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Communication and Organizational Culture

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Abstract

When people in an organization understand themselves and their context of interaction from very different perspectives, there is an increased risk of poor organizational dialogue. The reason is not only that individuals' social interpretations of others are influenced by their idiosyncratic perspectives. In interactions involving a significant diversity of individual perspectives, there is also a risk that communicators form radically different interpretations of goals and processes in the organization. It is therefore of crucial importance that people have a sufficiently similar understanding of action-guiding information, communicative acts and the workplace itself. The chapter focuses on the importance of creating shared organizational culture on the basis of four communication conditions from social interaction theory. (1) In communicative processes, senders need to secure the attention of audiences. (2) Senders and audiences need to have a sufficiently similar understanding of the language that is used. (3) Senders and audiences need to interpret communicative acts in a sufficiently similar way. (4) The attitudes and values that audiences ascribe to senders must correspond to the values and attitudes that senders actually have. After having clarified these conditions, the chapter applies them to analyse fundamental organizational challenges. The final part of the chapter argues that the conditions can, typically on management levels, constitute conceptual tools for creating unifying communicative cultures. Furthermore, using the conditions (1)–(4) actively as a means for securing communication across a diversity of individual perspectives can contribute to reaching organizational goals, no matter how they are defined.

Keywords: organizational communication, shared understanding, philosophy of language, cultural interaction, methodological tools

1. Introduction

One of the key concepts in communication theory is *horizons of understanding*. The concept refers to individuals' overall cognitive, emotional and experiential perspectives on themselves. It denotes the totality of mental states—representational and non-representational—that an individual has at a given time [1–3].

Defined like this, it is not difficult to understand why the concept of a subjective horizon has received a lot of attention in theories of organizational communication: Communicative challenges typically arise when communicators understand each other from very different perspectives [4, 5]. Such differences do not only shape individuals' interpretation of others. They can, even more fundamentally, create barriers of meaning connected to the language that is used. In such cases,

the meaning a sender uses a communicative act to express in a communicative process is not the same as the meaning the audience associates with the act [6–8].

Differences in horizons can be intrinsically personal, and they can be connected to individual values and idiosyncratic preferences. However, and this is particularly interesting from a cultural perspective on organizations, differences can also be traced to formal and informal roles and positions [9, 10]. Consider for instance typical relations between managers and employees working in frontline services in organizations. Managers have, in many ways, a top-down perspective on frontline organizational challenges and employees' roles. Frontline employees, on the other hand, typically have a bottom-up point of view, closely connected to their roles and experiences in the organization [11–13]. This positional difference can make it difficult to reach aims of shared understanding in manager-employee dialogue about job tasks, principles of efficiency and quality aims [14, 15].

These kinds of communicative challenges related to organizational roles and positions can be analysed from various analytical perspectives. In this chapter, I focus on how different horizons of understanding can affect dialogue and social interaction understood as fundamental communicative processes. I will, more specifically, distinguish between four communication conditions: (1) the need to have attention, (2) the need to have a shared language, (3) the need to avoid associative misinterpretation and (4) the need to communicate attitudes, emotions and experiences.

After having clarified these conditions, I will argue that they can contribute to explain how organizational culture can be improved in two ways: From a descriptive perspective, the conditions can be used to understand the significance of having a shared communicative practice as an essential part of a well-functioning organizational culture. From a normative perspective, they can be used, on personal and system-based levels, as conceptual tools to strengthen communicative cultures. Fundamentally, I will conclude that collective knowledge and application of basic communication principles can improve the efficiency of organizations.

2. Background

It is widely recognized that communication is vital for organizational functioning [16–18]. If the communication within an organization is poor, then it is difficult to find adequate solutions to organizational challenges. If the communication is good, then the probability of efficient organizational performance is improved, no matter how the goals and aims of the organization are defined [19]. When he was asked about the secret of his success, August Busch, CEO of one of America's most successful companies, famously said in an interview with *Forbes Magazine* (June 23, 1997): 'You're going to laugh at this … it sounds so simple – but the key is communicate, communicate, communicate'.

