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Reconsidering Openness in Organizational Communication

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Much organizational theory and research is characterized by an uncritical acceptance of the efficacy of open communication. In this critique, the lack of support for this view of openness is discussed. A contingency perspective that more accurately reflects the political nature of organizational life is proposed.

Many organizational theoreticians and researchers uncritically accept the efficacy of open communication. Recently, however, some writers (Eisenberg, 1984; March & Olsen, 1970; McCaskey, 1982; Pascale & Athos, 1981; Pfeffer, 1977) have argued that organizational participants are strategists oriented toward multiple goals who communicate in ways that may not be completely open, but nevertheless may be effective. This agrees with recent work that rejects simple models of communication in favor of a more complex view of managers and employees as strategic, symbolic actors (Pfeffer, 1981; Pondy, 1978; Putnam & Pacanowsky, 1983; Weick, 1979, 1980).

This essay extends these lines of argument by examining the key assumptions that underlie the idea that opening up lines of communication is a panacea for organizational ills. It traces the development of the ideology of openness in organizational communication from its origins in the human relations movement, describes its use in contemporary organizational research, and proposes an alternative, contingency model of communication in organizations.

The Legacy of Human Relations

Early Human Relations

The emphasis of the early human relations movement on open superior-subordinate communication stemmed from an assumption about the need for uniform goals among organizational members. Viewing workers as latent cooperators (Bendix, 1974), Harvard researchers saw open communication between manager and employee as an integrating mechanism (Mayo, 1945; Roethlisberger & Dickson, 1947). First, by persuading employees to disclose their feelings about their jobs and superiors, this talking would simultaneously relieve worker stress and allow management to discover untapped sources of worker motivation (Perrow, 1986). Second, by increasing frequency of contact between workers and management, the employee would identify with the goals of the company. Morale and productivity would improve.

To achieve these ends, early human relations practitioners stressed frequent downward communication from superiors to increase integra-

tion and show a sincere interest in the employee (Bendix, 1974) and disclosive communication upward on the part of the employee. The former could be achieved by developing a managerial elite trained to communicate lucidly and unemotionally with workers. The latter was facilitated by nondirective personnel interviews. In these interviews, employees were encouraged to achieve emotional relief by airing grievances and frustration to counselors, even though the counselors were powerless to change the employees' circumstances (Wilensky & Wilensky, 1951). Employees were encouraged specifically to discuss personal problems with interviewers, under the assumption that useless emotional complications and obsessive thinking that could interfere with work performance might be reduced (Mayo, 1945).

Reexaminations of early human relations research reveal that economic rewards, better discipline, and the anxieties caused by the national depression contributed more to improved performance than did improved communication (Carey, 1967; Conrad, 1985; Franke & Kaul, 1978). Peter Drucker (1974) spoke for many in management when he referred to early human relations as a kind of psychological manipulation in which the exploitation of "individual fears, anxieties, and personality needs replaces the old fear of being punished or of losing one's job" in controlling employees (p. 243).

Later Human Relations

The early human relations school has been criticized by those who view its goals and techniques as serving managerial interests over those of workers (Bendix, 1974; Edwards, 1979; Perrow, 1986). Later advocates of human relations emphasized the *mutual* responsibility of managers and employees to create "supportive relationships" through open communication (Likert, 1967).

Likert's concern for supportive relationships inspired much of the research on openness conducted in the communication field. Notable within this tradition is work by Redding (1972) and

Jablin (1985), who defined an open communication relationship as one in which both parties perceive the other to be a willing and receptive listener, and refrain from responses which might be seen as negative or nonaccepting. From this perspective, the ideal managerial climate is characterized by supportiveness, empathy, participation, and trust, achieved in part by the "candid disclosure of feelings" (Redding, 1972, p. 330).

When subjected to empirical tests, these later conceptions have fared only slightly better than the earlier human relations theories. Numerous contingencies moderate the relationship between openness and employee attitudes and behaviors. For example, Miner's (1982) review of research on Likert's System-4 model and other related theories found only mixed support for the importance of supportive relationships. He further concluded that their impact varied across hierarchical levels. While some studies indicate a linkage between supervisor openness and subordinate satisfaction (cf., Jablin, 1985), others indicate negative findings (e.g., Rabinowitz, Falkenbach, Travers, Valentine, & Weener, 1983). In one study, Wiio (cited in Goldhaber, 1983) found that open communication was associated with greater *dissatisfaction* with the job and the organization. Dissatisfaction is not necessarily a reason to be less open, since conflict can engender compromise and positive change, but it does indicate the relationship between open communication and employee attitudes is not as simple as is sometimes presumed. Instead, the effect of openness on attitudes is moderated by the nature of the information that is shared and the extent to which revelations expose points of significant disagreement.

