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The Oxford Handbook of Positive Organizational Scholarship

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34. Trust 449
Positive Organizational Scholarship and Trust in Leaders
Aneil K. Mishra and Karen E. Mishra
35. Trustworthiness 462
Perspective Taking: Building Positive Interpersonal Connections and
Trustworthiness One Interaction at a Time
Michele Williams
36. Humor 474
The Laughter Advantage: Cultivating High-quality Connections and
Workplace Outcomes Through Humor
Cecily D. Cooper and John J. Sosik
37. Psychological Safety 490
Psychological Safety: A Foundation for Speaking Up, Collaboration, and
Experimentation in Organizations
Ingrid M. Nembhard and Amy C. Edmondson

Part Five • Positive Human Resource Practices

38. Career Development 507
Personal Growth Through Career Work: A Positive Approach to Careers
Douglas T. Hall and Mireia Las Heras
39. Mentoring 519
Relational Mentoring: A Positive Approach to Mentoring at Work
Belle Rose Ragins
40. Socialization 537
Socialization Perspectives and Positive Organizational Scholarship
Blake E. Ashforth, Karen K. Myers, and David M. Sluss
41. Diversity 552
A Positive Approach to Studying Diversity in Organizations
Lakshmi Ramarajan and David Thomas
42. Communication 566
The Role of Communication in Positive Organizational Scholarship
Larry Browning, G.H. Morris, and Kerk F. Kee
43. Negotiation: Objective and Subjective Value 579
Parallel and Divergent Predictors of Objective and Subjective Value in
Negotiation
Jared R. Curhan and Ashley D. Brown
44. Negotiation: Mindfulness and Emotion Management 591
The Mindful Negotiator: Strategic Emotion Management and Well-being
Shirli Kopelman, Orli Avi-Yonah, and Akshaya K. Varghese
45. Work-Family Dynamics 601
Positive Work-Family Dynamics
Jessica Keeney and Remus Ilies

The Role of Communication in Positive Organizational Scholarship

Larry Browning, G. H. Morris, and Kerk F. Kee

Abstract

This chapter offers a position on organizational communication as a positive force by drawing together the literature on organizational communication, social interaction, and communication technology as they apply to organizations. We organize these ideas around two themes. First is integrative communication, which includes the subsets of inclusiveness, respectfulness, and supportiveness. Second is constructive interaction, which includes the subsets of solution focus, a future orientation, and collaborative interaction. These topics are elaborated as we offer orientations and practices that show evidence of their use. We conclude with an example of positive communication from the medical community and offer a glimmer of hope for the future based on current practice.

Keywords: Integration, dialogue, respectful interaction, information sharing

If part of the aim of positive organizational scholarship is to learn how to cultivate positive human processes and dynamics in organizations, then no concept is more ripe for examination than communication. Communication is a quintessential human good and, at least in popular views, the more of it, the better. Most people harbor very favorable assessments of communication because it can generate understanding, spread knowledge, overcome isolation, enable coordination, and improve problem solving. Communication technology, likewise, is well thought of because it can enable pooling of intelligence, conquer distances, speed activities, and expand networks. However, communication is playing with fire. It does not necessarily live up to its marvelous potential, and it can also be dangerous, disruptive, dull, disappointing, distracting, and even destructive. Just a few instances of destructive communication are enough to spoil a much larger number of successful communication experiences. Very commonly, a communication event that is positive for some purposes is simultaneously negative for others; events that uplift some may suppress

others (Putnam, 2009). Because of its affirmative orientation, positive communication is susceptible to masking error and harm (Deetz, 2009). How is it possible to have directness, honesty, on the one hand, yet embrace communication acceptance at the same time? Because of these doubts, we feel an urgent need to better understand what counts as positive communication and to spark more consideration of the circumstances under which positive communication might contribute to other positive processes and dynamics in organizations.

In this chapter, we offer a model to organize images of positive communication. We begin with a brief historical overview of images of "good communication" from ancient Greece to the present. Next, we derive a definition of positive communication. The concepts of organizational integration and constructive interaction are key to our definition of positive communication, and we devote a section of the chapter to each. In each section, we mention particular orientations and practices that constitute positive communication (see Table 42.1 for a summary of concepts). After a brief conclusion, we close

Table 42.1 Characteristics and practices of positive communication

Integrative Communication		Constructive Interaction	
Characteristics	Practices	Characteristics	Practices
• Inclusiveness (coherence, cohesiveness, and relevance of diverse and unique voices) • Respectfulness (trust, honesty, self-respect, and being considerate facework) • Supportiveness (willingness to help, encouragement, comforting communication, and validating others' feelings)	• Dialogues (elaboration, connections beyond boundaries, social ties, etc) • Information sharing (being informed, forming group memory, speaking for interests of members, STICC formulation) • Creating public goods (knowledge management, e-mail copies, pass along effect) • Generating engagement (social capital, social network sites, city/community websites)	• Solution-focused (believe in becoming better, seeing possibilities, being optimistic) • Future-oriented (vision of the future, shadow of the future) • Collaborative (cogency, timeliness, nexting, aligning actions)	• Conversation (answer a question, accept a proposal, comply with a request, etc) • Therapeutic interaction (equitable, flexible, blaming-free, etc) • Future search conferences (discovering common ground, building cooperation, etc.) • Narrative vision (beyond belief, uncertainty absorption, argument centered, evidence centered)

this chapter with an example of positive communication in organizations.

