CHAPTER 2

Defining Organizational Communication

As stated in the last chapter, so long as there have been humans there has been organizing, and with organizing comes a concern about how to do better, whether the task is hunting, coaching a sports team, or running a multinational corporation. Unfortunately, those with practical interest in organizational communication have not as a rule ascribed to the same definitions and assumptions. For example, when engineers speak of the importance of communication, they often (but not always) refer to its role in promoting clarity and consensus. In contrast, a group of clergy calling for improved communication would likely focus on the evocative and emotional power of discourse. In this chapter, we describe some common approaches to organizational communication, beginning with models of communication as information transfer, transactional process, strategic control, and a balance of creativity and constraint, and concluding with a model of communication as dialogue.

APPROACHES TO ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION

Of the various conceptions of organizational communication, four have attracted the greatest number of adherents: (1) communication as information transfer, (2) communication as transactional process, (3) communication as strategic control, and (4) communication as a balance of creativity and constraint.
Communication as Information Transfer

The information-transfer approach views communication as a metaphoric pipeline through which information flows from one person to another. Managers thus communicate well when they transfer their knowledge to subordinates and others with minimal “spillage.” According to Steven Axley (1984), this version of communication theory rests on the following assumptions:

1. Language is capable of transferring thoughts and feelings from one person to another person.
2. Speakers and writers insert thoughts and feelings into words.
3. Words contain those thoughts and feelings.
4. Listeners or readers extract those thoughts and feelings from the words.

The information-transfer approach sees communication as a tool that people use to accomplish their objectives. This view, popularized in the early to mid-1900s, compared human communication to the flow of information over a telegraph or telephone wire. During this period, clear, one-way communication was emphasized as a means of impressing and influencing others. Along these lines, communication is typically defined as “the exchange of information and the transmission of meaning” (Dessler, 1982, p. 94). It is further characterized as “information engineering,” wherein information functions as a tool for accomplishing goals, but the process of transmission is not seen as problematic — that is, “If I say it and you can hear it, you ought to understand it” (Feldman & March, 1981). An analogy can be made to the classroom teacher who relies completely on lectures, never stopping to engage with students. The underlying belief is that since the professor said it, you should get it.

According to this perspective, miscommunication occurs only when no message is received or when the message that is received is not what the sender intended. Typical communication problems include information overload, distortion, and ambiguity. Information overload occurs when the receiver becomes overwhelmed by the information that must be processed. Three factors can contribute to information overload: (1) amount, or the absolute quantity of information to be processed; (2) rate, or the speed at which the information presents itself; and (3) complexity, or the amount of work it takes to interpret and process the information (Farace, Monge, & Russell, 1977). Information overload situations can vary in intensity and type. A government worker in a severely understaffed bureaucracy, for example, may have to deal with mountains of simple, steady work. In contrast, a police officer on patrol may be faced with varying amounts of complex information that presents itself at a fast rate.

Distortion refers to the effects of noise on the receiver’s ability to process the message. Noise can be semantic (the message has different meanings for the sender and the receiver), physical (the sound of static on a telephone line or of a jet plane
passing overhead), or contextual (the sender and the receiver have different perspectives that contribute to the miscommunication). A typical example would be trying to communicate with a co-worker who is experiencing a personal crisis; although you may be saying important things, the co-worker's emotional "noise" may prevent him or her from getting the message you intend to send.

Finally, ambiguity occurs when multiple interpretations of a message cloud the sender's intended meaning. Abstract language and differing connotations are common sources of ambiguity. When a manager asks two employees to work "a little harder," for instance, one might put in an extra half-hour a day, and the other might work all night.

David Berlo (1960) offered a communication model that reflects the information-engineering approach. According to his SMCR model, communication occurs when a sender (S) transmits a message (M) through a channel (C) to a receiver (R). The sender "encodes" an intended meaning into words, and the receiver "decodes" the message when it is received. The information-transfer model, while dated, remains a useful way to explain certain communication situations in organizations, such as the giving and receiving of technical instructions or e-mail exchanges among employees. To illustrate a more complex application of the information-transfer approach, let's assume that an advertising agency has just received a new account. The senior account representative calls a team meeting and gives assignments to the junior people. One of the team members, however, has difficulty with the assignment. He found the senior representative's presentation confusing, and was distracted by people coming in and out of the room during the team meeting. The deadline arrives, and his assignment is not complete. In this situation, communication is said to have broken down because the intended meaning of the sender (the senior representative) did not reach the receiver (the junior member).

Critics of the information-transfer approach argue that it is simplistic and incomplete, painting a picture of communication as a sequential process (i.e., "I throw you a message, then you throw one back"). In addition, the model assumes that the receiver remains passive and is uninvolved in constructing the meaning of the message. Finally, this theory is incomplete due to its inability to take into account important—and often ambiguous—nonverbal signals. People's facial expressions, for example, often carry significant information about one's degree of understanding and attitude toward the message.

**Communication as Transactional Process**

Dissatisfaction with the information-transfer approach to communication led to the development of the transactional-process model. It asserts that in actual communication, clear distinctions are not made between senders and receivers. Rather, people play both roles simultaneously. "All persons are engaged in sending (encoding) and receiving (decoding) messages simultaneously. Each person is constantly sharing in the encoding and decoding processes, and each person is affecting the
The transactional-process approach highlights the importance of feedback, or information about how a message is received, and particularly nonverbal feedback, which may accompany or substitute for verbal feedback. Consider, for example, the nonverbal messages that students send to instructors during a lecture to indicate their degree of attention and comprehension. While the members of one class may be on the edge of their seats and making consistent eye contact with the teacher, the members of another class may be slouching, fidgeting, and avoiding the instructor’s gaze. Rightly or wrongly, most teachers will impute these nonverbal behaviors with meaning and interpret the first class as more engaged and intelligent. The importance of nonverbal communication is captured by the famous axiom “You cannot not communicate” (Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson, 1967, p. 49). In other words, a person need not speak to communicate; nonverbal messages are conveyed through a person’s silence, facial expressions, body posture, and gestures. As a result, then, any type of behavior is a potential message (Redding, 1972).

The transactional-process model differs from the information-transfer approach in terms of the presumed location of the meaning of the message. In the information-transfer model, the meaning of a message resides with the sender, and the challenge of communication is to transmit that meaning to others. The transactional-process model rejects this idea in favor of one in which meanings are in people, not words (Richards, 1956). It focuses on the person receiving the message and on how the receiver constructs the meaning of that message. As a result, says Steven Axley (1984), “Miscommunication is the normal state of affairs in human communication. . . . Miscommunication and unintentional communication are to be expected, for they are the norm” (p. 432).

