6

Explaining Theories of Organizational Communication

❖ ❖

Businesses give a great deal of lip service to the importance of communication. Managers often give speeches about it to their employees and customers. Employees and customers listen and nod their heads. Sometimes they shake their heads. That's the problem. Employees and customers listen, but often that's the extent of their participation. Corporate information usually flows from the top down. (Parkinson, 2003, para. 1–2)

Recognize this scenario? One of the most intriguing paradoxes of corporate life is how often organizational members stress the importance of communication yet how few of these members know about organizational communication. In Chapter 1, we argued that popular culture tends to oversimplify the communication process. Nowhere is this more evident than in the organizational setting.

❖ ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION DEFINED

Before introducing theories of organizational communication, first let's define what we mean by an organization. An organization is characterized

by a group of people who coordinate activities to achieve individual and collective goals (Miller, 2003). Note that this definition is not referring only to incorporated entities or only to profit-making enterprises. The definition we are using includes obvious examples of organizations, such as IBM or Johnson & Johnson, as well as less obvious examples, such as the Girl Scouts of America, your local pizza parlor, or an intramural volleyball league. In short, think broadly as you read these theories of organizational communication. These theories are likely to apply not only to businesses where you work or frequent; they also hold true for any structured leisure activities you might pursue.

Communication within organizations typically serves three functions or purposes (Shockley-Zalabak, 2002). First, communication serves a *relationship* function. The relationship function refers to the centrality of communication in socializing organizational members and integrating them into their work environment. Second, communication serves an *organizing* function, which means that communication guides, directs, and controls organizational activity. Third, communication serves a *change* function. It is through communication that organizational members analyze, problem solve, adapt, and innovate.

This chapter focuses on four theories of organizational communication: organizational culture, organizational assimilation theory, organizational identification and control, and Weick's organizing theory. The first, organizational culture, emphases all three functions described previously. The second, organizational assimilation theory, emphasizes the relationship function. The third, organizational identification and control, emphasizes both the relationship and organizing functions mentioned previously. Finally, organizing theory returns to an emphasis on all three functions of organizations.

ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE

Few of the concepts covered in this book are more popular than the notion of organizational culture. Bookshelves are overflowing with tomes entitled *The Corporate Culture Survival Guide* and *Diagnosing and Changing Organizational Culture*. Before discussing any specific approaches to organizational culture, however, it is important to note that there are at least two competing perspectives on organizational culture: approaches that view culture as something an organization *has* and approaches that view culture as something an organization *is* (Smircich, 1983).

The first approach is exemplified by Deal and Kennedy (1982), who argued that organizations become high performing when they have a strong culture. These authors identified four central elements to culture: values, heroes, rites and rituals, and the cultural network. *Values* underscore the organization's core beliefs, for example, how the organization treats clients, suppliers, stakeholders, and employees. *Heroes* are the people who best represent or personify these values, such as the countercultural visionary Steve Jobs of Apple or the ostentatious real estate mogul Donald Trump. *Rites and rituals* refer to public performances that demonstrate the organizational values. The most obvious of these rituals are entry rituals, such as an academic convocation to welcome incoming students or a dinner for new employees. Finally, the *cultural network* is the informal communication processes that take place in the organization, including stories, jokes, and gossip.

Given these components, Deal and Kennedy (1982) identify four types of organizational cultures that vary based on the degree of risk the organization is willing to perform (low versus high), as well as the type of feedback and reward system it has (rapid versus slow). Table 6.1 identifies how these qualities interact to form the four cultures.

Table 6.1   The Four Organizational Cultures

	Risk	
	Low	High
Feedback and Reward Rapid	Work Hard–Play Hard Culture	Tough-Guy Macho Culture
Low	Process Culture	Bet-the-Company Culture

The *work hard–play hard culture* is characterized by fun and action (Deal & Kennedy, 1982). Organizations of this type encourage lots of activity, but the activity has high levels of certainty. Stress comes from the rate at which one works and not from the work itself. This type of culture is typical among sales organizations. The *tough-guy macho culture* is one of quickly taking gambles, with the potential of high rewards or huge losses. People who thrive in this type of culture need constant feedback and are often temperamental in their demands. In fact, this is the type of culture that values superstars rather than team players. Not surprisingly, the tough-guy macho culture is often found

among advertising agencies and the entertainment industries. Turning our attention to a *process culture*, employees in this culture typically can't measure what they do but focus instead on how it is done. The work is stable and consistent. Industries that are highly regulated often fall into this realm, such as banking, insurance, and pharmaceuticals. Finally, the *bet-the-company culture* is exemplified by high-stakes gambles that take years to pay off. Unlike the work hard–play hard culture, stress here is a low-level constant, and being deliberate is the name of the game. Oil companies, who invest billions of dollars on a drilling operation, and capital goods manufacturers, who spend years researching and developing new products, are examples of this type of culture.

