Supervisor-Subordinate Communication: Hierarchical Mum Effect Meets Organizational Learning

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Abstract

The authors provide nine propositions regarding the function and effects of supervisor-subordinate communication to encourage business communication researchers to go beyond a unidimensional view of this workplace relationship. Taken together, these propositions represent an argument that connects and clarifies the associations between micro-level supervisor-subordinate communication behaviors and macro-level organizational learning. We explain how command structures produce relational contexts that create consequences for communication behaviors between subordinates and their supervisors. Specifically, we explain how subordinates' reluctance to disagree with supervisors results in silence or equivocation—what the authors label the hierarchical mum effect. In turn, we describe how this organizational suppression of dissent produces a barrier to organizational learning and adaptation.

Few topics are more fundamental to the domain of business communication research than supervisor-subordinate[1] communication. Such working relationships are unique to—perhaps defining of—the working world. These explicitly power-laden

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relationships create contexts that shape interactions, expectations, and outcomes—both for good and for ill. Throughout the pages of the *Journal of Business Communication*, supervisor-subordinate communication is typically presented in a unidimensional fashion in that researchers' primary aim seems to be to improve supervisors' messaging to their subordinates (e.g., Campbell, White, & Durrant, 2007; Sharbrough, Simmons, & Cantrill, 2006).

Certainly, improving supervisors' messaging to their subordinates is an important objective; however, the supervisor-subordinate relationship is a microcosm of the organizational universe and our description of this relationship should parallel the complexity demanded by such an insight. When two individuals coordinate their actions within a predefined hierarchy—such as when supervisors communicate with subordinates—their interactions are an observable manifestation of organization-in-action (Weick, 2001). Ashcraft, Kuhn, and Cooren (2009) explained that when a manager and employee interact, "the conversation does not so much represent each party's internal states, but rather *jointly produces* reality by co-creating meanings that establish 'what is' and coordinate and control activity accordingly. Simply put, outcomes are determined in communication" (p. 5). Furthermore, and consistent with these observations, research in organizational communication over the past few decades emphasized regularly the importance of *all* organizational members' talk in the constitution of organization (Keyton, 2005), and we believe business communication scholarship should grapple with the meaning of this insight (Fairhurst & Putnam, 2004).

Business communication researchers tend to study the supervisor-subordinate relationship in a unidimensional fashion in that we focus almost exclusively on downward communication. Similarly, management or organizational communication studies of supervisor-subordinate relationships tend to focus exclusively at the level of the dyad and fail to discuss how communication behaviors unique to the supervisor-subordinate relationship shape or are shaped by system-level organizing. Supervisor-subordinate communication research has a long history in the management and communication literatures (Jablin, 1979; Pelz, 1952). To date, researchers remain primarily concerned with supervisors' communication and compliance-gaining tactics (Infante, Anderson, Martin, Herington, & Kim, 1993) or power bases (Rahim, Antonioni, & Psenicka, 2001), and their effect on subordinate performance (Uhl-Bien & Maslyn, 2003), satisfaction (Wesolowski & Mossholder, 1997), commitment (Green, Anderson, & Shivers, 1996), involvement (Thomas, Zolin, & Hartman, 2009), information experiences (Sias, 2005), or intention to leave (Koslowsky, Schwarzwald, & Ashuri, 2001). Likewise, supervisor-subordinate experts have also conducted numerous studies of subordinates' upward maintenance tactics (Higgins, Judge, & Ferris, 2003) and their effect on job evaluation (Wayne & Liden, 1995), promotion, or leader-member relational quality (Waldron, Hunt, & Dsilva, 1993).

The supervisor-subordinate relationship is a microcosm of the organizational universe and our description of this relationship should parallel the complexity demanded by such an insight.

