case studies in courageous organizational communication

Research and Practice for Effective Workplaces

Alexander Lyon

"This book vibrantly shows how to create a winning formula for organizational success by becoming collaborative, communicative, transparent, engaging, and COURAGEOUS! Alexander Lyon has written a go-to guide for practitioners, and a perfect resource for organizational, management, and business courses."

—*Sarah J. Tracy, Arizona State University-Tempe*

"This is an exceptionally written book on effectiveness and ineffectiveness in organizational communication. Its numerous case studies provide excellent examples of the pitfalls and successes associated with organizational communication. I recommend this book to both students and leaders."

—*Robert R. Ulmer,*
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Alexander Lyon (PhD, University of Colorado, Boulder) is Associate Professor at The College at Brockport, State University of New York. His research has appeared in *Communication Monographs, Management Communication Quarterly, Journal of Applied Communication Research*, and others, as well as in numerous book chapters.

Alexander Lyon presents 31 case studies in organizational communication that explore issues of courageous communication. Through case studies on many well-known organizations such as Google, the Miami Dolphins, NASA, Comcast, the Boy Scouts of America, Netflix, Taco Bell, Massachusetts General Hospital, Merck Pharmaceuticals, and others, the book articulates a communication-based model of courage around four themes: Courageous communication is collaborative, upward, transparent, and engaging.

The book presents both effective and cautionary portraits of organizations as they responded to complex issues. It situates the case studies in existing literature and provides practical guidance for enacting courageous communication in professional settings.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Lyon, Alexander, author.
Title: Case studies in courageous organizational communication:
research and practice for effective workplaces / Alexander Lyon.
Description: New York: Peter Lang, 2016.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
Identifiers: LCCN 2016032916 | ISBN 978-1-4331-3124-0 (hardcover: alk. paper)
ISBN 978-1-4331-3123-3 (paperback: alk. paper) | ISBN 978-1-4539-1875-3 (ebook pdf)
ISBN 978-1-4331-3593-4 (epub) | ISBN 978-1-4331-3594-1 (mobi)
Subjects: LCSH: Communication in organizations.
Classification: LCC HD30.3 .L96 2016 | DDC 658.4/5--dc23
DOI: 10.3726/978-1-4539-1875-3
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2016032916

Bibliographic information published by **Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek**.
Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the "Deutsche
Nationalbibliografie"; detailed bibliographic data are available
on the Internet at http://dnb.d-nb.de/.

29 Broadway, 18th floor, New York, NY 10006
www.peterlang.com

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Acknowledgments

This book was only possible because of a long list of people for whom I thank God. My good friend Julien Mirivel helped me identify the focus of the book early in the process. He was an instrumental sounding board and source of encouragement. Joe Chesebro challenged me to "just make an outline," which I did. I would like to thank Mary Savigar and the team at Peter Lang who believed in the project and were excited to publish it. I'm also blessed to have supportive parents, Ken and Alicia Lyon. My mother, with a PhD in English, was particularly helpful in the writing process throughout this long adventure. My wife, Erin, provided numerous rounds of feedback at various stages of the book's development. My son, Soren, was very patient with me as I typed away but equally relieved when the book was done. Students in my advanced undergraduate and graduate organizational communication courses at The College at Brockport, State University of New York inspired many of the case studies in this book. Numerous cases—such as Foxconn (Jennifer Zhang), Miami Dolphins (Nick Wockasen), Nalgene (Julie Goonan), Boy Scouts (Mark Shipley), Domino's (Kelsey Hartigan), JetBlue (Andrea Sillick), and Abercrombie & Fitch (Tia Kennedy)—came to my attention through in-class projects, discussions, and during back-and-forth exchanges between teacher and student that I can only describe as ideal. I would also like to thank the anonymous reviewers at each stage who pushed my thinking forward. Lastly, I would like to acknowledge the long-time guidance and inspiration of two mentors, Stan Deetz and Robert R. Ulmer.

Introduction to Courageous Communication in Organizations

When I was visiting a friend's house, his young son, Michael, was hitting a rotten stump with a hammer. My friend bought the hammer at a yard sale as a special gift to signal a new level of responsibility for his 6-year-old son. The hammer instantly became Michael's favorite item in the world. At first, Michael was handling his grown-up tool well, but he quickly grew bored of pummeling the poor old stump. As several other children played in the yard around him, Michael looked for new objects to hammer—some dirt, the driveway, and then the tire of his father's new Jeep. His father called out a few times, "Please don't hammer that!" "Be careful, Michael!" Michael's choices went downhill quickly. We soon spotted him on the swing set, twirling his hammer above his head like Thor as other children played just inches away. Michael's father had seen enough and said, "That's not what hammers are for. Give me that!" The experiment was over. Michael surrendered the tool.

This book juxtaposes 31 real-world case studies that show both problematic and productive communication approaches. The cases feature some of the most well-known companies in the world such as Google, GlaxoSmithKline, Nestlé Purina, the Miami Dolphins, General Motors, JetBlue, Taco Bell, Massachusetts General

Hospital, Merck, Zappos, Comcast, the Boy Scouts, and many others. Some of these organizations are not so different from Michael. They gravitated toward a few key "tools," systems, and philosophies and often overused them. As employees, we may do the same. We develop shorthand ways of interacting with others and pull out default solutions when problems emerge. These ways of responding become metaphorical tools we use almost automatically to handle everyday situations. Organizations develop strongly preferred ways of seeing and doing things to reduce the ambiguity of life and move the ball forward (Weick, 1979, 2000). Unfortunately, like Michael, they sometimes use tools for the wrong purposes that do more harm than good. Deetz, Tracy, and Simpson (2000) put it this way:

> Old habits and automatic responses are hard to recognize and change. … As with riding a bicycle, one's early learnings never quite go away. Most people carry about thousands of social recipes for handling routine life events. They have used these over and over again for most of their lives. And most have worked reasonably well or they would have gone away some time ago. When ways of responding become entrenched, even repeated failure rarely leads to change. Many people assume if they just do what they usually do only with more strength and tenacity they will succeed. Only focused attention can make these automatic response patterns visible, let alone provide a motivation for change. (p. 40)

This book is fundamentally about examining four common ways of viewing and practicing communication in organizational settings and suggests an alterative. Specifically, many organizations view and practice communication as a tool for ***control***, as flowing ***top-down***, as ***secretive***, and as ***impersonal***. I agree that communication like this still has a viable place, but I suggest that these four approaches have been overplayed to the point of hurting many organizations' effectiveness. As the quote from Deetz et al. suggests, these approaches may have been useful at a certain time and place, but a continued emphasis on them in today's environment will not take organizations to the next level. This book makes these four common approaches more visible and suggests alternative ways of viewing and practicing communication in organizations that is more courageous. This chapter defines communication from various perspectives, describes a model of courageous communication, and outlines the rest of the book.

Models of Communication

Three models of communication have relevance here. The first two are necessary steps to understand the third. The classic model of communication is often referred to as the ***information transfer model***. Sometimes called the *transmission* model, it is the first one taught to most college freshmen. In it, a speaker or *sender encodes* a *message* and sends it through a *channel* to a *receiver* or listener who *decodes* the message (Shannon & Weaver, 1948). The model presents a one-way, linear conceptualization of communication and has been critiqued as a narrow view of a rather complex process (Craig, 1999). It sees communication as mainly the process of transmitting information or data from one point to another. The message flows through the metaphorical pipeline to its destination. It has been called a "container" model because the meaning of a message is contained in the words. This objective, fixed model was developed and articulated by Claude Shannon and Warren Weaver in late 1940s when people were still making sense of the telephone and related technologies. A sign of the times, this theory explains the way a telephone or radio works quite well but misses many important aspects of face-to-face communication.

In the 1960s, Paul Watzlawick built on the work of Gregory Bateson to develop the ***transactional model of communication*** (Watzlawick, Bavelas, & Jackson, 1967). It compensated for some of the limitations and frustrations with the first model. From this new view, communication was a two-way process, a transaction or exchange between communicators. This model allowed for important aspects of face-to-face communication like the *context*, *nonverbal cues*, and *feedback*. When considering nonverbal communication, for example, both individuals in a conversation were always sending a message of some kind whether they spoke or not. Even listening silently or perhaps not listening well sends the other person a message. For this reason, the oddly worded statement, *you cannot not communicate* is associated with this model. In other words, we are always communicating. From this model's view, meaning is not fixed or contained in words. Rather, it is established in the minds of the communicators as they interact back and forth and is socially determined. In this book, I refer to the concepts in both models because they often provide the most useful labels to explain an issue.

However, the third and most salient model for this book, the ***constitutive model of communication***, was articulated best by Robert Craig (1999). He explained what the previous models missed. Communication is constitutive. It does not merely transmit information that already exists. Communication creates and establishes our lives and relationships. In a similar fashion, Karl Weick wrote how "organization" was far too fixed a term to represent the way various workplaces functioned. Instead, he (1979) preferred to discuss the constantly active processes of "organizing" that establish our workplaces. In other words, the process of organizing comes first and builds what we look at and describe in more concrete terms over time (e.g., the building, the brand, etc.). In the same way, communication is the main generative process that creates our relationships, organizations, and society. Craig (1999) explained it this way:

> Communication, from a communicational perspective, is not a secondary phenomenon that can be explained by antecedent psychological, sociological, cultural, or economic factors; rather, communication itself is the primary, constitutive social process that explains all these other factors. (p. 126)

Said more simply by Manning (2014), "Communication is not a mere tool for expressing social reality but is also a means of creating it" (p. 433). This is the view I take in this book. Communication is not a secondary activity that serves more important functions (e.g., finance, accounting, IT, etc.). It is the central generative activity in organizational life. Improving communication is not so much about expressing ourselves more clearly. It is about transforming our organizations through different communication practices (Deetz, 1995). For better or worse, our daily communication practices create our organizational realities. For this reason the model of courageous communication below holds up an ideal to which organizations can strive.

Courageous Communication

As we look at the landscape of corporate scandals since 2000, clearly courage in organizational settings is in short supply. Therefore, case studies and research on courage are sorely needed. Jablin (2006), who noted this gap, stated that courage is obviously more complex than "doing the right thing" or "following your convictions" (p. 100). These notions appeal to a higher sense of duty, moral obligation, and a firmness of mind that all resonate, but courage is clearly more layered. As Jablin (2006) explained, the word is often tossed around in conversations about professional life but is seldom developed as a specific set of concepts, ideals, and practices. In professional settings, courage has clear communicative features. In a foundational text titled *Managerial Courage*, Hornstein (1986) described what many of the case studies in my text show. Organizations put forth constant energy to maintain the status quo and the way things have always been done:

> Organizations always harbor powerful forces which discourage employees from questioning the value of established practices. By carefully dispensing perks and promotions, and by using a host of other organizational blackjacks, these forces easily find persuasive means of communicating that individual self-interest is better served by silently assenting to what is than by openly speaking out on behalf of what might be. (p. 2)

Hornstein described the "menacing protection" by organizations to reinforce traditional practices even when continuing to do so can cause the organization "illness and even death" (p. 2). He explained that, at its root, courage often means expressing ideas that run contrary to the group's current consensus or at other times, perhaps, resisting the temptation to jump on the latest fad or bandwagon. Hornstein's text has clear communication implications throughout.

