Organizational Information Theory

Managing large amounts of information is one of the leading challenges for organizations. As new means of communication increase, the amount of messages we send and receive, and the speed of those messages increase. "Karl Weick developed an approach to describe the process by which organizations collect, manage, and use the information that they recieve" (West and Turner, p. 243). In developing his approach, Weick focuses on the process rather than the structure. Here, his focus was on the exchange of information that takes place within organizations and how individuals within the organization take steps to understand the material. "The focus of Organizational Information Theory is on the communication of information that is vital in determining the success of an organization" (West and Turner, p. 244).

Karl Weick -

Karl E. Weick is the Rensis Likert Collegiate Professor of Organizational Behavior and Psychology Professor of Organizational Behavior and Human Resource Management Professor of Psychology at the University of Michigan. His PhD is from Ohio State University in Social and
Organizational Psychology. Dr. Weick's Book *The Social Psychology of Organizing*, first published in 1969 and revised in 1979, was declared one of the nine best business books ever written by *Inc Magazine* in December of 1996. The organizing formulation has more recently been expanded into a book titled *Sensemaking in Organizations*. Dr. Weick's research interests include collective sensemaking under pressure, medical errors, hand-offs in extreme events, high reliability performance, improvisation, and continuous change. Dr. Weicks graduate level teaching focuses on the social psychology of organizing, micro foundations of organization studies, the craft of scholarship, and his executive education teaching focuses on the management of uncertainty through sensemaking and improvisation.

**Example Application -**

Do you remember the Y2K scare? Companies and people world-wide who depended on computers were in a state of panic when they learned that their computers might not be compatible in the new millenium. NowBank was one of these companies. An associate named Dominique Martin was to head up operations for a Y2K conversion. However, the company had branches in Denver, Dallas, and also Phoenix. By way of videoconferencing, all teams would meet to discuss each branch's responsibilities. Upon meeting, many different areas of management began to arise. Areas such as providing updates, maintaining communication between all branches, and keeping their own division running made the operation stressful. As concerns began to escalate, Dominique realized that effective communication would be key to the success of the project. To manage all of the concerns, problems, and communication issues the team implemented aspects of Organizational Information Theory. With communication as the highest priority, NowBank was successful in their conversion. The company continues to run smooth.

**Influences on O.I.T. -**

In Weick's first book *The Social Psychology of Organizing*, he presents "his theoretical approach explaining how organizations make sense of and use information" (1969). Weick states, "Organizations and their environments change so rapidly that it is unrealistic to show what they are like now, because that's not the way they are going to be later" (1969, p.1). However, Weick realized that complete knowledge could not come from one source. There must be other influences on communication and also relationships among individuals. Two other theories were explored.
General System Theory

Weick applied Ludwig von Bertalanffy's (pictured here) General System Theory in developing his approach to examine how organizations manage their information. In order to make necessary adjustments to reach a common goal, an organization must depend on combined information. Bertalanffy notes, "While in the past, science tried to explain observable phenomena by reducing them to an interplay of elementary units investigatable independantly of each other, conceptions appear in contemporary science that are concerned with what is somewhat vaguely termed "wholeness," i.e., problems of organizations. General System Theory, therefore, is the general science of "wholeness" (Bertalanffy, pp. 36 - 37).

Back to top

Darwin's Theory of Evolution

Weick also used another theory to describe the "process by which organizations collect and make sense out of information" (West and Turner, p. 245). This process is Charles Darwin's (pictured here) Theory of Sociocultural Evolution. Originally, the theory of evolution described the "adaptation process that organisms undergo to thrive in a challenging ecological environment" (p. 246). This was when the term was coined, "survival of the fittest." The theory later describes the "changes that people make in their social behaviors and expectations in order to adapt in their social surroundings" (p. 246). "Weick adapts the theory of sociocultural evolution to explain the process that organizations undergo in adjusting to various information pressures" (p.246)."
General Assumptions -

One way to explain the way in which organizations make sense out of information that may be ambiguous or confusing is Organizational Information Theory. This theory focuses "on the process of organizing members of an organization to manage information rather than on the structure of the organization itself" (West and Turner, p. 246). There are assumptions beneath Weick's Organizational Information Theory:

- Human Organizations engage in information processing to reduce equivocality of information
- The information an organization receives differs in terms of equivocality
- Human organizations exist in an information environment

General Concepts -

Organizational Information Theory does include a significant number of concepts that are crucial to fully understand this theory. They are: information environment, information equivocality, and cycles of communication. Here is a brief explanation of each one:

Information Environment -
"Information environment is a core concept in understanding how organizations are formed as well as how they process information. Everyday, we are faced with thousands of stimuli that we could potentially process and interpret. The availability of all stimuli is considered to be the information environment." (West and Turner, p. 248).

Information Equivocality -
"Organizations receive information from multiple sources; They must decode the information and determine whether it is comprehensible, which person or department is most qualified to deal with the information, and whether multiple departments require this information to accomplish their tasks. Without clarity in these areas, there is information equivocality" (p. 248).

Cycles of Communication -
There are three steps to the cycle of communication. The three steps consist of act, response, and adjustment. The act "refers to the communication behaviors used to indicate one's ambiguity as a result of information that is received. The reaction to the act indicating equivocality of information defines the concept of response. A response of clarifying information is provided as a result of the act. As a result of the response, the organization formulates a response in return as a result of any adjustment that has been made to the information that was originally received. An adjustment is made to indicate that the information is now understood" (p. 252).

**Critique -**

In thoroughly studying this theory, I find that Organizational Information Theory plays a very prevalent role in organizational communication. We have come to such a day where communication is critical to our personal lives, our social lives, and also our professional lives. I believe this theory has no limitations within organizational communication. It addresses aspects of the individual and also the group within the organization. Organizational Information Theory is a valuable theory to study and also practice.

**Bibliography -**


Weick, K.
http://webuser.bus.umich.edu/departments/OBHRM/faculty/weick/bio.html


Back to top