
‘What on earth?’: Understanding ambiguity toleration in business communication

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Abstract

This paper explores the types of ambiguity that may be encountered in business communication, and their philosophical and language-based origins. It discusses the dependence of the business environment on language context, ambiguity in organisational climate and the ethical uses of ambiguity. The paper then outlines the usefulness of ambiguity in strategic organisational communication; explores strategies of ambiguity in crisis and risk management; comments on ambiguity in organisational mergers and acquisitions; and explains ways in which ambiguity can both help and hinder business communication. Finally, the paper explores leadership qualities for ambiguous situations.

the fact that a statement may have different meanings. For Eisenberg, ambiguity is engendered through “detailed literal language as well as through imprecise, figurative language” (1984, p. 230). However, ambiguity itself is ambiguous. Ambiguity of meaning may be totally independent of perceived ambiguity which is a psychological variable, which may be different again from the ethical use of “strategic ambiguity” within an organisation (1984, p. 230). As Eisenberg suggests, “ambiguity occurs in an organisation when there is no clear interpretation of a phenomenon or set of events. . . ambiguity can exist within the organization as a whole as well as within individuals” own cultural experience” (1984, p. 259).

Introduction

Communication theorists regard the reduction of uncertainty as a key factor in business communication (Salazaar, 1996, Dwyer 2009). Certainly ambiguity in the business environment has positive and negative qualities. Everyday positive features of ambiguity in business language include the use of metaphor to explain, promote cohesion and provide inspiration, however, this may be contrasted with negotiating and contracting in which the elimination of uncertainty is a necessary condition before forming any business agreement. Ambiguity in the workplace will always exist when there are two or more people engaging in symbolic interaction to exchange information (Mead, 2003). The sources of ambiguity are multiple. Ambiguity can result from indecision, an intention to mean several things at once, or

Participant ambiguity in language

Kahn, Wolfe, Quinn and Snoek define ambiguity as “the lack of clear, consistent information” (1964, p. 23). Ambiguity may occur in the location and mobilisation of symbolic communication, or simply, in the expression of language. Ambiguity occurs in the spaces of meaning which are not fixed or in which words may “gesture to things which are not fully understandable”, for example: ideas, emotions and experiences (Komesaroff, 2005, p. 632). Ambiguity occurs where language attempts to define meanings that are indirectly approached or may be multivalent (meaning several things at once). Ambiguity may be generated from inside language, not as “part of a formal, logical deduction involving an interlocutor but with a singularity located outside the subject of exchange” (Komesaroff, 2005, p. 633). Ambiguity differs from deception in so much that ambiguous

communication has the potential, a) to be either right or wrong, or b) to be neither right or wrong, or c) simply metaphorical; whereas “deceptive language” is accomplished by falsification, concealment, or equivocation (Buller & Burgoon, 2003, p. 99). Ambiguous communicators do not necessarily intend to deceive, rather to imagine how things ‘might be’, however, deceptive communicators can usually be characterised by uncertainty and vagueness, non-immediacy, reticence and withdrawal, disassociation, or “image and relationship-protecting behavior” (Buller & Burgoon, 2003, p. 100). Nevertheless, people also may or may not exhibit these qualities in the normal course of communication.

Philosophically, constructionists argue that there is no purely objective reality to describe (that there are no objective world traits universally apparent) that are not mediated by language. Accordingly, knowledge is relational and inter-dependent, and new knowledge is discovered by extending existing knowledge. The use of ambiguity is a language device that may “unlock” new understandings (Eisenberg, 1984, p. 229). However, a linguistic relativist position does not consider ambiguity to be a special problem of language, suggesting instead that meanings are constituted by individuals but that they are not inherent in discourse itself. The interactional view of communication proposed by Watzlawick and Weakland (1977) argues that all action is potentially communicative and the context is a key factor in determining meaning.

Empson suggests there are three possible dimensions in language use along which ambiguities may occur. These are the degree of logical grammatical disorder, the degree to which the apprehension of the ambiguity must be conscious, and the degree of psychological complexity concerned (Empson, 1996, p. 48). In his famous book of literary criticism, *7 Types of Ambiguity*, Empson defines the kinds of ambiguity in language use (summarised here).

