10.4: Disengaging

Learning Objectives

- Differentiate between voluntary and involuntary disengagement.
- Explain Fredric Jablin’s four step model of organizational disengagement.

As discussed in Figure 10.6 "Organizational Socialization", there are three primary phases of organizational socialization. The first two were discussed in the previous section. In this section, we’re going to examine the final part of organizational socialization, how individuals go about disengaging from an organization. To help us understand disengagement, we are going to examine two types of organizational-disengagement and the steps of disengagement.

Types of Organizational Disengagement

Disengagement is the process an individual goes through when considering a separation and then separating oneself from an organization. Jablin, F. M. (2001). Organizational entry, assimilation, and disengagement/exit. In F. M. Jablin & L. L. Putnam (Eds.), The new handbook of organizational communication: Advances in theory, research, and methods (pp. 732–818). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. For our purposes, we are going to examine disengagement in terms of either a voluntary process or an involuntary process.
Voluntary Disengagement

Voluntary disengagement occurs when an individual decides that he or she needs to look for alternatives elsewhere. There are countless reasons for why an individual may decide that it’s time to move on. Whether someone sees greener pastures elsewhere or just needs a change of scenery, people regularly change their jobs. People also voluntarily disengage from a job when they transfer to another department or division or retire. As noted earlier in this chapter, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, “The average person born in the latter years of the baby boom (1957–1964) held 11.3 jobs from age 18 to age 46, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. Nearly half of these jobs were held from ages 18 to 24.”

Involuntary Disengagement

Involuntary disengagement occurs when an individual is forced to leave an organization. The most common forms of involuntary disengagement are getting fired or getting downsized (involuntary turnover), but getting fired or downsized are only two forms of disengagement that are involuntary. Other forms of involuntary disengagement include changes that happen as a result of mergers or acquisitions or non-voluntary transfers. In each of these last two cases, individuals are moved to a new position or transferred to a new location with the threat that noncompliance will result in losing one’s job.

Steps of Disengagement

Whether someone is going through voluntary or involuntary disengagement, Fredric Jablin proposed the general steps that he or she will take are generally fourfold: preannouncement, announcement of exit, actual exit, and postexit. Jablin, F. M. (2001). Organizational entry, assimilation, and disengagement/exit. In F. M. Jablin & L. L. Putnam (Eds.), The new handbook of organizational communication: Advances in theory, research, and methods (pp. 732–818). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. Let’s look at each of these steps.

Preannouncement Step

Communication during the preannouncement step of disengagement involves any cues or signals one consciously or unconsciously sends when someone dissatisfied with particular people, work, or the organization. These cues send the message that you are officially starting to “check out.” Dissatisfied coworkers may also start to have conversations with their families and friends about the possibility of finding a new job long before they have they start to disengage in the workplace itself. These
Other cues may be subconsciously sent but are observable to others. For example, someone may increase her or his voicing of dissatisfaction with one’s coworkers, supervisors, work, or the organization as a whole. Although the person may realize that he or she is voicing dissatisfaction, he or she may not realize that others are seeing the increased dissatisfaction as an indication that the person is starting to disengage. Even if someone is not voluntarily disengaging, coworkers and supervisors may view a change in someone’s attitude at work, decrease in organizational citizenship, or decrease in organizational commitment as indicators that he or she needs to be corrected or forced out of the organization.

Announcement of Exit Step

Eventually, the dissatisfied organizational member will officially make it known that he or she is leaving (voluntary disengagement), or the organization will make it known that the organizational member will be leaving (involuntary disengagement), which occurs in the announcement of exit step in the disengagement process when either a dissatisfied organizational member officially makes it known that he or she is leaving (voluntary disengagement), or when the organization makes it known that the organizational member will be leaving (involuntary disengagement). It is not uncommon for people to roll-out one’s announcement of exit over a period of weeks or even months depending on the nature of one’s job. One of our coauthors once had a letter of resignation sitting in his desk waiting to be sent to his immediate superior 30 days prior to his intended last day of work. His secretary knew that he had accepted another position two months prior, but she had been the only organizational member to know that he was leaving. Unfortunately, he let it slip a week early to his most vocal coworker that he wouldn’t be around long enough to work on a project and that she should probably assign someone else the task. Within 10 minutes, he started receiving phone calls from coworkers, and within 24 hours the organization was already having phone conferences determining what would happen to his position post-voluntary turnover. Obviously, this announcement did not go as originally planned.

