THINKING THROUGH COMMUNICATION: An Introduction to the Study of Human Communication, 4/e

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SAMPLE CHAPTER

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Organizations are everywhere. In the United States today, there is no way to escape their influence. Public school systems, organized religions, groups such as the Boy and Girl Scouts, hospitals, banks, charities and relief agencies, fast-food restaurant chains, and certainly the United States government, are all examples of organizations that have an impact, large or small, on our lives. Each of us is affected by and, in turn, affects organizations. As such, we are all “stakeholders” in the complex, goal-directed, social systems we call organizations.

This chapter is about communication in complex organizations. In looking at this communication context, we’ll combine traditional and contemporary views of what organizational communication is. We’ll begin by considering how information flows through organizations, examining informal pathways such as the organizational grapevine as well as more formal communication routes. We’ll also consider the importance of building healthy workplace relationships. We’ll then take a more interpretive view and discuss ways in which organizational cultures are created and maintained through communication. Finally, we’ll focus on two specific skill areas, interviewing and use of organizational technology. Throughout, we’ll concern ourselves with some of the ethical issues that confront organizations today.

Each of us is affected by and, in turn, affects organizations.
What Is an Organization?

An organization is a system consisting of a large number of people working together in a structured way to accomplish multiple goals. The college or university you attend, for example, is a complex organization that involves many people working together to achieve a common educational goal. Each person plays a different role depending on his or her position within the organization. Faculty, administrators, staff, and students have their own organizational identities and their own ways of behaving, and the success of the university depends in large part on each group’s willingness and ability to fit into the university’s structures. If, for example, faculty started to behave like students, or students like administrators, the whole enterprise would likely fall apart (although the results might be quite interesting). So, as you read this chapter, remember that you’re already part of a complex organization. Consider how communication flows through your campus. Think about how power is distributed and used. And try to use what you learn about organizational communication to diagnose problems and understand the climate of the complex organization of which you are currently an integral member.

Characteristics of Organizations

Organizations have several characteristics that make them unique. Among these are interdependence, hierarchical structure, linkage to the environment, and a dependence on communication.

Interdependence

Perhaps the characteristic that best defines an organization is interdependence. Interdependence means that all the members within an organization are connected to one another. They share a common fate: what affects one part of the organization affects every other part. Interdependence is the reason people join organizations in the first place. People in organizations know that by working together they can accomplish goals they could not achieve on their own.

Hierarchical Structure

In addition, organizations are hierarchical. A hierarchy is a system that is divided into orders and ranks. In a hierarchy, status and power are not distributed equally: some people are subordinate to others. The classic form of the hierarchical organization is the bureaucracy. In a bureaucracy, there is a clear chain of command. Every member of the organization reports to someone else who is responsible for overseeing his or her work. Jobs are usually specialized, and employees are rewarded on the basis of performance. When we use the term bureaucracy now, we generally equate it with red tape and inefficiency. However, when sociologist Max Weber first used the term, the bureaucracy was thought to be the ideal organization.
for Western industrial democracies because of its efficiency and impersonality. Since Weber, the concept of strict hierarchical control has been criticized. Nevertheless, division of labor and recognition of status differences are still characteristic of most complex organizations.

**Linkage to the Environment**

It is important to keep in mind that, like other living systems, organizations are linked to their environments. Organizations depend on their surroundings for resources and energy. Just like living creatures, organizations cannot survive without a healthy environment. And just like living creatures, organizations change (and sometimes destroy) their environments. An obvious example occurs when a manufacturing company depletes local resources. But there are other, less apparent, instances as well. When a large corporation moves its corporate headquarters, the move has an impact on the well-being of its former community. When a college or university expands, it creates pressures (for example, energy, transportation, and housing needs) as well as opportunities (both economic and cultural) for those who share its environment. The fact that organizations are linked to the communities around them means that they must be aware of the damage they can sometimes cause. They must also be capable of adapting to changes in the environment that surrounds them.

**Dependence on Communication**

It's common practice to talk about organizations as though they had an identity independent of the activities that define them. When the newspaper reports that “the Fed is lowering interest rates,” the Fed seems to be a “thing.” When we announce, “I'll be working at MTV next year,” MTV sounds like a place. But Tom D. Daniels and his colleagues point out that we should not think of organizations as “things,” or as “places,” but rather as elaborate and complicated forms of human behavior. In other words, “an organization is not merely a container for behavior. Rather, an organization literally is human behavior.” And one of the most important kinds of organizational behavior is communication. People in organizations argue, cooperate, make decisions, persuade one another, solve problems, and forge relationships. When they do these things (and others like them), they engage in organizational communication.

One of the things that make organizational communication so important is that the very nature of the organization depends on the way members communicate. Marshall Scott Poole and Robert McPhee have pointed out the importance of communication in creating and maintaining organizational identity, or climate. Taking what is called a structurational approach, they believe that there is a
reciprocal relationship between organizational structures and organizational communication. How does this work? Well, as individuals settle into organizations, they begin to communicate in ways they feel are appropriate to the organization. For example, they may learn that complaints and excuses are considered unprofessional. By following perceived rules—for example, by hanging tough when things get bad and taking criticism on the chin—they create an organizational climate that stresses personal accountability and individual responsibility. This climate, in turn, may generate new rules of behavior—such as the rule that employees should take tough stands and argue forcefully for their beliefs. Poole and his colleagues base their theories on the work of sociologist Anthony Giddens. Giddens believes that social structures (including organizational structures such as climate) are continually produced and reproduced by human interaction. Giddens once said that the structures in human societies are “buildings that are at every moment being reconstructed by the very bricks that compose them.”4 Organizations, too, are structures—structures built on a foundation of human communication.

Why Communicate in Organizations?

Good communication skills are absolutely essential to organizational life. As we just saw, the way we communicate affects our feelings about our organizations as well as the ways they structure themselves. In addition, it’s through communication that people in organizations coordinate their efforts and achieve their goals. When communication succeeds, the organization is likely to be effective and efficient and workers satisfied and committed. When it fails, both the organization and its individual members suffer. Charles Redding, a scholar who studied organizations for many years, lists just a few of the problems that can occur when communication is faulty:

. . . insensitive supervision, confusing instructions, fruitless meetings, deceptive announcements, vicious defense of “turf,” biased (or entirely omitted) performance evaluations, misleading reports, empty promises, backstabbing tête-à-têtes with the boss, privacy-invading questions, sexist or racist harassment, scapegoating memorandum,
clumsy explanations, paucity of information, conflicting orders, ambiguity (both intentional and unintentional), worship of inane regulations, refusal to listen to bad news, and rejection of innovative ideas—not to mention stubborn reliance upon autocratic, downward-directed messages in general. . . .  

Only by learning to communicate effectively in organizations can we recognize and avoid problems such as these.

Not only can being skilled in organizational communication help us avoid common pitfalls and frustrations, it can also enhance our careers. Organizations look for and reward employees “who understand 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.” Such employees have “more successful careers and contribute more fully to their organizations” than do people without these skills.  

Modes of Discourse in Organizations

Communication in the organizational context differs in some fundamental ways from everyday interpersonal or group communication. First, because organizations are hierarchical, members are expected to act not just as individuals but as incumbents of organizational positions. This latter identity puts some restrictions on communication. As Charles Conrad points out, even a strong personal relationship with a supervisor doesn’t mean that we can communicate with that supervisor as we would with a friend. While at work, we have to maintain at least some degree of relational distance and detachment. Because organizational communication is driven not only by our own personal goals but also by the need to work together to achieve common goals, it is more formal and deferential than communication in other contexts.

Second, there are unique types of communication, or communication genres, that occur only in organizations. Business letters, memoranda, meetings, interviews, and so on are widely recognized genres in American business. Each genre is governed by rules of discourse that define not only what should and should not be conveyed but also how it should be conveyed. Letters of recommendation, for example, must speak to the qualifications of the candidate while avoiding irrelevant information. A recommendation letter (and this is a true example) that starts out, “Although she is no beauty, you can count on her to get the job done,” violates the rules of proper business etiquette, betrays a sexist bias, and gives irrelevant information. Part of fitting into an organization is knowing what you can and cannot say in certain situations and choosing the correct genre to convey your message.
Communication genres and the rules that define them are, of course, culture-specific. The American coffee break, for example, could be considered an informal communication genre. But what goes on there is not the same as what occurs when Japanese stop for tea. Bruce Feilor, who worked as a teacher in Japan, provides a perfect example when he describes the meaning of a uniquely Japanese organizational genre, the *aisatsu* tea-break. When Feilor first reported to his office, work ground to a halt as he and his principal were served cups of green tea and a plate of intricately wrapped sponge cakes. As he explains:

> Aisatsu greeting ceremonies like this occurred in school and in my office no fewer than eight times in the course of a normal day. . . . That meant eight times a day everyone must rise and bow to the guest. Eight trays of tea that must be made, served, drunk, retrieved, and cleaned. Eight plates of sponge cakes stuffed with bean paste, fancy rice crackers, cookies or plastic containers of jelly that must be eaten. It didn’t seem to matter what was said in these meetings. Their purpose was to establish the unofficial paths along which tacit deals and arrangements are made. As I was . . . drinking tea and bowing to strangers, I was creating lines along which I could later walk, if need be.9

Although the lines of communication may be different in the United States, they still serve the same ends: creating an atmosphere in which the work of the organization can be accomplished. To work effectively in organizations, one must know when to stick to well-worn paths and when to blaze new trails.

