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**The value of strategic ambiguity in organisational communication**

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## **The value of strategic ambiguity in organisational communication**

### **Introduction**

Communication professionals and researchers have emphasised the importance of ensuring that communication can be clearly understood so that the listener or reader gets the message. Each year awards such as 'The Crystal Mark' are made to organisations that meet exacting standards for clarity. Recent research in the field of Organisational Communication has brought into question the virtues of clarity and emphasised the strategic importance of ambiguity. This article explores the case for and against the uses of ambiguity in communication. In so doing it moves beyond the relatively parochial concerns of Organisational Communication Theorists and by relating the debate to mainstream research in Organisational Studies develops a new agenda for management developers and for future research.

### **What are the arguments for and against the use of strategic ambiguity in organisational communication?**

Organisational communication is an emergent research field informed by a variety of theoretical approaches and perspectives, with different views about the nature of the relationship between organisations and communication. (Putnam et al 1999) Thus, the perspective one takes influences how communication is defined and judgments about whether a particular communication strategy is seen as positive or negative.

If we adopt the 'conduit metaphor' (Putnam et al 1999) of communication then we would argue a case against strategic ambiguity under the assumption that communication is a linear flow of information (Shannon & Weaver 1949), where the boundaries of both organisation and communication are reified (Putnam et al 1999). The argument would be that the sender needs to ensure that communication is structured clearly to allow the receiver to understand the message. However, a perspective of communication as 'Strategic Control' (Eisenberg & Gooddall 1993) would argue that strategic ambiguity is

a useful 'resource' to be deployed as a tactic for control, where the primary goal is 'organised action' rather than 'shared meaning'. A competent communicator viewed from this perspective would use strategies appropriate for the situation and consequently accomplish multiple goals, recognizing that people are socially, politically and ethically motivated and a strategic approach is necessary for control.

We shall argue that these approaches identify opposite ends of a continuum.

Our definition of strategic ambiguity is taken from Eisenberg (1984) as the purposeful use of ambiguity in communication to ensure that goals are attained. As opposed to 'clarity' where the message is designed to anticipate and limit the possible interpretations in pursuit of 'openness' (Jablin 1985).

Various labels have been used to consider ambiguity: indirectness, vagueness disqualification (Bavelas & Chovil 1986), equivocation (Putnam & Sorensen 1982). Eisenberg (1984) argues that the distinction between terms is unclear and reminds us that clarity and by extension ambiguity, is not an 'attribute of the message' but a 'relational variable' which arises through a combination of source, message and receiver factors. Clarity, seen as a continuum, reflects the degree to which the sender of a message has been able to reduce the possible interpretations so that correspondence is achieved between intention and interpretation. We shall explore those aspects of communication where strategic ambiguity might confer an advantage and those where correspondence between intention and interpretation i.e. 'clarity' might be more desirable.

In exploring these cases we shall adopt a broadly interpretive perspective, where communication is seen as socially constructed involving a plurality of meaning, symbols (Feldman & March 1981), sense making activities (Daft & Wieck 1994) and interactional goals. This view is reflected in my definition of organisational communication: as a "*process by which organising occurs*" (Johnson 1977; Putnam 1993). Where sharing information and relationship creation, evolve, are culturally dependent (Wilson 1986) and communication is viewed as the "*ongoing process that includes patterns of interaction*

*between organisational members that both emerge from and shape the nature and actions of the organisation and the events within it.”*

In the first section we shall review the case ‘for’ strategic ambiguity. We shall consider how strategic ambiguity in communication: enables management to frame and secure a common sense of purpose in the context of diversity; facilitates organisational adaptation; promotes relationship development; preserves positions of privilege; allows for deniability; facilitates the management of organisational crisis and; promotes innovation. The second half of the paper presents the case against strategic ambiguity by exploring how its impact might have negative consequences.

### **The case ‘for’ the use of strategic ambiguity – securing unified diversity**

Organisations are regularly confronted with equivocal information, which can be interpreted in a variety of ways (Huber & Daft 1987). One of the key responsibilities of leaders is to make sense of equivocal information and ‘frame’ organisational ‘reality’ (Smircich and Morgan 1982), mobilizing collective action. To be successful they must communicate their view in such a way as ‘*to appeal to the self and collective identities of individuals.*’ (Eccles & Nohria, 1992). This is particularly important in an organisation where individuals are actively seeking meaning in their work, ‘*even transcendent meaning*’ (Geertz 1983). The challenge is to create a sense of unity, “*an acceptable view of what is going on*” (Fairhurst et al 1993) whilst at the same time accommodating a plurality of goals and diversity of individuals’ sense making needs. Strategic ambiguity therefore, serves a political function (Eisenberg 1984) by allowing for multiple goals and interpretations to coexist within a common mandate. A collective response can be articulated without requiring individuals or groups to sacrifice self and group identity, and autonomy (March 1987).

