

COMMUNICATION, PERCEPTION AND THE MEDIA

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Open Systems Theory (OST) has always been vitally concerned about communication in all its forms. Obviously that is because communication is one of the most highly visible behaviours in which we engage: less obviously, it is because 'communication' is often taken for granted as some primary, simple and well understood bedrock feature of the human being when it is neither primary, simple nor well understood. As the papers in this section demonstrate, the term 'communication' covers a multitude of behaviours both adaptive and maladaptive, in a range of contexts over a range of media.

There are two major complications that must be considered in any discussion of communication. The first is the nature of the conceptual framework(s) within which the discussion takes place. The second is the nature of the theories of perception that lie alongside the views of communication as a phenomenon and as a behaviour.

As the name implies, the basic unit within OST is not the person but the person-in-environment. That is, we assume that the sufficient conditions for behaviour lie in the system-in-environment. It is easily demonstrated that people change their behaviour as environmental conditions change. When the temperature drops, people either put more clothes on or turn the heater up. Different people choose differently here showing that Lewin's formula - behaviour is a function of environment and personality - holds true.

That is the point where organizational theory intersects communication theory as the organisational structure functions as an environment for the people within it. Change the design principle and behaviour changes.

That is also the point at which OST diverges from and conflicts with the Human Relations School of thought which includes an assumption that communication is a primary property of organisation and therefore, must be dealt with directly by teaching people to communicate better. This view fuels a huge training industry.

HR theory believes the sufficient condition for behaviour lies within the person, that is, if there are 'communication problems, then their communication skills are deficient. Assuming the sufficient condition for behaviour lies within a person or social unit is the hallmark of a closed systems theory (Emery M, 2000). Thus the choice of open or closed is fundamental to our theories of communication and the practices to improve communication that accompany them.

The whole concept of 'communication' also cannot be divorced from our theories of perception. Again OST differs from other theories in that it acknowledges and practices ecological learning, our ability to directly, without mediation, extract information from our social and physical environments. The reader who is interested in this aspect of the theory should also consult the paper called *Educational Paradigms* which is in the section on the design principles and democratizing organizations.

Perception is intrinsic to any work on communication and the media, as all technological media, that is apart from face to face, distort the quality and quantity of communication in some ways. And some technological media such as those based on the cathode ray tube, and now it seems, our various digitally based devices, actively disturb the central nervous system infrastructure underlying perception. There is much more work to be done in this area.

Reference

Emery, M. (2000). The current version of Emery's open systems theory. *Systemic Practice and Action Research*, 13(5), 623–643