What is Organizational Communication?

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So what is organizational communication? And what are we doing when we study organizational communication? I want to try and answer these questions from two different perspectives. First, we can talk about organizational communication as the communication that happens within organizations. That is, all the communication activity you’ll see if you go to any organization today: sending emails, writing memos, talking on the phone, having meetings (and more meetings!), teleconferencing, video conferencing, speeches, presentations, and so on. This is a more conventional approach, and I think is what comes to mind when people initially think of organizational communication.

But I want to go deeper. I want to introduce an alternative, more sophisticated approach of seeing organizations as communication. This can radically change how we understand human interaction and organizational life, and it opens up exciting possibilities for research and practice.

But first let’s say a bit more about the conventional approach to organizational communication, which focuses on communication within organizations.

This perspective sees the organization as something like a container, and communication is what flows within the container. If we extend the metaphor, we can see how communicating is then shaped by the structure of the organization, in the same way liquids take the shape of their physical containers. And by the “shape” of the container we can mean the physical shape of the organization, like if you have to take the elevator up ten floors to deliver a report to your boss...or more of a symbolic shape, like where you are in the organizational hierarchy and how this influences the way you communicate with other organizational members.

The key here is that the organization is seen as something that exists separately from communication. So communication is “organizational” when it happens within these separate structures we call organizations. This relates to what scholars call an informational view of communication, because communication is all about transmitting information throughout the “container” of the organization, and “ineffective communication” or “communication breakdowns” are seen as technical problems...the right information didn’t get to the right people in the right manner...someone didn’t get the memo, as people like to say.

And this is important stuff…it’s how the work of organizations gets done. From small businesses and multinational corporations to nonprofits and government agencies...if organizations don’t communicate the right information to the right people at the right times in
the right ways things fall apart: directions aren’t followed, customers aren’t satisfied, clients aren’t served, regulations aren’t obeyed, and general chaos ensures. And in certain high-risk organizations, like our military or your local fire department, getting the right information to the right people is absolutely critical. So we certainly need effective communication within organizations.

But again, I want to go deeper...beyond this conventional view of organizational communication... because as important as this conventional view is for the day-to-day operations of organizations, I don’t think this view fully captures the complexities of organizing and communicating in our society.

In a perfect world we could create more efficient structures of information sharing so that the right people would always have the right information and miscommunication would be a thing of the past. But a funny happened on the way to communication paradise. Turns out different people interpret the exact same message very differently; that people can be deceptive in their communication and their motives are incredibly difficult to figure out; that the meaning of language changes depending on the context; that what you don’t communicate is often more important than what you do communicate...or that what you say is often much less important than how you say it; and that people often (if not usually) communicate for many other reasons than to just transmit information. And these are not just aberrations...this is the normal state of affairs for human interaction.

Why is it, after all, that “communication problems” are continually mentioned as one of the main difficulties for most organizations? Is it just that people aren’t getting the right information? If so, this is merely a technical problem that should improve as we develop new ways to get better information to more people more efficiently. But it seems like almost the opposite is happening...that the more sophisticated our communication technologies have gotten over the years the more communication problems we have. Now why is that? Perhaps it’s because there is more going on with communication than just transmitting information.

So in contrast to the first approach of communication within organizations, I want to offer an alternative, more sophisticated approach to organizational communication: organizations as communication. But this means we have to think very differently about both communication and about organizations.

Instead of viewing communication as merely the transfer of information, this second approach goes deeper and sees communication as the fundamental process that shapes our social reality. Communication is not just about transmitting already-formed data between senders and receivers, but rather a complex process of continually creating and negotiating the meanings and interpretations that shape our lives. Scholars call this a constitutive view of communication because communication literally “constitutes,” or “makes up” our social world. More on this later.
Additionally, this second approach of seeing organizations as communication questions the very notion of “organization” in the first place. The first approach of communication in organizations assumes there is this thing called “organization” that “exists” and we just focus on the communication that happens inside. But what exactly is this thing called “organization?” Where did it come from? Organizations aren’t natural…they don’t just “exist” in nature like trees and mountains and rivers. They are created by people, and people have different values, motivations, abilities, resources, etc. So organizations are never just neutral structures that exist apart from human activity…they are the visible manifestations of human activity, of communication.

And so at their core organizations are communicative. Think about it…an organization is essentially an ongoing collection of interactions, decisions, messages, interpretations, symbols, images, negotiations, agreements, contracts, relationships, and so forth. There’s nothing else “there” that exists apart from communication. Well, let me qualify that just a bit. Certainly there are other material or physical things “there,” like buildings, cubicles, computers, and other equipment…and these things help “make up” the organization. But these things have no inherent meaning apart from human interaction, nor can they have any impact in the real world apart from the choices we make through communication. Similarly, the outcomes of communication definitely have consequences in the material world. For example, you might be thinking, “Hey, if I get laid off, it’s not just a matter of perception…it’s not just talk…there is a stark reality I have to face.”

Yes, but how the decision to lay you off was made, and the meaning of that decision—whether seen as cost-cutting efficiency or ruthless bottom-line thinking—and how you make sense of this event are matters of communication…and the culmination of these communication processes are what make organizations what they are. I’m not suggesting that organizations exist in an imaginary land of perceptions and symbols and wishful thinking…like the material world doesn’t matter, it’s all in your mind. No, no…this constitutive perspective of organizations as communication is very-much rooted in the material world of things and stuff. But what I am suggesting is that these material things come together and have meaning as an organization only through communication…thus leading us to the conclusion that organizations exist as communication.

