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COMMUNICATION CONSULTANTS AS ORGANIZATIONAL SENSEMAKERS: APPLYING THE TEAM METAPHOR

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Since Weick's (1979) work, there has been increasing consensus regarding the symbolic nature of organized activity (e.g., Pfeffer, 1981). This consensus has led to the application of interpretive techniques for organizational analysis and to an heightened understanding of the role of the organizational communication analyst/consultant in the construction of social reality (Kreps, 1989; March, 1991). The investigation reported here was a response to the need for the continued generation and dissemination of case studies outlining a variety of approaches to applied interpretive analysis and intervention. More specifically, this study builds on previous work that has recognized the important role metaphor and other symbolic forms play in organizational development and change (Armenakis & Bedeian, 1992; Boje, Fedor, & Rowland, 1982; Burke, 1992; Cleary & Packard, 1982; Morgan, 1997; Owen, 1984; Pondy, 1983; Schein, 1985; Smith & Eisenberg, 1987).

We approach metaphor as a means of strategic ambiguity, suggesting, as did Eisenberg (1984), that the strong emphasis on the need for and advantages of clarity as a prerequisite for communication effectiveness may be counterproductive to addressing the complex needs in organizations. According to Eisenberg, the shift on the part of some leading scholars to examining organizational symbolism and culture "reflects a genuine willingness . . . to accept the notion that organizational members use symbols strategically to accomplish goals, and in doing so may not always be completely . . . clear" (p. 228). In particular, we apply the team concept as a strategically ambiguous metaphor, useful for perceptual reorientation. In this way, the study builds on ideas of others such as Keidel (1988) and Morgan (1993) who have recognized that a

"team" can be many different things to different people. All teams have certain common elements, but each has different sets of assumptions regarding rules and roles for organized activity. As examples, Morgan (1997) noted the differences between American football and soccer teams in terms of the degree to which action is planned or spontaneous and differences between rowing and baseball teams in terms of role specialization. According to Morgan, "There's a world of difference between these games and the kind of teamwork implied" (p. 199). Also according to Morgan, perceptual differences rooted in varying understandings of the team concept can be the basis of serious organizational problems and conflict; at the same time, the team metaphor offers a kind of ambiguity, variety, and elasticity useful for creative and therapeutic reframing. The case discussed below illustrates these very things: the problems arising from different understandings of the team metaphor, the utility of the team metaphor as a means of therapeutic perceptual reframing, and the overall value of interpretive techniques for organizational assessment and intervention.

Intervention Overview

Participants

The analysis involved individuals in an office providing support services for students at a medium-sized public university in the upper midwest of the United States. The staff consisted of six women and three men: five full-time professional service providers (including the office director), one full-time support staff member, one part-time support staff member, one part-time intern, and one supervisor who was the director's immediate supervisor.

Procedures

A survey administered in face-to-face interviews was used as the primary analysis tool for the intervention. The survey questionnaire was designed based upon informal discussions between all three authors, who were serving as consultants, and the office director. A recent annual report document written by the office director also was referenced for designing the questionnaire. The document was chosen as an ideal reference for an analysis embracing an interpretive philosophy. From an interpretive perspective, this kind of intervention is really an attempt to

assist in organizational sense-making. Since the annual report was an internally produced document designed to reflect the current shared organizational reality, it served as an ideal starting point.

The following major areas of the document were investigated in the interviews:

1. The "accomplishments" section of the annual report.
2. Comments featured in the annual report related to a recent office relocation.
3. Comments featured in the annual report related to group morale and trust.
4. The "goals and objectives" section of the annual report.
5. The peer-review process.

