# Communication and Work Systems

# Communication and Work Systems:

*Theory, Processes, Opportunities*

R. Wayne Pace, Ph.D.

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# PREFACE

This manuscript subscribes to the long-standing adage that the study of organizational communication has the important mission of making knowledge useful.

I've had articles about "the contributions of knowledge management to workplace learning" (*The Journal of Workplace Learning)*, the organizational learning audit (*Management Communication Quarterly)*, and communication, work systems, and HRD (*European Journal of Training and Development*). Out of those ideas, I have designed a new approach to organizational communication, incorporating concepts of work systems, energizing workers, organizational learning, and knowledge management into the organizational communication framework.

Some reviewers have wondered about referring to work systems as the focus of a book on organizational communication. I've observed that the context in which organizational communication occurs is the place where people engage in productive activities. Regardless of whether the location concerns providing healthcare, engaging in educational activities, conducting community service activities, engaging in union activities, building houses or automobiles or roads, or participating in recreational activities, or running a city, state, or nation, or selling insurance, groceries, toys, or homes, or drilling for oil or gas, or raising cattle and growing vegetables, or marketing corn or computers or gadgets, or raising a family unit, they all occur in what may be called a work system.

## Stability versus Unpredictability

A work system model allows us to make sense of the burgeoning complexities among all of the elements involved, just as models of the communicative processes provide guidance in comprehending the complexities of communicating interpersonally. I have concerns about the efforts of some to call this a "container" approach to organizational communication. That isn't the case at all. Every living creature, including human beings, exists in an environment. Fish don't live in a container of water, they flourish in an environment. People don't live in an organizational container; they exist in an environment of buildings and

offices and other people that, for purposes of comprehension and understanding, we call an organization.

**People create organizations.** We plan and design and construct the buildings; we devise and specify relationships; we conceive of and write rules and regulations and evolve standard operating procedures to guide our actions. We select individuals to carry out the work and describe ways in which they can achieve the objectives in efficient and effective ways. We appoint individuals to assist the workers and report on their accomplishments. On occasion, we pay big bucks to someone to oversee the entire operation so that more people can benefit by achieving the goals and objectives, whether the organization was devised to provide goods or services, to facilitate recreation and enjoyment, to help maintain an orderly society, to assist in the education of individuals, or to provide protection for citizens.

**People have been endowed** with the ability to make decisions and to evolve ways to make organizations more livable, more resilient, more responsive, and more productive. Two processes--what Bakke and Argyris called the personalization of the organization and the socialization of the individual--merge into a fusion process that constantly maneuvers to achieve the best results. All things change naturally and by design; we get older, objects deteriorate, the population changes, people travel and visit and experience things in ways different from what they knew as youngsters, and out of their creative impulses new structures and ways of doing things evolve.

Interestingly, with all of the natural and artificial changes that occur during one person's lifetime, we still recognize the mountains and valleys, the paths and roads, the buildings and people, and the rules and guidelines. We still find it necessary to have order and mission statements and procedures and goals and objectives. We still coordinate the activities of many in order to cooperate and achieve small and great things. Golf courses and lawn bowling greens are constructed somewhat systematically and players use orderly procedures to access and play the games; both games are played by the rules and everyone reaps the rewards of orderly play.

**We certainly acknowledge that deviations occur**, that play is often disrupted by the weather, that individuals sometimes can't attend, that physical ailments require modifications in facilities and routines, that disagreements emerge, that interpretations differ, but we still have rules of play and fairly stable facilities, and ways to accommodate all of the differences. In fact, it is by the system that we are able to exercise constraint, marshal resources, and focus energy to achieve goals.

