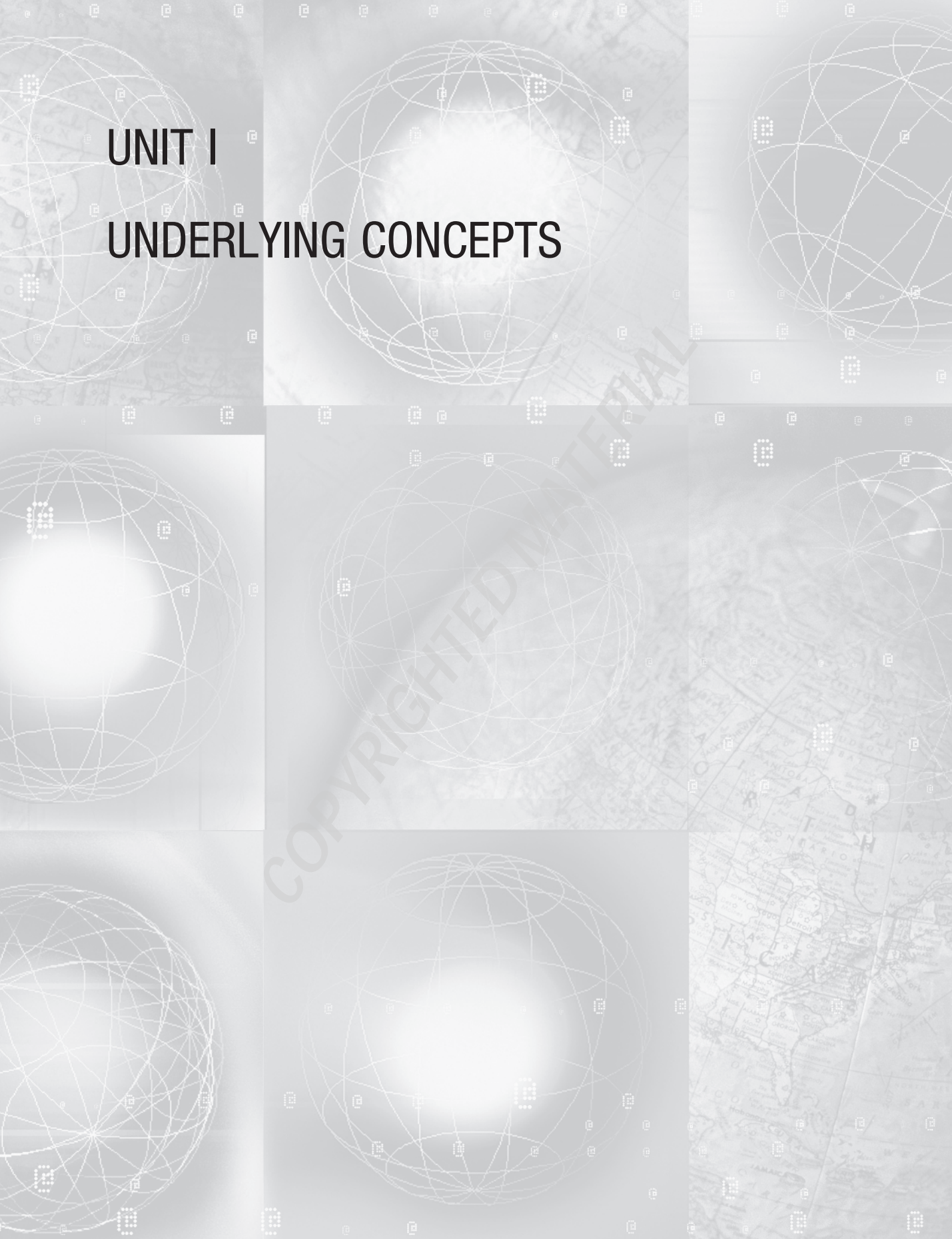


UNIT I

UNDERLYING CONCEPTS



CHAPTER 1

STRATEGIC ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION

Don't ask me. I just work here.

Anonymous

We must hold a man [sic] amenable to reason for the choice of his daily craft or profession. It is not an excuse any longer for his deed that they are the custom of his trade. What business has he with an evil trade?

Ralph Waldo Emerson

[H]istory matters. . . . What comes first (even if it was in some sense “accidental”) conditions what comes later. Individuals [policy makers] may “choose these institutions, but they do not choose them under circumstances of their own making, and their choices in turn influence the rules within which their successors choose.

Carolyn Tuohy

CENTRAL THEMES

- Organizational communication is strategic in two senses. Organizations emerge from strategic choices about how they will be designed and operated. These choices create the situations that employees encounter at work. Employees must then make their own strategic choices about how to manage those situations.
- Societies and organizations face a fundamental paradox. They must control and coordinate the activities of their members. But doing so frustrates their members' needs for autonomy, creativity, and sociability.

Strategic Organizational Communication: In a Global Economy, Seventh Edition.

Charles Conrad and Marshall Scott Poole.

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- Organizations are designed through conscious choices among a number of strategies of organizing. Employees make their own choices about how to communicate within the guidelines and constraints created by those strategies of organizing. By doing so, they reproduce the strategies, the guidelines, and the constraints.

KEY TERMS

blended relationships	stability/predictability	unintended consequences
reification	needs	coercive influence
autonomy needs	specialization	social institution
creativity needs	deconstruct	normative influence
sociability needs	legitimize	mimetic influence

At one time or another, almost everyone has responded to the question “How did this (disaster) happen?” with a statement like “Don’t ask me. I just work here.” In some cases the excuse is legitimate. The person giving the answer is not allowed by his or her organization to make even simple decisions or take any initiative. “I just work here” means that the person knows the answer or is aware of a solution to the problem but has too little power to make the necessary changes. In other cases, someone else failed to inform the person of the policy, problem, or procedure that is in question. “I just work here” means that the speaker simply does not have the information needed to answer the question. But sometimes the person did act in ways that caused the problem, and the response is merely an excuse. Although viable excuses are often available in organizations, in the final analysis it is an employee’s own choices that create the situations she or he faces.¹

This book is about the choices and choice-making behaviors of members of formal organizations. It concentrates on communication because it is through communication that employees obtain information, make sense of the situations they encounter, and decide how to act. And, it is by communicating that employees translate their choices into action. Organizations must maintain at least an adequate level of communication effectiveness to survive and prosper. People who have developed an understanding about how communication functions in an organization, who have developed a wide repertory of written and oral communication skills, and who have learned when and how to use those skills seem to have more successful careers and contribute more fully to their organizations than people who have not done so.

As a result, the number of college courses and professional training programs concerned with organizational communication has mushroomed. Of course, employees cannot function effectively unless they possess the technical skills that their positions require. But more and more it appears that being able to recognize, diagnose, and solve communication-related problems is vital to the success of people in even the most technical occupations. Accountants must be able to gain complete, accurate, and sometimes sensitive information from their clients. Supervisors of production lines must be able to obtain adequate and timely information on which to base their decisions. Managers of all divisions must be able to give their subordinates clear instructions, make sure those instructions are understood, create conditions in which their commands will be carried out, and obtain reliable feedback about the completion of the tasks that they have assigned.²

Understanding organizational communication has advantages above and beyond career advancement. At many times during their careers, people feel powerless because they simply do not understand the events taking place around them and/or do not know how to deal with those events. In the worst cases they are victimized by those events and do not understand how they became victims. As the title of a popular book says, bad things do happen to good people (and vice versa), both in our lives as a whole and in our organizations. People need to be able to take a critical perspective on organizational events, that is, they need to be able to examine the situations they find themselves in and understand the many pressures and constraints that make up those situations. People can learn from their experiences only if they understand the situations they face and the communicative strategies that they could have used to manage them more effectively. In short, understanding organizational communicative processes is itself empowering – it allows people to determine which events are their responsibility and which events are outside of their control and to discover new strategies that they could have used successfully.

The primary goal of the book is to give readers a sense of how organizational communication is used strategically, that is, how employees can analyze the organizational situations they face and choose appropriate communication strategies. It assumes that all employees are goal oriented and that if they understand how communication functions in their organizations they will be better able to achieve their objectives and those of their organizations. It explains when it is appropriate to use a variety of communication strategies, including the denial of responsibility and the claim of ignorance (“Don’t ask me. I just work here”), and, as important, when not to use them. In this chapter, we will introduce the core concept that underlies the rest of the book. We will observe that organizational communication is *strategic* and explain the two dimensions of that concept. As the book progresses, this concept will become clearer and clearer.

ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION AS STRATEGIC DISCOURSE

One way to understand a complicated phenomenon is to begin with definitions of key terms. The simplest definition of organizational communication is that it is communication that occurs within organizations, but that definition is not very informative. Communication is generally defined as a process through which people, acting together, create, sustain, and manage meanings through the use of verbal and nonverbal signs and symbols within a particular context. Of course, the key terms in this definition are people, acting together, meaning, and context. In even a simple conversation, individuals bring a number of things with them. They each have histories of past conversations with one another or with people they perceive as similar to the other person. For example, conversations with one’s boss are in some ways influenced by one’s past conversations with bosses and other authority figures. They also bring expectations about future conversations with one another, goals for the conversation and for their relationship, assumptions about how people are supposed to communicate with one another, different kinds and levels of communicative skills, and so on.

During every conversation people create and exchange a complex set of messages with one another and in doing so create meanings for each message and for the interaction. Some of the meanings that are created during interactions are consistent with the communicators’ intentions; others are not. People create systems of meaning together, and

those meaning systems influence their impressions of one another, their interpretations of their relationship, and their selection of communication strategies in future interactions. As their conversations continue, their goals may change as they discover that the other person is more (or less) sympathetic to their position than they expected the person to be. Similarly, their understanding of the best ways to communicate with the people around them also emerges over time through successful (and unsuccessful) interactions.

For example, one of our graduate students studied a committee that was charged with designing guidelines for the sex education program of a city school district. To represent both sides of the issue, the committee was composed of some members who were “liberal” in the sense that they supported a fairly extensive sex education program and others who were “conservative” and were opposed to most types of current sex education programs. Both the liberal and conservative subgroups came to the first meeting of the committee with little direct knowledge of one another. But each thought they knew what the others would be like based on their interpretations of the public debate in the United States over teenage sexuality and abortion. Conservatives feared that the liberals would want a program that encouraged sexual promiscuity among teenagers and would advocate abortion as a primary method of birth control; liberals were convinced that the conservatives would want a program that gave students little information and a great deal of fear and guilt.

During an early meeting, the conservative group gave a number of long speeches arguing that the district’s sex education program should persuade students to abstain from sexual activity. To both the liberal and conservative groups’ surprise, everyone in the room agreed. Although it took a while for the two groups to recover from the shock of finding that they agreed on something important, the rest of the committee’s deliberations were different than they otherwise would have been. They continued to be suspicious of one another, but at least they listened to one another. In doing so, they discovered many other areas of disagreement and some additional areas of agreement. By communicating with one another over a six-month period, the committee members created, sustained, and modified a system of meaning that was uniquely their own. Their discussions were always influenced by the context in which they took place, both the local situation faced by the school board and the national debate over sexual issues. But the messages they exchanged and the meanings that they attributed to those messages could only be understood within the communicative process that they created (Legg, 1992). In short, people with varying degrees of communicative skills acted together through the use of verbal and nonverbal cues to create, sustain, and modify systems of meaning. That is, they communicated.

Our definition of *organizational* communication differs from this general definition of communication primarily in terms of its complexity. Organizational relationships are both like and unlike “normal” interpersonal relationships. We communicate with people at work because our assigned tasks require us to do so. Sometimes we like them and would communicate with them even if our tasks did not require us to do so; sometimes we talk with them only because we have to. Our relationships at work have *both* an interpersonal and an organizational dimension. As later chapters will explain, we constantly have to negotiate an appropriate mix of these two dimensions. We may have a strong personal relationship with our supervisor, but have to maintain the kind of relational distance, detachment, and subservience that are appropriate to our organizational relationship. We may like one of our subordinates very much, but his or her inability to do the job well creates constant stresses in our interpersonal relationship. Work relationships are like “regular” interpersonal relationships, but they also are different.

Case Study 1.1

How to Handle the Scarlet Email?

In some ways, the interpersonal relationships that we form at work are like the other interpersonal relationships that we form throughout our lives. But in other ways they are different.¹ Natural relationships seem to be voluntary – we encounter people, discover that we are attracted to one another, and begin to develop a relationship. We learn about them, develop expectations about how they will act, and begin to trust them when those expectations are fulfilled. If they violate our expectations, we interpret their behavior as a negative comment on them or as a negative comment on our relationship. If the relationship continues, we develop psychological contracts about how we will act and communicate toward one another, and we try to ensure that those contracts are understood by both parties. The nature of our relationships is influenced by our relational histories and our anticipated future, and by our expectation that our relationships should be mutually fulfilling. We continue them because they fulfill what leadership expert Fredric Jablin called “psychological-individual” functions.

Being members of the same organization complicates the relationships in many ways. Since we spend so much of our time at work, we are likely to form close relationships with some of our coworkers. But, many organizational relationships are imposed on us, at least initially. We accept them because we have to do so in order to do our jobs well. Sometimes these involuntary relationships are with people we like, and would have voluntarily formed relationships with on our own. Others are with people we would avoid like the plague if we were able to do so (Hess, 2000). In addition, differences in power and status complicate our work relationships – buying lunch for someone in the next cubicle does not mean the same thing as buying lunch for the vice president of sales or one of a person’s subordinates. We communicate differently with people of different power and status, and we expect to be treated differently by them. Third, organizational role relationships complicate work relationships. Friends usually provide comfort and support to one another. But supervisors are required to evaluate

their subordinates’ work (and in some organizations, subordinates also evaluate their supervisors), and doing so may involve uncomfortable assessments of one another’s competence, performance, and personality. Working relationships are also complicated by a “fishbowl” effect; they are public in a way that natural relationships are not.

The work situation also complicates normal aspects of relationships. All friends have to balance autonomy and connectedness – too much autonomy and the friends feel emotionally distant from one another, or too little and one or more of them feels “smothered.” If friends work together, their jobs may require them to spend *too much* time together or to work *too closely*. Friends in voluntary relationships also can be relatively open and honest with one another because of their mutual trust. But, organizational roles often require people to keep information secret, even from their closest friends. So, for a number of reasons, the **blended relationships** that people form at work are more complicated than natural relationships. As they develop, some work relationships become close friendships because the parties are attracted to one another, as well as because they help one another solve work-related problems. Some coworkers become trusted confidantes, and communication with them becomes more personal and less cautious. Eventually some coworkers become an important part of one another’s personal life.

These complications are easiest to see in romantic relationships at work. Most experts on office etiquette still advise people to keep romance out of their careers. Nevertheless, about 40 percent of workers admit to dating a colleague, a figure that has remained relatively stable for the past few years, and attitudes about doing so have softened enough that today two thirds of employees involved in relationships with coworkers no longer feel a need to hide them. Curiously, the percentage has increased to more than 50 percent during the Great Recession. The risks are higher, since losing one’s job due to a romance gone bad is a bigger problem with high levels of unemploy-

ment. But, alternative sources of connection are expensive, and when budgets are tight people forgo the expenses of clubbing – trendy clothes, transportation, and bar tabs. A veritable cottage industry of publications has popped up providing “how to” advice for dating coworkers – items in *Glamour* and *Cosmo*, of course, and on websites of AskMen.com, *Forbes*, and *Inc.*, as well as popular books with salacious titles such as *Office Romance: Love, Power and Sex in the Workplace* or *Officemate: Your Employee Handbook for Romance on the Job*.² With people working 50–60-hour weeks, they simply do not have the time or opportunity to look elsewhere for romantic partners. Perhaps more importantly, people can gather accurate information about a potential mate by working with him or her – much more than they can learn at a singles’ bar, from a classified ad, or through an online dating service (all of which have their own complications).

Most office romances involve people at different levels of the organizational hierarchy (about 70 percent). The riskiest pairings involve married, male supervisors and single, female subordinates. Most workplace romances seem to be based on “true love” rather than on job- or advancement-related motives (about 80 percent). In general, research indicates that romances do not harm organizational performance, unless they generate such a high level of gossip that it interferes with task performance. But, obviously, perceptions of favoritism are more likely for employees involved in a romantic relationship with their supervisors. Gossip and discomfort among coworkers are extremely likely. If the parties terminate their relationship, it is awkward to see one’s ex every day (Dillard and Miller, 1993; Dillard, Hale, and Segrin, 1993; deWine, Pearson, and Yost, 1993).