In addition, questions were designed to investigate communication patterns and networks existing among the office staff, the impact of numerous recent changes, the nature of job satisfaction, descriptions of critical incidents which occurred within the past calendar year, and perceptions of "teamness" among office staff. The team issue was highlighted as a focal area early in the investigation for a number of reasons. First, the office director clearly and explicitly emphasized concerns about teamwork in the initial informal meetings with consultants. Second, teamwork was specifically mentioned in both the accomplishments and the goals and objectives sections of the annual report document. So, at least for the office director, organizational concerns were being framed and communicated in terms of "team" issues. Because of this and because work by Morgan (1993, 1997) and others had demonstrated the utility of the team metaphor for organizational intervention, the investigation was designed at least in part to be sensitive to the team metaphor.

The questionnaire, which served as a guide for the interviewers, featured both closed-ended and open-ended questions. All interviewees were asked the same 15 primary questions, unless the question could not be answered by the respondent because of the nature of his/her staff position. Additional pre-designed follow-up questions were asked

contingent upon respondents' answers. In some cases, the interviewer probed with spontaneous questions. This interview design thus allowed interviewers structure with the freedom to probe, if necessary, for additional information.

Eight of the nine interviews were conducted on the same day. Due to scheduling restrictions, one interview was conducted one week later. Consultants conducted the interviews in pairs. For each, one individual would conduct the interview while another listened and recorded responses on the pre-designed survey form. Following each interview, the two interviewers shared in private their initial comments and observations with each other. This was done to ensure thorough recording and reasonable interpretation of responses. Each interview required between 30 and 45 minutes to complete. The confidentiality of the interviewee's responses was ensured at the beginning of each interview.

Data Treatment

All three consultants met together to review and interpret the interview data. First, the interviewers tallied how many responses were generated for each question, as not all of the interviewees responded to every item. Responses for each question then were reviewed and organized into thematic categories. All three consultants analyzed and discussed responses in collaboration to achieve a joint interpretation of the data. The wording of the thematic categories was carefully designed to ensure the confidentiality of the respondents and yet retain the meaning and essence of the responses.

Results

It is not the primary goal of this report to thoroughly overview the intervention as a research study. Instead, our goal is to consider the intervention as an application of the team metaphor as an interpretive approach to organizational communication intervention. Therefore, only a sample of interview results will be presented to serve as examples of the kind of findings that came from the analysis. The results directly related to team issues will be highlighted because of their relevance to this case study.

All members of the office staff were asked a number of questions directly related to the team concept. Each of these questions is listed below, followed by a breakdown of thematic responses and an indication of the number of office staff who identified the theme.

Question: In your opinion, in what ways, if any, does this unit function as a team?

- Six persons commented that they have reasonably common goals (e.g., covering duties, meeting student needs, specific task related duties).
- One commented that his/her colleagues show up and pay attention.
- One commented that they argue and try to come to consensus.
- One commented that they have much in common (e.g., their ages).
- One commented that they are reasonably supportive of each other's work.

Question: In your opinion, in what ways, if any, does this unit NOT function/on as a team?

- Six commented that they are impatient with each other; they need to support and care for one another; they need to listen to and value each other; they need to trust and be sensitive; they need to risk being more vulnerable and share; they need to stop their passive-aggressive behavior.
- Three commented that there is a 3-2 split in the staff.
- Two commented that they have no team leader. The director does not follow a democratic approach to leadership (e.g., director shows gender favoritism and requests no input from others about the unit's goals).
- Two commented that they do not hang around after work or discuss non-job related issues; some do not share personal information.
- One commented that some staff have the tendency to focus on problems; they see "potholes."

- One commented that they need to build individual self-confidence and independence before they can come together as a team.
- One commented that there is tension that they all recognize as a problem; some but not all talk about this.
- One commented that there is a need to better communicate and follow through on policy changes.

Question: Is there any term, other than team, to define or describe the unit?

- Three did not know of another term or did not give an appropriate response.
- One stated "Business unit" (autocratic).
- One stated "Friendly" (based on interactions with students).
- One stated "Group of individual service providers who share offices and a suite, and cooperate by paying the rent together."
- One stated "Work group, coworkers, collegial group."
- One stated "Two smaller teams."