And my argument is that this second approach—organizations as communication—is a much better perspective to guide our study of organizational communication. Now of course we need effective communication within organizations…that’s a given. But if we limit ourselves to just this perspective we miss important opportunities for deeper insight and understanding.

But why complicate things with a more sophisticated approach? After all, conventions become conventional for good reason…and conventional views usually have a lot of practical value. What do we gain with an alternative approach? I’m sure by now there are some objections in favor of the conventional view of communication within organizations I described earlier. After all, the container metaphor seems to describe how most of us actually experience organizational communication much of the time, and the physical reality of organizations (you
know, buildings, computers, equipment, stuff like that.) seem to reinforce the conventional view, so what’s wrong with this approach?

Well, when we just focus on communication within organizations (based on an informational view of communication), we’re taking what a colleague of mine at the University of Colorado calls a “flat earth” approach towards communication. What I mean by a “flat earth” approach is a perspective that seems correct from a limited vantage point because it “works” for much of our day-to-day lives, but ultimately it fails to account for the complexity of a situation.

For much of human history we got by just fine thinking the earth was flat, even though it was always round. And even with our 21st century sophistication where we know the earth is round, most of us can actually get by with flat earth assumptions much of the time.

But what about when things get more complex? If you want to put a satellite into space or take a transcontinental flight, flat earth assumptions aren’t going to be very helpful. Remember in elementary school when you compared a globe to a map and realized, for example, that it’s quicker to fly from New York to Moscow by flying over the North Pole instead of across the Atlantic? What seems counter-intuitive from a flat earth perspective actually makes perfect sense from a round earth perspective.

The same is true with communication. We can get by with “flat earth” assumptions about communication for much of what we want to do throughout our day. Much of our communication involves sending and receiving relatively unproblematic messages and acting on that information: giving directions, planning our schedules, requesting information, and so on. And the conventional, informational approach towards communication works just fine in these situations. But other times things are more complex.

Like when you need to resolve conflict with a close friend or family member. Or when you have to share bad news with someone you care about, confront someone about a wrong doing, or you need to mediate a dispute. There is so much more going on in these situations than merely exchanging information; you are actually engaged in a complex process of meaning negotiation and social construction. In these situations you have to do much more than think about what information you want to exchange...you actually have to think about the social realities you create. What might seem intuitive from a conventional, “flat earth” approach to communication...like expressing what you think or trying to control information...may actually work against you because it constitutes a social reality that produces unfavorable outcomes.

This is especially true within the context of organizations. Sure, much of what goes on in organizations is the transmission of messages between senders and receivers. But what about implementing a large-scale organizational change? Or navigating the politics of an organization? Or persuading skeptical leaders about the merits of a new idea? If you’ve ever been involved in any of these activities you know that you quickly run up against some organizational complexities that make the mere transmission of information inadequate to successfully accomplishing your goals.
Things like power, identity, gender, ideology (or world view), ethnicity, culture, and so forth are the “round earth” complexities of the organizational landscape that call for a more sophisticated understanding of communication. And these complexities need to be accounted for if we are to have a good understanding of organizational communication.

So this all has to do with our approach to communication—either as a thing that happens within organizations, or a social process that actually constitutes organizations (and organizational realities)...and our corresponding approach to organizations—either as relatively neutral containers that exist apart from communication, or as contested sites of power, resources, and strategies that converge into recognizable forms we call organizations.

Now I certainly recognize the importance of the conventional approach to organizational communication—communication within organizations based on an informational view of communication...but I’m trying to push us to a deeper, more sophisticated understanding of organizational communication—organizations as communication, based on a constitutive view of communication.

The point, then, is that a constitutive view of organizations as communication enables us to question and investigate key organizational realities, not just accept them as given. We can question the existence of the organization—its structure, its forms of power, its guiding assumptions, its norms of operations—and so on. If these organizational features are not “natural,” but rather came into existence through specific communication processes, then we can examine the implications of those communication processes and explore ways of communicating that lead to more favorable organizational outcomes for more people.

We can examine, for example, how certain patterns of interaction give rise to norms of conflict resolution, or how the taken-for-granted values of a particular industry or sector shape the practice of leadership, or how interpersonal dynamics affect the success of an organizational change initiative. We can look at how certain views of masculinity or femininity are connected to communication practices, or how our very identities are often created and sustained through organizational communication. We can uncover hidden forms of power and control that are embedded within communication processes. We can explore ways to make organizations more equitable and representative by surfacing alternative voices. We can figure out how to make organizations more productive, adaptive, and responsive through organizational communication that encourages innovation and collaboration. Whatever the case, a constitutive view of organizations as communication provides a much stronger explanatory framework to understand the complexities of organizing and communicating.

What I’m advocating, therefore, is a communicative approach to our understanding of organizations. Organizational communication is all about taking a communication perspective to the study of organizations—exploring organizations through the lens of communication. Communication is not the thing to be explained; communication actually provides an explanatory framework from which to understand the complexities of organizational life.
Of course our natural tendency is to relapse back to the conventional view, the container metaphor—communication within organizations—because it seems simple and intuitive from a limited perspective. But I’m trying to push us towards a deeper understanding, a perspective that better accounts for the complexities of organizing and human interaction.

So what is organizational communication? And what are we doing when we study organizational communication? Communication is “organizational” not just because it happens within organizations, but rather because it coordinates the activities and interpretations of multiple people into an organized, recognizable form and sustains or alters this form for subsequent collective action. To study organizational communication, therefore, is to study the fundamental social processes that create and sustain the dominant structures of our society.