A Reflective Stakeholder Approach:
Co-orientation as a Basis For Communication and Learning

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Abstract

Organizations are undergoing dramatic changes as stakeholder groups exert more and more influence on organizations' place and responsibilities in society. Important drivers in this process include the environmental movement, the search for total quality management, the concept of sustainable development, ethics and organizational learning. Because the various stakeholders can view these complex issues quite differently than the organization does, it is important that those working with communications are able to understand the underlying complexities of stakeholder relationships.

Work in a number of diverse fields has provided an understanding of the factors involved in developing an effective communications strategy. Stakeholder theory is an important contributor in that it provides a means for uncovering the relevant participants in the process. We contend that, as part of this process, the co-orientation model can provide a unifying framework for identifying the nature of the relationships between stakeholders or actors in a communication process. At the heart of this model lies the notion of "mental models" from the organizational learning literature, and the recognition that in order for any communications process to be effective these models must be "oriented" properly.

We build on research from the organizational learning field to gain a deeper understanding of the processes that influence our perceptions of stakeholder groups. Three specific communication skills are identified that enable the communications manager to engage stakeholders in a meaningful dialogue, and thereby enhance the effectiveness of the organization's communication efforts.

Key words: stakeholders, communication, co-orientation, organizational learning

Introduction

Organizations' roles are undergoing dramatic changes as important stakeholder groups develop and modify their perceptions of the organization's place and responsibilities in society. The drivers in this process come from two general sources. The most obvious source stems from the effects of the organization's operations on the external world. Important drivers here include environmental effects, influences on other cultures, and the effects of globalization, to name but a few. The other source is internal. Here, the transformation of the nature of work, from production- to knowledge-based services as described by Reich (1991), total quality management, demands for ethical behavior and increasing calls for sustainable development have changed the way employees view their situation and possibilities. To further complicate the matter, these internal and external sources are not independent. Their interactions result in a business and communications environment that is characterized by detail complexity and dynamic complexity, conflict, abrupt change and a host of other confounding factors. Research in human problem solving (for example, Hogarth 1980, Sterman 1994) has extensively documented the difficulty people have when confronted by these factors. According to several researchers, the firm's communications personnel have the primary responsibility for taking a leading role in developing strategies for working effectively with these new organizational challenges and shifting sets of stakeholders. However, in the absence of a guiding rationale or plan, communications can quickly be reduced to stating and reinforcing static ideological positions.

In the process of developing strategies for addressing these challenges it is essential for there to be as high a degree of understanding of the relevant stakeholders'

positions as possible. Agreement is not necessarily to be expected, but an appreciation of the multiple interpretations of a complex situation is imperative in order to achieve understanding so that progress can be made. Additionally, this contributes to increased learning on the part of both actors.

The co-orientation model, developed by McLeod and Chaffee (1973), provides a framework for identifying the relationships between groups in a communications process. At the heart of this model is the notion of mental models (Senge 1990, 1992) and the recognition that in order for any communications process to be effective, these models must be "oriented" properly. Stakeholder theory is an important contributor in that it provides a means for uncovering the relevant participants in the communications process and who must be included in the co-orientation model.

This paper is organized in the following way. After this introduction, we present a brief introduction to the concept of "stakeholders." Stakeholder groups distinguish themselves by having a different set of assumptions regarding a particular situation. This results in a different interpretation of situations or issues under consideration and this is frequently a "problem" condition that must be addressed, but which also can present opportunities for organizations. This naturally leads to a discussion of the notion of mental models. This is a central concept from the organizational learning literature, which is relevant for applying the co-orientation model. A brief review of the elements of the co-orientation model and its application is then presented. We point out that although the model is an attractive normative structure, it provides little in the way of prescriptive guidance for how actually to work with the relationships that it identifies. The following section proposes that the key to operationalizing the co-orientation model

lies in the methodological tools of the organizational learning field. A very brief review of this field is provided and three communications skills that can be used to work proactively with the mental models of stakeholders are identified. We then discuss the integration of the communications model and the organizational learning methods in the context of the organizational communications function. The paper concludes with guidelines for implementation and suggestions for future research in this area.

