

## 1. The Crisis of Management and the Role of Organisational Communication

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### INTRODUCTION

What does the future hold for the theory and practice of management? What role, if any, is there for organisational communication in these deliberations? Exactly which aspects of communication contribute centrally to the core of corporate practice? This book addresses itself to these and other key issues. In this chapter our objective is to contextualise the book by examining a number of areas central to this overall ambition.

- *We look at the business context in which most organisations now work. Many if not all are under enormous external pressure. The agenda faced by managers is crowded to breaking point. These pressures sometimes see organisations fragment rather than cohere. A primary focus on the bottom line has often elbowed other considerations, including communication, to the sidelines. In the process, the theory and practice of management has entered into crisis. Many aspects of this crisis are explored in this book, and we showcase some of the main themes in the present chapter.*
- *We explore whether organisational communication makes any difference to how organisations function and how their internal relationships are managed. Recent years have seen a voluminous research literature into the human dimensions of organisational functioning. Communication has contributed to*

this, directly and indirectly. Our discussion of these issues does not presume that all members of organisations share a common set of interests and a readily agreed set of priorities or goals - what some researchers would describe as a 'unitarist' or 'functionalist' bias. Rather, it is to emphasise that while many management theorists have been developing inclusive agendas of involvement, participation and empowerment, most management practice has been marching to a different drum, and in the opposite direction.

- *We discuss precisely what we mean by the terms 'communication' in general, and organisational communication in particular.* Our intention is to alert readers at the outset to the themes that they will find in the chapters to follow. Contributors to this volume repeatedly discuss the communications implications of issues that have been deemed vital to the theory and practice of management. It is essential that readers appreciate the full range of issues implied by any discussion of communication, the better to grasp their full implications.
- *We summarise some key debates in the field concerning the parameters of organisation science and organisational communication.* Thus, we acknowledge that there is no one agreed agenda guiding communication research, or a single theoretical paradigm that is employed when communication processes are analysed. For example, some researchers adopt a critical management perspective, in which a principal concern is to explore relationships of power and domination. Others pursue a more positivistic agenda, characterised by a search for causal explanations of observable phenomenon. Readers will find a variety of approaches in the text, and are alerted here to some of the main issues involved.

Clearly, therefore, this book is not intended as an introductory text on organisational communication or management. While we outline some basic principles of communication in this chapter, the main thrust of the book is to explore the brutal dilemmas that now confront organisations daily, and illuminate many of the debates engulfing the field from the often neglected perspective of communication studies.

### **THE BUSINESS CONTEXT OF ORGANISATIONAL COMMUNICATION**

Humans are easily tempted to interpret the world as more volatile, fast changing, tempestuous, uncertain and unpredictable than it actually is, and to assert that each of these conditions prevails more than during any other period of history. This seems to be an endemic part of the human condition. As the Bavarian comic Karl Valentin once put it 'In the past even the future was better'. We make no such claims.

However, this book has been prompted by the realisation that society faces many challenges, none more so than in the field of work. Our economy is certainly more globalized than ever before, and therefore prone to sudden shocks inspired by unanticipated events beyond the control of even the most far seeing manager. To take the most obvious example, the terrorist attacks in New York on September 11 2001 sent political, social and economic shockwaves around the globe, and helped usher in a period of instability characterised by war with Iraq, sudden stock market fluctuations and a heightened mood of fear that is clearly not conducive to the orderly functioning of business.

The fate of individual companies illustrates the strains most are now exposed to. In 1989 Mitsubishi was a key global player. It even acquired a 51% stake in New York's Rockefeller centre. This corporate giant, seemingly so infallible, proceeded to lose \$330m. in 1999 (Hitt, 2000). Even more famously, IBM was ranked as the no. 1 corporation in the US by *Fortune* magazine in the early 1980s. It featured as one of the 'excellent' companies profiled in the best selling management book of all time - *In Search of Excellence* (Peters and Waterman, 1982). By 1995 it had tumbled to a position of 281 in the *Fortune* 500 – a shadow of its former pre-eminent self. As we write this chapter, sections of the business press have begun to float another previously unthinkable possibility – that the Ford Motor Company may be heading for disaster, and even bankruptcy (Wachman, 2003).