In addition to the above responses, the team concept came up as a theme in replies to questions not directly probing team issues. For instance, when asked to identify a particularly ineffective or dissatisfying incident, two commented on a recent recommendation to engage in team building by "going out into the wilderness and playing frisbee" or by participating in a "venison feed." This recommendation was not perceived as inclusive by some staff members.

One question asked about the impact of a number of recent changes that had occurred within the office (e.g., a new director, a new physical location, and the separation from a larger service unit). One staff member commented that the new location led to a greater "team" feel, while another commented that there was more cohesion and trust following the changes.

In another question, staff were asked, "As with any move, there is a certain amount of adjustment to be made and some fine-tuning to be done. What, if anything, needs to be adjusted and/or fine-tuned in your opinion?" Three commented that staff needed to be team players: to tell

each other about things bothering them, to get along better, and to develop interpersonal skills.

Intervention Recommendations

More important to this paper than the results themselves are the recommendations that were presented to the office staff. It is in these recommendations that one can see how the intervention capitalized on the team metaphor to help the staff make sense of the past and present and how strategic ambiguity was presented as a mechanism for gaining new perspectives and moving forward in a more effective way. Therefore, much of this section will consist of an extended excerpt from the recommendations section of the final written report that was provided to each of the office staff by the consultants.

Because the team concept emerged as a central issue in the early discussions between consultants and the office director, in the annual report, and in a number of responses to interview questions, the team metaphor was used as a sensemaking and unifying framework in the final written report to the staff.. The following excerpt is from the recommendations to the staff that illustrates how the team metaphor and strategic ambiguity were applied as a part of an interpretive approach to intervention. The excerpt has been edited so as not to identify the particular service unit or any individuals in that unit.

A concern for the unit to function as a team was apparent. The topic was discussed in both the Accomplishments and the Goals and Objectives sections of the 1993-94 Annual Report. In interviews, all staff members expressed clear ideas about ways the unit did and did not function as a team. It seems safe to say that concerns regarding teamwork and staff morale were the primary reasons for this analysis, at least in the minds of many staff members. Such concerns are understandable, especially in this day when "teamwork" has become one of the strongest and most widespread of all corporate buzz-words and strategies. But even though organizational teamwork as a general concept is something to be admired, teamwork as a general concept is too vague to be effectively applied. The results of this analysis suggest

that [this office] needs to clearly define what kind of team they are and need to be.

This kind of clarification is necessary for a number of reasons. First, the general consensus among staff members seems to be that the... unit is not a team, but this is not a sound conclusion. The first and foremost characteristic of an effective organizational team is the existence of a clear and elevating collective goal. Responses to the question, "In your opinion, what ways, if any, does this unit function as a team?" indicated strong agreement that staff members held the common goal of serving students in need and that everyone was ready and willing to do whatever was necessary to accomplish that goal. This viewpoint could be seen in responses to a variety of other questions as well. So, to begin, [this office] needs to acknowledge and accept that, regardless of whether they feel like it, they are a team and have overcome the first and most important hurdle in team building, the development of and commitment to a clear, elevating goal. Additionally, there was little, if any, concern expressed about some other characteristics identified as vital to effective teamwork such as a concern to achieve, effective work methods, and organized procedures.

In the above comments, the consultants were attempting to deal with the staff's focus on the problems they were having with teamwork. Apparently, many of the staff were functioning under certain assumptions regarding the most vital issues for effective teamwork. Phrased another way, they had identified what they considered to be the essential entailments (Clancy, 1989) for the team metaphor, the things that really make a team a team. These issues also happened to be problem areas in the minds of many staff members. But the team metaphor is inherently ambiguous. As noted previously, Keidel (1988) and Morgan (1993) see a team as a kind of umbrella metaphor encompassing many related but significantly different metaphorical manifestations. Additionally, a host of theorists and practitioners have identified what they consider to be the "essential" characteristics of effective organizational teams (e.g., Blubaugh, 1989; Dyer, 1977; Francis & Young, 1979; Larson & LaFasto, 1989; Woodcock & Francis, 1981).

