

Part One

Foundations

Introduction

Richard Brown, former CEO of Cable and Wireless in London and currently president and CEO of EDS, a major American information technology company, has an undergraduate degree in organizational communication. He explains that communication is the basis for the way in which an organization functions:

There are many ways to describe a business enterprise. For example, there is a legal description, such as you would find embodied in its articles of incorporation, there are material descriptions that describe the business in terms of its capitalization, its assets, or its sales revenues. There are functional definitions that tell you what the business does, what needs it meets, and what products or services it provides. But if you are looking to understand what a business truly is, and how it really works, I believe the most pertinent starting point is to define it from the human angle. Simply put, before it is anything else, a business is a group of people organized around a common goal. When a business is understood this way, the universal importance of organizational communication becomes clear. It is not only a discipline for specialists, but also a core element of leadership. After all, whether you are talking about the CEO or the shop foreman, leadership is at base a matter of influencing people to agree on and pursue a goal. The leader knows that people do the job and that motivation is essential if people are to do it well. (DeWine 1994, xxix)

For students of organizational communication, these thoughts should be very encouraging. This passage comes directly from a leading CEO telling readers just how important understanding communication in organizations is, especially in comparison to other perspectives on organizational life (e.g., legal, material, and functional). As a former major in organizational communication, Mr. Brown understands the complex nature of communication, making his declaration about its importance that much more significant. Additionally, you as students should be encouraged to know that the field of organizational communication is gaining exposure in the marketplace. Knowing that someone who majored in organizational communication can rise to the level of CEO in a large organization should provide you with the confidence you need to explore the field in depth. It is our intention in this book to provide you with an overview of the field of organizational communi-



cation and to demonstrate the critical role communication plays in most every aspect of organizational life.

Defining the Study and Practice of Organizational Communication

Organizational communication as a discipline seeks to help people understand the central nature of communication in all aspects of organizational functioning. As we examine the process of communicating within an organization, we view organizations as instruments created to achieve other ends. It is rare that an organization is established as an end in itself. Rather, they are established to realize some goal, such as selling a product, providing a service, or generating an income. In fact, the English word *organization* comes from the Greek word *organon*, which means “tool” or “instrument.” Communication is both the means by which that tool or instrument (the organization) is created and sustained *and* the prime coordinating mechanism for activity designed to attain personal and organizational goals. Hence, communication and organization are intimately interrelated.

The definition of organizational communication that we propose is a slightly modified version of one developed by Fred Jablin (1990, 157). According to our definition *organizational communication* is the process of creating, exchanging, interpreting (correctly or incorrectly), and storing messages within a system of human interrelationships. Central to this definition is the concept of a message. A *message* is a “nonrandom verbal symbolization” (Stohl and Redding 1987, 452). In other words, a message is a use of language (written or spoken) that the recipient interprets as having been created intentionally. The focus on language use becomes important as a means of differentiating the study of organizational communication from related fields such as management and industrial psychology and as we develop the central feature of the text—misunderstandings.

Inherent in the definition of organizational communication are several assumptions and features (we will cover these elements in greater depth in Chapter 6):

- Communication is central to the existence of the organization; it creates and recreates the structure that constitutes the organization. That structure, in turn, affects the nature and flow of communication within it.
- Organizational communication as “process” indicates its dynamic nature. The concept of process implicates the past, present, and future, such that communication within an organization at a particular moment in time is dependent upon prior conditions as well as expectations for the future. For example, a particular interaction between a superior and a subordinate at a given point in time (the present) is related to their prior interactions and interactions with other superiors and subordinates (the past) and their expectations for how they will interact in the future.
- Communication involves more than the physical act of exchanging messages. Communication is an inherently complex process that also includes the cognitive energy associated with creating, exchanging, interpreting, and storing messages.



- Things can go wrong at any point in the communication process and often do. Throughout this book we will refer to this very broadly as “misunderstandings.” The concept of misunderstandings, as used here, involves more than ineffective communication between members of an organization. It is an umbrella term used to connote the problematic nature of interaction in organizational settings.
- Misunderstandings seem to characterize communication in organizations. As organizations (“systems of human interrelationships”) develop, both productive and unproductive features emerge, such as layers of hierarchy, opposing goals, struggles for power, use of technology, gender and cultural differences, reward systems, and control mechanisms. These features serve to complicate the communication process to such an extent that misunderstanding is as prevalent as understanding if not more so.

