The Critical Approach
To Organizational Communication

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“Office Space” was a comedic tale of company workers who hated their jobs and decided to rebel against their greedy boss. There are three main characters that go through their mundane daily routines at the office under the unfair treatment of their boss. The boss does as he pleases and gives his employees no benefits and lets them have no inputs as to what decisions are made throughout the office. Basically, throughout the movie he belittles all of his employees. In the end of this movie, one of the most disrespected and overlooked employees comes to a breaking point and ends up burning the office building down.

This is an extreme case of workplace tensions, but the feelings these employees felt are actual feelings going throughout several people who are involved in corporations and organizations across the world. They crave to have a sense of belonging in their groups and want their opinions to be heard and mean something at the workplace. Therefore this paper is meant to inform its readers on the practical applications of the Critical Approach to Organizational Communication Theory and the positive ethical standpoints that surrounded the theory in its development.

According to the Critical Approach to Organizational Communication theory, the people involved in the communication process are submerged in an environment where they create the rules, norms, beliefs, and values in their organization. Deetz feels as if many workplace settings have become too political, which in turn, negatively affects the workers and the well being of the organizations at hand. He also feels that the communication methods throughout the corporations and organizations are polluting the workplace environment. This theory has practical use in day-to-day groups such as in organizations, businesses, committees, and corporations. This theory is ethically sound
and if used properly will create positive atmospheres and environments in these everyday settings.

This theory would have been impossible to conceive without its foundation in Critical Theory. “The adoption of critical theory provides a means of viewing again the notion of knowledge management in terms of the ethics of human communication and allows the questioning of the centrality of rational decision making as the basis of managing” (Vary 2002). From the foundation of Critical Theory stemmed off four methods of managerial control and the effects they have on the people working under these ideas. Everyday groups, organizations, and even corporations can benefit from the Critical Approach to Organization Communication theory if it is used properly. When working under this theory a group will gain cohesiveness and collaboration will produce a richer overall outcome.

For nearly ten years, Stanley Deetz has been the Professor of Communication and also the Director of Peace and Conflict Studies at the University of Colorado. He is specialized in the field of study in organizational communications with a critical, philosophic, and cultural interest. Deetz sees power as a negative force that causes tension between employees and their superiors. “Power is a very messy, controversial concept in the social sciences and especially in the management literature” (Deetz, 1987).

Deetz is also a firm believer in interpretative research methods. “The central intent of interpretative research is to construct a coherent description of everyday events which is plausible to organizational members” (Koch & Deetz, 1981). Therefore interpretative researchers feel that theories are not developed for situations, but are developed due to individual responses in all aspects of a situation. Instead of
developing and releasing new ideas to the public domain, interpretative researchers deal more in situational aspects that are adapted to the different personalities of different people. “Interpretive research methods do not add new facts to a cumulative base of knowledge. Rather, they situate or contextualize bases of knowledge by explicating the implied possibilities inherent in current situations and endeavors” (Koch & Deetz, 1981).

The Critical Approach to Organizational Communication may have not been possible if it wasn’t for Critical Theory. According to a handout we received in our Introduction to Communication course, “…A critical theory provides the descriptive and normative basis for social inquiry aimed at decreasing domination and increasing freedom in all their forms.” Critical theory in a rough definition means knowledge is power and with power comes domination over others. If one gains enough knowledge or power in a subject, they can be free to manipulate the situations they are in. Deetz says “Critical theories have been useful because they have identified the nature of rather then the participants in the discussion as the key problem” (Deetz, 2003).

Stanley Deetz took Critical Theory deeper and then developed his theory of the Critical Approach to Organizational Communication. Deetz’s theory looks at corporations and the people within them. Deetz realized that no matter what, corporations must make decisions but he felt that the employees and other stakeholders should have say in what is going on. If employees are given this power, they would influence then company and then perhaps feel more satisfaction within their job. Deetz does not feel that employees should have all the power; they just need to create a balance between authority and workers in order for a corporation to flourish.
Within this theory, Deetz describes several communication methods in which corporations make decisions. There are four different methods in how corporations make their decisions and communicate to their workers. The first style method is using strategy which is under managerial control. By using strategy, authority goes above and beyond workers ideas and does as they please. They take their authority and use it to as much extent as possible even if it means creating an unhappy atmosphere among workers. When using managerial control, authority figures value their level of control and power over others and sometimes abuse their privileges.