An analysis of mission statements, organisational goals and symbols, illustrates the way in which strategic ambiguity can confer this particular advantage. Mission statements provide a framework of the ‘publicly announced belief system’ and guiding principles

[Swales and Rogers (1995)]. As Swales and Rogers note they deal in abstractions and feature a 'strategic level of generality and ambiguity' [Fairhurst, 1993:336] which allows the organisation to operate in political contexts. Connell & Galasinski (1998) in their analysis of the mission statements of UK Higher Education institutions, demonstrate how the judicious use of imprecision enables senior managers to satisfy the requirements of the funding council, those of their employees and their own interests.

### **Facilitating organisational adaptation**

In seeking to adapt to uncertain environments organisations need to make marginal adjustments (Mosakowski 1997). Expressing organisational goals and strategy statements in an ambiguous way enables continuous strategy adjustments (Quinn 1980) by providing 'interpretive room' (Eisenberg & Goodhall 1993). Operations and product portfolios (Eisenberg, 1984) can be changed without giving the appearance that the organisation has moved beyond its articulated charter and strategic direction. Thus, "*shifting interpretations of organisational goals*" (Eisenberg) would seem to serve the purpose of 'logical incrementalism' (Mintzberg 1980). Change is legitimized and stakeholders remain satisfied that managers are rational, logical and consistent. Managers are also provided with a resource for stretching the performance of employees.

Where goals are presented in an ambiguous way new readings allow for new rhetoric, metaphors and symbols to emerge, with the potential for the organisation to create for itself a new image (Carroll 1995). A new rhetoric can be particularly helpful to "recapture a dwindling value" (Reich 1991), in helping managers retain their credibility (Jackall 1988) and in demonstrating that managers are "progressive" (Abrahamson 1996).

New interpretations of ambiguous statements can create a captivating vision (Kissler 1991), enable consensus building and transform the organisation (Gray et al 1985). A change in the discourse enables "*a new point of reference*" to be created and the desired action becomes possible (Fairhurst 1993, 344).

For organisations to adapt successfully to a fast changing and unpredictable environment they also need to maximize organisational learning, we would suggest that strategic ambiguity could facilitate this, requiring organisational members to use their own sense making resources. This idea is consistent with the principle of Action Learning where the emphasis is upon encouraging learners to ask questions rather than seek answers.

### **Promoting development of interpersonal and group relationships**

At the level of interpersonal relationships, Eisenberg (1984) suggests that strategic ambiguity facilitates change through relational development. "*Indirectness allows the other person to chose the interpretation that suits him or her best*" (Jaworski 1993) whereas '*directness*' may leave the listener '*with no choices*' and "*elaborate utterances*" may be received as "*insincere*".

Where individuals are purposefully ambiguous the listener fills in the gaps and increased 'projection' may lead to perceived similarity and increased attraction. The result is that camaraderie can develop.

Individuals or groups faced with strategic ambiguity may develop their own privileged interpretations and code, which can increase group coherence and membership identity.

### **Preserving positions of privilege**

"*Power in organisations accrues to leaders who are able to impose an acceptable version of what is going on*" (Olsen 1985). Strategic ambiguity may help ensure that the 'version' is 'acceptable' to as many as possible and therefore, less likely to be challenged. The role of the leader (Williams & Goss (1975) is thus strengthened and perceptions of credibility are enhanced, where clearer communication might lead to reevaluations of character, questioning of leadership and thus an undermining of power. The 'deniability' of ambiguous messages is an advantage but only for those who have the power to communicate.

### **Allowing for deniability**

Eisenberg (1984) suggests that because strategic ambiguity provides 'interpretive room', deniability is facilitated. This allows the sender to keep future options open whereas clear

information forecloses future courses of action (Bok, 1983), with implications for both task and interpersonal communications. Explicit communication may lead to difficult positions when rules are violated. In intra-organisational agreements ambiguity allows for a 'lighter touch', greater flexibility in decision making and may reduce costly commitments (Aldrich & Whetten 1981). Ambiguity is thus, a useful strategy where the organisation does not want to be tied to specifics, enabling the organisation to '*venture nothing but give the appearance of giving*' (Goffman 1967).