A few organizations have formal, written policies that forbid dating between supervisors and their subordinates, and more than 70 percent of employees say that people should never date their bosses or people who report to them, although about 15 percent do so anyway. However, 70 percent of organizations have no official policies, so the rules can be very ambiguous. The most common, unwritten rule seems to be “Date anyone you want, but if it starts to cause

trouble for your supervisor or work group, you’ll be in big trouble.”³ There are a number of commonsense steps that people can take to manage the complications created by office romances (this advice assumes that both parties are single). First, all employees should learn their supervisor’s and organization’s view of workplace relationships. This information may be available through informal channels, but once a relationship becomes serious, a frank conversation with one’s supervisors is warranted (it’s almost always best for partners to coordinate the timing of these conversations). Second, decide when and how to go public. Advisors differ on this issue. Some say that it’s best to come clean about the relationship immediately after the talk with your supervisor. Others say that keeping it private is the best strategy. Your goal should be to minimize hearsay and innuendo, and *especially* to make sure your relationship does not interfere with your work. In some situations, those goals can best be achieved by keeping quiet; in others, the honest approach is less disruptive. If the relationship does become a problem for the organization, the job of the lower-ranked partner (or least difficult-to-replace partner) is most at risk. Third, be discreet. Always maintain a professional relationship at work. Richard Phillips, a career counselor in Palo Alto, California, reminds employees that “what you consider to be lovey dovey [interaction] between the two of you may make your coworkers [want to] retch. You’re forcing them into a situation they don’t want to be in” (quoted in Eng, March 14, 1999). Don’t hold hands in the hallway, play footsie at meetings, or anything else that is perfectly appropriate in romantic relationships but completely inappropriate in professional relationships. And make sure your partner knows that your “aloof” behavior at work is not an indication that you’re cold and uncaring toward him or her. Finally, have an exit plan. Discuss what the two of you will do if the relationship ends. Of course, these conversations are about as romantic as negotiating a prenuptial agreement, but they are just as important. Then do it.⁴

Washington Post columnist Marc Fisher once wrote a column that vividly described how awkward office romances can be to coworkers. One of his coworkers accidentally sent him an

email that was meant for her romantic partner, probably by clicking the wrong line of her address book directory. The message started out in a friendly tone, but very quickly became erotic. To make things worse, Marc knew the woman and her husband (who was *not* the recipient of the message); in fact he had been invited to their home for dinner that night. What should he do? Respond in a businesslike tone: “Your message of 9:46 on Sunday morning was misdirected to me. Have a good day”? Notify the husband of what was going on? Keep quiet? Find some excuse for canceling the dinner date? He asked his friends for advice (so much for the secrecy of email). Most of the women told him to stay out of it; most of the men wanted him to find out all the sordid details and then tell them all about it (so much for the myth that only women are interested in gossip). He decided to do nothing.

Then, another message arrived, one that was even more intimate than the first. He went to dinner, sat between husband and wife, and felt very nervous throughout the evening. He squirmed during a private after-dinner conversation when the husband told everyone about his dreams for the couple’s future years together. Fisher went home rattled and vowed to not have anything more to do with either of them. Then he went to a stationery store and bought note cards and envelopes – a more appropriate medium for private messages (Fisher, June 1, 1999).

Applying What You’ve Learned

1. In what ways did the characters in Fisher’s account violate the advice typically given to romantic partners in organizations? In what ways did they follow it?
2. Would a formal organizational policy about office romances have prevented this problem? What effects did the romance seem to have on the functioning of the organization?

Questions to Think About and Discuss

1. What would you have done had you been in Marc Fisher’s place? What should you have done had you been in his place?
2. What does your answer to question 1 reveal about your personal values? And about your view of the extent to which you have different values for working relationships at work than for nonwork relationships?

Notes

- 1 See Bridge and Baxter (1992); Winstead, Derlega, Montgomery, and Pilkington (1995); and Sias and Cahill (1998). Jablin (2001) makes the distinction between these two functions.
- 2 The recession data are from Losee and Olen (2010); also see Mainiero (1989).
- 3 Cautionary tales are provided by Weinstein (2008) and Powers (1999).
- 4 See note 1.

Just as we create relationships through conversation, we also create “organizations.” Thirty years ago, scholars thought of organizations as “things” or “containers” within which people sent chunks of information to one another through stable “channels” or “conduits” in order to meet shared goals. There is a grain of truth in this view. In fact, it is the view of communication that characterizes the traditional strategy of organizing that we will examine in Chapter 3. But, the container or conduit perspective has three weaknesses. First, it oversimplifies communication by reducing it to simple information exchange. Second, it depicts organizations as much stabler than they really are. Third, it depicts employees as relatively inactive automatons who routinely react to the messages they receive. By the late 1970s organizational theorists started to view organizations as dynamic, ever-changing groups of people who were actively trying to make sense out of the events that took place around them, while pursuing their own individual goals as well as goals they shared with

their coworkers. At the same time organizational communication theorists started viewing communication as more than the transfer of information, but as a complex, multidimensional process through which organizing took place (Putnam, Phillips, and Chapman, 1996; Weick, 1979).

During the late 1990s, an influential group of organizational communication scholars went even farther, arguing that organizing and conversing are the same thing. Through communicating, we create shared views of organizational life. A group of people does not become a “work group,” much less a “team,” until members start talking about themselves in those terms. Once they do that, they start thinking of themselves as a “group” or “department” or “organization.” Once that happens, the collective takes on something of a life of its own. We talk about “what this organization does” or declare that the “auditing committee says” or “the legal department thinks” as if *organizations* can act, *committees* can speak, or *departments* can think, when it is the people who make up those groups who do all of those things. Communication theorists use the term **reification** to describe this process through which people come to think of something that *they* have created as having its own identity, existence, and power. In organizational settings, reification is one of the most important dimensions of communication. For example, it is much more difficult to question the decisions of “the auditing committee” than it is to disagree with “John, Julie, Fred, and those folks from Arthur Andersen who they hired to go over the books with them.” It also is much more likely that an employee will be seen as credible when she or he speaks for “the organization” than when he or she speaks for himself or herself alone. In fact, the miracle of organizational communication processes is that they allow large numbers of people from very different backgrounds, ways of thinking, needs, and goals to coordinate their actions and create “organizations” that at least *seem* to be stable containers within which information flows from person to person (Cooren and Taylor 1997; Taylor and van Every, 2000).

THE FUNDAMENTAL PARADOX

The concept of strategy enters into our perspective on organizational communication at two levels. One level is that of the organization. Most people have learned to think of organizations as places where large numbers of members efficiently cooperate with one another to achieve some shared objectives. According to this view, disagreements, conflicts, inefficiencies, and communication breakdowns are avoidable evils – failures that could have been avoided had the organization and its members only worked the way they are supposed to work. They should happen very rarely, and when they do, members of the organization should dispassionately analyze their causes and take corrective actions.

In this book we will take a very different perspective. We will suggest that the notion that organizations normally run like “well-oiled machines” not only is unrealistic but also can be damaging to organizations and to their members. It is more realistic, and in the long run more productive, to view organizations as sites in which multiple tensions exist. They are not aberrations, but are inevitable aspects of the way organizations function and the way people function within organizations. They must constantly be managed if the organization is to succeed in meeting its members’ goals. Some organizations experience more internal tension than others; and some are more often in conflict with members of

other organizations and the surrounding society. But all organizations face at least one *fundamental tension*: a tension between individual members' needs and the needs of their organizations. People have needs for **autonomy** (the feeling that they are in control of their actions and destinies), **creativity** (feelings of pride that comes from making something that did not previously exist or in doing something better than or in a different way than anyone else), and **sociability** (the feeling that they have meaningful interpersonal relationships with other people). They also need an adequate degree of structure, **stability**, and **predictability** in their lives. They need to know who they are, where they fit in their organizations and society, and how they and their peers are likely to act in different circumstances.

Organizations also have needs that must be met. The most important of these are control and coordination. Organizations exist because the tasks that people must perform are sufficiently complex that members must cooperate with one another to achieve their goals. In essence, organizations require us to sacrifice some of our independence – our ability to be self-sufficient – and replace it with interdependence. In modern societies, few persons have the skills, experience, or opportunities to do everything personally that are necessary to live a productive life. Most modern people actually can do very little. We are constantly at the mercy of electricians, plumbers, appliance-repair technicians, auto mechanics, and organizations in which we work. What people can do, we do very well. Modern human beings have traded independence for **specialization** and have become far more efficient as a result. But our efficiency depends almost wholly on coordinating our activities with the activities of others. Different cultures vary in the degree of interdependence that exists within them, as do different organizations and the various departments within them. Research-and-development divisions usually have low interdependence, relying only on computer operators, purchasing and receiving departments (which order and deliver raw materials), and the physical plant operators (who keep equipment secure and functioning). For them, coordination within the division is crucial; coordinating their activities with outsiders is less important. For other divisions, coordination is a more complex and critical problem. But to some degree, all organizations need to coordinate their members' activities.

Organizations also need to control their members' interpersonal relationships, in terms of both who they form relationships with and how they communicate within their work relationships. Some version of the military command that officers cannot "fraternize" with enlisted personnel exists within almost all organizations, and enforces the rule by transferring offenders to different departments. But, they may not restrict dating among one's peers, as long as the members are discreet and the relationship does not get in the way of task performance. Others forbid any romantic relationships among any members of the same department; a few forbid them with anyone in the same organization. Often the command is never spoken because it need not be. Sometimes these informal rules are more specific. Associates (recent graduates) in law firms learn by observation that they should not initiate conversations with senior partners, but should respond immediately when partners initiate communication with them. Assembly workers at Dana Corporation learn that they are expected to have lunch with upper management, and individuals in upper management learn that they are expected to have friendly but relatively superficial interpersonal relationships with rank-and-file workers. In both cases, the organization subtly controls the kind of interpersonal relationships that employees form and maintain. Organizations do vary in how tightly they control their members' actions

and relationships, but all organizations must exercise at least a minimal level of control if they are to survive.