But it is more than just the fate of a few individual companies in the US and Japan that is at stake. The technology index peaked in March 2000, but in the following three years £778billion was wiped from the value of British company shares (Connon, 2003). A period of what had been dubbed 'irrational exuberance' (Shiller, 2001) shuddered to a halt. Micklewhaite and Wooldridge (2000: 120), two stalwart defenders of globalisation, conceded that there existed '...a universal feeling that every manager now faces a world in which the old certainties have been replaced by a string of unpleasant surprises and in which strategy has devolved from long-term planning to simple panicking.'

These developments, not to mention other famous and notorious debacles such as the Enron scandal, have created what can only be described as a crisis of legitimacy for the profession of management. More evidence has accumulated that many of the most

prized organizational interventions spawned by the management theory and guru industry have a limited to non-existent effect on performance. Jackson (2001) in surveying much of the evidence, cited the following dismal data:

- Of 500 companies studied, only one-third felt that programmes such as Total Quality Management had a significant impact on their profitability
- Only 20 out of 100 British firms thought that their adoption of organisational improvement plans improved their financial performance
- An analysis of managers in 100 companies looking at 21 different programmes found 75% of managers unhappy with the results
- A review of 787 companies around the world found that 70% of managers thought the management tools they were exhorted to use generally promised more than they delivered

In addition, much attention has been focused on the behaviours of senior executives. There can be no more apposite illustration than Jack Welch, formerly CEO of General Electric (GE), and lauded in some circles (though not by us) as the best corporate leader of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Welch started his retirement in a novel fashion by commencing an extramarital affair with an editor of the *Harvard Business Review*, who had been sent to interview him. His subsequent divorce brought to light a number of intriguing facts such as that he had amassed a personal fortune of over \$900 million, while firing tens of thousands of workers, that his retirement package included a \$9 million a year pension, plus use of GE's Boeing 737 and a Central Park apartment, free wine, food, laundry, toiletries, limo services, security, country club

memberships, and Wimbledon, Red Sox and Yankee tickets (Helmores and Morgan, 2002). In many senses this epitomised the excesses of the era.

The problems that have arisen from unbridled greed at the top have been widely acknowledged, and not just among 'the usual suspects' in the anti-globalisation movement. Noted management guru, Charles Handy, commented gloomily: 'The danger is that the flaws in the capitalist system may be its undoing, leaving us with something much worse... My hope is that we can do something about the flaws in capitalism... although I am not optimistic' (Handy, 2001: 119).

The language used has on occasion been vitriolic. Leading management thinker Henry Mintzberg offered the following opinion: 'We live in a crazy world. It's totally scandalous. In the US business has literally bought its way into government... We've gone completely out of balance... At the moment everything is totally imbalanced towards business: it completely dominates the social and government sectors too' (Caulkin, 2003:10).

The data is compelling. 86% of the stock market gains of the 1990s went to only 10% of the population, cementing the power of business and making the US the most unequal society in the world apart from Nigeria (Handy, 2001). Social cohesion has been seriously wounded. One of the most interesting books dealing with this (the evocatively entitled *Bowling Alone*), argued forcefully that Americans had seen a drastic collapse of honesty and trust, because of the rise of crude individualism and the consequent erosion of vital social networks (Putnam, 2001).

Perhaps inevitably, the theoretical basis of management has also been called into question. Traditionally, management was viewed as a process involving planning, organising, commanding, controlling and co-ordinating (Fayol, 1949). These and other certainties (e.g. unity of direction, unity of command and a clear chain of authority) may well have been appropriate in a stable environment, but seem less applicable in the context of virtual, e-commerce and service oriented companies, all competing in a globalized economy (Harvey and Buckley, 2002). More recent management thinkers have advocated a culture of empowerment (or liberation), on the basis that the new knowledge economy requires the active, willing and creative contribution of a workforce to an organisation's bottom line (see Collins, 2000, for an account and critique). The stimulus for such ideas has been provided by changes in the economy.

More than half of the total GDP in rich economics is now derived from what is defined as knowledge based work, while knowledge workers account for eight out of ten new jobs (Dess and Picken, 2000). These authors conclude that '...to compete in the information age, firms must increasingly rely on the knowledge, skills, experience, and judgment of *all* their people. The entire organization, collectively, must create and assimilate new knowledge, encourage innovation, and learn to compete in new ways in an ever-changing competitive environment' (Dess and Picken, 2000: 18).