**Managing Organizational Communication**

Early scholars in the field of organizational communication were quick to realize that information is a precious organizational resource. They recognized that high-quality information is the fuel that powers organizational decision making and that the ability to create, analyze, store, and retrieve information is a source of power within any organization. Such scholars therefore turned their attention to the study of *information flow*, the path information takes as it passes through the organization. They believed that effective use of communication channels was directly linked to organizational effectiveness and employee satisfaction.

**Using Formal and Informal Channels**

As traditional scholars learned about organizations, they started to distinguish between two kinds of channels: formal and informal. Formal channels of communication occur when information flows through a structured chain of command officially recognized by the organization. For example, if a worker hands in a report to his or her manager, who then sends it on to an immediate supervisor, information
flows through formal channels. When information takes a more personal and less structured path, informal channels of communication come into play. When a sales representative meets the head of personnel’s secretary in the lunchroom and discusses rumors about cutbacks, the worker is taking advantage of informal channels. Both forms of communication are essential to the life of the organization.

**Understanding Formal Organizational Structure**

Formal channels are often made explicit in an organizational chart, a visual representation of the organization’s chain of command. Organizational charts, such as the Campus Safety Organizational Chart shown in Figure 8.1, specify formal relationships between organizational positions. They indicate where, in a hierarchy of responsibility and power, each job is located. They show who supervises whom, and they also illustrate preferred communication pathways.

As you can see in Figure 8.1, information can flow in several directions. **Downward flow** occurs when someone near the top of the organization sends a message to someone near the bottom (for example, when the associate director of campus safety sends a memo to the escort service supervisor). We find **upward flow** when a message travels from the bottom of the chart toward the top (for example, when a message from a records clerk ends up on the desk of the operations director). Finally, **horizontal flow** takes place when communication occurs between people at the same level (for example, when an investigator discusses an automobile break-in with a parking attendant and a patrol officer or when the heads of the community service, training, and administration departments meet to discuss budget needs.)

**Downward Communication** Instructions, appraisals, and announcements are examples of communications that typically flow downward. When a supervisor discusses the results of a yearly evaluation with a subordinate or explains travel policies to new employees, the supervisor is using downward communication. Unfortunately, employees in most organizations report dissatisfaction with downward communication. Daniels and his colleagues list some of the problems responsible for this dissatisfaction. Included are “inadequacy of information, inappropriate means of diffusing information, filtering of information, and a general pervasive climate of dominance and submission.”

*Communication overload is a common problem in complex organizations.*
Organizational Chart: Campus Safety Department at XYZ University

- Director of Campus Safety
- Associate Director
- Assistant Director
- Assistant Director
- Operations Director
- Investigations Lieutenant
- Community Service Lieutenant
- Training Director
- Administrative Lieutenant
- Patrol Supervisor
- Traffic Control Supervisor
- Crime Prevention Specialist
- Escort Service Supervisor
- Personnel Manager
- Business Manager
- Patrol Officers
- Investigators
- Student Escorts
- Clerical Staff
- Administrative Assistant
- Parking Attendants
- Records Clerks
Dissatisfaction with the amount and type of information received is a serious problem in most organizations. Employees report, on the one hand, that they often don't receive enough information to do their jobs. On the other hand, they report receiving too much information. Often, they feel buried under an avalanche of forms, letters, memos, bulletins, reports, and e-mails. Given these seemingly contradictory responses, it is reasonable to conclude that organizational members receive a lot of information but that, unfortunately, it is not the information they want or need. This may occur because managers don't consider the needs of employees when they send out messages or because they don't choose the correct medium. Several scholars have found that organizational members receive too much mediated and not enough face-to-face communication from their superiors.\(^\text{11}\)

In addition to inundating employees with information that is not particularly useful, downward communication often contains information that is misleading or downright wrong. If you've ever played the game called “telephone,” in which players pass on a message by whispering it to the person next in line, you know that messages change as they pass from person to person. This change is known as **message filtering**, and it is a serious problem in formal communication. As messages flow downward, some details are omitted, others are added, and the gist of the message may get lost in the process. The more links through which information must pass (the “taller” the organization), the more likely messages are to undergo distortion. Table 8.1 lists some of the kinds of distortion that occur during **serial transmission** (transmission of a message in a one-way direction from one person to the next.)

There are a number of things that can be done to improve accuracy during serial transmission. First, managers can build redundancy into their messages. Second, employees can ask for clarification when messages are ambiguous. Unfortunately, these simple solutions are rarely used. Adding redundancy takes thought

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Leveling</th>
<th>Details are left out as the amount of information in the message is reduced. The message grows shorter.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sharpening</td>
<td>Certain high points are given special significance and elaboration.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assimilation</td>
<td>Memory of the message is affected by the sender’s frame of reference. Unfamiliar material is changed so that it makes sense to the sender.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

and effort, and superiors are often too rushed to think carefully about their communications. In addition, because they don't want to run the risk of putting themselves in a bad light, subordinates are often reluctant to ask questions of their supervisors. Furthermore, both superiors and subordinates may not know that there is a problem. Most of us understand our own meanings, so we assume that others will also understand us. Managers in particular tend to overestimate the clarity and frequency of their communications.\textsuperscript{12}

Some message distortion is inevitable in any system that uses serial transmission, even when those involved do their best to communicate accurately. When information is deliberately withheld or distorted, as it often is, the result is that much worse. When information is sensitive, managers may deliberately distort their messages. If managers anticipate that a piece of news will anger employees, decrease the organization's competitive edge, or be criticized by external stakeholders, they may decide to keep the information to themselves or even to lie about it. Unfortunately, this practice creates a climate of mistrust, damaging the credibility of future downward communication.

**Upward Communication** Although most organizational messages flow downward, some flow from the bottom up. Typical of these are progress reports, warnings of job-related problems, and suggestions or feedback about organizational policies. When employees submit project reports, alert their superiors to changes in client needs, or express their objections to reorganization efforts, they are using upward communication.

Research shows that organizations often neglect upward communication, especially when it is negative or when it calls for organizational change. As a result, suggestion programs may be implemented in name only, with very little attention paid either by superiors or subordinates. Furthermore, upward communication is often distorted. Subordinates fear being seen as the bearers of bad tidings and tend to withhold information that will reflect badly on them. Research shows, for example, that subordinates who are insecure, who don't trust their superiors, or who are very ambitious tend to distort upward flow and withhold negative information.\textsuperscript{13}

In addition, gatekeepers may affect upward flow. A gatekeeper is someone (like an administrative assistant or receptionist) who is in a position to pass on or discard information. While gatekeepers can provide a valuable service by filtering out trivial messages, they can also suppress information that is badly needed. As we saw in the last chapter, one of the characteristics of groupthink is the presence of self-appointed mind-guards who paint an unrealistic picture of events in order to protect the leader from negative information.

What can an organization do to improve upward flow? First, managers can seek out bad news and encourage subordinates to tell the truth, no matter how negative it may be.\textsuperscript{14} In addition, unnecessary gate-
keepers can be eliminated or special channels can be provided to bypass cumbersome serial transmission. Some organizations have a special position called ombudsman. This person’s job is to listen to workers at lower levels of the organization and pass their concerns directly to the top. Finally, the most important thing managers can do to increase upward flow is to establish a climate of trust and openness.

**Horizontal Communication** When information travels between people at the same level in the organization, horizontal communication is being used. U.S. organizations tend to prefer vertical to horizontal communication. However, horizontal communication is used in such situations as when employees from several departments work on teams to determine ways to develop and market new products.

A number of factors can make horizontal communication ineffective. One occurs when experts who have been trained in different areas try to work together. Often, differences in the way they approach problems get in the way. A product design engineer, for example, may, as a matter of professional pride, want to develop the most sophisticated product possible. A human factors engineer, on the other hand, may look for a product that is quick and simple to use. And a representative from marketing may be concerned only with a product that has built-in market appeal. When faced with a problem, each may interpret it in the light of his or her interests. And even if members of different departments manage to agree on an approach, they often use the technical jargon of their respective fields. The vocabulary used by a senior chemist may be unintelligible to the people from advertising and vice versa. In addition, territoriality may rear its ugly head. When organizational resources are limited, departments are often in competition for their share of the pie and may not communicate openly. Or individuals from different divisions may be anxious to avoid criticism by placing the blame on each other. Such situations do not encourage trust and cooperation. Team members can overcome these differences by trying to see things from each other’s points of view, by checking to make sure they understand one another, and, most important, by establishing respect and a climate of cooperation.

