



# The power of strategic communication in organizational development

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this study is to describe and reflect on strategic communication and its relevance for organizational development and the service sciences.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The approach is conceptual and based on an analysis of relevant earlier research. In the first part of the paper, contemporary organizational challenges are discussed, using a communication perspective. Then, a discussion about communication foundations follows. Finally, four arguments why strategic communication is valuable for organizational development is discussed, raising questions for further empirical research.

**Findings** – The main driving force behind the increased interest in strategic communication is the organizational need of legitimacy to operate in the late modern society. The analysis concludes that there are possible synergies to be made between strategic communication (following a holistic and ritual approach to communication) and the service sciences. The four arguments for focusing strategic communication for organizational development are its relevance for organizational efficiency, image, identity and transparency. There is need of further empirical research.

**Originality/value** – Communication has for many years mainly been viewed as a transmission system and organizational function for production and distribution. In this paper, strategic communication is viewed as a critical organizational management process.

**Keywords** Public relations, Strategic communication, Organizational communication, Communication theory

**Paper type** Conceptual paper

Strategic communication is a multidisciplinary field of knowledge, defined as purposeful communication that an organization plans and executes to fulfill its overall mission in relation to different internal and external stakeholders (Hallahan *et al.*, 2007). The overall aim of strategic communication is to enforce, shape or defend legitimacy inside organizations (between managers and coworkers) and between organizations and society. There are two starting points for research in strategic communication. One starts either from an organizational perspective, meaning that strategic communication processes are related to their significance for organizational effectiveness, culture, management and governance, or from a societal perspective, which means that strategic communication is analyzed based on its consequences for social change, public opinion or behavior, democracy and culture. Historically, strategic communication has been associated with organizational functions (e.g. communication or corporate communications departments) and communication actors (e.g. public relations or communications officers). Functions and professional actors still have important roles



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for organization's strategic communication. But in contemporary research strategic communication is viewed from a holistic approach, challenging borders between functions such as human resource, marketing, information technology and communications. Strategic or corporate communication "is a mindset, a certain way of thinking about and approaching communication as a strategic management function./ [...] that embraces all the organization's communication activities" (Christensen *et al.*, 2008, p. 2). The development of strategic communication as a management asset and process has strong support also among practitioners, according to empirical research (Tench *et al.*, 2013).

Since a long time ago, researchers have emphasized the close relationship between communication and organizations. Already in 1938, Chester Barnard wrote that communication is fundamental to an organization and that leadership and communication are closely linked (Barnard, 1938/1968). But it was with the publication of the second edition of Karl E. Weick's *The social psychology of organizing*, in 1979, that organizational theorists seriously began to take an interest in the fundamental importance of communication in organizing processes. The view of organizations presented in the book (Weick, 1979) is different to the traditional and static view of organizations. Weick argues that organizations are made up of a variety of formal and informal interpersonal relationships between people and that these relationships must be constantly maintained. In many cases, communication reproduces the social structure of organizations, but the structure may also be altered in other directions (Giddens, 1984). This reasoning implies that organizations are created and maintained through communication and emphasizes situational aspects (Gregory and Halff, 2013) Communication is the foundation for all organizations and their activities.

Organization's communication has primarily interested researchers in organizational communication and public relations. But marketing and service researchers have increasingly begun to emphasize the importance of communication for successful marketing and service management. Historically, marketing has been product-driven and communication has many times been treated as something secondary. Because marketing now has entered a new service-dominant logic era there are possible synergies with communication theory. Vargo and Lusch (2004, p. 11) described the marketing evolution as having a clear communicative approach even if the concept is not mentioned: "Interactivity, integration, customization, and coproduction are the hallmarks of a service-centered view and its inherent focus on the customer and the relationship".

The aim of this conceptual paper is to describe and reflect on strategic communication and its relevance for organizational development. In the first part of the paper, contemporary organizational challenges are discussed using a communication perspective. Then, a discussion about communication foundations and perspectives follows. In the final part of the paper, four arguments why strategic communication is valuable for organizational development is discussed, raising questions for further research. The article does not answer empirical questions, but aims to increase interest for strategic communication dimensions related to quality and service management research.