The issue of how organizational efficiency depends on efficient communication has been explored in a number of ways [15, 20]. Many theorists have, in particular, analysed how communicative challenges typically arise in organizations and why it is of fundamental importance to meet these challenges [12, 15, 21]. On a general level, it is possible to categorize the challenges into two types:

- Exchange of information—how knowledge and action-guiding norms are conveyed, interpreted and implemented throughout an organization

- Relational communication—how people understand each other as autonomous subjects with attitudes, concerns, values and experiences

The informational and relational dimensions of human communication can be addressed from a variety of perspectives. In organizational contexts, two important sources of analysis are theories of communication and empirical studies of the diversity of understanding within organizations [22, 23].

Within the theoretical perspectives, a core idea has been the conditional that if communicators in organizations have very different individual perspectives, then it is difficult to secure efficient communication. Inconsistent or even incommensurable perspectives, many theorists have argued, will necessarily influence interaction, cooperation and organizational efficiency and undermine goals of performance [9, 20, 24].

Empirical studies have established that the antecedent of the theoretical conditional is, *de facto*, correct. Furthermore, the empirical research has not only shown how there is diversity of individual and group perspectives in different types of organizations but also contributed to explaining why this so and what the consequences are. A number of studies have, in particular, explored how barriers of communication are caused by individual and system-based factors and how these barriers have negative consequences for organizational performance [15, 24, 25].

The importance of implementing empirical knowledge about negative consequences of communicative barriers in organizational analysis has been thought of as essential [26, 27]. Generally, in social interpretation, it is impossible for communicators to step out of their idiosyncratic first-person perspectives—no person can see himself entirely from the outside. It is therefore not possible to avoid being influenced by one's own perspective in social interpretation [28, 29]. Arenas of interaction in organizations are no exception. As long as social interaction in organizations involves human beings with thoughts, beliefs, values and attitudes, one has to accept that it is of fundamental importance in organization theory to address communicative challenges related to gaps of subjective meaning and different idiosyncratic perspectives [30].

Recognition of the need to focus extensively on the diversity of understanding has led many theorists to focus on the relational 'soft side' of management and leadership [13]. The empirical studies of communicative challenges have also been a main source for the interest in relational aspects of organizations and human resource management [31, 32]. Within this tradition, many theorists have, on the basis of normative theories, elucidated how it is possible to reach aims of agreement and cooperation across gaps of understanding in organizations. These analyses have, in turn, been used to develop practical models for securing efficient organizational communication.

2.1 Shared horizons

In the philosophical literature on social interaction, many have argued that having partially shared horizons is a precondition for communication [1]. This has been connected not only to Hans Georg Gadamer's [2] theory of consensus as a condition for understanding. In the context of epistemology, aims related to shared horizons have also been connected to Jurgen Habermas and his theory of deliberate interaction. While Gadamer's theory concerns the basis for meaningful dialog, Habermas is more concerned with how communicators need to be able to communicate freely and rationally in order to get shared knowledge about a topic of discourse [29].

Hermeneutical analyses of the kind developed by Gadamer and Habermas have typically been applied on an individual explanatory level: The analyses have been used as frameworks to clarify what individuals can do to improve communication and how they can get the same kind of understanding about a topic of discourse [33, 34]. Nevertheless, it is widely recognized that the hermeneutical

analyses also apply on group levels of explanations. For instance, a professional group will often need to understand other group perspectives in order to reach agreement about routines on interdisciplinary work. In organizational theory, conceptual resources from Gadamer and Habermas have been used to discuss such challenges along a number of dimensions, most notably to understand tensions and conflicts that arise when groups' horizons become too heterogenous [23].

Communicative conditions for organizational efficiency have not only been linked to the general concept of knowledge understood as justified true belief [35]. They have also been connected to various kinds of more specific knowledge. Furthermore, knowledge can be explicit—literally expressed in words. But knowledge can also be implicit and visible more indirectly through what people do. As described by Bermudez [36], this kind of knowledge is grounded in 'principles that guide our social behaviour and social understanding in those situations where we are not explicitly deploying the concepts and tools of propositional attitude psychology'. It is, in short, knowledge that is non-conceptualized [37].

Another dualism related to knowledge is the distinction between formalized and practical knowledge [38]. Knowledge that is part of a formal framework is not necessarily the knowledge that, in fact, governs practices. Formal knowledge might be poorly related to practice, and formal knowledge does not necessarily capture action preferences.