1.) Ambiguity by difference – a word may have several distinct meanings or several

meanings may be interconnected, e.g. ‘a sitting duck’.

2.) Ambiguity by reduction – two or more word meanings may be resolved into one, e.g. ‘point-blank’.

3.) Ambiguity by definition – two ideas which are connected only by being relevant in context, can be given simultaneously in one word, e.g. ‘a paradox’.

4.) Ambiguity by distinct creation – two or more meanings of a statement do not agree amongst themselves but combine to produce a more complicated statement, e.g. ‘your cheque has bounced’.

5.) Ambiguities of transition – an idea occurs which applies to nothing exactly but lies halfway between two meanings, e.g. ‘meet me half-way’.

6.) Ambiguity of tautology – the reader is forced to invent intended understandings, e.g. ‘leave before you go’.

7.) Ambiguities by division – two meanings of the word, are the two opposite meanings defined by the context, e.g. ‘she had a break’.

The implication is that language use is inherently complex in terms of the meaning it creates. As post-structuralists recognise, Derrida’s theory of linguistic trace adds further complexity to Empson’s understanding of ambiguity in language use by, “show[ing] that the supposedly primary, dominant or superior value implicitly relies on the supposedly secondary, different or inferior value in order to achieve the presence that it should achieve all by itself,” thus language meaning may be inherently shifting and ultimately indeterminate (Bradley, 2008, p. 7). However, the use of ambiguity in communication may be both inadvertent and advertent. Therefore, an objectivity test may apply in which language use considered subjectively ambiguous can be assessed in terms of the meaning that a ‘reasonable person’ would ascribe it. This may work well in print. However, the ‘catch’ with language ambiguity in organisations that have both high and low context protocols is that it is frequently not enough to dismiss the ambiguous language as ‘something’ that could ‘mean anything’ but rather better to think of it as a conceptual ‘seed’ of meaning that could grow

in many directions. This raises the question of what makes selective attention worthwhile. Mostly this is a factor of varying attention span and shifting focus as much as it may be of rigorous analysis.

The dependence of business environment on language context

Businesses depend on effective written and spoken communication for operational efficiency. If communication is poor productivity decreases and labour and supervisory costs increase. If communication is clear and communication channels are designed efficiently, productivity increases (Cheney, Chistensen, Thoger, Ganesh, & Shiv (2004), Piotrowski (2005), Hargie (2006), Mintzberg (2004, 2009), Page & Zorn (2007)). Similarly, the desire to reduce ambiguity in interpersonal communicative interactions is usually motivated by three elements: a) “anticipation of future interaction”; b) “incentive value”, or; c) “deviance” (Berger, cited in Griffin, 2003, p. 143). Even company morale may be linked to poor or effective communication and consequently company image (Piotrowski, 2005). The quality and uses of ambiguity in an organisation may be complex and to some extent counter-intuitive. For example, in order to achieve change an organisation may need a comparatively high degree of complexity and a correspondingly high degree of precision but in some situations it is more efficient to be “ambiguous and more lowly-structured” in order to keep options open to adapt to change (Menz, 1999, p. 101).

Ambiguity in business organisations is of course not only limited to communication. The relative clarity or ambiguity of communication within a business organisation can also be affected by the very nature of business itself. Kahneman and Tversky’s (1979) ‘prospect theory’ aims to describe how decision-making will be informed by making choices between risk-laden alternatives with known probabilities, that are implicitly or explicitly the decisions at the basis of much market-based behaviour. Relatedly, ‘expected utility theory’ explains

how the price of a good or service will be related to ‘marginal utility’ (its perceived value relative to other goods or services) (Bernoulli, 1954/1738). Put simply, efficient communication in business is a necessary but not sufficient quality.

At the basis of all communication practices are technology, relationships, and the use of language. Language is essential to human communication which includes communication in the business context. As Piotrowski (2005) relates, communication issues can become compounded exponentially in the expedition of work. For example, “30% of letters and memos in industry and government do nothing more than seek clarification of earlier correspondence or respond to the request for clarification” (Piotrowski, 2005, p. 1). At the root of poor communication is ambiguity, which is the discursive understanding of ‘indeterminacy’ or being is a state of not knowing or ‘misunderstanding’. However, written and spoken ambiguity may also bring positive benefits to communication, depending on what context they are used in.