Ideas of empowerment naturally follow – people's willing involvement in job tasks, necessary for the innovation required by knowledge-oriented firms, presumes some measure of autonomy and discretion over what they do. Moreover, when at work,

people generally prize the ability to realise their full potential as individuals (Mitroff and Denton, 1999), to do work that has some social meaning or social value (Ashmos and Duchon, 2000), and to enjoy the feeling of being part of a larger community (Mirvis, 1997). They also aspire to live and work in an integrated fashion (Pfeffer, 2001). None of these needs is likely to be met in an authoritarian environment.

The problem, however, is clear. It is one thing to stress the need for empowerment. Whether it can thrive in an environment that Mintzberg describes as ‘crazy’, in which most business leaders still instinctively respond to problems with a strong need to command and control, in which corporations are widely regarded as having too much power, and in which senior executives are ridiculed for their pay and benefits is another matter.

Frequently, these paradoxes have been disregarded by management theorists. It is often assumed that management is ‘the rational administration of unitary organizations. Organizations are assumed to be social technologies, or ‘tools’, systematically designed in order to attain specific goals’ (Thomas, 2003: 29).

Moreover, where it is addressed at all, power is most often discussed simply as 'a matter of strategic resource control or illegitimate moves in the legitimate organization game' (Clegg, 2003: 537), rather than as the exercise of control over one person or group by others. It is thus implied that organizations are geared to the achievement of ends that are both socially useful and generally shared – assumptions that in truth are ever more widely contested. Within this framework, a variety of management gurus produce recipes for organisational success, with all the panache of a magician who performs miracles - aided by smoke, mirrors, and his audience's



willing suspension of disbelief. Senior managers are urged to pursue the latest miracle cure through a process that is nine-tenths diktat to one tenth-persuasion. In reality, such has been the ferocity of life in the workplace over recent years, that most employees greet such efforts with ‘a healthy mixture of confusion, scepticism and even cynicism’ (Miles, 2001: 317). It is not insignificant that one of the most widely read writers on organisations is Scott Adams, whose Dilbert cartoons depict a workforce constantly bombarded by brainless management initiatives devoid of any real sense. Nevertheless, many practising managers eagerly embrace each new development, however untested its assumptions might be (Harvey and Buckley, 2001).

Thus, we regularly see the appearance of management prescriptions fatally hobbled by their own internal contradictions. It is quite common to find gurus (and others) advocating such approaches as participation, and yet creating programmes ‘whose successful implementation depends upon the use of hierarchy, unilateral control, and employee limited freedom’ (Argyris, 2002: x). For example, Beer and Eisenstat (2000) identified a number of barriers to organizations effectively implementing their chosen strategies – what they dubbed ‘the silent killers.’ Among the killers listed is a top down or laissez faire senior management style, which stops those at the top receiving enough corrective input to the decision making process. Their recommended solution, however, ‘starts with the top team of the business unit or corporation defining its strategy’, (p.30), and then proceeding to sell it down the line. A unitarist focus is simply assumed, and a top down strategy recommended – as part of the attempt to move organisations beyond top down strategies.

It is our belief, and a driving force behind this book, that such paradoxes could be addressed more effectively if communication theory – concerned as it is with how meaning is formed and then shared between people - was more often incorporated into the analysis. However, it seemed to us that a great deal of the general writing on management has neglected to fully incorporate a study of the communication processes involved. Where communication is acknowledged at all it is frequently addressed in passing, and more often with the assumption that it is a phenomenon that is self-explanatory and hence one that requires no deeper level of analysis. Likewise, in many organisations, communication is recognised as being important but little or nothing is done about it. The attitude seems to be that the formal recognition and endorsement of the need for better communication will somehow, by a process of osmosis, bring it to pass. This emu-like approach to strategic communication is of course doomed to failure. A major objective of this text is to showcase the importance of devoting time and resources to communication. It is also our intention to address this issue by building some much-needed bridges between two often disparate fields of study - management and organisational communication.

## **COMMUNICATION AND ORGANISATIONAL EFFECTIVENESS**

Communication is central to any study of what managers do, and to the effectiveness or otherwise of organisations. Managers devote much of their time to interactions with staff. Manager-watching studies have revealed that they spend over 60 per cent of their working time in scheduled and unscheduled meetings with others, about 25 per cent doing desk-based work, some 7 per cent on the telephone, and 3 per cent walking the job (Schermerhorn, 1996).