**Taking Advantage of Informal Structures**

In everyday life, people are connected to one another in complex and intriguing ways. It’s not uncommon to meet a stranger and, after talking awhile, discover that you have friends in common, that you are in fact connected to one another through a network of acquaintances. It may be a small world after all. To find out exactly how interconnected the world is, psychologist Stanley Milgram set up an experiment in which he asked individuals from Nebraska and Kansas to try to contact strangers in Massachusetts.\(^{15}\) His subjects were each given a message and asked to send it to a personal acquaintance. The acquaintances were then asked to forward the message to someone they knew personally. This continued until the message reached its goal. Surprisingly, it took on average only five or six links. Milgram
discovered that we are all part of a giant network, connected to others (including Kevin Bacon) by “six degrees of separation.”

Acquaintance networks like those studied by Milgram also occur in organizations. People are linked to one another through personal relationships that often do not mirror the formal channels found in organizational charts. The problem with formal channels is that they are artificially constructed. Because they fail to take into account employees’ social bonds and friendship choices, employees often bypass them by creating informal links to people they trust or like. Informal channels serve to counterbalance the inefficiency and distortion found in formal channels. When employees want to find out what’s really going on, they may turn to informal channels. As Charles Conrad points out, “if organizational communication really was restricted to formal channels, most people, in most organizations, most of the time could honestly say that they do not know what is going on.”

The Grapevine Informal channels are often referred to as the grapevine. When someone says, “I heard it through the grapevine,” he or she means that the news came through an informal channel. Where did this usage arise? Evidently, during the Civil War, telegraph lines were threaded through trees in a complicated pattern resembling a grapevine. Later on, the term was adopted to describe any system of messages that does not follow a straight-line, predictable pattern.

Susan Hellwig and Keith Davis have both studied grapevine communication and have come to a number of conclusions. First, the grapevine arises because individuals have personal interests and needs that are not satisfied by formal channels. According to Keith Davis, “a lively grapevine reflects the deep psychological need of people to talk about their jobs and their company as a central life interest. Without it, the company would literally be sick.”

Second, although it’s common to equate the grapevine with rumor, rumors comprise only a small proportion of the information on the grapevine. The grapevine contains useful and valid information as well. Third, information on the grapevine may be incomplete, but it is quite accurate. In fact, it has been estimated to be anywhere from 75-percent to 95-percent accurate. Sometimes, it may even be more reliable than formally conveyed information. Conrad argues that it is also richer in content than formal communication, and, because it usually operates on a face to face basis, it also allows for immediate feedback and clarification. Although managers may caution employees not to use the grapevine, their concern may be due to their own lack of control rather than to the grapevine’s accuracy.

Network Analysis Informal communication can be very influential. Organizations should therefore understand and take advantage of informal networks. One tool for understanding networks is called network analysis, a method of mapping
informal communication patterns. Network analysts can identify who is connected to whom in the organization. They can also specify the role each individual plays in an informal network. For example, some individuals, called opinion leaders, are at the center of things; they are the first person others go to for information. Other individuals, called isolates, have very few connections with coworkers; they are “out of the loop” when it comes to information. In times of institutional change, it makes sense for management to seek out and discuss the situation with opinion leaders rather than with isolates. If opinion leaders can be persuaded that a proposed change is good, they can influence others in their networks. It also makes sense to try to reintegrate isolates into the organization, especially if the isolates are keeping valuable ideas to themselves. Table 8.2 lists some other key network roles. As you look at the table, ask yourself how you, as a manager, could use network analysis to enhance organizational communication.

**Table 8.2**  
**Network Roles**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Boundary spanner or cosmopolite</td>
<td>An organizational member who has contact with individuals outside the organization’s boundaries. Often, boundary spanners tend to occur at the top or bottom of organizations. They represent the organization and can bring valuable information into the organization.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bridge</td>
<td>A member of a clique who has connections with another clique.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clique</td>
<td>A group of people who communicate more with each other than they do with others in the organization. Members of cliques may have similar jobs or share a common status.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isolate</td>
<td>Someone who is outside the informal network. An isolate has no links to any clique.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liaison</td>
<td>Someone who connects two cliques without being a member of either one. A liaison may help spread information between people who might normally not speak to one another.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opinion Leader</td>
<td>Someone within a clique who can influence the attitudes and actions of members.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Star</td>
<td>The member of a network connected to the most members.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Loose and Tight Coupling

Another distinction that describes organizational communication is the construct of coupling. Organizations may be either tightly or loosely coupled. Subunits within an organization that are closely connected and highly interdependent are characterized by **tight coupling**. In such an organization, anything that influences one part of the organization influences all parts. Information flow is rapid. Tightly coupled organizations are easy to control and standardize. But, because subsystems are so closely connected, a problem that affects one part of the organization can affect all parts: in essence, subsystems are like dominoes—when the first goes down, the rest follow. Sociologist Charles Perrow suggests that one of the factors that led to the Three Mile Island nuclear accident was the fact that the system was so complex and so tightly coupled.

When the relationship between subunits in an organization is relatively weak, the organization is characterized by **loose coupling**. Each unit acts in a relatively independent fashion and an event that influences one unit may have only indirect effects on others. Here, information flow is more gradual. One of the apparent disadvantages of loose coupling, lack of standardization, may sometimes be an advantage. Because loosely coupled units are relatively independent, a given unit can respond rapidly and creatively to change. Of course, loose coupling does not always lead to positive results; units can also “preserve archaic, outmoded traditions.”

Colleges and universities are prime examples of loosely coupled organizations. Individual departments are usually fairly autonomous and will defend to the death any attempt by an outsider to interfere with the academic decisions they make.

Promoting Professionalism in Workplace Relationships

Getting along in an organization means more than simply passing on information efficiently or getting one’s reports in on time. It also involves creating healthy relationships with one’s coworkers. Too often, however, organizational relationships are marked by petty jealousies, resentments, stereotyping, and the like. In this section, we’ll look briefly at why building good relationships is so important and so difficult in the organizational setting.

Workplace Relationships

Most of us treat strangers very differently than we treat those we know and trust. We find it quite natural to distinguish between public and personal relationships: the former are more distant and more formal than the latter. But where exactly do coworkers fit on the continuum between stranger and intimate? The answer is that they fit somewhere in between. Because we spend so much time with them, it is
natural to feel a personal connection and want to be friends. Yet we are in the organization to get a task accomplished rather than to build social connections; we certainly aren’t paid to have fun and hang out. In the workplace, relationships must be professional, and part of fitting into an organization is figuring out just exactly what professional relationships are all about.

Professional relationships differ from personal relationships in at least two dimensions: choice and power. Choice is important. Although we choose our friends, we do not choose our coworkers; they are chosen for us by the organization. As professional consultant Bob Wall points out, “Companies do not bring people together to be friends. We are not there to develop some form of an extended family. Our primary purpose is to accomplish work, and the company is depending on us to be able to work together to make that happen.”21 Because employees are chosen for competence rather than personal compatibility, we may find ourselves working with people we would not otherwise choose as friends. Yet in order to work effectively together, we often have to put aside personal feelings of like or dislike.

Power is an added complication. Organizations are hierarchical; thus, differences in power and status are natural and expected. This means that while organizational members should recognize that everyone in the organization, regardless of status, has a contribution to make, they should also understand and acknowledge role and status differences. It doesn’t work to pretend that everyone is equal. The CEO and the guy or gal in the next cubicle don’t do the same work, and the organization does not expect that they be treated exactly the same way.

Acknowledging status differences and putting aside personal feelings are necessary in professional contexts, but they may not come naturally. Because we live in a world that stresses equality, deferring to authority may make us feel uncomfortable. Because we are usually encouraged to be open and candid, being polite may appear phony. Therefore, when we enter the world of work, we may have to learn new sets of behaviors in order to act professionally. Table 8.3 lists some general guidelines for communicating on the job. As you read them, think about whether you agree or disagree with them and about how easy or difficult they might be to follow. Also ask yourself what other rules you would add. And keep in mind that different organizations will call for different kinds of communication, so general rules must always be modified in specific situations.