Jablin (2006) elaborates on Hornstein and his own perspective on courage as a fertile but still seldom explored area of organizational communication. He stated that the most obvious cases of courageous communication in organizational settings involved both internal and external whistleblowing, various aspects of the leader-follower relationship such as upward communication or dissent, what is not talked about, openness, and organizational socialization and assimilation processes. This list is not comprehensive but offers a starting point for reflecting on courageous communication activities in organizational settings. Jablin also suggested that courage can be (a) offensive, "as the courage of the charge, the attack" or to take action to change a situation for the better, or (b) defensive, "standing one's ground under the face of attack" (p. 106). Similarly, May (2012) stated,

> Ethical organizations have employees who have the courage to identify, assess, and resolve ethical dilemmas that may negatively affect the organization or its stakeholders. Courageous organizations have the courage to admit mistakes, reject conformity, respond to injustice, and defy standard industry practices or laws that may be unethical. In addition, courageous organizations seek not only to respond to ethical challenges but also to anticipate them; they exhibit the positive courage to be ethical. (p. 11)

At its center, thus, courage involves taking risks often by doing what is unpopular by ethical, organizational, or industry standards. Inspired, in part, by the work of Hornstein, Jablin, and May this book offers an expanded model of courageous communication.

Courageous communication goes against the consensus, the way organizations commonly handle issues and moves toward something better. For the purposes of this book, I define courageous organizational communication as follows: *Communication is courageous when it a) stands against common but minimally effective and even harmful practices and b) pursues more effective and sustainable strategies, even if doing so is unpopular in a given context.* As such, I present four dominant communication tensions that most organizational members have experienced at one time or another. As implied by the earlier descriptions of courage and shown in the rest of this book, many organizations have traditionally favored *controlling*, *downward*, *secretive*, and *impersonal* communication. These four approaches represent the status quo and default communication "best practices." I suggest four alternatives of the courageous communication model:

- Courageous communication moves from controlling to ***collaborative***
- Courageous communication moves from top-down to ***upward***
- Courageous communication moves from secretive to ***transparent***
- Courageous communication moves from impersonal to ***engaging***

Each of these four components is defined and spelled out in detail in the text's four sections.

Clearly, some level of controlling, top-down, secretive, and impersonal communication will always exist in organizational life as a matter of necessity. To use Hornstein's phrase, they are "established practice[s]" for a reason. The research and case studies in this book show, however, too many organizations overemphasize these traditional approaches to communication in ways that have done more harm than good. I offer the four elements of courageous communication not as replacements for but alternatives to these traditional approaches. Further, like any concept, other ways of articulating courageous communication certainly exist and should by all means continue. As noted, the term "courage" is not easily defined. The four central components or themes here advance a particular view of courageous communication that gathers the types of practices many readers will admire under one conceptual roof.

This model has both practical and ethical justifications. From a practical standpoint, the case studies show the untapped advantages of collaborative, upward, transparent, and engaging communication. Despite the benefits, these practices often involve going against the grain. The players in the cases who followed these courageous practices did so for the good of the company, often in the face of resistance within the organization or in contrast to broader industry "common sense" or accepted "best practices." In addition to practical advantages, another key element of courage is that it calls us to a higher standard that goes beyond self-interest. Thus, each of the four research themes of the book corresponds to four ethical standards to ground this view of courageous communication in a clear moral foundation. First, the practice of collaboration is informed by a *dialogic* ethic in contrast to more linear or monologic approaches to communication. Second, the call for more upward communication is grounded in the *utilitarian* standard of *promoting the greatest good for the greatest number of people*. Third, the need for transparent communication is supported by the ethical standard of *significant choice*. Fourth, engaging communication is drawn from the *I-Thou* ethical perspective on communicating with others. Taken separately, each of these four research themes and ethical standards can stand on their own. Taken together, the case studies show courage as their common characteristic.

The Format of This Book

Within these four themes, the 31 case studies here span a wide range of industries and issues: airline, pharmaceuticals, Internet and telecommunication, manufacturing, food service, healthcare, and many others. The cases also touch on a wide variety of issues from food safety, college sports, frivolous lawsuits, product design, defective products, customer backlash, employee treatment, mismanagement, and others. In about half the case studies, organizations made decisions and took actions that made a situation worse. These aligned closely with the traditional default communication practices that many organizations use: controlling, top-down, secretive, and impersonal. In the other half of the case studies, the organizations made decisions and took actions that the book positions as courageous. These organizations' actions aligned closely with collaborative, upward, transparent, and engaging communication, even though they experienced some degree of organizational or industry pressure to do otherwise.

It would be tempting to see these counter-point themes as sorted into "bad" and "good." The spirit of this book, for example, is not to say that control is bad and collaboration is good. More accurately, the book looks at what can happen when practices like control, top-down communication, etc. are emphasized too much. Of course, in some cases it is difficult to see any good or to empathize deeply with those who made mistakes. When a space shuttle disintegrates on reentry or a company goes bankrupt, something went very wrong indeed that deserves attention. As such, this book does not take a "right vs. right" approach common in some useful case study books (e.g., May, 2012), but in the majority of cases, plenty of room for disagreement and diverse opinions exist. Even cases that look unambiguous on the surface provide space for different opinions and a variety of entry points for robust discussions. Further, the case studies generally focus on a particular issue that cannot possibly capture all of the nuances people experience at work over the long run. But they do allow us to look at a snapshot of a particular time and place. Sometimes the snapshot shows an organization at a good moment and sometimes at a moment they wish wasn't caught on camera. All of these moments are instructive and serve as a catalyst for further discussion. They offer an opportunity to draw out lessons and consider the nature of courageous communication in organizational settings. Many of the organizations featured are familiar and have existed for decades, but some are newer. With some exceptions, I chose 2000 and forward in terms of when the central activities featured in the case took place. My goal was to select not only cases from the last few years but also to provide enough variety of issues and industries to show relevant practices discussed across time and contexts.