Finally, subordinates' preferences for open communication vary depending upon characteristics of their superiors. While subordinates generally prefer open communication, they are less at ease disclosing information to superiors who they perceive as "highly involved in political activities" (Jablin, 1981, p. 273). McGregor (1967) correctly anticipated the need for a contingency approach to communication: "virtually every

variable associated with human interaction may be 'dysfunctional' at both extremes. Like other variables, the openness of communication is relative for all practical purposes, not absolute Even in the most intimate personal relationships—marriage, for example—absolutely open communication could destroy the relationship" (pp. 162–163).

Reconsidering Openness

Openness has been identified three different ways in the literature. First, openness has been treated as the *disclosure of personal information*. This is due to an emphasis from the early human relations movement, in which the disclosure of employees' feelings and the resultant emotional relief were important for effective superior-subordinate relationships. Secondly, openness involves *disclosure of nonpersonal information* (such as work plans or objectives). This is reflected in later work by Likert, Redding, and Jablin, in which openness is defined as supportiveness rather than unrestricted candor. A third view of openness overlaps the first two and addresses the linguistic choices associated with being more or less open; that is, how *clear* or *ambiguous* disclosure may be. This is most apparent in work on language and symbolism in organizations (cf., Eisenberg & Riley, in press; Pondy, Frost, Morgan, & Dandridge, 1983).

Openness as Personal Disclosure

In advice that recalls Mayo's (1945) notion of nondirective interviewing, Imberman (1979) argued that frequent listening sessions that encourage employees to share their feelings lead to better labor-management relations and a decreased likelihood of strikes. Closer in spirit to the later human relations theorists, Stagnaro (1982) contended that managers should conduct leveling sessions in which they communicate openly with employees about their performance, skills, ability, and feelings. He believed that honesty would not backfire as long as managers listened carefully, avoided emotionalism, and viewed employees who left the organization as

a result of leveling sessions as the "removal of stress from the organization" (p. 19).

Sessions of this kind can backfire for both managers and employees. While disclosure and directness are appropriate under certain circumstances, this approach can cause serious discomfort, confusion, emotional demands, and more stress than is alleviated. Those who prescribe disclosive communication assume that by understanding the other person better, one will be better able to get along with him or her. However, this assumption is counter to common sense and empirical evidence. Most work relationships are noninterpersonal, because participants are low in "intrinsic commitment" and, subsequently, little private psychological-level information is exchanged (Conrad, 1985; Parks, 1982). Furthermore, close relationships that result from mutual disclosure can complicate rather than simplify employees' work lives (Conrad, 1985). While it is possible that increased knowledge of another person may lead to an improved work relationship, it is also possible that knowing someone better may increase the probability of serious disagreement that could jeopardize the future of the relationship (Bochner, 1984).

The idea that open communication may not always be good is resisted by many because it contradicts deeply held beliefs about human relationships. When asked to describe their *ideal* superior-subordinate relationship, most people respond that it should be trusting, open, and honest (Jablin, 1985). Often, however, these beliefs about communication differ from actual behavior in organizations (Steele, 1975). Managers frequently use "manipulative persuasion" to disguise self-interest, to distort information, and to overwhelm others (Allen, Madison, Porter, Renwick, & Mayes, 1979). Although most managers believe they are supportive when dealing with poor performers, in actuality, their behavior may contradict this belief (Fairhurst, Green, & Snavely, 1984). Research about subordinates reveals a similar pattern. When communicating with superiors, subordinates deviate from openness to protect self-interests; messages directed

upward in organizations are "largely edited, cautious, and inaccurate" (Krone, 1985, p. 9).

Openness as Disclosure of Nonpersonal Information

The assertion that the free flow of task-related, nonpersonal information increases organizational effectiveness is true only under certain conditions. Between superiors and subordinates, labor and management, and the organization and its publics, both individual and group goals can be promoted through the cautious disclosure of information.

In collective bargaining, seasoned negotiators use ambiguity and concealment as a matter of course—research shows that open disclosure does not lead to better settlements and may reduce the likelihood of satisfactory agreements (Putnam & Jones, 1982). At times, norms against openness are a matter of convention. For example, in many organizations there are strict informal rules against the discussion of controversial topics at meetings; real differences are hammered out backstage (Steele, 1975). In organizations that depend on public perceptions of legitimacy for survival, communication about technical activities may be restricted to prevent internal conflicts that could damage the organization's image (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Finally, openness must be restricted in the treatment of confidential or proprietary information (Steele, 1975).