Communication is ambiguous because people are complex, will seldom be thinking the same thoughts, may have divergent views, and because of cultural differences, no two perspectives are exactly alike. Furthermore, human interactions may be infinitely complex or very simple. Wallerstein questions whether we can we measure the impact of the perceiver on the perception, the measurer on the measurement? Something taken at face value by one person may be deeply significant to another (2004). This is the Heisenberg uncertainty principle writ large. Furthermore, he asks, “[h]ow can we get beyond both the false view that an observer can be neutral and the not very helpful suggestion that observers bring their biases to their perceptions?” (2004, p. 26). Clearly Wallerstein is sceptical of the ability for people to step outside their subjective views. However, in the everyday working context this can usually be managed by the mediation of the work-task itself following from communication.

As DeVito, O’Rourke and O’Neill suggest, uncertainty and ambiguity “increase with larger

cultural differences” (2000, p. 107). Contexts of ambiguity in communication may also exhibit inter-cultural differences. The basic distinction between ‘high-context’ cultures which place emphasis on personal relationships, local knowledge and oral agreements and in which information may be known by all participants but not explicitly stated, and ‘low context’ cultures in which information is explicitly stated and often written down, also reflects differences in ambiguity toleration. As DeVito et al. state:

To a member of a low context culture, what is omitted creates ambiguity. To this person ambiguity is simply something that will be eliminated by explicit and direct communication. For a member of a high-context culture ambiguity is something to be avoided – it is a sign that the interpersonal and social interactions have not proved sufficient to establish a shared base of information. (2000, p. 104).

Some workplaces also have a combination of high and low context protocols which can lead to conflict and interference in upward, downward and horizontal communication. Communication is also a factor of people’s motivations, generally understood to be: money, sex, success, social status, power, emotional security, self-image, family welfare, national welfare or getting through the day. Motivations are inherently complex and may be ambiguous or under-realised influences on many people’s behaviours, self-fashioning and perceptions of other’s. No two people’s motivations and thus communication responses to a given situation will be exactly alike. Unless communication is fundamental and basic, no two people will have exactly the same motivations for communicating about any one issue. Sunnafrank suggests that people are inclined to seek information not necessarily to reduce uncertainty per se, but to assess the potential outcome of the situation, whether it is positive or negative. The term Sunnafrank uses for this is “predicted outcome value theory” (1986, p. 3).

‘Uncertainty reduction theory’ in communication relationships involves the two psychological components of ‘self-awareness’ and ‘knowledge of others’. In ‘objective self-awareness’ the person focuses on the self rather than the objects of the environment. In “subjective self-awareness” the self is viewed as peripheral within a continual stream of experiences (Littlejohn, 2002, p. 243). Any ‘self and other’ regarding behaviour such as those behavioural patterns frequently involved in the interpersonal aspects of business communication involve the concept of understanding or being aware of the “predictive uncertainty” of others as a measure of expectations, and may involve a notion of “explanatory uncertainty” in comprehending their actions (Littlejohn, 2002, p. 245). However, ambiguity is not only expressed orally and behaviourally. Causes of ambiguity in written business communication include: “ignoring the reader or audience, a lack of professional pride, a lack of confidence, inexperience, and writing for the wrong reasons, and strict requirements” (Piotrowski, 2005, pp. 1-2). Some ambiguity is clearly positive in so far as it is motivational, however, low ambiguity in the group context may result in the negative state of ‘groupthink’ which is best understood as a “deterioration of mental efficiency, reality testing, and moral judgment that results from in-group pressure” (Verderber, Verderber, & Berryman-Fink, 2008, p. 234). ‘Groupthink’ is all the more pernicious because group members may not be aware of its onset or consequences. Milgram’s (1963, 1974) experiments on obedience to authority figures at Yale University are a classic case in point.