As should be evident, Deal and Kennedy's (1982) approach focuses on qualities of an organization that a manager can develop or change. The second approach to culture, described by Smircich (1983), instead focuses on the processes of communication that create, sustain, and constrain interaction within the organization. To illustrate this perspective, we will focus on the work of Schein. Schein (1985, 1992) described the elements that comprise an organizational culture and how organizational cultures assist individuals in making sense of their experiences. According to Schein (1992), culture refers to a pattern of shared assumptions that have been invented, discovered, or developed by a given group and are taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and behave. Although this definition seems to imply that organizational members are consciously aware of organizational cultures, Schein argued that this is not always the case; frequently organizational members are not aware of the cultural assumptions they hold. Moreover, culture is something that emerges from interaction and continuously develops, although it is resistant to change.

Schein's (1992) model includes three levels of culture: artifacts, values, and assumptions. Although all three make up a culture, he believed that the third level, assumptions, is at the crux of organizational culture, and that the first two levels, artifacts and values, may simply reflect the more abstract and subconscious assumptions shared by organizational members.

Level 1: Artifacts

Similar to Deal and Kennedy's components of a strong culture, artifacts refer to the observable evidence of culture (Schein, 1992). They may take the forms of physical entities, such as architecture, dress, and documents, but they also consist of patterns of behavior. These patterns of behavior can take the form of rituals, acronyms, forms of address,

approaches to decision making, and management style. Table 6.2 lists some examples of artifacts.

Table 6.2 Cultural Artifacts and Behaviors

Artifact/Behavior	Examples
Architecture	Open floor plan, cubicles; offices with windows; size of offices; rented suites versus owned campus
Technology	Type of phone system used; up-to-date versus archaic computers/computer systems; availability/type of Internet connection, e-mail, portable digital assistants (PDAs)
Dress	Business attire versus casual attire; casual Fridays; dress codes
Forms of address	Titles used versus first names; differences in address by hierarchical level
Decision-making style	Autocratic versus participatory; rapid versus slow; conservative versus risk taking
Communication patterns	Formal versus informal; friendly versus distant; use of acronyms, unique terms, myths, stories; rituals

Source: From Miller, *Organizational Communication*, 3e. © 2003 Wadsworth, a part of Cengage Learning, Inc.

Although artifacts are, by definition, observable, interpreting what the artifacts mean may not always be obvious (Schein, 1992). For example, imagine an organization that develops a pattern of using formal titles among organizational members. According to Miller (2003), such a behavioral artifact might mean that the organization is a very formal one. On the other hand, it might simply mean that organizational members hold each other in high esteem and wish to show each other respect. Or it might be an indication that the organizational members dislike each other and seek to maintain distance. Thus, while this level of culture is readily apparent, it does not provide much substance to an understanding of organizational culture. Attention must be turned to higher levels for such understanding.

Level 2: Values

The second level of culture is organizational members' values, defined as preferences about how situations should be handled (Schein, 1992). These preferences represent shared beliefs about how things ought to happen. By nature, values are intangible, but organizational members are typically able to articulate them. Organizational leaders are frequently the source of values; for instance, research shows that the values held by the founder of a company strongly influenced the values described by other employees (Morley & Shockley-Zalabak, 1991). Certainly, literature suggests that leadership is, by definition, the ability to shape members' perceptions of the task and the mission of the organization (Barge, 1994). Accordingly, it's not surprising that organizational members are persuaded to adopt the values of organizational leaders.

Still, simply because a leader articulates a value system does not make it so. Importantly, championed values are not always authentic values, as is evident when the ideals expressed do not match behavior (Schein, 1992). Consider, for instance, two organizations that claim to value *innovation*. When scrutinizing the artifacts of the first organization, observers notice that the company encourages risks and gives employees time to experiment. Failures are not punished; in fact, the company encourages employees to talk about failures, because one person's failure might be the solution to another person's problem. A significant portion of the annual budget is earmarked for research and development. In this case, the artifacts seem to support the value of innovation. At the second company, however, failure is not an option; people who fail are punished. The organization is resistant to change and has very rigid systems to implement even the smallest change. Little of the budget is slated for research and development, and employees are kept so busy maintaining the current product line that they have virtually no time to develop any new ideas. In fact, employees have facetiously created the following company slogan: "We don't innovate; we duplicate." Clearly, these artifacts do not seem to suggest that the value of innovation is actually practiced. The point is that espoused values are not always identical to the actual values of the organization; just because it appears in the mission statement does not mean it reaches the level of everyday practice.