Overly disclosive communication may be harmful to organizations during a crisis. Kleinfeld (1985) explored the public disclosures of wrongdoing in corporations such as E. F. Hutton and General Electric. In such situations, employees must be reassured that the organization will not repeat its mistakes and that the company is worthy of their continued commitment. Simple prescriptions of openness do little to help managers cope with such complex problems.

Perhaps the most publicized claim made about openness in organizations is that the free exchange of information equalizes power relationships and reduces the likelihood of political

behavior. For example, Naisbitt (1982) argued that the open communication characteristic of his ideal network structures would help members to treat each other as peers, regardless of formal status. Similarly, Peters and Waterman (1982) contended that the informal, free-wheeling communication that characterizes their excellent organizations reduces political maneuvering.

Increased exchange of information alone may not be sufficient to equalize power relationships. Power is derived from information only when the individual is able to make sense out of the raw data and has the opportunity and is willing to act on it (Blackburn, 1981; Mechanic, 1962). Members who have superior abilities and are in better positions to translate information into action will dominate those who lack this ability. Even in organizations where there is free exchange of information, power is manifested in the dynamics of ordinary interaction through who initiates, terminates, and sets the agenda for what gets talked about (Conrad & Ryan, 1985; Eisenberg, Monge, & Farace, 1984). Similarly, people have varying abilities based on position and credibility to make information salient for others (Weick, 1979). For these reasons, more disclosive communication alone cannot make people equal or remove the politics from organizational behavior.

Disclosure of technical information is especially risky for lower-level employees. Lower-level participants have few means of building power bases other than from the highly specialized information uniquely in their possession (Hickson, Hinings, Lee, Schneck, & Pennings, 1971). As a result, the sharing of technical information can reduce lower-level employees' access to informal power within the organization (Mechanic, 1962). In contrast, managers and executives can rely on legitimate authority (position power) if their technical knowledge becomes widely shared.

Upward communication in organizations presents a more fundamental dilemma for employees. Although the interests of the organization often are best served when employees reveal

all they know about problems and opportunities, revealing such information can be damaging to the individual's job security and career aspirations. The disincentives to reveal negative information are well-documented (e.g., the space shuttle tragedy) and less dramatically shown in research on the "mum effect" and on upward distortion in organizational hierarchies (cf., Jablin, 1979). Individuals may feel trapped between conflicting motivations, that is, to reveal what they know for the good of the company, but to do so at their own peril. Openness often involves risks people are unwilling to take, and they will resist strongly if openness is imposed (Zalzenik, 1971). While it is admirable to strive for an organizational climate in which people feel comfortable speaking openly with one another, such a goal is unreasonable unless we are realistic about the good reasons people have for concealment. According to Conrad (1985), "the norms and political realities of organizations thus reward people for closed, not open communication" (p. 104).

Openness as Clear, Unambiguous Communication

Many managers place excessive "trust in increasing the clarity of communication between people, especially when disagreements are substantive. Getting a currently hopeless impasse clear is often unwise and likely to make things worse" (Pascale & Athos, 1981, p. 94). At all levels, members of organizations stand to gain from the strategic use of ambiguity (Eisenberg, 1984). In this way, organizational participants can express their feelings ("I have some reservations about giving this assignment to Joe") and can deny specific interpretations, should they arise ("You mean, you don't think he's bright enough to do the job?").

It can be especially useful to use strategic ambiguity when coping with the multiple interactional goals associated with supervisory positions. The ability of a manager conducting a performance appraisal "to use strategically ambiguous statements and comments may improve sub-

ordinate performance by allowing him or her the freedom and creativity to excel" (Goodall, Wilson, & Waagen, 1986, p. 77). Vague, metaphorical, and humorous suggestions are methods of communicating multiple messages which could not be expressed as easily in a literal fashion. While one risk of such strategies is that the subtlety will be lost on the audience, employees tend to be sensitive to this kind of communication. Usually, they can tell, for example, when the boss is at the same time conveying a more serious message (Ullian, 1976; Winick, 1976).

Researchers of organizational evaluation processes found that beliefs tend to be self-perpetuating, despite managers' efforts to overcome their biases. Once an initial assessment of another person has been made, there is a tendency mainly to attend to information that supports this first impression (Jones & Nisbet, 1972). For this reason, full disclosure is risky, but equivocation can serve as a kind of character insurance for people who are perceived as credible (Williams & Goss, 1975).

