

# Application of communication theories | reflection



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

## **Applying Communication Theories to the Career of a Graduate Student**

- Alayna Naro

### **Organizational Culture Theory**

Members of an organization create their own culture within that organization. The culture can come from ways members communicate with each other, rituals of the organization, and shared symbols within the organization. Each organization has a culture that is distinctly theirs and differs from the cultures of other organizations. Furthermore, organizational culture is not created overnight. An organization's culture is something that forms over a period of time and is specific to the way of "living" within an organization.

Since the fall of 2010, I have been a student of Mississippi State University. I began my academic career as an undergraduate student. The organizational culture I was a part of at that point in my life is a lot different than the organizational culture I am a part of now. As an undergraduate, I was familiar with a majority of my professors, but I did not necessarily extensively communicate with them. Now, as a graduate student, the organizational culture that I am most familiar is within the School of Human Sciences, where I am a graduate assistant as well as a full time student.

The make-up of the organization is important when discussing its organizational culture. In the School of Human Sciences, the organizational make-up consists of a director, faculty members, staff members, and graduate assistants. All of these members, though they have different roles, are who establish the values and morals for the organization. By being active

participants within the organization, the members help to create meaningful symbols within the organization.

Symbols include verbal and nonverbal communication that is unique to a specific organization. The first type of symbol that can be seen within an organizational culture are physical symbols. Physical symbols consists of designs, logos, décor, and material objects. Within the School of Human Sciences, we have certain symbols that express the culture house in our organization. The School of Human Sciences has a specific logo that we place on key chains, shirts, pens, and other items to market our department. Even our building, Lloyd Ricks-Watson, is a physical symbol that houses us all under one roof.

The second type of symbol that can be seen within an organizational culture are behavioral symbols. Behavioral symbols are things such as ceremonies, rituals, or traditions that are specific to that organization. In the School of Human Sciences we have plenty of behavioral symbols that we continuously participate in. Every fall semester, there is a welcome back tailgate for students, faculty, and staff. In the spring, there is a chili supper welcoming students back for a new semester. And one Friday, every month, we have a faculty meeting where we discuss upcoming news within the School of Human Sciences. These reoccurring behaviors help to establish and identify the culture within the organization.

Finally, the third type of symbol is verbal symbols. Verbal symbols include jokes, jargon, or stories that revolve around the organization. Within any type of organization, jokes and stories are going to be expressed through

verbal communication. Furthermore, faculty calling each other by their first names when students are not around can be seen as a verbal symbol. As a graduate student, I catch my instructors calling other faculty members by their first names and then correcting themselves when they realize they are speaking to a student. By listening to stories, joke, or understanding the jargon, one can better understand the culture of the organization.

Everyone within an organization is connected. A variety of members make up an organization, and each member contributes something unique to the culture of the organization. We find connections to the organization through shared ideas, rituals, and symbols. Through physical, behavioral, and verbal symbols, one can feel connection with the organization they are a part of.

One way this particular theory does not coincide with my career, is that not everyone participates or actively uses all of the things that make up an organizational culture. In any organization or work environment, there are going to be those employees who choose not to participate. Even when they are required to immerse themselves within the organizational culture, resistance can still be seen. However, overall the theory was very applicable to my situation, and will be applicable to any organizational situation I encounter in the future.

## **Structuration Theory**

Groups and organizations engage in certain behaviors in order to achieve their goals. Within an organization, structure is a necessity. Structure can include the rules and resources used to sustain the organization. Through structuration, organizations transform socially because of the rules and

resources that dictate relationships. Rules and resources guide behaviors and decisions within an organization. Rules consists of guidelines for how a goal can be accomplished. Resources refer to the power that all individuals within the organization bring to the group. Therefore, structuration allows for members of an organization to better understand the social structure of their organization.

Power structures are evident in any organizational setting and aid in guiding the decision making process. Power enables members of an organization to achieve goals. Every member within an organization has some form of power; superiors, subordinates, etc. Power allows for members of an organization to get what they want within the system. For an individual, power is an authoritative resource that helps the organization to function properly. In regards to this theory, there are five different types of power that an individual can exemplify; reward, coercive, referent, legitimate, and expert.

Reward power refers the perception that another person within the organization has the ability to provide positive reinforcement. With reward power, the rewards can consist of praise or material rewards. As a student, I deal with reward power on a pretty frequent basis. My instructors are able to reward me for exceptional work by providing words of praise or encouragement. Additionally, as a student, there are ample opportunities for honors, awards and distinguishments. So at the same time, the university itself holds reward power too. Not to mention the greatest material reward a student can receive, a college degree. Because I know that my professors hold a majority of the reward power, I try my hardest to produce exceptional

<https://assignbuster.com/application-of-communication-theories-reflection/>

work. By producing that exceptional and receiving verbal rewards from professors, it provides a sense of incentive to seek out higher rewards, such as the material rewards previously mentioned.