These activities are embedded in dense networks of relationships between managers and employees. Most such communication is face-to-face, and most of it is task related rather than personal in content. Managers spend much of their day communicating with many people, in brief interactions which are nevertheless of enormous significance in determining the communication and cultural climate of their organisations (Tourish and Hargie, 2000). Effective management depends on open communication, and requires an interpersonal style characterised by warmth, candour, supportiveness and a commitment to dialogue rather than monologue. Indeed, it has also been shown that ‘communication, especially oral skills, is a key component of success in the business world...executives who hire college graduates believe that the importance of oral communication skills for career success is going to increase’ (O’Hair et al., 2002: 3). No wonder that Mintzberg (1989: 18), having surveyed a wide range of evidence, drew the following conclusion: ‘The manager does not leave meetings or hang up the telephone in order to get back to work. In large part, communication *is* his or her work.’

Research findings have long suggested that the effective management of communication processes brings large-scale organisational benefits. In a review of the research, Clampitt and Downs (1993) concluded that the benefits obtained from quality internal communications include:

- Improved productivity
- Reduced absenteeism
- Higher quality (of services and products)

- Increased levels of innovation
- Fewer strikes, and
- Reduced costs.

Within the fields of Human Resources Management (HRM) and organizational behaviour there has also been a huge growth of study into what are generally defined as High Performing Work Organisations – those that tend to outperform their rivals over a long period of time. Extensive summaries of this evidence can be found in Pfeffer (1994, 1998); O'Reilly and Pfeffer, 2000; Collins and Porras, 2000; Reichfield, 2001; and Collins, 2001). Much of this relates directly to communication processes, and is concerned with the impact of such practices on employee commitment.

A report summarising the results of a human capital audit into the British Aerospace industry is typical of the data (Thompson, 2002). This explored the impact of High Performance Work Organizations (HPWO), generally characterised by good communication, semi-autonomous teams, employee participation, high levels of training, and performance based rewards. The audit found that:

- 'Companies high in the HPWO index in 1999 recorded sales per employee in 2002 of £162k, compared to £62k for those low on the index – a difference of 161%. In value-added per employee the corresponding figures were £68k and £42k – a difference of 62%' (p.5).

- ‘Use of profit sharing and of share ownership schemes in 1997 correlated with higher sales per employee and higher value-added per employee respectively in 2002. Greater provision of information to employees – through, for example, briefing groups – were associated with higher levels of profit per employee, and employee turnover was lower where firms gave employees more responsibility for the quality of their work’ (p.5).
- ‘Greater investment in management development was associated with high levels of value-added per employee. Companies investing heavily in management development recorded value-added per employee of £68K compared to £42K in companies that invested less – a difference of 62%’ (p.6).

Another example of the importance of communication was a survey in which 2,600 UK employees clearly expressed the view that what was most de-motivating of all was lack of communication from managers, citing issues such as a complete absence of interaction, a general lack of feedback, or meetings taking place behind closed doors (Reed Employment Services, 2002).

In relation to employee satisfaction, the Gallup Poll organisation produced a scale (*Q12*) comprising 12 questions, which are rated by staff on a one to five scale. These encompass issues such as the extent to which respondents feel they know what is expected of them at work, whether they are recognised for good performance, if their supervisor cares about them, and to what degree they believe that their opinions seem to matter. Thus, much of this *Q12* scale relates to communication by managers. From

its database of surveys of more than one million employees in the USA, Gallup found a significant link between scores on this scale and business performance (Caulkin, 1998). Organisations where staff scored highly outperformed their rivals on a range of measures of productivity, such as employee retention, profitability, and customer satisfaction. In like vein, companies in the UK which featured on the list of best 100 companies to work for have been shown to consistently outperform the FTSE normal share index (Sunday Times, 2003). This pattern is also reflected in data from the US. Companies on the list of *Fortune* best companies to work for found that their share values rose 37% annualised over a three year period up to 2000, compared with 25% overall (Levering and Moskowitz, 2000).

The data on the importance of commitment, especially in the modern knowledge economy, is overwhelming. A longitudinal study of entrepreneurial companies in Silicon Valley discovered that those founded under a 'commitment' model had 12 times the likelihood of advancing to a successful initial public offering (Burton and O'Reilly, 2000). Interestingly, and in an industry where rapid ascent can just as easily be the prologue to a dramatic fall, no firm founded with a commitment approach to managing people failed during a five-year period (Hannan et al, 2000). The story is repeated in the UK. A nationwide survey of 7500 UK workers found that where employees were highly committed to their employers they delivered 112 per cent three-year returns to share holders. Employees with low commitment returned only 76 per cent over the same period (Internal Communication, 2000).