Researchers in organizational communication study the various elements associated with our definition in a variety of ways. All the following research topics have the study of messages as a common theme. Researchers attempt many tasks:

- Examining the flow of messages in the organization to determine how information is disseminated.
- Studying relationships in the organization (e.g., between superiors and subordinates, or between peers) and how those relationships are created, maintained, and dissolved through communication.
- Attempting to understand the process of organizing.
- Identifying who is receiving information in the organization and who is not, how much information is enough, and which are the most effective channels of communication.
- Describing the interaction between technology and human communication.
- Analyzing the existence of democracy in the workplace.
- Analyzing how the structure of the organization influences communication patterns.
- Studying patterns of interaction in work teams.
- Studying the intricate relationship between communication and organizational culture.

The above list is just a sample of the kinds of topics relevant to the study of organizational communication. All of them are important for an effective communication specialist in the organizational environment.

Organizational communication researchers Dennis Mumby and Cynthia Stohl (1996) point out that a common theme among all of the above concepts and research activities is language: “The use of language as a symbolic means of inducing cooperation in beings that by nature respond to symbols, constitutes our disciplinary foundation . . . a concern with collective action, agency, messages, symbols, and discourse” (53). How messages are sent and understood, through the use of language, forms the basis of communication study in general and organizational communication specifically. For this reason, we have offered a message-centered definition of organizational communi-



cation and integrated issues of the creation, exchange, interpretation, and storage of messages throughout the text.

Mumby and Stohl suggest that students of organizational communication are

well equipped to address contemporary workplace issues (such as the development of a temporary workforce, the implementation of teams, the adoption of new technologies, and multiculturalism) because they are trained to focus on the complex and collaborative nature of communicating, organizing, and knowing. (1996, 54)

These skills—communicating, organizing, and knowing—are central to effective membership in any organizational setting. Being articulate about ideas; understanding the task of organizing individuals, groups, projects, and thoughts; and knowing how to learn are the foci of the field of organizational communication.

In this initial chapter we introduce issues and concepts that will be woven into the chapters that follow. We begin by presenting a central feature of this book, the notion of misunderstandings, followed by an outline of the changing nature of organizations. Next, we give an overview of diversity in organizations and then turn to a sketch of ethics. We conclude the chapter with three common processes and outcomes relevant to the study and practice of organizational communication: organizational identification, job satisfaction, and communication satisfaction.

The Prevalence of Misunderstandings

The central idea of this book is that organizational life is inherently problematic and that communication plays a major role in the creation and resolution of this quality. As the number of people in an organization increases, the following phenomena also tend to occur:

- More levels of hierarchy *or* more work teams with more members.
- Cultural, age, sex, gender, religious, and value differences.
- Struggles for power.
- Emergence of sub- and counter-organizational cultures.
- Competition among peers for scarce resources.
- Increased use of impersonal communication media.

As you can see from this very abbreviated list, organizational life, almost by definition, is fraught with problems in human interaction.

We have chosen the term *misunderstandings* to represent the inherently problematic nature of organizational life. In her book on misunderstandings in interpersonal relationships, Julia Wood defines misunderstandings as “instances in which people who are communicating don’t share meanings” (1998, 8). This book expands on Wood’s definition to include situations in which features of organizational life (such as those listed above) serve to impinge upon the efficient and effective functioning of organizational members. We chose the term *misunderstandings* because it highlights the central nature of communication.



Our use of the term *misunderstandings* is in no way meant to oversimplify the complicated nature of organizational functioning. Truly, many organizational problems are caused by a lack of “shared meaning” between organizational members owing to the limits and constraints of language. But just as many are related to deeper organizational characteristics. Consider the following story relayed to the authors from a development manager named Ian Lambert. Although on the surface it may seem to be an instance of a lack of shared meaning between people, the problem is much deeper and is related to many issues, including organizational culture, technology use, relationships between superiors and subordinates, and organizational alliances.

* * *

I help resell my company’s products to other outlets. I form partnerships between my company and another company that could use our software. The job is part marketing and part sales. We do voice data systems, for example, when you call up a bank or a clothing store and you hear menu choices; that’s our software.

Approximately six months ago, I engaged a corporation in discussions toward a strategic alliance between my organization (Company A) and another corporation (Company B). The alliance would involve the reselling of our core product line to Company B’s base of existing clients, as well as creating new products based on our technology. Things were progressing quite well and we were in the process of contract negotiations when Company B merged with another organization. Although this presented a host of problems, ranging from support to a new management infrastructure, I was confident that we were still working under our agreed-to timelines for executing the agreement. Company B’s president and CEO, my main contact, was now the chief financial officer and VP of strategic technologies in the newly merged company (Company C). Therefore, I thought I had the right individual on my team in order to close the agreement quickly. Also, you should know that if this deal went through, my commission would be close to \$20,000. My boss also thought that we needed to execute the agreement quickly so I could spend my time on other pending relationships. Like most organizations, quarterly revenues drive us, and as the end of the quarter approached, I was presented with a communication problem.

