohesion, ensuring that ‘members of a group may choose to not express dissenting opinions in the interests of maintaining consensus and cohesiveness in the group’ (Morrison and Milliken, 2003, p.1353).

This analysis is also consistent with emerging data on company failure (e.g. Finkelstein, 2003), which documents a tendency on the part of top managers to ignore critical feedback, and indeed suppress its transmission. Tompkins (2005) documents repeated failures of this kind within NASA. He suggests that this helps explain many of its most high profile disasters, including the Columbia and Challenger catastrophes.

In a wider organisational context, the suggestion here is that most people at the receiving end of what they perceive as a hostile response to CUC tend to minimise further efforts at conveying what they really feel. The organizational climate becomes perceived as punitive. The effects are likely to go beyond the employee or employees most immediately affected. In line with consensual validation theory, people are more likely to speak up when they believe that they will obtain support from others (Bowen and Blackmon, 2003). The failure of co-workers to offer CUC discourages more and more people from also doing so. Senior managers, meanwhile, tend to imagine that in interrogating CUC they are merely applying rigorous standards to ambiguous data, and that its diminishing profile denotes higher levels of employee support for managerial initiatives than actually exists.

Ultimately, it is senior managers who are most often charged with resolving these paradoxes. Their efforts to do so, clearly, are based on their own narrative constructs rather than those of anyone else – constructs which are, in the case of both managers and non-managers, self serving in nature. Given these disparities in perception, efforts at remedial action, however well intentioned, may have a counter-productive effect – a question which we now address.

SELF-SERVING NARRATIVES, AND IATROGENIC MANAGEMENT INTERVENTIONS

This paper has discussed narratives about the communication processes between managers and non-managerial staff, and which are deployed by both sides to shape their overall perception of each other. Their views of organizational life are determined

by the stories they construct, while this view reinforces the types of stories that they then tell, which in turn once more reinforces the apparent veracity of their sense of the world of work.

Flowing from this, when managers respond to communication issues with narratives in mind that exaggerate how much CUC they receive, and which therefore signal an inaccurate impression of the communication climate within which they operate, they may create iatrogenic phenomena rather than solve problems – i.e. organizational maladies can result that are derived from the treatment regime that has been prescribed, rather than from a pre-existing condition. We suggest here that the notion of iatrogenic interventions and the implied analogy with medical interventions offers valuable insights into how CUC impacts on management behaviour, which in turn impacts positively or negatively on the wider body of the organization. The development of communication strategies, in particular, has been likened to a medical process, in which the condition of the organization is diagnosed, a treatment plan is prescribed and is then implemented (Hargie et al., 2002). Such plans are in the main devised by senior managers. Strategy will therefore reflect their intuitions, hunches and stories. Such narratives inevitably purport to describe cause and effect, accept or refuse responsibility and allocate blame. Blame avoidance ‘is a social fact of life’ (Bell and Tetlock, 1989, p.105), and strongly influences the behaviour of both managers and non-managers in most organisations. In this paper, we have highlighted how many managers over critique negative feedback, and through self serving attributions realign blame in such a manner that responsibility for poor internal communications is placed on the shoulders of others. In terms of the dynamics of CUC, action plans founded on a mis-reading of an organization’s mood, and without

sufficient awareness of the alternative stories constructed by others, are more likely to inflame such underlying problems as poor relationships, low levels of trust and ineffective communications than they are to cure them.

In particular, such plans may stimulate a process of blame allocation, lead to the emergence of a (perceived) punitive internal culture, and see the intensification rather than the relinquishing of control. Each of these is likely to increase status differentials rather than diminish them. In turn, this will widen the gap in perception between managers and non-managers on such important questions as the communication climate they both inhabit. People may feel, even more intensely, that their concerns have been by-passed and that a wider gulf has emerged between themselves and managers. Further behaviours which minimise the transmission of CUC will result. Management interventions of this kind could therefore be described as iatrogenic – that is, managers are likely to preside over organizational problems that are to a large extent derived from the treatment regime they themselves have prescribed, and which was optimistically intended to have a curative effect.

CONCLUSION

From the overview presented in this paper, we would suggest that previous research in the field has been illuminating in many respects. For example, it is interesting and useful to know that managers who actively seek out critical feedback find that their stature is enhanced rather than diminished (Ashford and Tsui, 1991). But the ‘story’ does not end there. It is vital to understand the sense making processes whereby people

explain their communicative conduct, usually with a view to exonerating their own behaviour.