Stakeholders and multiple world-views

Today, the concept of a "stakeholder" is generally accepted in a business context. The modern conception of a stakeholder is based on Freeman's (1984) definition that a stakeholder is "a group or individual who can have an effect on or be affected by the actions of an organization." He was one of the first to articulate the concept of the "stakeholder approach," which he sees as an answer to the need for businesses to be more proactive to changes in their operating environments. Mitroff (1983, p.4) sees the modern organization as being "buffeted by a growing disparate array of forces," which he refers to as stakeholders. These are all interest groups, parties, actors, claimants, and institutions, internal and external to the organization that exerts a hold on it. Mitroff succinctly defines stakeholders as the concrete entities that affect and in turn are affected by an organization's actions, behaviors and policies. Freeman (1984) credits the rise of the importance of stakeholders to the concept of corporate social responsibility and a new theory of the firm. In this view, the firm is seen as a sociopolitical institution where the lines between the business and its external environmental are less distinct. Business now has to deal with a host of public issues, issues that arise "when publics demand collective

action and there are disagreements about the solutions" (Eyeston, 1978). According to Harrison and St. John (1994), stakeholder management includes communicating, negotiating and contracting, managing relationships and motivating them to respond to the organization in ways that benefit it.

Stakeholder theory is a much discussed and controversial area. Recent articles have addressed whether or not there exists empirical evidence for applying the concept of "theory" to the stakeholder approach (Jones 1995; Clarkson 1995; Donaldson and Preston 1995; The Toronto Conference 1994). What all of these researchers agree upon, however, is that the concept of stakeholders is "commonplace," that it is a model of how organizations should behave, and that any stakeholder, and not just customers, can have an impact on an organization and its performance.

In the form of either an individual or a group of individuals, stakeholders represent different points of view with respect to an issue under consideration. The fundamental element that distinguishes stakeholders is captured in the notion of a "mental model." A mental model is essentially a personal theory of how things work (Senge 1990). It is composed of the perceived most important factors and the various relationships that link the factors together to produce a means for interpreting sensory inputs. As simplified road maps through life, they affect how we interpret situations and guide our behavior. Mental models are individual, but can also be shared, as in the case of organizations and special interest groups. At the level of shared mental models, the concept is closely related to the notion of organizational culture. Mental models are exceptionally pervasive in that they affect all aspects of behavior, including problem

structuring, information gathering and processing, evaluation, choice, implementation and learning.

Because human cognitive capacity is limited, these mental models are incomplete representations. In place of “facts” we have to make do with assumptions and frequently rely on short-cut heuristics or "standard operating procedures" to guide our behavior. It is here that the danger for misunderstanding and miscommunication becomes apparent. The dynamic processes of taking in data through observations, processing, judging and acting is very complex and not at all well understood. However, the “ladder of inference” (Argyris 1990) provides a description of the stages that our inference processes go through from original data selection to deciding upon a course of action. The ladder of inference is shown in figure 1.

Figure 1: The Ladder of Inference (adapted from Argyris 1990)

The ladder of inference describes the sequence of steps involved in linking observations with actions. Beginning at the bottom of the ladder, an observer (for example, the communications manager) is confronted with a flood of information from a variety of sources. Not all of this data is deemed relevant and only that which is perceived as important in a given situation is selected for further processing. This selection is a filtering process that is influenced by the observer's mental model. The data that is selected is incomplete and likely biased, but this provides the basis for subsequent processing. In the process of moving towards action the selected data is processed according to the rules, logic and values embedded in the mental model of the observer (in this case the communications manager).

Since the data is incomplete there are gaps that must be filled in so that an action plan can be developed. This is accomplished by making assumptions and by interpreting the selected data in accordance with the observer's world-view. From this, conclusions are drawn and actions are taken.

As this is a dynamic process, this sequence tends to be reinforcing, as indicated by the reflexive loop from the top of the ladder to the data selection step. The observer's belief structure tends to exert a strong influence on what data are selected from the pool of experience in subsequent situations. Experiences that are at variance with the prevailing world-view will tend to be undervalued or even ignored, resulting in the (unconscious) selection of only confirmatory evidence, which again serves to reinforce the prevailing mental model.

The "mental model" exists at the middle and upper steps of the ladder of inference. Because they are so deeply engrained, they are automatically and

unconsciously activated. In general, mental models are necessary in order to get on with life; they can, however, become serious liabilities in important communication situations if they are not regularly tested for veracity with respect to the situation under consideration.