Level 3: Basic Assumptions

The final level of culture is the most difficult to identify because it is often taken for granted by organizational members. Basic assumptions

refer to the viewpoints organizational members hold about the world, including perceptions, thoughts, feelings, and beliefs. These assumptions are subconscious because they have been reinforced over and over again as the organization faces challenges. Basic assumptions lie at the heart of organizational culture because such presumptions are made uniformly throughout the organization (Schein, 1992).

Specifically, organizations develop assumptions about the nature of reality, time, space, human nature, and human relationships, among other things (Schein, 1992). These concepts are relatively profound philosophical commitments to things, such as the "right" way for people to interact with each other, whether human beings are by nature good or evil, and whether truth is singular (i.e., there is one absolute "truth") or conditional (e.g., some things are true at some times in some places for some people).

Although this notion sounds complex, such assumptions have a substantial impact on organizational life. Morton (1999) illustrated this effect through an analysis of assumptions in child welfare agencies. Specifically, a fundamental assumption of one child welfare agency might be that people are capable of changing. Such an assumption will affect the everyday decisions that are made because organizational members will spend energy seeking to develop and reward individuals rather than punish them for past infractions. Yet a different organization might hold the assumption that the best predictor of future behavior is past behavior. In this case, organizational members are likely to view individuals who have made previous mistakes as risky prospects likely to repeat those mistakes.

According to Schein's (1992) model of organizational culture, an analysis of assumptions could assist organizational members in generating a coherent blueprint for how the organization should operate. This prediction is not always the case. Some organizations might simultaneously hold seemingly conflicting assumptions. For example, employees of a Catholic institution of higher learning may be challenged by incompatible assumptions; for instance, assumptions that the Catholic Church makes about "truth" may contrast the assumptions that some of the university's academic disciplines hold about "truth." Such contradictory assumptions might cause problems for members who are seeking to behave in concert with organizational assumptions. How the organization reconciles these inconsistent assumptions determines the overarching organizational culture.

To summarize, Schein (1985, 1992) proposed three levels of culture: artifacts, values, and assumptions. Although there may be surface inconsistencies within and across these levels, a careful analysis of the

patterns that emerge will give observers an understanding of the organizational culture. These cultures are created by employees, with particular emphasis placed on the impact of those at the highest levels in the organization, but organizational cultures also constrain how organizational members communicate.

ORGANIZATIONAL ASSIMILATION THEORY

Many of us have learned very quickly that we don't "fit" with a particular organization. You might find, for example, that you are a blue jeans kind of person in a three-piece suit kind of world. Or you might find that an organization's values (e.g., slow and steady wins the race) don't mesh with your Type A personality. We've just finished discussing what organizational cultures are and how we might identify a particular organization's culture. Taking this a step further, organizational assimilation theory was created by Jablin (1987, 2001) as a way to explain how individuals become integrated into the culture of an organization.

Jablin (2001) argues that the process of being socialized into an organization is complex and takes place over years. Moreover, the process of assimilation can be planned, for example, through a potential employee's active researching of a company or formal training procedures. But assimilation is often unplanned. Coworkers' interaction styles might not be intended to send messages about the organizational culture, but the new organizational member might perceive these messages regardless.

The theory identifies four stages that organizational newcomers go through before becoming full members of an organization. These stages are summarized in Table 6.3 and next.

Vocational Anticipatory Socialization

Before we ever get our first job, we learn about the nature of work. We watch our parents leave us in the morning and return to us in the evening, oftentimes frazzled and grumpy. We listen to our teachers tell us that we've done a good job or that we have not worked hard enough. We have laughed at the incompetence of Michael Scott on *The Office* or cringed at the worst-boss-in-the-world in *The Devil Wears Prada*. We've had part-time jobs and even full-time jobs, and we have listened as our professors tell us what it's really like to be a journalist, or a PR rep, or a manager. In short, we spend years collecting information about the nature of work, yet much of what we learn is

Table 6.3   Stages of Assimilation

Stage	Description
Vocational Anticipatory Socialization	Developing a set of expectations and beliefs about the nature of work and work settings Example: The people I work with will be my close friends.
Anticipatory Socialization	Learning about a particular vocation, position, and organization Example: DanCo provides networking services to nongovernment organizations.
Encounter	Making sense of the organizational culture Example: Unlike my last job, people at DanCo come in to work late and stay late.
Metamorphosis	Transitioning from outsider to insider Example: We work hard and play hard—it's just what we do here at DanCo.

distorted, biased, or just plain wrong. Jablin (2001) describes a host of studies that indicate that the media overrepresent managerial and professional work, and underrepresent low-prestige jobs. People who fill positions are often stereotyped by race and sex. Moreover, the nature of communication in the workplace is distorted, with much of the conversation focused on socializing, giving orders, or giving advice. All these notions of work are brought with us as we begin to assimilate into an organization.

