Comprehensive Examination One

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Abstract

This research paper looks at current research literature to investigate how leaders utilize communication to develop and maintain culture in virtual and face-to-face organizations. Effective communication is foundational to organizational growth because it encourages worker productivity and fosters strong working relationships between employees that are vital to organizational operations and processes. Effective communication is also essential to driving and maintaining organizational culture as well as organizational climate, and therefore producing organizational change. The basic difference between climate and culture in an organizational sense is that culture refers to the set of values and beliefs shared by a group of people and climate refers to the behavioral norms and attitudes of the organizational culture (Lambert & Minor, 2010, pp. 230-231). Culture is created and maintained in virtual organizations through a mix of communication modalities that can be challenged by the lack of verbal, para-verbal and non-verbal cues such as the facial expressions and body language of other team members in the group as communication is occurring.

Introduction

Use of communication is inarguably one of the most essential components in any type of organization, whether for-profit, non-profit, face-to-face, or virtual organization. Research has shown that effective communication is very important to the development of an organization and helps to mitigate against and minimize anxiety, uncertainty and fear associated with organizational change (Brown, 2011). Effective communication is foundational to organizational growth because it encourages worker productivity and fosters strong working relationships between employees that are vital to organizational operations and processes. Popescu and Iacob (2017) consider communication to be at the heart of management and argue its importance to organizational goals toward improving employee motivation and solidarity.

Defining organizational communication involves understanding that the one term is essentially two different phenomena–organization and communication that intersect and interrelate through social interaction. One definition captures the dynamic relationship between organization and communication as the process of creating and negotiating collective, coordinated systems of meaning through symbolic practices oriented toward the achievement of organizational goals (Mumby, 2013). Organizational communication can be viewed from two functional perspectives: communication as a process and organizations as systems that are interrelated, interdependent, hierarchical, and permeable. There are many different views on organizational communication that have emerged within communication studies that present different approaches to improving communications for organizations and organizational leaders. Scholars generally recognize these four approaches by the same or relatively different names: The functional approach, the systems approach, the interpretive approach, and the critical approach (Miller, 2009; Popescu & Iacob, 2017).

The Functional Approach

Understanding organizational communication from a functional approach involves viewing communication by describing the function and nature of messages as a complex process i.e. what messages do and how they move through organizations (Shockley-Zalabak, 2015).

The Systems Approach

General Systems Theory had its origin with biologist Ludwig Von Bertalanffy (1968) who proposed that systems were an open, complex set of interdependent parts that interacts with its environment, in order to understand how the part relates to the whole and the whole relates to the part. Systems approach as applied to the study of organizational communication was theorized by Karl Weick as a way of making sense of organizational communication. Weick's theory posited that organizations are complex organisms and that all organizing activities are comprised of individuals and behaviors that interact and are interlocked through communication (Miller, 2009).

The Interpretive Approach

In organization communication, the interpretive approach or view describes the complexities of meaning coded in language, social engagement, interactions, and symbols that represent social constructions of reality that are attributed meaning by social actors that generates ongoing action and social interactions from which organizations emerge (Putnam & Banghart, 2017).

The Critical Approach

Critical organizational communication researchers, according to Mumby (2013), are interested in the ways that communication and power intersect in complex ways and similar to the interpretive approach, the critical approach views reality as made up of the communication

practices of social actors and sees organizations as created through communication and symbolic

practices of organization members and how these meanings, in turn, sustain or resist certain

organizational power relations and political structures where power plays a central role (p. 21).

Having established a theoretical framework for organizational communication, this

researcher will now examine recent research and theoretical support in order to compare and

contrast how leaders use communication in developing and maintaining culture in virtual and

face-to-face organizations.