I'm quite convinced that deviations occur in nearly all organizations; however, to recognize a deviation, one must have some idealist image of what an organization consists and of how it should operate. For the most part, we derive our concept of organizational functioning from concepts developed by organization, management, and behavioral theorists. Some say that, regardless of the type of organization in which one is involved, it must (1) be **high in egalitarianism**, have broad participation in leadership, involve wide ranging contributions by all members, seek lifelong learning and educational opportunities, provide for compassion and service to others, have high tolerance toward others, and develop strong feelings of community, (2) be **low in inequality**, hierarchy, privilege, and class distinctions, and (3) be **low in resistance to new ideas**, self-centeredness, intolerance, and separateness. These are simply visions of ways in which the system ought to work. They **do not** dispute the elements of the system itself. These guidelines for how the system should function often evolve from strongly held ideologies and philosophies, not from relevant theories of organizations and systems. But, our goal is to work toward the ideal.

Having grown up working in various systems, including operating a family-owned general merchandise store, a large cattle and range ranch, a trucking company, and large dairy farms, as well as being a faculty member in both small and large private colleges and small and large state universities, and serving as a consultant to major government land agencies and private businesses, I have often struggled with what people ought to know about the context or the work system in which they devote a large portion of their lives. I have resolved that issue for myself and now feel that those preparing to leave college and pursue life in a "real" organization—one based in large part on the principles of a bureaucracy, rather than a "pseudo" hierarchy such as is exhibited in most colleges and universities—ought to be acquainted with (1) a practical definition and explanation of the phenomenon of "communicative behavior," (2) the structure and elements of a work system, (3) some of the contributing theories that explicate or inform us about systems coming from organization and management theorists, (4) theories that provide an understanding of communicative processes and organization practices, which evolve into a phenomenon called organizational communication, (4) how to recognize and describe both communication and systems problems and strategies for solving the problems, (5) an analysis of the manner in which communication activities influence and are influenced by various processes that occur in the context of a work system, such as disseminating and retrieving information in a system, energizing everyone involved in the system, using power and empowering others, evolving a

leadership style that contributes to enhanced system functioning, facilitating groups and work teams, managing conflict and stress, and moving the system toward becoming a learning organization, and, finally, (6) a description of some of the most likely careers that graduates might enter upon graduation.

## Inclusions and Exclusions

This book is structured around those key ideas with combinations of similar ideas serving as a Part, with appropriate Sections elaborating each Part. Because of limitations on length, broad social issues such as globalization, terrorism, climate change, and health delivery are mentioned only at moments when they impact directly on organizational communication processes. Entire books are available that address such issues in greater length and depth. This text provides specific summaries of methods, techniques, and strategies for identifying problems with which graduates will need to deal when they begin work in an organizational system and for ways to engage and solve those problems. This book describes how you can enhance key processes so as to help the organization function more fully and respond to visions of how a truly effective organization can deal with many of the personal issues so important at this time, such as resisting unnecessary and inappropriate change, showing respect for, dignity of, and the civil liberties for all, privacy issues, and inappropriate racial, sexual, religious, and political discrimination.

## Organizational versus Individual Imperative

Overall, this book focuses on the individual and a person's perceptions of various processes, but it acknowledges that the people associated with the system as volunteers or paid workers are not the guidelines of the system; however, they work with, live with, enliven the guidelines, and on occasion exert influence in making adjustments to and changes in the guidelines and some other parts of the system. At times, some people confuse the word with the thing and end up reacting emotionally and in a *self-reflexive* manner to what they "*call*" the system and how they "*feel*" about elements of the system, rather than the system itself.

This book is a bit more inclined toward the preparation of students to confront actual work conditions in a system than it is to prepare students to elucidate complex theories and ideological similarities and differences,

although some critical differences in approaches are addressed in the more theoretical chapters.

## A Fair and Balanced Approach

This book was designed to provide a balance among the various ideologies for characterizing communication and organizing, but with a constant eye to making knowledge useful. The practical aspects of most chapters suggests strongly that it may be very useful when students enter what we call "the workforce," whether as volunteers or individuals paid to enact a real and serious role. Just placing the book on a shelf in an office indicates that they are familiar with how organizations function and they are ready to assume a place in a work system. A colleague who had graduated in organizational communication and worked in an organization once observed that he had discovered that you need to know more than "communication theory" to function effectively in an organization. The work system is the context in which organizational communication occurs and an understanding of the work system and communication provide students with the knowledge they need to enter the world of work.

