4.3: Rethinking Communication

Learning Objectives

• Differentiate among the three models for how communication functions—linear, interactional, and transactional—and the limitations of each model.

• Differentiate among the seven traditions of communication theory and understand how each approaches the nature of communication and how meaning is exchanged.

You were introduced in Chapter 1 to the “SMCR” model of communication. For two good reasons, numerous textbooks in communication begin with this longstanding model. First, its components—source, message, channel, receiver—are easy to grasp. In our modern world of phones, computers, networks and mass media, we encounter the basic idea of the SMCR model on a daily basis. And so, second, the model is effective in getting students to think—often for the first time—about “communication” as more than just a reflex action, more than something that just “happens.”

In this section we will consider the two questions: how communication works and what communication is. The SMCR model, for example, suggests communication works by traveling in a straight line from source to receiver. But scholars have largely moved beyond this simple linear model of communication which holds that a message travels in a straight line from its source, through a channel, and to its receiver. model and have described communication as an interactional model of communication which holds that communication travels in a circle as a sender transmits a message and then the receiver responds with feedback; thus both parties become sender/receivers. or, more recently, a transactional model of communication which holds that sending and receiving of messages/feedback occurs simultaneously. process. Below, we will review these three models below of how communication works. Yet an even more basic question concerns what communication is. The SMCR model belongs to a body of theories that conceive of communication as information processing, an approach that is called (as we will explain below) a "cybernetic" concept of communication. Yet the cybernetic concept is not the only body of communication theories. As Robert Craig described, seven distinct traditions of communication theory have emerged. Craig, R. T. (1999). Communication theory as a field.
Communication Theory, 9, 118-160. Since modern theories of organizational communication are often built on a different concept of communication than a cybernetic one, then later in this section we will review the seven approaches to answering the question: What is communication?

How Communication Works: Three Models

At the most basic level, the three models of how communication works—linear, interactional, and transactional—can be represented by the three graphics in Figure 4.6 below. The linear model originated in the 1940s, the interactional in the 1950s, and the transactional in the 1970s. That the original linear model of communication remains influential is attested by its inclusion in so many introductory textbooks—including this one. But theorists have long noted its limitations: the assumptions that listeners are passive, that only one message is transmitted at a time, that communication has a beginning and an end. In fact, a source could transmit a confusing or nonsensical message, rather than a meaningful one, and the linear model would work just as well; there is no provision for gauging whether a message has been understood by its receivers. Neither is the context of a communication situation taken into account. Nevertheless, the linear model introduces helpful concepts and terms that are the basis for understanding, as we will see later, the interactional and transactional models of communication.

Figure 4.6 Three Concepts of Communication

Linear Model

Inspired by postwar research at Bell Laboratories on telephone transmissions, Claude Shannon and Warren Weaver developed the “mathematical model” of human communication shown in Figure 4.7 below. Shannon, C., & Weaver, W. (1949) The mathematical theory of communication. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1949. In their model, successful sending and receiving of a message is a function of the channel’s capacity to handle signal degradation caused by static noise on the line. When applied in general to human communication, “noise” can be physical (background noises that make the message harder to hear), physiological (impairments such as hardness of hearing), semantic (difficulties in understanding choices of words), and psychological (predispositions and prejudices that affect how the message is interpreted). As you can see in Figure 4.7 "Linear Model of Communication: Shannon & Weaver", communication travels in a straight line.

Figure 4.7 Linear Model of Communication: Shannon & Weaver
A decade after Shannon and Weaver, David Berlo adapted their concepts into the now-familiar SMCR (source, message, channel, receiver) model. Berlo, D. (1960). *The process of communication*. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston. This is the model we introduced in Chapter 1 “Introduction to Organizational Communication” and have reproduced in Figure 4.8 "Linear Model of Communication: Berlo" below. Berlo’s adaptation was “tremendously influential” in offering a more flexible and “humanized conception of Claude Shannon’s model” that facilitated its application to oral, written, and electronic communication. Rogers, E. M. (2001). The department of communication at Michigan State University as a seed institution for communication study. *Communication Studies*, 52, 234-248; pg. 234. Moreover, the notion of feedback provided a means for gauging reception and understanding of the message. Yet as we will see below in the descriptions of the interactional and transactional models, subsequent theorists have attempted to show how communication is better understood as circular rather than linear, how listeners are also active participants in communication, how multiple messages may be sent simultaneously, and how context and culture impact understanding.