Coercive power refers to the perception that someone within the organization has the ability to provide punishment. Coercive power makes others feel as though they must comply with the requests of their superiors in order to avoid negative consequences. As a student, the same people who provide me with reward power can also provide me with coercive power, my professors. However, I do not do my work solely to avoid ridicule or punishment, I complete my work in order to maintain my credibility. If I were to not give all of my effort on assignments, did not respect my professors, and did not produce quality work, my credibility with my professors would decrease.

Referent power refers to establishing a relationship between a superior in an organization and a member who has less power than them. A person who holds referent power is typically a friendly, well liked, well respected individual who may even serve as a role model for others within the organization. Again, I believe my professors have often exposed me to referent power. Sometimes it is very easy for me to form a meaningful relationship not only with my advisor, but also instructors within the department that I respect. I respect them so much mostly due to their personality and the way they choose to interact with me as a student. Though I know my professors are above me academically and within the work environment, they still treat me as an individual and pursue general interest in my goals and aspirations.

Legitimate power refers to exerting power due to a particular position or title. In the academic community, there are many individuals who exert influence on others based on their titles. For example, I comply with the wishes of my major professor. Her position as my advisor allows her to influence and help structure the direction of my goals by providing her input and expertise when needed. Furthermore, my major professor has someone who exerts legitimate power on her as well. The director of our department within the School of Human Sciences holds legitimate power over all instructors within the department. By holding the power as being the director of the department, he has the right and the ability to exert influence over the department as a whole.

Expert power refers to a person having a specific set of knowledge or expertise. Those with expert power are very valuable for any type of group or organization. Expert power allows those individuals to assist in decisions making processes and as a source knowledge when consulted. Yet again, my professors hold a sincere amount of expert power. All of my professors have completed a bachelor's degree, a master's degree, and most have completed their PhD. Therefore, my professors are experts in their fields. It is such a benefit for an organization, more specifically outside of academia, to have employees that exhibit expert power.

As a graduate assistant, I even experience possessing all five of these powers at some point. As an instructor in classes, I use reward and coercive power by being the person who is in charge of my students' grades. Hopefully, through the reward and coercive power used, my students respect me and my assignments, knowing that I hold the power within the

classroom. Additionally, I hope I possess some form of referent power with my students and my colleagues. I hope to establish a working relationship with those that I work with and encounter on an everyday basis. I possess legitimate power because of my title as a graduate assistant. That title provides me with the opportunities to serve as an instructor for certain classes, conduct research for myself and for others, and decipher me from undergraduate students. Finally, I exert expert power because of my degree titles. I have already completed a bachelor's degree in which gives me an extensive amount of knowledge in the field of agriculture. Currently, I am pursuing a master's degree which will further enhance my expertise within the field.

## **Social Penetration Theory**

Social penetration refers to a process of relationship bonding where individuals move from superficial communication to more intimate communication. Social penetration relates to more than just physical intimacy, it also incorporates intellectual and emotional intimacy. Social penetration suggests that relationships progress in a systematic way, are predictable, and dependent on our verbal, nonverbal, and environmentally oriented behaviors. All relationships form and follow a particular trajectory in which there are four stages. The four stages of the social penetration process include orientation, exploratory affective exchange, affective exchange, and stable exchange.

The orientation stage begins by revealing small, ordinary facts about ourselves to others. This past January I moved from an office across campus where I was by myself, into an office which I would share with two other

<https://assignbuster.com/application-of-communication-theories-reflection/>



students. For my situation as a graduate assistant sharing an office with two other graduate assistants, the orientation stage was very important. At this stage, we divulged enough information for others to begin to find common ground with us, but not enough to be able to judge us. Though the information we tend to express in this stage is simple, and sometimes superficial, it is a necessity for any type of relationship to form.

The exploratory affective exchange stage occurs when we begin to share aspects of our individual personality with others. Self-disclosure becomes a crucial part of this stage because it helps to transform superficial relationships into more intimate ones by revealing information about yourself. After a few weeks in the new office situation, I began to realize that I was learning more and more about my office mates. Without even realizing it, we would end up in short conversations about things unrelated to classes or work, which helped to better grasp each other's personalities.