The dependence on language in the professional environment

Any professional workplace context is dependent on language use. Whilst different professions (such as law or medicine or accountancy) may have specialised terminologies, many professional workplaces get by with the efficient use of Plain English. Having determined that ambiguity is a potential cause of inefficiency in the workplace, it is now possible to identify three causes of ambiguity:

a) semantic ambiguity – words may have more than one meaning and it may be difficult to discern which shade of meaning is the preferred or most accurate, b) people have difficulties in the attempt to explain meaning, and c) people of different languages or cultural groups may have inter-lingual difficulty in understanding one another (Holland & Webb, 2006). A factor in remediation involves simply taking the extra time needed to know and understand the other person and comprehend their point of view. Frequently trying to clearly separate the message from the messenger is also beneficial but not wholly so.

Ambiguity in communication has benefits and risks. Whilst generally scientists and business people seek certainty, clarity and non-divergence of meaning, in other contexts what is required is the deliberate preservation of uncertainty, requiring ambiguity. This may arise in situations where the facts are unknown or in which the event may take place sometime in the future. Ambiguity is thus used to keep open future possibilities. As Komesaroff states, the “construction of the future from within the present as an open array of possibilities ... is what we call ‘hope’” (Komesaroff, 2005, p. 632). Hope is dependent on ambiguity. Whilst hope certainly plays a role in any future-oriented business, business communication can be complex and involve a heterogeneous mix of discursive practices which arise from different discourses. These may include: scientific knowledge, economics, social insight, marketing, and philosophical reflection. Clearly, crystal-ball-gazing is not simply a fairground attraction.

Tolerance for ambiguity is also related to group motivations. Salazar states that, “If individuals composing the group have little tolerance for ambiguous situations, they may be perceived as being too complex” (1996, p. 177). However, individual characteristics and tolerances toward ambiguity may differ from group uses or the strategic use of ambiguity. Menz argues that a “continuous switching between routine and non-routine helps to create the delicate balance between ambiguity

reduction and ambiguity maintenance which is essential to the continued existence of organisations” (1999, p. 104).

Reverting to clear and simple communication may be the ‘default’ position in business practices; it is not always possible to traverse all communication divides. The ability to effectively use ambiguity in business communication is an everyday competence. Speech within the business environment is often not a solitary or impersonal activity but rather a process of shared discovery and of contested meanings. It is useful to bear in mind that there is “no exact or complete transmission that remains unchanged within any cultural system of meaning” (Komesaroff, 2005, p. 633).

Ambiguity in job-related messages

Discounting a normal range of tolerance for communication ambiguity, Krayer and Bacon infer that differences in the perception of ambiguity in a stimulus message is “significantly related to differences in role ambiguity perceived by the worker on the job” (1984, p. 90). This positive correlation between communication ambiguity and role ambiguity means that reductions in perceived communications ambiguities can be achieved through diminished role ambiguities. As role ambiguity may cause stress and organisational dysfunction, the knowledge that role ambiguity and communication ambiguity are correlated may mean that a reduction in the former may result in a reduction in the latter. Thus the ambiguity of job-related messages may reduce in an organisation in which roles are clearly defined.

Pickert has described how the ability to provide a solution for an ambiguous task may enact “decentration” (or ‘reversability’, the ability to focus on two or more aspects of a problem simultaneously and relate them together) in two ways (1981, p. 56). Firstly, to interpret and respond to an ambiguous communication may involve the consideration of another person’s point of view (involving concrete operational thought). As the respondent may realise that they lack information they will then ask questions, social

decentration may follow as the logic of the problem presented is considered but also the responses of other interpretants (Pickert, 1981).

Furthermore, 'cognitive dissonance' may be the result of communication in the business organisation as the result of unexpected appropriation or blame or simply changing market-circumstances. Dissonance occurs as the result of an unexpected correlation between concepts or events which may produce tension or stress as the result of a perceived need to change (for example, either attitudes or behaviours). The overriding consequence of cognitive dissonance is the desire to reduce it; however, in the extreme this may produce "situational avoidance" (Littlejohn, 2002, pp. 126-127).