![Figure 4.8 Linear Model of Communication: Berlo](https://socialsci.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Communication/Book%3A_Organizational_Communication_-_Theory_Research_a…)

**Interactional Model**

Only a few years after Shannon and Weaver published their one-way linear model, Wilbur Schramm proposed an alternate model that portrayed communication as a two-way interaction. Schramm, W. (1954). How communication works. In W. Schramm (Ed.), *The process and effects of communication* (pp. 3-26). Urbana: University of Illinois Press. Writing several years before Berlo, he was the first to incorporate feedback—verbal and nonverbal—into a model of communication. The other important innovations in Schramm’s interactive model, which we have adapted in Figure 4.9 "Interactional Model of Communication" below, were the additions of the communication context (the specific setting that may affect meaning) and of “fields of experience” (the frames of reference and the cultures that each participant brings to the communication).
With Schramm’s model, communication moves from a linear to a circular process in which participants are both senders and receivers of messages. Yet the model portrays communication like a tennis match: one participant serves up a message and the other participants then makes a return. Each waits, in turn, passively for the other. Thus, communication goes back and forth as one person (on the left of Figure 4.7 “Linear Model of Communication: Shannon & Weaver”) initiates a message and waits until the other (on the right) responds. But if you think about times when you have engaged in conversation, you will recognize how the other person is simultaneously sending messages—often nonverbally—while you are talking. Unlike a tennis match, you do not wait passively until the “ball is in your court” before acting communicatively. To demonstrate the simultaneity of communication, we move next to a transactional model.

Transaction Model

Perhaps the first model to portray communication as a simultaneous transaction is attributed to Dean Barnlund. Barnlund, D. (1970). A transactional model of communication. In K. K. Sereno & C. D. Mortensen (Eds.), *Foundations of communication theory*(pp. 83-102). New York: Harper. Later theorists have developed this idea of simultaneity, which is illustrated in Figure 4.10 “Transactional Model for Communication” below. As you can see, messages and feedback are being exchanged at the same time between communicators. And because they are engaged together in the transaction, their fields of experience overlap. Useful concepts such as noise and context can likewise be added to the model.

Figure 4.10 Transactional Model for Communication

An expanded view of how communication functions can help us to better understand how *individuals* within
organizations communicate. But for a firmer grip on modern theories of organizational communication we will now go beyond the message-centered, functional models described above and take a meaning-centered approach.

What Communication Is: Seven Traditions

You have probably heard the proverbial question: If a tree falls in the forest and no one is around to hear, does it make a sound? Similarly, we might ask: If you send a message that the receiver does not understand, has communication taken place? This question introduces the idea of meaning into the equation. Let us borrow from the SMCR model one more time to explore the place of meaning in communication.

Some theorists believe (as you probably do) that the meaning of a message lies in the sender. You think up a message and transmit it, and then the receiver must decode what you mean. But other theorists believe the meaning of a message is something that the sender and receiver construct together as they interact through their communication. Still other theorists believe that meaning resides in the channel—perhaps in the signs and symbols that, over time, humans invest with implied meanings, or perhaps in the larger structures of history and culture that condition how we perceive the world. As noted at the start of this section, Craig has identified seven traditions—which are summarized in Table 4.5 “Seven Traditions of Communication Theory” below—in communication theory.Craig, op. cit. Each wrestles with the question of how people derive meaning from a communication. And if we grant that communication only takes place when meaning is exchanged, then the issue of how people derive meaning is another way of putting the question: What is communication?