Evolving Images of Good Communication

As a discipline, the communication field has drawn upon several images of good communication over the years. The field is heir to a centuries-long evolution in views of good communication, which can be seen by looking into the kinds of instruction offered to persons seeking to improve as communicators. The Greek and Roman ideals were persuasive oratory to be used by individuals defending their interests in court and the assembly. The European ideal, drawn from the conversation salon, was erudite, learned, sophisticated conversation. The Victorian ideal, also conversational in nature, was polite and nonconfrontative. More recently, the U.S. civic ideal was democratic discussion of the issues of the day by small groups of neighbors. Although they may be de-emphasized in the contemporary era, these models are remarkably durable. Today's views of good communication combine previous sensibilities while incorporating new interaction styles.

We discern four aspects of a contemporary idea of good communication by individuals. First, it is rhetorically effective. Communicators harness language use and nonverbal communication to meet the purposes at hand. Second, it stresses individuals' abilities to relate to others in face-to-face (FTF) interaction that features assertiveness, attentiveness, directness, openness, friendliness, and empathy in organizational relationships and groups (Cameron, 2000). Third, it is technologically sophisticated, calling for quick, responsive, efficient

use of information and communication technologies (ICTs). Fourth, it is culturally and situationally appropriate and accountable. Increasingly, good communication involves working out ways to handle the rhetorical, relational, and technological aspects of the positive style, for the particular cultural and situational circumstance, at the same time, and under circumstances that may not be ideal.

Defining Positive Communication

A crucial purpose served by communication in all organizations is to enable people to arrive at sensible, workable, accurate, consensual, and contemporary understandings of the meaning of situations and events influencing them. Organization communication comprises an interpretation system, and one key purpose of positive communication is to improve that system. In other words, in a general sense, positive communication is that which enhances organizational intelligence (Johnson, 1977). More colloquially, positive communication improves how the organization understands the world in which it is operating. In the two following sections, we concentrate on two key standards of positive communication that make it suitable to help organizations better understand the world.

Integrative Communication

Integration is a master term across the social sciences including differentiation–integration (Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967) and integrative complexity in social psychology and public policy theory (Maruyama, 1992; Suedfeld & Leighton, 2002). To communicate integratively is to speak as one. In a way consistent

with the idea of workplace democracy, positive communication integrates disparate parts, even through hard-fought discussions, and gives them a single voice. To have a voice is to become part of the whole, to join the discussion (Putnam, 2001). Recent research in communication suggests that ICTs may have a democratizing influence over organizations. For instance, "the Web tends to reduce the significance of offline hierarchies in accessing information—thereby 'democratizing' access to worldwide resources" (Caldas, Schroeder, Mesch, & Dutton, 2008, p. 679). Adoption of ICTs makes knowledge contribution and information more accessible to a wider audience.

Similarly, in a recent study of distributed teams, Yuan and Gay (2006) found that "homophily in gender and in race had no significant impact on the development of either instrumental or expressive ties. In instrumental networks, both homophily in group assignment and in location had significant impact on the development of network ties" (p. 1062). Thus, the use of ICTs can promote inclusiveness beyond the influence of demographic variables visible in most FTF interactions. This finding is encouraging because it suggests that organizational integration can be created based on group assignment and geographic location when the process is facilitated by ICTs.

Three characteristics that enable communication to be integrative, hence positive, are inclusiveness, respectfulness, and supportiveness.

INCLUSIVENESS

To be integrative, communication must add to the number and kind of voices that participate in sense-making while remaining coherent, cohesive, and relevant. Positive communication practices bring people together across distances, ideological divides, language barriers, and diverse cultural and individual experiences, enabling them to merge into single incorporated entities (Gibbs, 2009). Members each bring something unique, including experiences, strengths, and knowledge to the table, and they also appreciate what others bring (Browning & Shetler, 2000).