Anticipatory Socialization

The second stage of organizational assimilation theory is anticipatory socialization. Here, individuals gather information about a specific vocation, a specific position, and/or a specific organization. It includes the process of choosing an organization, interviewing, and preparing to enter the organization. Jablin (2001) argues that in many cases individuals

retain unrealistic and inflated notions of the organization because organizations typically communicate only the positive aspects of the organization. These unrealistic expectations are often problematic, as organizational members find it difficult to meet these expectations once on the job. Clearly, during this phase the organizational newcomer starts to become socialized into the organization before he or she ever works in the organization.

Encounter

The third phase is one of uncertainty and anxiety. The organizational newcomer enters the workplace and begins to learn the normal work patterns and expectations of the organization. As described in Chapter 3, there are many ways that people reduce uncertainty, including observation and asking questions. Typically, the organizational newcomer relies on coworkers and his or her supervisor for uncertainty reduction. The individual in this stage frequently undergoes a "culture shock" as she or he compares expectations with the reality of the new workplace and disillusionment as she or he lets go of old values and behaviors.

Metamorphosis

The final stage of assimilation reflects the movement of the individual from an outsider to an insider. During this stage, the newcomer and the organization exert mutual influence in the process of developing a "fit" between the organization and the employee. Here, the newcomer internalizes the values and behaviors in order to fulfill organizational expectations (known as *socialization*) while at the same time the organizational member seeks to have an impact on his or her role and work environment (known as *individualization*). Imagine that you have begun working at an organization that rigidly follows the rules of the employee handbook. You have reached metamorphosis if you still allow the handbook to guide your behavior, but you also use the inconsistencies and missing areas of the handbook to achieve your goals. In this case, you have been socialized to rely on the handbook, as is the organizational culture, but you have adapted the culture to your own needs by taking advantage of the handbook's limitations to get what you think you need to accomplish your job.

The next theory, organizational identification and control, takes this notion of organizational assimilation a step further by articulating the hidden aspects of becoming a member of an organizational culture.

❖ ORGANIZATIONAL IDENTIFICATION AND CONTROL

As indicated in Chapter 5, organizations are increasing their use of team-based structures to improve quality, engender creativity, and increase employee involvement (Deetz, Tracy, & Simpson, 2000). Although these are the *stated* goals of work teams, research suggests that team-based structures also serve another purpose: *control over employees* (Barker, 1999). Consequently, organizational identification and control (OIC) theory centers on the way that an individual's connection to the organization influences behavior and decision making in team-based structures (Barker, 1999). Three main concepts tie the theory together: identification, control, and discipline.

Identification

OIC's first major concept, identification, refers to the sense of oneness with or belongingness to an organization; when individuals experience identification, they define themselves in terms of the organization (Mael & Ashforth, 1992). Identification happens most frequently in the metamorphosis stage of organizational assimilation, as described earlier in the chapter. Evidence of identification happens when you listen to organizational members speak. Often they will say things such as, "We don't operate that way here" or "We launched a new product today." In these cases, the organizational member is adopting the persona of the organization—she or he may have had little to do with the new product, but there is a sense of pride in and ownership of the product because of identification. This process of identification plays a central, yet subtle, role in how organizations control their employees.

Control

Quite simply, "an organization needs control to get things done" (Miller, 2003, p. 210). OIC suggests that there are, however, several forms of control that an organization might utilize. Based on Edwards's (1981) delineation, an organization may exert control through three traditional methods. *Simple control* involves direct, authoritarian control. If a manager makes threats (e.g., "do this or you'll get fired") or places conditions on an employee (e.g., "you can leave early if you finish the Kegway project"), she or he is using the classic way of controlling employees by simply directing the employee as to what can or should be done.

The second method of control is slightly more subtle. *Technological control* involves the use of technology to manage what can and can't be

done in the workplace (Edwards, 1981). A factory assembly line is a perfect example; employees must go exactly as fast as the assembly line is moving—no faster and no slower (as the classic episode of *I Love Lucy* in the candy factory illustrated). Employees on an assembly line can only take prescribed breaks, as well, because the whole line must be shut down if one person takes a break. A more contemporary example of this type of control is the limitation of computer technology. How often have you been told by someone, "The program won't let us do that"? What sorts of technology you do or don't have access to and the ways that technology does or does not work serves as a means of organizational control.