One area to which the transactional-process model may be applied is leadership. Ideas about leadership have evolved from the simple belief that certain people are born with leadership skills to the acknowledgment that leadership involves a transaction between leaders and followers. Thus, successful leaders can shape the meanings that followers assign to what leaders say or do. In this sense, then, leadership is the transactional management of meaning between leaders and followers. Compare this to the information-transfer model, which gauges a leader’s effectiveness solely on his or her ability to “put across” an inspirational message. In contrast, the transactional-process model predicts that a common understanding will emerge between a leader and his or her followers over time through communication.

Many experts criticize the transactional-process view for its emphasis on the creation of shared meaning through communication. This bias toward shared meaning may be based more on ideology than on empirical research. The degree of shared meaning between people can never be truly verified; all one ever has as proof is people’s reports about what they mean, which can be manipulated and may be unreliable. Shared meaning implies consensus, and it is commonly observed that organizational communication is more typically characterized by ambiguity, conflict, and diverse viewpoints.
Communication as Strategic Control

Unlike the transactional-process model, which assumes that effective communicators are clear and open in their efforts to promote understanding and shared meaning, the strategic-control perspective regards communication as a tool for controlling the environment (Parks, 1982). It recognizes that, due to personal, relational, and political factors, greater clarity is not always the main goal in interaction. The strategic-control perspective sees communicators as having multiple goals. For example, in a performance review, a supervisor might have two primary goals: to be understood and to preserve a positive working relationship. In this view, a competent communicator is one who chooses strategies that are appropriate for accomplishing multiple goals.

In addition, the strategic-control approach to communication recognizes that while people may have reasons for their behavior, they cannot be expected to communicate in ways that consistently maximize others’ understanding. Communicative choices are socially, politically, and ethically motivated. We all recognize that others may violate the communicative expectations of clarity and honesty when they believe it is in their interest to do so.

The limits of general statements about what constitutes “effective” communication led to a focus on communication as goal attainment, as a means to accomplish one’s ends through adaptation and saying what is appropriate for the situation. Communicators must be able to recognize the constraints of the situation and adapt to multiple goals simultaneously, such as being clear, assertive, and respectful of the other person (Tracy & Eisenberg, 1991).

In organizational communication, strategic ambiguity is an important concept that describes the ways in which people may communicate unclearly but still accomplish their goals (Eisenberg, 1984). While common sense may dictate that effective communicators speak clearly, Eisenberg notes that clarity is not always, nor should it be, a primary communicative goal. Rather, there are several instances in organizational life when ambiguous messages may be productively deployed. Specifically, strategic ambiguity

- Promotes unified diversity
- Preserves privileged positions
- Is deniable
- Facilitates organizational change

First, strategic ambiguity takes advantage of the diverse meanings that different people can give to the same message. For example, the mission statement “Quality is job one” is sufficiently ambiguous to allow all Ford employees to read their own meanings into it. In contrast, the more specific statement “Quality through cutting-edge engineering” is less inclusive and less likely to inspire unity, particularly in the manufacturing and administrative ranks of the company.
Second, strategic ambiguity preserves privileged positions by shielding those with power from close scrutiny by others. A seasoned diplomat or a professor emeritus giving a speech, for example, is traditionally given the benefit of the doubt by supporters who may have to fill in some gaps in their understanding. Fans of seasoned performers often come to shows rooting for their heroes, willing to overlook what may seem to others as signs of weakness (e.g., a hoarse voice, eclectic song selection). Similarly, by being less than precise (e.g., in providing a lukewarm reference for a mediocre colleague), employees can protect confidentiality, avoid conflict, and conceal key information that may afford them a competitive advantage. In this sense, strategic ambiguity is said to be deniable; that is, the words seem to mean one thing, but under pressure they can seem to mean something else.

Finally, strategic ambiguity facilitates organizational change by allowing people the interpretive room to change their activities while appearing to keep those activities consistent. For example, with the advent of air travel, transatlantic ocean liner companies that provided overseas passage by ship were faced with a major challenge to their service. The firms that defined themselves as transportation companies did not survive, whereas those that interpreted their business more broadly (and ambiguously) as entertainment went on to develop vacation or leisure cruise businesses. An example of the pros and cons of strategic ambiguity appears in *What Would You Do?* on page 34.

Unlike other models of communication, the strategic-control approach opposes the idea of shared meaning as the primary basis or motivation for communication. Rather, it holds that shared meaning is an empirically unverifiable concept (Krippendorff, 1985) and that the primary goal of communication should be organized action (Donnellon, Gray, & Bougon, 1986). If we accept that the meaning one person creates may not correspond to the meaning that another person gives to the same communication, it is less important that the two people understand each other than it is that they act in mutually satisfying ways (Weick, 1995).

Although the strategic-control perspective advances our appreciation of the subtleties of communication, it is not without problems. First, it minimizes the importance of ethics. While strategic ambiguity is commonplace in organizations, it is often used to escape blame. Particularly when called upon to testify about their actions in a court of law, many if not most executives will make good use of the “wiggle room” afforded by vague or ambiguous language. That way, when they succeed they can claim credit, but when they fail they can quickly identify an interpretation of events that lets them off of the hook.

Another limitation of the strategic-control approach is its emphasis on the behavior of individuals (or on individuals controlling their environment through communication), often at the expense of the community. As such, it clouds issues related to cooperation, coordination, power and inequality, and the interdependent relationships of individuals and groups. The strategic control model suggests that the world is composed of independent communicators, each working to control his
Sudden Flags: Organizational Ambiguity in Action

The strategic uses of ambiguity can have positive or negative influences on the quality of organizational life. Viewed positively, strategic ambiguity can encourage members of an institution to unite around common symbols (such as a college mascot or tradition) without requiring people to hold the same meanings for those symbols. Viewed negatively, strategic ambiguity can be used to mask and even suppress important differences between individuals.

An interesting example of this dynamic occurred in 2005 when the Florida state legislature voted to place American flags in every classroom in the state. The intent of the law was to remind people of their citizenship as part of their education. Nearly overnight, thousands of inexpensive flags mounted on plastic PVC pipes were affixed to the walls of classrooms at every level of education in Florida (preschool to postgraduate).

Discussion Questions

1. Flags are a classic example of ambiguous symbols. If you were a student in one of these classrooms, how would you react to the appearance of the flag?
2. How would you react if you were the teacher?
3. How should teachers react to students who have varied views of the flag and may even oppose its presence in the classroom?
4. Outline a conversation that you might have with your class on the first day the flag appears. How would you solicit multiple interpretations of its meaning, and how would you handle strong differences in beliefs?

or her own environment, and that meaning exists only within people’s minds. It thus overemphasizes the role and power of individuals in creating meaning through communication.