In this spirit, we have argued that previous research into feedback processes has had relatively little to say about how organizational actors themselves understand these dynamics. It has also insufficiently explored how managers and non-managers justify the amount of CUC they transmit or receive. Ultimately, the narrative devices constructed by managers exaggerates how much CUC they receive and places the blame for the fact that more of it does not occur on non-managerial staff. Non-managers, on the other hand, are prone to ingratiation behaviours, and seek to minimise their own responsibility for the transmission of information. Repeatedly, communication audits have found that although respondents typically report that they urgently want greater information, relatively few also say that they themselves should be sending more of it (Tourish and Hargie, 1998). Rather than admit all this to themselves, they therefore construct narratives which claim that senior managers have no interest in CUC, and that a terrifying fate awaits those who dissent. Such beliefs may frequently, and in some organizations, have a degree of objective truth. They may also represent a set of self serving rationalisations for ingratiating behaviour. The failure to offer feedback becomes a narrative of struggle against impossible odds and hence a rational choice, rather than an abdication of personal responsibility. However, a strong case can be made that it would be useful to institutionalise CUC more thoroughly into the fabric of organizational life. If this is to be done, the sensemaking heuristics employed by managers and non-managers to justify their present behaviours needs to be explored much more thoroughly than has been the case to date.

Thus, there are multiple implications for both practice and research:

Implications for practice

1. Organizations may find it useful to train people to seek out and respond constructively to CUC (Vatcha and Tourish, 2003). It does not appear to be a skill that is automatically acquired, or one that features in the course of most management training.
2. Flowing from the above, managers also require training in ingratiation processes and how they might be overcome. It has been noted that even those exposed to information regarding ingratiation often assume, erroneously, that they themselves are immune to its effects (Tourish and Robson, 2003). They therefore fail to recognise its presence in their own lives, and, in a state of denial, avoid taking action to overcome it. Training on the issue would sensitise them to the various ways in which it is manifest.
3. As part of acquiring heightened sensitivity to ingratiation issues, managers might also find it useful to routinely scrutinise positive upward communication with the same rigour that they bring to bear on CUC (Tourish, 2004). Jonathan Swift expressed it best: 'The only benefit of flattery is that by hearing what we are not we may be instructed what we ought to be.'¹ Management meetings could therefore find it beneficial to regularly focus on such questions as:
 - What problems have come to our attention recently?
 - What criticisms have we received about the decisions we are taking?
 - What is the ratio of positive to critical feedback that each of us has received recently?

¹ Cited by De Vries (2001) *op. cit.*, p.89

- Are the criticisms valid, partially or completely? What should we change in response to them?
 - How can we get more critical feedback into our decision-making processes?
4. Greater experimentation with upward and 360 degree appraisal is also clearly warranted. Although, as we noted at the outset of this paper, many major organisations now routinely make use of both, others remain unaware of their benefits and resistant to their implementation.
 5. Methods should be developed to encourage much greater and more regular informal contact between managers and staff (Tourish and Hargie, 2004a). Such approaches are more likely to overcome some of the status differentials which inhibit CUC.

Many of these pointers for practice are less than extraordinary, and may even run the risk of appearing mundane. However, there has been a tendency in the general leadership literature to ignore the more mundane aspects of managerial work and leadership (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003) – a neglect which we would suggest is unhelpful, and which partially explains the parlous level of practice to be found when it comes to institutionalising CUC into organizational systems.

Research implications – towards an interpretivist agenda

Significant research challenges can also be identified. In particular, we would suggest that a closer study of how managers respond to whatever CUC they receive, and how non-managers limit the amount they transmit, is warranted. In particular, we have suggested that the sense-making approaches of both managers and non-managers tend

to be self serving in nature, and are more likely to reinforce the status quo than stimulate change. Further research into such narratives and their impact is required.

We also need to study more closely how participation in decision making affects the choice of influencing strategies that employees make, and how managers respond to them. For example, it has been found that failing to provide legitimate avenues for upward influence reduces CUC and limits the range of topics discussed in organizations (Krone, 1992). But providing supposedly legitimate outlets for CUC may not reduce such problems as the construction of disparate and antagonistic organizational stories, the use of ingratiation behaviours and hence the phenomenon of managers receiving predominantly over-positive upward communication. In particular, ingratiation behaviours may be endemic to any social situation in which even a modicum of status differentials and power imbalances are allowed to persist.