RESPECTFULNESS

Respectfulness is also a key to positive communication because disparate voices bring with them the possibility that others will ignore or discount what is said. According to Weick (2003), at least for high-reliability organizations, action in potentially problematic circumstances requires members to provide

accurate reports on evolving situations. The consequences of mismanaging them could have catastrophic consequences. Weick's view of respectful interaction emphasizes the roles of trust, honesty, and respect as preconditions for respectful interaction. Being respectful necessitates willingness to trust others' accounts, reporting honestly oneself, and having respect for one's own interpretations of what is happening. The essence of respectful interaction, in this view, is to be able to trust each other's reports because they are presumed to be honest. Respectful interaction has been shown to have beneficial outcomes. A focus on respectful interactions allowed one group to maintain their motivation, as observed in their persistent behavior and objective job performance (Granta et al., 2007). In other instances, it has increased awareness of joint decision making in hospitals, on firefighting teams, and in promoting client care on physical therapy teams (Browning, 2007).

In an extension of Weick's (2003) approach, Morris (2008) argued that respectful interaction must also be considerate. Morris (2008) drew upon Goffman's work (1967, 1971) to suggest that people who are being respectful interact to save their own and others' faces and that "there is no time out" from this facework. Thus, besides being trusting, honest, and self-respecting, they are also considerate, not only in strategy sessions dealing with dynamic circumstances, but throughout their daily round of interactions with fellow organization members, leaders, and customers.

Whether or not communication is respectful shows in the small rituals of interaction, such as the making of introductions or in passing greetings. An individual can recognize and use another person's name or fail to remember it. One can choose whether to fill in a newcomer to a group meeting about what happened so far (offering a summary) or not consider his or her ability to follow what is going on. If a summary is offered, the individual can play it straight and not disparage anyone's contributions, or can deprecate them (e.g., "John was just telling us about his *brilliant* design"). Based on the literature on facework (i.e., Brown & Levinson, 1987; Goffman, 1971), part of what is respectful is the act of being considerate of others' goals and interests; what is negative is obstructing their desire to be free of interference.

ICTs may contribute to respectful communication in an unexpected way, because trust and honesty play out differently in computer-mediated communication (CMC). In a recent study,

Giordano, Stoner, Brouer, and George (2007) found that deception is lower and satisfaction is higher in CMC, such as in the use of instant messaging tools for negotiation, than in FTF interactions. In another study of lying behaviors in ICTs, Hancock and colleagues (2004) argue that the automatic recordability of ICTs is the condition that reduces participants' willingness to risk being caught lying; therefore, deception is less likely when people use instant messaging and e-mail communication compared to FTF communication; ICTs might increase the prevalence of trust and honesty by users and thereby facilitate organizational integration.

SUPPORTIVENESS

Supportiveness can be understood as "a desire and willingness to help others succeed . . . by encouraging someone whose confidence is wavering" (Lafasto & Larson, 2001, pp. 14–15). Such support is especially valuable under conditions of personal stress. A community of support of particular individuals will provide both emotional energy and strength. It will cause one to take good advice. Such declarations are sometimes the most memorable gifts a person can receive. One of the most studied examples of the role of communication in relationship maintenance is the research on social support, which shows that it can increase participants' well-being and happiness and act as a vanguard against depression. Social support also enhances peoples' ability to withstand stress. On the other side, the lack of a confidant is a major risk factor for developing depression. "Social support is enacted through interpersonal communication" (Segrin, 2003, p. 318).

Social support and comforting are the focus of emotional help-giving. Comforting communication consists of messages that bring about positive change in emotional states, including person-centered messages, through which a helper validates the feelings of the other and encourages talk about the troubling event. Comforting communication reflects interpersonal warmth (Jones & Wirtz, 2006). Although it may or may not include advice giving, when it does, advice is given in a way that does not threaten the target's face or undermine his or her competence (MacGeorge, Lichtman, & Perse, 2002).

In sum, the three features of positive communication that support organizational integration are inclusiveness, respectfulness, and supportiveness. They may work in concert by enabling people who might not ordinarily be willing or able to work together successfully to lend their voices to

organizational dialogue, have their voices be treated as valuable, and be buoyed up by others when they experience difficulties that the less fortunate would have to handle alone.

Orientations and Practices of Integrative Communication

In this section, we turn to a discussion of some of the orientations and practices that might facilitate organizational integration and lead to organizational intelligence. These key orientations/practices are dialogues, information sharing, building public goods, and engagement. We treat both FTF communication and the use of ICTs to generate CMC as a range of channels that members can employ. When communicators select among communication media, FTF is viewed as a technology with rules and protocols, just as electronic ICTs are (Browning, Sætre, Stephens, & Sørnes, 2008).

Dialogue

Dialogue can be construed as a process of elaborating on the information and perspectives others offer. van Knippenberg and colleagues (2004) define the process of elaboration as "the exchange of information and perspectives, individual-level processing of the information and perspectives, the process of feeding back into the group, and discussion and integration of its implications" (p. 1011). When members engage in elaboration, "diverse groups should outperform homogeneous groups. The idea is that diverse groups are more likely to possess a broader range of task-relevant knowledge" (van Knippenberg, De Dreu, & Homan, 2004, p. 1009). Discussion of a topic by a diverse group of people can both lead to creative solutions and produce ownership as a result of participation.

