Introducing Communication Theory: Analysis and Application

Fourth Edition

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Chapter 17
Organizational Information Theory

Chapter Overview

- OIT at a Glance

- Introduction

- The Only Constant is Change

- Assumptions of OIT

- Key Concepts

- The Principles of Equivocality

- Reducing Equivocality

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OIT at a Glance

- Main activity of organizations is making sense of equivocal information

- Organizations will evolve as they try to make sense out of themselves and their environment

- OIT describes how organizations collect, manage, and use information to accomplish its goals

Introduction

- Organizations collect, manage, and use information

- Focus is on the process to manage information

- As the channels of communication increase, so do the number of messages exchanged

The Only Constant Is Change

- Theoretical perspectives that influenced OIT

    - Bertalanffy's **General Systems Theory**

    - Campbell's extension of Darwin's **Theory of Sociocultural Evolution**

The Only Constant is Change

General Systems Theory

- Describes the influence of information that is received from an organization's external environments

- Focus is on the organization as a system

- Interrelationships exist among units in an organization

- Application of feedback

The Only Constant is Change

Theory of Sociocultural Evolution

- An expansion on Darwin's Theory of Evolution (1948)

- Organizations employ selectivity

- Organizations and their members adapt and adjust to various information pressures

Assumptions of OIT

- Human organizations exist in an information environment
  - Organizations depend on information to function and accomplish goals
  - Information environments include many channels

Assumptions of OIT

- The information an organization receives differs in terms of its equivocality

  - Organizations need a process to make sense out of information

  - Messages are frequently ambiguous or unclear

  - Equivocality is not necessarily problematic, as it may motivate people to organize

Assumptions of OIT

- Human organizations engage in information processing to reduce the equivocality of information
  - Members of organizations must work together to reduce ambiguity of information
  - An ongoing cycle of feedback assists in this process

Key Concepts

- **Information environment** is the availability of all stimuli in an organization.

- Tasks in managing multiple sources of information
  - Interpreting
  - Coordinating

Key Concepts

- **Rules** are the guidelines established by an organization for analyzing the equivocality of messages and for guiding responses to information

- Types of rules
  - Duration
  - Personnel
  - Success
  - Effort

Key Concepts

- **Cycles** are the series of communication behaviors that serve to reduce equivocality.
- Stages of a cycle
  - Act
  - Respond
  - Adjust
- Double interact loop

The Principles of Equivocality

- Analyze the relationship among the equivocality of information, rules for removing equivocality, and the cycles of communication
- If only a few rules to reduce equivocality exist, more cycles will be needed
- The more cycles, the lower the equivocality

Reducing Equivocality

- Stages to reduce equivocality
    - Enactment: How information will be received and interpreted
    - Selection: Decisions about the rules and cycles that will be used to reduce equivocality
    - Retention: Stage at which organization stores in memory those rules/strategies that were effective for future reference

Integration

- Communication tradition
  - Cybernetic
- Communication context
  - Organizational
- Approach to knowing
  - Positivistic/empirical

Evaluating OIT

- Logical consistency
  - People are not always guided by rules in an organization
  - Organizations are not static units in society
- Utility
  - Explains the complexities of information processing
- Heurism
  - Prompted considerable scholarly discussion