

Boundary Spanning

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Organizations exist as long as they are functionally successful in their environments. The need for such functional success calls for strategic communication research to examine the purposeful use of communication by organizations, with the aim of fulfilling their missions (Hallahan, Holtzhausen, Van Ruler, Verčič, & Sriramesh, 2007). This research field focuses on how organizations communicate effectively with relevant stakeholders in their environments. Such environments are far from stable. In order to stay in tune, organizations have to continuously interact with their environments. Changes in the environment should be observed, interpreted, and used to adapt products or services, to develop new ones, or even to change the environment.

For strategic communication, the big picture is important. It is about continuously aligning external and internal events, formal and informal communication, intended messages and unintended signals—especially taking into account how all of these interact with each other in the networks that people form, both within and outside the organization. Such alignment, however, does not take place automatically. Boundary-spanning activities are needed, not only between an organization and its environment, but also between different units and levels within the organization (Cross, Ernst, & Pasmore, 2013). In the twenty-first century, boundary spanning has become even more important as social media and corresponding forms of mass self-communication make environments even more complex, interconnected, and dynamic. Boundary-spanning activities involve tools that have prompted horizontal networks of interactive communication between people throughout the organization (Castells, 2007).

Williams (2002) regarded boundary spanning as crossing borders, margins, or sections to build relations, interconnections, and interdependencies with the aim to solve problems or to realize innovation. Boundary spanning drives the attention to understand what is going on in human interaction. When interaction between an organization and its environment is troublesome, either because there is (i) no contact, (ii) conflict, or (iii) major uncertainty on both sides, boundary spanners are needed to effectively deal with such disturbed or dysfunctional relations (Klerkx, Aarts, & Leeuwis, 2010).

Understanding the role of boundary spanning in organizations requires reconsidering how change takes place. In most fields, including communication science, change is often, and narrowly, understood as the result of intentional activities in which the deployment of a certain set of instrumental means will result in a desired outcome. Consequently, communication is regarded as a linear instrument for achieving change with an emphasis on the diffusion of messages between individual senders and receivers. This conceptualization of change is suitable for relatively simple and non-conflictive situations that allow actors to consider the future as plannable and predictable, including the

role of communication: We have a means, we have an end, and we go straight in that direction.

Instead of such a predictable set of outcomes, many changes come about in a much messier manner. A complexity perspective regarding change helps explain why relatively insignificant events can sometimes have unexpectedly large consequences, whereas major events may not have any effect (Van Woerkum, Aarts, & Van Herzele, 2011; Williams, 2002). Instead of resulting from a single cause, change often results from a complex interplay of developments that take place simultaneously and gradually reinforce and even compel one another toward a tipping point. What is easily considered to be the cause of some outcome is often no more than the well-known straw that breaks the camel's back.

Moreover, change cannot be understood as being narrow and simple because of the behavior of an involved individual who encounters coincidences and trivial choices. Mutual interdependence between people and the way in which encounters are formed in numerous interactions ultimately determine the course of matters. People's changing activities and behaviors must therefore be understood and explained based on the social bonds they have formed during interactions. Interaction exhibits interdependence, which results in an order that is more compelling and stronger than is produced by the will and reason of each individual person (Elias, 1982, p. 240).

When focusing on boundary spanning for optimal organizational performance, change is better described as the result of a dynamic interplay between ambitions, circumstances, and interactions. An organization, for instance, that has the ambition to improve its corporate social responsibility performance has to deal with circumstances that entail all kinds of obstacles, as well as present opportunities. Such changing conditions need to be identified, analyzed, and dealt with through numerous interactions between many kinds of entities and persons.

The conventional approach to communicative intervention falls short when we focus on the ambition of strategic communication to optimally connect to the environment by spanning boundaries by merely being open systems. Emphasizing what is going on in interaction asks for a perspective on communication that involves the way people in organizations communicate in everyday situations. An interactional approach to communication, in which the interactions between people and organizations are the unit of analysis, is needed. The focus is on the dynamics that communication brings about, resulting from interactions between people who are part of different networks in which negotiations about meanings and interpretations continuously take place. From this perspective, organizations emerge as ordinary, everyday processes of inter-human communication that help people cope with the complexity and uncertainty of organizational life (Stacey & Griffin, 2005, p. 3). Processes of ordering and reordering chaotic complexity come about in conversations (Hajer & Laws, 2006) that are defined as "the speaking and listening that goes between and among people" (Ford, 1999, p. 484). Boundary spanning takes place in conversations in which people construe images of the world around them in terms of contexts and meanings that people consider to be important.

For boundary spanning in organizations, the focus is on the process, on how events become meaningful, on the mutual dependencies between causes and consequences and between actors from different backgrounds and interests, shaped and reshaped

in interaction. Change both becomes visible and is produced in what Ford (1999) called shifting conversations. These conversations are powerful mechanisms through which organizational change takes place. Such conversations are an important tool and a research object for boundary spanning. Studies of mechanisms and strategies that make boundary spanning a challenging endeavor are, however, still not very common. Building on past and recent research of what is actually going on in real-life conversations, a number of interrelated mechanisms that play decisive roles can be identified that should be at the core of the attention of boundary spanners in organizations (see Aarts, 2015).

First, boundary spanners should realize that people involved in conversations employ selective perceptions and framings. Framing is a strategic act of selecting some aspects of a perceived reality in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, or treatment recommendation for the issue described (Entman, 1993). Frames are produced, reproduced, and/or transformed through interaction. Because of their outcome-oriented dimensions, it is not easy to achieve common framings in multi-actor settings. As frames have great strategic value, rather than adopting a new frame that would not fit their existing context and interactional purpose, people in conversations try to convince their interlocutors of the value of their own frame, making boundary work difficult.