The reader may also notice a strong theme of leadership. This is intentional because people clearly influence organizations. Since I assume a constitutive view of communication, leaders come into focus because they shape their contexts profoundly. Those who hold official positions have a special responsibility to make decisions on behalf of those that follow them. This book, however, is meant for employees and leaders at every level. Thus, terms like "leader," "manager," "supervisor," "follower," "employee," and "member" include the full range of scenarios. Even a new hire and front-line employee can lead by example at any given moment. Sometimes the use of these terms grows out of specific research discussed in a given segment. In other instances, I use these terms interchangeably to include the widest variety of contributors to organizational life.

The book's four parts discuss collaborative, upward, transparent, and engaging communication. Each section features a theme in the model of courageous communication: (a) The beginning of each case-study chapter provides a brief overview of the issues to provide a conceptual vocabulary and research context for the cases that follow. (b) The central feature in each part is a collection of seven to eight mid-length case studies. Both the number and average length of the cases provide the reader multiple industries, issues, and angles. (c) Each part of the book then concludes with a tips, tools, and resources chapter that draws from the case studies and existing literature to ground the advice. It is important to note that the order of the book's major sections is not particularly important. I chose to begin with control because it emerged as a recurring and perhaps root element supporting top-down, secretive, and impersonal communication to various degrees. Like Michael who wanted to use his beloved hammer in some not-always-helpful ways, organizations must look for better communication tools to create long-term success. My goal, thus, is to equip readers with a conceptual vocabulary, a robust set of case studies, and some practical skills to apply to the workplace.

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Part I

Moving from Control to Collaboration

1 Controlling Communication and Case Studies

Most conversations are simply monologues delivered in the presence of a witness.

—Margaret Miller

Years ago, I worked briefly for a very controlling supervisor who had a raw style of interacting. Several times a day, she reminded everybody about important procedures and pointed out almost every mistake we made. She was clearly the most experienced person in our department and had excellent technical skills. Still, her clipped, corrective communication short-circuited what might have otherwise been pleasant or even inspiring conversations. Instead, she micro-managed everybody to the point of frustration, did little to help the organization achieve its goals, and hurt her own credibility. Strictly speaking, control is not "wrong," is clearly one component of a manager's responsibility, and has a place. However, she mistakenly overused it as a stock response. This chapter looks at the various ways people use control counterproductively. The first part introduces the conceptual landscape of control, and the second presents four case studies where control played a damaging role: Enron, Foxconn, Jim Beam, and the Miami Dolphins.

Controlling Communication

At its core, controlling communication flows in a linear, one-way direction. People with this approach spend their time steering conversations, telling others what to do, and imposing their ideas into others' heads. This ***monologic form of communication*** involves "some form of control, utilization, domination, or manipulation" (Yoshikawa, 1977, p. 103). You may have experienced, for instance, leaders with an ***autocratic style***, which aligns closely with notions of control. As Cherry (2014) writes, "Autocratic leadership involves absolute, authoritarian control over a group" (para. 1). These leaders limit others' participation in decision making, seek little input, and communicate through directives (Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001). While autocratic leaders can be effective in certain situations, conversations with them are usually about deadlines, priorities, and other task-related activities and emphasize their power distance over followers. Perhaps for these reasons, even if people anticipate a favorable outcome when working under autocratic leaders, they are more likely to exit a group compared to those working with democratic leaders (Van Vugt, Jepson, Hart, & De Cremer, 2004). The way a leader relates to others, thus, often matters more to people than the outcome of the work.

Research has long recognized that some level of authority and control is an expected part of leaders' job descriptions. As Richmond, Davis, Saylor, and McCroskey (1984) explain, most researchers who have studied power and control conclude that leaders are, in part, "responsible for directing, coordinating, and guiding subordinates' activity so that organizational objectives may be reached" (p. 86). Most leaders' years of experience qualify them to help employees learn new skills or guide them. However, even early research on an autocratic approach frames this style in an unflattering light that may resonate with readers' experiences. For example, Rosenfeld and Plax's (1975) foundational study contrasting autocratic and democratic styles showed that individuals with the former also typically lacked insight about themselves, manipulated others for their own benefit, did not consider others' feelings, and did not make "any show of treating [others] as people" (p. 208). A controlling approach is not limited to leaders. Employees at all levels may respond this way if positioned to do so.

An often unspoken belief is that a controlling approach is the best way to get things done. Most of us know people we would characterize as micro-managers or even bona fide "control freaks" who manage others' tasks and insist that things be done their way. This mindset has led to unfortunate expressions like "managers think, employees do," "do as you're told," or "good employees [like children] are seen and not heard" that distance employees from a sense of agency and initiative. Controlling individuals may check in on others' tasks on a daily basis and readily point out perceived mistakes before duties are even completed. These conversations do not normally involve a two-way, back-and-forth exchange of ideas or provide the opportunity for others to voice their opinions. Even though frequently discussed in a negative light, control is sometimes necessary, at least in low doses. When less restrained, however, a control-oriented person can frustrate others' drive. More recent research has gone beyond the simple autocratic-democratic continuum and delves deeper into the various ways controlling communication emerges in the workplace.

