CHAPTER 16
FUNCTIONAL PERSPECTIVE
ON GROUP DECISION MAKING

Outline

I. Introduction.
   A. Randy Hirokawa and Dennis Gouran believe that group interaction has a positive effect on decision making.
   B. Hirokawa speaks of quality solutions; Gouran refers to appropriate decisions.
   C. The functional perspective illustrates the wisdom of joint interaction.

II. Four functions for effective decision making.
   A. Hirokawa and Gouran draw on the analogy between biological systems and small groups.
      1. Group decision making must fulfill four task requirements to reach a high-quality decision.
      2. These tasks are requisite functions of effective decision making—hence the functional perspective label.
   B. Function #1: analysis of the problem.
      1. Group members must take a realistic look at current conditions.
      2. Misunderstandings of situations are compounded when group members make their final decision.
      3. The clearest example of faulty analysis is a failure to recognize a potential threat.
      4. Group members must determine the nature, extent, and probable cause(s) of the problem.
   C. Function #2: goal setting.
   D. Function #3: identification of alternatives.
   E. Function #4: evaluation of positive and negative characteristics.
      1. Some group tasks have a positive bias—spotting the favorable characteristics of alternative choices is more important than identifying negative qualities.
      2. Other group tasks have a negative bias—the unattractive characteristics of choice options carry more weight than the positive attributes.

III. Prioritizing the functions.
   A. No single function is inherently more central than the others.
   B. As long as a group covers all four functions, the route taken is not the key issue.
   C. Nonetheless, groups that successfully resolve particularly tough problems often take a common decision-making path: problem analysis, goal setting, identifying alternatives, and evaluating the positive and negative characteristics.
D. The salience of individual functions is task specific.

IV. The role of communication in fulfilling the functions.
A. Traditional wisdom suggests that talk is the conduit through which information travels between participants.
   1. Verbal interaction makes it possible for members to distribute and pool information, catch and remedy errors, and influence each other.
   2. Ivan Steiner claimed that actual group productivity equals potential productivity minus losses due to processes.
   3. Communication is best when it does not obstruct or distort the free flow of ideas.
B. In contrast, Hirokawa believes that group discussion creates the social reality for decision making.
C. Hirokawa and Gouran outline three types of communication in decision-making groups.
   1. Promotive—interaction that calls attention to one of the four decision-making functions.
   2. Disruptive—interaction that detracts from the group’s ability to achieve the four task functions.
   3. Counteractive—interaction that refocuses the group.
D. Since most communication disrupts, effective group decision making depends upon counteractive influence.
E. Hirokawa's Function-Oriented Interaction Coding System (FOICS) classifies each functional utterance for analysis.
   1. Using FOICS, raters determine which of the four functions an utterance addresses.
   2. They also consider whether the utterance facilitates or inhibits the group's focus on the function.
   3. Coding decisions is fraught with difficulty, and Hirokawa continues to refine the methodology.

V. From the tiny pond to the big ocean.
A. In the laboratory, Hirokawa finds that the functional perspective accounts for over 60 percent of the total variance in group performance.
B. Hirokawa's assistants used the FOICS to analyze the role of communication within the groups and judged how well each group met the requisite functions (except identifying alternatives).
C. Yet the functional perspective will be unable to forge a stronger connection between communication and good group decisions until it can isolate specific comments that move a group along its path.
   1. Raters could judge the quantity but not the quality of statements.
   2. Hirokawa believes group decision-making performance is dependent more on quality than quantity of utterances.
D. In 1995, Hirokawa studied a four-person medical team in rural Iowa.
   1. Team members’ discussions aligned with the four requisite functions specified by the functional perspective.
   2. He discovered that the medical services they offered were more satisfying to the patients and less expensive to the state than conventional health care.
3. This experiment strengthened his faith in the vitality of the functional perspective in a real-world context.
4. Yet in some cases patients got worse, even when the requisite functions were addressed.
E. The crucial challenge for group researchers is to discover precisely when a group’s performance of functional requisites yields effective group decisions and when it does not.