Second, Luhmann's (1995) theory of self-referential social systems helps explain the strong inclination of people and organizations, instead of being open to their environment, to reproduce themselves in forms varying from offspring, to identities, opinions, and ideas. To this end, people pick up those elements from the environment that define and maintain their own existence. The perception of the environment is thus determined by the system's own internal logic, rather than by the crucial features of external information (Van Herzele & Aarts, 2013). Clearly, boundary spanning between two or more self-referential systems, each reducing and transforming information so as to confirm and maintain their own system, is a challenging endeavor.

Third, related to the former mechanisms, research shows that people, also in organizational contexts, are poor listeners (Scharmer, 2009). They are not spontaneously interested in people who think differently, both within and outside the organization. Instead of listening by focusing on new information, or listening without judgment by trying to grasp the perspective mainly of the other, Scharmer's research found numerous organizational conversations that constitute *downloading*, listening by selecting what is already known and what confirms people's existing opinions. Because downloading is common, effective boundary spanning is hard to accomplish.

Fourth, recent studies of conversations between people and organizations who have different backgrounds, frames, and perspectives found that actors who are involved exhibit the aim of convincing each other. They use interactional strategies that more often than not have a polarizing effect. Such strategies may include using intensifying language (*a tsunami of strangers is flooding our country*), using disclaimers (*I am not a feminist, but ...*), indirection such as blaming (*smart people would come to us*), connecting independent events as phenomena and thus making things bigger, often referring to expert knowledge (*research shows ...*), and dichotomization. This last tactic entails dividing something into two radically opposed categories that cannot be

united or reconciled. This tactic occurs in situations in which different shades of gray between polar opposites deserve to be explored but are not (Macagno & Walton, 2010). Boundary-spanning activities are helped by having an open attitude, accepting ambiguity and paradoxes, inviting people to consider new reasons and arguments, all with the aim of coming to consensus, or at least sufficient concurrence, as a basis for common action (Rawls, 1999).

Finally, it should be realized that much of what is spoken in everyday talk is the product of repetition, the reappearance of what has been said before. People and their conversations are part of wider social networks and configurations in which a lot of discursive recirculation takes place (Van Herzele & Aarts, 2013). As people mostly feel comfortable with what they already know and with those people who agree with them, they tend to interact mainly with like-minded people who share similar opinions. Often repeated opinions gradually become firm and uncontested realities that are not easy to change. Shared opinions are reinforced by groupthink; this mechanism makes people withdraw into and cling to their own group's thinking. They close their minds to what is happening outside, as well as to deviant opinions and perspectives that may exist within the group. For various reasons, such silencing frequently happens in organizations in ways that motivate members to refrain from discussing different viewpoints within and between groups (Verouden, Van der Sanden, & Aarts, 2016). Consequently, boundary spanning becomes difficult when silencing is taking place; boundary spanners should be able to discover differences of opinion in order to discuss and even overcome them.

For these reasons, boundary spanning is not an easy job. However, for organizations to survive in environments affected by differences and diversity, it is a necessary investment, not only for the CEO and executive management, but for all employees. Those who have special and specific boundary-spanning tasks should start by understanding the mechanisms that are at play when people from different backgrounds interact. Further research is needed for a more in-depth understanding of patterns in communication that lead to impasses, conflict, and polarization, or to bridging and convergence, including mechanisms, strategies, and contextual conditions underlying these patterns. How, for instance, self-referentiality is established, maintained, or blunted during conversations still remains unclear. Very important in this regard is the need to learn more about the roles social media play in shifts in opinions, discourses, and interaction practices, both within and outside the organization. Finally, how institutional contexts shape the way discussions evolve and how discussions shape institutional contexts deserves in-depth study.

Everyday conversations make a difference, in organizations and in societies. Therefore, interpretive research is needed to study natural talk. To do so requires the use of different forms of discourse analysis as the main methodological approach. To understand the interplay between what is going on in micro-interactions and the wider structures in which these interactions take place, social network analysis will be relevant. The art of continually creating and making the most of opportunities in daily encounters, in order to coordinate and level both internal and external boundaries, will make boundary spanners even more important within organizations.

SEE ALSO: Alignment; Change Communication; Organizational Communication; Relationship Management

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Further reading

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Branding/Brand Management

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To understand branding and brand management, one must first understand the brand. The word *brand* stems from the Old Norse word *brandr* which means *to burn*. In its original meaning “branding” refers to the marking of livestock as a means of identifying which cattle belong to which farmer (Keller, 2008). A brand is essentially a mark that denotes ownership—in legal terms as well (Kapferer, 2012). The understanding of a brand as a mark of ownership is mirrored in the notion that a brand is a label that allows identification. In other words, the brand allows consumers to identify the origin or provenance of a given market offer. This is also suggested in the much-cited definition from the American Marketing Association (AMA). They define a brand as “a name, term, sign, symbol, or design” either on its own, or in some form of combination (e.g., Keller, 1993). According to the AMA, the brand has a dual purpose: first, to identify the goods or services from one particular manufacturer or seller; second, to differentiate these goods or services from those of competing manufacturers or sellers. Embedded in this definition is the understanding that a brand is a means not only of identification, but also of differentiation. Consequently, a brand also denotes the recognition of difference in the market offers within a given product category.

The initial understanding of the brand as something that identifies and differentiates is seemingly straightforward and simple. However, the simplicity is deceptive, as