The third kind of control is *bureaucratic control* (Edwards, 1981). Undoubtedly, you are familiar with the term *bureaucracy*, and it is usually associated with negative perceptions. Edwards, however, was referring to the vision of bureaucracy first articulated by Max Weber, a German sociologist. Writing at the turn of the 20th century, Weber argued that modern organizations are served best by a hierarchical system of rules, with rewards and punishments drawn from those rules. That hierarchy is evident in contemporary organizations through company policies and formal procedures. Employee handbooks and other such formalized rule systems are the clearest example of bureaucratic control.

These three forms of control are the ways that power has typically been exerted in organizations. In developing OIC, however, Tompkins and Cheney (1985) suggested that changes in organizations during the latter part of the 20th century have shifted the way that control is wielded. With the growing use of team-based organizations and organizations grounded in participation and empowerment, Tompkins and Cheney identified two additional types of control: unobtrusive and concertive.

First, *unobtrusive control* is based on shared values within the organization. Put simply, in the "new" organization, management's job is to create a vision and mission for the organization. When organizational members make decisions based on the vision or credo of the organization, they are not making those decisions because they are forced to but because they believe in the mission of the organization—they identify with the organization. Thus, the commitment to organizational values controls employees.

Similarly, the second new type of control is based on interpersonal relationships and teamwork (Tompkins & Cheney, 1985). More obvious than unobtrusive control, *concertive control* happens when coworkers develop mechanisms to reward and control behavior that influences the team. For example, Barker (1999) suggested that group

members can discipline nonconforming coworkers through criticizing directly, monitoring, being silent, and exerting social pressure, among other things. As with simple control, concertive control is obvious and direct. It is not, however, a managerial function in this system but happens among hierarchical equals. Because of this, it is often described as a hidden form of control. Table 6.4 provides an overview of the types of control.

Table 6.4   Organizational Identification and Control

Type of Control	Examples
Simple	• Commands • Threats
Technological	• Assembly lines • Removing computer games from workplace machines
Bureaucratic	• Employee handbooks • Employment contracts
Unobtrusive	• Identification with organizational values • Decision making based on organizational mission
Concertive	• Monitoring of other team members' performance • Coworker pressure on nonconforming members

Discipline

Pulling together the concepts of identification and control, Barker (1999) and colleagues (see also Tompkins & Cheney, 1985) suggested that discipline is achieved through a sense of responsibility to the work group because members identify with their organization and because they share common values and a vision for the organization. When individuals are faced with a decision, they will rely on organizational values to make that decision—there is no need for top-down management directives. If an individual is not behaving in concert with organizational values, work group members tend to censure that individual.

Notably, according to OIC theory, superiors need not do the disciplining themselves; the norms for behavior generated by the organizational mission and values coupled with the identification of organizational members work together to maintain organizational control. Thus, the creation of organizational missions and visions might have the explicit function of driving the organization's business, and work teams might provide a mechanism for employee empowerment; but these initiatives also serve the implicit function of controlling employees.

❖ ORGANIZING THEORY

The previous theories in this chapter have linked communication processes to organizational processes. The fourth and final perspective, Weick's (1969) organizing theory, takes this link one step further by stating that communication *is* the organization. Instead of viewing organizations as containers in which communication occurs, Weick argued that communication is what constitutes an organization. Instead of examining an *organization* (a noun), Weick examined the process of *organizing* (a verb).

With roots in Darwin's theory of evolution, information theory, and systems theory (see Chapter 5), organizing theory assumes that organizations exist in an *information environment* (Weick, 1969). Rather than focusing on the physical environment, Weick's theory is concerned with the massive amounts of information that organizations have available to them. Information comes from internal and external sources. Importantly, organizations depend on information to accomplish their goals. The challenge of processing all of the available information is a Herculean task.

In addition to issues of quantity, managing the information environment is difficult because much of the information that organizations deal with is unpredictable. The term *equivocality* references the ambiguity of information available to organizations (Weick, 1969). Messages are equivocal to the extent that there may be multiple understandings of the information. Equivocality is different from the concept of uncertainty. When individuals are uncertain about a message, they can gather more information to reduce uncertainty. However, when individuals find a message to be equivocal, they do not need additional information; instead, they must decide which of multiple interpretations is the best fit. Consider the example of an individual who has to decide how to invest her money. The state of the economy is equivocal;

some financial planners argue that the stock market will pick up, and so she should invest in the stock market, whereas others suggest that because the market is poor and looks like it will continue to perform poorly, she should invest in real estate. Gathering more information is likely only to add to the equivocality. In the end, she has to interpret the state of the economy for herself, but her interpretation is only one of many interpretations that can be made.