However, these two sets of needs – those of a society or organization and those of their individual members – create a fundamental paradox. If a society or organization successfully controls its members, the individual needs for autonomy, creativity, and sociability are frustrated. But, if the society or organization fails to control its members, it loses the ability to coordinate its members' activities, and fails. So, societies or organizations must find ways to meet their members' individual needs while persuading them to act in ways that meet the society or organization's needs. They do so through adopting various *strategies of organizing*. Conversely, if members of organizations are to meet their own needs, they must find ways to *communicate strategically* within the situations they face in their organizations. This book is about this fundamental paradox, and the role that communication plays in managing it.

THINKING STRATEGICALLY ABOUT ORGANIZING AND COMMUNICATING

For more than 2000 years, communication scholars have believed that people communicate most effectively if they adapt their communication strategies to the situations they face.³ To communicate effectively, employees must be able to analyze the situations they encounter in their organizations, determine which communication strategies are available to them in those situations, select the best of those strategies, and enact them effectively. However, selecting appropriate communicative strategies is a challenging process. All organizational situations contain rules that tell employees how they are supposed to act and communicate. Some of these rules guide and *constrain* their actions – they are the secular equivalent of the commandments in theologies. Other rules provide members of an organization with *resources* that they can draw up to achieve their goals – interpersonal relationships and commitments, shared interests, potential lines of argument, acceptable forms of persuasive appeal, and so on.⁴ After entering a society or organization, people begin to learn these rules through communicating. Although some members may have a better understanding of them than others, everyone is sufficiently knowledgeable to successfully navigate the situations they face. But, this does not mean that the process of communicating in strategically appropriate ways is either simple or easy.

For example, one of the most common comments that newcomers to an organization hear is “That’s just not how we do things here” (we will discuss the experiences of new employees at length in Chapter 5). Most will respond with a comment such as “OK, so that’s how to do this task; thanks for the information.” But, think carefully about the comment, about what it says and what it does not say (the fancy term is to **deconstruct** it), and about the range of responses that are possible. It implies that there are expectations in place regarding how an employee is to act and/or how a task is to be performed. It also implies that these expectations are not random, but have emerged and developed over time, and have been accepted by other employees. Organizations have histories, and part of those histories are a set of rules and resources that have been **legitimized** as the *natural* (that is, obvious and beyond debate) and *normal* (that is, expected and morally correct) ways to do things. There may or may not be any rational basis for them – as we explain in Chapter

2, there always are many different ways to achieve the same goal – but they are *treated* as being rational and true in a particular organization at a particular point in time. The comment also implies that the newcomer will not be accepted as a legitimate member of the organization unless she or he learns, accepts, and practices those guidelines and constraints. That is, if the newcomer is going to become part of the “we” in the statement, they must start “doing things in this way.” It implies that the two people involved in the conversation also have their own individual histories. Differences in their life, work, or other experiences may simplify or complicate their working together. The comment also may imply something about the current employee’s expectations about their future together. Oldtimers have little incentive to take the time and effort needed to teach newcomers unless they expect them to be working together for some time, something that interns and temporary employees often discover the hard way (Gossett, 2001, 2008). So, every conversation is embedded in both the past (history, rules, and resources) and the future (expectations).

But, most important, the comment says something about the *power relationship* that exists between the two employees. The oldtimer is acting *as if* she or he has the legitimate *right* to correct and teach the newcomer. It is not clear from the comment why this is so – being older, having more organizational experience, occupying a superior position in the organizational hierarchy, and a host of other attributes may have become legitimate bases for domination in this particular organization. It is not even clear that the oldtimer actually believes that he or she is superior. The comment may be an effort to *establish* a superior power position. It invites the newcomer to accept a subordinate position, but it does not guarantee that he or she will do so. The power relationship will depend on the newcomer’s response. The most common response (“OK, so that’s how to do this task; thanks for the information”) says that the newcomer accepts his or her inferior position in the power relationship, accepts the oldtimer’s *right* to tell the newcomer what to do and how to do it, and accepts the assumption that the advice given really does explain the “right” (legitimate, wise, efficient, or other form of “correctness”) way to do the task.⁵ The response “I know that’s how this task has been done for years, but I learned in school and my internship that there’s a much better way to do it” challenges the oldtimer’s assertion that she or he is legitimately the newcomer’s superior, challenges the “rightness” (correctness) or the advice and instruction, and may even challenge the definition of power that has been legitimized in the organization by placing “book learning” or “having a new perspective” above experience, seniority, or tradition. Of course, the interchange will not be complete until after both parties respond to their initial exchange. We will explain all of this in more detail in Chapter 8, but at this point it is important to realize that every conversation in an organization conjures up rules of “right” in both senses of the term – who has the right (power) to dominate and what kinds of statements are treated as “right” (correct) – and derives its meaning and importance from the *interaction* between the parties, rather than from an individual comment.⁶ Organizational situations, and the communication produced within them, are embedded in time and permeated with power.

The comment also suggests that situations and communication are embedded in “space.” But, the term “space” is a deceptively simple term because it encompasses physical location, economic role, and political positioning. It includes the site(s) of a particular organization, of course (we are “here,” at Amalgamated Tool and Die, for example). But, it also is a statement about where the organization is located in the economy. For example, is it a for-profit,

or not-for-profit firm? Does it operate in the private sector or is it a governmental agency or NGO (nongovernmental organization)? What sector of the economy does it operate within? Does it act locally, or only within one state or province, or regionally, or throughout its home country, or internationally? Is it a marginal “player,” or does it dominate its sector of the economy, or the economy of its city, state, region, nation, and so on? How much political power does it have, and at what levels (local, state, national, and/or international)? The answers to these questions are important because they contribute to the set of rules and resources that organizations and their members have available to them. In the remainder of this chapter, we will examine this multilayered concept of space, and explain how it guides and constrains strategic organizational communication. For an extended illustration of the concepts developed in this section, see Case Study 1.2.

Case Study 1.2

Can You Trust Anyone Under Thirty?

When managers, professors, and reporters think about workforce diversity, they usually think in terms of race, gender, ethnicity, or nationality. Each of these sources of difference is important, and we will examine them in detail in Unit III. But, an often-overlooked source of difference in today’s organizations involves age, and the experiences that accompany being part of a particular generation. The most common contrast is among the baby boomers, who were born between 1946 and 1964; Generation X, born between 1969 and 1979; and the Y-generation or Millennials. Boomers were raised in the post-World War II era of social stability and relative prosperity. Divorce was relatively rare; schools were safe, and jobs secure. Single-earner households with a clear division of labor between men and women were normal, for perhaps the only time in US history. Their fathers and role models were the “organization men” described in William Whyte’s 1956 book by the same name, and dramatized in the popular TV series *Mad Men*. They were loyal to their organizations, learned to pay their dues patiently and wait for the opportunity for advancement, and largely defined themselves and their success in terms of their organizational rank. It was an era during which white-collar workers in

US organizations believed and acted as if they had an unspoken contract with their organizations. If they worked hard, were loyal and productive employees, and followed the rules of their organizations, they expected to stay with their organizations as long as they chose to do so, to be rewarded for their contributions, and eventually to be supported during their golden years by an adequate pension.¹

In contrast, Xers, who now make up about one third of the US workforce, grew up in two-career families, where divorce rates were increasing rapidly. They are the products of daycare; technology, including television; and, perhaps most important, downsizing. From 1985 until 1995, the Xers’ formative years, two thirds of white-collar employees experienced downsizing or major restructuring. The fastest growing sector of the labor market between 1990 and 1995 was the category of temp and employment agencies. (The next fastest growing categories were restaurants and bars, local government, recreation, and hospitals.) Richard Florida, a Carnegie Mellon University professor who studies employee retention, observes that Xers (and Millennials) “expect corporate disloyalty. A 24- or 25-year old says, ‘I am responsible for my own

life. No one's going to take care of me, [I know] because they threw my dad out of work'" (Franken, 2000). Adding to the fear and insecurities that Xers' parents felt was a growing resentment that stems from the disparity between skyrocketing firm profits and upper-management incomes and the experiences of both white-collar and blue-collar workers. Average worker pay rose 28 percent between 1990 and 1998, only 5.5 percent faster than the inflation rate. But average compensation of the top two managers in large companies rose 481 percent over the same time period. Consequently, the ratio of the base salaries of CEOs of US firms to their average employee's salary in 1992 was 140:1 compared to 15:1 in Germany, 13:1 in Japan. In 1995, the ratio in the United States rose to 187:1 overall and 212:1 at the 30 largest US companies; in 1999, the ratio was approximately 350:1; and in 2008, it was around 500:1 (1000:1 in the largest US firms), even though there is very little evidence that CEO salaries are related to organizational performance. Over the course of a single decade, the 1990s, CEO pay jumped 535 percent, five times the increase in corporate profits and 17 times the increase in average worker pay. Had the average pay for US factory workers increased at the same rate as it did for CEOs between 1989 and 1999, it would have been \$114,035 at the end of the period (instead of \$23,753); had the federal minimum wage increased at the same rate it would have been \$24.13 instead of \$5.15. These trends *accelerated* in the United States during the first decade of the new century.²