Culture

Culture refers to a specific civilization, society, or group and its distinguishing

characteristics and according to Skinner (as cited in Brown, 2011) "A culture is not the behavior

of the people 'living in it'; it is the 'it' in which they live–contingencies of social reinforcement,

which generate and sustain their behaviors" (p. 10). Anderson and Ackerman-Anderson (2010),

define culture as the way of being of the organization–its character, personality, core values,

norms, operating principles, myths and stories, determining what types of individual behaviors

are acceptable or not (p. 184). Organizational culture has been defined as a cognitive framework

consisting of attitudes, values, behavioral norms, and expectations shared by members of an

organization (Greenberg, 2012, p. 368). Corporate or organizational cultural norms are often

created and transmitted through the leadership style of one or more leaders, symbols, slogans,

jargon or specialized language, ceremonies, stories, and written statements conveying values,

goals, and vision (Brown, 2011). Researchers Anderson and Ackerman-Anderson (2010)

identified the following cultural attributes associated with high-performing team cultures and

low-performing team cultures:

High-Performing Team Cultures

- Aligned intent and purpose; common known goal
- Unconditional trust, mutual support, and collaboration
- Friendly give-and-take among members; a sense of equality
- Extraordinary commitment and passion to deliver results
- Personal initiative and responsibility; can-do attitude
- Open flow of information
- Fun
- Clear roles and decision making
- High personal integrity of members
- Learning-oriented; forgiveness of mistakes; dedication to improvement

Low-Performing Team Cultures

- Confusion about goals and roles
- More attention on personal power and status than performance
- Opposition and conflict among members
- Compete with each other rather than cooperate
- Disempowerment: wait for others to act rather than take initiative
- Blame and finger-pointing
- Low flow of information
- Not much listening; lots of telling
- Defend positions and mistakes rather than be learning-oriented (p. 191)

Organizational Communication in a Virtual Environment

A virtual team is defined as a group of individuals that does most of its work through use

of the telephone, e-mail, electronic bulletin boards, chat groups, electronic databases, or

teleconferences, and rarely if ever meets face to face (Berry, 2011). Virtual environments can

consist of virtual teams and virtual organizations, where the latter has no centralized or regional

offices at all and the former has offices, however the team works remotely in different locations

(home or office) from each other. Effective communication in a virtual environment is critical for

success and as a result, virtual teams must match the technology to the task. Virtual organization

members collaborate virtually by communicating through a mix of communication methods like

e-mail, videoconferencing, team v-meetings, instant messaging, group chat technologies, and even social media platforms like Facebook which helps team members get to know one another, learn more about one another and strengthen the interpersonal relationships, which in turn increases social interaction and engagement, and helps the virtual team overcome the challenges of not having face-to-face interaction. However, the lack of physical interactions such as verbal, para-verbal and non-verbal cues and other symbiosis that are associated with face-to-face exchange within traditional organizational contexts, create communication challenges for driving culture in virtual environments.

Informal communication issues that are negative are less impacting to virtual teams, which are more likely to have misinformation corrected through constant virtual engagement than face-to-face teams that maintain misinformation in secret, informal groups (DeRosa & Lepsinger, 2010), however Hinds and Weisband (as cited in Berry, 2011) found that virtual team members tend to initially share less information than members of face-to-face teams. Thus, team members may have greater knowledge gaps about needed outcomes, which in turn may cause negative effects on performance outcomes. This initial set back however decreases over time. Researchers found the work performance of the virtual heterogeneous teams was superior to that of face-to-face heterogeneous teams, which were positively correlated to transformational leaders' behaviors, which were positive culture drivers, although the same study found that virtual teams were generally less satisfied with work performance than face-to-face teams, due to heterogeneous nature of the teams (Gera, 2013).

This researcher is currently part of a virtual team that is a small department of a large software company in the Pacific Northwest. Team members all live in different states, some work at the companies 'brick and mortar' headquarters office and some work out of the regional office

in the Southwest, and others work remotely from home. Team meetings are weekly via Zoom, a

videoconferencing platform, regular communication happens through e-mail, group chat, phone

calls, and annual meet-ups at the regional office for training, socialization, recreation and fun.