Types of Control

Organizations today employ a variety of strategies in addition to "bossy" or overly directive individuals. Our daily work experience is often layered with intersecting systems that act as obstacles and feel like stifling restrictions. ***Simple control***, the most basic and common form, consists of an authority figure telling a subordinate what to do. As Bullis and Tompkins (1989) explain, this type "involves simple overt direction and supervision. Straightforward commands are issued. Compliance with commands is monitored and contributors are corrected as needed" (p. 288). Depending upon its intensity, simple control most closely resembles the autocratic style mentioned earlier and is sometimes overused as a primary strategy for interacting with others. Organizations also establish ***bureaucratic control*** through the numerous steps, rules, and procedures employees must follow to accomplish work (Tompkins & Cheney, 1985). Workers at all levels sometimes complain about "bureaucracy" or "red tape" that encourages *in*-the-box thinking. The sometimes-hundreds of rules employees must follow make innovation difficult. ***Technical control*** (Bullis & Tompkins, 1989) has many developing forms. Essentially, it integrates simple or bureaucratic control into technology. The assembly line is a typical example, but cell phones, computers, and countless other technologies control our tasks and even tie us to work after hours. Video surveillance, swipe cards, and other monitoring technologies keep track of keyboard strokes, email content, phone calls, and visited websites. Simple, bureaucratic, and technical controls share the same goal: compliance of individuals to organizations' rules, policies, and procedures.

Groups, teams, and social relationships also exert control. Several overlapping terms capture these inherently communicative dynamics. For instance, we experience ***cultural control*** when the norms, rituals, and values of an organization guide our behavior (Deal & Kennedy, 1982). Strong cultures guide actions in organizationally prescribed directions. New members often learn the ropes by following or violating expectations they did not know existed. While many expectations remain unspoken, they shape activities nonetheless. We experience a general sense of ***social control*** (e.g., Mumby, 1993) in our groups and interpersonal relationships. Our ties and connections in a network bind us to others in a web that shapes and reinforces attitudes and values (Yang & Kim, 2013). Group members maintain their influence and social currency in the group, in part, by conforming to the group's norms, expectations, and mutual interests. At a more intense level, we police ourselves and fellow co-workers to ensure that everybody conforms to sometimes unreasonable expectations. Tompkins and Cheney (1985) call this ***concertive control*** because the group acts "in concert" to control themselves and each other. As Papa, Auwal, and Singhal (1997) describe, "the locus of control shifts significantly from management to workers who collaborate to create rules and norms that govern their behavior" (p. 221). Some research (e.g., Barker & Cheney 1994) shows that concertive control can be even more powerful than traditional top-down supervisory control because everybody in the group enforces expectations rather than a single supervisor. No clean lines separate the daily reality that these three terms describe. Cultural, social, and concertive forms blur together, and all emphasize the relative intensity of cohesiveness, pressure, and conformity. Social cohesion has its benefits including increased coordination, teamwork, and collective well being (Putnam, 2000). However, an overemphasis on cohesiveness and harmony in groups has been a long-acknowledged potential contributor to bad decisions (e.g., Janis, 1982). While these types may have their place, employees today frequently experience numerous forms simultaneously, which undermine the sense of purpose, initiative, and creative problem solving that keeps organizations effective.

The aim of argument, or of discussion, should not be victory, but progress. (Joseph Joubert)

Unintended Consequences of Control

A controlling approach is not always a bad idea. Organizational crises (e.g., Ulmer, Sellnow, & Seeger, 2013), for example, occur when response time is short, the organization is under potential threat, and leaders *must* take decisive and often controlling action. By definition, however, crises are not everyday occurrences. In most situations, organizations need just enough control to coordinate activities and keep people safe. When employees notice control or see it as excessive, this approach has unintended consequences.

Two common responses to heavy-handed control are resistance and imitation. Neither response helps organizations succeed. ***Resistance*** occurs when employees feel dominated, the organization has encroached too far into their territory, their dignity and worth as a person has been challenged, and their freedom and choices have been too limited. In response, they resist the organization's control by creating space and distancing themselves from the organization's power

(Mumby, 1997). When leaders emphasize control too intensely, it engages some employees' fight-or-flight response to reclaim the threatened territory. Some, for example, resist by doing the bare minimum while others may actively confront or openly question and critique a managerial policy. Some resistance like telling unflattering jokes about managers or privately complaining is relatively harmless. Other employees engage in more harmful activities like stealing, breaking or sabotaging company property, or calling in or quitting without notice. Some who are burned out or frustrated by the organization's power moves even lash out at unsuspecting co-workers or customers. Resistance like this has a negative impact on the organization. When employees are focused on resisting, little work gets done.

Another common response to control is imitation. Studies show that a variety of behaviors and attitudes, even harmful ones, are ***contagious***. For instance, Sy, Côté, and Saavedra (2005) showed that group leaders' moods shaped the group's mood and attitude noticeably. People in supervisory roles have a disproportionate influence over a group in that followers are likely to take on the behaviors, attitudes, and tone of leaders (Zenger & Folkman, 2013). Porath and Pearson (2013), for instance, showed that managers' incivility was often a direct consequence of their own supervisor's incivility. This is not surprising given the normative and constitutive influence of communication (Craig, 1999). Our communication practices shape our organizations. Those who lead set a powerful example. Controlling people, thus, can create cultures where other employees then see directive, one-way communication as proper interaction with everybody. Control, thus, has unintended "blowback" that we must consider. Thankfully, the reverse is also true. Positive features of leadership are even more contagious than negative features (e.g., Cherulnik, Donley, Wiewel, Tay & Miller, 2001; Zenger & Folkman, 2013).

> *O, it is excellent to have a giant's strength, but it is tyrannous to use it like a giant. (William Shakespeare)*

Dysfunctional Levels of Control

As the case studies later in this chapter show, some leaders and organizational cultures have what I characterize as dysfunctional levels of control driven by a personal reason rather than by what is best for the whole organization. For some people, control can become a self-justifying preoccupation, a distraction from the organization's actual purpose of serving the public in a valuable way. When this happens, we see additional attempts at control beyond those mentioned earlier.

It becomes an adversarial, fearful, and habitual process in the form of turf wars, bullying, and systematically distorted communication.