### **Contemporary organizational communication challenges**

In earlier days, professional communication had a limited role in organizations. Communication was viewed as a production and distribution function. Strategies and

decisions were made, and communication practitioners were given the task to produce internal or external messages and transmit them through different channels. According to the excellence theory of public relations (one of the pillars of strategic communication), based on major empirical quantitative analysis focusing communication practitioners (Dozier *et al.*, 1995; Grunig, 1992; Grunig and Hunt, 1984), it is possible to divide the evolution of public relations into five models. The *publicity model* represents the rise of public relations practice in the USA. During this period, public relations was the same thing as damage control and propaganda focusing the mass media and the public opinion. The primary purpose of public relations was to get media attention, and the relationship to ethical considerations and truth was neglected. The basic problem with this model is ethical in that the purpose is considered to justify the means. The belief in direct effects of media attention is also, from an applied perspective, naïve (McQuail, 2010). The *information model* is not as focused on the mass media as the publicity model. But it is the same persuasion model that is the starting point. The impact is now assumed to be linked to information *per se*, but the main interest is a distribution model. If a transmitter manages to pass a leaflet to the recipient's mailbox, the goal is achieved. Strategic development, adaptation to the group or individual level and evaluations are not considered relevant. In practice, the information model leads to one directed mass information.

The *two-way asymmetrical model* is a strategic model that in practice means that the transmitter is more interested in segmentation of target groups and feedback than in previous models. It is a mixture between persuasion and adaptation. Assuming that the publicity model is about pure exposure and the information model focuses on distribution, this third model leads the communicator (as sender) to examine the effects of each message in different target groups. The *symmetric model* is based on a dialogue ideal, where transmitters and receivers as concepts are replaced by two equal participants (inside organizations or between organizations and its external stakeholders) having a dialogue. The symmetry model was criticized, partly to be utopian, partly for obscuring the power and persuasive dimension which is indispensable in strategic communication practice (L'Etang and Pieczka, 1996; Toth and Heath, 1992). A fifth *excellence model*, inspired by the game theory, was developed as a compromise between symmetry and asymmetry and based on negotiation as the core concept. The different parties give up something and win something, and consensus is achieved.

The interest in strategic communication has increased due to the social, political and economic development. The main driving force behind the increased interest is the organizational need of legitimacy to operate in the late modern society. Increased transparency, individualism, risk notions, mobility and globalization do not have only financial consequences for contemporary organizations. The relationships to different stakeholders have become more complex, fragile and create social demands on organizations to be legitimate in different contexts. Strategic communication is, following this reasoning, a core late modern expert system since legitimacy:

[...] is not a question of how an organization actually decides and acts – but of the way it is interpreted. Consequently, strategic communication and legitimacy are closely interrelated, and communicative competences are of pivotal importance to organizations today (Holmström *et al.*, 2010, p. 3).

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Bauman (2000) names the contemporary social macro-context liquid society. This society is defined by increasing uncertainty and more individual choices. Individuals continually reexamine their relationships to other individuals as well as organizations depending on how they interpret new information. Jenkins (2006) concludes that we live in a participatory culture in which technologies and content converge in new forms. The participatory culture is defined by individual active consumption and coproduction, but linked to collective intelligence where new media is central. Consumers and citizens communicate and gather information from different sources on the Internet when they make decisions. Rumors, scandals, likes and comments are easily spread, often out of reach for contemporary organizations management, and effect reputation as well as consumer behavior.

Strategic communication has become an important organizational asset and, in many cases, a valued dimension of strategic management processes (Zerfaß *et al.*, 2012). As mentioned above, legitimacy, based on collective perceptions of organizational behavior, is the driving force. But there are a number of other driving forces, which also need to be mentioned.

First, the increased demand on managers to be communicative leaders. Contemporary managers in post-bureaucratic organizations are supposed to be strategic communicators of visions, values and goals as well as facilitators of organizational change (Heide and Simonsson, 2011). Previously, managers were primarily supposed to be good rhetoricians. Nowadays, leadership training is not only about presentation skills but also about building relationships and links between communication, management and activities of the organization from a strategic approach. One reason for the increased element of communication in leadership training is the demands on managers to communicate complex phenomena such as values, norms, visions and overall goals, organizational identity and culture to a variety of recipients, both within and outside organization. Contemporary managers need to be framing strategists and adapt to contexts and situations that are complex and different.

Second, the development of ICT has led to both new business possibilities, transparency, monitoring and information overload. Constructing effective information and communication systems, between management and coworkers, coworkers and coworkers and organizations and their stakeholders, have become crucial for efficiency. New information and communication technology (ICT) (e.g. e-mail, Internet, intranets, blogs, discussion groups, micro-blogs, social networks) has led to the amount of information in modern organizations to increase immensely. This has both advantages and disadvantages. Organization members can access information easier than before and thereby produce new understanding and knowledge. At the same time, the large amount of information may lead to that members may spend too much time to sort, read and manage information.

Third, but not least, the service-centered view of service marketing and the focus on cultivating relationships, value propositions and learning from feedback have made communication a core asset for contemporary organizations.