According to Weick (1969), one way to reduce equivocality is to rely on *rules* (also called *recipes*). The term *rule* most often refers to guidelines for behavior, and Weick's use of the term is consistent with this conceptualization. Typically, organizations have rules, or guidelines, for analyzing both the equivocality of a message as well as how to respond to messages. These rules are developed to make a process more efficient, and they are generally based on past successes. There are many obvious examples of rules, such as rules for whom to contact to accomplish certain tasks, rules about specific forms to be used, and rules about processes to be followed. Rules can also be less formalized. For example, an organization might have had past success with increasing profits by reducing packaging costs for its products. Accordingly, the next time corporate earnings are in question, the stock response is to seek to reduce packaging costs: Cost reduction has become a rule.

Rules don't always work, and there isn't always a rule for every situation. Organizing theory suggests that a second way to reduce equivocality is for organizational members to engage in communication cycles known as *double interacts* (Weick, 1969). Double interacts are suited for instances of high equivocality because they require organizational members to develop interdependent relationships in the process of communicating. Recall that in Chapter 5 we discussed the concept of *nonsummativity*: The whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Weick's theory is grounded in systems principles, and so he argued that greater involvement among organizational members can produce greater results in reducing equivocality.

A double interact consists of an act, a response, and an adjustment (Weick, 1969). An *act* is a communication behavior initiated by one person or group of people. The receivers of the message communicate in return, which is considered a *response*. This two-way exchange of messages is the one most typically used to understand the communication process. Weick proposed that genuine communication requires a third step, an *adjustment* to the information that was originally received. This adjustment can take several forms. It might be a confirmation that the information has been understood. If the

information is still equivocal, the adjustment might be additional information gathering.

To illustrate, the marketing department of a major manufacturing company has created a new product configuration to be sold only at Walmart. They approach production with the new idea, but members of the production team respond by telling marketing that the configuration they have sold cannot be produced on the current assembly lines. Marketing amends the proposal so that the customer receives the specialty product and the production department can utilize existing equipment and materials: act, response, adjustment.

At the beginning of this section, we stated that Weick (1969) was more concerned with the process of organizing than with the entity of an organization. Double interacts are the process of organizing; according to Weick, they are literally the links that hold an organization together. Weick also believed, however, that organizing is an evolutionary process. Much like Darwin's theory of evolution, which suggests that organisms become extinct if they can't adapt to their environment, organizing theory maintains that organizations that don't adapt to their environment will collapse. Accordingly, Weick proposed a three-stage process of *sociocultural evolution* for organizations.

The first stage of sociocultural evolution is *enactment* (Weick, 1969). Enactment occurs when members of an organization take note of equivocal information in their information environment. Recall that equivocal information can be interpreted in multiple ways. Recognizing that there are multiple interpretations and acting to put into process a mechanism for making sense of the information are at the heart of enactment.

The second stage is *selection* (Weick, 1969). In seeking to reduce equivocality, organizational members must choose how to respond. As described earlier, organizational members can choose between *rules*, or standard guidelines for how to respond, and a *double interact*, which is a communication process that allows members to adapt solutions to the problem.

The third stage is *retention* (Weick, 1969). Retention is a form of organizational memory. What was done and how it was done is stored, formally or informally, so that organizational members can refer to it again. Notice what is happening here; even if organizational members go through a double interact to reduce equivocality, in this stage the double interact is retained as a new rule or guideline for behavior for future use. Accordingly, retention should be used sparingly. Figure 6.1 provides a visual illustration of sociocultural evolution.