Overall, this paper highlights a profound ambiguity within organizations on the issue of CUC. Decision making improves when it is present, and it is clearly a characteristic of more empowered and participative organizational environments. However, managers appear to be largely unaware of how little CUC they receive, or of how their own behaviour sometimes acts a barrier to its development. Employees, meanwhile, are prone to the constructions of narratives which minimise their own responsibilities on the issue. Substantial problems result. It is hoped that this paper stimulates further research into the narratives which underpin these polarities, and assists in the development of strategies which may overcome them.

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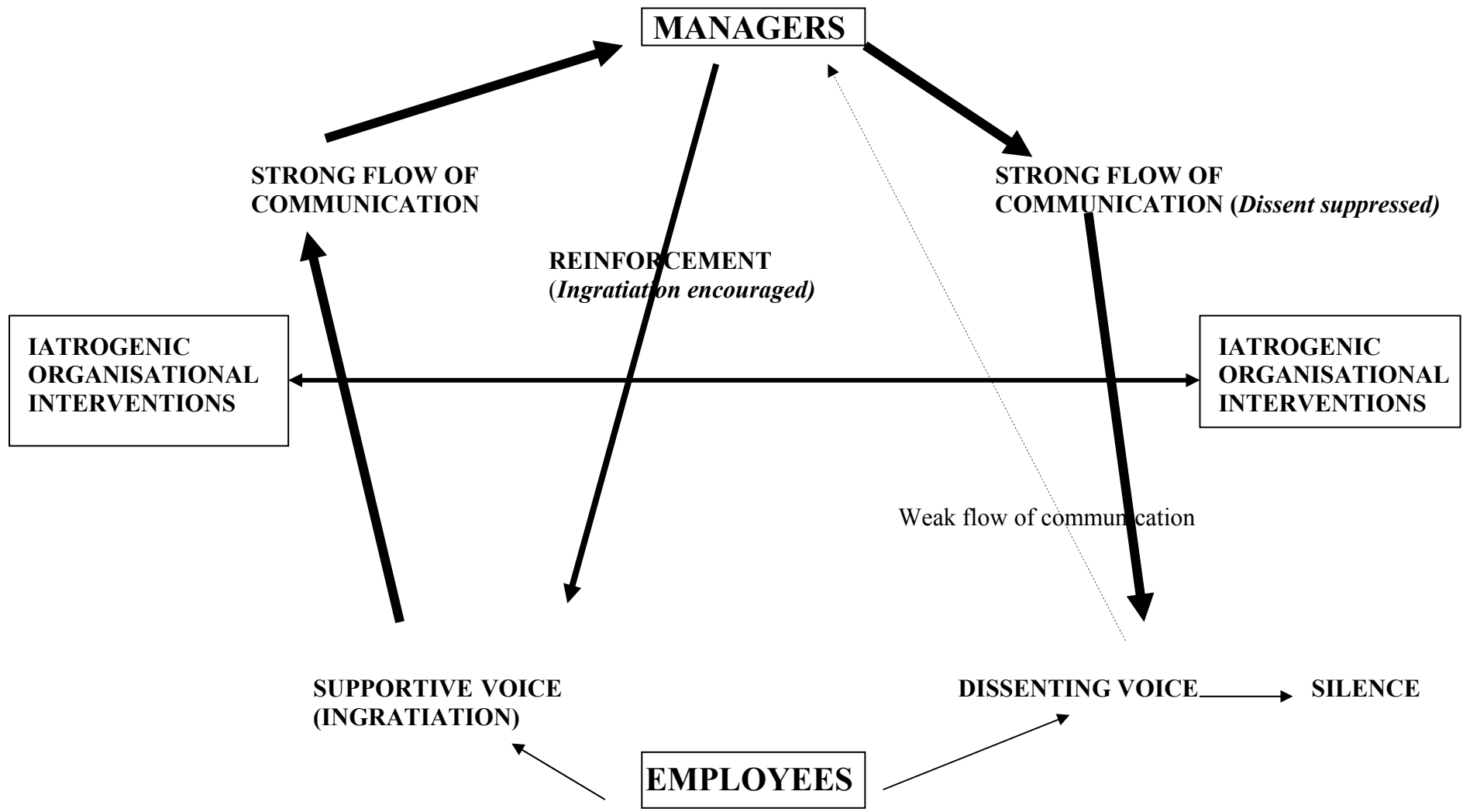


Figure 1: Supportive and dissenting voice in upward communication