The affective exchange stage is where the closeness of the friendship begins to blossom. At this stage, nonverbal communication can sometimes substitute for verbal communication. For instance, I can come into the office not say anything, but smile, and my office mates can substitute that as a "good morning". Also, during this stage we begin to form our own jargon and inside jokes. For example, after about three months of sharing an office, we had inside jokes, we shared funny videos and pictures, and we also listened to music together. We share information about our families, significant others, and ask for advice on any problems we may be having. Through this stage we were not only able to form a more intimate friendship with one

another, we were also able to create an office environment that was comfortable for everyone.

The final stage is the stable exchange stage. At this stage, the relationship is more spontaneous than before. Communication and behavior are a lot more predictable, and those involved know a lot more about each other and how they react. After reaching this stage, I can say my office mates are more than just people I share a room with Monday through Friday, they are my friends. We know when to talk, when to not talk. We can tell when someone might need a pick me up. And we are not afraid to be ourselves. By working through the stages of the social penetration process, we were able to divulge information about ourselves at a progressive speed and form relationships with one another.

The only way to understand other people is to engage in personal conversations with them and by sharing personal bits of information about yourself. Each personality will influence the direction a relationship will take. Though initial conversations may seem unimportant, they allow individuals to understand each other and provide early relational development. Through the social penetration process individuals achieve a way to balance their needs while also forming a relationship with another person.

Overall, this theory was very applicable to my current situation. I have seen first-hand how relationships develop, and I agree that they are a linear process. I also agree that there are certain steps, or stages, one must go through when developing a relationship with another person. There is give and take with all individuals associated with a relationship, and relationships

take time to develop. I will forever keep this theory in the back of my mind as I embark on my professional career where creating, developing, and maintaining relationships is so important.

## **Groupthink**

Groups are sets of individuals whose goal is to work toward completing a task or solving a problem. Groups need a solid foundation and need to be able to remain unaffected by all other influences. In order for the members of a group to work together effectively, the group needs a certain level of cohesiveness, or culture, within the group. Group cohesion encourages greater satisfaction within the group, the group members are more enthusiastic, and the group experience is overall positive.

As a student, I am required to work in groups on a pretty regular basis. For example, I am an ambassador for the Graduate Student Association on campus. As an ambassador I am required to attend planning meetings, assist when we host events, and serve as a liaison between the GSA and certain departments on campus. As a task oriented group, every group member has a specific job assigned to them, and when everyone does their job, our overall goal is more easily accomplished.

Groupthink is a way of group negotiation that reduces conflict and emphasizes the need for unison. When working within a group, sometimes it is easy to have tunnel vision on the end result. We can succumb to pressures of needing to keep the group harmonious and not really address the problem that we need to solve. The need to form a homogeneous group often distracts away from the true purpose of the group. Furthermore, rather than

face rejection, some members will even withhold their input if it differs from others' within the group.

The initial group meeting for any group is where groupthink is going to be most visible. Certain people choose not to speak up if their opinion slightly differs, some people do not want to offer up new ideas, and everyone looks to the group leader for direction. As meetings become more frequent and the group members get to know each other, I believe those barriers break down and people feel more open to express their opinions. On the other hand, there will always be group members who are never afraid to voice their opinions. It is easy for those people to have influence over the less vocal members in the group, so it is important to keep a happy balance.

The only problem with this theory, as it relates to the group I am a part of, is that the theory seems to focus more on decision making groups. Though the GSA committee makes decisions that affect the graduate student body as a whole, it is not our primary role. This particular group, as originally stated, is more task oriented.

Regardless, overcoming groupthink is a reoccurring challenge when working within a group. One of the ways we have actively addressed groupthink within the GSA committee is by allowing members to voice their doubts. We have created a very neutral environment where everyone feels comfortable expressing their thoughts, even if they differ from the majority of the group. When we cannot make a unanimous decision on an issue or task, we completely discuss both sides. Without interruption, without judgement, and

without ridicule, we as group work together to find the solution that will be best for the group as a whole.

## References

West, R., & Turner, L. (2010). Groupthink. In *Introducing communication theory: Analysis and application* (5th Ed.). Boston: McGraw-Hill.

West, R., & Turner, L. (2010). Organizational Culture. In *Introducing communication theory: Analysis and application* (5th ed.). Boston: McGraw-Hill.

West, R., & Turner, L. (2010). Social Penetration Theory. In *Introducing communication theory: Analysis and application* (5th ed.). Boston: McGraw-Hill.

West, R., & Turner, L. (2010). Structuration Theory. In *Introducing communication theory: Analysis and application* (5th ed.). Boston: McGraw-Hill.