The measures required to generate commitment are not necessarily complex, but they do involve a strong emphasis on communication. Take, for example, a study into 135

high performing US companies (Towers-Perrin, 1993). In these, there was a definite tendency to seek suggestions from front line employees, delegate, develop two-way communications and seek suggestions. Seventy-four per cent of employees in such organizations felt that their manager or supervisor asked them for ideas on improving efficiency. In another study of poorer performing organizations this figure was only 41 per cent. The evidence thus shows that commitment and enhanced performance is forthcoming when employees' participation is invited and welcomed, and is facilitated by the building of strong systems to promote effective internal communication.

However, most organizations do not pursue the practices that produce high commitment. We alluded above to impressive data on HPWOs, including a human capital audit in the British aerospace industry (Thompson, 2002). The latter report found that when all the work practices that characterise a HPWO were taken into account, only 11% of establishments were using two-thirds or more. 45% were using less than half. Moreover, although the only type of training that was clearly correlated with improved financial results was that related to people management, such training constituted the smallest amount of that available – barely 18%. Worse still, spending on management development appeared to be falling. Such data may have a bearing on the persistent finding, typified by a study of 216 international and global manufacturing businesses, to the effect that 'the strategic management of both international and global operations is still poorly executed in very many Europe-based manufacturing businesses' (Sweeney and Szwejczewski, 2002: 1).

Positive communication policies have also been eroded. Large-scale workplace industrial relations surveys in the UK showed that in 1980 about 34% of workplaces had formal joint consultative committees between managers and workers. This was down to 29% by 1998 (Millward et al., 2000). Predictably, all this means that commitment is actually on the wane, at a time when most organisations would say that it has become more important than ever. A UK Gallup Q12 survey found that only 17% of workers felt engaged (i.e. loyal and productive) with their workplace, 63% were not engaged (i.e. they were not psychologically bonded to the organisation) and 20% were actively disengaged (i.e. they felt psychologically absent, and were intent on running the organisation down) (LaBarre, 2001). As one measure of the costs involved, those in the latter category had twice the level of absenteeism of those in the first.

Falling commitment is linked to an intensification of workplace pressure. In Chapter 2, we discuss downsizing, and its devastating impact on morale, cohesion and commitment. But the problem is wider than this. For example, data was gathered from a sample of more than 10,000 individuals in Britain each year between 1991 and 1999, focusing mostly on the public sector. It found deteriorating levels of job satisfaction throughout and sharply rising stress levels – the size of the deterioration measuring between one half point and one full point on a standard General Health Questionnaire mental stress scale (Gardner and Oswald, 2001). In similar vein, Mirvis (1997: 198) summarised a wealth of available data in the US to conclude that the dominant climate in the workplace had become one of ‘fear, pressure and impermanence.’



The reality of much workplace communication is well illustrated in the following e-mail, sent by Neal Patterson, CEO of Cerner Corporation (a major US health care software development company) to his line managers. The effects can be readily imagined:

‘We are getting less than 40 hours of work from a large number of our... EMPLOYEES... The parking lot is sparsely used at 8a.m.; likewise at 5p.m...NEVER in my career have I allowed a team which worked for me to think they had a 40-hour job... I STRONGLY recommend that you call some 7a.m., 6p.m. and Saturday a.m. team meetings... My measurement will be the parking lot... The pizza man should show up at 7.30p.m. to feed the starving teams working late.’ (Cited by Wong, 2001: 1).

Driven by a variety of factors beyond the scope of this chapter, it is therefore clear that there is large and seemingly growing gap between the best data and theories of management, and what is actually happening on the ground. It hardly overstates the case to describe this as a crisis. The question arises: what can organisational communication bring to the study of these issues?

## **ORGANISATIONAL COMMUNICATION AND THE CRISIS OF MANAGEMENT**

We want here to indicate the breadth of the field, and so demonstrate how the core concerns of organisational communication intersect with the challenges of

management at many critical points. The chapters that follow then showcase these intersections in action.