Figure 6.1   Weick's Model of Organizing
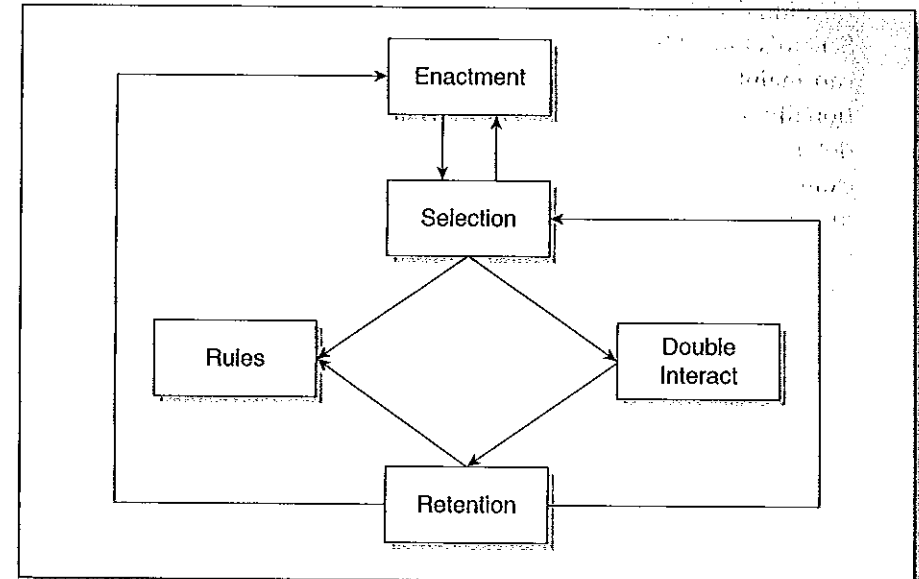
To complete the analogy with Darwin's theory of evolution, Weick's (1969) theory of organizing posits that organizations exist in a complex information environment. This environment is complex because organizations have to deal with equivocal information. Organizations that don't adapt to equivocality, whose members don't utilize double interacts to resolve new forms of ambiguity, will not survive and flourish. In short, change is the key to organizational success, and change occurs through the process of communicating.

⁂ CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter introduced four theories of organizational communication. In brief, we first looked at organizational culture, using two distinct theories to illustrate this concept: Deal and Kennedy's strong culture approach, which identifies four types of organizational cultures, and Schein's model of organizational culture, which suggests that there are three levels of culture: artifacts, values, and basic assumptions. His model proposes that basic assumptions are at the heart of organizational culture and is currently being applied to a new paradigm of business development called corporate sustainability

(e.g., Baumgartner, 2009). Specifically, an organization can only become socially, environmentally, and economically viable with a strong organizational culture that supports these sustainable values. Likewise, Schein's model has been used to investigate whether or not companies can maintain their organizational culture when they expand internationally (Pioch, 2007). Second, organizational assimilation theory details the three stages of being socialized into a new organization, for example, explaining how first-year medical students adjust to their institution (Zorn & Gregory, 2005). As another example, when studying interactions of teachers and administrators, Gómez (2009) found that when time was perceived as scarce, newcomers had less chance to socialize with existing organizational members, thereby inhibiting the assimilation process. Next, organizational identification and control proposes that when organizational members identify with the values of an organization, they can be controlled through self-discipline and peer pressure. The management approach of the Grameen Bank in Bangladesh is one such organization that simultaneously empowers and controls its employees with concertive controls. For example, it is the employees, not management, who have created their own norm of working 12-hour days and 7-day weeks because they believe in the organization's mission of empowering the poor (Papa, Auwal, & Singhal, 1995). Finally, Weick's theory of organizing argues that organizations and its members must process equivocal information in order to succeed. Hermann (2007) used this approach to study online discussions of financial experts, finding that participants frequently used the double interact to better understand contradictory financial messages. Such application extends Weick's theory beyond brick-and-mortar organizations, suggesting that today's businesses must work even harder to create a uniform and unambiguous message.

Case Study 6: Losing Hope

For more than 80 years, Hope Medical Center had serviced its local residents as a privately run, not-for-profit community hospital. However, with the rapidly escalating cost of medical care, last year, Hope's board of directors agreed that, for the hospital to survive, it was in their best interest to partner with the Greater Valley Hospital Alliance (GVHA)—a for-profit hospital management group. Under GVHA's management, resources could be used more efficiently, the hospital would have more financial security, and patients and doctors alike would have access to other facilities in GVHA's

network of hospitals. GVHA had promised that Hope's daily operations would remain untouched after the merger. When announced in the local newspaper, nearby residents as well as the hospital staff enthusiastically supported the partnership.

Stella Brindle had worked for Hope for the last 8 years in its community relations department. She helped publicize the hospital's services, success stories, and awards. She also helped the hospital raise money, and she was particularly proud of her work directing the most recent fund-raising campaign that helped finance the hospital's pediatric unit renovations. Stella was excited by the merger; by sharing resources, she believed the partnership would free her from some of the more tedious job duties and allow her team to focus more on fund-raising and developing the hospital's services.

Additionally, Stella's team had spearheaded an initiative called "The Beacon of Hope," a mission statement and motto for all employees. Called "The Beacon" for short, its purpose was to "inspire all members of the Hope community to realize what it means to be truly exceptional caregivers." The Beacon had emerged after the American Medical Association named Hope as "the nation's most compassionate hospital." The director of community relations, Mathilde Auberge, wanted to formalize this standard of care and assigned Stella to lead The Beacon initiative.