The distinction between formalized and practical knowledge [38] has often been used to analyse challenges related to transmission of information across levels of knowledge. Knowledge that people have on one level of an organization is not always known on other levels—even when the knowledge would have been important on those levels [30]. This type of problem has typically been addressed in discussions of interaction between managers and frontline employees in organizations. In particular, economic-administrative knowledge on management levels is not always understood in frontline groups, and experiential and professional judgement-based knowledge in frontline groups is not always adequately understood on management levels [13, 39].

No matter what the causes of this kind of decoupling are, gaps of knowledge can have a number of dramatic negative consequences [16, 25]. It is, after all, first-line professionals that directly deliver the product or service of the organization. Securing efficient 'vertical' information exchange and, more generally, good cooperation and shared knowledge is therefore of crucial importance. This is, to a large extent, a management responsibility [9].

2.2 Organizational culture

The concept of organizational knowledge has many dimensions, related to contexts of interaction and the abovementioned challenges [11]. There is, however, a general and close conceptual link between the concept of organizational knowledge and organizational culture. The latter concept has been defined in various ways in the literature, but the majority of definitions fall under Schein's [40] famous short characterization of organizational culture as 'This is how we do it here'.

Understood like this, the concept denotes what people actually do in an organization, not necessarily what they say they do or what written information to the external world outside the organization describe what people in the organization do [41, 42]. Schein's more precise definition is well known:

> *The culture of a group can now be defined as a pattern of shared assumptions*
> *learned by a group as it solves its problems of external adaption and internal*
> *integration, which has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to*

> *be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think and feel in relation*
> *to those problems. ([40], p. 18)*

The key concept here is shared practices. Organizational culture is manifested in collective action, it is action guiding, and it is often implicit: It cannot be explicated as surface knowledge or norms in collective practices. Just like implicit knowledge, as I explained this concept above, organizational culture is non-conceptualized and essentially tied to actions that are not directly governed by formal frameworks.

Schein calls this dimension of organizational culture for 'tacit, taken-for-granted, underlying assumptions', and he argues that 'unless you dig down to the level of the basic assumptions, you cannot really decipher [the culture] … On the other hand, if you find some of those basic assumptions and explore their relationship, you are really getting at the essence of the culture and can then explain a great deal of what goes on' ([40], p. 53).

Consequently, one might say that if an organization expresses a certain external profile to the outside world—for instance to a group of clients or stakeholders—but nevertheless is governed by very different basic assumptions on the 'inside', then the main identifier of the organizational culture are those 'inside' assumptions, not the descriptions that are communicated externally. And the culture is a substantial driving force; it is a main 'engine' in the organization. Cultural practices have a large impact on how organizations actually work and how they function economically and reach performance goals [43].

Given the correlation between a 'good' culture and efficiency, the need to form a communicative platform is obvious: People need be able to communicate in order to share cultural frameworks. The point generalises to social interaction in organizations: Achieving aims of shared understanding is the key to getting people to cooperate.

In particular, this significance of organizational culture is salient in conceptions that emphasize that dialogue is the glue that ties a culture together. As Eisenberg and Riley ([43], pp. 294–295) notes, 'a communicative view of organizational culture sees communication as constitutive of culture'. This conception of culture as a communicative practice opens up for a variety of descriptive analyses, first and foremost on structural levels, in the sense that a communication perspective 'acknowledges the symbolic character of ordinary language and the ways in which cultural meanings are coconstructed in everyday conversation' [43]. However, explanations of how culture is a communicative practice can also be tied to individual levels, particularly connected to how 'the practical interests of organizational members seeking to enhance their effectiveness' [43].

3. Communication theory

How should the idea of communicative glue of an organizational culture more precisely be understood? The concept of communication can be analysed from different academic perspectives, but it is widely acknowledged that theories of meaning and understanding from philosophy of mind and language can be important resources in any conceptual analysis and thus also in analyses of organizational communication. This relevance of conceptions of meaning and shared language is first and foremost recognized in the abovementioned conceptions of organizational cultures as communicative practices but also in many other theoretical traditions that emphasize the importance of relational interaction in organizations [39, 44].

Within a general framework of philosophical analysis, I will in the following focus on four communication conditions—conditions that must be met for

successful communication to happen. They focus, in turn, on the need to have attention, the importance of having a shared language, the need to avoid misinterpretation and the significance of understanding attitudes, values and preferences.