A helpful way of grasping the seven theoretical traditions is to pose a single communication scenario and then consider it from each of the seven approaches. For our purposes, we will pick a common scenario from organizational life—namely, the annual employee recognition luncheon in which awards are given to those who reach five or ten or fifteen years of service, and so on, up until retirement. During this festive event a catered lunch is served in a large room, speeches are made by key executives, long-serving employees come forward as their names are called and receive a certificate or plaque, and the luncheon concludes on a light note as employees organize a mock ceremony to give out humorous awards. For our overview of the seven traditions, let us begin with the tradition to which you have already been introduced—the cybernetic tradition—and see how it might explain our communication scenario.

Table 4.5 Seven Traditions of Communication Theory

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theoretical Tradition</th>
<th>Communication theorized as...</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cybernetic</td>
<td>information processing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phenomenological</td>
<td>experience of otherness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sociopsychological</td>
<td>expression, interaction, influence</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sociocultural</td>
<td>(re)production of social order</td>
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<tr>
<td>Semiotic</td>
<td>intersubjective mediation by signs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical</td>
<td>discursive reflection</td>
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Theoretical Tradition  Communication theorized as...
Rhetorical  practical art of discourse

Cybernetic Tradition

Theorists in the cybernetic tradition start with the assumption that an organization is a system comprised of many interdependent parts. The annual employee recognition luncheon is a particularly good occasion to see all those parts in action:

- The top executives who make speeches and set policies for giving awards;
- The managers who implement the policies;
- The human resources department that generated the list of employees eligible for awards and organized the luncheon;
- The corporate communications department that will send out a press release after the event;
- The accounting department that processed purchase orders and payments to the caterer;
- The information technology department that set up the audiovisual equipment for the awards ceremony;
- The maintenance department that prepared the room and will clean up afterward; and finally,
- The employees who attended the luncheon, received awards, and put on the humorous entertainment.

All of these parts depend on each other—and must communicate together—to make the annual employee recognition luncheon happen. In the cybernetic tradition, then, communication is theorized as information processing. But cybernetic theorists do not stop at charting information pathways. They are also interested in how a system continually makes adjustments needed to sustain itself. Indeed, the word “cybernetics” was coined from the Greek word for “steersman” by MIT scientist Norbert Wiener. Wiener, N. (1954). The human use of human beings: Cybernetics in society Boston: Houghton Mifflin. In devising a new antiaircraft firing system during World War II, he addressed a major problem: though existing systems could feed back information on firing trajectories, targets would pass by before human operators could make adjustments. He saw that the new system must regulate itself by acting on its own feedback, a principle Wiener then extended to human societies. Communication theorists picked up on this idea by casting the communication process as a self-regulating system in which people act on feedback, adjust their messages, gradually eliminate distortions, and arrive at intended meanings.

Adjustments are made via feedback loops which connect the various parts of the system into networks. Our example of the employee awards luncheon illustrates several of these networks in play. Top executives, who want to annually honor loyal employees, must get feedback from the human resources department for a list of who is eligible. To organize the event, the human resources department must get feedback from the maintenance department on the room setup, the IT department on audiovisual equipment, and the accounting department on the budget for the caterer. To publicize the event, the corporate communication department must get feedback from top executives on the desired tone or theme of the press release. Moreover, the system cannot survive just by feeding on itself. Inputs and resources are gathered from the surrounding environment—for example, by soliciting proposals from local caterers, and by talking to local media about possible news and feature story angles. Through all these avenues of organizational communication, the system processes the information it needs to keep on going.
Phenomenological Tradition

Imagine yourself as a new employee who is attending the annual recognition luncheon for the first time. As you watch the first group of honorees go forward and accept their five-year service certificates, you picture yourself in their shoes and ponder, “Is this company a place I want to be in five years? Or is it a stepping stone?” Then you see the ten-year honorees and think, “Wow, ten years! If I’m still here in ten years, that means I’m committed long-term.” Also, you notice that ten-year employees tend to be people who have better job titles and higher pay, so that longevity has its rewards. Finally, you see plaques handed out to retirees and say to yourself, “I can’t even relate! What will my career have been like when I look back on it, someday? What do I want to be known for?” In the days after the luncheon, you run into some five- and ten-year honorees you know, tactfully engage them in conversation, and try to feel out their answers to the question, “Is it worth it to stay long enough to earn a service award?”