VI. Practical advice for amateurs and professionals.
A. Be skeptical of personal opinions.
   1. Groups often abandon the rational path due to the persuasive efforts of other self-assured group members.
   2. Unsupported intuition is untrustworthy.
B. Follow John Dewey's six-step process of reflective thinking, which parallels a doctor's treatment regimen.
   1. Recognize symptoms of illness.
   2. Diagnose the cause of the ailment.
   3. Establish criteria for wellness.
   4. Consider possible remedies.
   5. Test to determine which solutions will work.
   6. Implement or prescribe the best solution.
C. Hirokawa and Gouran's four requisite functions replicate steps two through five of Dewey's reflective thinking.
D. To counteract faulty logic, insist on a careful process.

VII. Critique: is rationality overrated?
A. Although the functional perspective is one of the three leading theories in small group communication, its exclusive focus on rationality may cause mixed experimental results.
B. The FOICS method all but ignores comments about relationships inside and outside the group.
C. Cynthia Stohl and Michael Holmes emphasize that most real-life groups have a prior decision-making history and are embedded within a larger organization.
   1. They advocate adding a historical function requiring the group to talk about how past decisions were made.
   2. They also advocate an institutional function that is satisfied when members discuss relevant parties who are absent from the decision-making process.
D. Recently, Hirokawa has turned to naturalistic inquiry.
   1. An analysis of over 500 personal narratives about memorable group experiences revealed that participants attributed success to relational and emotional factors, as well as member attributes.
   2. If the functional perspective is to take the participants' perspectives seriously, it will have to account for social-emotional satisfaction.
Key Names and Terms

Randy Hirokawa and Dennis Gouran
Communication researchers at the University of Iowa and Pennsylvania State University, respectively, who developed the functional perspective of group decision making.

Functional Perspective
A rationally based approach to small group communication that emphasizes requisite functions for reaching high-quality decisions.

Requisite Functions
The four specific task requirements for good decision making are problem analysis, goal setting, identification of alternatives, and evaluation of positive and negative consequences.

Positive Bias
The attribute of some group tasks in which spotting the favorable characteristics of alternative choices is more important than identifying the negative qualities.

Negative Bias
The attribute of some group tasks in which the unattractive characteristics of choice options outweigh positive attributes.

Promotive Communication
Interaction that moves a group along the goal path by redirecting attention to decision-making functions.

Disruptive Communication
Interaction that diverts, retards, or frustrates group members’ ability to achieve the task functions.

Counteractive Communication
Interaction that members use to get the group back on track.

Function-Oriented Interaction Coding System (FOICS)
Hirokawa's coding system for a group discussion that classifies the function of specific statements.

Functional Utterance
An uninterrupted statement of a single member that appears to perform a specific function within the group interaction process.

John Dewey
Previously introduced in Chapter 5, this early twentieth-century American pragmatist philosopher developed the six-step process of reflective thinking.

Reflective Thinking
Paralleling a doctor's treatment regimen, Dewey's rationally based, systematic process of decision making is the prototype of the functional perspective.

Aubrey Fisher
Critiquing his own work, this late communication theorist identified the problem caused by neglecting the socioemotional dimension of groups, a problem replicated by the functional perspective.

Cynthia Stohl and Michael Holmes
Critiquing the functional perspective, these communication researchers from Purdue University advocate adding historical and institutional functions to the process.
Principal Changes

This chapter, which was previously Chapter 15, has been significantly revised. Griffin has enhanced the section entitled “The Role of Communication in Fulfilling the Functions” by developing the discussion of the FOICS checklist and elaborating on the difficulties of such analysis. Particularly toward the end of the chapter, he has updated Hirokawa’s research on the functional perspective, as well as his discussion of the implications of this work. The Second Look section reflects Hirokawa’s recent work.

Suggestions for Discussion

Hirokawa and Gouran’s tightly constructed, highly rational, theoretically elegant approach to small group decision making contrasts instructively with the expansive, epistemologically complex, theoretically amorphous approaches to communication presented by scholars such as Pearce and Cronen and Barthes. (The latter’s theory will be presented in Chapter 25.) The functional perspective—imbued with a faith in reason that is virtually platonic in nature, as well as a willingness to pare down the complex reality of a confusing social process to a few key variables and components—demonstrates both the strengths and the weaknesses of social-scientific theorizing and experimentation, and we recommend discussing these plusses and minuses with your class. Because the rigor and precision of the functional perspective make it an excellent exemplar, we would highly recommend bringing several of Gouran’s and Hirokawa’s articles to class to show your students exactly how this kind of work is done. Furthermore, we encourage you to invite students to test Hirokawa and Gouran’s approach with their own experience. Following Griffin’s lead in the chapter, bring in your own stories or solicit your students’ narratives in order to demonstrate instances when requisite functions were—or should have been—marshaled to help groups reach quality solutions and appropriate decisions. Just as important, ask students if they can recall instances when the socioemotional dimension seemed as or more important than purely rational elements of decision making. Have they experienced situations in which relational issues such as friendship and team cohesiveness, emotional factors such as joy or pride, member attributes such as commitment and experience, prior decision-making histories, or institutional frameworks were salient?