The purpose of communication during the exit step is to help reduce uncertainty on the parts of those leaving and those staying within the organization. On the part of the individual, the announcement of exit step helps to solidify that leaving is going to be a “good thing.” On the part of coworkers, communication helps to create accounts and justifications for why the individual is voluntarily or involuntarily leaving the organization. According to Jablin, exit accounts provided by those leaving an organization typically fall into one of four categories:

1. exit will facilitate the person’s achieving long-term goals (future orientation),
2. exit allows one to avoid a bad situation/problems at work,
3. exit is due to unique circumstances (e.g., organizational restructuring, spouses’ job, unique opportunity), or

Of course, Fredric Jablin also recognized that organizational members sticking around have options for how they respond to these accounts as well. Jablin, F. M. (2001). Organizational entry, assimilation, and disengagement/exit. In F. M. Jablin & L. L. Putnam (Eds.), The new handbook of organizational communication: Advances in theory, research, and methods (pp. 732–818). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage; g. 790.: 

1. simply accept the leave-taker’s account,
2. blend the leave-taker’s account with the one circulating around the office,
3. reject the account provided by the leave-taker,
4. construct a new account based on some of the information provided by the leave-taker, or
5. create a brand new account for why the person is actually leaving.

**Actual Exit Step**

Finally, the individual actually leaves the organization, which is referred to as the actual exit step in the disengagement process when an organizational members actually leaves the organization. Now, the period from which an individual announces exit to when he or she exits the organization can happen in a manner of minutes to months depending on whether the exit is voluntary or involuntary and the post-exit plans of the person taking leave. If the parting is amicable, it's possible there will be celebrations to honor the person as he or she leaves (retirement or going away parties). If the parting is not amicable, the person may simply not be there one day and coworkers will speak in hushed tones about the person’s exit.

Communication during the actual exit step is generally focused on how the leave taker behaves and how her or his coworkers respond to the actual disengagement. We always recommend that when taking leave an organization don’t burn any bridges—it’s just not worth it in the long run. Instead, even if you’re in a situation where you are being involuntarily turned over, it’s in your best interest to keep your communication professional. Coworkers should also keep things professional during the actual process of exiting. Even if you didn’t like a specific colleague, it really just isn’t professional to come off looking catty, vindictive, or happy that you’ve pushed someone out of the organization.

**Postexit Step**

The final step in organizational disengagement is the post-exit step in the disengagement process when an individual who has left an organization makes sense of her or his experiences within the organization and when organizational members make sense of the former colleague’s departure. When someone finally leaves an organization (whether voluntary or involuntary), those who are left behind need to deal with her or his absence. For example, who has to take on the person’s workload? Are you going to re-hire for that position, or are you just going to let the position go unfilled for a period? These are basic questions that organizational members ask as they attempt to understand how the work environment has altered because the person has left the organization.

At the same time, the person who has left the organization also has to renegotiate who he or she is as a person now that the association with the organization is no more. People always associate their lives to some extent with their jobs or careers. When someone leaves an organization (whether voluntarily or involuntarily), he or she is forced to create a new version of whom he or she is as a person. Obviously, if you left of your own free will and both you and the organization consider your leaving amicable, you may have a quicker adjustment period postext. Conversely, if you’ve spent the greater part of your life working for an organization only to be downsized a couple of years before retirement, your adjustment and view of your former organization is going to be much more complicated. Furthermore, you may find yourself having to explain why you’ve left the organization for many years to come, so the postexit communication process may be one that takes years to effectively complete.
Key Takeaways

• When people disengage from an organization there are two basic types of disengagement: voluntary and involuntary. Voluntary disengagement occurs when an individual decides that he or she needs to look for alternatives elsewhere. Involuntary disengagement, on the other hand, occurs when an individual is forced to leave an organization.

• Explain Fredric Jablin’s four step model of organizational disengagement: preannouncement, announcement of exit, actual exit, and postexit. The preannouncement step occurs when an individual transmits cues or signals, either consciously or unconsciously, because he or she is dissatisfied with particular people, work, or the organization. Next is the announcement of exit step, which occurs when either the individual (when voluntary) or the organization (when involuntary) announces that the employee will be exiting the organization. Third, is the actual exiting of the individual, which occurs when the employee makes her or his departure. Lastly, the individual who has left the organization makes sense of her or his experiences within the organization while organizational members make sense of their former colleague’s departure.

Exercises

1. Describe a time when you were a part of either involuntary or voluntary disengagement. Explain how communication occurred during the period of disengagement.

2. Take a time when you’ve left an organization. Using Jablin’s four step model of organizational disengagement, describe your experience leaving the organization.