In the following pages, we provide nine propositions, which will guide business communication researchers in our efforts to understand more completely the function and effects of communication in the workplace from both micro and macro levels of analysis. To provide a systematic series of arguments that connect supervisor-subordinate communication to system-level organizing, we (a) explain the importance of command structures for a communicative study of this essential workplace relationship, (b) describe how these command structures have implications for facework between subordinates and their supervisors, and (c) show how facework, within command structures, relates to failures in organizational learning.

Command Structure as Relational Context

Command structures constitute particular relational contexts that enable and constrain interaction between supervisors and their subordinates, and vice versa. Command structures (e.g., organizational charts) are, in themselves, communicative *and* a product of communication. These structures formalize the supervisor-subordinate relationship. This formalization functions to make explicit expectations about the form and content of interaction between parties. In the introduction to their important edited volume on talk in institutional settings, Paul Drew and John Heritage (1992) explained,

> First, utterances and actions are *context shaped*. Their contributions to an ongoing sequence of actions cannot be adequately understood except by reference to the context in which they participate . . . This contextual aspect of utterances is significant both because speakers routinely draw upon it as a resource in designing their utterance and also because, correspondingly, hearers must also draw upon the local context of utterances in order to make adequate sense of what is said. (p. 18)

While Drew and Heritage's book was primarily concerned with conversation analysis and those features of talk endogenous to institutional settings, these authors still articulate elegantly the importance of context in the shaping of institutional interactions. In the workplace, command structures serve as potent contextual resources in the meaning-making process of supervisor-subordinate communication. We argue that supervisors and subordinates draw on these potent contextual resources in order to make sense of their interactions. For example, Fairhurst and Chandler (1989) analyzed interactions between supervisors and subordinates. In one such instance, they explain how a supervisor "appear[s] to give [a subordinate] . . . the option not to take . . . [his] suggestion . . . [However, the subordinate's] responses reflect 'compliance' with the suggestion . . . more than 'consideration' [of it]" (p. 227). The participating subordinate interpreted his supervisor's suggestion as a directive because of the command structure that contextualized the message (i.e., the "suggestion").

We believe that command structures are important social influence tactics borne out of the need to coordinate actions with others. After all, task accomplishment is the

central exigency out of which individuals organize to coordinate their actions (Bisel, 2009). However, ensuring actions are coordinated so that tasks are accomplished is no small feat. Command structures and related organizational policies are communicative attempts to concretize and routinize instructions, directions, commands, and orders so that actions may be coordinated and superordinate goals may be achieved, and achieved efficiently. We argue that this communicative process sets into motion numerous important implications for supervisor-subordinate communication as well as what we may expect of its content and outcomes.

Employment Agreement, Psychological Contracts, and Facework

Functionally, command structures curtail certain disagreements (Taylor, Cooren, Giroux, & Robichaud, 1996). These structures provide a make-ready rebuttal to the argument, "You can't tell me what to do!" By joining an organization, an individual forfeits a minor degree of autonomy (Stohl & Cheney, 2001). Employees submit the freedom to use their time and efforts as they wish in order to receive payment in exchange. In addition to monetary payment, subordinates may also garner status, self-esteem, and respect from the employment agreement. Such agreements may be written, verbally communicated, or based in culture or custom. When perceived by organizational members as commitments, they come to constitute obligations between persons and their organizations (Rousseau, 1995; Shore & Barksdale, 1998). These perceived obligations represent *psychological contracts*, which have the benefit of creating "productive relationships" and "mutual predictability" between workers and organizations (Rousseau, 1995, pp. 5, 11). Employment agreements codify a partial relinquishment of personal autonomy for payment and come to produce a kind of social structure by defining relationships "as if they were commodities" (Powell, 2003, p. 316). Employment agreements and their related psychological contracts represent discursive frameworks, which are regularly drawn upon by organizational members to help them make sense of work directives: Subordinates expect directives from bosses because subordinates entered into the agreement to work for pay. However, in contrast to this common workplace arrangement, sociologists observed that individuals in society expend a great deal of effort attempting to *maintain* their own autonomy as well as help others maintain autonomy (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Goffman, 1967).

