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Corey Jay Liberman Marymount Manhattan College, cliberman@mmm.edu

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## **GIFT:**

# The social construction of organizations: Understanding the process of organizational development from a communicative perspective

Corey Jay Liberman Marymount Manhattan College

No matter how one approaches and teaches organizational communication, it is likely that we all borrow the idea that communication both produces, and is produced by, organizations: an idea that was popularized as a result of Charles Redding's foundational publication. This idea, however, is not easy to grasp, even for the advanced undergraduate student. In fact, when we think outside of the box, even for a moment, it is difficult for students to understand that when we refer to "organizations" we are reifying the very notion of "organization" and, in so doing, are dialoguing about the communication between and among different constituents. In essence, we are studying people and interactive processes that socially construct organizations. As instructors, we are always faced with the fundamental challenge of speaking about both the organizational variables in which social processes are embedded and the effect(s) of such variables. For instance, if one teaches about organizational leadership, he/she is at once responsible for dialogues dealing with the use of communication in creating leaders, but also the communicative implications of these socially constructed leaders. This, in short, is taking into consideration both process and outcome perspectives. The problem, however, is not so much about "what" we do, but rather "how" we do it. The purpose of this exercise is to help students truly understand the role of communication in the social construction of organizations: how communication is both an antecedent to, as well as a consequence of, organizing.

# The Assignment In Brief

Working in groups, students are responsible for creating, from the ground up, their very own organization. They are required to (a) create a name for their organization, (b) create an organizational symbol that comes to represent their organization, (c) create their organization's mission statement, (d) discuss how leadership seems to manifest itself, (e) explain how the organization makes decisions, (f) describe the organizational culture, (g) explain how conflict is managed within the organization, and (h) explain how technology is used within the organization. In so doing, the students must use both theory and research to substantiate their major claims. For example, if they argue that leaders should emanate from an authoritative perspective, they must explain why, based on their organizational mission, culture, structure, etc., this style of leadership would be effective and conducive.

### The Assignment In Detail

Although instructors will certainly approach this assignment differently, based on their approach and expertise (e.g. public relations folks might well ask their students to create an organizational pitch, while functionalists might ask their students to create an organizational hierarchy and organizational handbook), the assignment seems to work best when there are both written and oral requirements. In past years, the assignment has asked students to write a 15-page paper, coupled with a 20-minute presentation. The overall key to this assignment is to have students approach this from a communication perspective, not a business perspective, which sometimes is a difficult task, as these two perspectives often become intertwined. For example, students have, in the past, made decisions about how much the organization will pay its employees and the price of certain products from a business/financial perspective. Although this is certainly part of the decision-making process, it is important that students focus more on the process (e.g. how the organization decided what products it should sell and how the organization decided how to best market its products). In addition, students must include evidentiary support from the concepts and theories presented throughout the course of the semester, ultimately indicating their mastery of material. For example, students should speak about theories related to culture, decision-making, power, conflict, conflict resolution, technology, leadership, management, knowledge, motivation, and the like.

### Rationale For The Assignment

As instructors in higher education, there is no statistic that worries me more than the one indicating the sheer knowledge that students take with them upon completion of a course. If, for example, you have students in subsequent semesters and ask them the five most important things that they learned in your previous course(s), it will be an absolute struggle for them. This, understandably, is quite upsetting. At the same time, however, it is human nature to forget. This assignment, however, is one that students remember semesters later because they were not required to memorize people, dates, facts, models, theories, perspectives, and paradigms. Instead, they put these people, dates, facts, models, theories, perspectives, and paradigms into practice. It is a way of teaching through experiential learning. It is a way of having students apply a semester's worth of discussions into a final, culminating project which, when it comes to fruition, students are excited and eager to present. There is a striking difference between a student saying, "an organization that encourages emergent leaders is more likely to have a committed workforce because of the possibility of organizational involvement" and "OUR organization encouraged emergent leadership because WE believe that OUR employees WILL BE more committed to, and satisfied with, organizational membership." The former will be a product of a final exam, but the latter will be a product of this final project: one that students will gain from both academically and professionally.