The relevance of mental models to the communications function is clear. The ability to communicate with others who share similar mental models and understandings of the world is easier than communicating with someone who does not share a common conceptual structure. However, the simple fact of having similar mental models in no way guarantees that this model is “correct,” i.e. a true representation of the situation. It only assures that there is similarity in the conceptual structures that organize the world, our particular world.

From this perspective, which is strongly influenced by the organizational learning field, a primary task of corporate communicators with respect to organizational stakeholders is to work actively to attempt to uncover and understand the stakeholders’ mental models. This becomes critical to the success of the communication process. However, at the same time that the organization is attempting to understand the stakeholders, it must also be prepared to continuously test and update its own mental models. Just this self-reflection constitutes a significant organizational challenge that goes beyond the traditional boundaries of corporate communications. The activities that support these organizational “soul searching” activities are captured in three fundamental communications skills: reflection, inquiry and advocacy. These are discussed in a subsequent section.

This perspective on organizational communications is more comprehensive than the traditional role of communications as information transfer. Here we see it as a fundamental instrument of organizational change, renewal and development. It is renewal in the sense that the basis for the organizations' mental models are continually questioned and tested for veracity. It is development in the sense of the organization becoming something more than it was previously. It learns about its internal and external environment and becomes more capable and creative in dealing with new and unique situations and challenges.

The organizational implications of this perspective are no less dramatic than those for communications because it will require a redefinition of the role of the corporate communications function. This role now requires as much a focus on the organization's internal state of awareness with respect to stakeholders in a given situation as a focus on the external environment. In this sense, the role of the corporate communications manager becomes ever more one of helping the organization to surface its world-view, something that can require significant changes in the organization itself.

Multiple world-views and the co-orientation model

“I’m sorry, but if you expect any self-respecting activist to believe a word you say about your commitment to human rights, then you are as arrogant as the PR firm that came up with this strategy.”

Unknown ‘activist’ quoted in ‘How do we stand?’
People, Planet & Profits, A summary of the Shell Report 2000, *Newsweek*.

In contrast to Shannon and Weaver's (1949) basic communication model, a message from a source sent through a medium to a receiver, the co-orientation model emphasizes the role of cognition in the communications process. It focuses its attention not on the message sent between a sender and a receiver but rather on two more fundamental aspects of communication. These aspects are problem finding and problem understanding. Problem finding refers to the processes of 1) identifying that a problem or specific issue exists, 2) accepting the situation as something on which resources are worth spending, and 3) defining the situation in terms of objectives and actions to achieve them. This task encompasses all planning levels, from the tactical up to the strategic, and crisis situations represent a special case with both short- and long-term implications.

Problem understanding is an essential part of the communications process; it is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for effective communications. In the context of organizational communications, problem understanding refers to the process of exploring the impact of an issue, as identified in the problem finding stage, on the internal and external organizational stakeholders. This function is an exceptionally complex cognitive activity that is easily influenced by automatic and unconsciously triggered responses generated by the activated mental model on the part of the organization and the individual communicators. This is frequently exhibited in the ad hoc and reactive nature of many communication activities. These two activities of problem finding and problem understanding are captured in Chase and Jones (1979) issues management model. While not a part of this paper, IM is recognized as an integral part of the work related to stakeholders. It is often issues raised by stakeholders that bring crises or opportunities to the organization.

The co-orientation model of McLeod and Chaffee builds on the paradigm originally presented by Newcomb (1953). It identifies three critical types of relationships that define and influence the interactions between an organization and a stakeholder. To the extent that there is more than one stakeholder, the number of relationships increases nonlinearly in that it is natural also to consider the possibility of inter-stakeholder interactions as well.

Figure 2: The Co-Orientaion Model (after Grunig and Hunt 1984)

The essential problem addressed by the co-orientation model is that of “mess management.” The real world situation is so complex and multifaceted that it can be interpreted in many different ways depending on the underlying assumptions, values and beliefs of the observer, i.e. their mental models.