## Course Design

The difficulty of designing courses about organizational communication tends to vary with the degree to which it emphasizes theory and the application of theory to understanding organizations versus the degree to which the course emphasizes understanding the elements of organizational systems and the impact of communication on the system and the system on communicative processes. This book looks more, for example, at how to energize organization members and less at the philosophy underlying energizing mechanisms, although theories of energizing are discussed. This book looks more at why and how teams fit into an organization and less on the philosophies of involvement. This book focuses more on how to encourage the flow of information in an organization than on the ideology of technology. This book treats more the practice of knowledge management and organization learning than specific contemporary electronic technology, which most students have been using for years before entering a college or university. Email, the World Wide Web, and smart phones are ubiquitous and used widely. How to keep people from using such phones at inappropriate times may be an issue that confronts employees where they work more than on an ideology of chaos or the end of work.

# Instructional Methods

Most seasoned faculty members have probably selected a particular approach to teaching and are probably quite comfortable with what they're doing. That's perfectly understandable. Having taught at about a dozen different schools, I've learned that one's approach to teaching depends a great deal on how you phrase the objectives of the course. That is, if your goal is to help students see a relationship between theories of communication and communicative practices, you may be inclined to use incidents and have students read and critique the theoretical issues involved. If your goal is, however, to prepare students to recognized problems of communication in organizations, you may be more inclined to use structured experiences to involve students directly in exercises that expose them to problems and how to solve them. As an acquaintance said a while back, "I never heard anyone where I work ask about 'the variety of cultural theories' involved in this organization."

The "learning objectives" for each chapter in this book indicate that students should be able to do things beyond describing a theory or differences between theories or familiarity with an idea. For example, objectives in this book state that students should be able to explain to others how to recognize the characteristics of a bureaucracy or how to conduct an analysis of the eight features of organizational communication in a real organization, rather than to be familiar with or know what or understand something or appreciate something. The focus is on making knowledge useful, not on what theory describes a hypothetical incident.

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In writing, rewriting, and writing again any manuscript, any author appreciates a clean, well-lighted place in which to work. I admire without restriction the enormous effort my spouse, Gae Tueller Pace has taken to provide a pleasant place to write and an uplifting environment in which to think and cogitate about issues. We've been married for over sixty years and she has seen the results of her oversight in bringing to fruition about one book every two years. This has been a monumental task that cannot be taken lightly. She exudes love and support and even caution at times, but she always stirs me emotionally, and a man is never old as long as he can be stirred emotionally by a woman of his same age.

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sayings, followed by an international book called *Powerful Leadership*. Adela McMurray and Don Scott, both from Australia, and I collaborated on a book called The *Commonsense of Research*. Finally, Peter Miller, from Australia, Stephan, and I published a book about the methods of gentle influence. I wrote the remainder of my thirty books without collaboration, but with the assistance and guidance of all of the above.

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R. Wayne Pace
St. George, Utah

# PART I

# THEORETICAL BASES OF ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION

This book has been arranged around parts representing theories, processes, and opportunities involved with organizational communication. Part I, theoretical bases, is devoted to five chapters that explain the foundations of the sub-discipline of the field of communication called organizational communication. The content and practice of organizational communication has roots in a variety of subject areas, including theories of communication, organization, management, culture, and criticism. For the most part, however, organizational communication derives the bulk of its foundational ideas from role theory, goal-setting theory, theories of organizing, and theories of interpersonal dynamics. It has been observed that to work in the field of organizational communication, you need to know more than just communication theory and practice. Since work systems constitute the context in which work and communication merge, theories of organization, managing, and behavior are conceptually and practically critical to understanding organizational communication. These chapters provide much of the substance out of which organizational communication has evolved.