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Scholars theorized about these efforts under the label, face. Face refers to the public self-image each of us claim for ourselves. Goffman (1967) and Brown and Levinson (1987) explained that the desire to have one's own face esteemed and

remain free from imposition is a universal attribute of human beings. More to the point, these theorists also observed that it is a universal attribute of societies to reinforce an expectation to *aid others* in claiming a public self-image that is both esteemed and autonomous. But do command structures contradict this most basic building block of social order? Consider this thought experiment: If a person exits a building when another is attempting to enter, the pair may apologize collectively, produce an awkward shuffle-like dance, smile, nod, bow slightly, or any combination thereof. As members of a language community and society, the individual and the other know that they ought to act as though each has a right to remain free from imposition and remain autonomous.

This example contains a face-threatening action as well as facework. A face-threatening action is any deed that could be interpreted as flouting the societal universal of aiding others in claiming a public self-image that is esteemed and autonomous. Facework, on the other hand, is any attempt to counter, mend, or mitigate the affect of face-threatening actions (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Morand, 2000). Returning to our example, trying to occupy the same physical space as another flouts the other individual's desire to remain unimpeded, and, is a face-threatening action, which produces facework—the awkward moments of redressive adjustments.

Assuming we behave as though a possible bump at the building door is enough to warrant ceremonial humbling, how much more countering must be required when a supervisor, in an effort to coordinate actions, requests work from a subordinate? Or worse yet, when a supervisor demands a subordinate's efforts? Getting another person to comply with a directive is certainly a face-threatening action in that it flouts the other's desire to remain autonomous (Carson & Cupach, 2000; Lim & Bowers, 1991). Thus, it stands to reason that face and facework are central dynamics present in supervisor-subordinate communication, especially given that much supervisor-subordinate talk entails the giving and receiving of instructions, commands, and directives (Bisel, 2009; Courtright, Fairhurst, & Rogers, 1989; Mayfield, Mayfield, & Kopf, 1998).

The command structure context tends to be reinforced at the outset of working relationships by employment agreements with the organization and, by extension, with the authorized organizational representative assigned to oversee and evaluate an employee's work in fulfillment of that agreement (i.e., a supervisor, Waldron et al., 1993). Some scholars relate this common influence tactic to *transactional* leadership in that it sets up a system of quid pro quo trade-offs between leaders and followers in the workplace (Yukl, 2006). In fact, such a reward-contingent foundation of leader-member relationships in the workplace may even make value-based and inspirational leadership styles like transformational leadership possible (Bass, 1999; Judge & Picollo, 2004). We argue that the function of employment agreements (and their related psychological contracts) fits nicely into our communicative description of supervisor-subordinate relationships in that these agreements may be thought of as an initial discursive attempt at context setting, which mitigates the face-threatening actions subordinates will no doubt incur when working for an employer. Unlike other

relational contexts where directives are negative face threats (e.g., among acquaintances; Brown & Levinson, 1987), receiving a directive from a supervisor[2] is less face threatening in a relationship that is contextualized (at least partially) by the employment agreement. Thus, we propose:

> *Proposition 1:* Workers, who have an employment agreement (i.e., perceive a psychological contract) with an organization, perceive directives from an authorized organizational representative (e.g., a supervisor) to be less face threatening than individuals who do not have an agreement of employment[3] with the directive giver's organization.

By way of a qualifier, if an employee is promised a democratic organizational culture, where employees' autonomy and self-direction are privileged and reinforced, a directive from a supervisor in this context may be as face threatening as receiving a directive from an individual outside the workplace context. In this scenario, the employee perceives a psychological contract that includes a specific kind of relationship with supervisors; we doubt, however, that such psychological contracts are commonplace.

