

CHAPTER SUMMARY

In this chapter, we discussed four distinct theories of group communication. Systems approaches place communication at the heart of all processes of social interaction. The perspective provides a means for recognizing patterns that develop over time. Much research has focused on communication within organizational systems. For example, Gillespie and Dietz (2009) focused on the systemic nature of organizational trust repair, providing a model for how each component of an organizational system needs to be addressed in order to regain trust after an organizational failure. IPA predicts that the enactment of specific behavioral types can indicate group roles, leadership, and problems. When used to compare electronic group meetings with face-to-face group meetings, IPA showed that, while the online group was more productive on its initial task, it also had the lowest socioemotional ratings and members couldn't sustain their productivity in later, more complex group tasks (Jürgen, Simone, & Bruno, 2000). SCT suggests that particular types of messages called fantasy themes contribute to a sense of group identity or consciousness. An examination of these fantasy themes and how they might combine provides a rhetorical vision that provides the principles by which the group operates. Novek (2005) studied the impact of symbolic convergence on inmates who wrote for the prison newspaper. Her analysis found that the inmates' rhetorical vision helped them cope with the shame and "make meaning of the prison experience" (p. 292). Recent extensions of fantasy theme analysis have examined rhetorical visions created through political communication and political campaigns (Page & Duffy, 2008, 2009). Finally, functional group decision-making theory delineates specific tasks group members need to complete to make an effective decision. When studying the decision making of corporate work groups, researchers have found that effective groups, compared to ineffective groups, communicated significantly more when establishing decision criteria and when evaluating alternatives (Graham, Papa, & McPherson, 1997).

Case Study 5: Dr. Evil and the Doomsday Assignment

Nora Klein, the new CEO of Summit Communications & Advertising, unveiled radical plans to restructure and automate its contracts, part of which would include a price increase for its existing clients. She appointed two senior account managers, Dave Corell and Charlene Guyer, to oversee both the technical and communications aspects of the restructuring. Dave

and Charlene then formed a working group of six employees from three key departments to work on the communications portion of this delicate project. Members included Ellen and Susanne from sales, Kyra and Marty from billing, and Adam and Tonya from client services. Ellen and Susanne shared office space and had worked closely on several high profile advertising accounts together. They were friendly and assertive, making them excellent salespersons. Kyra had been at Summit the longest, while Marty had accounting experience from two previous industries. Although very competent, Adam always seemed to focus on the worst-case scenario, while Tonya was jovial and laid-back.

Because Summit is a large agency, its employees often didn't know many people outside of their departments, so the first meeting was simply to establish contact and determine a project plan.

After they all introduced themselves, Ellen jumped right in offering, "This is going to be a challenging assignment. Why don't we go over Dave and Charlene's directive before doing anything else."

Susanne agreed, adding, "We want to make sure we're all on the same page and know exactly what we're getting ourselves into."

They all nodded in agreement and Susanne read the charge aloud. Specifically, the group was to develop several viable communications strategies for moving Summit's existing clients (more than 1,000 of them) to a new contract schedule with different terms and higher pricing. The communications plan had to inform clients of the price increase, when it would take effect, and why it was being done.

Adam grumbled sarcastically, "Dave strikes again! This is a doomsday assignment! Our performance reviews will depend on the success of this plan, but how on earth do we succeed in telling 1,000 clients they need to pay more? We'll be priced out of the competition!"

Dave did have quite a reputation; although Dave was respected in the industry, Summit employees found him pompous and rude. When Dave spoke, he did so loudly and aggressively; consequently, many people were afraid of him.

"I know," Kyra agreed. "One of our billing reps worked on a 'pet project' for Dave last year, and he totally killed her! She was so fed up that she left Summit!"

The other group members each chimed in with their own tales of Dave's bitter reputation.

"To top it off," Tonya said and laughed, "he looks just like 'Dr. Evil' from the *Austin Powers* movies!"

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The group erupted in laughter, and Marty added, "Charlene's no better!"

Even Adam got on board, dubbing Charlene as "Frau"—a reference to Dr. Evil's right-hand woman in the movie *Austin Powers*.

The group met almost daily for the next month, and every meeting started with an *Austin Powers* reference. They'd spend a few minutes talking about how Dr. Evil and Frau treated the team and the project. Whenever a group member agreed with Dr. Evil's latest directive or feedback, the rest of the group immediately dubbed the person Mini Me.

After the joking subsided, Tonya would get the group back by imitating Austin Powers, saying, "Oh be-have! We've got to find our mojo," in her best British accent.

As a whole, the group got along and had been successful in brainstorming numerous creative ideas and had created several draft plans. The only catch was Adam. Inevitably, at each meeting, he'd find a way to interrupt the group with a tirade about the impossibility of their task. At first, Kyra and Marty tried to assuage his fears. Combined, they had decades of invoicing expertise between them and firmly believed that a modest price increase wouldn't even be noticed by the larger clients. However, Adam's complaining reoccurred day after day. At one meeting, Marty politely suggested that if Adam didn't have anything constructive to bring to the group that he should leave the project. Yet, Adam stayed on, kept complaining, and the group quickly learned to ignore him; trying to battle the negativity just slowed them down. It got to be a little game—when one person got frustrated with Adam and looked as though he or she was going to confront him about his attitude, the other group members raised their pinky to their mouths in imitation of Dr. Evil's classic gesture in the *Austin Powers* movies. It was their own variation of saying, "Shh."

On one particular day, the team was sharing research; each departmental pair (Ellen and Susanne; Kyra and Marty; Adam and Tonya) had taken the group's top five proposals back to their own departments for feedback.

Yet again, Adam griped, "Well, my colleagues think this whole idea is ridiculous. They didn't like any of the plans!"

Susanne rolled her eyes while Kyra and Marty exchanged frustrated glances. Everyone turned to look at Tonya because she was in Adam's department.

"Adam, you know you're exaggerating," Tonya replied. "Only Marcia criticized all of the plans. The majority of account reps liked Plan C in its entirety, and everyone liked at least bits and pieces of all the proposals."

The group took note of all of the employees' feedback and spent the next few days crafting ways to incorporate some of the suggestions. By the end of the week, they had three viable communications plans to present to Dr. Evil and Frau. Even Adam was pleased. After the team presented its proposals, Dr. Evil actually congratulated them on the creativity and efficiency of their work. When he left the room, Tonya adopted her phony British accent, saying, "Yeah, baby, we got our mojo." Everyone laughed.

Before closing out the project, the new CEO asked the team members to evaluate Dave and Charlene's performance. Survey items included: (1) "Did this person have a friendly demeanor?" (2) "Was this person too aggressive?" (3) "Did this person take initiative?" (4) "Did this person give valuable feedback?" and (5) "What would you like to see more of from this person?" After completing the survey, the group members chatted about the scores they gave. There seemed to be consensus that while both managers were unfriendly the group also recognized that Dave and Charlene knew what they were doing and had succeeded in accomplishing the task. Still, no one wanted the "pleasure" of working with Dr. Evil and Frau again.

Questions for Consideration

1. Which assumptions of systems theory are visible? Identify the axioms present in the case study.
2. Using Bales's IPA categories, try to analyze the communication of the working group and its leaders, Dave and Charlene. Who is task oriented? Who is relationship oriented?
3. Discuss the elements of symbolic convergence as related to the group. How do you think symbolic convergence might have affected the decision-making process?
4. Using the functional model, was the group likely to be effective? Why or why not? Describe if and where each function emerged.
5. Do any of the theories emerge as "better" than the others? Why do you believe this to be the case? What situations might surface that would make a different theory or theories better at explaining the situation?