3.1 Attention

There is no hope of communication if a sender in a communicative process does not have the attention of the audience. Furthermore, communication has not succeeded if a message is not processed by an audience even though he or she observes the communicative act in question. This can happen, for instance, when an audience is so stressed or full of anxiety that a message does not really enter his or her consciousness [4, 5].

Having attention is particularly important in communication of action-guiding information. If such information is not received, the consequences—lack of action or nonintentional actions—can have dramatic negative consequences.

The importance of securing attention has a psychological dimension as well. If the argumentative basis for a decision does not reach the attention of an audience, there is an increased risk that the audience will fail to understand the rationale of the decision. For instance, changes in an organization can easily be experienced as negative by those who are affected by them if the justifications for the changes are not communicated properly [9]. Such lack of understanding of underlying reasons can cause a variety of negative consequences related to motivation, conflicts and (thereby) efficiency [20, 25].

3.2 Language

Having attention is no guarantee for communication. Consider a sender who aims to communicate something to an audience. The sender might have the attention of the audience—the audience might be able to observe the sender's communicative acts—but if they do not have a shared language, then the acts will not be interpreted as intended. Understood like this, having a shared language is also a necessary condition for communication. Communication breaks down if senders and audiences understand the language that is used—no matter what kind of language it is—in very different ways.

In philosophy of mind and language, there are various conceptions of what it means to share a language [6, 7, 37, 45, 46]. However, most theorists have, in one sense or another, tied this to exchange of concepts. As an illustration, consider as an everyday example a person who aims to communicate his belief that it is raining to another person. What is commonly defined as the propositional content of this belief is made up of the three concepts *it*, *is* and *raining*, and communication is successful if the audience associates the speech act with the same concepts as the sender, if the audience understands that the sender means *it is raining*. The sender and the audience need, in other words, to have a sufficiently similar understanding of the verbal or nonverbal expressions of meaning that are used [6, 46].

3.3 Associative misinterpretation

Together, having attention and having a shared language are still only necessary conditions for successful communication. The reason is that what is directly expressed in language is only the top of the iceberg in social interaction. In typical verbal or nonverbal dialogue, communicators ascribe to each other many beliefs and thoughts that are not literally expressed in words. Theoretically, the main

reason is that in normal dialogue, communicators intend to be as economical as possible when they convey meaning. As Sperber and Wilson [47] observe:

> *When communicating humans automatically aim at maximal relevance, i.e. maximal cognitive effect for minimal processing effort. This is the single general factor which determines the course of human information processing.*

The point is that in ordinary communication we only say what we think we need in order to convey all that we want to communicate. We include the part of the communicative iceberg that is beneath the visible surface and hope, due to more or less contextual or conventional norms for interpretation, that the audience also gets the part of the message that is beneath the directly visible surface in the way we intend it to be understood [48].

An everyday example from an organization might be a situation involving a manager and an employee who talk about a job task. The manager asks 'Is it possible for you to look into this?' The employee interprets this as an informal request, but the manager, we can imagine, understands this differently. What he means is that he wants the employee to take responsibility for the task.

The lack of clarity about this might cause a misunderstanding and have negative consequences. We can imagine that the employee does nothing about the task—he thinks this is a viable option in the light of the managers' vague question—and that the manager after some time discovers that nothing has been done. He says to the employee: 'But I asked you to do this!' The employee gets frustrated. He thinks that the criticism is unfair in the light of what the manager actually asked him—he thinks that his interpretation of the question was valid.

In this kind of situation, it is always a good question if someone is to blame for the misunderstanding. Initially, one might think of this in the light of the idea of a social norm: If there is a common social norm for how an utterance should be interpreted, and if only one of the parties interpret a message in accordance with this norm, then the other party is, at least *prima facie*, to blame for the misunderstanding.

Here, the idea of a social norm can be understood broadly, as a norm in the whole language community. But it can also be understood more narrowly within a context or social group, as a way of interpreting what have been established as part of a culture [8, 43]. If there are many different contextual or group-related interpretative frameworks within an organization, then this can have a huge negative impact on organizational communication and, thereby, on organizational performance.