Turf wars. Many subgroups in organizations develop an *us-versus-them* mentality. Departments, teams, and various peer groups who should be working cooperatively nurture intense rivalries. This happens when resources become scarce, "healthy competition" becomes too intense, and leaders unwisely pit their followers against each other. Internal ***turf wars*** can become so familiar that our efforts to dominate another group seems normal, desirable, and justified. As shown in two related articles on the same organization (e.g., Lyon, 2005; Lyon & Chesebro, 2010), some departments became virtually obsessed with discrediting others. These groups spent hours each day creating disparaging nicknames and labels for each other, spreading rumors, gossiping, manipulating, and refusing to work with their perceived opponents. These activities were counterproductive and expensive placeholders that prevented the organization from investing its time, effort, and attention to the common goal of helping clients. The organization received increasingly poor customer feedback and ultimately went out of business.

Workplace bullying. In the past decade, researchers have begun to study workplace bullying in earnest. Similar to schoolyard bullying, it involves "persistent, verbal, and nonverbal aggression at work that include personal attacks, social ostracism, and a multitude of other painful messages and hostile interactions" (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2006, p. 406). The statistics should concern us. Approximately 30% of workers in the U.S. report being bullied at some point in their careers, up to 25% of organizations report bullying, and 80% of workers have witnessed bullying (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2006; Lutgen-Sandvik, Tracy, & Alberts, 2007). Bullies exist at all levels including leaders, co-workers, and even subordinates who "bully up." In most cases, however, supervisors and managers are the culprits (Lutgen-Sandvik et al., 2007). At its core, this negative tactic dominates the target emotionally and even physically. In these contexts, people may mistake this behavior as the best way to get results. In contrast, research above shows that bullying hurts the organization by lowering productivity, retention, and employee satisfaction and by increasing confrontation and retaliation. Neither the bullies nor their targets do anything that resembles working.

Systematically distorted communication. In contrast to a back-and-forth conversational pattern, some communication feels monolithic. When only one voice dominates interactions, the perspective a listener gains likely represents a narrow agenda. As Deetz (1990) explains, these conversations usually involve at least one person who seeks to "divert, distort, or block the open development of understanding. When discussion is thwarted, a particular view of reality is maintained at the expense of equally plausible ones usually to someone's advantage" (p. 235). Perhaps you've experienced the frustration of not being allowed a voice in decisions that directly impact your work. For a variety of reasons, however, some people in organizations do not believe or simply forget that others have valuable insights to offer. Thus, ***systematically distorted communication*** (Deetz, 1992) occurs when conversational lopsidedness gets built into the norms, expectations, and structure of the organization and become "routine, patterned, and reproduced" (Lyon, 2007, p. 379).

Deetz (1990, 1992) provided a comprehensive list of the ways people shut down others' voices in interpersonal and organizational settings. For instance, some will only invite individuals with the "right" expertise, qualifications, credentials, or connections to key discussions. Those with credentials that are not positioned as good enough experience a ***disqualification*** from the discussion. Another approach to closing off communication is ***objectification*** when the dominant view is positioned as the objective truth while alternative views are treated as meager, subjective, and rooted in personal opinion. Perhaps the most common way to tilt conversations is simply to avoid undesirable topics altogether or ***topical avoidance***. Touchy topics (e.g., moral failings, illegal activities, inappropriate conduct, etc.) are simply not broached and considered taboo. Various systematically distorted communication practices can accumulate to repressive levels and are limited by individuals who determine what gets said and what does not.

Turf wars, workplace bullying, and systematically distorted communication are examples of a controlling approach gone too far. Too, many acceptable types like simple control, bureaucratic control, technical control, cultural control, and so on may stifle an organization's chances at effectiveness and long-term success if they become intense. The following four cases demonstrate what can happen when organizations overemphasize control.

Case Studies on Controlling Communication

Enron's Controlling Culture Covered Leaders' Tracks

In the late 1990s, Enron Corp. was known as one of the largest and most successful companies in the US. Just a few years later, however, the mere mention of the name "Enron" was used to symbolize all that can go wrong in corporate America. The company was the center of the first and largest corporate scandal of the 21st century. For years, Enron existed as just another traditional gas and oil company in the 1980s' sluggish energy market. As the federal government deregulated the energy industry, Enron's founding President and CEO, Ken Lay, looked for new ways to make money. To do so, he hired a soon-to-be controversial figure, Jeff Skilling, who quickly became Lay's key confidant and right-hand man. Together, they fought to shed Enron's old image and business model as a traditional energy company and transform the company into an energy trader or clearinghouse. From their view, Enron no longer needed to own actual hard assets such as gas, oil, pipelines, refineries, etc. Instead, as Lay and Skilling envisioned it, Enron's expertise and big ideas would transform Enron into a "new economy" company that was able to make money every time smaller energy suppliers and large customers bought and sold virtually any type of energy.

These leaders envisioned Enron as a new stock market of sorts for energy as the company simultaneously fought to dominate the energy marketplace. The company's future was no longer bound by its direct ownership of hard assets. As Enron's president, Skilling wrote the following in Enron's (1999) annual report to stockholders:

> Enron is moving so fast that sometimes others have trouble defining us. But we know who we are. We are clearly a knowledge-based company. … We are participants in the New Economy, and the rules have changed dramatically. … The fluidity of knowledge and skills throughout Enron increasingly enables us to capture value in the New Economy. (p. 2)

Enron's bold but ambiguous vision for the future seemed to work, as least at first. In the end, much of Enron's growth and apparent success was the result of a combination of illegal accounting practices, the deception of stock analysts, and essentially stealing money by exploiting confusing rules in the newly deregulated California energy market. When the truth came out, Enron went bust in 2001. Leaders ran the company into the ground and declared bankruptcy shortly before their fraud was exposed in 2002. The meteoric rise and catastrophic failure of Enron marked a turning point in corporate America. This case examines how company leaders' management style allowed them to keep their wrongdoing hidden for so long.

