

Chapter 13

Doing Applied Organizational Communication Research: Bridging a Gap Between Our and Managers' Understandings of Organization and Communication

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ABSTRACT

Over the past several decades, organizational communication has embraced rich theoretical understandings for organization, communication and the interface between the two. Yet, as our theories have become richer and more complex, they have also become increasingly difficult to “sell” to applied audiences that often assume a “transmission” model of communication. This chapter describes challenges I have faced while applying organizational communication theory to issues related to wildland firefighter safety. I propose that a key challenge of applied organizational communication research is transforming what it means for organizational managers to think communicatively. This requires uncovering the organization’s research engagement history and trajectory, encountering and working with organization members’ assumptions about organization and communication, and identifying and working with pivot points that can help organization members approach problems using communication lenses.

INTRODUCTION

Most qualitative methods textbooks provide advice about negotiating access with gatekeepers. For instance, Lindlof and Taylor (2011) advise researchers to tell a “research story” that conveys to gatekeepers and member participants why the research is relevant to them, and how it is aimed at capturing their voices and telling their story. While gatekeepers might be pleased to grant organizational access based on an initial compelling argument for the value of a research project, applied research, particularly engaged scholarship, often puts the researcher in a position to converse with organization members about

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communication and organizing in deeper, more nuanced ways so involved parties might jointly address organizational issues. As such, organization members might be keenly interested in what our theoretical perspectives have to say about communication and organizing phenomena and processes.

A key challenge is that both organizational gatekeepers and our engaged research collaborators alike might hold simpler and persistent understandings of communication and organizing as compared to ours. We as scholars must build a bridge between their and our understandings of communication and organizing. Such conversations are crucial for maintaining our access to the research site, and for fostering both respectful interactions and productive research partnerships with our applied research collaborators. With these concerns in mind, this chapter argues that applied communication research often requires researchers to make a clear, coherent case for why attending to communicative explanations of organizing is a worthwhile pursuit for both parties.

The chapter builds on existing advice regarding negotiating research access in organizations through providing additional pointers about how we, as applied organizational communication scholars, might claim value for communicative explanations of organizational phenomena. In particular, the chapter presents key challenges regarding disparities between managers' and our understandings of organization and communication, and highlights opportunities for talking through those challenges to build bridges between their and our understandings. To illustrate, I present a case study in which I worked with US federal wildland firefighting agencies on such challenges and opportunities.

“THAT TOUCHY-FEELY STUFF”

“Social science. That touchy feely stuff is a waste of time,” I overheard one of the officials say who had been assembled for a daylong meeting to re-define safety in US wildland firefighting operations. The meeting was to begin at 0800. It was 0752 and I was pouring coffee from a cardboard to-go box into a paper cup. My back was turned to the officials; the first guy continued, “I just don’t know what social science can tell us. What--we need a better culture?” He worked the word “culture” around in his mouth like it was a spoonful of sawdust. The other official seemed ambivalent to the comment—neither agreeing with the sentiment, nor offering an alternative.

The meeting convened. Despite the one person’s resistance to social science, the introductory talk around the table sounded promising. All who had gathered were greatly invested in re-defining safety in wildland fire operations, and using social science to do it. Everyone at the table cared deeply about the 19 Yarnell Hill fatalities from the previous summer, and all, including myself, still held visceral memories from our personal connections to the Thirtymile, Cramer, and South Canyon fatality fires.

The meeting convener, who invited me to join, began with a brief white-board lecture explaining different ways of seeing and understanding organizational systems. First, he explained, there are simple systems in which there are interconnected and interactive parts, like gears of a wristwatch. In a simple system, causes and effects are directly linked. There is often one explanation for a phenomenon, and one right answer to any given question. Next, there are complicated systems in which variables and parts are sometimes interconnected and sometimes not—like automobiles on a highway, he said. Here, there are numerous factors at play in any given event, any number of questions and answers, and cause and effect are not necessarily linked. Finally, he described complex organizational systems in which the number of questions and answers is infinite. In complex systems, he explained, the “unexpected is inherent” and all parts of the system need to work “adaptively.”

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