In many cases one might appeal to such broad or narrow norms in formal or informal analyses of misunderstandings—one can legitimately argue that a person's interpretation is non-standard compared to a relevant norm that it is normal to defer to. However, in some cases it is far from clear that there are any definite norms that should govern interpretation. In such cases it is often not justified to blame one or both communicators for the misunderstanding.

3.4 Relational communication

The abovementioned communication conditions focus on thoughts and beliefs—information that is expressed and interpreted. The final condition focuses on a remaining aspect of communication, what one might call the relational aspect of social interaction: In addition to beliefs and thoughts, senders attempt to convey attitudes, preferences and values, and communication is only successful if audiences interpret these mental states as they are expressed by senders.

The idea of similar interpretation is the same: A sender who intends to convey a mental state like an emotion, experience or attitude must be experienced in the intended way by the audience. The immediate consequence of this is that it is not how a person defines himself as someone who expresses a specific mental state that defines successful communication of this kind, but how he is experienced by his audience.

An example might be the attitude of empathy. Consider an employee in an organization who thinks of himself as empathetic in dialogue with a colleague. The employee's understanding of himself does not help for communicative purposes if the colleague does not experience him as empathetic. Or consider a manager who defines himself as a friendly person. There might be factors that cause his audience to experience him differently in a dialogue, for instance, the manager's body language. Then, for communicative purposes, he does not appear friendly to his audience. It is how the audience perceives him that determines how successful the communication is.

The same goes for a range of other non-conceptual mental states like values, interests and preferences. The way a sender intends to be understood must correspond to how the audience experiences him. Incongruent communication—communication in which there is an inconsistency between verbal and nonverbal language—causes uncertainty about intentions and negative interpretations [5]. Fundamentally, the significance of avoiding this kind of communication is connected to the need to clearly express positive attitudes in order to create a positive culture [49].

Together, the four communication conditions I have outlined can be understood as principles for communication that it is especially important what communicators think of. Communication as a process involves many aspects, and the process can be understood as a cycle: The audience needs to close the communicative loop, and in order to get a confirmation that a message has been received, senders need to get feedback from the audience [4, 5]. The four conditions above are core pitfalls that communicators easily can fall into when trying to secure two-way dialogue.

Turned around, the conditions can also be understood as conceptual resources. To each condition, there is a crucial question that any communicator can use as a mental checklist for evaluating the quality of social interaction: (1) Do I have the attention of my audience? (2) Do we have a shared language? (3) Do we interpret beliefs and thoughts that are not directly expressed in language in a sufficiently similar way? (4) Do the attitudes, values and preferences that we ascribe to each other correspond to what we intend to convey? These questions can be understood as methodological tools that can be implemented individually or collectively to sharpen communication practices.

4. Applications

The need to meet basic communication conditions is general and therefore also of crucial importance in organizations. Such conditions have not, however, been linked to organizational culture: In the academic literature, the question of how it is possible to change organizational culture by implementing communication principles has not received much attention.

The significance of this question is striking on personal levels. After all, and as Eisenberg and Riley ([43], p. 316) notes, 'the most significant information exchange among organizations has always occurred through personal flows'. However, the need to focus on communication as part of culture is recognized to be important on

system levels as well. This has, in particular, been connected to the importance of creating communicative networks and especially to analyses of how such networks arise. Nevertheless, as Gailhurst [8] observes, the literature 'focuses much more on the creation of networks than their maintenance or dissolution … [and] this reflects a serious shortcoming in current theoretical perspectives and empirical research'. This is the main reason why analyses of communicative cultures are so relevant. Such analyses can explore how formal and informal communication networks actually work.

This dependency between communication and the dynamics of cultures has been addressed in many ways. The important point for the present purposes is that both on individual and general levels, the four communication conditions above have striking implications for how it is possible to strengthen communicative organizational cultures. It is not difficult to understand how this is so.

4.1 A culture for efficient information exchange

Related to the abovementioned initial communication condition about attention, the most fundamental principle is to create a culture for involving all relevant persons in communication loops, so that relevant persons are included. Simply put, if action-guiding information does not reach the attention of relevant recipients, then members of the organization will not act as presupposed and thereby, at least typically, not in the best interest of the organization.

This point is of crucial importance on management levels and, more generally, in analyses of how communication channels should be designed throughout an organization [38]. It is, however, also significant for individuals, in the light of their personal responsibility for securing communication. In particular, it is an important individual responsibility to make sure that one does not become what Varey [27] labels an 'information dump'—a person who does not pass on information that should be passed on.