Of course, acting professionally doesn’t mean keeping everyone at arm’s length and never developing friendships. Professional relationships can and do turn into personal ones. But workplace relationships should be grounded in professional behavior. As Wall suggests, “It will be easier to build personal relationships when we know that we can work powerfully together and disagree without taking things personally. . . . It is simply easier to like people when we are able to work out the mechanics of working together.”22
The Office Romance
Not only do people make friends at work, but also they occasionally fall in love. Handling workplace romance is particularly complicated. In the past, most organizations forbade office romances. If they were discovered, one partner (for heterosexual couples it was usually the woman) would be asked to leave. Nowadays, attitudes are more relaxed. Several studies have surveyed both participants and

Table 8.3 Some Rules for Professional Behavior

- **Understand and acknowledge that different people have different roles to play in the organization.**
  Take account of others’ organizational identities without losing sight of the fact that they are people too. Acknowledge roles, but don’t grovel or condescend. In addressing others, use formal titles until you’re told to do otherwise. Let your superior initiate and set the tone and content of a conversation. In other words, don’t corner the CEO in the hall and launch into a long conversation about your vacation.

- **Remember that you’re there to work.**
  Take care of personal business before or after work. It is generally considered inappropriate to make personal phone calls at the office if you are in an entry-level position. Similarly, you are not being paid to play computer games, download pin-ups, run through your repertoire of jokes, flirt, spend hours rehashing your personal problems, and the like. If others do so, disengage yourself politely.

- **Manage time and responsibilities effectively.**
  Arrive on time and stay till closing. Don’t call in sick unless you are sick. Take deadlines seriously. You may have managed to get extensions while you were in college, but the rules change after graduation. When you say you’re going to do something, follow through. You do your job dependably because other people are counting on you.

- **When it comes to relationships, balance inclusion and distance.**
  Greeting coworkers with a few friendly words, offering to help out in small ways, and inviting others to be part of group activities are actions that signal inclusion and help build a positive climate. Refraining from asking nosy questions and resisting the temptation to read others’ faxes, listen to their phone calls, or look through their desks show that you respect coworkers’ privacy. In other words, find a way to be pleasant without being overly familiar.

- **Remember that you share public space with others and must therefore take their comfort and concerns into account.**
  Your office is not your home, no matter how many hours you spend there. Don’t assault others with noxious stimuli such as smoke, heavy cologne, smelly sandwiches, or loud music. Be especially sensitive about eating or smoking at your desk. An office should look like an office, not a picnic area, and no one should have to breathe your second-hand smoke.

- **Know when to put aside personal feelings.**
  Open expression of like and dislike (either to others’ faces or behind their backs) can destroy a cooperative climate. Personal feelings are often irrelevant in a work environment, so learn to bite your tongue.

- **Figure out how to handle disagreement and criticism.**
  Disagreement and criticism are normal parts of office life. Without disagreements, we’d simply rubber-stamp every idea. Without criticism, how could we learn? When negative feedback is directed at you, don’t take it personally. And when you’re the one disagreeing, make sure that you focus on the issues, not the person.
observers and found the majority of respondents accept office relationships and feel that they make little difference in terms of work performance. Indeed, so common have they become that several modern etiquette books include advice for handling them. Grace Fox, for example, advises romantic partners to be discreet and tells them not to spend too much time together or send each other cute e-mails or faxes. She also advises them about what to do if the romance ends: “Don’t tell your side of what happened around the office. Don’t take it out on the person in meetings or in private. Treat each other as kindly as you can.”

Office romances are not without risks. They can disrupt work, cause perceptions that one of the partners is being given unfair advantages, isolate the lovers from the rest of the office, and affect the credibility of the organization in the eyes of clients. Because they play out in public, participants may lose control. Office romances are, in a sense, no longer dyadic relationships; they affect the attitudes and behaviors of all coworkers. Indeed, Gary Alan Fine criticizes office romances and even goes so far as to suggest, “If the company is a family, an organizational romance is incest.”

**Sexual Harassment**

Although dating coworkers is becoming more accepted, there is a thin line between pursuing a personal relationship and assaulting coworkers with offensive displays of affection and intimacy. Pursuing a coworker who is not interested in a romantic relationship can be a form of sexual harassment and can destroy a working relationship. According to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), sexual harassment consists of

*unwelcome sexual advances, request for sexual favors, and other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature . . . when submission to or rejection of this conduct explicitly or implicitly affects an individual’s employment, unreasonably interferes with an individual’s work performance or creates an intimidating, hostile or offensive work environment.*

It should be noted that the harasser may be a woman or a man and the victim does not have to be of the opposite sex. In fact, anyone affected by the offensive conduct—for example, a bystander who is forced to witness harassment—can be considered a victim. Sexual harassment is not a laughing matter. It violates Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and can lead to serious legal repercussions.

According to Charles Conrad, harassment is more likely to occur in certain kinds of organizations than in others. When the organization defines the “normal” employee as male, when support systems for women and people of color are weak
or nonexistent, when the organization is loosely coupled, and when power relationships between superiors and subordinates are unequal, there will be more incidents of harassment. Unfortunately, as Conrad points out, “each of these factors is present in most colleges and universities.”

Although some sexual harassment is intentional and egregious, some may be the result of stupidity or insensitivity rather than malice. While anyone would agree that unwanted touch, requests for sexual favors in return for job advancement, or sexual taunting clearly fall within the bounds of sexual harassment, is it sexual harassment if the victim overhears an off-color joke being told in the hall? Experts disagree. As Daniels puts it, “it is very clear that you cannot do something such as put a pornographic photo with a sexual proposition couched in vulgar language on a co-worker’s office desk to taunt that person. Whether you can play songs with explicit lyrics on your portable CD for your own amusement during lunch break remains to be seen.” What constitutes a hostile work environment is currently being clarified in the courts. Regardless of the results, sexually suggestive behavior in any form has no place in the workplace. Restraint and respect should characterize all workplace relationships.

**Developing Organizational Cultures**

The traditional approach to understanding organizations has been expanded, in recent years, by efforts to understand how organizational members make sense of organizations and share their understandings with others. In this section, we’ll begin by looking at what new employees do to understand new organizational cultures. We’ll then expand the notion of culture by looking at how cultural understandings are conveyed through metaphors, stories, and rites.

**Fitting in: Entering New Organizational Cultures**

Whenever a collection of people share common understandings, values, and perceptions, we can think of them as belonging to a common culture. Because people in organizations need to find a way to understand and manage what goes on around them, they create organizational cultures. In the words of Gary Kreps, organizational culture consists of collectively held “logics and legends about organizational life and the organization’s identity.”

If you have ever lived or traveled abroad for an extended period of time, you may have experienced culture shock, a sense of disorientation that occurs when the rules you’re used to playing by no longer work. That same sense may occur as
individuals enter new organizational cultures. They need to know what’s going on, and they need to find some way to adapt to their new surroundings.

Meryl Reis Louis argues that newcomers should be helped to make sense of organizations. When newcomers enter an organization, they often have trouble understanding what is going on because old scripts and schemata no longer work. As a result, they experience surprise, an emotional reaction to differences between life in the organization and life outside it. For Louis, surprise is the emotional state that occurs when one’s expectations about the job or about oneself are disconfirmed. And surprise triggers the need for sense making.

When insiders in an organization encounter a surprising event, they can use their knowledge of the culture to help explain it or they can turn to friends and colleagues. But newcomers lack cultural knowledge and have no one to turn to. Their only way of understanding organizational events is to use models based on past experience. Unfortunately, these forms of sense making may not be useful. A newly employed recent college graduate who uses college experience to define what it means to “put in a hard day’s work,” for example, may be in for a rude awakening.

Louis believes that organizations must help newcomers learn the ropes. By linking newcomers with mentors and instituting early appraisal meetings in which superiors give newcomers feedback, organizations can eliminate many transition problems. “Secrecy norms, the sink-or-swim, learn-on-your-own philosophy, and sanctions against sharing information among office members,” she argues, “are dysfunctional for newcomers and for their employing organizations as well.” Louis believes that newcomers should also be taught to understand the nature of entry experiences. They should learn to anticipate surprise and actively seek information from insiders. The newcomer who expects to experience organizational culture shock and who makes active efforts to learn the culture will be at a real advantage during his or her first year on the job.
Organizational Culture: 
Metaphors, Stories, and Rites

Newcomers can learn a lot about organizational culture by observing what goes on around them. But what, exactly, should they observe? In their classic article on communication cultures, Michael Pacanowsky and Nick O’Donnell-Trujillo suggested that organizational culture can be seen in communication practices including metaphors, stories, and rituals. By carefully observing these forms of communication, they argue, we can better understand an organization’s underlying values, beliefs, and attitudes.

Metaphors and Stories

As we saw in Chapter 4, metaphors are linguistic expressions that allow us to experience one thing in terms of another. Metaphors both reflect and shape the way we see the world. This is as true in organizations as it is in our private lives. The metaphors used in corporate settings interest communication scholars because they embody basic aspects of organizational culture. For example, one organization may encourage the use of a family metaphor (“Here at Acme, you’re part of a family who cares”), while another may see itself as an armed force (“We’ve got to go out there and blast the competition”). Cynthia Stohl explains how the family metaphor can affect employees:

If we “see” our office group as a traditional family, then we expect people to take care of and protect one another. . . . [D]ominant behavior would be interpreted as fatherly or motherly[,] . . . weaker members would be treated as children, with fewer rights but much support. Our personal lives would be appropriate topics for discussion and rituals surrounding birthdays, the birth of a child, and other personal landmarks would be enacted.