Modern organizations are investing a lot of energy and financial resources to strengthen their brands. This is partly for competitive reasons: it is more difficult to copy a brand than a product or service. The focus on corporate brands has been linked to the increasing number of organizations available in the rapidly growing and increasingly important service sector which offers various types of services that we

encounter every day, such as health and fitness, restaurants, hotels, consulting, pre- and elementary schools, public service, etc. Because services are intangible, the customer's decision-making processes largely build on the intangible values that are offered or communicated, but also on notions of organization's legitimacy in relation to social, ethical, environmental and political issues. The perception of an organization, sometimes described as reputation (Fombrun and van Riel, 2004), are in many ways dependent on images that are shaped and communicated through traditional or new media. Strategic communication has, compared to service marketing or management, a stronger focus on organizational representations and legitimacy processes in relation to stakeholders and publics that shape and enforce collective perceptions.

### **Communication foundations**

Communication is something that is often taken for granted and not reflected on. In communication theory, two fundamentally different perspectives are highlighted (Carey, 1988). The dichotomy between the transmission and the ritual models of communication may be used as a thinking tool that helps us to reflect on communication in different contexts, but one should be aware that the dichotomy is a normative theoretical construct and not necessarily incompatible in practice.

Viewing communication as a process of transmission has its origin in the evolution of modern society. Carey (1988) describes how the oral communication tradition was replaced by the art of writing and mass communication. The oral communication forms were focused on now and here, while communications technology in the modern society made it possible to store and move information in time and space. The oral communication tradition has its origin in ancient Greece. In this culture, it was important that all people defined as citizens could make their voices heard in the courts and popular assemblies, where decisions were taken. In a modern nation or large organization, it is obviously impossible to maintain this ideal. It was therefore a more efficient way to communicate across time and space, construct management systems and to take the help of various modes of transport. Communication then came to mean both the transport of people and goods and the transport of information. New identities, e.g. national cultures, evolved.

According to Carey, the transmission perspective has dominated societies since the 1920s. The core of this approach to communication is spatial movement (across geographic areas) of signals and communication to achieve control. This approach to communication is coupled with verbs such as transfer, transmit, forward and provide. Carey argues that our conception of communication is deeply rooted in our thinking and seen many times as a process in which the message is transmitted and distributed through space for control of distance and people. Communication is perceived as a process where a sender transmits a message via a channel to a receiver. The process is seen as successful when the recipient has received the message, not taking into account interpretative factors or sensemaking aspects. Human intellect is seen as a container for ideas and thoughts. Communication based on transmission is viewed as a technical process where an idea is passed from one person to many persons through objective language. The transmitter encodes a message into linguistic form and sends it via a medium to the receiver as required by encoding the message and places it in the right place in the brain (which is seen as a knowledge bank). The words are believed to contain exact information. Based on this view, communication is something fairly

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simple. It is basically about finding the right words and to express them as accurately as possible and to select an effective medium. Consequently, organizations' communications problems may be equated with technological problems; e.g., if employees do not understand, management applies one of two principles. One principle (amplifying) involves sending more and slightly modified and more "accurate" information. The second principle (repetition) means that the transmitter repeats and resends the same information to the receiver until the receiver can repeat the message.

A completely different approach to communication is the ritual model. Carey (1988) writes that the typical case of ritual communication is a sacred ceremony when people create a community. This view on communication is based in ancient history, based on the etymological origin of the word: "commonness", "communion", "community", associated with the words "participation" and "union". The goal of the ritual view of communication is to keep together a community (e.g. group, culture, department, organization and society) over time.

The ritual model is equivalent to a sensemaking approach to communication. Humans are constantly trying to understand through interactions with each other. Communication is fundamental for humans. We draw inspiration from and are happy to share our experiences, thoughts and ideas. Meaning is, in other words, a social and interpretative process that takes place with others. Previous experiences, contexts and situations are defining how humans interpret information, and it is also through communication that people create meaning and opinions, retrospectively (Weick, 1995).

The ritual ontological view is diametrically different from the view that is fundamental for the transmission view of communication. From a ritual and sensemaking perspective, language is a filter that makes it impossible to mirror reality. With the help of language, we can set different labels or metaphors of what is around and what has happened to us. The language has not come by itself, but was created and developed over time. Thus, language is a social product that we learn from the very first passage of socialization processes. With different cultural backgrounds, interests, training and experience, we focus on different things and therefore will see and understand different things. The ritual view on communication has strong links to social constructionism and contemporary concepts such as coproduction or participatory culture.

As mentioned initially, the dichotomy is normative and is a theoretical construct. In organizational practice, the ritual model may not always be ideal due to limited resources, the art of information and different levels of engagement in a certain organizational issue. As an example, one may think of a crisis situation where operative information needs to be delivered very fast to a large number of people; another example is when one needs to communicate simple or instructional information (e.g. instructions on how to apply for holidays).

