

Functional Group Communication Theory

The functional group communication theory is a unified and coherent set of propositions, assumptions, and claims that attempt to explain how and why communication is related to the quality of the decisions groups make. The theory has been very influential in guiding researchers' and practitioners' views about how communication affects group decision making and how communication might be structured to increase the likelihood that groups will arrive at high-quality decisions.

Origins and Influences

Dennis Gouran and Randy Hirokawa are the researchers most closely associated with the functional theory of effective group decision making. They state that the origins of the theory lie in three influences: the work of John Dewey and his work on reflective thinking, Robert Bales and his work on interaction process analysis, and Irving Janis and his work on vigilant decision making.

During the early part of the 20th century, John Dewey developed a method to describe the process that individuals should go through as they work on problem solving. In his 1910 book, *How We Think*, Dewey suggested that the process of reflective thinking involves five steps: (1) a felt difficulty, (2) its location and definition, (3) suggestion of possible solution, (4) development by reasoning of the implications and consequences of the solution, and (5) further observation and experiment leading to its acceptance or rejection.

The second influence on the development of the functional theory of effective group decision making is the work of Robert Bales. Bales and his colleagues had been working on group members' ability to deal with four functional problems: adaptation, instrumental control, expression, and integration. These are problems with which groups must deal in order to perform effectively. Adaptation and instrumental control relate to the management of task concerns (i.e., making a decision); expression and integration relate to the management of socioemotional concerns (i.e., managing relationships). Groups strive to maintain equilibrium with regard to these two concerns, and group communication is a major means of maintaining that equilibrium. For Bales, work on the task serves to disturb a group's balance in the socioemotional dimension, and group members must work to restore this balance. **Group** communication, then, is both a means by which deviations from equilibrium can be identified and a means by which equilibrium can be accomplished or restored. Bales developed interaction process analysis (IPA) in an effort to capture how communication functions in both the task and socioemotional domains. IPA consists of 12 categories—six related to task and six to socioemotional—into which communicative acts (utterances) may be classified.

The third influence on the development of the functional theory of effective decision making is the work of Irving Janis on vigilant decision making. Janis theorized that highly cohesive groups sometimes suffer from poor decision making because of the pressures placed on their members to reach consensus. Janis labeled this condition *groupthink*. Vigilant groups (a) survey the possible alternatives-solutions available, (b) survey the objectives to be accomplished, (c) examine the risks and benefits associated with the alternatives, (d) perform an information search, (e) process the information in an unbiased manner, (f) reappraise the alternatives in light of risks and benefits before making a final choice, and (g) work out a plan for implementing the desired choice along with contingency plans should additional risks associated with that choice become known.

In all three influences, the functional nature of communication is the focus; in other words, communication is goal oriented and serves to accomplish some purpose. In Dewey's reflective thinking method, communication is functional because when applied to group discussion, it is the means through which each of the steps of the method are accomplished, thus enabling the group to reach effective resolution of a problem. Bales's IPA denotes communication categories that function to enable a group to deal with equilibrium in task and socioemotional domains. In Janis's vigilant decision making, communication is functional because it is the means through which group members fulfill each of the characteristics of vigilance.

The Theory

The functional theory of effective group decision making rests on the assumption that decision-making effectiveness is not affected by the production of certain communicative behaviors per se, but by the extent to which these fulfill the requirements for successful task completion. These requirements, termed *functional requisites*, were spelled out by Gouran and Hirokawa in 1983. In order to make an effective decision, a group should adequately do the following:

- Understand the type of answer for which the issue under consideration calls. These answers are in response to the type of question the group is attempting to answer—fact, conjecture, value, or policy.
- Determine the characteristics of an acceptable answer. **Group** members develop criteria that the desired choice should satisfy.
- Marshal a realistic range of alternatives among which an acceptable answer is presumed to exist. **Group** members generate a broad range of possible answers/alternatives/solutions to the issue under consideration.
- Critically examine every alternative in relation to each criterion used to define an acceptable answer. This requisite assumes skill, knowledge, and a sense of objectivity on the part of group members.
- Select the alternative that best conforms to the characteristics of an acceptable answer. **Group** members should also compare the alternatives against each other to determine which appear to be the most desirable and appropriate.

As a group progresses on its path toward a given goal, communication may influence decision making in three ways: When communication plays a *promotive* role, it allows the group to successfully accomplish the functional requisites. When communication plays a *disruptive* role, it functions to create obstacles that hinder or prevent the group from satisfying any of the requisites for successful decision making. Finally, when communication plays a *counteractive* role, it functions to negate or neutralize a communicative act that functioned as disruptive influence. Thus, communication enables a group to resume movement along the goal path defined by the requisites of effective decision making. The theory predicts that groups that better fulfill the requisites of effective decision making will make more effective decisions.