We argue that command structures create influential contexts that shape face concerns both for subordinates as well as supervisors. Here, it is important to consider clearly the implication of perspective taking in our theorizing, especially given that facework is both a self- and other-oriented communication behavior (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Supervisors must maintain their credibility in front of subordinates in order to produce an image of authority and avoid appearing weak (Gronn, 1983). However, supervisors do not have to be especially concerned about affronting the public self-image of their subordinates (Campbell et al., 2007; Lim & Bowers, 1991) precisely because of the hierarchical relationship described here. Thus, we propose:

> *Proposition 2:* Supervisors are motivated by the context of the command structure to protect their own public self-image when communicating with subordinates.
> *Proposition 3:* Supervisors are not motivated by the context of the command structure to protect their subordinates' public self-images when communicating with subordinates.

From subordinates' perspectives, they must maintain their credibility in front of their supervisors in order to survive—and thrive—in the workplace (Yukl, 2006). To look foolish or untrustworthy in front of a supervisor is to run the risk of inciting negative evaluations, which could have negative effects on job security and advancement.

> *Proposition 4:* Subordinates are motivated by the context of the command structure to protect their own public self-image when communicating with supervisors.

Similarly, subordinates are likely to help their supervisors maintain their public self-images if for no other reason than to reduce the likelihood of being associated with negative feelings and harming their relationship with their boss (Waldron, 1991).

> *Proposition 5:* Subordinates are motivated by the context of the command structure to protect their supervisors' public self-images when communicating with supervisors.

But do subordinates who protect their bosses' public images really do better in preserving their employment? The answer seems to be yes. While it is difficult to parse the unique effect of upward impression management influence tactics (Bolino, 1999) from job performance, research suggests that subordinates who show deference to and agree with their supervisors (i.e., ingratiate) receive more favorable job performance ratings from supervisors and, in turn, tend to receive more pay and promotional opportunities than subordinates who do not (Kacmar, Witt, Zivnuska, & Gully, 2003; Wayne & Kacmar, 1991; Wayne & Liden, 1995; Yukl, 2006; Zorn & Violanti, 1996).

Communication (In)Competence in Hierarchical Relationships

Given the influence of the context of hierarchical relationships on face and facework, we attempt to move across the boundary between interpersonal relating to system organizing in order to offer macro-level theorizing based on micro-level observations. We begin this movement by discussing communication competence and how hierarchical relationships may alter upward information sharing, which may, in turn, hold implications for systemic organizational ignorance. Communication competence is a major practical goal of much workplace communication skills training (McGehee & Webb, 2008). This communication skill refers to a speaker's ability to strike a balance between effectiveness (i.e., goal achievement) and appropriateness (i.e., relational management) in a given situation (Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984). Conversely, communication *in*competence arises when communicators are (a) overly effective, (b) overly appropriate, or (c) neither effective nor appropriate, within the context of a given situation.

Many face-threatening predicaments arise in the workplace, such as supervisors' need to give directives to subordinates (Mayfield et al., 1998; Salter, 1995) or subordinates' need to refuse to comply with directives that are incorrect, unbeneficial, or unethical (Kassing, 2006). We believe that perfectly balancing effectiveness and appropriateness in such predicaments requires communicative acumen (Carson & Cupach, 2000). Thus, we argue that achieving a balance in these workplace situations is difficult and likely infrequent (for a review of research on communication *in*competence in the interpersonal literature, see Spitzberg, 1994). This line of reasoning begs the question: If communication incompetence is not uncommon in these workplace relationships, is incompetent supervisor-subordinate communication likely to be too effective or too appropriate? Much organizational science scholarship points to the

consistent tendency of individuals and groups to overemphasize relationship manage-
ment and consensus at the expense of task accomplishment and effective decision
making (Brown & Starkey, 2000; Haslam, 2001; Wright, Heijden, Bradfield, Burt, &
Cairns, 2004). Thus, it stands to reason that when subordinate-supervisor communica-
tion is incompetent, concerns for relationship management often tend to trump
concerns for task effectiveness.

In order to understand how system-level organizing shapes and is shaped by
supervisor-subordinate relationships, it is important to understand common communi-
cation patterns. In the following paragraphs, we describe the hierarchical mum effect
as well as boatrocking communication as a means of explaining how the context of
supervisor-subordinate relationships encourages an overemphasis on relationships at
the expense of task accomplishments.