# Chapter One

# Ways of Thinking about Organizational Communication

## Learning Objectives

- Describe the principles of General Systems Theory.
- Briefly characterize the meaning of Living Systems.
- Explain why descriptions of organizations are essentially metaphorical.
- Explain what is meant by the term "paradigm."
- Describe the key features of an "interpretive" paradigm.
- Describe what is meant by a "functional" paradigm.
- List some features that distinguish between the two primary paradigms.
- List three reasons why people study organizational communication.

## Section 1.1 Living Systems

The variety of systems is enormous, ranging from molecules, cells, organs, the comprehensive individual, groups, organizations, and society. Living systems consist of matter and energy organized by information. *Matter* consists of anything that has mass and occupies space, such as human beings. *Energy* represents the ability to do work. Miller explains that "the principle of conservation of energy states that energy can be neither created nor destroyed in the universe, but it may be converted from one form to another" (1965,193).

Miller also explains that mass and energy are equivalent; one can be converted into the other in accordance with the relation that *rest-mass energy* (the energy that would be released if mass were converted into energy) is equal to the mass times the square of the velocity of light. Thus, Miller uses the term *matter-energy* throughout his discussion because living systems require matter-energy in specific types—heat, light, water, minerals, vitamins, and raw materials of various kinds-- to continue to exist.

*Information*, on the other hand, can be understood as "whatever is put in form or in order. Information signifies "the placing of several elements or parties—either material or non-material—into some form, into some classed system—that represents classification of something. Under this general form information is also the classification of symbols and of their relations in a nexus like the organization of the organs and of the functions of a living being or the organization of any social system or any other community in general (Miller, 194).

In a communicative sense, information does not concern itself with the "matter" or content of the system, which we call *meaning*. Information is NOT the same as meaning. Meaning is the significance of information to the system that processes the information (Miller, 193). Some small bits (binary digit) have little information, but they carry vast amounts of meaning. Hence, in organizational communication, we are concerned about the kind, types, and amounts of *Meaning* associated with bits of information.

The development of contemporary information technologies, making the markers of information smaller, has tended to decrease the costs of storing and transmitting information, but it has NOT reduced the number of misunderstandings or the meaning of information. Organizations are increasingly able to create more information, but without the ability to enhance the meanings associated with the information. This will tend to be a continuing issue in organizational communication.

## Section 1.2 General Systems Theory

General Systems Theorists (Boulding, 1965; Bertalanffy, 1968, and Rapoport, 1968) identified some principles that apply to all types of systems; that is, machines, organizations, and organisms (people) all have similar processes and can be described with common tenets.

Organizations as structural or people systems, they say, can be described by general systems theory and take into account structure, relationships, and idiosyncratic behaviors.

The systems concept focuses on the arrangement of parts, relationships between parts, and the dynamics of the relationships that lead to unity and wholeness. The concept of systems is so encompassing that it defies easy definition. A simple definition would screen out the complexity and sophistication of the concept, and an extensive definition leads to intricacies that are not readily comprehensible. Yawson (2012, pp. 56-59) summarizes the key dimensions of systems, systems theory, and systems thinking that characterize a functional approach to theory.

**Tenets of Systems Theory.** Systems concepts enable one to conceive of an organization as a whole entity that is greater than the sum of its parts by virtue of its dynamics. Fisher (1978) explained that "system theory is a loosely organized and highly abstract set of principles which serve to direct our thinking, but which are subject to numerous interpretations" (196). Nevertheless, we shall paraphrase the tenets of systems theory, following Fisher's explanations (196-204).

**Interdependence.** The first tenant has to do with the notion of interdependence, which suggests that a mutual dependence exists among components or units of a system. A change in one component brings about changes in every other component. Understanding the idea of interdependence is critical to understanding systems thinking. In sum, systems theory is explained by six additional tenets: nonsummativity; structure; function; evolution; openness, and hierarchy. We shall briefly summarize each tenet.