Each list of essential characteristics differs. For some, creativity is identified as an essential team characteristic (Dyer, 1977; Francis & Young, 1979), while for others it is not (Larson & LaFasto, 1989; Woodcock & Francis, 1981). For some researchers, effective teams must be able to engage in open and lively critique (Dyer, 1977; Francis & Young, 1979; Woodcock & Francis, 1981), but others do not identify this as an essential characteristic (Larson & LaFasto, 1989). Though the team concept offers a great deal of metaphorical and definitional latitude, the office staff were choosing to remain fixed on understanding "teamness" in terms of a few problematic entailments. Therefore, in our report, we chose to focus instead on entailments of the team metaphor (e.g., commitment, elevating goal, concern to achieve) that could allow the staff to view themselves as, in fact, a team that was functional in many ways.

Another reason [the office] needs to clarify what kind of team they are and need to be is because current differences in people's definitions seem to be clashing and leading to misperceptions and unhealthy assumptions about the actions of others. For instance, when asked how the unit does <u>not</u> function as a team, most staff members agreed that there needed to be more trust, caring, and respect for each other. For some, that apparently means spending more time together in informal interaction (e.g., going to coffee together, discussing non-job related issues after work). So if other staff members choose not to participate in such activities, they may be viewed as untrusting, uncaring, and lacking in respect. On the other hand, some individuals seem be functioning under the assumption that trust, caring, and respect for others is demonstrated best by allowing them to work independently and to keep their work and private lives separated. For these individuals, anything suggesting expectations for increased collaboration, informal socialization, or non-work related disclosure might be seen as untrusting, uncaring, and lacking in respect.

Through the comments above, the consultants directly addressed the competing notions regarding teams among the staff. They pointed out the potential misperceptions and problematic attributions that could, and likely have, come from these differences.

So there appear to be differences in assumptions about what teams are and what it means to be a trusting, caring, and respectful team member, and these differences seem to be the basis for some misunderstanding and misperception in the unit. Which of the two

general perspectives discussed above is right? Which is the correct set of assumptions regarding team trust, caring, and respect? Ultimately, that is something that [this office as a] "team" will need to determine together, but one recommendation is to consider that the answer is "both and neither." There is no one correct set of assumptions about effective team functioning. What teams do to demonstrate trust, caring, and respect is not "right" or "wrong" but rather "appropriate" or "inappropriate" based on the uniquenesses of the team in terms of task, size, history, members, and a host of other characteristics. Both prevailing definitions of teams in [this office] have some appropriateness for the unit, but neither offers a sufficient model for effective functioning.

The consultants indicated here the appropriateness of both versions of the team concept. In doing so, they supported the ideas of strategic ambiguity and encouraged the staff to see validity of the "competing" perspective and the inadequacy of either perspective for the office as a whole. The following comments from the recommendations section continue to illustrate the variations of team metaphors, encouraging the staff to explore more fully what metaphors work best for them, for their purpose and goals, for their history, for their structure, and for their personalities. This is consistent with recommendations and procedures advocated by Morgan (1993) in his work on the process of "imaginization."

For purposes of illustration, consider the relationships between organizational work units and sports teams. In the game of basketball, the goals of the team and the rules of the game require a great deal of active, immediate, interdependent action. Players cannot focus on individual performance or the team performance will undoubtedly suffer. On the other hand, a gymnastics team is a very different thing. Each gymnast functions independently in performance, even though the individual performances are able to be combined to reflect a team score. It makes some sense to assume that, because of the nature of what they

do, basketball players would benefit from a high degree of "connectedness" both on and off the court; the amount and quality of informal, social, and personal interactions among players likely would have a clear impact on the kind of play required of them. This would be less true of the gymnastics team since training and performance are so much more of an individual endeavor.

Much of the [office] staff is made up of individual [service providers]. The work [they] do tends to be, and is inherently required to be, private and independent. Their mission calls them to function more like gymnasts than basketball players. So, from a functional standpoint, it does not seem that trust, caring, and respect needs to manifest itself through the kind of informal sociability and disclosure apparently desired by some staff members.