Means (2010, p. 45) and Piotrowski (2005) outline 10 principles that provide a rule of thumb for managing ambiguity in the business environment:

- Organise your thoughts
- Maintain a professional attitude
- Refrain from making judgments about others
- Keep an open mind
- Don't make assumptions or jump to conclusions
- Keep emotions in check
- Be slow to take offence
- Give others the benefit of the doubt
- Keep control of yourself
- Ask what your immediate purpose is, what is the scope of the problem, what are the constraints or your response?

Following these 10 principles may alleviate some, but probably not all, of the ambiguity associated with job-related messages.

Strategic ambiguity within the business organisation

Although some of our experiences with ambiguity may teach us that while being clear in communication is a worthy goal, there exists a body of thought which argues that clarity in communication is 'non-normative' and not a sensible standard against which to assess individual or organisational

effectiveness. Rather, ambiguity can be seen as a continuum between exact understanding and nonsense. We are more likely to achieve rapport with someone who communicates such that we can understand them; and others are more likely to achieve rapport with us if we can communicate so as to be understood. For dependable patterns of action and independent initiatives to coexist in the business environment, a consensus of meaning is sufficient but not necessary. However, as Salazaar states, ambiguity may have an effect on group strategy for decision-making for "... under conditions of uncertainty and ambiguity, individual decision makers engage in search processes to better define the problem confronting them ... [S]earch involves assessing information regarding alternatives, establishing criteria, and examining outcomes and payoffs associated with those outcomes" (1996, p. 176). The process of searching can itself be creative but a risk is divergence unless clear parameters are set. A further response of strategic ambiguity is convergence. This occurs when people may share "fantasy themes or a rhetorical vision" which gives them a sense of identification with a shared reality (Littlejohn, 2002, p. 158). Convergence may occur informally within an organisation and only tangentially be related to it, or more formally through public relations campaigns.

In order to be able to adapt, Menz argues that an organisation needs to be able to effect "a continuous balance between adaptation and adaptability, between stability and flexibility" (1999, p. 105). Furthermore, Eisenberg has argued that "strategic ambiguity" is essential to a business organisation in so far as it: 1) promotes unified diversity, for example, by contributing to group identity formation; 2) facilitates organisational change, by signalling aspirational values, and/or; 3) amplifies existing source attributions and preserves privileged positions by "mythologizing leadership roles" or minimising commitments that are difficult to break (1984, p. 227).

Ambiguity and organisational 'climate'

The positive view of some levels of strategic ambiguity within organisations is partly a

response to internal recognitions and partly a result of the desire to achieve external objectives. For example, employees might be enthused by a successful advertising campaign depicting their business or embarrassed by inadequate representation. Moreover, they may become frustrated by the inability to effect changes in company public relations and become cynical.

The role of the recognition of value to the ascription of 'cognition' to the worker in an organisation in historical terms is a relatively modern concept. Most efficient and productive workplaces today will value some degree of workplace autonomy within organisational structures. Whilst the desire for accountability will remain the predominant factor, as Eisenberg suggests, there is a shift in most progressive workplaces to seeing organisational participants as "thinking individuals with identifiable goals" (1984, p. 227). In order to distinguish ambiguous communication firstly from 'interference and noise' and secondly, from disruption to channels of communication, it must be understood that "complex systems are not dominated by linear and causal relations but by non-linear ones" (Menz, 1999, p. 105). The difficulty here is that non-linear relations may be a cause, by-product or indeed causally irrelevant to the creation of ambiguity but *are* seen as relevant to its perception. In ambiguous workplace situations it is difficult to distinguish between cause and effect because frequently communication may be attributable to the organisational 'climate' rather than a defined source.

Within many organisations, the role of manager is seen to be taken by people who are skilled 'symbolic communicators'. Often managers use language effectively because it is a by-product of political, dramaturgical and language skills necessary for organising resources and people. Competent communicators may use "strategic symbols" to accomplish their goals, but the communicative change of this language use may not always be open or clear (Eisenberg, 1984, p. 227). Frequently, leaders might 'ad-lib' in their responses in transitional

organisation climates, particularly if when questioned, the 'paperwork has gone west!'