#### **Four arguments for the relevance of strategic communication**

As shown in this article, strategic communication is a growing field of research and practice, focusing legitimacy and communication inside organizations and between organizations and the society. The holistic approach challenges traditional notions of communication as transmission of information, publicity and as a production and



distribution function for organizations. Strategic communication permeates organizational life and involves not only communication practitioners but all managers and coworkers in different aspects. The service-dominant logic has a strong communicative dimension, according to my interpretation of this concept. To be more concise, the importance of strategic communication for organizational development may be based on four interrelated arguments, which I describe below. As shown, there is lack of empirical evidence regarding some of the goals. This is partly due to the fact that it is difficult to measure causal communication effects on organizational legitimacy, and partly due to the fact that research in strategic communication in some aspects is undeveloped because the field is new.

First, strategic communication is used by organizations because communication is considered to contribute to the organization's effectiveness and trust and legitimacy is supposed to be important for efficiency. This goal has a strong support also among communication practitioners (Hamrefors, 2010, p. 150). Research in the field of communication and effectiveness is done in several areas and is not possible to review here. But the conclusion from a survey in a multinational corporation focusing on quality and quantity of information for trust among employees may illustrate the complexity in measuring such effects:

The relationship between communication and trust is context related and interconnected, which makes it difficult to tease apart. We found that in the relationships with coworkers and supervisors, it is quality, not quantity, of information that best predicts trust. In contrast, in the relationship with top management it is the quantity, rather than quality of information, that is significant. In all cases, trust was very closely tied to perceptions of organizational openness, which, in turn, predicted employee involvement (Thomas Gail, 2009, p. 306).

Second, strategic communication is related to the importance of maintenance, change or strengthening organization's images among stakeholders. The concept of image is a contested terrain, with an unclear ontological status (Alvesson, 1990; Christensen and Askegaard, 1999). Image is in this context defined as collective perceptions of organizations that are made by external stakeholders in relation to mediations of the organization (through representations more than experienced contacts), especially related to "controlled" marketing communications as well as "un-controlled" journalistic and third-party representations (e.g. in social media). There is an obvious link between marketing and strategic communication regarding image. But the difference is that from a strategic communications approach, the focus is not on products or services and direct relations to customers, but corporate or organizational brands (as holistic concepts) and indirect relations through stakeholders such as the mass media, political institutions or local communities. The main interest on an operative level concerns the production and distribution of media-tailored information (press releases, press conferences, public opinion surveys, organization of events, etc.). A general assumption is that media reporting has great significance for modern organizations, especially when connected with crises and scandals. There is an arsenal of measurement methods to use and a long tradition of media research. One relevant, even if fragmented, theory of image construction related to mediated communication is framing. Empirical research about framing effects has so far mainly been conducted in the field of political

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communication. News media use different frames when reporting events, e.g. responsibility frame, morality frame or human interest frame:

Frames, then, define problems – determine what a causal agent is doing with what costs and benefits, usually measured in terms of common cultural values; diagnose causes – identify the forces creating the problem; make moral judgments – evaluate causal agents and their effects; and suggest remedies – offer and justify treatments for the problems and predict their likely effects (Entman, 1993, p. 52).

Strategic communication is, in relation to image, a framing expert system.

Third, strategic communications is motivated by organizations as a tool for enforcing, enhancing or changing the organization's identity among employees and the organizational culture. There is a clear link to organizational effectiveness, but here, the focus is mainly on values, norms and cultural aspects. Good communication is assumed to lead to positive community around core values, which in turn supports the organization's vision and strategy. The tools that are used to support organizational effectiveness and image are interrelated to this goal. But in effect terms, it is difficult to show causal relations between communication efforts and organizational identity. This is so due to the same complexity that is valid for the role of communication for organizational efficiency. Critical scholars also point out that the whole idea that culture is something that may be altered by management techniques is naïve (Alvesson, 2011). Still, it is not naïve to assume that strategic communication has an important role to play for cultures of organizations, if one develops systems and practices based on a ritual communication approach (Carey, 1988).

Finally, strategic communications are justified based on the argument that it may favor openness and transparency between members of the organization and between the organization, stakeholders and the public sphere. The argument is based on a non-authoritarian and deliberative view of organizations and society that assumes that secrecy, hierarchy and withholding of information is negative for organizational development. This may not be obvious from an organizational effectiveness perspective. One may also argue that too much openness leads to negative consequences (e.g. shortsightedness, uncertainty or inefficiency) or that an increased information flow about everything that happens in an organization is of minor interest for most customers or stakeholders (Christensen, 2002).

In this article, strategic communication and its relevance for organizational development has been reflected on and the fundamental communication theory has been described. One aim has been to show that contemporary organizational challenges in several aspects also are communicative challenges. Four arguments why strategic communication is valuable for organizational development have been discussed, raising questions for further empirical research.

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