With support from the entire hospital community, The Beacon was to serve as a code of conduct for all physicians, nurses, staff members, and volunteers. Stella ran a number of focus groups and sought input from various stakeholders. As a result, Hope employees were quite proud of The Beacon and what it stood for. The mission statement appeared prominently on all of the hospital's promotional materials, and a framed copy hung in each patient's room. The hospital gift shop even sold a variety of items with The Beacon's logo. Hope's physicians were invited to use The Beacon in their patient office areas, and The Beacon logo was stitched on all hospital lab coats and scrubs.

Despite The Beacon initiative's success and the initial community support for merging with GVHA, however, tough times were on the horizon for Hope. Six months into the merger, Stella and many other employees had serious regrets about joining the GVHA network. When initially proposed by the board, Hope employees were led to believe that a partnership with GVHA would have minimal impact on their day-to-day tasks. The CEO of GVHA even told hospital staff that "a partnership would not disrupt the wonderful community culture of Hope Medical Center." However, only days

(Continued)

(Continued)

after the deal was signed, this promise seemed moot. First, a bright red and purple GVHA banner was hung, overshadowing The Beacon. Next, GVHA administrators sent an e-mail informing Hope employees that as part of the GVHA network, Hope employees must wear the GVHA-approved uniforms or lab coats. Although seemingly a trivial issue, Stella and the rest of the community relations team were upset. Not only were they being forced to wear a uniform but the demand also meant that The Beacon logo could no longer be worn because it wasn't "consistent" with the other GVHA hospitals.

Transformations appeared in the gift shop, too. The Beacon merchandise was still there but on a back shelf where it was hard to see. And several weeks after that, Stella noticed changes to the hospital's Web site. The Beacon was no longer featured prominently; instead it was a tiny link, buried halfway down the page. Stella was confused; normally, her department managed the Web site and all changes were made as a team. Yet no one in community relations knew anything about the changes. When Stella called GVHA to find out about the new Web site, she was told, "Oh, you don't need to worry about maintaining your site anymore. We'll do all of that for you so you have more time to work on fund-raising." Stella felt conflicted. On one hand, no one in community relations liked the tedious task of constantly updating the Web site; however, she wished the team would have been asked, or at least informed, about this change.

The changes weren't just about logos and merchandise. Hope had always prided itself on its familylike atmosphere where all of the doctors, nurses, and staff knew each other by first name. The cafeteria and elevators were typically jovial places because people would chat with each other. Since the merger, however, physicians and nurses could be required to work at several of GVHA's hospitals, depending on which hospital had the most need. This meant that there was an ongoing influx and exodus of medical personnel and more unfamiliar faces. Although always busy, the pace at Hope now felt more intense as doctors dashed from room to room trying to see all of their patients before driving to another location.

Community relations started receiving complaints—first from the nurses, then from the doctors, and even from patients. A letter to the editor was published in the local newspaper, criticizing Hope for "going commercial." Reported medical mistakes had risen since the partnership, and patient satisfaction had declined. Stella's boss, Mathilde, asked the community relations team to start categorizing these complaints. After a month, Mathilde prepared a report and called a meeting with the board of directors. She showed them all of the data along with her conclusion: Hope was losing

what had made it such an exceptional hospital. The medical staff felt more overworked than ever, while patients felt like numbers, rather than people. The whole philosophy behind The Beacon had become overshadowed by GVHA's businesslike atmosphere. The board was at a loss. If the hospital's record of medical mistakes was too high, or if too many patients filed complaints, GVHA would void their contract and withdraw hospital funding. Clearly, something had to be done, but what?

Questions for Consideration

1. Compare and contrast the culture of Hope Medical Center (before the merger) with that of GVHA. Make sure to describe the artifacts, values, and assumptions apparent in both organizations. Using Deal and Kennedy's four cultures, which type of culture has Hope historically had? Based on Schein's theory, can the cultures of Hope and GVHA coexist?

2. Using organizational assimilation theory, describe the stages of Stella's adjustment (or failure to adjust) to GVHA's culture. Do you believe metamorphosis will occur?

3. What types of control did Hope Medical Center use before the partnership? Compare this with the types of control GVHA uses to manage its hospital network.

4. Using organizing theory, what evidence is there of the use of double interacts? What might sociocultural evolution predict will happen to Hope?

5. Do any of the theories emerge as "better" than the others? Why do you believe this to be the case? How could the story be altered so as to make a different theory or combination of theories better at explaining the situation?