Communication as a Balance of Creativity and Constraint

Since the late 1960s, the central focus of social theorists has been the relationship between individuals and society, which in our case translates to the relationship
between employees and organizations. Two competing perspectives examine this relationship. The macro perspective sees individuals as being molded, controlled, ordered, and constrained by society and by social institutions. In contrast, the micro perspective sees individuals as creating society and its social systems. This dichotomy has obvious implications for organizational communication, depending on whether the emphasis is on how employees communicate to create and shape organizations or on the constraints organizations place on that communication. In other words, while we no doubt conform to social pressures, rules, laws, and standards for behavior, “we are rule and system users and rule and system breakers as well” (Wentworth, 1980, p. 40).

In their foundational text on the individual and society, The Social Construction of Reality (1967), Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann argue that societies and organizations are constructed as people act in patterned ways; over time, people take those behavior patterns for granted as “reality.” In other words, most of what we take for granted in organizations is created or constructed through people’s choices and behavior. Over time, routines develop and members amass a general knowledge of “how things are done.” What results is a tension between the need to maintain order and the need to promote change.

Although many writers have contributed significantly to this line of thought, Anthony Giddens’s (1984) theory of structuration is especially relevant to students of organizational communication. In discussing the relationships between individual communication and social systems and structures, Giddens simultaneously focuses on the creative and constraining aspects of structure, or what he calls the duality of structure. In this view, the designer of a new product advertisement is both bound by the rules, norms, and expectations of the industry and open to the possibility of transcending those structures by designing a creative ad. In this sense, creativity is the design and modification of social systems through communication. The communication process is not viewed as what goes on inside organizations but as how people organize (Barnard, 1968; Farace, Monge, & Russell, 1977; Johnson, 1977). This does not mean that the process is always deliberate or rational; to the contrary, much of what is taken for granted as organizational reality is either unintentional or based on people’s perceptions and assumptions (which may or may not be valid). People create social reality through communication in an ironic sense: They rarely get the reality they set out to create (Ortner, 1980). The process of designing a new retail store, for example, is necessarily a series of compromises among differing dreams and worldviews; rarely does one individual get to call all the shots. Both the physical design and the interpretations of that design are the result of overt and covert negotiation.

The theory of structuration thus sees human behavior as an unresolvable tension between creativity and constraint. William Wentworth (1980) acknowledges as much when he describes the conflict between under- and oversocialized images of people. For Wentworth, the idea that people are either inherently constrained
or inherently creative does not offer a complete characterization of the relationships between individuals and society. Instead, he argues, social life is a balance of creativity and constraint—of constructing social reality and of being constrained by those constructions—and it is through communication that the balance is achieved.

Our definition of organizational communication in this text—as the balance of creativity and constraint—is derived from the perspectives of Wentworth and others. We believe that communication is the moment-to-moment working out of the tension between individual creativity and organizational constraint. The phrase “moment-to-moment working out of the tension” refers specifically to the balance of creativity (as a strategic response to organizational constraints) and constraints (as the constructions of reality that limit the individual’s choice of strategic response).

As an example of how the tension between creativity and constraint is constructed through communication, we can cite the meetings we attended at a company that manufactures hydraulic lifts. These staff meetings were controlled by the company president according to an agenda that he prepared. Most discussions were marked by short briefings on various topics (such as new sales, personnel changes, and capital equipment expenditures) and little actual decision-making. Although the executives in attendance were experienced decision makers, they knew that the president viewed any opposing viewpoint as a sign of disloyalty. Nicknamed “Little General,” the president routinely embarrassed employees who disagreed with him or who attempted independent action. Over time, employee nonconfrontation was taken for granted, and what had started out as a human construction came to be accepted as an organizational reality (Berger & Luckmann, 1967). Despite the strong constraints on communication and the norm of nonconfrontation at the company, however, occasionally the urge to be creative emerged during meetings. An employee might, for instance, introduce a topic that was not on the president’s agenda or present new data that conflicted with data given by the president. By observing communication in these ways, we saw both creativity and constraint in action, as the company’s norms were applied or challenged.

Notice that this balancing act stimulates creativity as a strategic response to organizational constraints. In our example, the staff members acted on information they already had to guide their choices of when to speak and what to say. Unfortunately, however, the organizational reality of nonconfrontation limited their strategic choices and their ability to respond. Because the president seemed unable to respond to their initiatives positively and because they were unable to alter his construction of reality, the balance was tipped toward constraint and away from creativity. It was this lack of balance that made the staff meetings relatively unproductive, one-sided affairs.

Fortunately, the balance does not always tip in favor of constraint, although some degree of structure is always necessary. A great example of an organization known for encouraging idiosyncratic behavior on the part of its employees is
On-line Networking Profiles: Balancing Creativity and Constraint

Balancing creativity and constraint, the metaphor we conceived of as an analytical framework, may also be used to make organizations and individuals more successful. Let’s consider the usefulness of the metaphor in an arena that you may already be familiar with—that of successful on-line networking and self-promotion.

If you are a student who wants to meet new people on campus, an individual who wants to find a prospective dating partner, or a member of a new band that wants to be discovered, you may not need to look any further than today’s on-line networking sites such as Facebook, Match.com, and MySpace. These sites allow groups and individuals to market themselves to a desired audience (whether a social group, a date, or a company) by posting on-line profiles that reveal personal and professional information. As individuals grow increasingly comfortable with the use of technology, however, more profiles appear on these sites (160,000 new accounts are created every day on MySpace), increasing the competition for “hits” and possible connections. As such, profiles have had to become increasingly unique to attract attention, while still offering the requisite information desired by would-be readers. The authors of successful profiles have to walk the line between creativity and constraint to market themselves appropriately and effectively.

In this chapter, we discussed Anthony Giddens’s theory of structuration and offered the example of a designer of a new product advertisement. A successful advertisement must be bound by the rules and norms of a given industry while remaining open to the possibility of creatively transcending those structures. The same can be said for successful advertising and marketing in the virtual world. The developed norms of on-line networking pressure individuals to offer key pieces of information. Successful dating profiles, for example, typically offer the author’s age, height, weight, hair color, profession, and a list of personal interests as well as desired traits in a prospective date. Without this information, a profile will be entirely overlooked or considered suspect for its glaring omissions.

Despite the constraint to offer this requisite personal information, dating experts agree that profiles that are too constrained, and lack creativity, are not likely to receive many hits. Or, as dating expert Evan Marc Katz states: “If you’re writing a profile, you have one job and that is to sound different than everybody else” (qtd. in Dykstra, 2006). In other words, profile authors must go beyond offering the standard bits of information—they are not enough for success in and of themselves. Sites like Match.com do allow room for these spots of creativity. Catchy
Profile titles attract visitors, as do personal photographs and open responses that allow the author—in his or her own words—to relate additional information from an explanation of a favorite hobby to a description of the ideal vacation.