One of the premises of integrative communication is that the more of it that crosses barriers, whether cultural or academic, the greater the likelihood of people understanding each other. One of the greatest difficulties of cooperative scientific efforts is the natural chauvinism that goes with being a part of a scientific discipline. One of the downsides of commitment and professionalism is that other disciplines are flawed in some way; they are lesser and wanting. The positive communication value is that direct conversations lead to insights that would not have been possible for a brilliant, but isolated individual.

An example of cross-barrier communication is the National Academy of Science's call for increasing understanding among academic disciplines via

the use of communication using a concept called the interdisciplinary research process (IDR). "At the heart of interdisciplinary understanding is communication—the conversations, connections, and combinations that bring new insights to virtually every kind of scientist and engineer" (Project Kaleidoscope, 2006). Skill at communicating across disciplines has to do with overcoming language differences, building trust—both in the short and long term—and the ability to press forward with task and relational goals. Otherwise, a lack of communication creates a cultural divide (Rosenfeld, Richman, & May, 2004). Since "communication and language are the mechanisms through which social identity is created, maintained, and modified" (Riedlinger, Gallois, McKay, & Pittam, 2004, p. 61), integrative communication in the scientific arena holds promise for constructing interdisciplinary identities and, hence, cooperation.

At the interpersonal level, ICTs can promote the creation of social ties underlying dialogues. The development of social ties within structures is critical for organizational integration. In a study of the use of ICTs and social ties, Zhao (2006) found that "social users of the Internet have more social ties than nonusers do. Among social users, heavy e-mail users have more social ties than do light e-mail users. [Furthermore] . . . e-mail users communicate online with people whom they also contact offline" (p. 844). The use of ICTs, such as e-mails, generates social ties that enable the communication process. When multiple collaborations overlap among dispersed members, the formation of a virtual organization can further promote organizational integration. Based on complexity theory and a case of collaboration among 2,000 scientists, Bird, Jones, and Kee (2009) argue that the use of a range of technologies and remote instruments can create three paradoxical characteristics that promote the effective functioning of a virtual organization as dispersed but coordinated, diverse yet coherent, and flexible nonetheless secured. When an organization is too big to easily allow for FTF dialogues, ICTs expand dialogues beyond time and space.

Information Sharing/Being Informed

Having information to share and being informed by others go hand in hand as key practices for organizational integration. Communication tends to level information across groups because the asymmetrical knowledge becomes distributed when the knowing person communicates to the unknowing through the act of sharing. The result of sharing is to increase

the amount of information held by a broad group of people, which creates an opportunity for group memory and a broadly felt sense of competence. Such shared knowledge that is recalled means that a group "re-members" by harkening back to what everyone knows when it is pooled into a single culture (Corbett, Faia-Correia, Patriotta, & Brigham, 1999). Interaction among groups serves to inform members about organizational wisdom, which is knowledge known by its members. "Groups recall more information than individuals" (Wittenbaum, 2003, p. 617). Since some members know more than others, communication allows for that information to be shared.

One version of membership in a network is being well enough informed to speak for the interests of members. For example, an association's board of directors may be affirmed and trusted because members believe that the board protects the interests of its members. Harter and Krone's (2001) study of the Nebraska Cooperative Council reported that members used the metaphor of voice to depict how they view the council as protecting the larger cooperative interests. Voice serves as a kind of representation for stakeholders. Key to the voice metaphor is access (Harter & Krone, 2001). Part of the communication process is to become informed, so that information seeking is a kind of adaptation based on gaining a seat at the table. This allows a person to be involved in a learning process and subsequently to contribute to problem solving and decision making as an informed participant. One version of being informed and knowing what is going on is exemplified by African American women executives, who emphasize the importance of being open to information and paying attention to active listening (Parker, 2001).

An orientation for integrating diverse views under potentially catastrophic conditions is Weick's (2003) sequence of statements for respectful interaction about dynamic, potentially consequential events. In this STICC formulation, the leader sets up the interaction by saying:

1. *Situation*: Here's the situation we face.
2. *Task*: Here's what I think we should do.
3. *Intent*: Here's why we should do that.
4. *Concerns*: Here's what we should keep our eyes on because if that changes, we're in a new situation.
5. *Calibration*: Now talk to me.

Under conditions of trust, honesty, and self-respect, members are willing to offer their perspectives when called upon to do so, to disagree, and to

work successfully through disagreements as they calibrate their determination of what is to be done. Indeed, willingness to disagree could sometimes display commitment to the collective's goal and work toward integrating the individual into the group.