Dozier and Ehling (1992) suggest four co-orientation states: a state of true consensus, a state of dissensus, a state of false consensus, and a state of false conflict. As explained by the authors, true consensus exists when both parties know that they share an

agreement on their view or evaluation of an issue. Dissensus occurs when the parties hold conflicting views and they are aware of their differences. A false consensus exists when the organization believes that the stakeholder agrees with them on a particular policy, action or issue. The same is true if the stakeholder group mistakenly believes that the organization holds the same view that they do. Similarly, this state also exists if both groups mistakenly believe that they *agree* on an issue when in fact they do not. A state of false conflict exists when the parties, the organization and the stakeholder(s), believe that they *disagree* on an issue, policy or action, when in fact they agree. It becomes quite easy to see how crises arise and opportunities are missed.

As defined by Kim (1993), problems are “a formal statement of a set of assumptions about the world.” To the extent that there are significant differences between the assumptions sets of the organization and a stakeholder, the likelihood of different interpretations on important dimensions increases and a problem is perceived.

The mental model concept lies at the heart of the co-orientation model and the significance is that differences in values, beliefs and perceptions result in different interpretations of events and outcomes of actions. The situation becomes more difficult when there is a need for the groups to communicate but no efforts are made to uncover and discuss the assumptions each is working with. The co-orientation model identifies the three types of relationships that have to be sorted out in order to have meaningful communications and to use that as the basis for common action.

The fundamental relationship in a communication interaction is that of agreement. This refers to the extent that the organization and the stakeholder have identified and evaluated a common situation, or that they each recognize the validity of the other party's

concern. This is a fundamental requirement because without a sufficient degree of agreement as to what the situation is all about, it is not possible to begin to formulate a perception of how the other party sees the issue.

Once there is the requisite degree of agreement on the problem definition, at least in objective terms, the congruency and accuracy relationships become relevant. In developing a strategy or response to the actions of the other side, each party develops a “picture” of the other’s interpretation of the situation. This picture is strongly influenced by the mental model of the other party. Because full and open exchange of information is rarely possible, many of the uncertainties with respect to the opposite party’s values, knowledge and interests are “assumed.” This is a significant step up the ladder of inference and is influenced over time by the action of the reflexive loop, drawing on past experience with the stakeholder, or other stakeholders who are, again, assumed to be similar to the current case.

This perception may or may not be a fair representation of the stakeholder’s true beliefs. This is where the accuracy relation plays a role. It is an indicator of the veracity of the organization’s perception of the interests of the stakeholders. To the extent that the organization’s perception is closely correlated with the stakeholders’, the organization has a solid basis for developing a communications strategy. The less accurate the perception, the more ineffective the communications will be. In the extreme case, a poorly informed communication effort can easily serve to reinforce the stakeholder’s already negative image of the organization. This makes the subsequent work of the communications executive even more difficult.

Mental models and organizational learning

The co-orientation model has existed for nearly 30 years, yet it is based on many of the premises in today's organizational learning theory. And, although the current managerial interest in organizational learning has its roots in recent work conducted at the MIT Sloan School of Management, the concept is also not new. Learning was a central issue in many of the seminal management writings from the 1950's and 1960's (Fiol and Lyles 1985; Huber 1991). Learning has always been at the heart of organizations' responses and adaptations to their surroundings. These processes occurred either explicitly, as part of a conscious program of change, or implicitly without any obvious guiding managerial influence. With the increased awareness of the importance of knowledge and information in the rapidly changing economic and social environment, realization that there possibly were better ways of making learning happen was a strong driving force in the development of the discipline.

Because of its inter- and multidisciplinary basis, organizational learning has developed along many different branches. The most well known proponent of organizational learning is Peter Senge, whose 1990 book, **The Fifth Discipline**, became an immediate business best seller and placed the concept on the managerial agenda. This book describes five learning disciplines that characterize a learning organization. They are:

- Mental models
- Team learning
- Systems thinking
- Shared vision
- Personal mastery

Key is that organizational learning is a process and not an end state, and the central discipline is “mental models.” As we have seen, the mental model concept for the problem of communication is important because of the powerful influence it exerts on how individuals, as well as organizations, interact with their surroundings. An important distinction is made between “espoused (mental) models” and “models in use.” This refers to the frequently observed differences between what is said and what is actually done. Espoused models are those that people are able to articulate and use to explain how and why they behave in certain ways. “Models in use,” on the other hand, refer to actual observed behavior. Frequently, a person can say one thing and do something else. This is not necessarily an example of hypocrisy, but rather an example of just how taken for granted the mental model is. The problem for communications managers is that this difference can make it difficult to achieve the necessary level of congruence between the organization's perceptions of the stakeholder's mental model and the stakeholder's actual mental model. Not discerning these two forms can be a contributing factor to many communications problems. Fortunately, there exist tools for actively working with mental models and these can significantly improve the quality and accuracy of stakeholder communications.