Many bands have found a great deal of success by balancing creativity and constraint on-line, particularly on the MySpace networking site. With major record labels signing fewer acts and spending less money on marketing, MySpace allows artists to get their music out to the masses. Naturally, over time, rules, norms, and expectations developed for the types of profiles that bands create. Most successful profiles offer a photograph of the group, MP3 music files of recent performances, and a list of upcoming tour dates. Profiles also need to be found easily through MySpace’s search engine, and therefore lists of music genre and influences tend to be fairly lengthy: They need to cast a wide enough net but not be so exhaustive that they’re meaningless. And there is hardly a band that doesn’t give plenty of kudos to other bands, in a quid pro quo system that has everyone advertising for everyone else.

But despite these constraining norms, there is plenty of room for creativity. Gavin DeGraw, a pop singer who writes earnest lyrics, has a black-and-white photo of himself smiling, a straightforward bio, and blog entries with comments like “just saying hello and letting you know that I’ll be checking in frequently” and “thanks to all of you all for the support.” The Indie band Fletch hasn’t recorded an album yet, but their profile does have (in true Indie spirit) a self-designed feature called “Help Us Decide,” which asks viewers to pick which songs should go on their first album. The most popular profiles are widely different from one another, with each artist tailoring their pages to their personal tastes and individual styles.

**Discussion Questions**

1. If you have an on-line profile or have ever viewed on-line profiles, consider which ones stand out the most. What characteristics do they share? In what ways are they different?

2. What are some of the other everyday contexts in which your life is organized through your own attempts to balance creativity and constraint? Consider the choices you make about your personal style of dress in various contexts (school, social events, work) or the way you interact in meetings (whether at work, a religious institution, or a campus organization).

3. In which organizational environments do you organize your self-presentation in ways that favor creativity? In which environments do you accommodate organizational constraints? Why do you make those choices?
Southwest Airlines. From its inception, Southwest has cultivated an organisational culture that values individual creativity and initiative, most keenly manifested in the employees' dress, informal attitude, and use of off-beat humor. To better understand the two approaches, reflect on the different classroom climates that you have experienced. More than likely, you will be able to place each on a continuum between those that emphasized constraint (strict rules, centralized control) and those that stressed creativity (flexible rules, tolerance for a range of acceptable behaviors).

The main advantage of this framework appears to be the ability to simultaneously consider the enabling and constraining aspects of communication. Occasionally, researchers and theorists lose this important point and lapse back to the information-transfer approach, suggesting that individuals create society, which then in turn constrains the individual. This is a serious misunderstanding of the theory. Finally, there are some who object to the use of the balance metaphor to characterize what happens between people and institutions, claiming that there is an implied norm of "good balance" that might not be in anyone's best interest. Researchers who study the interplay between home and work spheres, for example, frequently maintain that the decision to regard these spheres as separate and then seek balance between them both defines and perpetuates our current predicament (e.g., Jorgenson, Gregory, & Goodier, 1998). They argue instead for a view of work that sees experience as continuous across activities and settings, suggesting the need to study human "occupation" more generally and in ways that go well beyond paid work. Further study and discussion of these ideas is needed.

Having now reviewed the high points of organizational communication theory—communication as information transfer, transactional process, strategic control, and a balance of creativity and constraint—we use the best concepts from each perspective to develop our own model of organizations as dialogues. A summary of the perspectives appears in Table 2.1. A specific representation of the "balance" metaphor for understanding organizational communication is shown in Figure 2.1 (p. 42).

**ORGANIZATIONS AS DIALOGUES**

We are both social and private beings. As such, we establish a sense of self that is apart from the outside world (an identity) that engages in a lifelong conversation with another sense of self that is a part of the outside world (a member of a community). If we could somehow construct reality all on our own—as a monologue—we would then be totally alone. Conversely, if our contexts for interpretation came entirely from others, we would lose our unique identity. The critical issues, then, revolve around these concepts of identity and community, or self, other, and context.
### Organizational Communication: Preliminary Perspectives

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>COMMUNICATION AS INFORMATION TRANSFER</strong></th>
<th><strong>COMMUNICATION AS TRANSACTIONAL PROCESS</strong></th>
<th><strong>COMMUNICATION AS STRATEGIC CONTROL</strong></th>
<th><strong>COMMUNICATION AS A BALANCE OF CREATIVITY AND CONSTRAINT</strong></th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Metaphor:</strong> Pipeline or conduit — sender transmits a message to receiver.</td>
<td><strong>Metaphor:</strong> Process — communication is a process that creates relationships; “You cannot not communicate.”</td>
<td><strong>Metaphor:</strong> Control — individuals attempt to control their environments.</td>
<td><strong>Metaphor:</strong> Balance — individuals attempt to develop distinct identities while participating in an organized community.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Assumptions:</strong> (1) Language transfers thoughts and feelings from person to person; (2) speakers and writers insert thoughts and feelings into words; (3) words contain the thoughts and feelings; (4) listeners or readers extract the thoughts and feelings from the words.</td>
<td><strong>Assumptions:</strong> (1) There are rarely clear distinctions between senders and receivers; (2) non-verbal feedback accompanies or substitutes for verbal messages; (3) meanings are in people, not words.</td>
<td><strong>Assumptions:</strong> Strategic ambiguity gains control because it (1) promotes unified diversity; (2) preserves privileged positions, (3) is deniable, and (4) facilitates organizational change.</td>
<td><strong>Assumptions:</strong> All communication accomplishes two things at once: It reflects historical constraints of prior contexts, and it represents individuals’ attempts to do something new and creative. This is the duality of social or organizational structure.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Description:</strong> Source transmits a message through a channel (air or light) to a receiver; communication is a tool people use to accomplish objectives.</td>
<td><strong>Description:</strong> Person receiving the message constructs its meaning; the idea is for senders to adapt their messages to the needs and expectations of their listeners.</td>
<td><strong>Description:</strong> Strategic ambiguity takes advantage of the diversity of meanings people often give to the same message; choices of what to say are socially, politically, and ethically motivated; strategies can be selected to accomplish multiple goals.</td>
<td><strong>Description:</strong> Communication is the moment-to-moment working out of the tension between individual creativity and organizational constraint. Approaching organizations as constructed through communication requires simultaneous attention to the ways...</td>
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## Organizational Communication: Preliminary Perspectives

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Communication as Information Transfer</th>
<th>Communication as Transactional Process</th>
<th>Communication as Strategic Control</th>
<th>Communication as a Balance of Creativity and Constraint</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Measure of effectiveness:</strong></td>
<td><strong>Measure of effectiveness:</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Receiver of communication understands (or does) what the speaker intended.</td>
<td>Shared meaning.</td>
<td>Coordinated actions accomplished through diverse interpretations of meanings.</td>
<td>A balance between satisfied individuals and a coherent community.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Limitations:</strong> (1) Overly simplifies communication: Treats transmission of the message as linear and unproblematic; (2) sees the receiver as a passive receptor uninvolved with the construction of the meaning of the message; (3) does not account for differences in interpretation between speaker and listener.</td>
<td>(1) Emphasis on shared meaning is problematic and ultimately unverifiable; (2) bias toward clarity and openness denies political realities; (3) does not account for ambiguity, deception, or diversity in points of view.</td>
<td>(1) Can minimize the importance of ethics; (2) places strong emphasis on individuals over communities; (3) overemphasizes the role and power of individuals to create meaning through communication.</td>
<td>Limitations: Can sometimes be difficult to identify what counts as a constraint; also tends to draw attention away from material economic realities that may threaten the system independent of member behaviors.</td>
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FIGURE 2.1
Communication as a Balance of Creativity and Constraint

Metaphor: Balance

Assumptions

1. The duality of structure: Individuals are molded, controlled, ordered, and shaped by society and social institutions; individuals also create society and social institutions.