Furthermore, as objectives change, the goals of communicators may also change, meaning is rarely unitary or consistent, often people in the workplace have multiple and sometimes conflicting goals which they orient towards. As people in organisations confront multiple situational requirements, they may respond to communicative strategies which do not always minimise ambiguity. As Eisenberg comments, the "climate" of a business may also shift from an ideological adherence to clarity towards one of a contingent strategic orientation; this may or may not be communicated amongst the various levels of the organisation (1984, p. 228). In any organisation there may be three or more levels of communication reflecting different uses and tolerances of ambiguity. At lower operative levels there is often tighter control over ambiguity than at middle-management level, whereas higher levels of management may use both ambiguous and non-ambiguous language in everyday language use.

Eisenberg compounds the complexity of the use of strategic ambiguity in organisational communication by suggesting that while explicit communication may be a concept of cultural assumptions, it is "not a linguistic imperative" (1984, p. 228). People will vary their language along a continuum of explicitness and indirection, depending on how they may "read" another person's desires, aims, or understandings (1984, p. 228). Ambiguity may thus be seen as a resource of language which may intentionally or otherwise be employed to strike a balance between being understood, "not offending others and maintaining a self-image" (1984, p. 228). Furthermore as Salazar suggests, in decision-making situations characterised by minimal ambiguity in which "members are homogeneous" with regard to information and the "task is not novel", communication is likely to play a minimal role (1996, p. 179). This may be compared with organisational situations of high ambiguity in which the motivation to "persuade, exchange information, check for errors in reasoning" – all necessary factors for

effective decision-making – will be stronger (Salazar, 1996, pp. 178-179).

Frequently any communicated message will deviate from a hypothetical ideal. Ambiguity may be defined in terms of “message attributes” (lack of specificity, abstract language, absence of a course of action) and receiver interpretation (perceived equivocality of the message) (Eisenberg, 1984, p. 229). Eisenberg argues that the concept of an ideally clear message is misleading in so far as clarity is a relational variable a continuum which “reflects the degree to which a source has narrowed the possible interpretations of a message and succeeded in achieving a correspondence between intentions and interpretation of receiver” (1984, p. 230).

In a turbulent business environment in which there are many impacting external or internal variables, ambiguous communication is a “rational method” used by communicators to orient towards multiple goals (Eisenberg, 1984, p. 239). In any organisation there are conflicts between centralisation and decentralisation, the individual and community, self-determination and security, as such strategic ambiguity may promote unified diversity. The issue of divergent goals may be manageable not necessarily by consensus but through the “development of strategies to preserve and manage differences” (Eisenberg, 1984, p. 231). A variation of strategic ambiguity is “equivocal communication”. This is described as “non-straightforward” communication which may be ambiguous, tangential, or evasive. Equivocal communication is usually indicative of avoidance and is used when all other forms of communication might lead to negativity (Tyler, 1997, pp. 59-60).

In complex business organisations with many members, and multiple organisational values and interpretations, a sense of unity may be derived from points of symbolic divergence. Ambiguity may be used strategically to encourage creativity and guide against the acceptance of “one standard way of viewing organisational reality” (Eisenberg, 1984, p. 231). Sometimes the role of leaders

is to provide meaning for followers. The language required may be abstract, evangelical, and even poetic.

Interpreting meaning

Thus, there are many business contexts in which a literal meaning cannot be taken, or a purposive meaning (what was the meaning intended?) may not be understood. For example, if you are discussing your work allocations with your manager and she or he tells you have ‘five-floating’, it may mean he or she wants to do the ‘high-five’ with you or it may mean that you have five days leave in lieu. Asking questions and seeking clarity can help but symbolic language may also transcend the context it is spoken in.

A further ethical dilemma with strategic ambiguity in business is that it may or may not involve a ‘mischief’ element. Was the statement intended to be ambiguous and therefore to mystify, can it be discounted as ‘only a symbol’ and hence meaningless? From the point of view of interpretation, ‘there could be fish hooks with that’ but ethically, clear commentary is preferable in a business setting when dealing with ‘day-to-day’ issues.