**Nonsummativity.** The second tenet suggests that a system is not just a sum of its parts, but when all of the components are related to each other in mutual dependence (interdependence), the system takes on an identity separate from the individual components. For example, what two people might bring to a situation through transactions with one another may be quite different from what might happen by adding up the results of each individual's behavior. The nonsummativity of component parts of a system is more important, systemically, than the individual units themselves.

**Structure.** Structure refers to relationships between components of a system. Superior/subordinate relationships, for example, may be distinguished on the basis of status, a structural element. Structure reflects order, and a bureaucracy represents a highly structured system that reflects a high degree of order.

**Function.** Functions refer to actions and behaviors and constitute the primary means by which people are identified in a system. The actions a person performs in conjunction with others are considered part of the functional element of a system.

**Evolution.** Evolution concerns the changes and non-changes that take place in a system over time. Evolution affects both the structural and functional elements of the system. The complexity of a system is related to the extent to which both functional and structural elements vary.

**Openness.** The boundaries of a system are assumed to be permeable, allowing the system to interact with its environment and import energy and information into it.

**Equifinality.** Open systems are characterized by equifinality, which means that the same final state may be reached from different conditions and in different ways; equifinality also means that organizations that start with the same resources and initial conditions may reach quite different end states.

**Hierarchy.** The components of the system are arranged hierarchically or in a pyramidal structure so that supra-systems and sub-systems both exist in the larger system. An analysis of communication in a system would involve both analyses of supra-systems and sub-systems as well as the system itself. It has been suggested that analyses at different levels, such as the individual, group, organization, society, for example, require knowing how they are all tied together, how one level interacts with another level (Weick, 1969, 45).

## Structure of Social Systems

The concept of "structure" has been misunderstood on occasion, but most social scientists concur with the idea that social systems are comprised not of individuals, but of "roles." A manager, for example, is not an individual, but it is a role into which different individuals step. A role is an organized set of behaviors of persons interacting with each other, a pattern of roles. The roles are the units of a social system.

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### Table 1.1 Tenets of General Systems Theory

• **Interdependence** has to do with the notion that a mutual dependence exists among components or units of a system

• **Nonsummativity** suggests that a system is not just a sum of its parts, but it takes on an identity separate from the individual components.

• **Structure** consist of relationships between components of the system.

• **Function** asserts that actions and behaviors constitute the primary means by which people are identified in a system.

• **Evolution** says that changes take place in a system over time.

• **Openness** claim that the boundaries of a system are permeable, allowing the system to interact with its environment and import information into it.

• **Equifinality** assumes that the same final state may be reached from different conditions and in different ways.

• **Hierarchy** asserts that components of the system are arranged hierarchically so that both supra-systems and sub-systems exist in the larger system.

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## Steady-State of Systems

Specialists in systems theory have argued for years that "All living systems tend to maintain *steady states (*or homeostasis) of many variables, keeping an orderly balance among sub-systems which process matter-energy or information. . . . systems also ordinarily maintain steady states with their environments and suprasystems. This prevents variations in the environment from destroying systems.

Inputs and outputs that force system variables beyond the range of stability constitute *stress*. That is one reason why stress becomes an important organizational issue. Stress affects the steady state of an organization. Stress may be anticipated. Information that a stress is imminent constitutes a threat to the system, resulting in a strain on the steady state of the system and elicits processes that can counteract the stress. For example, fluctuations in a market may trigger stress or certain approaches to managing may signal stress in the system. The general principle is that a stable system under stress moves in the direction that tends to minimize the stress indicators (Miller, 224-225).

To maintain a steady state, units within groups, organization, societies, and supra-national systems must keep in close enough contact to assure the effective operation of the physical channels among them that are essential to transmitting the *meanings* required for them to interact as a system. This makes communication processes central to system operations.