2. Communication is the moment-to-moment working out of the tensions between the need to maintain order (constraint) and the need to promote change (creativity). As such, communication is the material manifestation of
   a. institutional constraints
   b. creative potential
   c. contexts of interpretation

Representative Model

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<th>Creativity</th>
<th>Constraint</th>
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<td>Communication</td>
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Description

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<tr>
<th>Creativity</th>
<th>Communication</th>
<th>Constraints</th>
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<tr>
<td>Interpretations of meanings; all forms of initiative; new ways of organizing tasks and understanding relationships; resistance to institutional forms of dominance; uses of storytelling and dialogue to alter perceptions; uses of social constructions of reality to forge new agreements and to shape coordinated actions at work</td>
<td>Reveals interpretations of contexts; asks questions about resources for creativity and the presence of constraints; suggests the possibility of dialogue</td>
<td>Social and institutional forms, laws, rules, procedures, slogans, and management styles designed to gain compliance and limit dialogue at all costs; top-down decision making and problem solving</td>
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Foundations of Dialogue: Self, Other, and Context

Our self-concept is formed in part from the social relationships we have with others and from others’ responses to what we say and do (Bakhtin, 1981; Blumer, 1969; Jackson, 1989). According to George Herbert Mead (1934), the self consists of two interrelated “stories”: (1) the story of “I,” or the creative, relatively unpredictable part of a person that is usually kept private, and (2) the story of “me,” or the socially constrained, relatively consistent part of a person that is more openly shared with others. The “I” is impulsive, whereas the “me” strives to fit into society’s rules and norms. The creative aspect of the self (the “I”) desires meaningful action with others. The constraining aspect of the self (the “me”) guides this action by anticipating responses and applying social rules of behavior.

This definition of the self has important implications for interpreting organizational communication. Because the self is constructed out of our need to balance our own needs with those of others, the self is necessarily dialogic, or made in concert with others (Bakhtin, 1981). Whenever we interact with others, we engage in conversations that affect our perceptions of ourselves. We retell stories that were told to us by others, and we use and comment on others’ opinions of who we are (Blumer, 1969; Laing, 1965). We make use of both real and imagined characters and relationships (Goodall, 1996). The voice of our experience, therefore, carries with it the perceptions, memories, stories, fantasies, and actions of the many people who shape our lives—co-workers, family members, friends, teachers, students, enemies, celebrities, heroes, and villains (Conquergood, 1991). In other words, our identity only makes sense in relation to others.

At the same time, we construct the other in relation to our conception of self. It is said that people who consistently speak badly about others often reveal their own negative self-concept. Conversely, people who generally speak well of others may have a positive self-concept. Our construction of others is not entirely of our own making. It is constrained by the self’s culture, race, gender, and subconscious. How we learn to see and respond to the presence, actions, and meanings of others is shaped by many influences. In this sense, then, the self’s symbolic construction of the other is also always complex and dialogic.

Especially interesting is the role of others in our understanding of organizations. As noted earlier in the chapter, the information-transfer, transactional process, and strategic-control models of communication focus on how the sender (the self) acts toward the receivers (others). The sender is usually viewed as a manager and the receiver as a subordinate, reflecting the managerial bias of these theories (Putnam, 1982). Employees are too often viewed as “others” to be acted upon, communicated to, ordered, and controlled, rather than as participants in an organizational dialogue. This concept of others as partners to the dialogue contains the important idea of plurality, which refers to the fact that the self and others mutually construct the meanings they have for each other. It also embraces the idea that
multiple interpretations of a relationship are possible and that neither the self nor the others alone can control those interpretations.

Context refers to where communication occurs (i.e., the physical setting) and the interpretive frameworks used to make sense of the communicative exchange. Context is vital to our understanding of organizational communication. For one thing, it shapes our interpretations. In addition, multiple contexts are always available for sense making, and the concept of context tells us much about organizational dialogue.

There can be no meaning without context (Bateson, 1972). If we think of a message as a text, the context is information that goes with and helps make sense of the text. For example, if you overhear a friend call someone you don’t know a “loser,” how would you make sense of the comment? You would need to know more about the relationship between your friend and the other person and about what happened just before your friend made the comment. You might even need to know where the comment was made. Relationship and situation, two basic aspects of context, would affect your interpretation. If your friend and the other person had been teasing each other all day, the comment might be interpreted as a sign of friendship.

The role of context is always complex. We cannot fully understand the meaning of a message without first examining the relationship, its history, and the immediate situation for clues. This is especially true in organizations, where lines of authority, personal relationships, politics, the business situation, and other factors affect the interpretation of communicative exchanges. Because it is impossible to communicate in isolation, people necessarily communicate in contexts. However, contexts are not stable. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the word context originated as a verb meaning “to weave together, interweave, join together, compose.” We favor this older definition because it highlights context as “a verbal process aimed at the manufacture of something... the weaving together of otherwise disparate elements, perceptions, fabrics or words, the piecing together of a whole out of the sum of its parts” (Goodall, 1991a, p. 64).

When we say that individuals communicate in contexts, we use that term to refer to both (1) how a person defines a situation at any given moment and (2) the process of altering that definition over time. Our definition of context reflects the duality of structure: People both create contexts through communication and are constrained by those contexts as they are created (e.g., one’s creative decision to tell off one’s boss will constrain future interactions with him or her). As Linda Putnam (1985) puts it, “People establish the context, use the context to interpret messages, and use the messages to change the context” (p. 152). Over time, what we define as context becomes the constructed reality that we take for granted. Therefore, when we say that individuals communicate in context, we mean that they communicate in accord with their constructions of reality, or with their interpretations of the evolving situation.

Notice that we are, in a way, redefining what it means to participate in an organization. Rather than viewing institutional members as the product of a particular
organizational culture, we believe that a large part of working together is the interpretation of contexts. Although most obvious in white-collar jobs, this applies to blue-collar work and other kinds of organizations (e.g., religious institutions, sports clubs) as well. The performance of all organizational roles, whether pastor or accountant, soccer coach or college professor, is defined through interaction and collective sense making. How people think and talk about their role in the organization and how they feel about the relationships they maintain there have a significant impact on their behavior choices and, ultimately, on the effectiveness of the organization.

