

## Organizational Control Theory

Theories of organizational control examine the process by which one party attempts to influence the behavior of another within a given system. **Organizational** control is an inherently communicative activity that consists of verbal and physical actions designed to overcome resistance and exercise authority over others. Supervisors might rely upon verbal commands (e.g., telling someone exactly what to do), written directives (e.g., giving workers a set of rules to follow), or even peer pressure (e.g., coworkers reinforce the importance of following organizational norms) to control the actions of their subordinates. Collective effort (e.g., organizing) cannot be accomplished without individuals relinquishing some degree of autonomy in order to work toward a common objective. Communication scholars study organizational control processes to understand the strategies and resources organizational leaders draw upon to convince their members to work together.

Complicating the organizational control process is the fact that managers and workers often have competing interests. Managers typically want to maximize the productivity of their subordinates in exchange for the lowest organizational cost. In contrast, workers may seek out ways to maximize their individual compensation while exerting the least amount of personal effort. As superior and subordinate members negotiate for their particular interests, they create, reproduce, and transform the organizational context in which they interact.

To understand the strengths and weaknesses of various organizational control strategies, it is important to first establish a framework for examining this topic from a communication perspective. Second, three approaches to the study of organizational control will be examined to illustrate how different scholars make sense of this process. Finally, five different management strategies will be compared against each other to illustrate the evolution of organizational control practices over time.

### **The Double Interact of Control**

Phillip Tompkins and George Cheney provide a three-part framework for examining organizational control from a communication perspective, which they term the double interact of control. The first two steps of this control process are based on the basic interaction model of communication often taught in introductory courses: (1) *A* sends a message to *B*; (2) *B* provides feedback to *A*. Tompkins and Cheney add a third step to this model to create a double-interact sequence. The first part of the double interact of control is described as the direction step: (1) *A* (the organizational leader) gives an instruction or direction to *B* (the subordinate). The second step in this exchange is called evaluation: (2) *A* examines *B*'s feedback to the initial message in order to determine how the direction was interpreted. The final part of this process is the discipline step: (3) *A* provides *B* with an incentive for complying with the initial direction. If *B* has responded appropriately, he or she might receive some sort of reward. However, if *B* has performed in an unsatisfactory manner, *A* will provide some sort of punishment in an attempt to correct *B*'s behavior.

The significance of the double-interact model is that it places communication central to the process of establishing and maintaining a system of organizational control. This model provides scholars with a framework they can use to examine and identify specific communication strategies used during particular steps of the organizational control process.

## **Approaches to the Study of Organizational Control**

**Organizational** control is a broad and interdisciplinary research area. However, there are three distinct lines of scholarship that have had a particularly significant influence on communication research.

### ***Simple Versus Structural Control***

Economist Richard Edwards describes two different approaches to organizational control: simple control and structural control. Simple-control strategies require the intervention of a person to direct member behavior and maintain order in the system (e.g., a crew boss). In contrast, structural control strategies move the control process out of the hands of individual supervisors and into the physical or discursive environment of the organization itself (e.g., machines, rule systems). Edwards' two categories differentiate between interpersonal and mediated strategies of managerial influence. Simple control provides members with a clear source of authority to respond to and react against. However, structural forms of control depersonalize the managerial process and embed authority into the system itself. Structural control complicates member resistance efforts because there is no clear source of authority for workers to communicate with or to challenge.

### ***Normative Versus Rational Control***

Management scholars Stephen Barley and Gideon Kunda offer a slightly different approach to the study of organizational control. They categorize management strategies as either normative or rational. Normative-control processes motivate and influence member behavior by encouraging the development of strong personal relationships within the work environment. **Organizational** leaders use the communal and social aspects of the organization to persuade their subordinates to adopt attitudes and behaviors supportive of managerial objectives (e.g., happy workers are productive workers). In contrast, rational-control strategies influence member behavior by providing workers with well-designed tasks, clear objectives, and reasonable incentives (e.g., a carefully trained worker is a productive worker). In a rational-control system, order is maintained and collective effort achieved when members understand their roles in the larger system and/or lack the resources necessary to effectively resist managerial objectives. Barley and Kunda's approach highlights ways that various social and task communication strategies can serve as sources of power within the organizational environment.

### ***Obtrusive Versus Unobtrusive Control***

Communication scholars Tompkins and Cheney differentiate between obtrusive and unobtrusive organizational control strategies. They argue that obtrusive strategies rely upon external sources of influence to direct member behavior and accomplish organizational objectives (e.g., rule systems, machinery, supervisors). These control strategies are imposed upon the individual from the external environment. Obtrusive-management techniques do not presume organizational subordinates are willing or active participants in the control process. In contrast, unobtrusive-control strategies require organizational members to play an active rather than passive role in their own management. **Organizational** subordinates are encouraged to forge a close bond or identification with the system as a whole. Unobtrusively controlled workers embrace the organization's values as their own and use them to make organizationally appropriate decisions. Tompkins and Cheney's approach to this topic highlights the potentially interactive nature of the organizational control process. Communication scholars might draw upon this perspective to examine how member identification might be used as both a mechanism of organizational control and a strategy of member resistance.