Hierarchical Mum Effect

Many scholars observed that persons tend to prioritize maintaining relationships over
achieving goals and expressing hurtful truths (e.g., Tata, 2002; Yariv, 2006). In fact,
the mum effect, which refers to individuals' reluctance to provide negative feedback
to one another for fear of being associated with the message, is a social dynamic
observed and documented by interpersonal relationship scholars (Rosen & Tesser,
1972; Tesser & Rosen, 1972). We argue, however, that the mum effect may take on
special features when applied to these workplace relationships. Within the supervisor-
subordinate relationship, command structures are potent discursive contexts that
change how messages are interpreted. It may be that negative feedback (e.g., disagree-
ment) from one's boss is not only less face threatening but expected. We doubt, how-
ever, that supervisors tend to hold this same expectation about negative feedback from
their subordinates. Thus, we propose:

> *Proposition 6:* Supervisors' public images are more threatened by negative feed-
> back from their subordinates than subordinates' public images are threatened
> by negative feedback from their supervisors.

Regardless of whether supervisors tend to be communicatively incompetent by
overemphasizing effectiveness or appropriateness, subordinates are almost certainly
motivated to overemphasize relational dimensions (i.e., appropriateness and tactful-
ness) when communicating with their supervisors. The mum effect theory predicts
that individuals in interpersonal relationships will be reluctant to provide negative
feedback to one another for fear of being associated with the message and harming
the relationship (Tesser & Rosen, 1972). Another force motivates subordinates' reluc-
tance to communicate negative feedback to supervisors: In these situations, subordi-
nates may perceive that their job security is at stake. We label the hierarchical
constraint on upward information flow created by command structures the *hierarchi-
cal* mum effect.

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Observing the Hierarchical Mum Effect

A hierarchical mum effect may manifest itself in terms of the facework strategies of silence (i.e., not committing a face-threatening action) or equivocation (i.e., softening or mitigating a face-threatening action through ambiguity or indirectness). Inspired by the works of Kurt Lewin, Bavelas, Black, Chovil, and Mullet (1990) outlined a situational theory of equivocal communication. They describe communication features of naturally occurring discourse by accounting for the ways in which communicators employ ambiguity to highlight certain truths over others in order to protect and preserve relationships (Chovil, 1994). The theorists explained that individuals tend to employ equivocation when *telling the truth* could be "against one's own self-interest" (Bavelas et al., p. 59). Their collection of interpersonal communication experiments demonstrated consistently that the "communicative situation is the crucial variable" that determines whether communicators will engage in equivocal messaging and therefore highlight certain truths at the expense of others (p. 60). Equivocation is likely as common in the supervisor-subordinate relationship, especially when it is subordinates who need to communicate potentially face-threatening truths to their supervisors (Riley, 1993). In contrast to offending a friend or family member, one's financial well-being is at stake when offending a supervisor. In fact, Milliken, Morrison, and Hewlin (2003) reported that of the 40 employees they interviewed, 34 said that "on at least one occasion, they had felt unable to raise an issue or concern to their bosses even though they felt the issue was important" (p. 1459).

Do subordinates keep mum, as it were, out of fear of damaging their images and relationships? Again the answer seems to be yes. Milliken et al. (2003) reported that the first and second most common reasons employees gave for not speaking up about their concerns to their supervisors were (a) "fear of being labeled or viewed negatively" and (b) fear that "it could damage their relationship" (p. 1463). Again, these findings suggest the likelihood of a hierarchical mum effect in some organizations in that it seems subordinates tend to believe it is in their self-interest to avoid overt disagreement with their supervisors (see also, Bisel, Kelley, Ploeger, & Messersmith, 2011; Ploeger, Kelley, & Bisel, 2011). Furthermore, subordinates likely accomplish avoidance through facework strategies like silence and equivocation.