Information and communication technologies can support the practice of information sharing/being informed, especially in the processes of organizational socialization, coordination, and collaboration. Flanagan and Waldeck (2004) proposed a theoretical orientation of ICT use, and they argue that accurate, appropriate, and sufficient information via ICTs can promote successful organizational socialization of newcomers. They suggest that group and organizational norms about the use of ICTs play an important role in a newcomer's socialization and organizational integration process. After members have been socialized into an organization, ICTs can facilitate coordination and collaboration. In a study by Walsh and Maloney (2007), the use of e-mail was found to be associated with fewer coordination problems in collaborations. Furthermore, communication research on the use of ICTs for collaboration has shown encouraging results. Sooryamoorthy and Shrum (2007, p. 733) found that "Internet use, as measured by time spent on e-mail, is positively associated with collaboration." Studies like this one lead us to believe that the use of ICTs can promote organizational integration. Additionally, a unique practice of ICTs for information sharing is the *pass-along effect*, which is similar to the practice of traditional word-of-mouth communication. Norman and Russell (2006) argue that the use of e-mails generated a pass-along effect in the spread of information because spreading information via e-mail is easy and low cost. Technology amplifies the opportunity to communicate to a great extent. As an example, we call it "viral" when large numbers of people e-mail interesting information to each other or pass along a YouTube videos to friends. Information and communication technology users prefer to send positive messages (Tierney, 2010). Because of the ease of communication and the lack of cost to send someone an electronic message, people who have access to ICTs simply send items—"whether websites that offer good bargains, or foods that are rich in antioxidants"—to others because they think it might be useful (Berger & Milkman, 2010, p. 6).

Public Goods

The practice of information sharing/being informed can produce shared knowledge in the form of public

goods, which are "goods, such as parks, roads, libraries, neighborhood brush removal for fire prevention, beach cleanups, or other organized collective goals" (Fulk, Flanagan, Kalman, Monge, & Ryan, 1996). One of the values of positive communication is when it is directed toward a public good and information is meaningfully incorporated into the body of knowledge. Like an inoculation against a deadly disease, the knowledge can be available without regard to power and position in a hierarchy. In this way, positive communication is associated with a democratic process. "Traditional conceptions of deliberation emphasize quality, fairness, analysis, and a focus on the public good" (Gastil, Black, Deess, & Leichter, 2008, p. 139). Deliberation is a communication process that emphasizes weighing views and understanding each other's perspectives. People deliberate when they "carefully examine a problem and range of solutions through an open, inclusive discussion that respects diverse points of view" (Gastil, Black, Deess, & Leichter, 2008, p. 141).

When the practice of creating public goods is enabled by ICTs, we call the information repository *knowledge management* (KM). Knowledge management can be understood as "how distributed group members and their organizational colleagues locate, store and retrieve data, information and knowledge that they need for their individual and collective work" (Hollingshead, Fulk, & Monge, 2002, p. 335). When infused with technologies, organizations use KM systems to electronically create, transfer and apply knowledge to achieve their goals (Alavi & Leidner, 2001). The use of KM systems can lead to organizational viability (Palazzolo, Serb, She, Su, & Contractor, 2006) because knowledge is "information with assigned meaning that is stored and can be used in daily interactions to solve dilemmas or problems . . . [and] enables the individual to act" (Child & Shumate, 2007, p. 31).

Since the introduction of e-mails in the workplace in the 1990s (Rogers, 2003), the practice of e-mail copies is prevalent. Skovholt and Jan (2006) found that the practice of e-mail copies in a distributed work group serves to promote knowledge sharing, build a common information pool, and form alliance networks. Furthermore, in a study of 500 large companies, Lai (2001) found that organizations that implement an intranet system for employees to collaborate tend to have higher organizational and employee performance in general. Knowledge management systems have been studied as organizational platforms that would facilitate the

development of a "group mind" to promote performance of organizational work teams (Yuan, Fulk, & Monge, 2007).

In order for successful implementation of KM systems, there needs to be a knowledge-oriented culture, stable organizational infrastructure, a high level of motivation, and support from senior management (Davenport, De Long, & Beers, 1999). In a study by Gold and colleagues (2010), they argue that "a knowledge infrastructure consisting of technology, structure, and culture along with a knowledge process architecture of acquisition, conversion, application, and protection are essential organizational capabilities or 'preconditions' for effective knowledge management" (p. 185). Last, in a study of organizational merger, Empson (2001) argues that an acquiring company can obtain useful information about the acquired company's policy and expertise through possessing their computerized KM databases, which can lead to more effective organizational integration despite an awkward transition. All these studies demonstrate how KM systems and the use of intranet systems promote organizational integration.

ENGAGEMENT

Much of the work on positive communication recognizes that the behavior that builds a reputation is the amount of sustained involvement of those in a network. Engagement that enables social capital can be seen in different settings, including structures held together by a groups' ability to communicate together effectively, and relationship building among nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in a civil society effort. Rich communication channels allow groups to become central to information flow. Traditionally, engagement is enhanced when communication occurs in the presence of another, such that the feel of the person behind the discourse is visible, sensory, and directly experienced by those involved in the exchange. Such a position is structural (Giddens, 1984) in that the communication itself signifies the centrality of and regard for individuals.