As you critique this theory with your students, ask them to consider whether or not the functionalist perspective adequately treats the potential importance of complex developmental sequences and the emergent aspects of decision making. In some cases, what may be most important about a group’s deliberations is that its goals changed once it began examining solutions. In another case, careful attention to a group’s process might reveal that it began with alternatives before moving back to the problem, only to clarify its goal once it was faced with having to make a choice. Other times, a group may abandon the process after realizing the unfeasibility of every possible solution. In many cases, it does seem as though the developmental sequence of events may help us to understand what was most important in a given group’s work. An analogy to writing might help. When students embark upon research papers, we warn them that their theses or foci may change in the process of researching and writing. What they study affects how they view the overall problem. If they knew what they were going to say before they started, then most likely they wouldn’t produce very
sophisticated results. Group decision making often resembles such research and composition. If—as students of communication—we focus on the functions atemporally or in terms of simple linear progressions, then we may achieve an elementary understanding of what happened, yet miss the revealing developmental process that took place. Reduction clarifies, but it may also distort or neglect the most intriguing details of the picture.

Under Questions to Sharpen Your Focus, exercise #1 asks students to explore intriguing parallels between functional requisites and the functions of living organisms. Does Hirokawa and Gouran's approach account for reproduction, or is it necessary to bring in the institutional function to create the parallel?

We’ve often wondered if the functional perspective is more of a theory about problem solving itself than communication’s role in problem solving. Wouldn’t most of the concepts that Griffin discusses in this chapter apply equally well to a group’s deliberations or one person’s thought process?

Sample Application Log

Melodie

I’d like to take the theorist’s opinion that prioritizing, or the developing of a logical progression of a group is essential if it is to function, and look at my summer’s experience. I was the assistant director for S.I.C.M, the children’s program at College Church this summer. Our group of interns struggled with accomplishing tasks, and a large part of that was due to our lack of prioritizing. In the leadership role, our director did point out positive qualities of the members but failed to acknowledge the negatives. In this case one intern was repeatedly late for all group functions, thus causing us an extra hour of time that was not originally scheduled. This soon caused tension in the group but nothing was done about it. We had many decisions to make regarding day camp, scheduling and clubs, but our failure to prioritize our choices and lack of goal setting made the summer an organizational nightmare.

Exercises and Activities

Griffin features a discussion of Hirokawa’s experience with a four-person medical team serving rural Iowa communities that had no physician (239-40). Hirokawa claims that in making decisions, they satisfied the requirements that he and Gouran outline in their functional perspective. Ask your students to speculate about this process. More specifically, how do they suppose these budding health professionals came to decisions? What were their deliberations like? Could other factors have crept into the process that Hirokawa ignored or underestimated?

When Em Griffin teaches this chapter, he uses volunteers to constitute a decision-making body. He then gives them a problem to solve such as the familiar horse-trading problem (Farmer Glen buys a horse for ten dollars. A short while later, his neighbor convinces him to sell it for twenty. Glen soon decides he can’t live without the beast, so be buys it back for thirty. By now the horse is a local celebrity, and another neighbor persuades Glen to sell it
for forty. How much has Glen made or lost over the course of the transactions? Answer: twenty dollars ahead) or a similar puzzle. The key is that the problem needs to have multiple answers. Once the problem-solving group is established, he gives a second group of volunteers the task of using FOICs checklist to chart the first group’s responses as they work toward a decision. This exercise illustrates how a group functions, as well as the difficulty of coding systems such as FOICs checklist.

For a practical illustration of the functional perspective, Griffin recommends using a two-minute clip from Apollo 13 that begins when Ed Harris picks up chalk (1:28:30).

Further Resources

Sample Examination Questions

These are not available in the online version of the Instructors’ Manual