At the level of interpersonal communication most people use ambiguity or equivocal communication from time to time, to protect other peoples' feelings and avoid the unpleasant consequences of clarity. Ambiguity allows for the preservation of face (Hamilton & Mineo 1998), where total silence or directness might cause offense (Szasz 1974). Goodall, Wilson & Waagen 1986 demonstrate the effectiveness of this strategy in appraisal. In negotiation, it offers a technique to '*keep the opposition guessing*' (Williams & Goss 1975) and provides a 'character insurance' for those who are credible. Being 'tentative', allows you to find out what the other party knows and has been shown to be more useful in negotiations where ambiguity and concealment, result in better settlements (Putnam & Jones 1982), than open communication.

### **Handling organisational crisis**

In crisis situations publics may want reassurance (Kleinfield 1985) and employees need to feel confident: strategic ambiguity allows for the organisation to communicate a message that shows it is responsive while covering up for mistakes. An ambiguous response offers a useful compromise in situations where there is incomplete information or confidentiality is an issue (Steele 1975). Clear messages about financial disasters, redundancies, or mismanagement, might damage confidence and stakeholder support. Strategic ambiguity provides a resource to soften the impact and thus, is useful for damage limitation, providing the organisation with time to work out how to communicate reality, if at all.



identity and the mission statement is seen as “*little more than window dressing*” (Fairhurst et al 1997).

### **Inhibit the management of external relations**

Imprecision in external communications might inhibit the securing of effective feedback from the external environment (Cheney & Christensen 1997) and thus, the organisation may lose touch with reality. External audiences may call into question the trustworthiness of senior management and they may demand a closer auditing of their activities in the absence of precise information. Too much ambiguity, in for example published accounts, may lead to publics questioning the integrity and reputation of the organisation (Fombrun and Shanley, 1990). The organisation’s identity (Fairhurst et al 1997) may be diluted (Langeter 1992) with consequences for survival. If stakeholders perceive the mission statement as “*more poetry than product*” (Swales & Rogers 1995), doubts might be cast on management’s ability to manage.

### **Deflect behaviour away from organisational goals**

Ambiguity might lead to opposing views of reality resulting in conflict that deflects effort away from organisational goals. Interpretations which are ‘antithetical’ to the organisation’s interests might result (Fairhurst et al 1997), or there might be a more fundamental questioning of the power base of top management and the direction of the organisation. Groups might decide to interpret ambiguity to their own advantage at the expense of the organisation. Those best equipped to deal with uncertainty will gain power (Hinings and Hickson, 1974) and thus, strategic ambiguity may favour groups who have the ability to organise more quickly, increasing inequality and unrest within the organisation. It could be considered that this is the norm where organisational structures reflect societal structures but from a radical or feminist perspective if strategic ambiguity is the tool of capitalism or patriarchy, then one would present a strong argument against it.

### **Inhibit adaptation**

Strategic ambiguity does not always produce an environment that is conducive to change. Research by Barker (1993) and Markham (1996) shows that individuals and groups may attempt to 'naturalize' ambiguity and routinize their responses rather than develop new ways of behaving.

The solutions that are developed in the context of strategic ambiguity may be deemed to be inappropriate and/or impractical and this may lead to frustration and cynicism that makes employees less prepared to embrace change.

Working through responses to change without clear direction and control takes time and this can be detrimental to an organisation where the solution is clear and speed of response is critical.

### **Inhibit relationship development**

Faced with imprecise cues individuals may reveal aspects of themselves which others might find distasteful or unattractive, which would hinder relationships and negate the value of strategic ambiguity. Individuals and groups may develop their own privilege codes and interpretations but this might be antithetical to the interests of those deploying strategic ambiguities and uncomfortable for those trying to penetrate or relate to the group.

### **Weaken the management of crisis, safety and security**

In situations where safety, security or legal implications are paramount and it is important to minimize error, strategic ambiguity may be dysfunctional (Weick & Roberts 1993). Clarity, speed and certainty of response are critical and "*concealing information*" might "*lead to the worsening of some problems over time, making them less manageable in the future*" (Eisenberg & Witten) 1982). Strategic ambiguity in so far as it enables individuals to evade accountability and responsibility, may also undermine the ability of the organisation to respond effectively to crisis situations.

### **Vitiate trust**

Much of the OD literature (e.g. Bennis 1969; Argyris 1970) suggests that trust lies at the heart of communication efforts, enhances relationships, improves performance and leads to more ethical decision making (Pettit et al 1990). Strategic ambiguity might be interpreted as concealment and fuel distrust, politicking and unprincipled responses. A Macchiavellian culture might develop where trust, a critical feature of communication and decision-making (Pettit et al 1990), is absent.