According to the phenomenologicalA scholarly tradition that theorizes communication as dialogue and the experience of otherness. tradition of communication theory, you derive meaning by directly experiencing a particular phenomenon. At the luncheon you are confronted with the phenomenon of employee loyalty and longevity, and based on this experience you weigh your perceptions. Thus, you come to know your organizational world by directly and consciously engaging in it, pondering its meaning for you, interpreting that meaning through language to define and express it, and then continually reconstructing the interpretation in light of new experiences. Dialogue is another important concept in the phenomenological tradition. The annual luncheon was a type of dialogue as you listened to the various speeches and presentations. Then after the event, you dialogued one-on-one with coworkers who had been honored for their long service. Through these dialogues you open yourself to the experiences of others and can integrate this into your own experience.

Sociopsychological Tradition

In Chapter 1 “Introduction to Organizational Communication” you were introduced to a definition of human communication as a “process whereby one individual (or group of individuals) attempts to stimulate meaning in the mind of another individual (or group of individuals) through intentional use of verbal, nonverbal, and/or mediated messages.” We offered this definition in the opening chapter because it is a good place start. For one, the definition is held by many communication theorists. For another, it accords with what most laypeople (probably including you) believe about communication and about personhood. You likely see yourself as a distinct individual; your mind is your own. This is the basic assumption of sociopsychologicalA scholarly tradition that theorizes communicaiton as expression as expression, interaction, and influence rooted in human psychological processes. theories about communication, that people control their own intentions. Thus, as noted above, communication may seen as one person’s intention to impact another person’s intention. Such a notion is problematic, however, for many communication theorists. Where sociopsychological theorists see individuality as an objective fact, postmodern theorists hold that people’s intentions are subjectively conditioned by their histories and societies. And where sociopsychological theorists believe that the meaning of a communication resides in the individual, sociocultural theorists (as will review below) believe that meaning arises from the interaction.

But for now, let us follow the sociopsychological tradition and see how it might explain the annual employee recognition luncheon. First, consider the speeches given by top executives to celebrate company values and, by implication, the loyalty these values merit from employees. One theory suggests that, psychologically, you are more likely to be
persuaded if sufficiently motivated to carefully consider the arguments, and less likely if the speakers utter cliches you've heard before. Petty, R. E., & Cacioppo, J. T. (1986). *Communication and persuasion: Central and peripheral routes to attitude change*. New York: Springer-Verlag. Another theory claims that opinions are best understood not as a single point on a line, but as a continuum between acceptable and unacceptable; the more that the execs pitch their arguments on company loyalty toward the edge of this continuum, the more likely they can push the boundaries of what you will accept. Sherif, M., Sherif, C., & Nebergall, R. (1965). *Attitude and attitude change: The social judgement-involvement approach*. Philadelphia: Saunders. Still another leading theory proposes that if the speakers can make you feel an inner conflict between self-interest and group loyalties, you will be psychologically driven to resolve the conflict rather than feel torn. Festinger, L. (1957). *A theory of cognitive dissonance*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Then there are the conversations you had with longer-tenured coworkers. One theory of interpersonal communication holds that people's personalities are structured like the layers of an onion; to elicit your coworkers' inner feelings about staying long-term with the company, you had to go beyond mere chit-chat about sports and the weather, and instead penetrate into their goals, convictions, fears, fantasies and, at the deepest level, their self-concepts. Altman, I., & Taylor, D. A. (1973). *Social penetration: The development of interpersonal relationships*. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston. Another theory claims that people experience an ongoing psychological tension between their need for being connected and need for feeling unique, and between their need for being open and need for keeping some things to themselves. Baxter, L. A., & Montgomery, B. M. (1998). A guide to dialectical approaches to studying personal relationships. In B. M. Montgomery & L. A. Baxter (Eds.), *Dialectical approaches to studying personal relationships* (pp. 1–15). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum. In order to elicit coworkers' true feelings about their service with the company—and to expose your own concerns—you must both navigate these tensions.