On Monday the 29th, I had a very good conference call with executives from the newly merged company (Company C) and felt that we could get the deal executed in due time. On Tuesday the 30th, I spoke with Company C about 9 A.M., which was about noon their time. We spoke briefly on a few issues and agreed to resolve all remaining issues during a noon conference call. As a result, I assembled my president and CEO, my VP of sales, and my boss, the director of channel sales, to speak with the executives from Company C on any concerns they might have had or changes that needed to occur within the body of the agreement. Company C never showed up for the call.

I unsuccessfully attempted to track them down and the afternoon wore on. Hours passed with no response or messages. My executive team grew increasingly impatient and was very disappointed in the lack of communication. Thus, once 5:00 P.M. had passed (8:00 P.M. their time) I assumed that this company had decided not to partner with us and their lack of communication spoke to a lack of interest in moving forward. I left voice mails concerning the termination of our relationship. I was under a lot of pressure and overreacted in the way I presented that message. I said I was personally and professionally disappointed in their lack of communication and that we should cease all future conversations. Then, out of the blue, I was paged and Company C wanted to chat on getting the agreement executed. I was amazed and embarrassed.



Since they had not communicated to me that they could not make our scheduled meeting, I had decided that they must not want to form the partnership. I had reacted too quickly and without enough information and made assumptions. After I apologized to them, they explained that there had been some situation going on due to restructuring and that had distracted them. Had I received the correct information, I wouldn't have jeopardized the deal, my company's reputation, and my personal reputation.

Although on the surface Ian's account may seem to be a "simple" case of miscommunication, the misunderstandings associated with it were much more complicated than that. An examination of the narrative shows that several issues were at play here that led to the problem:

- Company B's merger and the eventual formation of Company C meant a significant change for Company A. Internal organizational functioning is interdependent with changes in the relevant environment of the focal organization.
- The fast pace and profit-driven nature of modern organizational life created a situation where a delay of a few hours caused tremendous concern and the flow of potentially damaging communicative action.
- Reliance on conference call technology meant a removal of important layers of relevant information. A lack of personal presence (i.e., face-to-face meeting) caused members of Company A to jump to conclusions regarding the lack of contact with Company C.
- In light of the seemingly broken deal, Ian was confronted with the need to save face in front of his superiors. To do so, he reacted more negatively and sternly than he should have and perhaps would have if his superiors had not been privy to the problem.

Although these were certainly not the only issues relevant to this case, what is obvious is that this misunderstanding was not merely a matter of a lack of shared meaning. It was much more complex than that. When we use the term *misunderstandings* in this book, we are referring to situations such as this one.

Now that we have introduced the general topic of misunderstandings and how it relates to life in organizations, in the next section of the chapter we discuss how conceptions of organizations have changed in the past few decades. As you read about the changes, keep in mind how each change affords opportunities and advantages for organizational members while at the same time it creates new arenas for misunderstandings to arise.

The Changing Nature of Organizations

Over the past several decades, the way academics and practitioners have thought about organizations and how they should be structured has changed. Changes in thought have translated to changes in practice in many organizations today, often to the benefit of the members and the bottom line. In other ways these changes have created a climate of stress in the work environment. The globalization of corporations today, combined with the competitive pressure and a diverse workforce, has forced organizational mem-

bers to be highly flexible and responsive to change. Table 1.1 summarizes these changes.



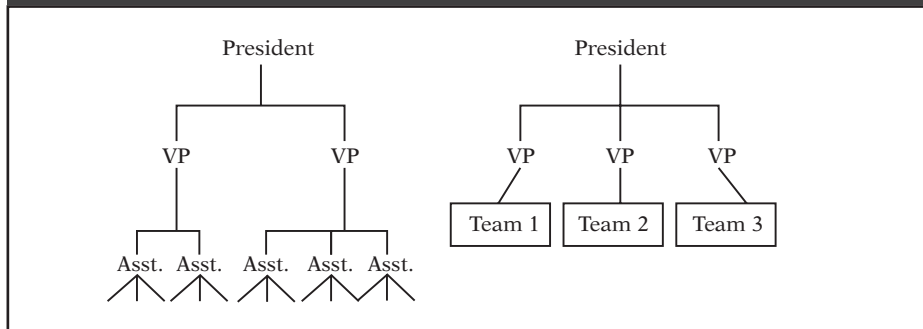
Table 1.1 Organizational Changes

Feature	1960s–1980s	Selected Organizations 1990s to present
Organizational structure	Hierarchical, tall	PDM, flat
Climate	Authoritative	Coaching, empowering
Information technology	Limited tool	Pervasive, essential
Competition	Local, national	Global
Communication	Top down	Multidirectional, complicated

The first major change for many organizations is the shift from hierarchical, or tall, structures in organizations to decentralized, or flat, structures. A “tall” (see Figure 1.1) organization has many layers through which messages and instructions must go before reaching the workers. A “flat” structure has few reporting levels, and managers have a much wider span of control, meaning the number of individuals reporting directly to one person. A large span of control may make the job of supervision more complicated and time consuming; however, the advantage is wider participation in decision making.