The ‘golden rule’ of interpreting words in context and giving them their ordinary meaning unless this produces an absurdity may work in formal situations of business activity but not always in less formal situations due to the transitory and oral nature of business communication. The allocation of correct ‘weighting’ to the communication context in the workplace is crucially important. This may be derived from both fields of experience and organisational knowledge.

Ethical uses of strategic ambiguity

As Eisenberg (1984) suggests, the uses of ambiguity within organisations are multiple but coalesce around issues relating to group leadership. If used creatively and relatively benignly, strategic ambiguity can achieve organisational goals in an ethical manner.

It can be used to provide inspiration that will imprecisely guide a group towards a desired aspiration, lead organisational change, or motivate productive organisational behaviour.

Further identifiable benefits of strategic ambiguity include: holding strained relations together, allowing a group to employ a single voice, facilitating change, allowing for adaptation, creating durable meanings, maintaining standing and 'character insurance', avoiding costly commitments, and preserving future options or courses of action (Eisenberg, 1984).

Moreover, at an interpersonal level strategic ambiguity can, a) facilitate relational development, b) control what people share of private opinions, beliefs, and avoid conflict, c) act as a buffer of deniability (essential to the moderation of different views), and d) provide a useful compromise between known and unknown. However, it is necessary to stress that a distinction needs to be made between strategic ambiguity used at an interpersonal level and taking 'strategically ambiguous' communication personally. The latter may be ethically inadvisable in circumstances in which relationship needs conflict with organisational expectations or protocols.

Furthermore, there is a fine line to be drawn between the use of strategic ambiguity in public relations campaigns, and deception. Here it is relevant to make a distinction between the use of strategic ambiguity in public relations campaigns that reflect realities of the business' operating environment and those which seek to conceal or present alternative realities. There are no uniformly established ethical guidelines but today's society of social media prolificacy is finely attuned and potentially rapidly mobilised to expose major discontinuities in issues of public interest.

Krohn (1994) has argued that the Sapir-Whorf-Korzybski hypothesis may be applied in the context of training business communication students in ethical practice by discouraging words that denote violence and including general semantics training. Despite the view that, "...the very act of communicating in the social context of a business culture implies an ethical basis, a respect for persons" (Mahin, 1998, p. 74), the fact that there is a lack of a common

framework for deciding what is ethical language use in business practice tends to detract from the concept that openness in communication is a factor which affects business performance (Nelson, 2003).

Ambiguity and crisis management

As Ulmer and Sellnow (2000) have suggested, crises in which there is a high degree of organisational ambiguity can result in benefit to the organisation if handled effectively. In crisis situations the idea is to "reduce communication ambiguity" (2000, p. 143). One of the difficulties in reducing ambiguity in crises is that businesses need to maintain the support of many groups including customers, employees, stockholders and regulatory agencies. Efficient communication is therefore essential, since reducing contradictory information lessens the ambiguity of crises and allows for planning a way ahead. Here 'reductionism' may be useful – reducing a problem to its smallest parameters. In this respect ambiguous communication may allow "divergent interpretations" to coexist and diverse groups to work together (Weick, 1988, p. 305). However as Ulmer and Sellnow (2000, p. 147) suggest, "strategic ambiguity" may be ethical when it involves conveying complete and unbiased information and unethical when biases or gaps in knowledge are evident. Ultimately the discourse of business communication may be accepted or rejected on the grounds of reasonableness. Thus understanding the ethical complexities of 'losing balance' in the communication with relevant stakeholders is important in understanding and rectifying communicative practices to resolve ethical tensions in a crisis. Cheney (1991) observes that understanding ambiguity may lead to a decentring of the self within the organisation by making the worker view themselves as a 'subject' within a system they do not fully understand. In normal organisational communication, not all puzzles have to be solved straight away.