The main lesson here is that a sociopsychological view locates the meaning of communication within the mind of each individual. The company executives acted with the *intention* of promoting employee loyalty in the hope of influencing your *intention*. And when you acted on your *intention* to elicit information from long-serving coworkers, they were prompted by their own *intention* to be more, or to be less, open toward your questions. Human communicative behaviors, then, are seen as seen as rooted in human psychologies. Indeed, without language—which arose because humans exist in society—there would be no thought. Mead, G. H. (1934). *Mind, self, and society*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. Another theorist in the sociocultural tradition, Erving Goffman, likened social interaction to a drama. Imagine yourself in an ordinary conversation and (being honest) think how you take a role (anything from clown to peacemaker) and "play to the audience" by communicating in ways that (you believe) will make

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**Sociocultural Tradition**

For the sociopsychological theorist, the meaning of a communication resides in each individual. But for the socioculturalA scholarly tradition that theorizes communication as the production and reproduction of a social order, such as an organizational culture. theorist, the meaning of a communication arises from interaction as people engage in discourse and socially construct what they jointly perceive to be real. George Herbert Mead, a founder of the sociocultural tradition, noted more than a century ago that—in contrast to the prevailing view that each individual is autonomous—people only develop a sense of self by being around other people. Further, since speech is the means by which people interact, then people develop their sense of self through communication. Indeed, without language—which arose because humans exist in society—there would be no thought. Mead, G. H. (1934). *Mind, self, and society*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. Another theorist in the sociocultural tradition, Erving Goffman, likened social interaction to a drama. Imagine yourself in an ordinary conversation and (being honest) think how you take a role (anything from clown to peacemaker) and "play to the audience" by communicating in ways that (you believe) will make

Given these assumptions, theorists in the sociocultural tradition look at the ways communication is used by people in interactions to produce—and then reproduce—stable patterns of social order. Sociocultural theorists of organizational communication, then, are interested in how organizational cultures arise as their members communicate with one another. And they would take a keen interest in the annual employee awards luncheon. First, there is the ritual aspect of the event as people on the platform speak structured sequences of words (an employee’s name is called, he or she comes forward, and the certificate is given with praise, smiles, and handshakes) that ultimately pay homage to the sacred object of the company. Second, the awards ceremony constitutes a story which fosters a “loyalty myth.” As the myth is enacted, the audience learns how they too are expected to fit into the story. Then, third, the awards ceremony is a “social drama” in which awardees gain honor by their perseverance, thus showing the audience how they can likewise win approval and continue to belong.

Organizational cultures are maintained not only through public events but also in natural conversation as employees spontaneously use “insider” talk. Such talk begins to form patterns that reproduce the values and assumptions of an organization culture. Philipsen, G. (1997). A theory of speech codes. In G. Philipsen and T. L. Albrecht (Eds.), *Developing communication theories* (pp. 119–156). Albany: State University of New York Press. Over time, the patterns seem so natural that employees use the talk without thinking and take the underlying cultural assumptions for granted. For example, if people address each other with formal titles—or, alternately, if they use first names—this talk reproduces assumptions about how organization members should relate to one another. Sociocultural researchers often look for words and phrases that keep recurring in significant ways. So perhaps the employee awards luncheon featured talk about the company as a “family” (a metaphor), or praised award recipients for being “customer-oriented” (a stock phrase), or continually referred to “aggressive” growth, “aggressive” marketing, an “aggressive” strategy, and so forth (a buzzword). Chances are that, when you later spoke one-on-one with award recipients, their use of such insider language in spontaneous conversation reflected their integration into the organizational culture.

