5.1: Introduction

Communication Structure

As discussed in Chapter 1 "Introduction to Organizational Communication", one of the fundamental parts of an organization is the presence of a hierarchy. Since the 1950s, researchers have been very interested in how information is passed around the various levels of an organization’s hierarchy. How information is passed around an organization is commonly referred to as “communication structure,” and there are three dominant perspectives: channels, perceived networks, and observable networks. Papa, M. J., Daniels, T. D., & Spiker, B. K. (2008). *Organizational communication: Perspectives and trends*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. The channels perspective sees messages as concrete objects that can be passed along clearly established channels of communication within an organization. Koehler, J. W., Anatol, K. W. E., & Applbaum, R. L. (1981). *Organizational communication: Behavioral perspectives* (2nd ed.). New York: Holt, Rinehart, & Winston. In essence, the channels perspective focuses on how the message moves along the channels of communication and not on the relationship between the sender and the receiver. Under this perspective, the receiver becomes a passive individual in the communication process. In Chapter 1 "Introduction to Organizational Communication", we mentioned Redding’s 10 postulates of organizational communication. Redding, W. C. (1972). *Communication with the organization: An interpretive review of theory and research*. New York: Industrial Communication Council, Inc. One of his postulates explains that the message received, not the one sent, is the one that a receiver will ultimately act upon in an organization. This channels perspective violates this basic tenant of organizational communication.

The second prominent perspective of organizational communication structure discussed is the perceived network perspective. Papa, M. J., Daniels, T. D., & Spiker, B. K. (2008). *Organizational communication: Perspectives and trends*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. One way that some scholars have attempted to ascertain how communication is transmitted within an organization is to ask organizational members. In essence, this method involves interviewing organizational
members and asking them who they talk to and how they pass on information to their coworkers. According to Steven R. Corman and Craig R. Scott, perceived networks are innately flawed:

This formulation denies the existence of a network of communication, suggesting instead that the network is a structure of perceived communication relationships. It is a kind of latent knowledge that guides members’ manifest communication behavior. We believe members’ reports of communication reflect this knowledge, not their recollections of specific communication episodes [emphasis in original]. Corman, S. R., & Scott, C. R. (1994). Perceived networks, activity foci, and observable communication in social collectives. Communication Theory, 4, 171–190, pg. 174.

Corman and Scott’s argument against the use of perceived networks is twofold. First, Corman and Scott argue that when researchers ask participants about their communication networks, the participants respond by thinking of who they should be communicating with not necessarily who they actually communicate with at all. Second, the perceptions that participants have about their communicative networks is more a generalized understanding of how they communicate and not how they actually communicate during specific communicative episodes. In other words, people often believe that they utilize specific channels of communication within the organization, whereas in reality, they are communicating in a completely different way.

The third prominent perspective of organizational communication structure is the observable network perspective. Papa, M. J., Daniels, T. D., & Spiker, B. K. (2008). Organizational communication: Perspectives and trends. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. Another way that scholars can examine how communication actually happens within an organization is to literally watch it happen. While actually watching how communication occurs within an organization provides the most accurate information, the research process is very time consuming. When actually observing an organization’s communication network, you cannot hope to get all of the necessary information in a short period of time. For this reason, data collection in this type of research is very laborious. Furthermore, a researcher’s ability to observe actual communication networks is only as good as the researcher’s access to those communication networks. People who talk outside of work or in inaccessible areas of the organization (like the bathroom) can lead to an incomplete picture of the actual communication networks within the organization.

Overall, watching how people interact within an organization and how information is transmitted within an organization is a very difficult task. Furthermore, how researchers and organizations view communication networks also differs. Corman and Scott noted, “we believe … there is no network of communication in the sense analogous to a network of computers or telephones or television stations. Instead, the network is an abstract structure of perceived communication relationships that functions as a set of rules and resources actors draw upon in accomplishing communication behavior” [emphasis in original]. Corman, S. R., & Scott, C. R. (1994). Perceived networks, activity foci, and observable communication in social collectives. Communication Theory, 4, 171–190, pg. 181. Ultimately, this abstract structure can be broken down into two basic parts: formal communication networks and informal communication networks. The rest of this chapter is going to examine formal and informal communication networks.