Organisational communication, as a discipline, is now many decades old, with the ‘modern’ study of the subject generally held to date from the late 1930s (Tompkins and Wanca-Thibault, 2001). Typically, it looks at how people ascribe meanings to messages, verbal and nonverbal communication, communication skills, the effectiveness of communication in organisations, and how meanings are distorted or changed while people exchange messages, in both formal and informal networks. More generally, seven main traditions in communication research have been identified by Craig (1999) as follows.

1. *rhetorical* (communication as the practical art of discourse)
2. *semiotic* (communication as the manipulation and study of signs)
3. *phenomenological* (communication as the study of the experience of others)
4. *cybernetic* (communication as information processing)
5. *sociopsychological* (the process of expression, interaction and influence)
6. *sociocultural* (symbolic processes that produce shared social and cultural understandings)
7. *critical* (a discursive reflection on moves towards understanding that can never be fully achieved, but the act of which is emancipatory).

Each of the above traditions is concerned with various elements of communication (Hargie et al., 2004).

- **Communicators** refer to the people involved. Personal attributes such as the age, gender, dress, physique and disposition of those involved influence

both our own actions and our reactions to the behaviour of others (Hargie and Tourish, 1999). An important attribute is what Goleman (1997) termed 'emotional intelligence'. After examining studies involving hundreds of large organisations, he concluded that this was the dimension that characterised star performers. Emotional intelligence includes the ability to persuade and motivate others, to empathise and build relationships, to handle one's own and other people's emotions, to give open and honest feedback sensitively, to form alliances, to monitor one's own behaviour, and to read organisational politics. It refers to the core skills of social awareness and communication.

- **Messages** are the signals and symbols we use to convey what we mean. Communication messages are usually delivered in a visual, auditory, tactile or olfactory format (Hargie and Dickson, 2004). We are more conscious of the first three. Visual messages include written communication, as well as all of the nonverbal modes (clothes, jewellery, facial expressions, gestures, and so on) prevalent in social encounters. Auditory communication may be face-to-face or mediated by telephone. Tactile communication refers to the use of touch and bodily contact (handshakes, hugs, kisses). Finally, olfactory messages include the use of perfumes, after-shaves, deodorants, and all the other types of scent, which in fact serve to disguise our natural body odours and project a certain image.
- **Channel** describes both the medium and the means used to deliver messages. The 'means' of communication would include face-to-face, telephone, pager, written (fax, e-mail, snail mail, Newsletter), audio and video. In face-to-face contact, communication occurs through the medium of the visual, auditory

and olfactory channels, while the tactile channel may or may not come into play. A skilled communicator will select, and maximise the use of, the channel most appropriate to the achievement of the goals being pursued, bearing in mind that employees tend to prefer face-to-face communication with managers (Tourish and Hargie, 1993).

- **Noise** is the term used to describe anything that distorts or interferes with meanings and messages. Dickson (1999) identified a number of barriers to communication, the main ones being:
  - ✓ *Environmental*. This includes a whole range of factors. For example, the lay-out of furniture can facilitate or inhibit interaction, intrusive noise may be disruptive, and heating and lighting can be conducive or uncomfortable.
  - ✓ *Disability*. Physical, neurological or psychiatric impairment can make normal channels or patterns of interaction difficult, or even impossible. Examples include sensory handicaps such as sight or hearing loss, and conditions such as Parkinson's disease or severe depression.
  - ✓ *Psychological*. This refers to the 'baggage' we carry with us into social encounters. These include the personal biases or stereotypes that influence how we perceive and interpret what a particular person is saying.
  - ✓ *Semantic*. This occurs when the actual meaning of what is being communicated becomes distorted due to language or cultural differences between the communicators.
  - ✓ *Demographic*. In particular, differences in age and gender have been shown to have the potential to cause problems during social encounters. To take but one example, when a male listener nods his head he is likely to be

communicating to the speaker 'I agree', but when a female nods her head she may just be indicating 'I am listening' (but not necessarily agreeing) (Stewart and Logan, 1998).