**Semiotic Tradition**

The old saying, “Where there’s smoke, there’s fire,” captures the essence of the semioticA scholarly tradition that theorizes communication as intersubjective mediation by signs, or the ways a sign (including a word) or symbol of a thing mediates the different thoughts that people have about the thing and thus permit meaning to be shared. tradition in communication theory. Semiotics is the study of *signs*—and a classic example, of course, is how the presence smoke is the sign of a fire. Charles Saunders Peirce, a founding theorist of semiotics, would have called smoke an *index* or a trace that points to another object. Peirce, C. S. (1958). *Charles S. Peirce: Selected writings* (P. P. Weiner, Ed.). New York: Dover. Thus, thunder is the sign of an approaching storm, a bullet hole the sign of a shooting, a footprint the sign of a prey. Other signs are *icons* or abstract representations of another object—for example, the stylized image of a pedestrian on a traffic crossing light. Yet other signs are *symbols* that have a purely arbitrary relationship to another object. Again, to use traffic signs as an example, think of how a red octagon means “stop” and a yellow inverted triangle means “yield.”
The most common symbols of all, of course, are words. Consider: the word “dog” has no inherent relation to the actual animal. Instead, as C. K. Ogden and I. A. Richards famously pointed out, the word “dog” may connote a friendly pet to one person and a dangerous beast to another. To explain how words work, they proposed a *triangle of meaning*. Ogden, C. K., & Richards, I. A. (1923). *The meaning of meaning*. London: Kegan, Paul, Trench, Trubner. They theorized that meaning emerges from the interplay between a referent (in our example, a dog), a symbol (the word “dog”), and the reference (what a person thinks when he or she hears the word). As such, the meaning of “dog,” whether a cute pet or dangerous animal, resides not in the word but, rather, in the mind of the person. In this way, as Robert Craig observed, semiotic theorists regard communication as a process of “intersubjective mediation by signs.” Craig, op. cit. In other words, the meaning of a thing is subjective for each person. Thus, as we communicate about that thing, there is an encounter between the different meanings we each carry. The encounter is mediated by a sign—whether the sign is a word or an image—and that sign makes it possible for some meaning, at least, to be shared between communicators.

The annual employee recognition luncheon is replete with signs and symbols. In addition to the many words that are used, shared meaning is created by the symbol of the award certificates and plaques, by the printed program with elegant cursive script, by the cake and the balloons with congratulatory messages, by the round tables that were set up rather than the room’s usual conference seating, by the festive centerpieces on the tables, by the company posters and slogans posted on the walls, by the formal business attire of the executives who presented the awards, and by the large company logo that is hung on the podium and printed on items ranging from table napkins to tee shirts. All of these symbols enable important meanings—about company values, about employee loyalty, about labor-management relations—to be communicated and shared by dozens of people, even though each brings his or her own subjective thoughts to the event.

Finally, the company itself becomes a symbol as it takes on a distinctive corporate image. Roland Barthes equated this kind of “second-order” symbol to mythmaking and gave the French national flag as an example. Barthes, R. (1972). *Mythologies* (A. Lavers, Trans.). New York: Hill and Wang. In the same way, Apple Corporation has come to symbolize high-tech innovation, a corporate image that instills its employees with a strong sense of organizational identity. By contrast, government agencies are often seen as bureaucratic and wasteful so that administrators must work hard to imbue their employees with a countervailing image of public service. The same semiotic process is at work as the college or university you attend strives to symbolize learning (if teaching is emphasized), or discovery (if research is emphasized), or opportunity (if career training is emphasized), or advancement (if nontraditional student are emphasized).

**Critical Tradition**

After witnessing or hearing about the employee awards luncheon, a critical scholar would likely ask who decided that employee loyalty would be the only value recognized and the only value which deserved a special annual celebration. The decision, of course, was made by the dominant interests who hold power in the organization. The luncheon reifies their interests (by establishing loyalty to the company as a taken-for-granted part of organizational life) and universalizes their interests (by equating management interests with “company interests” so that other interpretations seem irrational). Even though employees are expected to be loyal in order to gain approval, the company has no corresponding obligation of loyalty to the employees and may lay them off as needed. Not only is this proposition tacitly accepted—but to suggest that a second luncheon be held, to make a...
public accounting of the company’s loyalty to its workers, would seem irrational. So would the suggestion that workers, rather than the human resources director, should plan the annual luncheon and decide what values should be recognized and what awards given. Yes, the employees are permitted by the leadership to plan a humorous “awards” segment—but that is only a parody, a way to control workers by giving them a sense of participation without any real substance.