However, being on a gymnastics team means doing more than just racking up high scores individually and in combination with teammates. It means training, traveling, and simply living together. Similarly, being a part of [this office] means more than engaging in effective [work] with students. It means spending a good amount of time each day in the same location and being formally identified with other staff members as an organizational unit. Quality of work life issues are important too, and many people consider open, personal, informal interaction with coworkers to be vital in a working environment. Even though such interaction may not be functionally necessitated in [this office], it must be recognized that it is considered necessary by some for a quality work life.

Therefore, the recommendations for [this office] in regard to being a team include the following.

- *Recognize that there are many types of teams and that [this office] currently functions as an effective team in many ways.*
- *Recognize that there are differing definitions of "teams" among staff members and that these definitions may be the cause of misunderstanding and misperceptions.*

- *Spend time as a unit discussing what kind of team you are and need to be.*
- *Recognize the importance of work life quality issues, and accept the fact that a "quality" work environment is different for each person. Allow some to retain greater privacy and distinction between work and personal life, and allow others to pursue more personal, informal, and social relationships with coworkers.*
- *Explicitly acknowledge that one's work environment preference is not and will not be a performance consideration formally or informally.*

In addition to those identified above, the rest of the recommendations made to the staff were tied to notions of effective teams and continued to reinforce the idea that there are numerous ways to be an effective team and that staff members' overly-rigid and conflicting notions of what teams should be were the source of many of their existing problems.

Intervention Impact

When the analysis was completed, the final report was written and a copy was given to each staff member for individual consideration. One week later, we met with the staff as a group to discuss and clarify information in the report. Based on the behavior and comments in that meeting, we concluded that the staff were overall quite positive about the intervention, appreciative of the consultants' work, and willing to begin to apply the recommendations. Staff comments indicated that the team metaphor did function as a relevant and helpful framework for understanding their shared experiences. The fact that the intervention took an interpretive approach (focusing on differences between individual and shared perceptions and strategies for sensemaking) rather than a more functional approach (focusing on discovering causal mechanisms leading to problems and on objective measurement and reporting of organizational variables) did not seem to limit the staff's sense of the intervention's legitimacy.

In order to better assess the impact of this interpretive intervention, follow-up interviews were conducted with the staff approximately one year later. Six of the nine staff members involved in the original analysis were available for these interviews.[1] A survey questionnaire derived from the recommendations given to the staff by the consultants was used to administer face-to-face interviews with participants. Follow-up interviews lasted approximately 40 minutes each, and all were conducted on the same day and in the same room. Two of the original three consultants conducted interviews together. For each interview, one consultant asked questions while the other collected and summarized answers using a laptop computer. The following is an overview of the responses to the follow-up interview questions. All responses listed below are close paraphrases of interview comments.

Overall, responses indicated that staff continued to view the intervention as a positive and beneficial experience. They seemed to support the utility of the team metaphor, strategic ambiguity, and overall interpretive approach. For instance, one question asked, "What was the effect of the intervention on the climate of the office?" The following are examples of responses to this question:

- The study acted as a catalyst. The fact that it happened at all showed that we care enough about what's going on to examine our own process. A little Pygmalion effect occurred. The process transcended all content. It allowed for recognition that there was tension so it could be addressed.
- It gave us a chance to take a new look at ourselves. We had some habitual ways of seeing each other; this gave us a way to step back and look at everything in a fresh way--to get a new perspective, recognizing new styles and integrating that into the group.
- I was very impressed with the positive spin put on the team metaphor--effective "functional fiction."2

Another question asked, "Did staff spend time discussing nature of being a 'team'?" Some responses:

- It allowed for elegant ways to discuss who we were and what we're about.
- We did talk after the report. The pressure to act like a happy family diminished. Our functional fiction helped. There were no more suggestions to go off into the woods and play frisbee together. We are more work oriented and more comfortable.