In a flat organization, decision making is shared among a larger group of individuals. Participative decision making (PDM) is often a key characteristic of flat organizations. To the extent that a manager wants someone to implement and be supportive of a decision, she should allow that individual the opportunity to participate in making the decision (see Figure 1.1).

Figure 1.1 Hierarchical vs. Flat Organizational Structures



A second major difference in thought about organizations is a shift from a climate of authority characteristic of prior decades to a climate of coaching. Many contemporary organizations use the term *coaching* as the password for management. Instead of controlling the behavior of others through authority (e.g., fear of punishment), supervisors are now encouraged to coach individ-



uals to increase productivity. One author, Thomas Crane (1998), attempts to give managers a better understanding of coaching by defining it this way:

[Coaching is] a comprehensive communication process in which the coach provides performance feedback to the coachee. Topics include broad, work-related dimensions of performance (personal, interpersonal, or technical) that affect the coachee's ability and willingness to contribute to the meaningful personal and organizational goals. (31)

When a person becomes a coach instead of a supervisor or manager, it means the focus has shifted from control to support, though we suspect that many supervisors still attempt to control employees' behaviors even when they call what they are doing "coaching."

Another term that has entered management vocabulary is *empowerment*. When people are given decision-making responsibility, they are empowered to act on their own. It makes sense that an organization would want thinking individuals who can act on their own with good judgment. In order to empower others, managers have to trust employees to make wise choices. One of the aids to making wise choices is information technology.

The third major organizational change is the use of computerized information technology, which has gone from limited use as an occasional tool a decade ago to a pervasive and essential ingredient of the organization today. Anyone who does not understand the impact of technology on the work environment is severely disadvantaged. In Chapter 13 we will talk specifically about the interaction between human communication and communication technology. The Internet, e-mail, teleconferences, and all forms of technology that enable humans to communicate with one another have had a profound effect on the communication environment. With increased information supplied by technology, many experts believe that organizations have had to become more global.

One of the most significant contributors to stress in the workplace is competition. The fourth major change is that today an organization's competition is no longer regional or national but global. Organizations now compete around the world rather than around the block. Consequently, certain skills and knowledge are at a premium. Knowledge of the international marketplace is essential, as is being comfortable in many types of cultural environments.

All these developments have definitely changed communication within organizations. The new coaching style demands the sending of different messages from those employed under an authority-based system. Competition demands quicker responses, and a variety of cultural environments require a heightened sensitivity in communicating messages. As hierarchies flatten and self-managed work teams dominate organizational structures, communication flows in every direction and, in doing so, becomes quite complicated.

It is important to remember that the changes discussed in this section may not reflect current reality for every organization, but they certainly hold true for many. In the next section of this chapter we focus on important changes in the workforce that affect every organization.

The Realities of a Diverse Workforce



One of the most dramatic changes in organizations is the diverse workforce and the need to integrate workers of many cultures, backgrounds, and ideologies. The U.S. Department of Labor predicted that in 2000, five sixths of new workers would be women, African Americans, Hispanics, and immigrants. One in every three workers will be African American, Hispanic or Native American (Johnston and Packer 1987). When we talk about diversity in the workplace, we are including people of all kinds of diverse backgrounds. Brenda Allen (1995) suggests that “diversity in the workplace encompasses a variety of personal and social bases of identity, including race-ethnicity, gender, age, socio-economic status, and country of origin” (144). Clearly, cultural diversity is a reality in the workplace.

Diversity can introduce tensions in work-related groups as well as richness of ideas. Organizational members need to be able to turn diversity into a positive characteristic of the work environment. For example, research suggests that members of cultural groups from collectivist traditions, or cultures where group work is more important than individual success, tend to engage in more cooperative strategies than persons from individualistic cultural traditions. Asian, African American, and Hispanic cultures tend to be collectivist while the Anglo-American culture tends to be individualistic (Allen 1995). If the goal is a group product, workers from collectivist cultures may be more helpful to the group than those from individualistic cultures. Meanwhile, if the task calls for independent work, those from individualistic cultures may excel. The task of a good manager is accurately to identify which type of skill is needed at any one time and draw upon individuals with that skill to help others acquire it. We return to these issues throughout the text as we discuss topics in organizational communication.