Proposition 7: Subordinates tend to use silence or equivocation when they perceive a disagreement with their supervisors to be face threatning to their supervisor.

Alternatives to Keeping Mum: Boatrocking and Dissent

Scholarship on whistleblowing is commonplace in organization science (for a review, see Miceli & Near, 2005). Whistleblowing is an act of organizational loyalty in which

a subordinate reports a concern about business practices to external agencies (G. King, 1999; Near & Miceli, 1985; Tsahuridu & Vandekerckhove, 2008). Cases of whistle-blowing have been publicized (e.g., Sherron Watkins of Enron) and make for interesting stories of corporate wrongdoing (see also, Beamish, 2000). A related and more specific form of organizational dissent occurs when subordinates disagree with their supervisors' behaviors or directives, whether on factual, functional, or ethical grounds, and attempt to voice their disagreement *within* the organization (Kassing, 2005; Payne, 2007). Such dissent could be as mundane as a disagreement over the facts of a directive or as severe as a disagreement about the ethicality of a business transaction (Kassing, 2006). Famed organizational communication scholar Charles Redding (1985) labeled this sort of internal, upward, organizational dissent, *boatrocking*, as a way of distinguishing the communicative situation from whistleblowing.

We argue that boatrocking is a ripe context for study within supervisor-subordinate communication because it may hold important practical lessons for how organizations learn, or fail to learn, and we explain that connection in the following paragraphs. Additionally, and more theoretically, command structures define potent relational contexts that are made visible when boatrocking occurs precisely because the relational context does little to allow for upward disagreement. In this way, boatrocking may mark the philosophical grounds on which the very ontology of organization itself can be described in that these interactions are the exceptions that prove the rule (Bisel, 2009; Fairhurst & Putnam, 2004; I. W. King, 2003; Mengis & Eppler, 2008).

In the following section, we connect these insights about interactions among supervisors and subordinates to organizational effectiveness. Specifically, we theorize about the implications of these organizational communication dynamics for organizations' ability to learn and adapt.

Organizational Learning: Why Subordinate Dissent Matters

Broadly, organizational learning is a macro-level construct that refers to the ways in which organizational decision makers interpret (or fail to interpret) their environments and adapt (or not) accordingly (Argyris, 2008; Weick & Ashford, 2001). When organizational decision makers fail to recognize and adapt to changes in the marketplace, competition, customer base, and others, the organization loses strategic fitness with its environment (Boal & Schultz, 2007). Failure to recognize and adapt to changes is a failure of organizational learning known as organizational ignorance—literally, a collective's *not knowing* (Harvey, Novicevic, Buckley, & Ferris, 2001). The hierarchical mum effect discussed here represents a communication theory for describing a source of organizational ignorance and its related effect on organizational success. When bottom-up disagreement is suppressed by the communicative context of subordinate-supervisor relationships, ignorance grows, while learning and adaptation falter (Burgelman & Grove, 2004; Child & Heavens, 2001). Rarely have the micro-level

analyses of supervisor-subordinate interaction research been linked explicitly to the macro-level construct of organizational learning (for a notable exception, see Morrison & Milliken, 2000). However, the line of argument presented here bridges this conceptual gap.

Scholars recognized that organizations do not learn, per se. Rather, individuals learn (or fail to learn) and communicate (or fail to communicate) this knowledge with one another. I. W. King (2003) explained the process by stating, "Knowing does not originate inside one's head, rather it is something that people build from communicating with others" (p. 1205). This insight falls under a large domain of thought known as the *becoming orientation* (Fairhurst & Putnam, 2004). From a becoming orientation, scholars take a perspective of language use as preceding organization. In other words, these scholars do *not* ask, "Which organizational structures produce desirable communication behaviors?" Rather, scholars who take a becoming orientation tend to ask, "How do communication behaviors produce what we come to think of as the organization as-it-actually-is?" (Boden, 1994; Fairhurst & Putnam; Tsoukas & Chia, 2002).