Aggressive Communication and Leadership Approach

Hindsight allows outsiders to see what many Enron insiders knew all along. Enron's leaders' apparent success continued because of two main ingredients: (a) The sheer cleverness of their illegal activities and (b) the high level of control over Enron's culture that kept those illegal practices hidden. While Ken Lay had a reputation for being folksy and diplomatic, Jeff Skilling used aggressiveness and a combative style to get what he wanted. Some employees called Skilling "Darth Vader," a nickname Skilling was reportedly proud of (Schwartz, 2002). Skilling was a self-admitted control freak (Schwartz, 2002), though he prefers the phrase "'controls' freak,'" referring to the strict control systems and processes he put in place at Enron ("Skilling Claims," 2002, para. 3). He earned at least part of this reputation through his combative communication style. Enron vice president Sherron Watkins, explained that Skilling made sustained direct eye contact, "spoke in clipped, flat, supremely confident tones" and often used foul language to intimidate others (Swartz & Watkins, 2003, p. 12). According to Watkins, Skilling took the approach, "I'm right—you know I'm right—so why argue?" (p. 43). Skilling preferred to hire people like himself that he called "guys with spikes. He liked [individuals] with something extreme about them" (Gibney, 2005). For example, Andy Fastow, who eventually became the chief financial officer (CFO) at Enron, was the first person Skilling hired in 1990. Fastow regularly and publicly yelled, threatened, and cursed to get things done. Another high-level executive and close ally of Skilling, Cliff Baxter, was "blunt, blustery, and bombastic … [had] a towering ego and a volatile personality" (McLean & Elkind, 2003, p. 65). Lou Pai, a top executive, was described as "Enron's fiercest corporate warlord" (McLean & Elkind, 2003, p. 58). A fellow executive who worked with Pai described him this way, "you don't mess with Lou. … If you got in the way of Lou's agenda, he'd get rid of you" (McLean & Elkind, 2003, p. 58). Skilling and other top executives actively encouraged this aggressive approach. They labeled those with more measured styles "losers" who didn't "get it" (see McLean & Elkind, 2003, pp. 325–326; Swartz & Watkins, 2003, p. 2). Many people at Enron tolerated this aggressive approach, in part, because Enron appeared to be a great success story on paper. Enron's stock was higher than ever. Numerous magazines plastered the executives' faces on the cover. At its peak, Enron was the seventh largest company in the US. In this context, it would have been easy to conclude mistakenly that this level of success perhaps required their muscular, cutthroat managerial style.

Not surprisingly, this approach spread throughout the organization as the primary way to get things done. A junior attorney from Enron's legal department, for instance, believed that Andy Fastow (CFO) had a legal and financial conflict of interest in the company. Rather than hearing the attorney's explanation, Fastow attempted to fire him when he showed Fastow was operating in a way that was bad for Enron. Fastow left the employee a hostile voicemail that was laced with expletives as a warning to never cross him again and called for the junior attorney's resignation. The junior attorney's supervisor stepped in. He told other high-level executives that he planned to go to Jeff Skilling with his concerns about Fastow's handling of the attorney as well as the legal and financial conflicts of interest that could hurt Enron. Other executives told the supervisor, "I wouldn't stick my neck out. … Don't go there" ("House Energy," 2002, para. 193–202). Though it was not known until years later, the silenced attorney was correct. Fastow's activities at the time were ultimately sabotaging Enron's financial future.

Top executives often used this combative style when other people questioned Enron's ever-rising stock price, a rise that defied traditional principles of stock evaluation. In one instance, Skilling publicly called a fund manager an "asshole" during a conference call when he asked Skilling to provide simple financial statements to support Skilling's yet unverified claims about how much money Enron actually brought in and the appropriateness of Enron's high stock value. Rather than apologizing for the outburst, Skilling took pride in his brash approach. In fact, the most combative executives were routinely promoted. Many rose to the top of Enron's ranks. The most noticeably absent figure in this group of combative executives was founding CEO, Ken Lay. By this point in Enron's story, Lay had taken on a political role for Enron. He regularly mingled with the country's president, vice president, and influential lawmakers in Washington, DC. He grew out of touch as he moved away from the day-to-day operations at Enron. He nevertheless endorsed Skilling's style and soon promoted Skilling to CEO. Lay remained the company's president.

Emerging Concerns

People outside of this circle of high-level executives became increasingly concerned about Enron's future. Outsiders and lower-level insiders alike began to ask openly, was this how a company should be led? A former executive emailed Ken Lay to voice his frustration with Skilling's approach.

> I just read an interesting article … [that] focused on how to recognize CEOs and CEO candidates who were not up to the requirements of their job and used Jeff Skilling as an example. I have agreed with views of this journalist for some time, especially since Jeff called a fund manager an "asshole." Publicly calling someone [that] is simply not something any CEO should do and you and Enron's board should have done something about Jeff then. (Shaw, 2001, September 24, para. 2)

As CEO, Skilling had opportunities to address the growing discontent at Enron. Many people were tired of working in such a hostile environment. Further, lots of top executives disagreed with the direction that Skilling was taking the company. By moving almost entirely away from a traditional gas-and-pipeline business model, Skilling and Lay put the company at great risk. Further, Skilling struggled to get some of his famously "big ideas" off the ground, ideas that were supposed to ensure Enron's future.

Instead of adjusting to growing concern at Enron, Skilling fired executives who did not see things his way. He hired an outside consulting firm to interview Enron managers and to determine who agreed and disagreed with his way of doing things (Swartz & Watkins, 2003, p. 113). With this information, Skilling then systematically fired people who disagreed. In one year, Skilling filled 11 of 26 high-level positions with "Skillingites" or executives who were loyal to him alone (McLean & Elkind, 2003, p. 105). Many executives learned about the illegal practices Enron was engaging in over time. Sherron Watkins, a vice president testified before Congress that while she knew of potentially illegal accounting practices, she was not comfortable approaching either Skilling or Fastow about her concerns, "To do so, I believed, would have been a job-terminating move" ("Senate Commerce," 2002, February 26, para. 82). Skilling, Fastow, Baxter, Pai and other top executives, used this intimidating and combative approach, in part, to make sure Enron's ill financial health was not exposed to scrutiny either within the organization or to outsiders.

