BUSINESS DISCOURSE AS A SITE OF INHERENT STRUGGLE

COMPLEXITY
CONFLICT and
ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE
in BUSINESS COMMUNICATION

AMEP National Forum

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“Communication Skills” – still the most desired attribute in surveys of employer needs

“Business English” > “Business Discourse”

… a change that – implicitly – acknowledges that

COMPLEXITY
CONFLICT
CULTURE

are important factors in workplace communication
Social action: Two communicative agendas
(Habermas, 1984, 1987)

• **Communicative action** refers to communicative acts that are oriented towards mutual understanding and agreement, and which provide a basis for the ‘consensual coordination of individually planned plans of action’. Communicative action is open and equal, based on full knowledge sharing, and consists of *contestable utterances* and *negotiated meanings and plans*.

• **Strategic action** is oriented to success rather than to mutual understanding/agreement. In **open strategic action**, someone openly pursues an aim of influencing the hearer(s), and there is an associated claim to power. In **concealed strategic action** one party uses communication covertly and instrumentally, *and sometimes unconsciously so*, in pursuit of unilateral goals. Habermas refers to *communication pathologies*. 
Categories of social action

- Social action
  - Communicative action
  - Strategic action
    - Concealed strategic action
      - Unconscious deception (systematically distorted communication)
    - Conscious deception (manipulation)
  - Open strategic action
Systematically distorted communication

• In *systematically distorted communication* all parties believe they are engaging in communicative action whilst, in fact, the interests of one party take precedence.

• That is, one of the parties has a *unilateral agenda*.

• In all *concealed strategic action* there is often confusion between action oriented to understanding and action oriented to (unilateral) success.

• *Almost all actual conversations …. are a mix of communicative and strategic action.*

Competing “business interests”

Competing interests are both inherent and immediately apparent in certain kinds of asymmetric business relationships:

- Business-to-business competition
- Marketing/promoting goods/services
- Employer-employee relations (IR)
- Soliciting investment, and then reassuring shareholders

Thus strategic action is per se complex and inherently conflictual.

What everyone knows .....
Competing “discourses”
(motivations, rationales)

| Discourse of profit and costs | Discourse of staff development |
| Discourse of financial imperatives | Discourse of social responsibility |
| Discourse of fiduciary trust | Discourse of business needs |
| Discourse of open competition | Discourse of strategic advantage |
What is “a discourse”?

“Medical talk is not merely specialised vocabulary but an entire meaning-system that presupposes a particular view of the body (and mind) and a particular approach to managing illness and distress.”

T. Greenhalgh et al. 2006.

We can also view business discourse as “an entire meaning-system” that presupposes a particular view of the world, and of the goals of human activity (economic, financial), and of the nature of human relations.
Some symptoms of conflictual talk

1. **Occluded discourse** – speaker chooses silence instead of risking talk

2. **Competing discourses** – speaker shifts between positions in the same turn

3. **Impeded discourse** – speaker stutters, makes false starts, self-corrects, etc., etc.

How individuals (fail to) cope

….. I know about empowering people and getting them to see that by increasing their skills they can get more out of working here – as well as helping us to continually improve the quality of what we give to our customers. But what are my people going to think of me if they think that all this appraisal stuff I've been doing is going to be used to select people for redundancy. I know we've got a cost problem. It's all very well losing heads. But what sort of prat will I look like when I start yelling about month-end when I've lost half my team. .......... I thought it wasn't meant to be what we did any more; that was the old culture.
Competing discourses (coping strategies)

...we’re talking about having an organizational structure development workshop in June. Let’s say at the end of this workshop we are sufficiently interested in pathways as a tool in managing the work and a tool for costing and acquiring the appropriate funds, all of those. If we decide to go down that track and start setting up pathways we need to form ourselves into appropriate working parties which are multi-disciplinary teams. How that fits into a structure of taking responsibility and the ability to govern the hospital we all need to consider and think about.