A number of additional questions were asked about whether action had been taken on specific behavioral recommendations that went beyond perceptual reorientation. For instance, the report recommended such things as the use of an office bulletin board to showcase past collective accomplishments, implementation of a voluntary peer review system, participation in team building workshops and retreats under the facilitation of the director's supervisor, and changes in certain aspects of the director's communication style and preferred communication channels. The responses to these questions indicated that, in terms of the consultants' specific behavioral recommendations, little had really changed or been acted upon. The following summarized comments are examples.

- Peer support review was discussed. All agreed it was valuable but it was not implemented because of time constraints.
- Nothing was implemented for peer review. It is perceived as a low priority. Some of the staff's styles are not conducive to that.
- No team building strategies have been implemented to my knowledge.
- The director really hasn't changed in his ability to manage time. It's about the same.
- The director prefers to rely on face-to-face channels. This has not changed.

Still, in spite of what seemed to be a general agreement that little had changed in regard to these issues, all but one member of the staff indicated satisfaction with the intervention and its effectiveness. Some might attribute this to a classic example of the Hawthorne effect. It is well known that the simple act of intervention often leads those involved to perceive improvement and experience increased satisfaction for the short-term. However, the follow-up interviews took place over a year after the intervention. There should have been ample time for "reality" to set in

during that year. Also, the reports did not indicate that the staff were somehow seeing their organizational world through rose-colored glasses. They clearly indicated that problems still existed, many of the same problems they saw before the intervention.

Conclusion

Metaphor is seen as having utility for helping investigators understand groups and organizations (e.g., Morgan, 1997) as well as for helping the members of those groups and organizations manage change (e.g., Armenakis & Bedeian, 1992; Cleary & Packard, 1982) and better understand themselves (e.g., Ettin, 1986; McClure, 1987). Some have urged caution regarding the application of metaphor in understanding and facilitating organized activity such as Larwood (1992) who called for more investigation and thought into exactly how metaphors are to be effectively understood, interpreted, and used. This case study is an example of such investigation. Similar to conclusions drawn by Smith and Eisenberg (1987) in their work with Disneyland employees, the results of this study suggest that sensitivity to the metaphors that guide individuals' perceptions and actions can offer insight into the sources of problematic conflict. In this case, the team metaphor emerged early in the intervention as a framework for understanding relevant to, as well as problematic for, organizational members. It also served as a source of strategic ambiguity, allowing consultants to help reframe organizational activity in a therapeutic way.

This investigation also further reinforced the value of organizational intervention focused on perceptual reorientation--on development of shared organizational sensemaking. Some who would approach organizational intervention from a more traditional standpoint might argue that the case study demonstrates "mere" perceptual outcomes. However, as researchers and practitioners embracing interpretive techniques would attest, there is nothing "mere" about them. And, as reported here, the organizational members themselves recognized and benefited from the therapeutic reframing, in spite of the fact that little had been done in response to specific behavioral recommendations.[3] They could see that organizational problems are much less problematic and

much more potentially workable when there is a shared lens from which to see and interpret events, and that disjunction in a world of uncertainty is much more debilitating than that same disjunction in a world with a greater sense of order. This study highlights the power of metaphor in general and the team metaphor in particular to provide both a kind of conceptual anchoring for organizational chaos and enough ambiguity and symbolic latitude to free individuals conceptually moored in unnecessary and unproductive ways.

Footnotes

[1] Three members involved in the original analysis did not participate in the follow-up interviews. One member resigned from the university to accept a position elsewhere, one left the office to accept another position within the university, and one is no longer the immediate supervisor of the office director.

[2] A "functional fiction" may or may not be the truth, but seeing something in this way allows one to proceed in a positive direction.

[3] Though, overall, the recommendations for changes in process and structure were not implemented, there was no reason to believe that the lack of response was due to the particular intervention approach or to believe that similar recommendations stemming from a more functionalist intervention would have led to different results.

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