Overly explicit communication can affect task-related decisions and attributions about character. Indiscriminant explicitness limits options and can endanger plans (Bok, 1983). Often, sophisticated managers learn the hard way about the liabilities of speaking too soon (Pascale & Athos, 1981). Many managers who have been overly explicit in their policies have paid dearly later on, when a violation by a valued employee forces them to choose between making a good decision and remaining consistent with previous pronouncements.

The manager who is overly explicit in the statement of missions and goals also takes a risk. When missions are couched in unequivocal terms, conflict is unavoidable; when goals are stated concretely, they often are strikingly ineffective (Edelman, 1977). Ambiguous missions and goals allow divergent interpretations to coexist and are more effective in allowing diverse groups to work together. Further, ambiguous missions allow organizations greater freedom to respond to environmental changes (Keesing, 1974).

In public sector organizations, formal agreements often are constructed as purposefully ambiguous so that representatives of various constituencies can claim victory for their respective groups (Ring & Perry, 1985). Clear articulation of strategy may be inappropriate, since such disclosure provides a rallying point for the opposition, and over time leads executives to exercise inadequate caution. "Ambiguity in strategy, characteristic of many public organizations, therefore, may be an asset" (Ring & Perry, 1985, p. 279). The need for ambiguity in communication extends beyond formal organizations. All societies require a degree of value-consensus in order to survive; as a rule, this consensus is engendered through the creative use of communication. Political discourse is rarely literal, and usually a psychological sense of community (Sarason, 1974) or sense of oneness (Becher, 1981) is sufficient in modern social life (Hart, 1984). In communities whose members strive for extreme levels of *communitas*, ambiguity is absolutely essential for the maintenance of a sense of common understanding (Myerhoff, 1975).

Toward a Contingency Perspective on Organizational Communication

In this paper, an undifferentiated view of the benefits of open communication has been critiqued. This is not an objection to all suggestions regarding the beneficial effects of open communication or a suggestion that managers stop talking with their employees. Some organizational activities, particularly those having safety or legal implications, require clear, complete communication. Here, concealing information would lead to the worsening of some problems over time, making them less manageable if confronted in the future.

It is laudable to sensitize employees and managers to the benefits of empathic listening; to create an atmosphere of mutual respect and willingness to entertain new ideas; to share feelings and sentiments when individuals so desire; and to establish as much as possible in a context of unequal power a climate of trust and mutual

concern. Endorsement of these goals does not equal supporting openness in all circumstances. Instead, the development of a contingency perspective in which communication strategies reflect individual goals and situational characteristics is proposed. Future research should move systematically toward identifying appropriateness norms for open communication (Derlega & Grzelak, 1979), that is, the conditions under which managers and employees choose to be more or less open.

The reasoning behind an individual's decision to be more or less open can involve many different contingencies. Four types are suggested by this review: individual, relational, organizational, and environmental.

Individual contingencies are personal motives, preferences, and styles that affect communicative choices. If one knows that someone is highly ambitious in pursuing a career path or, alternatively, that one's primary concern is to keep his/her private life separate from his/her work life, his/her degree of openness can be explained regarding these desired ends. Similarly, it is expected that a communicator's personal style (e.g., loquacity or shyness) would affect the extent to which he or she communicates openly with others.

Relational contingencies refer to the closeness or shared history between organizational members. In part, choices to reveal or conceal information can be explained by an expediency model, since interactants in a relatively closed group with a long history can communicate less explicitly without compromising understanding (Bernstein, 1964). Attention to relational contingencies also may indicate tact, politeness, and the preservation of intimacy as possible explanations for one's degree of openness. For example, usually the decision to reveal highly personal information to another employee depends on the degree of trust and respect in the relationship.

Organizational contingencies are constraints on communication related to the job, the tasks at hand, or the interests of the organization as a whole. For example, a decision not to reveal

company secrets or a decision to hold back information from employees about a tentative plan may be justified because it furthers or protects organizational interests. Alternatively, a decision to share information about the big picture with employees can be viewed as one way of promoting more participative, democratic decision making.

Lastly, *environmental* contingencies may constrain an organization's internal and external communication. Particularly in organizations that are highly regulated or those in the public eye, communicative choices must be considered in light of how they will be interpreted by various publics. For example, managers and CEOs monitor their degree of openness with the public

as a way of protecting their organizations from possible threats to legitimacy or survival.

Often, the development of theories of human communication parallels the dominant values of society. Definitions of what constitutes *effective* communication have evolved from a concern with serving societal ends, to a focus on individual goal attainment, and most recently to a combined concern with personal goals and situational adaptation (Rawlins, 1985). The perspective presented here is consistent with this latter view. A contingent, differentiated view of organizational communication, one that eschews indiscriminant calls for openness in favor of a more subtle characterization of organizational life, is desirable.

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