(Workshop transcript: 41)
Uh he I think you’re right Terry I think we do have to ... get on the phone with Marilyn and let her know we have an issue. You know um I think that that if it were jist..ya know the fact that you’ve run into a quality issue..you’ve rejected a lot of parts I think you could sell that on the basis that we’re doing...you could sell that on the basis that we’re doing as much as is distasteful..as much as you don’t wanna hear it ya know ah customer... but ya know we ... ya know we..e... there was a minor blemish and we’re just not prepared to release that not on the first shipment and that’s affecting this production rate. But what concerns me Terry i..[sigh].. is...wi::ll we...be.. ya know will we.. do you feel comfortable that we’re going to be able to move from this point forward.. aand... first off  hit eh hit these rates and these rates by the way are not .... are not consistent with what ... Clemmons really needs.

(From Healey, 2006)
Interdiscursivity ("bad" interdiscursivity)

- Hyperpersonalisation, inappropriate self-disclosure
- Hyper-mitigation, over-politeness
- Hybridized speech acts (orders become requests in the process of being constructed)
- Self-contradiction – moving between multiple incompatible positions in an unplanned and un-thought-through manner
Occluded discourses, voices

*The meaning of silence*

• Unheard voices
  – lost opportunities
  – lost knowledge
• Backstage dissonance, dissent
• Unuttered opinions, critiques, proposals
• Giving a voice/opinion to silent executives is a mult-million-dollar business

Chris Argyris & Fernando Flores, consultants


How can we develop communicative expertise in business (work) contexts

1. EXPECT RESISTANCE

- Be prepared for difference (different aims, expectations; different ways of doing things)
- Expect indifference, suspicion, even hostility
- Avoid conflict
- Seek understanding: background knowledge
- Be proactive – gather information (perhaps indirectly at first)

(See Beyer & Hannah 2002; Scollon & Scollon 2001)
Both principles *and* profits
(Shell slogan)

2. INTEGRATION

- Identify competing interests in your environment
- Think through the issues
- Arrive at a defensible position that transcends conflict and disagreement
Interdiscursivity as communicative expertise ("good" interdiscursivity)

3. INTERDISCURSIVITY

Changing hats – sincerely

• Ability to adopt different viewpoints, perspectives, positions – in talk

• Skills use of communicative strategies in avoiding conflict even when the positions are irreconcilable) – e.g. gradualism, “projection”

• Skilled use of affiliative strategies

*Use the DA/CA research literature.*
Situatedness of good communication

4. EXAMPLE: GIVING DIRECTIVES

Successful use of directive speech acts depends on embeddedness; they are typically embedded in

- Relationships (long-term, respect-based)
- Task type (e.g. problem-solving talk, task allotment)
- Need for legitimation – explain reasons
- Conciliation – indicate awareness of any potential constraints or inconvenience

(cf Vine, 2009; Iedema, 1997)
Balancing acts (dynamic modelling of communicative exercise)

5. USE of PROFESSIONAL JUDGEMENT (TACT)

Need to balance competing communicative traits:

- Deference ↔ Confidence
- Non-imposition ↔ Assertiveness
- Solidarity ↔ Individuality

Discourses that collide ....

Here is Rick Iedema (2003) on “doctor-managers”:

Their organizational influence depends less on what they can achieve, than on how well they can mask the disjunctions and chasms that separate the discourses that populate their organization, and continue as if there is management, as if there is organization.

Creative communication
Fairclough (2001: 142-3)

“… creativity flourishes ….. when social struggles are constantly de-structuring orders of discourse; and the creativity of the subject is socially constitutive, in the sense that individual creative acts cumulatively establish restructured orders of discourse. Thus the social and the individual, the determined and the creative, are not paradoxically opposed to one another, but facets of a dialectical process of social fixation and transformation.

However … what about “workplace democracy”? (Deetz, 1992): Managing workplace conflicts/tensions.

- The problem in many workplaces is “the suppression of conflicts and democratic participation” (1992: 334)
- “There are no necessary contradictions, only tensions” among the various stakeholders of the organisation (1992: 335)
- Conflicts and tensions “if fostered, can enable greater balance in the meeting of the various goals and probably even greater productivity” (1992: 335)
- Managers and employers should avoid “a self-defeating preoccupation with effecting social closure upon world-openness through the control of nature, self, and social relations” in the workplace. (Knights & Wilmott, 1986: 26)
Some references


References continued …


PLUS:

Flores, Fernando. Building Trust: In Business, Politics, Relationships, and Life,