- ✓ *Organisational*. Barriers to communication can be constructed by the organisation itself. For example, we worked in one corporation where the CEO sent an edict to all employees that no-one was in future permitted to send any e-mails directly to him. Rather, they all had to go through the line-management hierarchy. This was a very disabling and disempowering message and a definite obstacle to upwards feedback. Other examples of organisation barriers include the disparate physical location of staff who should be working closely together, a lack of a coherent strategy for team briefing, or overburdened, stressed and under-resourced supervisors who simply do not have sufficient time to devote to communication.
- **Feedback** allows us to evaluate our performance. We receive feedback both from the verbal and nonverbal reactions of others, and from our own responses. This latter process, which is known as 'self-monitoring', involves being aware of what we say and do in social encounters, and of its effect upon others. Skilled communicators are high self-monitors who continuously analyse and regulate their own behaviour in relation to the responses of others.
- **Context**. Communication does not occur in a vacuum. It is embedded within a particular context, which in turn has a major impact upon behaviour. A manager will behave totally differently when disciplining a member of staff in the office, as opposed to when calling at the home of the same person following the

death of a child. In each case, the situation plays a key part in shaping the response.

It is evident from this that communication dynamics are thoroughly insinuated into the fabric of organisation life. We would argue that organisations cannot be thoroughly understood without bringing a communication perspective to bear. Indeed, attempts to even define what organizations are would founder without a clear acknowledgement of communication processes. Ocasio (2002: 42) conceptualised organizations as ‘social systems of collective action that structure and regulate the actions and cognitions of organizational participants through its rules, resources, and social relations’. In like vein, Huczynski and Buchanan (2001: 5) iterated that: ‘An **organization** is a social arrangement for achieving controlled performance in pursuit of collective goals’. Organisations involve:

- *Social arrangements*, where people come together to interact and organise themselves in a certain way. There are systems set in place whereby members interact with one another, both formally and informally.
- *Controlled performance*, which entails the setting of standards for outputs, measurement of performance against these standards, and the implementation of corrective action as required. Rules are laid down and employees have to accept and abide by these. This is facilitated by a managerial structure, and the pooling of shared resources.
- *Collective goals*, wherein members work together to achieve shared aims and common objectives. Organisational members are expected to hold certain

values and to think in particular ways. It is the accepted norm that employees should contribute to the corporate 'mission'.

In this book, we and our fellow contributors are particularly concerned with how the main elements of communication described here interact with the processes of management, to produce positive or negative outcomes. We now explore various theoretical paradigms that guide research within the field, and which also must be taken into account.

## **THEORETICAL PARADIGMS IN ORGANISATIONAL COMMUNICATION RESEARCH**

Organisational communication has been variously conceived as what people who are academic students of communication do, it can be viewed simply as the study of communication in organisations, or the term has been taken to mean the use of communication to describe and explain organisations (Deetz, 2001). Given the breadth of its core concerns, it qualifies to be regarded as a subset of the wider study of organisations. If organizational theory can be conceptualised as generalizations about organizations, then most contributions to the field can be dated from the last half of the twentieth century (Starbuck, 2003). In a highly influential paper, reproduced in a text specifically devoted to debate about the role of organization science, Burrell and Morgan (2000) proposed that four theoretical paradigms could be observed in this work. These were functionalist, interpretive, radical humanist, and radical structuralist.

- *Functionalism* is 'characterised by a concern for providing explanations of *the status quo, social order, consensus, social integration, solidarity, need satisfaction* and *actuality*. It approaches these general sociological concerns from a standpoint which tends to be *realist, positivist, determinist* and *nomothetic*' (Burrell and Morgan, 2000: 112). The aim is '...to create general theories about organizations and their members, which are reminiscent of the powerful universal laws found in the natural sciences' (Donaldson, 2003: 41). From the perspective of communication, studies in this tradition would be concerned with issues such as the causal relationship between communication satisfaction and organisational productivity, and be characterised by questionnaire based data collection and rigorous quantitative analysis.
- The *interpretivist* perspective is 'informed by a concern to understand the world as it is, to understand the fundamental nature of the social world at the level of subjective experience. It seeks explanation within the realm of individual consciousness and subjectivity, within the frame of reference of the participant to the observer of action' (Burrell and Morgan, 2000: 114). Fundamentally, the argument is that 'the social world cannot be understood in the same way as the natural and physical worlds' (Hatch and Yanow, 2003: 65). Interpretivist communication scholars are involved in exploring questions like what sense individual members of organisations make of communication processes, and how they understand or misunderstand messages received from management. It is likely that data will be obtained by qualitative methods such as depth interviews, from which major themes in understanding can be extracted.