Suppose you are a supervisor at a local copy center and during lunchtime you discover one of your part-time employees sitting in the rest room. What would you do or say? Your first challenge would be to interpret the situation and the context because human communication makes sense only in context. What do you know about this employee that could help you make sense of his behavior? Might personal problems or stress play a role? Recalling that the employee's mother had been ill, you inquire about the situation and discover that his mother's illness has become life threatening. This is the relevant context; it makes sense of the employee's behavior and allows you to offer an appropriate response. Furthermore, your interaction with the employee will affect your future interactions in ways that depend on how you and the employee interpret the situation. Thus, your relationship might become more aloof—or more friendly—as a result. Not only is context necessary to make sense of the initial communication, but that communication will, in turn, shape the context for making sense of future interactions.

**Dialogue and the Situated Individual**

Multiple contexts exist for interpreting communication. What are multiple contexts? Consider this definition provided by Goran Ahrne (1990):

> From birth every human being is affiliated to a family and a nation-state. Children's first experiences of the exercise of power occur within the family. After some years all children will have to yield to the power of the nation-state in the form of school. Growing up, children will slowly get to know the world outside the family and the school. Gradually the everyday world will be larger, adolescence being the typical time for activities in groups or gangs of various kinds. . . . Having married and settled down and started to work, people fill their everyday lives with organizational affiliations. In the course of their lives individuals orient themselves within the existing organizations in the social landscape. Every individual attempts to establish a domain within this landscape, balancing between different organizational influences and leaving some unorganized space. (p. 72)

In other words, we grow up and learn about life in multiple contexts, each of which has its own constraints—or rules, norms, and expected understandings—that make it unique. These constraints play two roles: (1) They limit creativity and
individual freedom, and (2) they suggest particular constructions of reality that assist in interpretation. For example, if a co-worker leans over and kisses you (against your wishes), it would be clear from the business context that such behavior is inappropriate and that a strong negative reaction on your part is warranted. If a family member does the same thing, the meaning would be entirely different, as would your likely response.

Consider also how interpretation is complicated by multiple contexts in the typical family business or when husband and wife work together in the same company. You can imagine the conversations: “Dad, you can talk to me that way at home, but not here in front of the other employees!” or “How could you, my own wife, vote against me at the faculty meeting?” Different contexts suggest different rules for action and interpretation. Even within a small organization, multiple contexts are always available for interpretation.

In conducting performance appraisals, how tough should supervisors be on marginal performers? Seen in the context of the business as a financial entity accountable primarily to shareholders, the supervisor should be direct and tough. In a context that emphasizes the supervisor-employee relationship, however, the supervisor could justify being more understanding. Interpreting and communicating in multiple contexts is the tough stuff of organizational life.

This brings us to our key point: All individuals are situated in multiple contexts. In a broad sense, this means that behavior is both guided and constrained by the types of organizations with which we affiliate, whether they be capitalist enterprises, voluntary associations, nation-states, or families. More specifically, all behavior is situated in smaller, or more local, contexts: The situated individual is a person who is conducting the everyday business of the maintenance and construction of the social realities in which we live.

The situated individual is connected to others through a network of shared, mutually negotiated, and maintained meanings. These meanings provide location, identity, action, and purpose to the individual. They tell me where I am, who I am, what I am doing, how to do it, and why. . . . The network of meanings is not independent of the situated individual. It is the product of the interaction among situated individuals. (Anderson, 1987, p. 268)

Difficulty is encountered when the multiple contexts impinging on an individual suggest inconsistent or conflicting communication or behavior. A study of Disneyland’s corporate culture provides a detailed example of multiple conflicting contexts for interpretation (Smith & Eisenberg, 1987). In the early days of the theme park, employees used two metaphors, “the show” and the Disney “family,” which were key to larger contexts. The first metaphor—Disneyland as a show—suggested that employees were actors who played important roles. They could thus be told by the “director” to act in particular ways because of “box office concerns” (e.g., to smile more or to style their hair). The other metaphor—Disneyland as a family—however, suggested a different and sometimes opposing context in which management, like a concerned parent, took care of its employees and provided a
nurturing environment. These conflicting contexts for interpretation had very different consequences for Disney policy, and in the mid-1980s, company employees actually called a strike in response to a pay cut that was being sold by management as a “sacrifice families are sometimes called upon to make.” In fact, recent case studies suggest that the drama metaphor—so compatible with business—has in fact worn out.

The situated-individual model of organizational communication may be summarized as follows:

1. The individual is an actor whose thoughts and actions are based on the interpretation of contexts.
2. More than one context always exists to guide the individual’s actions and interpretations.
3. Communication is a practice that includes both interpretation and action; as such, it can reveal sources of creativity, constraint, meaning, interpretation, and context.

A final example can help clarify this notion of the situated individual. One of the authors of this textbook (Erie) became involved with a problem facing a customer service manager at a large travel agency. The manager (we’ll call her Laura) sought to convince management of her need for a full-time accountant to manage the record keeping of customer service billings. Laura’s initial request was met with assurances from her boss that an accountant would be hired, but then management decided suddenly to deny her request. The problem, then, was how to interpret the denial and what, if anything, to do about it. There were various possible ways to make sense of (or contextualize) the situation. From Laura’s point of view, the problem centered on a lack of expertise in her department and the need to address it by hiring an accountant. The finance department saw the situation differently. Because it had sought for several years to hire its own accountant, it strongly resisted the idea that one might now be hired in customer service. As a result, rumors surfaced among the finance department staff about Laura’s competency as a manager, suggesting that she would not need the new position if she were doing her job properly. Still another view of the situation came from the general manager of the travel agency. He resisted the new hiring simply because none of the companies he had worked for in the past had had an accountant in customer service. The board of directors based its disapproval on economic concerns. Any new hires in a recession would not please shareholders. Finally, Laura’s peers perceived her as aloof and a loner, rather than as a team player. Consequently, no informal group within the company was inclined to support Laura’s agenda to hire an accountant. Laura might not have faced this problem if she had been more involved in informal communication networks or if the company had ways of considering multiple interpretations side by side in conversation—that is, in some form of dialogue.

Keep in mind that this is a simple example of how multiple contexts can influence interpretation and action. Although the facts remain the
those facts are constructed differently depending on which context is applied. Because no one individual has access to all potential contexts, each individual's interpretation is based on a limited understanding of the reality being constructed. The information drawn on to build a context for interpretation is varied, multiple, and always limited. All interpretations, therefore, are partial, partial, and problematic (see Chapter 3). Fortunately, however, the limitations of one person's interpretations are usually offset by others' perspectives. Because sense making is a social activity, more than one person is always involved in the construction of reality. When individuals work to coordinate their contexts, interpretations, communication, and actions, they are said to be organizing. One way of viewing this organizing process is as dialogue.