The second method under managerial control is consent. Consent is when a worker does as they are told without any questioning. A good example of this was with the Manhattan Project during World War 2. Workers were building the bombs to be dropped in Japan but had no idea of what they were actually doing. Perhaps if the employees of the company knew what they were doing, they may have not chosen to work in that environment. In using strategy or consent when forming a corporate decision, workers will be unhappy due to their lack of input or ideas in the decisions at hand. “The short term desire for production has lead it to adapting to the social change rather than being involved in it on a conscious level” (Deetz, 1979).

Co-determination is by far a better way for a corporation to form decisions. By using co-determination, both authority figures and workers come together and create a balance when it comes to the corporation’s decision making method. Involvement is the first method under co-determination. Involvement allows workers to express their issues and ideas to a corporation but the corporation does nothing with their words. A personal example of this would be from a time that I worked at a Menards Warehouse. There was
a box that employees could write down concerns, complaints, or ideas for Menards to improve upon. One day, I took an early break and saw a janitor empty the box into a trash bag. Therefore, we were allowed to express our ideas on paper, but they had no influence on any changes that were to be made at Menards.

The second idea under co-determination is the idea of participation. Participation is essentially stakeholder democracy in action. In using participation, people topping off the hierarchy of a company realize there are more people being affected by the company’s decisions than just themselves and that all levels of stakeholders should have a say in what is going on. There are 6 levels of stakeholders: investors, workers, consumers, suppliers, host communities, and the greater society and the world community. Perhaps not every stakeholder should have a say in corporate decisions but there are stakeholders that have invested a lot of time and effort into the corporation and deserve to have their input heard. The best way for a corporation to make a decision is by using participation among its workers. Here, what the employees say matters and authority takes these ideas into consideration and collaborates with both sides into one final product. This in the end will cause for overall satisfaction among all members of a corporation.

The Critical Approach to Organizational Communication theory can be applied in many different everyday situations. Basic everyday small groups could benefit greatly from this theory. This theory could create harmony among all of its members by allowing everyone to have a say in what is going on and what direction they want to take the project. When all members’ ideas are taken into consideration, the amount of information gathered from each person will have a greater effect due to different ideas each individual
would specialize in. Overall, the final project in a small group will be richer if this theory was used because the group would be working harmoniously and working to their full capacity while gathering different perspectives of the project.

A good personal example of this could apply to the small group of Monmouth College’s Fulton dormitory Hall Council. I am currently the Vice President on this council and have dealt with abusive uses of power above me. The head resident and president take all of the ideas around them and develop them on their own without taking into consideration any inputs from other females in the dorm. I feel that if other girls were allowed to contribute their ideas on the projects that the two girls had developed, past projects might have not been as much of a failure.

Organizations can also benefit from this theory. The members of the organization will have a richer experience with authority figures and will in turn work towards the best interest of this group. When it comes to organization meetings, members are allowed to discuss issues of importance. If higher authority listens to their members, this would also work in the benefit of the organization. Just as in a regular group, different members have different ideas and concerns that they feel should be addressed. If members were not allowed to voice their opinions, they may leave the group because the group would not be taking the members best interests into consideration. This would also help create a community among the organizations members were they would like to work with each other and in turn would be more productive.

Along with small groups and organizations, companies can also benefit greatly for the Critical Approach to Organizational Communication. Employee satisfaction rates would go through the roof producing a low turnover rate. This would also save the
company money due to not having to keep retraining new staff members. Productivity rates would also rise because the workers would not dread heading into work everyday due to overzealous management. “Social irresponsibility arises from the inclusion of only certain values in the decisional chain. Better economic and social decisions can be made if organizations allowed more decisional voices and if they valued debate and negotiation” (Deetz, 2003). When employees are given the chance to voice their opinion and given motivation to perform they can then work effectively and efficiently.