Organizational learning skills for effective stakeholder communications

The skills necessary for achieving effective communications have their roots in dialogue, which is defined as “a sustained collective inquiry into the processes, assumptions and certainties that comprise everyday experience” (Isaacs 1994, p.25). It has been proposed that communications that seeks mutual understanding is two-way

(Grunig and Hunt 1984). The key element in Grunig and Hunt's symmetrical two-way communication model is the feedback activity. They caution that the feedback is in the form of dialogue. This presents a unique opportunity for the organization to learn. It also carries with it the possibility of the stakeholder to influence the organization as much as the organization has to influence the stakeholder.

The communication skills identified from the organizational learning literature are reflection, inquiry and advocacy. While the skills are easily defined, putting them into practice is far more difficult because they require active work with mental models. The objective of consciously developing these skills is to be able to surface the mental models and their underlying assumptions that are activated in a given communications situation. The ladder of inference illustrates the cognitive stages that are involved in the communications process. The three organizational learning skills are central to the successful mastery of working with mental models.

Reflection. Reflection is an internally focused skill. The objective of reflection is to make the practitioner more aware of his or her own thinking and reasoning processes. Slowing down the thought processes and avoiding a rapid climb up the ladder of inference accomplish this. The first step in the reflection process is distinguishing between what is actual "data" and what are abstractions based on the data. As mental models are built upon a set of assumptions, another important reflection activity is to formally identify these assumptions and to test them in light of the current situation. This is done by, for example, explicitly identifying the data behind a particular statement, seeking agreement on what is and what is not relevant data, clarifying lines of reasoning and confirming interpretations of others' statements.

Inquiry. Inquiry engages the two parts of the communication process in a joint learning process. Here the objective is to understand the thinking and reasoning processes of the other stakeholders. This is accomplished by asking questions that seek to establish the basis for conclusions and statements; essentially, helping the other part to move down their ladder of inference and to investigate the set of assumptions under which they operate. This activity implies a significant interaction with intended receivers of messages, i.e. stakeholders, and may in practice be difficult to accomplish (see for example the quotation on page 8).

Advocacy. Advocacy is the process of communicating one's own thinking and reasoning in a manner that makes them visible for others. Barney and Black (1994) see the role of public relations as an advocate for the organization, somewhat akin to role of a lawyer, who may act on their client's interest by disseminating only selective information. From the organizational learning perspective, the advocacy role is perhaps more in the spirit of Grunig and Hunt's two-way symmetrical model (1984) because the communicating parties want to learn from each other and each recognizes that the other party has valid interests that must be respected.

The thoughtful communicator seeks to find a balance between the inquiry and advocacy. Too much advocacy results in one-way communication with little feedback, too much inquiry means getting bogged down. Skill in finding this balance is a function of experience but there are guidelines available to help initiate the process. The balancing act involves four dimensions: telling, generating, asking and observing. Telling is directly associated with advocacy and asking is related to inquiry. Generating

and observing combine elements of both advocacy and inquiry. The table below summarizes some specific communication activities needed to develop the balance.

Table 1: Activities for balancing advocacy and inquiry (after Senge et al 1994)

<u>Activity</u>	<u>Description</u>
Explaining	“Here’s how the world works and why I can see it that way.”
Asserting	“Here’s what I say and here’s why I say it.”
Testing	“Here’s what I say. What do you think of it?”
Skillful discussion	Balancing advocacy and inquiry, makes reasoning explicit, asks others about their assumptions but without being critical or accusing.
Dialogue	Suspending all assumptions and creating a “container” in which collective thinking can occur.
Clarifying	“What is the question we are trying to answer?”
Interviewing	Exploring others’ points of view and the reasons behind them.
By standing	Making comments that pertain to group processes, but not to content.
Sensing	Watching the flow of conversation but without contributing much; none-the-less, being aware of what goes on.