New social media platforms featuring increased interactivity and social presence seem to be just as effective as FTF interactions in generating social capital. Valenzuela, Park, and Kee (2009) found that higher-intensity Facebook users are also more likely to participate actively in civic engagement. High-intensity Facebook users also report a higher level of social trust and a greater degree of life satisfaction in general. In a subsequent analysis, Park,

Kee, and Valenzuela (2009) found that Facebook groups represent a social space in which online interactions often translate into offline activities. These studies suggest that social media can promote social capital that positively contributes to organizational integration. They argue in both studies that social capital exists in the use of social network sites such as Facebook.

When we extend the scope of engagement to a larger community, such as a city and metropolitan area, ICTs continue to show relevance. In a study of official websites of the core cities in the 50 largest U.S. metropolitan areas by population, Jeffres and Lin (2006) argue, "The Internet offers cities new opportunities to communicate with their constituents at a time when metropolitan areas struggle with their community identity and cohesion . . . [T]he vast majorities of all sample sites contained high frequencies of information links to reflect all major communication functions" (p. 975). We have identified four orientations and practices that constitute integrative communication. By engaging in dialogue with other members, sharing information, building public goods, and becoming engaged, individuals involve themselves substantively and symbolically in the sense-making activities of the organization and move closer together in the sense of a more common understanding and a greater sense of belonging to the organizational community.

Constructive Interaction

Integrative communication is positive, but it does not necessarily lead to improved ways of making sense of the world of the organization. We use the term *constructive interaction* to designate interpersonal and intergroup activities that involve participants "making things better." Although the focus of constructive interaction can be broadly conceived, at the heart of constructive interaction is an orientation that participants show as they speak or write, listen to or read others' contributions, and respond to them. This constructive orientation can be discerned when participants make their contributions solution focused, future oriented, and collaborative.

Solution Focus

This orientation is an insistence on talking about things being better, along with a persistent refusal to remain mired in talk about problems. Whereas communication that leads to disillusionment is negative, its positive counterpart is illusionment. It means building and holding on to the idea that those things that are not working well can be

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on talking about persistent refusal to problems. Whereas illusionment is neg- is illusionment. It n to the idea that king well can be

improved, things that impede progress can be overcome, current actions might work, and we have the resources we need. Zander and Zander (2000) call it "creating a framework of possibility" (p. 160). The solution focused nature of positive communication is well illustrated by a pilot project that says, "If we can do this here, you can do it anywhere." Such optimism also means keeping naysayers at bay. Whereas an orientation to problem solving includes both attention to the nature of the problem and attention to the characteristics of potential solutions, an orientation to the positive finds people imagining things being better, discounting evidence that things are staying the same or getting worse, recommending actions that can be tried, and encouraging quick trials and rapid abandonment of things that aren't working. It might be that the most basic idea of positive communication is that it keeps the flicker of hope alive for things to get better. Or, as Sematech CEO Bob Noyce said to encourage performance at the consortium he led, "Go out and do something wonderful!" instead of "That will never work!" (Browning & Shetler, 2000).

Future Orientation

One way that positive communication and ICTs can assist in improving organizational intelligence is to become bound up with a vision of the future. Organizations think hopefully about how technology will help them move into a future they want. People have a futuristic, sentimental attachment to technology. For people, communication technology is the great hope—especially when they do it because they imagine a brighter future. Communication technology is double-powered, in that it can both inspire hope and expand opportunities to accomplish desired futures.

In the language of the cooperation literature, participants are conscious of a "shadow of the future," which means that their day-to-day activities are conducted with an awareness that their long-term relationship makes a difference (Cohen, Riolo, & Axelrod, 2001; Kee & Browning, 2010). Logically, interacting constructively relies upon consciousness of a future together.

Collaborative Interaction

Part of being constructive is shown in the cogency and timeliness of participants' responses to what others say and do. Following Grice's (1975) model, participants in conversation provide what is needed at every given point according to the purpose and direction of the talk exchange. To respond cooperatively, they

make contributions that are relevant, informative, truthful, and stylistically appropriate. So strong is the pressure to be cooperative that when participants fail to provide the appropriate contributions, it is presumed they are nevertheless attempting to be cooperative, but have chosen to say something by implication rather than directly. To enact conversation, then, it is necessary for people to apprehend the purpose of the conversation, to be able to project where it is going, and make contributions that advance the conversation. The ability to say what is needed at the point when it is needed has been termed "nexting" by Stewart (2009). Nexting means "doing something helpful next, responding fruitfully to what's just happened, taking an additional step in the communication process" (Stewart, 2009, p. 30). In conversation, it "takes two to tango," and every next move affords the opportunity for things to go in a better or worse direction or for things to stay the same. Every time we respond to what another person is doing, we are putting on display an orientation to abandon it or to build on it. They can't build on it without our cooperation.