The team consists of a team lead (executive director), and operations manager, an account

manager, and national presenters that travel to make informational and sales presentations at

conferences.

      Research supports the findings that virtual teams can outperform traditional face-to-face

groups based on a study of 80 software development teams with programmers from four

different continents including the United States, which found evidence supporting the conclusion

that virtual teams can lead to better business results when managed efficiently. Factors to virtual

team success, according to the study were correlated with: clearly defined tasks and objectives;

an appropriate composition of skills; appropriate and developed roles; conflict management;

performance management processes, effective communication, building respect and trust,

engaging in innovative processes; and the management of team boundaries (Morgan,

Paucar-Caceres, & Wright, 2014). In the study above, effective leadership or management

efficiency was the key factor in determining increased productivity and overall better business

results within virtual teams. Scandura (2016) identifies six effective leadership behaviors and six

corresponding behaviors for leaders of virtual teams in the tables below:

Leadership Practices of Virtual Team Leaders	How do Virtual Team Leaders do it?
1. Establish and Maintain Trust Through the Use of Communication Technology	• Focusing the norms on how information is communicated • Revisiting and adjusting the communication norms as the team evolves ("virtual get-togethers") • Making progress explicit through use of team virtual workspace • Equal "suffering" in the geographically distributed world
2. Ensure Diversity in the Team is Understood, Appreciated, and Leveraged	• Prominent team expertise directory and skills matrix in the virtual workspace • Virtual sub-teaming to pair diverse members and rotate sub-team members • Allowing diverse opinions to be expressed through use of asynchronous electronic means (e g. electronic discussion threads)

Scandura, Essentials of Organizational Behavior. © 2016, SAGE Publications.

Leadership Practices of Virtual Team Leaders	How do Virtual Team Leaders do it?
3 Manage Virtual Work-Cycle and Meetings	• All idea divergence between meetings (asynchronous idea generation) and idea convergence and conflict resolution during virtual meetings (synchronous idea convergence) • Use the start of virtual meeting (each time) for social relationship building • During meeting—ensure through "check-ins" that everyone is engaged and heard from • End of meeting—ensure that the minutes and future work plan is posted to team repository
4 Monitor Team Progress Through the Use of Technology	• Closely scrutinize asynchronous (electronic threaded discussion and document postings in the knowledge repository) and synchronous (virtual meeting participation and instant messaging) communications patterns • Make progress explicit through balanced scorecard measurements posted in the team's virtual workspace

Scandura, Essentials of Organizational Behavior. © 2016, SAGE Publications.

Table 1.1

Leadership Practices of Virtual Team Leaders	How do Virtual Team Leaders do it?
5. Enhance External Visibility of the Team and its Members	• Frequent report-outs to a virtual steering committee (comprised of local bosses of team members)
6. Ensure Individuals Benefit from Participating in Virtual Teams	• Virtual reward ceremonies • Individual recognition at the start of each virtual meeting • Making each team member's "real location" boss aware of the member's contribution

Scandura, Essentials of Organizational Behavior. © 2016, SAGE Publications.

Table 1.2

Communication in a Face-to-Face Organization

Organizational communication studies on the use of communication technologies and communication modalities within traditional brick and mortar, face-to-face organizations, show that e-mail is the dominant form of communication in the workplace and its use significantly impacts and shapes company culture by influencing behavior, creating, maintaining and changing organizational social systems, communicating core values, new ideas and strategic political, power and control positioning and leveraging (Turnagae & Goodboy, 2016).