Engaging stakeholders in a dialogue that seeks to explore mental models and uncover assumptions is difficult. Depending on the nature of the relationship between the parties, this process can be hampered by, for example, mutual suspicion and game-playing for individual advantage. These are realities that must be accepted as a part of the job but they are not grounds for simply giving up. The ability to work around the personal and institutional barriers to dialogue comes with experience, training and the personal conviction that this is the right approach for the respective parties to take. Trust is an essential element that must be present. The communicators must exhibit exceptional openness and sensitivity to the other party in order for the dialogue process to

start. The table above offers some preliminary suggestions for initiating the activities in the dialogue process.

There is a different set of managerial competencies needed to achieve this level of communication. The communications manager must develop a flexible, questioning approach that has an open perspective, a systemic approach to problem solving and a response mode that is characterized by creativity. The manager's commitment must reflect empathy for the perspectives of all the relevant stakeholders, and not a blind organizational ethnocentrism (McGill, Slocum and Lei 1992).

Organizational implications of the co-orientation model

According to Harrison and St. John (1994), stakeholder management includes communicating, negotiating and contracting, managing relationships and motivating them to respond to the organization in ways that benefit it. And the co-orientation model provides the basis for accomplishing this. For the communications manager, it is their role as boundary spanner that makes their ability to apply the co-orientation model critical. Boundary spanning is a unique behavior attributed to people who are able to gather information internal and external to an organization and then somehow contribute it to the decision-making process (Tushman and Scanlan 1981). Public relations managers are boundary spanners by definition (White and Dozier 1992). The very words public relations literally mean relating with publics, and Grunig and Hunt (1984, p. 6) contend that every public relations activity is involved with the "management of communication between an organization and its publics." In other words they act as the bridge, or "boundary spanner" between the organization and their publics. Further,

research indicates that how they perform this role has implications for their acceptance by the top management team (White and Dozier 1992).

Meznar and Nigh (1993) contend that public affairs is the organizational function responsible for maintaining external legitimacy by “managing the interface between an organization and its sociopolitical environment” (1993). It is through the public affairs/public relations function that management can “perceive, monitor and understand external change” (Post et al. 1982). Meznar and Nigh (1995) offer two forms of activities that connect organizations with their social and political environment, buffering and bridging. These authors define buffering as an activity that a firm indulges in when trying to insulate itself from external influence or when it tries to influence it through such activities as lobbying, contributions or advocacy advertising. Bridging, on the other hand, occurs when organizations try to adapt organizational activities to conform to external expectations. Whichever activity the organization follows, both are “roles of boundary spanning units” (Meznar and Nigh 1995). It seems, however, that the buffering function is partially at odds with the intent of the co-orientation model as discussed here.

This means that communications managers must be able to collect and apply research-based information (Brønn 2000) on both issues and stakeholders. Collecting information on issues, as mentioned previously, is captured in the IM model of Chase and Jones (1974), but both activities can also be captured under the auspices of environmental scanning. Environmental scanning concerns the collection of information within and from without the organization (Stoffles 1994). It is a method for identifying sources of opportunities and threats using a variety of methods (Aquilar 1967; Hambrick 1982). It is generally agreed that this activity is a key component of strategic processes, as the

acquisition of information is a major organizational effort (Huber and Daft 1987).

Scanning can be in the form of client surveys, R&D, industrial intelligence or economic forecasts.

Part of these activities is collecting information through surveys, or actually asking stakeholders what they think. This means that the communications manager must be able to generate accurate lists of the organization's stakeholders. According to Mitroff and Mason (1981), generating a list of stakeholders is one of the key applications of what they call Strategic Assumption Surfacing and Testing (SAST) planning process. SAST is a process for revealing underlying assumptions of a policy or plan (strategic planning) and helps create a map for exploring them. It is designed especially for coping with what the authors call "wicked" problems of organizational complexity.

Another qualitative tool helpful in working with stakeholders is focus groups. Fombrun (1998) defines organizational reputation as the sum of the images of the various stakeholders of the organization. This implies that different stakeholders have different images based on their particular and peculiar relationship to the organization. To assume that, for example, investors have the same relationship with an organization as employees is erroneous. Each stakeholder group's assumptions must be uncovered. Focus groups are therefore helpful in finding out what is important in individual groups' relationship to the organization. This information can then be combined with quantitative methodologies such as surveys to find out what the perceptions actually are.

