

Chapter 46

Transformative Organizational Communication Practices

Philip J. Salem

Texas State University, USA

ABSTRACT

Most efforts at transformational organizational change fail. In order to explain that failure and the potential for success, this chapter introduces the construct of organizational communication practices and develops a theory to explain how these processes constitute organizations as complex adaptive social systems. Five axioms anchor the theory, and the author derives theorems explaining the important features of attempting to change transformative organizational communication practices.

INTRODUCTION

Communication and Organizational Change

First order organizational change is about simple learning and minor adaptations—the continuous, incremental adjustments that lead to differences in degree and more efficient outcomes (Argyris, 1992). Second order change, transformational change, involves altering the core features of organizations—goals, authority relationships, organizational structures, markets, or technologies (Aldrich & Ruef, 2006; Rao & Singh, 1999). Transformational change may appear to be discontinuous or episodic (Nadler, Shaw, & Walton, 1995), but it involves learning that challenges the premises behind first order change (Argyris, 1992). First order change refers to differences in degree, but second order change denotes differences in kind (Adler, 1967). First order change is about doing things better, but second order change is about doing better things. Change management is an expression that refers to efforts at controlling and directing both types of change.

Strategic initiatives are efforts at managing transformational change. These are typically top-down efforts aimed at employee commitment to the changes. Enduring improvements appear to be impossible without a change of culture (Cameron & Quinn, 1999). Some classic research indicated transformational

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change efforts were successful only about a third of the time (Cameron & Quinn, 1999; Meyer, Goes, & Brooks, 1995) and more recent estimates place the figure at or below 20 percent (Cabry & Haughey, 2014; Towers Watson, 2013). Strategic initiatives with the purpose of changing organizational culture succeed less than 20 percent of the time (Smith, 2002). There is a body of literature just dealing with these failures and a multitude of explanations (see Robbins & Finley, 1996), effective communication separates those that were most successful from those that were not (Cabrey & Haughey, 2014), and there are specific identifiable communication patterns associated with failed change efforts (Salem, 2008). Transformational change may be less a product of strategic initiatives and more about the natural ways changes emerge in any social system.

Most organizational change literature treats communication as a separate part of “the organization”. Weick (1969) argued that investigating the process of organizing was more true to the experiences of people than researching organizations. Farace, Monge and Russell (1977) offered one of the first organizational communication textbooks attempting to focus on process. Johnson (1977) contended “the ‘organizing’ of organizations can be examined as communication. Without communication, no organizations exist. Communication is not just something that happens within organizations. Communicating is organizing” (p. 3). Extending her earlier work (Johnson, 1976/1999), she went on to describe three communication coordination formats that organize social activity. These works were some of the earliest attempts to investigate the constitutive nature of communication (cf. Putnam, Nicotera, & McPhee, 2009).

Theory Development

When transformational efforts fail to alter “core processes”, it is because the efforts did not produce changes in organizational communication or the changes in organizational communication were not transformative. The purpose of this paper is to describe a theory that will answer the following questions. (1) What are the dynamic features of human communication? (2) How do human communication practices constitute the boundaries of social units such as organizations? (3) How do communication practices naturally affect the way social systems adapt and learn? (4) How do communication practices evolve? (5) How can organizational communication practices changes transform an organizational communication system?

What follows is a theory building attempt that will lead to set of theorems. The theory building strategy involves defining constructs and creating relational statements (Dubin, 1978). I will define constructs as I explain relational statements.

There are several taxonomies for relational statements (Bachrach, 1989; Kaplan, 1964), and I will adopt a modified version suggested by Hawes (1975). Primary statements consist of statements the theorist assumes to be true because of semantics, logic, or past research. Theorists normally label the primary statements as either axioms or propositions. Axioms are the most general and contain definitions or constructs that are not readily observable. Propositions describe how observable phenomena relate to each other, and they are often summary statements reflecting past research. Corollaries are supplemental statements that help explain or highlight important features of a superordinate primary statement. This essay employs axioms and corollaries, but there will be references to past research.

Secondary statements are derived from primary statements and may involve adding constructs not in the primary statements. This theory building effort ends with theorems, a type of secondary statement, suggesting hypotheses, another type of secondary statement. Theorems are more general statements about how observable phenomena might relate to each other, and hypotheses are more specific.

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