There are, of course, cultures within cultures. Often the greatest discrimination has existed among people living in the same environment. “Persons of color tend to have limited access to social networks, to experience blocked mobility, and often do not have mentors or sponsors [and] have been expected to check their race at the door; to become assimilated” (Allen 1995, 150). Allen is suggesting that in the U.S. culture, people of color experience limitations in the organization not experienced by others. The following story told by Marilyn, an elementary school teacher, reinforces Allen’s point.

* * *

When I was 24 years old, my husband, George, was going to be starting a doctoral program in Illinois. So, I had to get a job in Illinois. I had been teaching in New Jersey for two years and it had been a wonderful experience. Here [in Washington, D.C.], there are a ton of schools to work for, but in Illinois the jobs were more spread out. So, my choices of where I wanted to teach were more limited.

I began applying for jobs, and one of the first ones I applied for was in a small town in northern Illinois. I sent all the information they needed. The application did not include a picture because that would have been illegal. I sent the application in and then I left for a trip to Puerto Rico for two weeks to see a friend. When I returned from vacation, there was a telegram under the door. It said that the school had a position for me and they wanted me to call them. There were two other telegrams from the same school under-



neath the door as well, all saying the same thing. The telegram said to call no matter what time of day or night in order to arrange an interview. They were dying to have me!

I called the school right away and asked when I could set up an interview. They were very excited to hear from me and set up an appointment immediately. They were probably excited because no one wanted to work in that rural area. I went the following week to the elementary school to interview. I walked in and I went to the principal's office. I said, "Hi, I'm Mrs. Gardner. I'm here about the job." The principal looked me up and down and in a nervous voice said, "Oh gee, that job was filled this morning." I said, "You knew I was coming." The principal told me that a more qualified applicant had come in that morning and he was sorry it didn't work out. Then he told me he had to take me to the central office. I had no idea why but I got in his car anyway. He brought me to the head of the school and introduced me. Then he said in a very loud, booming voice, "THIS is Mrs. Gardner." He leaned in and said loudly, "I told her that we filled the job with a more qualified applicant this morning, isn't that right?" Then he leaned over and they began whispering. I knew something strange was going on. I ended up getting a job somewhere else.

It turned out later that one of my friends in the area was hired for that same job after me. She was very inexperienced at the time. She told me that I was crazy to think I could have gotten the job because there were no ethnic people whatsoever in that town.

We introduced this story with the idea that persons of color often experience limitations in organizations that are not experienced by others. In this situation, Marilyn never even had the opportunity to gain entry into the organization, by all accounts, because of her ethnicity. Several features of the story indicate that, prior to knowing her ethnicity, the organization was courting her very seriously. The three telegrams with anxious messages and the enthusiastic scheduling of an interview support this theory. The odd behavior of the principal after seeing Marilyn points to this conclusion as well. As this story illustrates, despite the social advances of the past three decades, members of minority populations still have difficulty gaining entry into certain organizations and positions, regardless of their qualifications.

In addition to problems associated with being hired as a member of a different culture, people are often evaluated less positively if they are perceived to be hired as a result of affirmative action. Three researchers (Heilman, Block, and Stathatos 1997) conducted a study with 264 male and female managers who were asked to review information about the job performance of persons portrayed as either a man or a woman, and if a woman, as either an affirmative-action hire or not. The following statement was placed on their performance record: "Hired through women/minority recruiting program." As expected, subjects rated female affirmative-action hires as less competent and recommended smaller salary increases for them than for men and women not associated with affirmative action. This pattern held even when negative performance information was provided for those not identified as affirmative-action hires. Affirmative-action hires are then marginalized, thereby reducing the variety of perspectives that could be available to the group and negating the benefits of diversity. Behavior such as this is often based on entrenched organizational and societal norms, which tend to reinforce the values and status of white males, who are the primary players in the shaping of those norms from the start (Elsass and Graves 1997).

As should be becoming clear, organizational life is inherently problematic; hence our focus on misunderstandings in this textbook. Whether those

misunderstandings be based on miscommunication, management style, information technology, or cultural diversity, they must be acknowledged and acted upon in an appropriate manner. For appropriate and responsible decisions and actions to be accomplished, organizational members must have a solid foundation from which to operate. In the next section, we discuss an important element of that foundation—ethics.



Ethical Frameworks and Organizational Communication

Organizational ethics is difficult to define outside the unique culture of a particular organizational environment. Organizations that encourage members to give voice to concerns about the organization and increase the choices members can make are establishing an ethical framework. These choices may take the form of actions or rhetorical acts. There are many factors that operate against such choices. W. Charles Redding (1984), one of the earliest writers on organizational communication, concluded: “There is something inherently present in any modern organization that facilitates unethical or immoral conduct” (1). As organizational members make choices on a day-to-day basis, the “inherent” desire for such things as control, power, information, resources, money, and promotions, could promote unethical behavior.