As a result everywhere Xers are advised to "consider themselves to be free agents," keep their résumés polished, and keep their network connections alert to opportunities in other firms. They must plan their own careers, and seek out opportunities to develop new, marketable skills and opportunities to grow. And they seem to be listening. Traditional values like long-term commitment and loyalty to the firm aren't very popular with them. They refuse to make the kinds of sacrifices that their parents made – being subservient to their bosses, accepting multiple cross-country moves, putting in long hours, or accepting overnight travel. They are fiercely independent,

aggressive, hardworking entrepreneurs, even if they are working in corporate structures. They concentrate on developing computer, leadership, and communication skills, in part to make them valuable to their current firms, but also as a means of going out on their own as soon as possible. They move on quickly, voluntarily changing jobs nine times by the time they're in their thirties. They are willing to take the risks of self-employment or job changes to get the greater rewards and freedom that accompany being their own bosses. But they also tend to form relatively superficial and inauthentic relationships in the workplace. Knowing that they may not be around very long, they make little investment in getting to know their supervisors and coworkers as people, and their supervisors and coworkers spend little energy getting to know them. This makes it easier to exit the organization – they can do so without leaving close friends or commitments behind – and makes it more likely that they will do so. Ironically they need to be given clear road maps about organizational life, and want lots of performance feedback.

The Boomers and Xers do have one thing in common – they increasingly have to work with an even younger generation. Alternatively labeled the "Y Generation," "Next Generation," or "Millennials," they were born between 1980 and 2002. There are more of them (81 million) than any generation in US history save the Boomers (87 million). While teenagers they had more disposable income than any group in US history, and they also are more technologically sophisticated. Millennials seem to accept both the traditional values of hard work and individualism – in one poll, 94 percent said they shared their parents' values – *and* share the Xers' self-reliance and mistrust of organizations and other institutions. They trust their established interpersonal relationships (families and long-term friendships), and their extensive competence using electronic technologies allows them to maintain those nonwork relationships, even over long distances. One of the best examples of this is the development of "helicopter parenting," although the most interesting question about the phenomenon involves the children, not the parents: why does this group of adolescents and young adults, who presumably are

psychologically wired to be *separating* from their parents, so happily accept, even encourage, them to helicopter? The answer seems to be simple – they need to maintain the relationships they trust.

Millennials also seem to rely on themselves – their ability to plan their own lives and strategically adapt to the situations they face. They are team oriented, but realize that the relationships formed in organizational teams are transient, and focused on tasks, not people. So, they see relationships formed at work as means to other ends, not as something to be cultivated for their own sake. They are optimistic, but it is an optimism based on their self-assessment, not their faith in organizations or institutions. Some observers say the Millennials are cynical and disconnected from their communities, while others draw the opposite conclusion that they engage in high levels of social activism. Both observations make sense if observers recognize that Millennials do act, but do so outside of established institutions. They did volunteer work in high school, but *decidedly not* in order to get National Honor Society points. As adults they often contribute a great deal of time and energy to meeting social needs, but they are more likely to do so through informal groups or grassroots organizations than through the United Way or Sierra Club (Green, 2007). If they participate in the political process, they do so because they are excited about an individual candidate or cause, not because of party identification or a broad sense of patriotism or political responsibility. As a result they are highly optimistic and see a world of opportunities in front of them. They are already trying to distance themselves from the Xers – for example with softer music and different clothing. Like the Boomers, they are maturing in a time of sustained economic growth; have become accustomed to material possessions – cars, stereos, phones, computers, and the right clothes; and believe in working hard in the short term for the promise of a big payoff in the long term. But, all of this may already be changing. They are the safest generation in US history – their parents were obsessive about car safety seats, bicycle helmets, and so on. The events of September 11, 2001, may have undermined their sense of invulnerability. The corporate scandals

and recession of the early 2000s put the optimism of the older Millennials to the test; the collapse of the financial industry in 2008 and the related Great Recession did the same thing for younger Millennials. The two groups who have been most hurt by these events are the Boomers and the Millennials. For both groups, the 2009–2010 job market was the worst since the Great Depression, even for those with college degrees. It is too early to assess the long-term impact of these new economic realities, but they clearly violate the Millennials' expectations and worldview (Kamanetz, 2005).

It is clear that these differences have generated tensions and conflicts at work. For example, some Boomer supervisors view Xers as slackers – one JC Penney manager complained, “When I started out, I worked long hours. I did whatever they wanted me to do. They come in at 8 and leave at 5.” They see the Xers are unrealistic about organizational rewards and the amount of time it will take them to be promoted – “If they don't get what they want, they'll leave – they're just not loyal.” Xers question their supervisors' decisions and authority. They ask questions that are unheard of to the Boomers, such as “If I don't like what my boss says, can I go to the next level?” and even do so during job interviews. In contrast, Xers sometimes view their Boomer bosses as burned-out relics of a bygone era. They want rewards to be based on performance, not seniority. They want to know what those rewards will be, and know them in advance of taking on a task. They communicate in ways that Boomers find excessively blunt – a direct, bold, cut-to-the-chase style. Boomers like to think that the Xers are just in a passing phase, that in time they'll settle down into a traditional mold. But, Xers plan to retire long before they settle down. Some organizations are already encountering serious conflicts between the two groups.

The Boomers and Xers are unified to a degree by their frustrations with the Millennials. Xers often view them as demanding, self-absorbed, and presumptuous. Both groups complain about their short attention spans and habits like talking to friends via cell phone or instant messaging or downloading music or playing computer games while at work. They seem to think they are entitled

to special projects rather than “pay their dues” doing mundane tasks. And they think everything is negotiable: “Mr. Lankford, a health care recruiter, said that young workers often challenged company policies on matters like tuition reimbursement. ‘Their attitude is “Why won’t you pay for this?’” he said. ‘Instead of accepting that these are our policies, they’ll say: “Let’s talk about making an exception.” Or “Let’s change the policies”’³ Education and training are other areas of negotiation because they know that they have to keep their skills current if they are to remain competitive. Many experts think that this model of constant negotiation cannot be sustained over the long run because it focuses attention on individual gain and away from the organization’s needs. From the Millennials’ perspective, these behaviors are a rational response to a contingent, constantly changing society and economy with few trustworthy rules or commitments. In a society in which nothing is stable, constant negotiation is necessary for survival. But bosses also admire their willingness to “take on tasks they know nothing about . . . and fearlessly march ahead” (Connelly, 2003, 4). And for the Millennials, there are those Baby Boomers and Generation Xers who still seem to be hanging around, reducing their opportunities for advancement.

Applying What You’ve Learned

1. What expectations do each of these generational groups have about life and about organizations?
2. What messages and experiences have contributed to those expectations?
3. Over what issues are the three groups likely to have conflicts? Why?

Questions to Think About and Discuss

1. To which, if any, of the three generational groups do you belong? (Generationalist research has long been criticized for a tendency to overgeneralize. This is especially true of research on the “Millennials,” because that generation is more racially and ethnically diverse than any other generation in US

history (one in five has at least one immigrant parent and one in ten has at least one parent who is not a citizen) *and*, ironically, has developed in one of the most politically and economically polarized contexts. For example, public schools in US cities are more segregated now than they were when the US Supreme Court announced its *Brown v. Board of Education* decision in 1954. So, it’s especially important to realize that generational membership depends on one’s experiences, not one’s age.) How do *your* expectations and experiences correspond to those of the three generalized groups? Over what issues are you likely to have conflicts with members of the three groups? Why?

2. Have the economic events since early 2008 – the collapse of the financial industry and the Great Recession – altered your expectations? If so, in what ways? Why or why not?
3. Are the strategies chosen by Generation Xers appropriate to the situations they face? Generation Yers?
4. What effects are their strategies likely to have on their relationships with their supervisors in traditional firms? With their coworkers? With their subordinates? Why?

Notes

- 1 For an excellent database, see Kohut (2007); for a broader time frame, see Strauss and Howe (1991); and for a standard application to workplace issues, see Zemke, Raines, and Filipczak (2000). Relationships between Boomers and Xers are examined in Walker and Moses (1996), Coolidge (1999), and Jackson (1999). For analyses of these trends see Buzzanell (2000), and Neumark (2000).
- 2 See “Executive Pay Remains Tops” (1999); also see Blau (1999), Galbraith (1998), and Phillips (2002). Management scholar Jeffrey Pfeffer (1988) effectively critiques arguments that high executive compensation, low worker wages, and large gaps between the two are good for organizations and economies in “Six Dangerous Myths About Pay.” Each of these trends will be analyzed in more detail in Chapter 12.
- 3 See O’Briant (2003), Howe and Strauss (2000, 2003), and Cappelli (1999).

