Chapter 14

Communication in Post–Bureaucratic Organizations:
Confronting Diversity and Crisis

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this chapter is to better understand post-bureaucratic organizations and their communication by focusing on and linking two factors in modern complexity: diversity and crisis. After outlining the key role of communication in the context of post-bureaucratic organizations, the chapter discusses literature on diversity, cultural diversity, and multicultural communication, which constitutes the background of this work. The chapter then explores in more detail the special case of crisis communication in multicultural contexts, which exemplifies an area where diversity and crisis meet and where the relevance of communication in facilitating relationships, environmental alignment, and organizational learning clearly emerges. Chapter considerations indicate that adaptation to variety is necessary but insufficient, and that a generative learning perspective in organizations is needed so that both diversity and crisis can be used to continuously question and regenerate core organizational assumptions and overall direction. The chapter concludes with future research avenues.

INTRODUCTION

Organizations increasingly operate in an environment characterized by:

- High competition,
- Globalization,
- Technological evolution,
- Flattening of hierarchies and
- Breakdown of internal and external boundaries (Jamali, Khoury, & Sahyoun, 2006; Wakefield, 2001).

Consequently, they are exposed to growing complexity and continuous change.

Faced with this reality, organizations have progressively revisited their traditional bureaucratic orientation and embraced a range of new characteristics that facilitate proper environmental alignment and support long-term viability (Burnes, 2000; Jamali et al., 2006). This paradigm shift has lead to new management values and methods (Drucker, 1999) embodied in the post-bureaucratic organizational form, which capitalizes on:

- Flexibility,
- Adaptability and
- Soft control principles (Bolin & Härenstam, 2008; Maravelias, 2002).

In this context, communication plays a central role as it nurtures:

- Collaborative relationships inside and outside the organization,
- Knowledge sharing across physical and cultural boundaries,
- Effective alignment with changing environments, and
- Ongoing organizational learning.

Two aspects, which are the focus of this chapter, contribute to increasing the complexity in which post-bureaucratic organizations work and communicate, presenting both opportunities and challenges:

- Diversity, more specifically in the form of cultural differences, and
- Crisis.

Diversity of people is a multifaceted and dynamic construct encompassing a range of dimensions more or less identifiable (Cox, 1993; Larkey, 1996; Loden & Rosener, 1991). Diversity is a phenomenon that increases the level of internal and external complexity faced by post-bureaucratic organizations (Malizia, 2015). In particular, much research points out the centrality of cultural diversity in the different local, regional, national and international contexts (Banks, 2000) driven by the modern phenomena of:

- Globalization,
- Labor mobility, and
- Immigration (Guirdham, 2005; Wakefield, 2001).

Despite the challenges it obviously involves, diversity is mentioned among the leverages that make it possible to handle new situations and "cultivate a more agile corporate body" (Christensen, Morsing, & Cheney, 2008, p. 185). Literature across disciplines (Cox & Blake, 1991; Ewing, Pinto, & Soutar, 2001; Foster, 2005; Grunig, Toth, & Hon, 2001; Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier, 2002; Milliken & Martins, 1996) suggests that when internal diversity keeps pace with the external one,

- An organization obtains a richer picture of the environment,
- Benefits from broader perspectives on innovation processes, communication, and relationship management, and
- Is better able to handle changes and unexpected situations.

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