In an organization using a military metaphor, on the other hand, life would be quite different. Charles Conrad describes a large West Coast toy manufacturer that takes a more military approach to organizational life. In this company, employees habitually talk about “fighting the battle” (working hard) and “taking no casualties” (being obsessed with quality). But, Conrad tells us, the most powerful expressions of the metaphor come directly from military slogans:

“Be all that you can be” is used to justify voluntary overtime, and “lean, mean fighting machine” is used to explain reduction in the number of middle managers. Almost every normal work experience is explained in language reflecting the “army under siege” metaphor; almost every behavior desired of workers can be justified by referring to the metaphor.

Clearly, the organizational cultures of these two companies are quite different.
Stories also help us make sense of organizational culture by reflecting company values. Conrad gives an example of how a story from the 3M corporation embodies the key value “innovation should be encouraged.” According to the story, a junior employee discovered Scotch Tape by accident. His superiors didn’t believe there was a viable market for the product. So he slipped into the boardroom and taped members’ materials to the conference table. The board members decided to give the new product a chance, and the rest, as they say, is history. Any new 3M employee hearing the story will quickly draw the conclusion that it is important to fight for one’s ideas.

Another example of an organizational story concerns the actions of a young receptionist at IBM whose job it was to stop anyone from entering restricted areas without a badge. When Thomas Watson, Jr., then chairman of the board, walked up without a badge, she stopped him. According to a former IBM employee, this story was still circulating several years ago and its interpretation was clear: at IBM, the boss gets no special treatment; everyone follows the rules. This interpretation is even clearer when it is compared to another story employees liked to tell. According to this companion story, the same situation occurred in a different organization, but instead of being understanding, the boss is reported to have said, “Don’t you recognize my name? You should. It’s on the checks you used to get. You’re fired.” Clearly, at least in these stories, IBM characterizes itself as a humane organization that “plays fair.”

Rites and Ceremonials

A more elaborate form of cultural life can be found in organizational rites and ceremonies. Harrison Trice and Janice Beyer define rites as publicly performed, “relatively elaborate, dramatic, planned sets of activities that consolidate various forms of cultural expressions into one event.” A ceremonial, on the other hand, is a “system of several rites connected with a single occasion or event.” Graduation, for example, is a ceremonial consisting of a number of different rites, including receptions, parties, award presentations, and the conferring of degrees. According to Trice and Beyer, rites have both manifest and latent consequences. The manifest (or public) consequence of graduation is recognition of the passage from student to graduate. The latent (or hidden) consequences, however, are more interesting. Graduations also celebrate the status of the college or university, reiterate the value of a college education, and remind participants that they are taking part in a practice that has a rich historical tradition. At the very least, they encourage both parents and students to believe that their sacrifices were worth it. Table 8.4 lists some of the kinds of rites that occur in organizations.

Trice and Beyer believe that rites play an important role in the creation and maintenance of strong organizational cultures and that strong cultures, in turn, help to produce effective organizations. They advise managers to assess the hidden consequences of rites in their organizations in order to find out whether the
rites are achieving desired effects. They also suggest that managers learn effective ceremonial skills. “Some flair for the dramatic and the ability to be expressive in speech, writing, and gestures,” they tell us, “could be an asset in meeting the ceremonial requirements of managerial roles.” They go on to quote Karl Weick, “Managerial work can be viewed as managing myth, symbols, and labels. . . . [B]ecause managers traffic so often in images, the appropriate role for the manager may be the evangelist rather than the accountant.”

**Increasing Organizational Skills**

Earlier in this chapter, we noted that organizations employ specific genres of communication. One of the most important is the interview. An interview is a form of two-way communication having a predetermined and serious purpose in which

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**Table 8.4 Organizational Rites**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rites of Passage</th>
<th>Purpose: Rites of passage celebrate new role identities</th>
<th>Example: Army basic training, freshman orientation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Example:</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Consequences:</strong> Facilitate transformation into new role while ensuring new member is as much as possible like previous members</td>
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</tbody>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rites of Degradation</th>
<th>Purpose: Rites of degradation strip away power or remove incumbent from role</th>
<th>Example: Impeachment, student judicial hearing</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Example:</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Consequences:</strong> Strengthen organizational boundaries by defining who belongs and who doesn’t; reaffirm value of role by punishing out-of-role behavior</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rites of Enhancement</th>
<th>Purpose: Rites of enhancement reward organizational achievement</th>
<th>Example: Academy Awards, student honor society induction</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Example:</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Consequences:</strong> Enhance status and value of organization, motivate individuals to strive, give organization credit for individual achievement</td>
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<tr>
<th>Rites of Renewal</th>
<th>Purpose: Rites of renewal improve functioning of organization</th>
<th>Example: Diversity awareness training, student government retreat</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Example:</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Consequences:</strong> Make members believe something is being done to solve problems; focus on some problems and avoid others; reinforce existing power structures</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rites of Conflict Reduction</th>
<th>Purpose: Reduce conflict and aggression</th>
<th>Example: Collective bargaining, grievance procedures</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Example:</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Consequences:</strong> Deflect attention away from problems; compartmentalize conflict</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rites of Integration</th>
<th>Purpose: Create common identity and commitment to organization</th>
<th>Example: Mardi Gras, end-of-semester party</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Example:</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Consequences:</strong> Permit catharsis; loosen norms temporarily in order to reaffirm their moral rightness; channel aggression</td>
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</table>

participants ask and answer questions. Interviews are used to accomplish a number of tasks within the organization. Interviews may orient and train employees, survey their attitudes, notify them of job performance, discipline them, resolve complaints or grievances, and motivate or otherwise change their way of thinking. And, of course, organizations use interviews to select new employees. Journalists use interviews to gather facts on a story, while ethnographers use interviews to find out about cultural practices. Lawyers, physicians, and therapists regularly interview clients, and professional pollsters and academic researchers use interviews as part of survey research. It would, in fact, take an entire course to cover this topic, and many colleges and universities do offer courses on interviewing. We will look briefly at one kind of interview, the employment interview, simply because this form of interviewing is of immediate concern to most college students.

Interviewing Skills

In order to secure a job in an organization, prospective employees must learn the communication skills necessary to be successful interviewees. Below, we look at some of the steps an interviewee should take to prepare for an employment interview.

Preparing for the Interview

Interviews are serious business. Talking off the cuff may be fine in everyday conversation, but it is not acceptable in a job interview. Preparation is a must. Interviewees should begin with a clear idea of their own strengths and weaknesses. They should also research the organization, and prepare a cover letter and resume.

Skills Assessment Before the interview, prospective employees need to review skills gained through coursework, personal experience, or previous employment. Facility in using computers, doing research, or designing graphics are examples of work-content skills, skills directly related to a particular job. Skills that apply to a variety of situations and settings are called transferable skills. The abilities to define and solve problems, teach others, and manage time are examples. Finally, self-management skills include personal strengths such as flexibility, enthusiasm, and persistence. In addition to listing skills in these three areas, prospective employees should be prepared to discuss specific situations involving these skills. It is not enough for a candidate to tell an interviewer, “I can deal effectively with the public.” The interviewer wants examples.

Researching the Organization Before the interview, job candidates need to know as much as possible about the job they are seeking. This means doing research. By consulting standard reference books such as Dun and Bradstreet’s Career Guide or
Hoover’s *Handbook of American Companies*, business magazines such as *Business Week* or *Fast Company*, company brochures and annual reports, and, of course, the Internet, candidates can walk in ready to answer two of the most frequently asked interview questions: “What do you know about our organization?” and “Why do you want to work here?”

**The Resume and Cover Letter** Interviews are like exclusive parties: you can’t crash the gate; you have to be invited. And that means sending out resumes and cover letters that catch the eye of potential employers and make them want to meet with you. The cover letter highlights one’s ability to do the job and motivates the employer to examine the resume. In the cover letter, prospective employees identify the position they are interested in, explain how they heard about it and why they are applying, emphasize how their qualifications meet job requirements, and make specific requests for an interview.

The resume is a profile of the candidate’s background and qualifications. It communicates who the job seeker is. Because resumes are generally limited to a single page, every word counts. The resume should include contact information, a statement of career objectives, a summary of education and work experience, a list of special skills or interests, and the names, addresses, and phone numbers of references. It goes without saying that both letter and resume must be completely error free. A single misspelled word or grammatical error can be enough to eliminate the writer from further consideration. Employers have come to expect a certain format for resumes. An excellent source of information about current resume formats is the career services office at your school. Career counselors can offer you more specific advice and show you models to follow. In the meantime, Table 8.5 gives you an example of what a resume should not look like. See if you can spot all the mistakes.