Deetz feels that communication via electronic means hurts communication between individuals overall. “Information technology has further complicated communication in two ways. First, organizations have come to rely on technologies such as email, instant messaging, electronic meetings, videoconferencing, voice mail, online transactions and so forth to support their communication… Secondly, information technology has intensified certain communication difficulties because of the cultural changes it has brought about” (Deetz, 2006). Deetz feels these methods are terrible for communication in organizations because they are not as effective for sharing knowledge and building relationships as face-to-face conversations.

When communicating in a corporation, different departments collaborate on project and online communication allows more roadblocks in conversation. An example of this could be a public relations practitioner communicating to the head of finances. There are things in the financial field that the public relations specialist would not understand without further explanation and when creating the data to disperse among employees could possibly make an error. This could have been avoided with face-to-face communication. Also, when decision making projects come about, employees are
spammed the generic form letters and may just disregard them. If one was to hold a meeting via a telecast, many outside distractions could occur making the meeting less meaningful to the viewers. Employees should be engaged in actual conversations with other members of organizations instead of receiving form letters. Employees need individual attention.

According to The Business Communicator (2005) “Engagement is two sides of a coin: the knowledge needed to do your job effectively and the motivation to apply that knowledge. A balance of the two creates an engaged and effective employee. To get true engagement, people must be involved in the planning processes of new projects, not just be given directional instructions from on high.” Not only do people in positions of power need to be knowledgeable in their field but they also need to know how to communicate with their employees. One way to motivate employees is by instilling trust in them and allowing them the opportunity to have inputs in the company’s decisions.

All-in-all, if the appropriate measures were taken into consideration at the company level, profitability would rise due to heightened worker satisfaction rates. If people within a corporation treat their employees properly, they will treat you and your customers with the respect they deserve. An example of this could be from a waitress at a restaurant. They must be nice to customers because their tip depends on it. In turn, when they are polite to customers, that reflects the business at hand and helps ensure a satisfied customer.

Corporations, businesses, and organizations fail for many reasons; perhaps one reason would be due to problems amongst communication methods through the hierarchy of the group. “One would only have wished the press had paid attention when faulty
managerial decision practices were weakening companies, costing people jobs, and creating social dislocation in other business sectors… As almost any student would know, both managerial decisions and the market economy are heavily value laden and rarely simply economic” (Deetz, 2003). Deetz’s theory is not only designed to improve communication in groups, but can also improve the group’s appearance on the outside and save the group from its overall demise. This theory can be used to diagnose distorted corporate decision making and improve employer – employee relations.

While it is not directly stated that ethical considerations were taken while developing this theory, I think that it goes unsaid that there was. Deetz once discussed ethical consideration in a paper. He stated “Ethical conduct is important in interpersonal interaction. While the interpersonal setting is often our place of greatest trust, it is also our place of greatest vulnerability… Yet relatively few scholars have focused on ethical concerns in the interpersonal setting” (Deetz, 1990). This statement shows that ethics in interpersonal communication settings need to be examined and taken into consideration while other scholars brush the idea off. Deetz then continues with “By focusing on developing ethical interpersonal systems, ethical practices become an intrinsic force of communication with a complementary relation to effectiveness.” The more ethical consideration that is given to research, the more practical and useful the final message will be when used in public.

If the Critical Approach to Organizational Communication Theory was taken into consideration by members with control in groups, organizations, or companies, the overall productivity of and satisfaction among members in the group would reach its maximum potential. Deetz uses interpretive theories which have three distinct
characteristics over if it was a purely scientific theory. Insight is gained, criticism can build up the theory, and it creates the formation of new ideas which will in turn benefit all those who choose to use this theory in practices (Deetz, 1982). This theory is purely interpretative because it takes into account several different ideas of managerialism and looks at how different individuals will react towards each implicated situation.

By using Stanley Deetz’s The Critical Approach to Organizational Communication Theory, corporations and their members can come together and create a harmonious atmosphere in which all members are satisfied and groups can produce their full potential. In looking over the theory, one could see four methods in which they could use to control their workers which are strategy, consent, involvement, and participation. In choosing which method to work with the best chances to fully engage ones employees would come from the participation aspect. This theory not only applies to the workplace situation but can also be adapted into group communication in general.
Works Cited