In a becoming orientation, *all* organizational members' communication comes to produce what we think of as the organization—an insight that includes subordinates' interactions with their supervisors. Subordinates are sensitive barometers of the changes needed for organizational learning, adaptation, and survival (Morrison & Milliken, 2000). Furthermore, all subordinates, whether frontline workers or vice presidents, have tacit and explicit knowledge about what does and does not accomplish work-related goals and objectives. Additionally, subordinates have moral and ethical judgment (Fletcher & Watson, 2007; Lovell, 2003)—judgment needed now more than ever, in light of many recent organizational scandals.

The Importance of Subordinates' Boatrocking for Organizational Learning

We believe subordinates' ability to scan for internal deficiencies and external threats and then communicate that information to supervisors, who likely have more authority to enact and coordinate functionally adaptive changes, is a lynchpin of organizational sustainability and innovation (Morrison & Milliken, 2000). In fact, management and communication scholars have made similar points by theorizing about the importance of dialogue and conversation among team members in developing organizational cultures of learning. For example, Edgar Schein (1993) explained that "organizational effectiveness is therefore increasingly dependent on valid communication across subculture boundaries . . . Dialogue, then, is at the root of all effective group action" (pp. 28-29). Similarly, Mengis and Eppler (2008) synthesized a diversity of research on organizational learning and organizational discourse to explain how "changes in single face-to-face interactions and in modes of conversing can gradually lead to alterations in organizational discourse and allow new behaviours and beliefs to be established within existing routines and structures" (p. 1293).

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Structural and Functional Distance

We believe the hierarchical mum effect often hinders the relaying of crucial dissent and disagreement from subordinates and, in turn, results in forms of organizational ignorance (Harvey et al., 2001), especially when subordinates perceive large differentials in their rank and status as compared to their supervisors (Schein, 1993). The degree to which subordinates engage in boatrocking communication may be associated with the structural and functional distances that characterize an organization's prescribed hierarchy and enacted culture, respectively. Structural distance refers to perceptions of social propinquity created by command structures (e.g., organizational charts; Avolio, Zhu, Koh, & Bhatia, 2004). Functional distance refers to the "degree of closeness and quality of the functional working relationship between the supervisor and subordinate; in essence, whether the subordinate is a member of the in-group or the out-group of the supervisor" (Napier & Ferris, 1993, p. 337). It stands to reason that subordinates would consider dissent or disagreement with a high-distance supervisor to be more face threatening than disagreement with a low-distance supervisor. In fact, in their formulation of politeness theory, Brown and Levinson (1987) identified social closeness and power distance to be two of three major factors in determining the severity of a face-threatening action. According to their formulation, socially distant others who have a great deal of authority over the self will perceive face-threatening actions as especially severe. Thus, we argue that subordinates are likely to "size up" the potential for face-threatening severity before dissenting with a structurally and functionally distant supervisor and, in turn, keep mum more often.

> *Proposition 8:* The hierarchical mum effect is increased by perceptions of high structural and functional distance in the supervisor-subordinate relationship as compared to supervisor-subordinate relationships characterized by low structural and functional distance.

Anonymity and the Hierarchical Mum Effect

The arguments laid out here connect supervisor-subordinate communication behaviors to system-level learning and ignorance. In summary, we argue that the supervisor-subordinate relationship likely contaminates crucial information sharing from below and, in turn, tends to constrain organizational learning and fitness by producing organizational ignorance—or a collective's *not knowing*—at the structural level. The question then arises: Now what? How can organizational decision makers glean important and needed information from their subordinates, especially if hierarchical

relationships shape subordinates' information sharing to be overly appropriate, tact-ful, and equivocal at the price of directness and truthfulness? In other words, are there communication solutions that could remedy these communication dynamics? According to our line of reasoning, subordinates' reluctance to provide dissent origi-nates in a fear of harming relationships. However, if the source of the face-threatening message was anonymous, then subordinates might not fear being the target of hurt feelings and retribution. The temporary masking of identities may functionally remove the hierarchical relationship context from the messaging process and encour-age important dissent from subordinates.