**Answering and Asking Questions and Following Up**

Success in the actual interview is measured by how well candidates answer (and ask) questions. Although there’s no way to anticipate all the questions the interviewer will ask, preparation and practice can help. Table 8.6 lists some frequently asked interview questions. By thinking about how to answer these questions, and by practicing responses, you can increase the likelihood that you will present yourself effectively. As Table 8.6 also shows, all the questions do not come from the interviewer. Interviewees are expected to ask questions. But watch what you ask. If
### Table 8.5

**What’s Wrong with This Resume?**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>PAT SUNDANCE</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Local address:</strong> Generic College, Generic, New York, 14850</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Career Objective:</strong> To use my people skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Education:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generic College, Generic, New York  Bachelor of Arts, May 2000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GPA: 1.02  <strong>Extracurricular Activities:</strong> American Marketing Society, Skateboarding, Following Phish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Experience:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Safety Patrol: John Paul Jones Elementary School  September 1990–June 1991  Assisted other students at crossings; gave out hall passes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Night clerk at Hollywood and Vine Video Store  Anywhere, New York  September 1999–June 1999  Rewound videotapes; learned names of all academy award nominated films since 1947; demonstrated people skills by talking with customers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Special Skills:</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Key to errors:** No zip on permanent address. Phone number and e-mail should be included. Career objective vague. Several misspelled words, including name of major. GPA should not be listed if below 3.00. Some extracurricular activities are better left unsaid. Experience should be noted in reverse chronological order, beginning with most recent employment. List only relevant experience. Describe work-related aspects of prior experience. Be specific about special skills and make sure they’re job related. Why are there no references from Hollywood and Vine or the Fissure? Overall layout is poor. Incidentally, description of employment at Fissure is fine.
your only concern is with salary, office size, and benefits, rather than with the nature and challenges of the job itself, you will come across as self-absorbed. In most cases, it is best to avoid questions about salary in the first interview and to focus instead on learning about the organization and the position. Throughout the entire process, it’s essential to demonstrate self-confidence, openness, and respect.

### Table 8.6  Typical Interview Questions

**Questions about career objectives and goals**

**Some typical questions in this category:**
- What are your long-range career goals? How have you prepared yourself to reach these goals? What other, personal goals do you hope to accomplish in the next ten years?
- Describe what you consider to be the ideal job.
- What characteristics do you believe are necessary for success in this field? Do you have those characteristics?

*Interviewer wants to know:* how your future plans relate to the organization, whether you have a realistic view of your career area, how goal directed and serious you are.

*Use these questions to:* demonstrate your knowledge of the field in which you hope to be employed, assure the organization that you have realistic goals, show a serious commitment to your career.

**Questions about your education**

**Some typical questions in this category:**
- How did you choose your college? Your major? If you had it to do over again, what would you change about your education?
- To what extent does your scholastic record reflect your abilities?
- What was your most rewarding college experience?

*Interviewer wants to know:* how thoughtful and goal directed you are, what your level of training and preparation is, whether you have the personal characteristics needed for the job.

*Use these questions to:* show your level of preparation; indicate characteristics; talents, and skills that are job related; indicate that you are serious and eager to learn.

**Questions about your work experience**

**Some typical questions in this category:**
- Tell me about the jobs you’ve held. What did you do exactly? Did you enjoy working there? Why did you leave?
- Did you encounter any problems at those jobs? How did you respond?
- What is your greatest strength as an employee? Your greatest weakness?
Like many things in life, the interview is not over 'til it's over. It is common nowadays for job candidates to follow up with a brief, professional letter thanking the interviewer for his or her time and restating your interest in the company. This gives a candidate one more chance to stand out from the crowd and make a positive impression.

**Interviewer wants to know:** what you will be like as an employee, what skills you possess, how your previous experience has prepared you for this position.

**Use these questions to:** demonstrate that you have what it takes to be an effective employee; show that you are responsible, willing to work, good with people, and so on.

**Questions about you as a person**

**Some typical questions in this category:**

- Tell me about yourself.
- What are your hobbies? How do you spend your free time? What kinds of books, magazines, or newspapers do you read?
- What personal accomplishment has given you the most satisfaction? Why?
- What is the most embarrassing thing that ever happened to you?
- What have you done that shows initiative?

**Interviewer wants to know:** how you relate to the profile of a successful employee, whether you have the necessary traits to fulfill job requirements, how articulate and focused you are.

**Use these questions to:** show concrete examples of job-related characteristics such as drive, ability to get along with others, leadership, and so on; indicate that you have a positive self-concept and are both confident and realistic about your abilities and experience.

**Questions you should ask**

**Some typical questions the interviewee should bring up:**

- How would you describe the organization’s management style?
- Describe typical assignments for someone in this position during the first year. What are some typical problems that the person in this position may encounter?
- Tell me about your training programs.
- What industry trends do you feel will affect this company in the next five years?
- Earlier you mentioned . . . Could you elaborate?

**Interviewer will be looking for questions that:** show a sincere interest in the field and organization, indicate that you want to continue learning, demonstrate that you want realistic information upon which to base your decision.

**Use these questions to:** show a sincere interest in the organization and its future, demonstrate a desire to advance, indicate that you want to grow professionally, show you were listening during the interview, let the interviewer know that you are interested in more than just salary.
Handling Inappropriate Questions

Although there are laws governing what can and cannot be asked in interviews, not all interviewers are sensitive about what they ask. Questions about marital status, plans for having a family, religious affiliation, politics, ethnic identification, and so forth are illegal. Yet it is possible that an interviewee may be asked such a question. What's the correct response? That's really up to each individual. There are a number of choices. The interviewee can

1. simply answer the question (although one should not feel pressured to do so).
2. politely refuse to answer and make the interviewer aware that the question was not appropriate.
3. discuss the underlying concern that may have prompted the question. For example, in asking a question about the candidate’s family life, the interviewer’s concern could be about the amount of overtime required by the job. An interviewee could respond by saying, “I understand that the job requires substantial investment of time. Let me assure you that there is nothing in my personal life that would keep me from performing any of the duties associated with this job.”

Of course, if the questions are extremely offensive, the incident should be reported. In any case, it's important to remain calm and behave politely.

Using Organizational Technology

Some of you may love technology; others of you may hate it. But, whatever your attitude, you will be exposed during your working life to an array of new devices designed to make your work easier and more efficient. Whether these advances in technology live up to their promise or whether they complicate your life will depend on your ability to use them wisely. To be successful in today's workplace, it's essential to keep informed about new technologies. More important, it's necessary to recognize the ways in which technology changes the structure and operations of organizations.

Telecommuting

For many people, the virtual office is replacing the real office. Growing numbers of employees are telecommuting, working from their homes via electronic media. Champions of telecommuting have pointed out potential advantages. Organizations will be able to save the money they normally spend on providing office and
work sites, and workers will not have to relocate to get that perfect job. It’s even been suggested that telecommuting can decrease traffic and pollution. In Los Angeles, for example, 60 percent of the city’s notorious air pollution comes from automobile emissions. Imagine how much more livable Los Angeles and other major cities could be if physical commuting were replaced by virtual commuting.

On the other hand, as it becomes more feasible to work at home, the traditional separation between workplace and home may gradually disappear. When we can work anywhere, there is no way to escape the demands of the office, no time when parents are available exclusively to their children or husbands and wives to their spouses. In *The Wired Community*, Stephen Doheny-Farina describes a typical telecommuter. Peg Fagen lives in Massachusetts and telecommutes to a New York office. She has equipped her home office with a “dedicated phone and fax line, computer and modem, e-mail and file-transfer connectivity, copier, and so on.” She also hires a baby-sitter to supervise her preschool children. She is single-minded about her work time. “When she goes into her office, she is at work. When the sitter leaves or when the children awaken, she is at home. If the day’s work is not completed when the sitter leaves, then she returns to her office after the children have been put to bed.” She telecommutes successfully because she can manage her time wisely and because her boss knows and trusts her. Nevertheless, her decision has not been without costs: “Co-workers with similar education, on-the-job experience, and time with the company have moved up the company’s management ladder faster than Peg.”