Allowing organizational members to voice concerns rather than eliminating anyone who speaks against the goals of the organization takes a great deal of trust in the workers on the part of organizational leadership. Workers will have little reason to act in ethically appropriate ways, however, if management does not set the standard. Richard Johannesen, known for his work in the ethics of human communication, argued this point:

Top management must set a high ethical tone for the entire organization by demonstrating a firm and clear commitment to ethical behavior for all employees. The personal example of their own daily behavior is one way for the top management to demonstrate such commitment. Also desirable is development of a formal code of ethics or set of written ethical expectations that explain in clear terms the ethical standards demanded by the organization. (1996, 176)

It would be nice to think that all organizational members would inherently want to operate in an ethical fashion, but history and human nature tell us differently. A quick scan of one day’s newspaper headlines illustrates this point:

Washington Post (May 1, 2001): A Troubled Osprey Wounds the Corps: Pressures to Build a New Plane Led to Deception and Deadly Shortcuts
Chicago Tribune (May 1, 2001): License Plate Scheme Admitted
Columbus Dispatch (May 1, 2001): Dollar General Hit by Fraud Investigation
Los Angeles Times (May 1, 2001): Man Sentenced in Tow Truck Fraud

As these headlines demonstrate, unethical behavior does not seem to be rare in organizational life. It appears that if organizational members are to behave ethically they need models and guidelines to follow.



For this reason, many organizations have attempted to establish ethics programs. A recent survey of large U.S. corporations found that 78 percent of responding companies had codes of ethics, 51 percent had telephone lines for reporting ethical concerns, and 30 percent had offices for dealing with ethics and legal compliance. Nearly two thirds of those offices were created in the 1990s (Weaver, Trevino, and Cochran 1999, 41). As further evidence of this trend, an October 18, 2000, story in the *New York Times* reports that membership in the Ethics Officer Association had risen from 12 in 1992 to 706 at the time of the story.

Formal corporate ethics programs typically include some or all of the following elements: (1) formal codes of ethics, which articulate a firm's expectations regarding ethics, (2) ethics committees charged with developing ethics policies evaluating company or employee actions and investigating and adjudicating policy violations, (3) ethics communication systems (e.g., telephone lines) providing a means for employees to report abuses or obtain guidance, (4) ethics officers or ombudspersons charged with coordinating policies, providing ethics education, or investigating allegations, (5) ethics training programs, aimed at helping employees to recognize and respond to ethical issues, and (6) disciplinary processes to address unethical behavior.

Some ethics programs embody a coercive orientation toward control that emphasizes adhering to rules, monitoring employee behavior, and disciplining misconduct. Such programs can be called compliance oriented. Corporate ethics programs may also, however, aim to standardize behavior by creating commitment to shared values and encouraging ethical aspirations. Such systems emphasize support for employees' ethical aspirations and the development of shared values (Weaver, Trevino, and Cochran 1999, 42). A third type of ethics program, termed "social outreach," was discussed in a story on corporate ethics in the November 13, 2000, issue of the *Financial Times* (London). Social outreach is the least common of the three types and emphasizes the role of the organization as a social citizen. Social outreach programs take two forms: social accounting and competency-based. Social accounting programs advocate that companies should account for their social activities much as they do their financial activities. Competency-based programs emphasize the social contributions a company undertakes over donating money to various causes.

A sense of ethics must be "institutionalized" into the organization. Ethical concerns must be regarded as on a par with economic and pragmatic concerns in decision making. Procedures must be established so that ethical issues automatically are confronted as part of a decision. Opportunities and mechanisms should be established for employees to express their ethical concerns without fear of blocked promotion or of demotion, firing, or other retribution. Employee "whistle-blowing" on ethical violations by the organization truly should become rare and a last resort. Organizations must consciously act to make ethics a legitimate topic of discussion, not only for those times of crisis when a personal value is challenged or painful competing claims are present but also to allow employees to examine fully the range of options available, to anticipate pitfalls, and to explore creative ways of resolving their dilemmas (Johannesen 1996).

Codes of ethics and ethics programs provide structures for ethical behavior, but when attempting to determine whether a particular behavior is ethical or not, it is useful to have more specific guidelines or principles to follow.

Gary Kreps (1990) and George Cheney and Phillip Tompkins (1987) have developed ethical guidelines that are useful for this purpose.



Kreps proposes three ethical principles that can be applied to communication in organizations. The principles are based in these concepts: “do not inflict harm” and “justice” (1990, 250–251).