- The *radical humanist* paradigm has much in common with interpretivism, but in addition is concerned ‘to develop a *sociology of radical change* from a *subjectivist* standpoint... its frame of reference is committed to a view of society which emphasises the importance of overthrowing the limitations of existing social arrangements’ (Burrell and Morgan, 2000: 117). This approach has led to a burgeoning growth in what has more widely been termed Critical Management Studies (CMS) (Adler, 2002). One of its central preoccupations has been a critique of existing ideologies (Willmott, 2003) - in particular, the assumption that existing ideologies are value free, self evident, morally superior or bereft of power based implications. Communication scholars so inclined would, for example, tend to ask how communication processes in organisations reinforce systems of domination and exploitation. Data will also be likely to be obtained by qualitative methods.
- The *radical structuralist* paradigm is ‘a *sociology of radical change* from an *objectivist* standpoint... Radical structuralism is committed to *radical change*, *emancipation*, and *potentiality*, in an analysis which emphasises *structural conflict*, *modes of domination*, *contradiction* and *deprivation*. It approaches these general concerns from a standpoint which tends to be *realist*, *positivist*, *determinist* and *nomothetic*’ (Burrell and Morgan, 2000: 119). Communication researchers influenced by this paradigm will also be concerned with issues of power and domination, but be more likely to utilise quantitative methods in their data collection and look for explicitly causal relationships between variables.

Each paradigm has been robustly defended and critiqued (see Corman and Poole, 2000) – the paradigm wars are well and truly alive in communication science. All this

has been deplored by some as representing an unhelpful fragmentation of the field (Pfeffer, 2000), and welcomed by others as providing the means of bringing multiple perspectives to bear on an inherently messy reality (Van Maanen, 2000). Despite a tendency towards polarised debate, it has also been recognised that ‘...scholars cross paradigms because the world of organizations is far too complex for any single theoretical approach to fully grasp’ (Fairhurst, 2000: 121). It is therefore increasingly usual to find studies that straddle the typology laid out by Burrell and Morgan – to the occasional howls of anguish from outraged purists.

This book has been partly inspired by the belief that the study of organisational communication has opened up a vast range of methodological approaches and theoretical insights that must be regarded as central to the future of management in the 21st century. We outlined the challenges facing the study and practice of management above. It is little wonder that texts have now been published with such titles as ‘The Organisation in Crisis’ (Cooper and Burke, 2000) – a proposition with which few would dissent. If the academic exploration of organisations and organisational communication has become fissured, it has done little more than mimic the external world it studies. The challenge is to make the best sense we can of this crisis, to understand its causes in more detail, to identify the role of communication in the various issues involved and, we would argue, to clarify the contribution that communication can make to building better organisations and better societies.

## **CONCLUSION**

Many management interventions can be likened to the Native American rain dance, and indeed are often inspired by a similar desperation for results. Fantastic interventions are enacted and often enjoyed by the central characters. The spectacle can also be fascinating for the uninvolved observer. But for all the drama and passion expended in their performance, they exert no appreciable impact on actual outcomes. Downsizing, in particular, has been a central part of the managerial rain dance in recent years and, as our own chapter in this text will illustrate, almost wholly associated with negative organisational outcomes. A main concern of this book, therefore, is to critically examine the true impact of key current themes in organisational communication for management practice.

This is no easy task. As this chapter has demonstrated, the study of organisations is a discipline characterised by multiple theoretical paradigms and methodological perspectives – as it should be. Reality is multifaceted, never more so than in the context of work. There is little agreement among scholars on the precise nature of the problems afflicting organisations, how they should be studied, or indeed what measures of organisational effectiveness are most appropriate. We have not attempted to foist any one theory on our contributors. Some remain within one preferred orientation, while others (ourselves included) adopt a more eclectic approach, surfing across theories and paradigms as demanded by and relevant to the context of the discussion. Readers will therefore find a variety of approaches at play in the ensuing text, and are invited to engage critically with the analyses on display.

Our hope is that, by the end of the journey, students of management will have a better appreciation of the role communication occupies in their field, and that students of

communication will more clearly understand how the world of management frames so much of human behaviour. Too often, managers grow frustrated by the intangibility of communication dynamics, and put their attention instead on whatever appears to be more easily measured. But, as Einstein once commented: 'Not everything that can be counted, counts – and not everything that counts, can be counted.' We believe that those who neglect communication will develop a very partial insight into the fascinating, contradictory, contested, interactive, infuriating, iterative and above all vital world of organisations. This volume is an attempt to broaden our vision to encompass much more of the territory around and within us.

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