## Section 1.3 Open Organizational Systems

The urge, nowadays, is to create and maintain "open" organizational systems. In open systems, all of the elements or parts are "open" and responsive to one another rather than operating with forms of dysfunctional internal rigidity, departmental territoriality, and increasing controls. Mink, Schultz, and Mink (1991) argue that organizations of the future will be "open" systems that "consider process more important than structure, and free human interaction more effective than impersonal, chain-of-command hierarchy" (p. 7). We shall examine many of the main components and processes involved in open organizations and the communication variables and practices that help maintain effective organizational operations.

# Section 1.4 Paradigms and Perspectives

Organizations exist uniquely in the domain of the conceptual. That is, an organization cannot be directly apprehended by the senses. Organizations cannot be touched, heard, seen, smelled, or tasted. All we know of an organization is what we understand from reports—what people say about it, what they say in its name-- the physical structures built to house it, and the customs and behaviors adopted to express it.

Because we cannot directly perceive an organization, we must imagine it. Things that we cannot actually see, touch, or hear, even though we accept that they exist, must be assumed to exist like something we already know about in a more direct, even physical way. We compare the idea of an organization with stairs and roads and other objects. We often say that we "imagine things through the use of metaphors." Well established metaphors are often called "paradigms" or what we call "a consistent and sensible (to us) way of thinking about things."

## The Nature of Paradigms

Paradigms consist of a commonly held body of ideas, values, axioms, and theories. The shared values and beliefs held in the hearts and minds of organization members constitute what they call the "organizational paradigm." Organization members use their paradigms to explain to themselves and to others how the organization functions. The paradigm is the base from which its leaders set organizational goals and which forms the foundation for policy formulation. Paradigms come into play whenever organization members—separately or in groups—ponder, decide, and justify their actions. Paradigms drive the organization's structure, rules, processes, and, hence, the behavior of its members.

The intent of this discussion is to help make some sense of the "social world" in which organizations exist. The fundamental idea that people experience the existence of physical things is an acceptable assumption, and the idea that individuals have their "agency" to make decisions about and interpret the experiences they have with people, things, and events also seems reasonable. The most important assumptions to understand are that (1) different people behave in different ways toward what they feel are worthy objects of scrutiny and that (2) the differences are based on how they think about the objects.

A "social object" is something that has significance to people and may call for some action by them. Organizational communication involves the process of giving people, actions, and objects significance. In the field of

organizational communication, two somewhat different paradigms or ways of thinking about social processes have evolved over a somewhat lengthy period of time. Thus, here we can only summarize some of the key features of these two dominant paradigms.

## Interpretive Paradigm

The Interpretive Paradigm asserts that the social world is created anew each moment, during encounters with everyday life as individuals interact and evolve meanings for events, people, and objects. They do so through the use of symbols—language descriptions and labels, routines and other symbolic modes. Thus, social affairs have no concrete status of any kind, and social reality is constructed through the use of symbols. This results in the development of multiple realities, which are shared and of which all are fleeting. Reality itself is confined to only those moments in which it is actively constructed and sustained.

Human beings attempt to make the world intelligible to themselves and to others as they talk about it. Individuals may work together to create a shared reality, but that reality is still a construction that may disappear the moment individuals cease to sustain it. Reality appears real because of conscious or unwitting collusion by the parties involved.

## Functional Paradigm

The Functional Paradigm asserts that the social world is an evolving process, stable in nature, but with everything moving and changing. Everything interacts with everything else, making it difficult to fix causal relationships among the elements. Most often the world exhibits general but contingent (depending upon) relationships among the more stable elements. Situations are fluid, but allow for opportunities for those with appropriate abilities to mold and manage relationships in accord with their interests. The world allows for individual agency so that people can make do with what they can while they struggle with various influences, each person attempting to achieve desired goals.

In this view, human beings exist in interactive relationships; they influence and are influenced by forces within the context and environment. Exchanges operate in an essentially competitive atmosphere, with individuals seeking to interpret and manage the environment to achieve certain goals and survive. Relationships among individuals operate so as to express a pattern of activity necessary for the well-being and survival of individuals (Morgan and Smircich, 1980, 494-495).