- **Organization members should not intentionally deceive one another.** While on the surface this seems to be a straightforward and uncomplicated principle, it becomes muddy in the organizational context. There is a tension between the old adage “Honesty is the best policy” and the complicated nature of organizational life. As Kreps notes, some information in organizations cannot be disclosed either fully or partially (e.g., certain personnel information or corporate secrets such as food recipes or technical components of products under development). But outside of these restrictions, organization members should make every attempt to provide realistic and truthful information to one another.
- **Organization members’ communication should not purposely harm any other organization member or members of the organization’s relevant environment.** For Kreps, this is the notion of “nonmalfeasance” or “refraining from doing harm.” The key element of this principle is intentionality—to what extent did the member intend to inflict harm? Another important question that arises from this principle is, what are the acceptable levels of harm in the organization?
- **Organization members should be treated justly.** This principle does not necessarily imply equality of treatment. Justice, according to Kreps, is a relative construct based on the particular organizational context. In some organizations, for example, high performers may be given preferential treatment. It would seem, however, that full disclosure of what constitutes just treatment is imperative to ethical organizational behavior.

The three principles proposed by Kreps are based on two widely held beliefs regarding humane treatment—avoiding harm and doing justice. Operating from a different foundation, George Cheney and Phillip Tompkins (1987) forwarded four broad ethical guidelines that are based less on general doctrine and more on communication, particularly persuasion. Their four guidelines for ethical behavior are

- **Guardedness:** Organizational members should use their own persuasive abilities to assess the messages from the organization and should avoid automatically and unthinkingly accepting the conventional viewpoint.
- **Accessibility:** Communicators should be open to the possibility of being persuaded or changed by the messages of others. If people are dogmatic, they are blind to useful information and different views.
- **Nonviolence:** Certainly coercion, overt or subtle, of others is ethically undesirable. Recent workplace violence should make everyone more sensitive to early signs of violent behavior toward others. Individuals should avoid using a persuasive stance that advocates one position as the one and only reasonable position, which often forces others to take more radical stances.



- **Empathy:** The empathic communicator genuinely listens to the arguments, opinions, values, and assumptions of others. The goal is to respect the right of all persons to hold diverse views.

Cheney and Tompkins articulate an ethical framework that is grounded in communication and recognizes the responsibilities of both the sender and the receiver of messages. Their guidelines are essentially skill based, to some extent equating what are considered basic communication skills with ethical behavior. These four guidelines and the three offered by Kreps are excellent tools for analyzing organizational behavior, particularly communicative behavior, and determining the extent to which the communicators acted ethically. We use these ethical principles and guidelines throughout the rest of the book to analyze communicative behaviors in the workplace.

Three Important Constructs

We conclude the final section of this chapter with a discussion of three constructs important to the study and practice of organizational communication—identification, job satisfaction, and communication satisfaction. Although there are certainly many more constructs that are relevant in organizational communication practice and research, these three are perhaps the most salient to the concept of misunderstandings. As we conducted interviews with organizational members for this text, we found that these three constructs were either explicitly or implicitly relevant to the misunderstandings discussed. As a result, explaining them at this early point in the book should help you understand the stories as they occur throughout the text and will provide a vocabulary for discussing and analyzing them.

Organizational Identification

A particularly useful construct in the study and practice of organizational communication is *organizational identification*. The term is adopted from the writing of rhetorician Kenneth Burke and positioned in the discipline most notably by George Cheney and Phillip Tompkins. Burke (1950) believed that the hierarchies present in society naturally divide humans from one another. To overcome the separation, humans act to establish some sense of commonality—a process termed “identification.” “Identification—with organizations or anything else—is an active process by which individuals link themselves to elements in the social scene” (Cheney 1983, 342). Those elements can include people (e.g., co-workers, supervisors, subordinates), policies, products, services, customers, or values.

Organizational identification involves an individual’s sense of membership in and connection with an organization. Bullis and Bach (1989) describe it in the following way: “Individuals identify with their collectives . . . to the extent that they feel similar to other members, they feel a sense of belonging, and they consider themselves to be members” (275). Organizational identification has been correlated with several relevant organizational outcomes (Cheney 1983, 342), including motivation, job satisfaction, job performance, decision making, role orientation and conflict, employee interaction, and length of service, among others.



As you can tell, organizational identification has been construed as both a *process* and a *product* (Scott, Corman, and Cheney 1998). Organizational identification as a process encapsulates the notion that people act so as to identify with a certain aspect(s) of their organization. In this manner, organizational identification is fluid, changing, and intimately related to the process of communication. As a product, organizational identification is seen as a result of socialization efforts by the organization, which could in turn lead to further positive outcomes such as increased motivation, and job satisfaction.