A separate qualitative research study using a structured open-ended interview design was conducted with 24 employees of a major banking institution whose communication with higher management was through face-to-face interaction as well as through e-mail. Researchers found that 100% of the responses from participants indicated that all communication from management, whether meeting announcements, security alerts, updates, trainings, sales reports,

policies, etc., was as productive to receive face-to-face as by e-mail, agreeing that it was the best way to receive information and general kinds of communication, accept when the information was perceived to be confidential and private, which was identified in the study as performance reviews, annual reviews, human resources issues, promotions, coaching and disciplinary concerns, sixty-nine percent of the participants preferred to face-to-face communication with their managers rather than e-mails (Kupritz & Cowell, 2011, pp. 67-70). Researchers also found that members of face-to-face teams are more satisfied, supportive and provide innovative solutions due to self-actualizing and constructive style cultures (Gera, 2013).

Other communication factors to consider within a face-to-face context that can contribute to the creation and maintenance of culture are psychological safety issues such as workplace bullying and sexual harassment that when compromised, can lead to the development of distrust and other negative cultural norms, such as fear, lack of respect and lack of engagement (Page, Boysen, & Arya, 2019). Research shows that leader behavior such as accessibility, openness, and availability is directly correlated to perceptions of psychological safety at work among their subordinates which in turn encourages positive follower behaviors, such as voicing new ideas, encouragement and openness to taking strategic risks, increased trust in leadership and stronger interpersonal relationships (p. 28).

In traditional organizations, organizational communication has formal and informal components that follow vertical and horizontal flows in direction. Vertical communication follows the hierarchical or organizational chart, which is upward and downward, the methods of vertical communication are typically formal such as oral (meetings), electronic (e-mail/website), and written form (memos and announcements). Horizontal communication refers to any kind of communication between equals in either the traditional or virtual organization, this type of

communication can be both formal and informal. Examples of informal communication within

either type of organization are 'grapevines' and 'rumor mills', the former is a small group of

employees who connect through mutual interests, concerns, beliefs, and activities, whereas the

latter is a gossip network that negatively impacts and changes culture by producing false and

negative information, to be distinguished from grapevines which may at times produce

incomplete but partially accurate information. The latter is more corrosive to face-to-face

organizations as information spreads quickly and is maintained by people who see each other

regularly (Lamberton & Minor, 2010, p. 176).

Comparison and Contrast of Communication in the Creation and Maintenance of Culture

Virtual	Face-to-Face
Formal and informal communication occurs vertically and horizontally. Informal communication such as incomplete information is more likely to be corrected sooner due to frequent virtual meetings.	Formal and informal communication occurs vertically and horizontally. Informal communications such as rumor mills are more impacting due to secret informal networks.
The lack of physical interactions such as verbal, para-verbal and non-verbal cues are a greater challenge for creating culture in virtual environments.	Face-to-face teams are more satisfied, supportive and provide innovative solutions due to self-actualizing and constructive style cultures.
Virtual organization members collaborate virtually by communicating through a mix of communication methods like e-mail, videoconferencing, team v-meetings, instant messaging, group chat technologies, and even social media platforms like Facebook which helps team members get to know one another, learn more about one another and strengthen the interpersonal relationships, which in turn increases social interaction and engagement, and helps the virtual team overcome the challenges of not having face-to-face interaction.	E-mail is the dominant form of communication in the workplace and its use significantly impacts and shapes company culture by influencing behavior, creating, maintaining and changing organizational social systems, communicating core values, new ideas and strategic political, power and control positioning and leveraging
The Systems Approach in organizational communication best explains the symbiosis between each virtual team member and their organization because it provides two functional perspectives of communication as a process	The Systems Approach in organizational communication best explains the symbiosis between each virtual team member and their organization because it provides two functional perspectives of communication as a process

and organizations as systems that are interrelated, interdependent, hierarchical, and permeable.	and organizations as systems that are interrelated, interdependent, hierarchical, and permeable.

Conclusion

This researcher agrees with the findings in our review of literature that both face-to-face organizations and virtual organizations offer challenges to creating and maintaining culture and any differences in performances were positively or negatively linked to the leaders communicative style and behaviors which either created a climate of trust or distrust, fear or confidence, high productivity or low productivity, high attrition or low turnover.

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