Despite its convenience, telecommuting has drawbacks. Undisciplined workers may find it difficult to work without direct supervision, while workaholics may find themselves writing memos well past midnight. According to a report commissioned by *Mobile Office* magazine, home workers work more hours and experience more stress to meet deadlines than do office workers. In addition, face-to-face informal networking and relationship building are not possible. Surveys show that telecommuters often fear a loss of “visibility and career momentum” when they don’t have the opportunity to form direct, offline relationships with those who evaluate their job performance. A final cost is to the development of a strong organizational culture. Corporate culture is created through the minutiae of everyday communications. As employees interact, they forge alliances and develop cohesion. Some of this interaction can be accomplished via corporate chat lines; however, text-based bulletin boards and video teleconferences don’t allow the informality and frequency of face-to-face communication.
Finding the Right Medium for the Right Job

Computer-mediated communications may be the latest thing, but that doesn’t necessarily mean they’re the best thing. One of their drawbacks is that they are lean rather than rich media. **Rich media** use a variety of channels to carry information. Face-to-face conversation, for example, is the richest medium because it contains the most verbal and nonverbal cues. Generally speaking, rich media are better than lean media when immediate feedback is important, when communicators need to know each other’s emotional responses, or when the message contains very personal, highly charged news.\(^{48}\) Computer-mediated communications may also discourage mutual problem solving, which is probably better done in a face-to-face context. On the other hand, computer-mediated communications do provide a great deal of information very rapidly. Not only do they serve to enhance distribution of simple announcements, they may actually improve information efficiency by bypassing formal channels. What is important is that communicators think carefully about what they want to accomplish with their messages and that they choose an appropriate medium.

Melinda Kramer offers a list of some of the factors that should affect choice of medium in a business context. Included are speed (How quickly does the message need to be there?), timing (Do you need an answer immediately or can you leave information to be dealt with later?), distance (How far does the message need to travel?), size of audience (How many people do you need to reach?), intimacy (How personal is the message?), talent (What media are both you and your receiver most comfortable with?), and cost (What is your budget?). Thus, if a message has to get out right away, if it doesn’t need an immediate reply, if it is to go to many people at the same time, and if it is not personal, then e-mail may be the way to go. On the other hand, if the material is sensitive, then a medium like the telephone (where the receiver can hear your voice) or, better yet, a face-to-face meeting (with the full complement of verbal and nonverbal cues) is the right choice. Kramer reminds us, “Many business people choose the communication medium with which they are most familiar . . . without thinking about which medium will actually be the most effective. Instead of following old habits, you should evaluate the available media and select the one that best fits your communication goals.”\(^{49}\)

Alan Zaremba gives an example of what can happen when people react without thinking about the appropriateness of the medium. He reports that, in 1999, a counseling center in Boston received a phoned-in bomb threat. Taking the threat seriously, administrators knew they had to notify the staff. How did they do it? By using a mass e-mail asking everyone to vacate the building. The problem? Most of the employees were in a conference at the time, and even had they been in their offices, it’s not likely that they all would have checked their e-mail. Luckily, the threat was a hoax. Had it not been, choosing the wrong medium could have led to disaster.\(^{50}\)
In choosing the best way to send a message, it may be helpful to keep in mind the distinction made by Lee Sproull and Sara Kiesler between first-level and second-level effects of technology. A **first-level effect** refers to what the technology is designed to do. For example, the first-level effect of e-mail is that it allows us to communicate cheaply and immediately. A **second-level effect** is an unforeseen side effect of technology. Zaremba explains that second-level effects of e-mail may be to make face-to-face encounters rarer, create a digital divide between those with access to computers and those without, and encourage flaming. When choosing media, it is important to keep both kinds of effects in mind.

**Etiquette in the Wired Workplace**

Just as there are rules of etiquette to help people develop workable relationships in the modern organization, so there are rules for the civil use of technology. If you’ve ever had to listen to someone else’s cell phone conversation during a meal at your favorite restaurant or if you’ve been the recipient of an abrupt, dismissive e-mail, you know how rude people can be in their use of electronic media. Table 8.7 lists some rules to follow as you employ electronic media.

**Becoming a More Responsible Communicator**

In today’s business environment, issues of responsibility are extraordinarily complex and critical. As the power of multinational organizations increases, so do troubling ethical issues. In an article on social responsibility in international business, Stanley Deetz lists just a few of the questionable business practices that occur in an organizational world where high-speed decision making hinders thoughtful ethical debate and internationalization and outsourcing make surveillance and control difficult. Values such as human rights, environmental protection, fair competition, and equal opportunity for all workers are abused in activities such as

- using prisoners as workers
- moving operations to environmentally less restrictive communities
- offering and taking bribes and payoffs
- creating environmentally unsound or wasteful products
- closing of economically viable plants in takeover and merger games
- growing income disparity
- declining social safety nets
- malingering
- harassment
- maintaining unnecessary and unhealthy controls on employees
- advocating consumerism
In a world where practices like these can and do occur, organizations must work to create responsible and humane environments for those both inside and outside their boundaries. Listed below are a few guidelines that can help members of organizations act more responsibly.

- In most organizations, it’s easy to pass the buck when it comes to ethical issues. As Charles Conrad points out, in bureaucratic structures, responsibility often falls between the cracks. Employees at lower levels who implement unethical procedures often excuse their behavior by pointing out that they were just following company policies and procedures. Employees at higher levels,

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**Table 8.7 Etiquette for an Information Age**

As new technologies enter the world of work, a new code of electronic manners has emerged. Letitia Baldrige offers some advice on using a variety of communications media.

**Cellular Phones**

“No one should intrude on anyone’s privacy by talking on a cellular telephone in a restaurant, during a concert, in the middle of a hot love scene at the movies, or during a church service.”

**Answering Machines**

“Try not to make jokes, play weird music, or be flip in your recorded messages. The CEO or the Japanese ambassador may be calling.”

“Don’t use an answering machine that allows . . . only very short messages. It’s aggravating and expensive to have to make repeated calls.”

When you leave a message, give adequate information and “don’t leave mysterious, teasing, or ambiguous messages that you might find amusing but which could be confusing to the person you have called.”

**Beepers**

“Don’t turn on your beeper (unless you’re a doctor on call) in auditoriums, opera halls, and other places where people are enjoying a performance.”

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**Conference Calls**

When participating in a conference call, “remember to identify yourself each time you speak, for the benefit of people not in the room,” and “don’t lower your voice to make sarcastic comments or to tell a joke [you don’t want everyone to hear.] It’s just plain rude and bad business procedure.”

**Faxes**

Don’t fax long, unannounced, or unwelcomed materials. When you do fax, “call the would-be recipient’s office first and ask if it’s all right to transmit material during a certain period.”

And always remember that “a fax may be seen by many people in an office, so don’t send anything personal or sensitive via fax.”

**Timing Your Communications**

Finally, always remember to time your calls and faxes so as not to disturb your recipient at home, and be cautious about beeping anyone on a car phone: doing business while driving can be dangerous.
who make the policies, do not feel any responsibility because they them-
selves don’t actually have to make illegal or unethical decisions. As a result,
in irresponsible organizations unethical practices are always someone else’s
fault. Responsible organizations, on the other hand, encourage all employees
to take an ethical stance.54

- Organizational cultures can be humane or inhumane. When they are hu-
mane, workers feel comfortable and supported and are able to work cre-
atively. When they are inhumane, workers feel criticized and defensive and
may be pressured to act in unethical ways to protect themselves. When orga-
nizations encourage mutual trust and support, employees are more satisfied
with their jobs and display more commitment and loyalty to the organization.
By refusing to play politics, engage in gossip, follow hidden agendas, or
attack coworkers, employees can enhance organizational climate and build a
more humane culture. D. K. Banner and T. E. Gagne express it this way:

[W]e create and maintain organizational forms consistent with our level of collective
maturity and our shared identity. If we see ourselves as separate, fearful, shame-rid-
den people whose best hope for happiness is to manipulate our external circumstances
so that they please us, we get the bureaucratic form. If we are willing to accept per-
sonal responsibility for expressing transcendent values, for living in true, spiritual
identity, we will create flexible, nonhierarchical politics-free organizations. We cre-
ate our own reality.55

- Responsible organizations encourage open communication. Since the 1960s,
organizational communication experts have argued that effective organiza-
tions must establish an open communication climate in which subordinates
have access to information on matters that affect their work lives and feel free
to express their ideas and participate in decision making. Both scholars and
practitioners have argued that when communication networks are open and
participation is encouraged, organizations are likely to be productive and ef-
fective. To ensure open communication, organizations must provide forums
for the voicing of opinions. But because many current forums are actually
used to suppress conflict and to increase compliance rather than to foster a
genuine exchange of ideas, companies must find new ways to encourage em-
ployees to express their own opinions, interests, and feelings.

- For too long, organizations have excluded large portions of the population.
By opening up to employees formerly denied entry, organizations not only do
the right thing, they also increase their ability to compete in a global econ-
omy. When organizations limit membership to people who think and act
alike, they diminish creativity and problem-solving ability. When they ex-
pand their membership, they expand their perspectives. According to Deetz,
“The presence of diverse goals, rather than creating costly conflict and
impasse, creates the conditions whereby limited decisional frames are broken and the company learns.⁵⁶ But diversity must be more than an organizational policy. Members at every level in the organization must learn to value diversity and to overcome their discomfort with others who are different.