The amount of information that flows through organizations can be huge. A crucial communication principle is therefore to avoid creation of too much communicative noise—contextual disturbances or transmission of information that is not necessary or sufficiently important. Furthermore, it is imperative to clarify the most essential information. A thumb rule in communication theory is that if it is important to express a message in a clear and concise way, and if it is possible to state the message in such a way, then this should be done. This will normally be a matter of formulating the message in a language that expresses clear concepts that the communicators have a shared understanding of.

Another example of a principle related to attention that can be part of a common culture is the principle of giving summaries of information. This is something that typically should be done towards the end of a meeting or a formal talk like an appraisal interview. Furthermore, many dialogues involve a variety of sub-discourses, and it is not easy to identify the most important information for audiences. Controlling that information that has been received and digested can therefore be of crucial importance.

4.2 Creating a shared language

As noted above, barriers of meaning can create communicative gaps. In organizational theory, this has often been connected to barriers of meaning—inconsistent or even incommensurable ideas of what language means [13]. There are several ways in which such barriers occur in organizations, but many can be traced to roles, positions and opposing ideologies.

More fundamentally, the need to have a shared language can be tied to the significance of consensus. Brutal disagreement—conflicts—can have a variety of negative consequences [10, 44]. Many of the conflicts that arise in organizations are semantic conflicts. They are caused by inconsistent conceptions of what language expressions mean.

By creating a shared understanding of key concepts as part of a common culture, it is easier to avoid such conflicts. It is also important to remember that inconsistent conceptions of what expressions mean can be intimately tied to group thinking within an organization. Two good examples can be the expressions 'quality' and 'efficiency'. On management levels, interpretation of these expressions is often influenced by economic-administrative ideology: The word 'efficiency' is typically associated with economic performance and 'quality' with observable quality indicators. On first-line levels, on the other hand, 'efficiency' is less connected to resources, administrative thinking and economy, and 'quality' is often associated with professional standards—like the need to meet medical norms for sound patient treatment in organizations like hospitals.

If these kinds of inconsistent conceptions of what language mean are not uncovered, discussions about how it is possible to improve 'efficiency' and 'quality' can easily escalate into conflicts [13]. When this happens, the real root cause of the problem is that the parties in the conflicts have inconsistent understandings of the language that is used. These conflicts are, in reality, pseudo conflicts, and they can often be resolved in a simple way, by making the opposing parties aware of the fact that they understand language very differently.

4.3 Creating a culture for norms of interpretation

I emphasized that having a shared language is not sufficient for communication. When people interpret each other, they do so on the basis of vast and huge assumptions about the part of the message that is not directly expressed in language.

As noted above, the concept of a 'norm of interpretation' is highly relevant in analyses of poor and successful communication. Interpretation is always made on the basis of implicit or explicit norms of interpretation. Common concepts are, obviously, often used in interaction in organizations, and in such cases interpretation of utterances is crucially connected to 'outside' norms of public meaning. Some of these norms are explicit, others are more implicit. But no matter which of these categories relevant frameworks of meaning fall into, senders and audiences need to have learned the same 'external' norms—they need to share a sufficiently similar interpretive perspective.

It would be too demanding to expect that it is possible to create an organizational culture in which everyone has the same ideas of how utterances should be interpreted by relevant members of the organization. However, some potentially vague or disputed concepts can often have a central role in organizational discourses. By creating, as part of the organizational culture, a shared understanding of how these concepts should be interpreted, it is possible to prevent many unnecessary misunderstandings that can easily lead to conflict.

One example could be the concept of an information meeting. There is usually no fundamental *semantic* problem with this concept in organizational discourse: Communicators typically share a core conception of what a meeting is and what it means to give information in a meeting. Communicators can nevertheless have inconsistent ideas of how such a meeting should be arranged. Some might think that it is okay to have discussions in an information meeting. Others might think that such meetings should only involve one-way communication—typically from manager groups to employees affected by changes decided on management levels.

Disagreement about how successful a meeting has been can be caused by these kinds of inconsistent conceptions.