It is not enough to merely ask stakeholders what they think; the organization must be willing, as mentioned, to "uncover their own assumptions." They must be willing to honestly engage an analysis of their own mental models. These are then compared with

the models of perceptions of the various stakeholders. This is akin to Dozier and Ehling's discussion on methodologies for obtaining accuracy difference scores and encompasses the inquiry skills of organizational learning. This information can then provide the basis for communicating. An analysis of this sort also helps suggest which tools to use for communicating effectively. Dow Chemicals has done an exemplary job in this respect as they identify relevant stakeholders, explain why it is important to communicate with that stakeholder, design messages for each one, and choose the medium to reach that particular stakeholder (Sancassiani, 1996).

Conclusions and recommendations for action

We can see that despite the significant challenges imposed by the need for dialogue, the co-orientation model is an excellent vehicle for illustrating the importance of the mental model concept and for framing the relationships between stakeholders' mental models. The links between the boxes point out the different potential sources for miscommunication and error in the communication processes between stakeholders.

The organizational learning field both contributes to and is enriched by the co-orientation model. It contributes to the model by providing a rich supporting theory and documented methods for improving individuals' (and consequently organizations') ability to work explicitly with the mental models of the important stakeholders. This is accomplished by emphasizing the use of reflection, inquiry and advocacy in the communications processes with the other stakeholders. The leads to increased learning on both sides of the issue and over the long term will enhance the quality of the interactions.

The association with the co-orientation model enriches the organizational learning discipline because the model is an established, but perhaps underutilized, framework in the communications field. By being able to establish practical and theoretical links with other disciplines only increases the potential for more active application of the tools and philosophy of organizational learning. At its heart, organizational learning is about communication. The challenge for organizational communicators is to elevate and institutionalize the organizational learning dialogue skills into the daily activity pattern of the organization.

Given the magnitude of the challenges that now face most organizations, the "casual" approach of combining communications with strategy appears to be a serious shortcoming. If one were to open almost any popular contemporary strategy textbook (for example, Mintzberg et al. 1998; Johnson and Scholes 1997; Grant 1998) and search the index for references to communications and its role in the strategy process, two points become clear. First, communications is claimed to be an important element in the organization's overall strategy process. Second, despite its purported importance, very little is presented in the form of how to integrate communications with the strategy development and implementation work.

Yet, despite the importance of communications, research (Brønn 1999) has shown that it is frequently relegated to a secondary function in many firms and is performed by people without the proper training or skills that allow them access to strategic decision-making. In the process of developing strategies for addressing these challenges, or to deal with an immediate short-term issue, it is essential for there to be a high degree of understanding of the positions of the relevant stakeholders as possible.

Communications between conscious entities is a far more complex process than the original Shannon and Weaver engineering-based communication model. Application of this model to social communication has been criticized (Chandler 2000) because it fails to take into consideration the meaning and interpretation of the information that is communicated. Agreement is not necessarily to be expected in a communication process, but an appreciation of the multiple interpretations of a complex situation is imperative. McLeod's and Chaffee's co-orientation model provides a framework that clearly illustrates the central role of message interpretation and reciprocal perceptions between the parties in a communication process. In this manner, the co-orientation model addresses the most important issue of communications: understanding.

In this paper we have argued that the co-orientation model, supported by conceptual and methodological insights from the field of organizational learning, provides a solid framework for structuring and working with complex corporate communications issues. The objective of a communication process should be increased learning about the issues under consideration by all of the relevant stakeholders. This is always difficult, if not impossible, in cases where stakeholders' interpretations are significantly different. As the organization usually is the cause of the issue under consideration, and is frequently the initiator of communication, it has the special responsibility to take the lead and to make its position clear and to work with the other stakeholders to help them explicate their understandings. Then, together a common framework for understanding and action can be established. The role of the corporate communicator becomes, through this process, far more than simply being the mouthpiece for the firm. He or she becomes a facilitator working to establish the basis for rational

dialogue among the stakeholders. This represents considerable challenges for the corporate communications professional.

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