## **Strategies of Organizational Control**

There are a wide variety of methods organizational leaders might use to influence the behavior of their members. The five strategies listed below are commonly referenced within the organizational control literature.

### ***Simple Control***

Simple control requires the direct intervention of an authority figure to accomplish all three aspects of the

control process. A supervisor provides the initial direction to the worker, evaluates his or her performance, and then administers some sort of disciplinary action (reward or punishment). This control strategy relies upon the strength of the relationship between the supervisor and the subordinate to maintain order in the system. It is also a fairly obtrusive management strategy; the worker is not required to internalize or actively participate in the control process. This can be a powerful management strategy because the supervisor is directly involved with the entire process (e.g., the manager sees and hears everything). However, this system can become compromised if the organization becomes too large or complex to control through line of sight management. As a result, simple control systems tend to work best in small organizations.

### **Technical Control**

Technical control relies on the intervention of some physical device (e.g., machine, computer software) to substitute for the presence of a supervisor. Technical control strategies became particularly popular during the Industrial Revolution, when technological innovations and the mass production of goods encouraged organizations to grow in size. Rather than rely upon a manager to tell employees how fast to work, a machine (e.g., a conveyor belt) can direct the pace of the production. Technological devices can also evaluate the degree to which members are deviating from their assigned tasks or violating office policies (e.g., software that alerts management when a worker visits a restricted Web site). Workers might even receive disciplinary information from an inanimate device rather than from a supervisor (e.g., automated e-mail warnings sent to workers when they fail to submit reports on time). Technical control enables managerial messages to be mediated through external devices, limiting the ability of workers to question or resist these directives. Technical control can be an effective management strategy when the work performance is relatively repetitive and the supervisor's span of control is too broad to monitor all subordinates through direct observation.

### **Bureaucratic Control**

Bureaucratic control strategies rely upon rule systems to influence member behavior and facilitate collective action. Technical control may work well for regulating the behavior of some organizational members, but it is not necessarily an effective strategy for influencing the behavior of knowledge workers or managerial staff. Instead, organizational leaders may attempt to direct the behavior of these workers through the creation of rule systems that carefully define how to perform specific tasks and make decisions (e.g., employee handbooks and training programs). Bureaucratic rule systems may also be used to evaluate member compliance with organizational directives (e.g., standardized performance measures). Finally, organizational policies can discipline member behavior (e.g., bonuses determined by a predetermined formula rather than left to managerial discretion). Although supervisors may still be physically present within the work environment, bureaucratic control strategies reduce the time and effort they need to spend managing their subordinates. Even when there is no supervisor present, the impersonal force of a carefully designed rule system extends to all corners of the organization and provides a consistent and rational basis for managerial control.

### **Cultural Control**

Cultural control strategies influence member behavior by drawing upon the communal and social aspects of organizational life. One weakness of bureaucratic control is that it is not possible to have rules for every situation. Cultural management strategies address this control challenge by persuading workers to make organizationally appropriate decisions even when there is no rule system in place to guide them.

**Organizational** leaders encourage employees to embrace organizational values as their own and use them to guide (direct) their behavior within the work environment. Cultural control persuades subordinates to forge strong personal connections with their peers and feelings of loyalty toward the organization. Cultural control is an unobtrusive managerial strategy because the locus of control moves away from the external structure of organization (rule systems, mechanized devices, supervisors) and becomes internalized within the member him or herself. Culturally controlled members identify with the organization and monitor their own behavior (evaluate and discipline) to ensure they make organizationally appropriate decisions. This is a particularly strong

management technique, but it requires that members have the opportunity to interact regularly with each other to maintain a cohesive sense of community within the work environment.

### **Concertive Control**

Concertive control is an extension of cultural management strategies. However, concertive control relies on participatory organizational techniques, such as team-based management, to promote a strong feeling of ownership and empowerment among the workers. In a concertive system, members work in concert with each other to achieve organizational objectives. Members are not only empowered to control their own behavior for the benefit of the organization, they are also encouraged to take responsibility for the actions of their peers. Everyone in the team is simultaneously a supervisor and a subordinate. Communication scholar James Barker argues that concertive control may emphasize worker participation and empowerment, but it is also one of the most restrictive and powerful forms of organizational control. The identification members feel with the organization and each other makes it particularly difficult for these individuals to resist managerial control efforts. Additionally, because these members are empowered to create their own rules and regulations, they also know where there may be weaknesses in the system. As a result, members work together to close the gaps and further reduce their own opportunities for resistance. Ironically, concertive control systems illustrate that the more freedom workers have to participate in their own management, the more controlled they can become.

—Loril M. Gossett

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### **Further Readings**

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