Job Satisfaction

Perhaps one of the most studied variables in organizational research is job satisfaction. It is the degree to which employees feel fulfilled by their job and related experiences. One of the most often cited definitions of this construct is offered by Locke (1976): *job satisfaction* is “a pleasurable or positive emotional state from the appraisal of one’s job or experiences” (1297). Job satisfaction is often broken down into relevant factors, such as supervision, work, pay, promotion, and co-workers (Pincus 1986). An employee’s overall job satisfaction would be the sum of his or her satisfaction with those individual factors. Job satisfaction has been linked with a variety of organizational outcomes, including absenteeism and turnover (Downs, Clampitt, and Pfeiffer 1988).

The challenge for managers is to understand that contributors to job satisfaction vary by individual employee. One individual is not satisfied unless he is doing challenging work, while another may not be satisfied unless he is in a collegial environment. One variable that has been linked to job satisfaction (Pincus 1986) is communication satisfaction.

Communication Satisfaction

Communication satisfaction is the degree to which employees feel that communication is appropriate and satisfies their need for information and work relationships. Redding (1978) defines *communication satisfaction* as the “overall degree of satisfaction an employee perceived in his [sic] total communication environment” (429). Inherent in this definition are several dimensions associated with varying individual needs as well as elements of the communication environment.

Cal Downs (1994), in an explication of the Communication Satisfaction Questionnaire developed by Downs and Hazen (1977), indicates that communication satisfaction can be broken down into eight factors concerned with: communication information, relationships, channels, and climate (114). Those dimensions are

1. **Communication climate.** The overall extent to which communication from the organization is positive as well as the perceived communication competence of other employees.
2. **Relationship to superiors.** Upward and downward communication as well as issues of openness and trust.



3. **Organizational integration.** The extent to which the employee feels informed of important organizational information including policies, procedures, and current events.
4. **Media quality.** Helpfulness and clarity of communication as it relates to the particular media used (e.g., meetings, written, dyadic).
5. **Horizontal and informal communication.** The accuracy and adequacy of communication networks within the organization.
6. **Organizational perspective.** The extent to which the employee feels the organization adequately communicates information regarding organizational goals, organizational performance, and changes in the external environment that affect organizational functioning.
7. **Relationship with subordinates.** The flow of communication between superior and subordinate and the ability of the subordinate (from the supervisor's viewpoint) to receive and send information competently.
8. **Personal feedback.** The extent to which employees perceive supervisors as being in touch with organizational and personal problems and employees' perceptions of the clarity of criteria by which their performance will be judged.

Communication satisfaction is often considered the “sum” of an individual's satisfaction with the above dimensions (Pincus 1986). Many of these dimensions will be covered in this textbook and communication satisfaction will often be referred to in discussing important organizational communication processes and issues.

Summary

Organizational communication is the process of creating, exchanging, interpreting (correctly or incorrectly), and storing messages within a system of human interrelationships. The study of organizational communication helps people understand and appreciate communication as the central process in the organization.

In this chapter we have attempted to outline some of the basic issues related to the study and practice of organizational communication. We argued that conceptions of organizations have changed dramatically in the recent past, having moved from organizational structures dominated by hierarchy, authority, and local competition to ones characterized by decentralized decision making, coaching, and global competition. Of particular interest is the fact that the workforce is no longer homogeneous but is now culturally diverse.

We also advanced the notion that misunderstandings characterize modern organizational life. *Misunderstandings* is an umbrella term used to encapsulate the role communication plays in the creation and resolution of organizational problems. Since organizational life is inherently problematic, it is of utmost importance that organizations and individual members approach situations with an appropriate and agreed upon ethical framework. We con-

cluded the chapter with the introduction of three constructs—organizational identification, job satisfaction, and communication satisfaction.



As a student, no matter what your future area of expertise may be—finance, management, health care, law, medicine, engineering, or the arts—it will be important for you to understand how communication functions in an organization and how you can make it work for you. We hope that after reading this book you will have a greater understanding of all aspects of organizational life. An appreciation of the historical development of organizational communication, a more developed sense of organizational culture, and an understanding of the many human communication processes that are a part of organizational life, are desired outcomes. In addition, knowing there are a variety of choices you can make about your own communication behavior will help you decide how to complete the tasks of your job successfully.

If you are a communication major, or more specifically an organizational communication major, others will turn to you for assistance in improving communication in the organization. You may have an official position devoted to communication such as a communication trainer, manager of internal communication, or work in the general area of human resources management. Or you may use your communication expertise in sales, management, administration, or project management. As a communication specialist, your goal should be to reduce misunderstandings through communication.