However, any human action can be done well or poorly, so part of being constructive is to strive to do what would be appropriate, help to rectify errors, and continuously help fellow interactants make sense of what is going on. Conversation participants align their own conduct with others' expectations for it (Morris & Hopper, 1987) and, should their contributions be questioned, they utilize a large variety of aligning actions (Stokes & Hewitt, 1976) to normalize and make sense of their actions. The capacity to notice and to rectify errors is central to the ability to react to problems and keep organizational activities on track.

Orientations and Practices of Constructive Interaction

Conversation

We have already noted that every next contribution to any conversation can be or fail to be constructive. Conversation analysts have identified numerous interaction sequences, organized such that when a first conversational action is provided, a paired second action becomes relevant and usually follows immediately (Schegloff & Sacks, 1973). For example, when a participant asks another a question, the answer becomes relevant; when a participant makes a proposal, an acceptance or rejection of the proposal becomes relevant; and when a participant makes a request, either compliance with or refusal of the request is immediately relevant. Analysts have

also noted that the preferred next action usually follows without delay and that departures from what would be preferred include elements that mark them as unusual. In other words, there is structural evidence that to answer a question, accept a proposal, or comply with a request—each of which displays a constructive orientation to the interaction—is the preferred type of conversational contribution (Pomerantz, 1984). This orientation is also shown in how participants design their contributions specifically for those for whom they are intended (Nofsinger, 1991).

Therapeutic Interaction

Popular images of constructive interaction have usually been derived from other types of interaction than conversation, most especially therapy talk. For instance, client-centered therapy (Rogers, 1951) became the basis for instruction in how to listen actively. Strategic psychotherapy (Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson, 1967; Watzlawick, Weakland, & Fisch, 1974) is the origin of the contemporary idea of “thinking outside of the box.” More recent forms of therapy are fertile ground for contemporary views of constructive interaction. Such approaches, which typically draw on a social constructionist standpoint (McNamee & Gergen, 1992), include collaborative therapy (Anderson & Goolishian, 1992), possibility therapy (Friedman, 1993), narrative therapy (Aronsson & Cederborg, 1994), constructive therapy (Hoyt, 1994) and solution-focused therapy (de Shazer & Berg, 1992; O’Connell, 1998). These approaches feature equitable and flexible dialogue between therapist and clients, in which they collaborate to understand what is going on and identify new possibilities.

Discourse analysis of these kinds of therapy has investigated how therapists and clients collaborate to arrive at understandings of their problems (Buttny, 2004), break through impasses (Couture & Strong, 2004), and define new possibilities for solutions (Couture, 2007). In solution-focused brief therapy (de Shazer & Berg, 1992; O’Connell, 1998) for example, the aim is to get couples to consider how things would be different if they weren’t having the problem that brought them into therapy. Therapists inquire about “What would you be doing? What would you be saying to each other? How would other people notice? How would it affect them?” Such questions are about what people want and the possibilities they can discover (Zander & Zander, 2000). Couples are invited to imagine a world that is not so full of problems. When this

world is revealed, the therapist and couple co-construct actions that can be taken to move in the desired direction. Since people in therapy often try to revert to a discussion of problems and blaming (Buttny, 2004), therapists strive to be “relentlessly positive” (de Shazer, 1985). To do so, they get clients to talk about the exceptions to their problems; they have clients estimate on a scale how much better they feel now than before and then ask clients to explain what they did to feel better. “How is the world better because of something you did?” This is a very concrete example of focusing on capabilities and building on strengths (Frederickson, 2003).

Future Search Conferences

Constructive interaction can also occur in much larger scale consultation. Building on years of work at the Tavistock Institute, Weisbord (1992) and his colleagues developed interaction formats that brought together several dozen, and often hundreds, of participants into future-oriented dialogue about their common interests and futures. In future search conferences, consultants guide participants from different parts of a large organization or different organizations in a community, over a period of two or more days, in an effort to discover and build on common ground. For example, a 2010 future search conference on youth violence in Santa Maria, California, brought together approximately 90–100 participants, including business owners, government officials, law enforcement personnel, probation officers, school officials, nonprofits, faith-based organizations, selected parents, and youth. Weisbord and his coauthors (1992) unveiled numerous designs for future search conferences they had facilitated, and they sought to account for their unusual success in uncovering common ground that enabled participants to work cooperatively toward solutions. The common sequence of topics discussed in future search conferences included, (1) describing the histories that led up to the present, (2) achieving consensus about the key aspects of the present situation, (3) shared ideas about mutually desired futures, and (4) commitments about actions to be taken. Despite the large numbers of participants, the complexity of the situations they faced, and the disparity in participants’ perspectives, future search conferences usually resulted in more cooperative relationships and definitive action plans.