Another even more everyday example can be the word 'have' as in a message 'We have to do this' about a job task in a business. What does this mean? Some might interpret such an utterance literally and think that everything is at stake if the task is not done—that the business will go bankrupt (and a person who thinks this might react even more negatively if he thinks that it is impossible, within the given competence or resource situation, to get the job done). Others might think of the utterance in a weaker way—as a moral suggestion that the task in question merely should be done. Such misunderstandings can lead to different actions. The moral interpretation can easily lead someone to give priority to other tasks, and those who interpret the utterance in this way can end up in a conflict with those who interpret the utterance in the hard 'We *have* to do this' sense.

4.4 Creating a culture for communicating positive attitudes

In addition to the informative and action-guiding aspect of organizational communication, many theorists have recognised that manager-employee dialogue has 'softer' relational aspects and 'a human side' [31]. As Hargie observes, it has been extensively documented that:

> *… when we are suffering emotional difficulties, we remember how we are treated by managers and co-workers … Concern shown for an employee, especially by a manager, is reciprocated in terms of increased attachment and loyalty to the corporation, with a resulting increase in effort ([12], p. 37).*

It is first and foremost personal motivation and organizational commitment that are affected by lack of intimacy [8, 21, 50]. And such attitudes, it has been recognised, are grounded in well-functioning relations with managers. It has been extensively documented that employees appreciate communicative managers.

To a large extent, this is a question of being informative and communicating positive attitudes like concern, care and empathy when this is needed. As noted above, to really communicate, an attitude involves more than expressing it. It has to be experienced in the intended way by the audience in the communicative process.

There is, of course, many things individual members of an organization can do in order to contribute in creating a culture in which practices of communicating positive attitudes are recognized as important. Furthermore, some persons are, more often than others, disposed to interpret the world through a negative filter, and by understanding the importance of having a less negative perspective, individuals can improve their relations to others [44, 49].

On system levels, collective learning about the importance of good relations can have individual implications so that the organizational culture as a whole is improved. Such initiatives can, to a large extent, use resources from positive psychology and empirical studies, models and theories about job engagement and motivational behaviour from organizational theory. The potential of such collective learning has, in particular, been connected to human resource management. Many studies have shown that there is a correlation between inspiring management and employee motivation and, in turn, between motivation and organizational performance [15, 20].

Again, the point is that when there is a collective focus on this, then positive changes become part of a cultural improvement. It concerns how something is done generally. By making the importance of relational aspects of interaction part of a shared consciousness—as 'this is how we do it'—then the shared focus will shape practices in a positive way.

Much more could be said about the importance of shared implementation of communication practices. However, doing that would fall outside the limits of this article. The aim has been of a more general character: I have argued that focusing on issues related to communication is important for building organizational culture. The communication principles I have focused on are especially important for the purpose of reaching this goal, so there is a special incentive for implementing on them within the organization. But the importance of establishing a communicative culture is more general.

5. Conclusion

In the literature on organization theory, the dependency between organizational communication, culture and performance has been recognized and explored in many ways. Focusing on this dependency falls under what Gailhurst [8] calls a dialogue perspective on organizational communication generally and on manager-employee communication in particular:

> *An individualistic focus produces the tendency to see the leader's communication in monologic and transmission terms. A system focus emphasizes meaning as a social construction through leader-constituent dialogue.*

Focusing on organizational culture as a communicative practice falls under the latter focus and has been tied to the correlation between good 'two-way' dialogue and organizational performance. That there is this kind of correlation and that it is important have been recognized in the literature. However, there have not been many studies that have contributed to explaining how this should be understood in more detail.

The aim of this article has been to contribute to this 'how' issue. I have done this by introducing key concepts from communication theory and explained how the concepts are relevant for understanding and improving culture. A communicative organizational culture, I have argued, can be improved by focusing on attention, language, interpretation and attitudes. In each way these concepts give substance to the idea of a relational culture—how it can be created, maintained and, most importantly, developed.

Obviously, much more could be said about communication and culture. In this sense an important aim of this chapter has been to set a general agenda: Good communication is crucial for establishing a good culture. Consequently, in order to get a sufficiently rich focus on the significance of organizational culture, future theoretical and empirical research cannot ignore organizational dialogue as a research area. Furthermore, research should not only explore how communication theory is relevant for understanding organizational culture. There is also a need for scientific models and principles that can be used in a normative sense to improve culture.

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