> *Proposition 9:* Anonymous feedback channels (when used frequently and heed-fully by top-level decision makers) moderate the association between struc-tural and functional distance in supervisor-subordinate relationships and organizational learning outcomes.

We are quick to point out that some supervisors may be skeptical of recommenda-tions or challenges that come from anonymous sources and may attempt to disregard such boatrocking. Thus, we include that anonymous channels would need to be employed by supervisors frequently and heedfully—meaning that supervisors would need to seek upward feedback with the kind of disposition and humility needed for authentic learning to occur (see Brown & Starkey, 2000). Clearly, not all boatrocking messages are created equal: We can easily imagine how some dissent could amount to bickering. The point remains, however, that *some* boatrocking is almost certainly useful at the level of strategic organizational decision making.

The preceding paragraphs and propositions suggest a critical theory perspective on supervisor-subordinate relationships. However, we do not mean to imply that hierar-chical relationships have only negative consequences. As already discussed, command structures are powerful discursive contexts that enable cooperation and may mitigate some face concerns among persons attempting to coordinate their actions to achieve superordinate goals (i.e., organizing). In fact, the supervisor-subordinate relationship strengthens the effectiveness of coordinated action if directives originating from supervisors are well developed, without flaw, ethical, and comprehended by subordinates.

Future Research

In order to test the propositions outlined here, we suggest that researchers begin by employing field experiments and field observations. Field experiments could be use-ful in determining how supervisors and subordinates perceive the relative severity of face-threatening actions for themselves and their counterparts. Likewise, field obser-vations may be able to capture organizational episodes, socialized expectations, or cultural enactments that suppress organizational dissent and, in turn, suppress organizational

adaptation. We imagine that nonprofit, business, and government organizations would each be fruitful data collection sites.

Conclusion

The supervisor-subordinate relationship is a microcosm of organization. Karl Weick (1995, 2001) emphasized the important association between communication and organization by suggesting that the noun, *organization*, is better thought of as the verb, *organizing*, given the processes' reliance on the fleeting and ephemeral nature of human communication. When boatrocking communication runs contrary to the prescribed communication flow of hierarchy, these often-invisible constitutive communication processes become visible. Thus, the loosing and binding of information sharing from within the supervisor-subordinate relationship may not merely be a by-product of organizing but rather the substance of organization itself (Putnam & Nicotera, 2009).

In the preceding paragraphs, we outlined nine propositions. Taken together, these propositions provide a multidimensional theory of supervisor-subordinate communication. Rather than focus exclusively on downward communication (e.g., Campbell et al., 2007; Penley, Alexander, Jernigan, & Henwood, 1991), or at the level of the dyad (e.g., Koslowsky et al., 2001; Uhl-Bien & Maslyn, 2003), these propositions articulate a comprehensive cataloging of the origin, content, moderation, and effects of supervisor-subordinate communication from both the micro-linguistic level of analysis as well as the macro-system level of analysis. We hope the series of arguments presented here will encourage business communication researchers to lead the investigation of workplace communication practices by remaining "grounded in the theoretical understanding of communication as it occurs in business environments" (Cyphert, 2009, p. 269).

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

Funding

Notes

1. We prefer *supervisor*-subordinate to *superior*-subordinate. While both labels reify organization by invoking a vertical metaphor, *supervisor* connotes a boss and overseer. *Superior*, on the other hand, connotes a boss and denotes a person of greater value or worth, especially because the antonym of superior is inferior.
2. The propositions offered in this manuscript pertain to the direct supervisor-subordinate *relationship*. In common parlance, there may be "supervisors" who do not supervise subordinates directly; these propositions do not necessarily pertain to such jobs.

3. This proposition could be applied to a study of supervisor-subordinate communication in nonprofit organizations. Specifically, we envision applying this proposition by comparing volunteer and paid workers in nonprofit organizations.

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