### **Increase stress and demotivate employees**

Individuals vary in their needs for openness (Jablin 1981). Some individuals are more suited to bureaucratic organisations where policies and rules state clearly expected behaviours and culture reinforces such. Ambiguity can mean the work environment is like 'shifting sand' (Markham 1996) which for some, may be uncomfortable. Barker's (1993) research shows that even self-managed teams evolve strategies to reduce ambiguity. If this is not possible and managers do not appear to provide answers, role conflict and stress might inhibit performance. Individual needs for explicit feedback and uncertainty reduction also vary. If openness can increase employee satisfaction (Redding 1972), then strategic ambiguity might reduce satisfaction, detract from leader/member relationships and impact on motivation and performance, particularly where goals cannot be understood and feedback is imprecise or non-specific. If empowerment has full and open communication at its heart (Pacanowski 1988) then staff may not feel empowered.

### **Weaken induction and acculturation processes**

Clear communication is important in the induction and acculturation process, in respect of task mastery, role clarification and social integration (Morrison 1993): ambiguity therefore, would be detrimental. The social exchange costs of too much information seeking (Miller and Jablin 1991) might inhibit questioning, which might then restrict the development of the appropriate interpretations of ambiguity.

### **May compromise accountability and be unethical**

Power and communication processes are not neutral. Dominant groups have more access to information and are able to manipulate symbols, interpretations and meaning (Deetz 1985) and thus may use ambiguity to 'shield' themselves from close scrutiny. (Eisenberg & Goodall, 1993). If this allows communicators to avoid accountability, to cover up bad practice and exploit others then one would argue against such a strategy.

Paul and Strbiack (1997) suggest that while strategic ambiguity is a valuable tactic in organizational communication, the deniability of strategically ambiguous messages in ways, which allow for escaping of blame, limit the usefulness of the strategy for ethical communications. They suggest that while strategic ambiguity may be an alternative for communicators who espouse a '*rational, logically consistent ethical system*' it is not ethical when communicator's behaviours are incongruent with their espoused ethics. It is also unethical where it has derived from management pressure to act in a way that is contrary to espoused ethics.

### **Conclusion**

The discussion demonstrates that strategic ambiguity can play an effective part in enhancing the process of organizing through providing 'interpretative room' and in this sense provides an important corrective to the 'conduit metaphor' which equates effectiveness with clarity. However it is also evident that strategic ambiguity on occasion may inhibit effectiveness. In overall terms the consideration of the case for and against seems to point to a contingency view. Eisenberg & Witten (1987) suggest the need to take account of individual goals and styles, relational contingencies and the extent to which history and organizational and environmental contingencies may place constraints related to tasks.

Whilst this would seem to provide a satisfactory resolution in terms of making sense of the research to-date there are a number of questions which have yet to be addressed. The

critical point here is that the evidence in the main relates to single factor studies of particular aspects of communication and not the implementation of a coherent strategy. It is important to understand not only when it is appropriate to aim for clarity and when strategic ambiguity is useful but also to understand the effect that a combination of the two might have. How would employees react to a planned communication strategy that combined ambiguity and clarity? Would they simply perceive it as Machiavellian, or as a failure to exercise leadership?

Most of the studies of strategic ambiguity point up a coarse grained distinction which may not be tenable at the level of social interaction where clarity and ambiguity may be deployed tactically on a moment to moment basis. Taken together these points underline a major weakness in much of the research to-date. Eisenberg and others, emphasise the importance of regarding strategic ambiguity as a relational concept but for the most part studies which explicitly examine strategic ambiguity give scant attention to the 'receivers' interpretation and the way sense-making unfolds in particular contexts, on a moment to moment basis. This is crucial because no matter how explicitly and clearly a message can be constructed, the receiver still has to undertake a considerable amount of interpretative work to see what the message means in this situation (Garfinkel 1967). What is clear and what is ambiguous is contextually bound and so are the conclusions that receivers draw about the intentions of the 'sender'. So in terms of addressing the case for and against strategic ambiguity there is a gap in our present understanding. Later research by Eisenberg and Goodall (1993) suggests a way of addressing these analytical concerns. This research draws on the Structuration Theory developed by Giddens (1979), and regards communication as the '*moment to moment working out of the tension between individual creativity and organisational constraint*' (p31). Thus, any fundamental consideration of the case for and against strategic ambiguity must examine the detailed in-situ interactional work involved.

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