DEFINITIONS OF DIALOGUE

In our working definition of communication as a balance of creativity and constraint, we maintain that dialogue is balanced communication, or communication in which each individual has a chance to both speak and be heard. Dialogue has three levels representing an increasing degree of collaboration and respect for the other: dialogue as (1) equitable transaction, (2) empathic conversation, and (3) real meeting.

Dialogue as Equitable Transaction

An equitable transaction from a communication perspective is one in which all participants have the ability to voice their opinions and perspectives. In defining dialogue this way, we call attention to the fact that not everyone in an organization has an equal say in making decisions or in interpreting events. In the traditional organization of the early twentieth century, people in low-level jobs were discouraged from "interact[ing] with anybody in the organization unless [they] got permission from the supervisor, and then he wanted to know what [they] were going to talk about. So there's this notion in an organization that talking to people is not what your job is, that talking to people [means] interfering with . . . productivity" (Evered & Tannenbaum, 1992, p. 48). Even in some of the most progressive companies, certain people's voices are valued more highly than others'. These people are said to have power because they can 'back up what they say with rewards or sanctions. The extent to which one person's remarks carry more weight than another's is not always obvious to the casual observer because a deeper exercise of power is applied to the shaping or defining of context. That is, determinations of whose voice counts most are either well established before the observer arrives on the scene or are created by those who define what is addressed. Numerous contextual factors—the structure of rooms, the arrangement of furniture, differences in dress and appearance, the length of time scheduled for meetings, who is invited (or not invited) to attend meetings, and norms derived from prior communication
situations—affect how much weight is given to the points of view of certain people. Once we are in a situation we can try to speak as if from a position of power, but this is often difficult given the numerous contextual constraints already in place.

One way to learn about how individuals participate in organizational dialogues is to ask questions about voice (who does and does not get to speak on organizational issues) and to pay close attention to when, where, and for how long individuals speak. Voice manifests itself in the ability of an individual or group to participate in the ongoing organizational dialogue. In most organizations, a few voices are loud and clear (e.g., those of the owners or senior managers), while others are muted or suppressed (e.g., those of the janitorial and clerical staffs). In the literature on organizations, voice has a more specific meaning: It refers to an employee’s decision to speak up against the status quo rather than keep quiet and stay or give up and leave (Hirschman, 1970). In an ideal world, voice is the preferred option because it raises important issues and encourages creativity and commitment. In most companies, however, many barriers to voice exist. The suppression of employee voice within organizations can lead to whistle-blowing, wherein frustrated employees take their concerns to the media, the courts, or others outside of the organization (Redding, 1985). In extreme cases of suppressed employee voice, the results may include sabotage and violence in the workplace (Goodall, 1995).

At a minimum, then, dialogue requires that communicators be afforded equitable opportunities to speak. While the notion of dialogue as equitable transaction is a good starting point for thinking about organizational communication, it does not explicitly address the quality of that communication.

□ Dialogue as Empathic Conversation

In defining dialogue as empathic conversation, we refer to the ability to understand or imagine the world as another person understands or imagines it. Achieving empathy is difficult for people who believe that their view of reality is the only correct view and that others’ perceptions are misinformed or misguided. Indeed, Western communication is largely based on assumptions of what is “right.” As a result, it becomes much more difficult to accept the validity of a different perspective, especially a radically different one. However, empathy is crucial in organizations. It promotes understanding among different departments, makes managing diversity possible, and acknowledges that although individuals and groups have different perspectives on the organization, no single perspective is inherently better than others. In this way, we can focus on common problems without immediately turning those who have a different view of these problems into enemies. The challenge, of course, is in learning to appreciate differences in interpretation without feeling pressured to either demonize the other or to strive for complete agreement. Put differently: “Can I recognize the value of your [perspective] . . . without us having to somehow merge into something that’s less rich than the community of differences?” (Evered & Tannenbaum, 1992, p. 52).
Researchers at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) take a similar view of organizational dialogue in their efforts to create learning communities (Isaacs, 1999; Senge, 1991; Senge et al., 1994). Building on the work of physicist David Bohm, the researchers define dialogue as a kind of “collective mindfulness” in which the interactants are more concerned about group effectiveness than about individual ego or position. From this perspective, dialogue affords new opportunities for people in organizations to work together. Not merely a set of techniques, dialogue requires that people “learn how to think together—not just in the sense of analyzing a shared problem or creating new pieces of shared knowledge, but [also] in the sense of occupying a collective sensibility, in which the thoughts, emotions, and resulting actions belong not to one individual, but to all of them together” (Isaacs, 1999, p. 358). The MIT dialogue project has attracted the attention of business because it links the fate of whole systems of individuals (e.g., organizations, societies, species) with dialogue, flirting with the idea that our relationships with others can possess a spiritual quality.

We know that treating people like objects is inappropriate, but are understanding and empathy enough? These questions recall the work of contemporary philosophers Martin Buber and Mikhail Bakhtin, whose critique of empathy as the goal of dialogue leads us to yet another definition.

Dialogue as Real Meeting

In defining dialogue as real meeting, we mean that through communication, a genuine communion can take place between people that transcends differences in role or perspective and that recognizes all parties’ common humanity. John Stewart (2000) refers to this state as “letting others happen to you while holding your ground.” The notion of dialogue as empathic conversation is insufficient because it assumes that one individual experiences the other as a kind of object, rather than as a fellow interpreter. In other words, even empathic communicators, once the conversation has ended, may continue to view the dialogue as mainly instrumental in accomplishing their personal and professional goals. Therefore, one’s performance of empathy may be false or even a means to a personal strategic end.

Certain types of dialogue are valuable in and of themselves. Buber distinguishes between interhuman dialogue, which has inherent value, and social dialogue, which has value as a route to self-realization and fulfillment. According to Buber, “We are answerable neither to ourselves alone nor to society apart from ourselves but to that very bond between ourselves and others through which we again and again discover the direction in which we can authenticate our existence” (as cited in Friedman, 1992, p. 6). Consider also this quote from Bakhtin (1984):

A single consciousness is a contradiction in terms. Consciousness is essentially multiple.

... I am conscious of myself and become myself only when revealing myself for another, through another and with the help of another. ... The very being of man [sic] is the deepest communion. (p. 287)
From this perspective, since life exists only in communion with other humans, dialogue is a fundamental human activity. How do meetings in organizations resemble Buber's ideal? Buber sees it as a relationship between "I and Thou," wherein two individuals acknowledge that each is an interpreter and that neither reduces the other to an object of interpretation within a context that has already been constructed. For example, we have seen senior managers who have struggled to understand each other deeply move to an even higher level of trust and coordination in which their respect and regard for the others appear as the foundation of each of their conversations. This respect for another's subjectivity and worldview is the key ingredient in real meeting.