CREATING SOCIO-ECONOMIC SPACES

In today's global economy the broadest relevant "space" is the entire world. Every large organization and many small "mom and pop" organizations have a global reach, either in terms of the people who purchase the goods and services they produce or provide, or in terms of the raw materials, including ideas, that they use. But, starting our discussion with such a broad topic could be overwhelming. So we have chosen to introduce the concept of strategic adaptation to space at a simpler level, a single nation, the United States. This is in part because many of our readers are US residents, but also because the system that has developed in the United States, for good or ill, currently dominates the global economy (Stiglitz, 2002; Greider, 1997; Mann, 2003; Soros, 1998, 2000). Consequently, we will begin with what has been labeled the "American system," and discuss its relationship with the global economy at more length in Chapters 2 and 11.

In the United States today, the most influential organizations are privately owned, only loosely regulated by government, allowed (even encouraged) to become very large, and allowed or encouraged to be politically active. They also are very undemocratic, both in terms of how decisions are made and power is distributed, and in terms of how the wealth created by the organization is distributed among its members and outside stakeholder groups. Of course, this is ironic for a society that presumably values democracy very highly. Other countries have developed social, economic, and political systems with some of the characteristics, but none have developed quite the same combination of attributes – it is a distinctively "American system." None of this was inevitable; it emerged over time as the result of a number of strategic choices by hundreds of political and economic actors. A few of these choices were consciously intended to create a particular kind of society. Most were made for a narrower purpose, to solve a specific problem or manage a particular challenge. But they had major **unintended consequences**. Others were made with very little thought, almost nonconsciously. But, they combined in both anticipated and unanticipated ways over a long period of time to create a unique kind of economy and society, one that involves a complex set guidelines and constraints that permeate even the simplest interaction in the smallest organization.

From their beginnings, the societies that eventually became the United States had all of the ingredients necessary for economic growth. Their land and the land around them were rich in natural resources. They had access to a seemingly inexhaustible supply of inexpensive labor from Europe and, later on, Africa and Asia. They developed cultures that celebrated individual achievement and entrepreneurship. Each of these factors was necessary for the development of the American system but not sufficient – our society and economy still could have developed in any number of different ways. But, during the early 1800s, a number of crucial choices were made.⁷ First, owners of businesses persuaded courts and legislatures to create "limited liability" corporations. This doctrine meant that if a company fails and cannot pay its creditors and/or workers, its owners (or the managers they hired to run their organizations) could be held liable for those losses only to the extent that they had invested monies in the firm – its owners would not have to pay the company's debts out of their own pockets, regardless of how wealthy they might be, or how risky or foolish their decision making had been. Policymakers at the time realized that this arrangement was risky, so they required corporations to be operated in the interests of the public as a whole and to have public representatives on their boards of directors. Their assumption was that governments would have to become much larger if they were to make the investments necessary for rapid economic growth – building

canals, roads, ports, or railroads. But the immigrants who had founded the nation, as well as the ones who came later, brought with them a deep distrust of large powerful institutions, primarily dictatorial governments and an established church. So, limited liability corporations seemed to be a good way to manage all of the risks they faced. Corporations would absorb the economic risks of large investment, and avoided the risks inherent in large, centralized government; indeed, they could serve as a useful counterweight to the power of church and state. Over time, it became easier and easier to incorporate, as states progressively weakened their requirements that corporations be operated in the public interest.

Eventually, owners persuaded legislatures to go even farther, not only to protect them from the risks of investing in large, expensive projects but also to actively subsidize their efforts (Perelman, 2006). These “deals with the devils” were controversial, to be sure, but as long as corporations were small and tightly regulated, the potential advantages seemed to outweigh the risks.

A number of other important choices were made, often by judges rather than legislators. Owners obtained the legal right to sell stock in their companies, and to do so in a way that severely limited stockholders’ influence over their decisions or operations. This legal change gave them almost unlimited access to the funds they needed to enlarge their organizations. The US Supreme Court declared that only the federal government had the power to regulate interstate commerce. This was important because, at that time, the federal government was much less powerful than the governments of the largest states. Indeed, the budgets of the largest corporations were many times the size of the federal government’s, something that did not change until the New Deal and World War II. Since the states could not regulate interstate corporations, and the federal government was weak, corporations could play the states off of one another, negotiating for the most favorable laws, including preferential regulations and tax systems.⁸ They also successfully used the courts to challenge states’ rights to restrict their activities (Ritz, 2001, 2007).

However, the most important court decision was made in 1819. In the *Dartmouth* decision, the US Supreme Court declared that corporations were “persons” and thus had all of the constitutional rights and obligations afforded individual citizens, except the right to vote (Cheney, 1993; Cheney and Carroll, 1997). Thus, corporations obtained the legal rights of “persons” 50 years before black Americans and more than a century before women. For many observers, the case seemed rather unimportant – the issue was whether or not the state of New Hampshire could require Dartmouth College to place representatives of the state government on its board of directors in exchange for receiving public money. But, for the key participants, Daniel Webster, who represented the college, and Chief Justice John Marshall, it provided an opportunity to permanently influence US society. As Thomas Cronin, an award-winning political scientist reminds us, “most of our framers [‘founding fathers’] were skeptical . . . and even hostile to notions of popular democracy. They had fought their war of independence in large part to get away from monarchy. . . . Yet democracy was regarded as a dangerous and unworkable doctrine. The very term *democracy* appears neither in the Declaration of Independence nor in the US Constitution.”⁹ In the *Dartmouth* case, Webster explicitly argued that private corporations must be *protected from* democracy, from “the rise and fall of popular parties and the fluctuations of political opinion.” Chief Justice Marshall favored Webster’s position, and delayed the case until the Court had a pro-corporation majority and a series of lower court decisions to use as precedents. Yale sociologist Charles Perrow concludes, “The *Dartmouth* decision . . . was not a mistake, an inadvertence, a happenstance in history, but a well-designed plan devised by

particular interests” (Perrow, 2002, 41). It was a conscious, strategic choice, but one whose primary impact was delayed for decades.

After the Civil War, the US economy began to change in ways that eventually revealed how important these changes were. Improved transportation and communication systems allowed corporations to grow rapidly as they pursued a growing mass market. But, the rapid growth of interstate corporations also meant that wealth and political power were being concentrated in the hands of a progressively smaller number of people. Still, as late as the early 1890s there were only a few large corporations. Suddenly, the number and the degree of concentration skyrocketed. Between 1898 and 1904 the 200 biggest corporations of the time were formed, many of which still exist. Simultaneously, the Supreme Court re-entered the picture. In 1886 it broadened and strengthened corporations’ constitutional rights (the *Santa Clara* decision); in 1889 (*Minneapolis & St. Louis Railroad*) and 1893 (*Noble v. Union River Logging*) it afforded corporate persons all of the due process and equal protection rights that are listed in the 5th and 14th Amendments; in 1906 (*Hale v. Henkel*) it protected them against search and seizure; in 1908 they received the right to a jury trial in criminal cases (*Armour Packing Company v. US*) and so on. Piece by piece, sometimes almost by accident, a unique political, legal, and economic system emerged, one that gave corporations and their leaders a level of social, political, and economic influence that today is unique among the developed capitalist democracies. Of course, for each piece to be implemented, owner-managers had to persuade someone that the changes would meet the needs of the overall society, by increasing economic efficiency, enhancing economic growth and job creation, or whatever. The fact that corporations often were (and still are) *no more* efficient, productive, or socially responsible than the governmental agencies or noncorporate organizations that they replaced is testimony to the success of their persuasive appeals (Perrow, 2002).

Suddenly, the fears and predictions of those who opposed the development of large, limited liability corporations (LLCs) became much more credible. The accelerating economic and political power of the “robber barons” goaded the federal government into trying to slow down or halt the corporatization of the society. In 1900, Congress forbade corporations from directly contributing money to political campaigns, and soon after President Theodore Roosevelt initiated his brief and rather ineffective “trust-busting” campaign. But the die was cast; the American system was born, legitimized, and accepted as normal, natural, and, for many, superior to any other alternative. No king, queen, or elected government created it as a coherent whole. It was institutionalized through the development and implementation of a distinctive set of political, economic, and social structures; perpetuated through a distinctive set of everyday practices, traditions, and habits; and solidified by the development of a congruent set of beliefs and values (see Chapter 2). It established a set of guidelines and constraints that influenced the kinds of organizations that developed within its reach, and the actions taken by members of those organizations.