- It's a common belief that the only people affected by an organization are its employees and stockholders. In fact, the impact of organizational decisions is far ranging. Organizations affect the communities in which they are located, the customers who use their products or services, and even the physical environments that surround them. The groups that can affect or are affected by organizations—that have a “stake” in the organization—are called stakeholders. In a sense, they are as much a part of the organization as employees, and, as members of the organization, their values and needs must be taken into account. Responsible organizations recognize the legitimacy of their relationships with a wider community of stakeholders, acting as their stewards.

**Summary**

An organization is a system made up of people working toward a common goal. Organizations have four characteristics: interdependence, hierarchical structure, linkage to their environments, and, most important from our point of view, dependence on communication. When communication fails, organizations experience problems in productivity and member satisfaction. Poor communication practices can also make the organization an unpleasant place to work by creating a negative organizational climate. By focusing on communication, managers and their employees can avoid problems and can increase their chances of organizational advancement.

In order to communicate competently in an organization, members must communicate with more formality than in other contexts. They must also master organizational genres, the unique forms of communication common to organizations. Of course, each organization will have its own rules for communication. What works in one organizational culture will not necessarily work in another.

Information is the lifeblood of organizations. As it circulates through the organization, it can follow a formal chain of command (the formal network) or a more unstructured pathway based on personal contacts and friendships (the informal network.) Formal communication can move in an upward direction (from subordinate to superior), a downward direction (from superior to subordinate), or a horizontal direction (between employees with equal status). In U.S. organizations, most information flows downward. Unfortunately, employees are often dissatisfied with the amount and quality of downward flow. Sometimes, they receive too little information; sometimes, they receive too much; and sometimes, they re-
ceive deceptive or false information. Part of the problem is due to the fact that, as messages pass between individuals, details are left out, elaborated, or changed so as to fit the communicator's own frame of reference. By building in redundancy and asking for clarification, communicators can overcome some of these difficulties in serial transmission.

Upward flow is less common in organizations, but it, too, can be distorted by employees who don't want to be the bearers of bad tidings or by gatekeepers who want to protect their superiors. Horizontal communication can also be beset by problems, especially in organizations in which departments are in competition. Even in organizations that encourage trust and cooperation, people with different backgrounds must work to overcome their own biases and approaches.

Informal structures, like the grapevine, are also prevalent in organizations. Although we tend to think of the grapevine as a hotbed of gossip and false rumor, studies have shown it to be quite accurate, although often incomplete. One way to determine the informal structures in an organization is to do network analysis.

Organizations can be pleasant places to work, or they can be your worst nightmare. This largely depends on the kinds of relationships that are built. In building relationships, employees have to recognize that there is a difference between personal and professional behavior and have to balance their need for intimacy and friendship with their need to get the job done. By recognizing role differences and by remembering that one's personal desires and feelings must sometimes be subordinated to those of others, we can create healthy and professional relationships.

When sex and romance enter the workplace, interaction becomes complicated. Nowadays, more and more people are engaging in office romances. These interactions can be risky and must be handled with a great deal of discretion and skill. Sometimes, the presence of sexual attraction in the workplace can lead to serious problems, including sexual harassment. Any communication that creates an intimidating, hostile, or offensive work environment on the basis of verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature counts as sexual harassment and is illegal under the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

The earliest work in organizational communication focused on determining variables (such as information flow) that were associated with productivity. More recently, scholars have also begun to use an interpretive approach, treating organizations as cultures. By looking at norms of conduct, metaphors, stories, and rites, researchers seek to understand how individuals make sense of the organizations they enter and uncover hidden values and assumptions.

Interviewing is a form of communication that one will encounter throughout organizational life. Interviewees should prepare for interviews by assessing their skills, preparing resumes and cover letters, and researching the organization. During the interview itself, they should use their answers to demonstrate competence and confidence as well as intelligence and respect.
Nowadays, keeping up with technological advances is a must. In addition to knowing the latest advances in technology, employees must be able to choose the correct medium for each message and must follow norms governing their use.

Factors such as speed, timing, distance, audience size, intimacy, talent, and cost should be taken into consideration when choosing how to convey a message. It’s also important to be aware of second-level effects associated with every medium.

Every communication context raises ethical dilemmas. The organizational context is no different. By taking responsibility for one’s actions, by trying to create a culture that respects the dignity of others, and by encouraging open discussion and respecting diversity, organizational communicators can create humane workplaces. In addition, organizational members should not develop an “us” versus “them” mentality; they should recognize that they are part of a wider community and take into account the needs and feelings of multiple stakeholders.

**Key Terms**

Listed below are the key terms used in this chapter, along with the number of the page where each is explained.

- organization 000
- interdependence 000
- hierarchy 000
- bureaucracy 000
- organizational communication 000
- climate 000
- structurational approach 000
- genres 000
- information flow 000
- formal channels of communication 000
- informal channels of communication 000
- organizational chart 000
- downward flow 000
- upward flow 000
- horizontal flow 000
- message filtering 000
- serial transmission 000
- leveling 000
- sharpening 000
- assimilation 000
- gatekeeper 000
- ombudsman 000
- grapevine 000
- network analysis 000
- opinion leaders 000
- isolates 000
- tight coupling 000
- loose coupling 000
- boundary spanner 000
- cosmopolite 000
- bridge 000
- clique 000
- liaison 000
- star 000
- sexual harassment 000
- organizational culture 000
- culture shock 000
- surprise 000
- metaphors 000
- stories 000
- rites 000
- ceremonials 000
Review Questions

1. What is an organization? What are the four characteristics of organizations? Using your college or university as an example, think of examples of each of the characteristics.

2. What is the relationship between organizational structures and communication practices?

3. What is an organizational genre? Gather examples of the genres used at your college or university. Analyze the rules that define form and content. Take the American coffee break as a genre. What are its rules of discourse?

4. What is the difference between formal and informal channels of communication? What are downward, upward, and horizontal flow?

5. What problems beset downward flow? How do messages typically change as they are serially transmitted? What can be done to improve serial transmission? Why are these things often not done?

6. What problems occur with upward flow? What is a gatekeeper? An ombudsman?

7. What is horizontal flow? What communication problems must be overcome?

8. Where did the phrase “six degrees of separation” come from?

9. What is the grapevine? How accurate is it?

10. What is network analysis? What are opinion leaders and isolates? What other roles can one find in networks?

11. What are the advantages and disadvantages of loose and tight coupling?

12. What do you think about office romance? What guidelines would you suggest for handling these potentially sensitive interactions?

13. Define sexual harassment. What kinds of organizations are most likely to encourage sexual harassment? What steps should one take at your school to deal with harassment?

14. When you were a first-year student, what kind of organizational culture shock did you feel? What sources did you go to to overcome surprise?

15. How do metaphors, stories, and rites function in organizational cultures? What metaphors are used to describe life in your college or university? What stories circulate among students about college life? What rites characterize your school’s culture? Which of Trice and Beyer’s categories do they fall into? What are their intended and unintended consequences?

16. What is an interview? How should a potential interviewee prepare? What is the difference between work-content, transferable, and self-management skills? What skills do you have in each area?
What are some good sources for researching organizations?

What needs to be accomplished in the cover letter? What information is necessary for a resume?

How would you handle an illegal interview question? Why?

What is telecommuting? What are its advantages and drawbacks?

What is a rich medium? Is e-mail rich or lean?

What are second-level effects? What are some of the second-level effects of e-mail?

What are some rules to follow when it comes to using organizational technology?

What are stakeholders? Why is it important to take them into account?

Suggested Reading


A thorough, intelligent survey of organizational communication with an excellent section on organizational culture. Of particular use are the case studies, which show how organizational principles play out in real-world situations.


Another excellent survey of organizational communication. This book is particularly strong on organizational theory. Sections on power and cultural control take a critical view of organizations.


Written by a communication scholar who has also worked as a consultant, this book shows how an understanding of organizational communication can be used in real-world situations to improve organizational climate and efficiency. If you’re interested in exploring career options for speech communication majors, this book might inspire you.


This text provides excellent case studies and is full of practical advice on communicating in the business and professional context. The chapter on ethics is particularly strong.


A solid overview of organizational communication, this text is especially good at providing real-life applications. In addition to reviewing literature, Zaremba has interviewed executives who have worked successfully in the business world and who provide a practitioner’s perspective.

Notes


10. Daniels, Spiker, & Papa, 115.
11. Ibid., 116.
20. Daniels, 124.
26. www.eeoc.gov/facts/fs-sex 6/15/00
31. Louis, 247.
34. Conrad, 86.
37. Ibid.
38. Ibid, 666.
41. Ibid, 5.
44. Ibid, 89.
45. Ibid, 90.
56. Deetz, 313.