Then, too, a critical theorist would point out how the awards luncheon, by celebrating only those employees who have served long term, actually silences the voices of traditionally marginalized workers. Historically underrepresented groups—women, persons of color, persons with disabilities, the working poor—have often lacked the access to acquire skills which would make them promotable in the corporate world. Because they are disproportionately placed in low-wage jobs, they are the first to be laid off or shunted into temporary work. Yet they do work that the company needs. Why is there no event to celebrate their contributions? Instead, the emphasis on longevity only marginalizes them further.

This all happens because the system follows an ideology that, in ways made to seem natural and inevitable, structures power relations to favor some at the expense of others. Stanley Deetz has described “managerialism” as an ideology that systematically distorts communication to produce a “discursive closure” that renders alternative views difficult to express or even think. Deetz, 1992, op. cit. The task of critical scholars is to “denaturalize” unjust ideologies and structures that are taken for granted, exposing them to resistance and discussion, and thereby reopening choices and possibilities the system had foreclosed. Thus, critical scholarship infuses research with action.

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**Rhetorical**

For the last of the seven traditions in communication theory, we come to the oldest. More than 2,300 years ago Aristotle wrote *The Rhetoric* and gave us, as many believe, the world’s first systematic treatment of human psychology. For example, Heidegger, M. (1962). *Being and Time* (J. Macquarrie & E. Robinson, Trans.). San Francisco: Harper and Row; pg. 178. He lived in Athens, one of the democratic city-states of ancient Greece where citizens publicly stated their cases in the assemblies and courts. Alarmed that some used oratory for personal gain rather than public good, Aristotle examined how speakers persuaded audiences and devised a theory and method of reasoned public address. Aristotle (2006). *On rhetoric: A theory of civic discourse* (2nd ed.) (G. A. Kennedy, Trans.). Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press. Today the phrase, “That's just rhetoric,” connotes hollow or self-serving words. Aristotle had the same concern about public oratory. Thus rhetoricalA scholarly tradition that theorizes communication as the practical art of discourse and how persuasion is accomplished. theory, from classical times to the present, has concerned itself with the problem of how things get done. In other words, rhetorical theorists—including those who study organizational rhetoric—examine the processes by which speaker (or rhetor) and listeners move toward each other and find common grounds to go forward.

Studies of organizational rhetoric distinguish between external rhetoric aimed at stakeholders outside the organization and internal rhetoric aimed at employees. Mary Hoffman and Debra Ford classified four types of external rhetoric: to create and maintain an organization’s public identity, to manage issues, to manage risks, and to manage crises. Internal rhetoric, on the other hand, aims to align employees with organizational values and imperatives so they are motivated to do their jobs. Hoffman, M. F., & Ford, D. J. (2009). *Organization rhetoric: Situations and strategies*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. Thus, the rhetoric of the annual employee recognition luncheon is internal, an attempt by management to find...
common ground with employees and persuade them to adopt company values. After the luncheon, the company will engage in external rhetoric as the corporate communications office issues a press release that, when carried by local media, will hopefully reinforce the company’s image as a great workplace that inspires employee loyalty.

Rhetorical theory offers many avenues for analyzing the speeches heard at the awards luncheon. The classical theory of Aristotle, for example, holds that speakers must **invent** a persuasive argument, effectively **arrange** its points, word it in an appropriate **style**, and **deliver** it in a suitable manner, while drawing on a **memory** of phrases, stories, and ideas to extemporaneously flesh out the argument for a given occasion or audience. Today we call this method the five canons of rhetoric. Yet to be compelling, arguments must be grounded in the shared **topoi** or mental topology of rhetor and audience. Thus, if everyone agrees that profit is good for both management and labor, then speeches at the awards luncheon can extol honorees for their contributions to the bottom line. But if the organization is nonprofit—like the college or university you attend—then arguments based on profitmaking would fall flat. Aristotle also theorized that artful rhetors can employ three types of proofs: logic (**logos**), emotion (**pathos**), and speaker credibility (**ethos**). Executives who spoke at the luncheon likely tried all three by stating how loyal employees are rewarded (logic), how such employees’ dedication is admirable (emotion), and how management can be trusted and believed (speaker credibility).