MAKING ORGANIZATIONS LOOK ALIKE

The key concepts that we introduced in the previous section – institutions, institutionalization, and legitimation – form the backbone of a valuable interdisciplinary perspective called “institutional theory.” Its key assumption is that distinctive systems develop social

groupings over time. The process is essentially the same regardless of the size of the group. A group the size of a nation or as small as a nuclear family develops parameters that guide and constrain their actions and perspectives that allow them to make sense out of their actions and the actions of people around them. These parameters and perspectives are attractive because they make life seem to be stable and predictable. As a result, they become very difficult to change. This does not mean that change never takes place. Systems and institutions are filled with tensions and contradictions – for example, a faith in democracy in every institution *except* formal organizations – which eventually may generate resistance and change. The elimination of race-based slavery in Western societies provides an example of all of these pressures; its continuation for hundreds of years shows how difficult it is to change institutionalized social and economic systems. But, the very human need for stability and predictability, combined with the forces of habit, history, and tradition, makes fundamental change difficult and slow.¹⁰

However, even in relatively homogeneous societies, the parameters and perspectives they provide still leave room for people to create distinctive organizational forms (Oliver, 1991, 1992). Early on, institutional theorists recognized that the members of organizations in different sectors of an economy seem to make similar choices. They cluster together into “fields” in which the organizations have similar structures, operations, and practices. Usually these institutional fields are defined by what their member organizations do – educate people, manufacture heavy equipment, develop “high-tech” products, and so on. Sometimes the similarities result from other factors. For example, they may be run by executives with the same background and training, which taught them what their “kind” of organization is “supposed” to look like and how they are “supposed” to operate. If asked to explain these preferences, managers usually say that the approach they favor is more profitable, more efficient, or more flexible and adaptive. But, institutional theorists realized from the beginning that institutional choices are based more on myths and rituals than on rational analysis. They are sustained by symbolic action more than technical efficiency.¹¹

For example, consider elementary schools. There is a general expectation that elementary schools should have teachers who work closely with the children to build their basic skills in reading and writing and in physical activities involved in games and the like. Most citizens also believe that an ideal elementary school would teach children to love learning and respect nation, state, locale, government, and other people. In a highly individualistic society such as the United States, there is also an expectation that elementary schools will treat each child as an individual with his or her own distinctive strengths and needs, although elementary schools rarely implement this assumption in their structures and practices. To carry out these duties, elementary schools have developed similar basic structures. They have teachers who work with relatively small numbers of students, 5 to 30 depending on age. They have principals who make sure teachers follow an established curriculum, handle problems, and otherwise manage the school. Classrooms vary a great deal, but they are expected to have educational materials to interest the students, books, appropriate educational media, materials for projects, the teacher’s desk at the front, and so on. Although actual schools may deviate from these expectations, they do so at the risk of being judged “inadequate.” Consequently, the deviations tend to be related to noncontroversial matters. And, in spite of at least a half-century of claims that US education is in a crisis and must be reformed in fundamental ways, the institution of elementary schools has been remarkably resistant to change.

Institutional theory explains both the similarities and the lack or slowness of change (Scott, 2008). Three types of institutional influences have been identified. **Coercive**

influence occurs when organizations are forced to adopt certain structures or practices by other institutions. Many of these involve larger social and political systems. A **social institution** is a major organizational force in society. Some institutions are actual organizations, like the Federal Communications Commission, which has legal power to regulate organizations in the communications industry; the Congress; and the courts. Organizations are forbidden to discriminate against women or minorities by federal and state legal codes. Other governmental institutions must act indirectly. For example, both the US and Canadian Constitutions say that public education is a responsibility of the states and provinces, not the federal government. So, the federal governments influence the state or provincial educational institutions through funding – conforming to national dictates will be rewarded with extra funds. States and provinces influence local schools in the same way.

In the private sector, coercion also takes place. Sometimes it is informal – prospective employees do not want to work for organizations that are too different from the norms in their “organizational fields.” Stockholders and bankers do not want to invest in firms that lack the up-to-date systems and practices that their competitors have. So, they are willing to pay relatively low prices for a company’s stock, or they may limit the size of loans or charge higher interest rates. In other cases the coercion is explicit. For example, Walmart recently forced all its suppliers to use wireless digital identification devices on all goods shipped to the merchandiser. Although this was quite expensive for the suppliers, they really had no choice in the matter because losing Walmart’s business would be a major blow. These examples illustrate the role of institutional coercion in the adoption of practices and structures by organizations. To be sure, doing these things may also make the organizations in question more effective. However, they are not adopting them for reasons of effectiveness, but because larger institutions make them do so.

A second source of institutional pressure is **normative influence**. Organizations are sometimes influenced to adopt a structure or practice by normative pressure from organizations like themselves. This pressure comes through associations among similar types of organizations and through other channels that indicate what organizations should do to live up to the value systems they subscribe to. To continue our school example, there are numerous organizations to promote effective education, and school district administrators, principals, teachers, school counselors, school nurses, and other staff belong to them, attend their meetings, and read their publications. These organizations have codes of values regarding how to be effective educators, administrators, counselors, nurses, and so on. They advocate various types of innovations and practices in accordance with these codes, and there is pressure to adopt these by people who value and want to live up to the norms of these associations. In addition to associations, most school personnel go through special educational programs to learn how to be a good teacher, principle, and so on, and one of the goals of these programs is to instill a sense of professionalism into their graduates. Values and expectations are an important part of learning to be a professional. When professionals go to work for an organization, they bring these values with them and influence the organization to adapt in ways consistent with professional norms.

Mimetic influence is the third type of institutional effect on organizations. Organizations often seek to be like exemplary organizations of the same type by imitating them. In the early 1990s Eastman Kodak, a high-tech company with a very good reputation for its information and communication technologies (ICTs), decided to “outsource” its information systems to a major contractor, which took over management of Kodak’s ICTs. This unusual move, to turn over management of a very important function to another company,

was widely reported in the press and grabbed the attention of other large corporations. In the next three years a number of other firms imitated Kodak and outsourced their information systems functions. This sudden move toward outsourcing was dubbed “the Kodak effect,” because rather than being driven by independent rational thinking it was traced to imitation of Kodak. Mimetic influence is strongest in situations with high uncertainty, when organizations may not be able to determine the likely consequences of their actions well enough to make a rational decision. When it is difficult to make sense of a situation, organizations often turn to models for guidance. At the time of Kodak’s decision, outsourcing of information systems was not well understood by most organizations, and so they turned to exemplary cases such as Kodak for advice. Since it seemed to work out well for Kodak, other companies began to outsource their information systems functions.¹²

How do members of organizations respond to these pressures? The simplest response is to *acquiesce* to institutional pressures. But, there are different versions of doing so. When pressures are strong, well established, and habitual, members may nonconsciously fall into the same practices as in the other organizations that make up its “field.” Or, they may consciously imitate other organizations because the situation is so uncertain that no other options seem to be available. Or, they may grudgingly obey rules and accept norms only because they are not powerful enough to resist. Members also may find a way to *compromise* by bargaining with the sources of the pressure, or placate them by appearing to comply while not changing their everyday practices. Third, they may try to *avoid* the pressures, by separating themselves from the other organizations in their field, or changing their goals, activities, or mission completely – moving into a more compatible economic neighborhood. If their organizations are sufficiently powerful, they may *defy* the pressures, by ignoring demands, challenging rules in courts or other venues, or attacking the credibility of the institutions exerting the pressures. The most difficult cases occur when an organization faces inconsistent pressures from multiple institutions, something that is quite common when it operates in many different societies. In these cases it may be necessary to balance competing pressures, never conforming completely to any of them, but adjusting their responses on a case-by-case basis. The choice about how to respond often is not based on rational judgments of what will improve efficiency or effectiveness, but on the basis of any number of nonrational considerations (Oliver, 1991, 1992; Scott, 2008; Bigelow and Arndt, 2000; Kitchener, 2002). Consequently, organizations often wind up in the middle of destructive “bandwagon effects” in which they foolishly adopt popular but unwise fads and fashions.¹³ Whatever strategic choices the members of an organization make, it is important to remember that they (1) were choices, not the inevitable results of conformity pressures, and (2) any choice other than acquiescence will make it more difficult for the organization’s members to legitimize its actions.

STRATEGIES OF ORGANIZING

The rules and resources that are legitimized and institutionalized at each of the levels we have discussed to this point – the global, national or societal, and organizational fields – influence each of the other levels (we will explain the processes through which this happens in Chapter 2). The next smallest level is the individual organization. In theory, there are an infinite number of different ways in which organizations could be designed and operated. But the rules and resources developed at each of the levels we have examined combine

to reduce the number of viable strategies. In Unit II of this book, we will discuss at length the major strategies of organizing that are employed in modern organizations – the traditional, relational, cultural, and network strategies plus a group of newer alternative approaches. Each strategy has a different design and structure, a different system of employee motivation and control, a different communication systems, and different ways of using communication technology. Of course, no organization corresponds perfectly to any of the strategies of organizing that we will discuss; organizational actors draw different attributes from each of the socially legitimate alternatives to create hybrids that are appropriate to the situations they face. Similarly, no strategy works exactly like it is supposed to work and all organizations have a mixture of strategies in place. But, thinking about real organizations in terms of the available strategies of organizing can help members make sense out of their particular organizations and consider potentially productive alternatives.

STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION FOR INDIVIDUAL MEMBERS OF ORGANIZATIONS

A final sense in which communication is “strategic” involves individual employees. In the best of cases, individual employees can assess the guidelines and constraints they face in particular organizational situations, and draw upon the available resources to construct messages that allow them to pursue their goals and the goals of their organizations. In the worst situations, there may be no viable communication strategy available. Organizational situations sometimes paralyze employees, at least momentarily. One kind of paralysis occurs when the guidelines and constraints in a situation are clear, but the resources available to meet them are unclear, unknown, or insufficient. For example, organizational situations may include commands for psychotherapists to “do good work,” hospital administrators to “cut costs,” or elementary schoolteachers to “stimulate all the students’ interests.” These “guidelines” may tell employees what they are supposed to do, but they tell them little about how they are supposed to do those things. As a result, employees may become paralyzed while they make sense out of their situations and discover the resources that are available to them. For example, one of our newly graduated students became a stockbroker. Frustrated by being given a desk and a “training session” that was limited to the comment “I hope you’ll like it here. Just don’t screw up like George, your predecessor, did,” he called and asked, “What do I do next?” This kind of paralyzing situation is depressingly common for new employees, and has been shown to be a major source of organizational stress. But, eventually, primarily through informal communication with his coworkers, the student started to understand what he should and should not do.

A more extreme form of paralysis occurs when action is called for, but constraints leave the employee with no available resources. Presumably, Linus’ purpose (in Figure 1.1) is to gain the childlike fun that comes from a friendly snowball fight. But Lucy’s comments leave him with both a command to act (since dropping the snowball is an act) and no productive way to achieve his purpose. Throwing the snowball will fail; so will not throwing it. Lucy has taken the fun out of snowball fights and has robbed Linus of any opportunity for meaningful choice.

Organizational situations sometimes parallel the *Peanuts* situation. Supervisors may find that they have only one position to allocate and two departments that desperately need



Figure 1.1 Source: PEANUTS © 1976 Peanuts Worldwide LLC. Dist. By UNIVERSAL UCLICK. Reprinted with permission. All rights reserved.

help, have equally strong claims on the position, and will be justifiably angry if they do not receive it. Subordinates may be told to do one thing by one superior and the opposite by another. They may know that one supervisor has a higher rank than the other and that in their organization they are always expected to follow the orders given by the higher ranking person. But they may also know that the lower ranking supervisor might retaliate against them, in ways that will never be detected by anyone else, for violating his or her order. In this kind of situation, the subordinate has no realistic options because no adequate resources are available. Between the two extremes of simple situations and paralyzing ones are the situations that employees normally face at work, situations that give employees a range of viable options.

Employees' strategic choices create and reproduce the guidelines, constraints, and resources that they face – traditional, bureaucratic strategies of organizing exist only because employees choose to act like bureaucrats. They gain acceptance and support from other bureaucrats by strictly applying established, written policies through documented and inflexible procedures. They may notice that being able to legitimately act like a bureaucrat is a valuable resource, both to establish their credibility and to perform their tasks (for example, managing excessively demanding customers).¹⁴ Similarly, some organizational fields are dominated by bureaucracies because traditional strategies of organizing are treated as natural and normal by the organizations within them; and some societies are dominated by bureaucracies because they have developed rules and resources that encourage that strategy. However, employees' choices also may change the

situations they face. They find ways to draw upon the resources they have available to them in order to resist objectionable guidelines and constraints, eventually change their organizations, over the long term influence the other organizations in their organizational fields, and so on.

SUMMARY: THE COMPLEXITIES OF ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION

All societies, and all organizations, must find ways to deal successfully with a fundamental paradox: if they are to survive they must control and coordinate the actions of their members. But, control and coordination frustrate individuals' needs for autonomy, creativity, and sociability. Historically, a number of strategies of organizing have been developed that strive to achieve the organization's goals while managing this fundamental paradox. Each of these strategies relies on communication because it is through communication that organizations emerge, are maintained, and change. Chapter 2 focuses on the process of making sense out of organizational situations, and examines the processes through which core beliefs and values are created, institutionalized, and enacted in organizations. The chapters that make up Unit II examine the dominant forms of organizing used in contemporary organizations. Although we will try to describe each strategy as a coherent whole, we also will continually caution readers not to lose sight of the complexity of organizational life. No strategy of organizing appears in a pure form in any modern organization. This is partly because every organization has its own unique history, membership, and mode of operation, and because each is embedded in a unique set of societal and "field" pressures. As a result, each organization's members develop distinctive mixtures of strategies in an effort to cope with the challenges they encounter every day. As a result, organizational life is much messier than any overall strategy envisions. That messiness makes organizational life interesting, and makes strategic communication especially challenging.

In addition, members of organizations in the early twenty-first century face an increasingly complex array of challenges. The chapters in Unit III examine what we believe are the most important of them – dealing with organizational power and politics (Chapter 7), making effective decisions and managing conflicts surrounding them (Chapter 8), affecting organizational change (Chapter 9), dealing with the challenges and opportunities created by the increasing diversity of organizations' members (Chapter 10), managing globalization (Chapter 11), and dealing with ethical challenges (Chapter 12).

At this point, all of these ideas may seem a little overwhelming. At least, at this point we hope that most readers feel a little overwhelmed. Communication is an exceptionally complex process; organizational communication is an especially complex type of communication. There are a depressingly large number of books, training programs, and consultants' gimmicks that depict effective organizational communication as the simple application of "five foolproof techniques" or some equivalent. Unfortunately, these depictions are as glib as they are misleading. There are a number of principles that employees can use in most organizational situations. But they are neither simple, nor foolproof, nor applicable in every case. Our goal in this book is to explain those principles and indicate how people can analyze the complexities they face at work and choose appropriate strategic responses, recognizing all the while that it was their choices and the choices made by other members of their organizations that created and reproduce the situations they face.

NOTES

- 1 Cheney, Lair, Ritz, and Kendall (2010, chap. 3) offer a similar analysis of the parallel phrase, “I’m just doing my job.
- 2 See, for example, Andrews and Herschel (1996, 16–18); and Sobó and Sadler (2002). For similar results in studies of Australian organizations, see Irwin (1997).
- 3 Kennedy (1980). A similar concept has been developed by rhetorical theorist Lloyd Bitzer (1968, 1980).
- 4 The concept that unique sets of “working rules” emerge in organizations, are legitimized over time, and guide and constrain employee behaviors has a long history, going back at least as far as Commons (1950). The version of this concept that has had the greatest impact on organizational communication was developed by Anthony Giddens (in 1979, 1984, 1991). It also is a core assumption of what has been labeled “institutional theory,” a perspective that we will refer to throughout this book. Institutional theorists who develop explicit links to Giddens’ work include Dacin, Goodstein, and Scott (2002).
- 5 This dual conception of the term “right” is developed at length in Foucault (1980). An excellent summary of Foucault’s complicated ideas is available in Barker and Cheney (1994).
- 6 The notion that power depends on interactions rather than statements is the basis of an extensively researched model called “Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) Theory” and Karl Weick’s conception of the “dual interact.” For a summary of the former, see Fairhurst (2001); for the latter, see Weick (1979).
- 7 For an extended analysis of these processes, see Conrad (2011); Roy (1997); and Perrow (2002).
- 8 The concept of a financially poor, weak federal government is a little difficult for today’s US citizens to believe, but the power imbalance continued until the New Deal (Perrow, 2002).
- 9 Cronin (1987). The classic treatment of this issue is Beard (1913/1986).
- 10 Institutional theory originated in two key sources Selznick (1957), and Meyer and Rowan (1977). Its development is summarized in Hinings and Greenwood (1988); Dacin *et al.* (2002); and Oliver (1991, 1992). For an application to organizational communication, see Lammers and Barbour (2006).
- 11 The concept of institutional fields is developed at length by Fligstein (1990, 2001). Excellent summary articles are available in Powell and DiMaggio (1990).
- 12 Dacin *et al.* (2002) prefer the term “translation” to “mimesis” because they want to focus attention on the interpretive processes that are involved in one organization’s employees “picking and choosing” the parts of another organization that they want to implement.
- 13 For examples of destructive bandwagon effects, see Staw and Epstein (2000); and Kitchener (2002). For an analysis of managerial fads and fashions and the role that managerial “gurus” play in their development, see Conrad (2011), esp. chap. 3.
- 14 For a case study of how face-to-face communication reproduces strategies of organizing, see Harrison (1995).

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