Seeking dialogue because it has value for itself can often result in positive consequences for the organization:

[Dialogue] is one of the richest activities that human beings can engage in. It is the thing that gives meaning to life, it's the sharing of humanity, it's creating something. And there is this magical thing in an organization, or in a team, or a group, where you get unrestricted interaction, unrestricted dialogue, and this synergy happening that results in more productivity and satisfaction and seemingly magical levels of output from a team. (Evered & Tannenbaum, 1992, p. 48)

This definition of dialogue combines the abstract or spiritual with the more practical aspects of how we communicate. Are we open to the voices of others? Do we recognize that all views are partial and that each of us has the right to speak? Are we open to the possibility of maintaining mutual respect and openness of spirit through organizational communication? Such questions are not easily answered by people in organizations today. Although people may desire to maintain an open dialogue, they are too often constrained by learned behaviors that guard against intimate disclosure, by the social, professional, and political consequences of those disclosures, and by the habit of separating emotions from work.

To establish dialogue as a real meeting, we must learn to interpret communication as a dialogic process that occurs between and among individuals, rather than as something we do to one another. All parties are responsible for the dialogue as well as for the risks taken; only together can they make progress. We engage in dialogue to learn more about the self in context with others. Dialogue helps us attain new appreciations for the multilayered dimensions of every context: "The crucial point is to go into a dialogue with the stance that there is something that I don't already know, with a mutual openness to learn. Through dialogue we can learn, not merely receive information, but revise the way we see something. Something about the dialogue honors inquiry and learning from the inquiry" (Evered & Tannenbaum, 1992, p. 45).

Authentic dialogue also provides a practical communication skill that is invaluable: We learn to speak from experience and to listen for experience. By sharing and risking the truth of our experience, we discover important questions that can
individual and collective constructions of reality, teach us about what counts as knowledge as well as how to value it, and influence how we generate our evaluations of people and things.

Dialogue as real meeting is difficult to achieve, which is why it does not characterize most relationships inside or outside of organizations. Most organizations readily acknowledge the importance of equitable transactions and are pleased to create increased empathy across hierarchical levels and professional groups. Still, dialogue as real meeting is an important communicative goal because it can transform organizations into energetic and dynamic workplaces. Such organizations are both effective and enjoyable because they encourage the kinds of communication required for real human connection.

There are advantages and limitations associated with promoting dialogue in organizations. It can increase employee satisfaction and commitment, reduce turnover rates, and lead to greater innovation and flexibility within the organization. However, it is also time consuming, requiring that issues be screened in terms of the amount of dialogue they warrant. It is also necessary that certain people possess the power to decide which issues are most important in a turbulent business environment. In addition, promoting dialogue may lead communicators to assume that their ideas and opinions will be implemented. Although there may be an equitable distribution of power and voice in the group, within a capitalist system the owners and their agents make the final decisions. Recent moves to develop employee-owned companies are beginning to address this concern. Finally, dialogue may lead to a lack of closure or to the feeling that “no right answer” can be found. This problem is related in part to the nature of Western society, in which people expect definitive answers about science, medicine, politics, and technology. In organizational communication, it may be more appropriate to focus on practical guidelines for action.

We conclude this section with two important questions. First: Is dialogue possible in organizations? Our experiences lead us to believe that while dialogue is possible, it is exceedingly rare. More common is communication that creates barriers to real meeting by attempting to convince others that their perceptions are faulty: “Management shouldn’t think that way,” “That idea will never fly,” and “I know my people aren’t dissatisfied.” Much may be gained by expanding the current interest in coordinating the diverse voices in business. In fact, critical organizational scholar Stan Deetz (2006) suggests that organizations can make dramatic improvements by initiating dialogical decision making only occasionally. Drawing a parallel to the Judeo-Christian tradition of tithing, Deetz argues that if organizations devoted a mere 10 percent of their time engaging employees in meaningful dialogue, these organizations would be more productive 90 percent of the time.

Our second question is more difficult: What role does the situated individual play in constructing organizational reality through communication? Some observers take exception with the concept of the situated individual. They argue that it simply restates the idea that a person has a political ideology in favor of free will
and capitalism (Grossberg, 1991). In their view, most choices are so constrained that decisions are made for us, and what we believe to be free or motivated action is actually the force of the world acting through us. Other observers, however, are less willing to underestimate the experiences of the situated individual (Jackson, 1989). In this view, we are born into a society that expects us to act out a balance of individual and social responsibilities. We are expected to make decisions about ourselves and about how our actions may influence and be influenced by others. Ultimately, however, the responsibility for those actions is our own. If someone commits a serious crime, for example, society may be implicated, but it is the criminal who goes to jail.

**Summary**

Researchers commonly encounter four definitions of organizational communication in the literature: communication as information transfer, transactional process, strategic control, and a balance of creativity and constraint. This list is roughly chronological and reveals an increased interest in feedback and two-way interaction as key to organizational sense making. Our own view of organizations as dialogues extends this trend.

Recasting organizations as dialogues (in contrast, say, with economic or political models) places our focus on the interplay between self and other in multiple, changing contexts and situations. Each of these foundational elements arises in relationship with the others, culminating in the idea that every individual is “situated” in flows of communication.

When situated individuals come together to organize, they may vary considerably in the sort of communication in which they engage. On one end of the spectrum is discussion, wherein people seek to dominate others. At the other end is dialogue. Writers on dialogue (Isaacs, 1999) have outlined what we categorize as three levels that increasingly reveal people with a fundamental respect for the subjectivity and differing worldview of the other. The three levels are dialogue as equitable transaction, dialogue as empathic conversation, and dialogue as real meeting. Although dialogue in contemporary organizations is rare, our experience suggests that some level of dialogue is indeed possible.

**Questions for Review and Discussion**

1. What are the major approaches to communication discussed in this chapter? What insights does each approach provide?

2. Explain what we mean by our definition of organizational communication.
3. How do the concepts of self, other, and context contribute to our understanding of organizational communication? How do these concepts help us understand the differences among the major approaches?

4. Strategic ambiguity is discussed as a way to encourage empowerment by allowing employees at different levels within the company to interpret the meaning of statements in relation to their own jobs. However, it doesn’t always work out that way. What potential problems are associated with using strategic ambiguity?

5. What is dialogue? Of the types of dialogue described in this chapter, which ones do you believe are most likely to be available to organizational employees? Why?

6. How would you characterize the kinds of communication that are most prevalent in university life, both in and outside of the classroom? For example, do students of the humanities and the social sciences follow different definitions of communication than their counterparts in the natural sciences?

**Key Terms**

Balancing creativity and constraint, p. 36  Situated individual, p. 46
Empathic conversation, p. 49  Strategic ambiguity, p. 32
Equitable transaction, p. 48  Strategic control, p. 32
Information transfer, p. 29  Structuration, p. 35
Real meeting, p. 50  Transactional process, p. 30
Self, other, and context, p. 43–44  Voice, p. 49