Generally, what has been found is that groups that make better decisions also produce (a) more communicative acts fulfilling the functional requisites, (b) acts that better fulfill the functional requisites, and (c) acts that rate higher on global assessments of the extent to which they accomplished the requisites. The research, however, has been inconsistent with regard to the importance of particular requisite functions—that is, while high- and low-quality groups do differ on the requisite functions identified in the theory, the particular functions that differentiate these groups are not consistent across studies. Further, it does not appear to matter in what order the functional requisites are accomplished. Although most of these studies have been conducted in the laboratory with groups having little or no history, other investigations have used a case study approach or been conducted in the field, in a more naturalistic setting.

A Critique

The theory has been criticized on various fronts with each contributing to its evolution and present-day form. Primarily, these criticisms may be organized around three themes: assessments of group decision effectiveness,

lack of attention to the broader context in which groups operate, and the static set of functional requisites specified by the theory.

The first of these criticisms—measurement and conceptualization of group effectiveness—concerns how the chief outcome variable of decision quality has been assessed in studies guided by the theory. The main method of determining decision quality has been to compare the group's decision to some preexisting standard (as in the case of intellectual tasks that have a demonstrably correct answer), or to have qualified judges rate the group's decision along preestablished criteria, such as feasibility, cost, and workability. These criteria may become problematic when one considers that (a) a group(s) may be working under a different set of criteria for determining effectiveness—criteria that may have grown out of the group discussion itself, and (b) groups may, during the course of their discussion, redefine the task in a manner such that the preestablished criteria for determining a decision's quality no longer apply.

The second criticism concerns the broader context in which group members conduct their work. The functional theory of effective decision making places an emphasis on the accomplishment of the requisite functions through members' interaction in the group setting. However, in the social context in which decisions are made, group members often communicate outside of the group setting. Members take breaks and text each other, they communicate in the hallway, over the phone, at the water cooler, on the golf course, or at the organizational picnic. Some of these functions may be accomplished in group members' interactions with one another in these settings, outside of the group meeting. Yet such communication is not adequately accounted for by the functional theory, which has led to an extension of functional group theory by Cynthia Stohl and Michael Holmes, outlined in the following section.

A third criticism concerns the functional requisites themselves. Scholars have questioned whether there are some as-of-yet undiscovered requisites that may better account for decision-making effectiveness. The first argument here is that the importance of functional requisites may not be consistent across dimensions that differentiate task types. Some tasks, for example, may be more complex than others, or have more than one correct or best solution. There may be particular functional requisites that apply to particular types of tasks. The second argument is that there may be some requisite functions that are related to effective group performance that are not inherently tied to the task itself, but to establishing and maintaining the socioemotional atmosphere of the group—that is, a precondition to effectively dealing with task-related functional requisites is dealing with socioemotional requisites related to establishing well-functioning relationships among group members. Failure to identify these socioemotional functions, then, is a weakness of the theory as originally formulated.

Evolution and Current Status

Stohl and Holmes, primarily in response to the first two criticisms identified above, have proposed an extension of the functional theory that encompasses bona fide groups—groups that are naturally occurring, interact with the broader social environment in which they are embedded, and whose members have a degree of history. They claim that most of the assumptions and methods inherent in the early conceptualizations of the functional theory have necessitated a focus on zero-history laboratory groups. To extend the reach of the theory, they suggest examining historical (understanding the past, present, and future) and institutional (understanding the group's connections to its environment) functions. Additionally, they suggest supplementary methodologies for examining the functional theory of effective decision making such as consideration of the time-ordering of messages and obtaining information from group participants in interpreting the task and outcomes.

In response to the various criticisms of the theory and the research that has been conducted under its auspices, Gouran and Hirokawa put forth a revision in the book, **Communication and Group Decision Making**. That revision includes clarifications that explicitly spell out the propositions and assumptions that guide functional theory. The authors also include a discussion that identifies some of the factors that can interfere with successful accomplishment of the functional requisites. In this identification is an acknowledgement of the

importance of the relational dimension of groups in making an effective decision. Among these factors are *affiliative* (group members are overly concerned with relationships), *cognitive* (information processing is impeded), and *egocentric* (personal motivations dominate) constraints. The scholars expand the theory by focusing on the ways in which these constraints may be managed in group discussion.

A new set of requisites, or what the authors now term the theory's propositions, are advanced. In addition to the original five requisites, which focus on the task, group members should also strive to do the following:

- Make clear their interest in arriving at the best possible decision.
- Identify the resources necessary for making such a decision.
- Recognize possible obstacles to be confronted.
- Specify the procedure to be followed in working on the task.
- Establish ground rules for interaction.
- Employ appropriate interventions for overcoming affiliative, cognitive, and egocentric constraints that interfere with successful accomplishment of fundamental task requirements.
- Review the process by which the group comes to a decision and, if indicated, reconsider judgments reached.

The functional theory has guided a great deal of research in the years since it was first introduced. Whether the theory continues to be as influential in the coming decades will depend on its utility in explaining a wide range of decision making in an increasingly diverse and technologically oriented world.

—Abran J. Salazar

Further Readings

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