Chapter 6
Organizational Theory and Communication across Cultures

ABSTRACT

This chapter analyzes organizational behavior and communication across cultures, using as a case study a cross-border project in hazmat transportation. It exemplifies the great complexity of global professional communications, equipping readers with both a model and application.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter explains the connections between organizational theory and intercultural professional communication. As much research has demonstrated (Adler, 2008), organizations vary significantly across cultures. In fact, most of the research about cross-cultural differences comes from the field of organizational behavior, including the significant studies of Hofstede (2010), Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars (2000), Adler (2008), and House, et. al. (2005). And most of these studies connect cultural differences in some fashion to communication. Consequently, discussing differences in organizational culture has the same breadth as discussing cultural differences, an endeavor that is well beyond this chapter. Further, much of the organizational theory developed by scholars for monocultural inquiry has become increasingly dependent on the local approaches

(Weick, 2001) and has moved away from key intercultural variables such as structure, organization, and function and into more emic-heavy areas such as information flow, decision-making, and ecology. These latter models are too emic-based for the kinds of intercultural comparison I need to do in this chapter. Additionally, much work in intercultural professional communication is across organizations, not within organizations. Thus, most U.S. organizational theory is inadequate for this inquiry. Instead, this chapter lays out the complexities of intercultural professional communication across organizations in international contexts, looking at how the basic organizational structure, team work logic, and communication patterns influence intercultural professional communication. This approach is simple, but powerful, and can be used as a starting point for more sophisticated models of communication across organizations and cultures.

To do this analysis and discussion, this chapter presents the case of a U.S.-Mexico cross-border Hazmat project that I directed for the EPA and which I reference in other chapters throughout this book. Next, the chapter grounds the organizational cultures of the agencies involved with the case using a simple organizational theory that was developed by the management expert Peter Drucker (1991). This theory exemplifies teamwork and organizational behavior using sports metaphors of baseball, football, and tennis doubles. Third, this chapter connects the organizational cultures and teamwork models with the eight value sets used throughout this book. This grounding and connection show intercultural professional communicators how to analyze the culture of organizations and their corresponding professional communication patterns in cross-cultural contexts. Finally, the chapter concludes by briefly discussing the roles of communication and information technology in facilitating change in organizational culture.

CASE OF US-MEXICO CROSS-BORDER HAZMAT PROJECT

In 2008, I directed a study funded by the EPA that evaluated the ability of Radio Frequency Identification (RFID) technologies to track the movement of hazardous materials between the manufacturing plants in Mexico and their disposal sites in the United States. According to NAFTA regulations, all hazardous materials used in the manufacturing of goods in maquiladoras (manufacturing plants) for sale in the United States must be returned to the point of their origin, which in most cases was United States. (This law has since changed, by the way.) Thus, the US-Mexico border region has some of the most concentrated flow of hazmat in the world, with raw chemicals moving from the United States into Mexico for the manufacturing processes, and the hazardous waste returning from Mexico to the United

States for disposal. Unfortunately, due to a lack of regulation and oversight in the border region, some of the hazardous materials and waste ended up being dumped in clandestine sites, becoming a significant threat to the environment and health of border residents. In addition, because of the enhanced levels of hazmat flow, the chance of hazmat incident on the border is quite high.

The EPA hypothesized that RFID technologies could be used to track this flow. RFID technology is much like the barcode technology that we see in grocery stores only that instead of a barcode, there is a miniature radio transmitter (tag) that can send out a signal to a receiver when it is in a prescribed distance from that receiver. Many of these tags are smaller than a quarter, and, for example, some are placed in the ears of cows to track their movement. Some of the transmitters are self powered, while others receive their energy from the RFID receiver or transponder. The EPA believed that we could monitor the flow of hazmat if we placed RFID tags on the barrels and cartons of hazardous waste that were going/returning from the maquiladoras to their disposal sites in the United States. My job was to write the field test plan and then set up the technology field test of RFID for cross-border hazmat; I was charged with designing the study in life-like situations, tagging the cartons and drums as they left the maquiladoras and tracking them as they cross the border from Mexico into United States and eventually to their disposal.

For our discussion of organizational theory across cultures, the complexity of the project centered on the responsibility and roles of the U.S. and Mexican federal, state, and local authorities for hazmat transportation. Further, the transportation companies and maquiladoras were situated within this governmental complexity. There were at least seven federal and state agencies from the Mexican government and six from the US government that were responsible at some point and in some fashion for hazmat transportation. And in almost every case, the responsibilities and roles

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