Skilling's Resignation and Enron's Collapse

On August 14th of 2001, Jeff Skilling abruptly resigned as Enron's CEO. Neither at the time nor since has Skilling ever admitted that he resigned because he believed the company was in trouble. Instead, he cited unspecified personal reasons upon which he would not elaborate. Enron employees' and investors' concerns about the hasty nature of Skilling's resignation were compounded by the growing realization that something deeper was amiss at Enron. The day Skilling resigned, for example, Enron's stock price had already lost over 50% of its value compared to just one year earlier. Shortly after Skilling resigned, Sherron Watkins delivered a letter to Ken Lay explaining her concerns about Andy Fastow's accounting irregularities. When Fastow heard about the letter to Lay, he screamed "at a very high decibel" at a fellow executive, accusing him of ghostwriting the memo ("House Energy," 2002, para. 736). Her letter, however, was far too late to save Enron. By November 2001, just three months after Skilling resigned, Enron's stock was worthless. The company closed its doors in December 2001. Over 20,000 employees lost their jobs along with billions of dollars in retirement funds tied up in Enron stock. Legal investigations began before the company even went out of business.

Throughout the investigation, congressional testimony, and court trials, both Ken Lay and Jeff Skilling maintained their innocence. Both claimed that other executives at Enron, like Andy Fastow, were responsible for the wrongdoing and deliberately hid those actions from them. As Skilling (Beltran, 2002) claimed in testimony to congress, "When I left on Aug. 14, I thought the financial reports accurately represented the financial [state] of the company … Enron was an enormous corporation … Could I have known everything going on in the company?" (para. 3, 5). He told the *New York Times* when he resigned, "I had no idea the company was in anything but excellent shape" (Schwartz, 2002, para. 3). Similarly, Ken Lay told his side of the story. He claimed that he had no knowledge of any wrongdoing and never did anything illegal himself. He simply hired the best people he could, trusted them, and gave the executives "room to run" (Mayberry, 2006, para. 3). In the end, Enron's success was a complete illusion.

Aftermath

By every measure, executives had "cooked the books." The company used manipulative accounting practices to make the company appear financially successful on paper. Enron executives dishonestly "talked up" the stock price and financial health of the company publicly but privately sold off hundreds of millions of dollars worth of their own stock at a fervent pace. This practice is known as insider trading. Investigations ("Enron Execs," 2002) show that Ken Lay profited over $119 million during his last three years at Enron by selling company stock at dramatically overpriced values. Jeff Skilling pocketed $112 million. Andy Fastow made $18.5 million. Lou Pai, "Enron's fiercest corporate warlord," pocketed an astounding $271 million. In total, the top executives made $1.3 billion. For most of them, however, this victory was short-lived. In January 2002, Cliff Baxter, a close friend of Skilling and executive at Enron, committed suicide as the investigation of Enron gained momentum. In 2004, Andy Fastow pleaded guilty to fraud and agreed to cooperate with investigators. He served six years of a ten-year jail sentence before he was released. In 2006, Ken Lay was convicted of conspiracy and fraud ("Enron Trial," 2006). He died of a heart attack after he was convicted but before

Questions:

- How would you describe Enron executives' communication approach? How did it shape Enron's culture?
- To what extent do you think executives' controlling tendencies contributed to Enron's downfall?

being sentenced. Jeff Skilling was convicted of fraud, conspiracy, and insider trading and was sentenced to 24 years in jail, a sentence that was later reduced to 14 years. In most cases, executives were forced to surrender their temporary fortunes as part of their sentencing.

Life Inside Foxconn's Electronics Factory: The Complex Relationship between Employees, Foxconn, and Apple

> *You go in this place and it's a factory but, my gosh, they've got restaurants and movie theatres and hospitals and swimming pools. For a factory, it's pretty nice.*
>
> *—Steve Jobs, CEO for Apple ("For a Factory," 2010, para. 7)*

When the iPhone first came out in 2007, customers lined up for hours outside of a store in New Jersey long before it opened. When the doors finally opened that morning, customers in the line that wrapped around the sidewalk clapped and cheered fervently. One by one, customers exited the store smiling broadly with excited eyes as they pumped their still-boxed iPhone in the air. One satisfied customer dressed in an iPhone costume exited the store to more cheers. Reactions like this remain common today for the release of new Apple devices. Over the years, customers in the US have shared a similar affection and pay top dollar for electronics products like Playstation, Wii, Kindle, and X-Box. Most people, however, do not realize the growing controversy around the way these products are made. All are made by overseas technology manufacturing giant, Foxconn Technology Group (Foxconn). Though its factories are located in China, the company partners with numerous brand-name companies in the US such as Microsoft, Amazon, Samsung, Hewlett Packard, Nokia, Dell, IBM, Sony, and, most notably, Apple.

Foxconn is led by an outspoken and controversial CEO, Terry Gou. The company employs over 178,000 workers at its three large manufacturing facilities located in China. The average employee is 23 years old. Most of the approximately 65% male and 35% female employees work various assembly lines making consumer electronics products. Foxconn recruits young Chinese job seekers with slick marketing. As a former employee explained, the company tells potential applicants, "Hurry toward your finest dreams, pursue a magnificent life. At Foxconn, you can expand your knowledge and accumulate experience. Your dreams extend from here until tomorrow" (Heffernan, 2013, para. 3). They promise the employees onsite apartments close to the factory, swimming pools, movie theaters, and recreational activities. By far, Foxconn's highest profile