In recent decades, scholarly interest in rhetorical theory has grown and proposals for a “new rhetoric” have gained wide acceptance. Kenneth Burke held that persuasion cannot occur without **identification**; the task of the rhetor is “consubstantiation,” or a sharing of substances, with the audience. Burke, K. (1950). *A rhetoric of motives*. New York: Prentice-Hall. (Thus, company leaders could persuade employees to be loyal only if the audience felt that executives could understand and sympathize with their concerns.) Chaim Perelman contended that persuasion cannot occur without **presence**; the rhetor must highlight “elements on which the speaker wishes to center attention in order that they may occupy the foreground of the hearer’s consciousness . . . against the undifferentiated mass of available elements of agreement.”Perelman, C., & Olbrechts-Tyteca, L. (1969). *The new rhetoric: A treatise on argumentation*. South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press; pg. 142. (Thus, management hopes its appeal for loyalty is enhanced by staging a special yearly event.) Walter Fisher contrasted a **rational-world paradigm** of persuasion through logic with a **narrative paradigm** in which audiences are persuaded by stories that ring true with their lived experiences and the “good reasons” validated by their communities. Fisher, W. (1987). *Human communication as narration: Toward a philosophy of reason, value, and action*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press. (Thus, the awards luncheon will foster loyalty only if executives can tell a story that resonates with the lives of employees.) And contemporary rhetorical scholars are recognizing the **materiality** of rhetoric as it “not only helps to produce judgments about specific issues, it also helps to produce or constitute a social world.”Jasinskis, J. (2001). *Sourcebook on rhetoric: Key concepts in contemporary rhetorical studies*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2001; pg. 192. (Thus, the rhetoric of the awards luncheon aims not only to persuade but, leaders hope, produce an organizational culture whose logics favor employee loyalty.)

**Key Takeaways**

- Three models for how communication functions have been proposed: linear, interactional, and transactional. The linear model holds that a message travels in a straight line from its source, through a channel, and to its receiver. The interactional model holds that communication travels in a circle as a sender transmits a message and then the receiver responds with feedback; thus both parties become sender/receivers. The transactional model holds that sending and receiving occur simultaneously.

- Seven traditions in communication theory have been identified by Robert Craig. The cybernetic tradition theorizes communication as information processing. The phenomenological tradition theorizes communication as dialogue and the experience of otherness. The sociopsychological tradition theorizes communication as expression.
interaction, and influence rooted in human psychological processes. The sociocultural tradition theorizes communication as the production and reproduction of a social order, such as an organizational culture. The semiotic tradition theorizes communication as intersubjective mediation by signs, or the ways that a sign (including a word) or symbol of a thing mediates the different thoughts that people have about the thing and thus permit meaning to be shared. The critical tradition theorizes communication as discursive reflection, or reflection on the ways that discourses create dominant and marginalized voices. The rhetorical tradition theorizes communication as the practical art of discourse and how persuasion is accomplished.

Exercises

1. Your class in Organizational Communication is itself a type of organization. Think about the communication that takes place in your class, whether the class is face-to-face or online. Would you say that communication between the students and the instructor is best explained as a linear, interactional, or transactional process? Explain your answer.

2. In the subsection above entitled “What Communication Is: Seven Traditions,” we imagined how the annual employee awards luncheon could be explained, in turn, by each of the seven traditions. Now on your own, think of another communication scenario that occurs in organizations (perhaps in your college or university, such freshman orientation or the annual commencement ceremony) and then explain your scenario by each of the seven traditions.