Narrative Vision

One positive communication practice, as it applies to leadership, is foreseeing a vision that gives

direction to a company by the goal and projection of the future it provides. It is common for a leader to know more of a real and dire story than her or his subordinates know. This may be true for both hierarchical subordination and for information subordination. Both operate from the privileged premise: "You don't have the information that I have. You don't carry the burden I carry." One of the meanings of hierarchy is that the person at the top has greater access to scarcity, whether money or information. Being in the know justifies action. In organization theory, this is called *uncertainty absorption*. As a result, leaders are obligated to have a view of a positive future—a vision that is more controlled by her or him. Paradoxically, the compelling vision makes explicit, rational, data-driven arguments promoting a belief in the organization that is beyond what is rationally supported. The leader takes on the risk of being wrong, but her belief sees the organization over the uncertain chasm. This is akin to the promise a coach might see and build upon in a young athlete of modest accomplishments. Of course, seeing a direction and its invigorating possibilities that no one else sees is not automatically productive. The positive version of this kind of vision is Robert Noyce, inventor of the microchip, who led Intel to promote the chip as an innovative solution and later led the Sematech consortium at a time when the American chip manufacturing industry was in shambles. The negative example is Kenneth Lay, the CEO of Enron, who looked and sounded like a person with vision even while the company around him was disintegrating. The behavior of the two men looked the same, in that they promoted a future that was beyond contemporary belief, yet the results were different.

Conclusion

In summary, this chapter has focused on two streams of thought that enhance positive communication. First, we elaborated on the integrative power of communication. The more information is shared, the greater the use of overlapping groups for decision making, the less marginalized and fragmented the thinking—and thus the members—of an organization are likely to be. Second, we conceptualized constructive interaction, which accounts for both the emotions that arise as a part of communication and the way emotions and facts lead to solutions that seem to fit future circumstances. Constructive interaction takes into account the ability to exchange information and give it additional meaning that adds human value to it. With these ideas, we reaffirm

communication as a source model—what the speaker says is paramount, but it also includes the responsiveness of the listener, so that the pair of utterances is the basic unit for understanding interpersonal communication in organizations.

One advantage of the positive communication position is that communication operates at specific and theoretical spheres simultaneously (Hartelius & Browning, 2008). It is possible to talk about rhetorical and communication theory from the time of Plato and address the likelihood of communication being used for honorable or pitiful purposes and refer to a specific set of practices from which to make such an ethical assessment.

Example of Positive Communication

Let us end this essay on positive organizational communication with the same hope and sense of tradition with which we began, by offering an example drawn from one of the most important sites for positive communication performance—the medical community (Browning & Morris, in press). The story offered here, which we have excerpted from the *New Yorker*, is an analysis offered by Gawande (2009), for which he won the 2010 National Magazine Award category for Public Interest. In his *New Yorker* piece, he analyzes the delivery of medical care in the city of McAllen, Texas, which is in the Rio Grande Valley. In that area, the medical costs are nearly double the national average, yet medical care remains no better and in fact even poorer than most of the United States. Gawande's conclusion—affirmed by interviews in the Valley—is that, in the Valley, there is a culture of overtesting and of piling up costs by treating medicine as a profit center. Given the incentives for such a culture, Gawande wonders why more medical communities do not follow the same practice.

To counter the McAllen example, Gawande showcases two settings where medical care is driven by a different value, one enhanced by positive communication practices. First is the Mayo Clinic, which operates at half the costs of McAllen per patient, with drastically better results. They do so by emphasizing communication that seeks inputs from everyone in the medical system when making decisions about patients. As one doctor from Mayo says, "When doctors put their heads together in a room, when they share expertise, you get more thinking and less testing" (Gawande, 2009, from webpage). Gawande's second example of positive communication is the hospital system in Grand Junction, Colorado, where doctors decided on a program that

- paid them a similar fee whether from "Medicaid, Medicaid, or private-insurance patients," which had the effect of reducing the incentive to select patients based on their ability to pay. Their practice of positive communication was to meet regularly "on small peer-review committees to go over their patient charts together. They focused on rooting out problems like poor prevention practices, unnecessary back operations, and unusual hospital-complication rates. Problems went down. Quality went up." These instances exemplify the precepts of positive communication as developed in this chapter in that these medical professionals (a) follow a design that values varied communication input, (b) seek information from expertise other than their own, and (c) consciously involve themselves in a give-and-take conversation that surfaces solutions that they would not have thought of operating as single individuals. It is possible to use communication for useful purposes, to be productive and satisfied with the outcomes of speaking. It is also possible to mispeak and correct the errors it produces, and finally to gain strength from that same communicative repair work on those errors. Of all the features of communication, its capacity to help in adapting to new circumstances by reframing what is understood, and its ability to generate a force for change makes us hopeful about communications' contribution to the positive study of organizations.
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