Ambiguity and risk

Ambiguity can be understood as being similar to economic 'risk', a term used to describe a situation in which an investment is made but of

which the outcome is uncertain. In some forms of risk outcomes are uncertain but probabilities are known. In others, termed “economically ambiguous”, the probabilities of uncertain outcomes are unknown (O’Neill & Kobayashi, 2009, p. 645). People prefer to take ‘risky’ decisions rather than ambiguous decisions, which suggests that people are averse to making decisions in “low information environments” (O’Neill & Kobayashi, 2009, p. 645). Furthermore, neuroeconomic studies by Ellsberg (1961) and Hsu, Bhatt, Adolphs, Tranel and Camerer (2005) have discovered evidence for brain regions preferentially activated by ambiguity (the *frontal cortex* and *amygdale*) and risk (the *parietal cortex* and *striatum*), implying that they may be separately encoded in the brain. So there is physiological evidence that the human brain processes ambiguity and risk in different ways.

Ambiguity in acquisitions and mergers

Risberg’s study of ambiguity and communication in cross-cultural business acquisitions reveals that the process of company acquisitions and mergers is for the acquired companies a threatening experience. One reason is that the present and future frequently become ambiguous. Problems are seen to develop from lack of sufficient information or a function of different values (Risberg, 1997). Therefore consistency of information between acquiring and acquired companies is important in creating meaning out of uncertainty. Differences in organisational cultures can be due to differences in ethnicity, gender, nationality or ideology or subcultures with conflicting assumptions (Risberg, 1997). Risberg suggests that three perspectives may be used to study corporate culture: the “integrative perspective, the differential perspective, and the ambiguity perspective” (1997, p. 258). The integrative perspective emphasises commonalities between organisational cultures, the differential perspective stresses inconsistency and lack of consensus; the business culture is seen as either harmonious

or conflicting. The ambiguity perspective combines aspects of each.

Many of the failures in acquisitions and mergers are due to the ambiguities produced from cultural clashes. These occur when companies refuse to find commonalities and instead see differences. Unlike the integrative perspective the differentiation perspective does not deny ambiguity; there may be different sub-cultures within any organisation. Multiple perspectives in any one organisation and a climate neither wholly of harmony nor conflict are more likely to be formed in an organisational culture viewed from an ambiguity perspective.

Ambiguity and leadership

Whilst most workplaces would have ideals of: security, community, respect, authority, and clarity in communication, in the era of social media, the worldwide web, globalisation and global warming, the pace of change within organisations has increased dramatically. As a consequence many organisations need to remain agile and responsive to changing internal and external environments. However there is a fine line between the communication of organisational values and the communication of organisational change in which planning sometimes gives way to adaptation. As Amorium suggests, business organisations need to know who they are (how they are defined in their operations) and what they want (or want to become), because the “how of their plans will be a moving target” (2010, p. 2). Clearly, visionary leadership and the ability to implement plans are on a continuum with variable points of intersection. Consequently, in times of organisational change, dealing with ambiguity is a leadership skill. Hooper defines the following characteristics of leadership skills (2007, p. 1):

Leaders:

- Can effectively cope with change
- Can decide and act without having a total picture
- Aren’t upset when things are up in the air
- Can comfortably handle risk and uncertainty

- Are future-orientated
- Handle volatility, uncertainty and complexity
- Identify threats and opportunities in business practice.

Thus leadership skills for ‘uncertainty’ are desirable and may in fact be necessary qualities for the modern workplace. Leaders often attract praise or blame for their ‘judgment’ but suspension of judgment may in fact be more valuable in many situations in which ambiguity results from excessive uncertainty or change. On the other hand, clarity of communication may enhance or inhibit workplace anxiety. Mitzberg critiques a growing trend he terms ‘macro-leading’, characterised by “leaders who manage by remote control, disconnected from anything except the big picture” (2009, p. 9). However, the opposite trend of ‘micro-managing’ may also inhibit organisational direction and growth by dampening down necessary sparks of creativity.

For any leader in today’s business market, opportunities and challenges must be appreciated from multiple viewpoints and not just seen as ‘traits’ to be expressed from a personal leadership bias. Often causes of conflict within an organisation are difficult to ‘diagnose’ from a single perspective. Thus a leader’s role must sometimes be to set reasonable goals and to ‘disambiguate’. However, providing a clear direction, synchronising the motivations of others and communicating adjustments within an organisation may involve both clear instruction and ambiguity. Other qualities of a leader’s toleration to ambiguity include: listening well, thinking divergently, and the setting up of incremental dividends to reward the efforts of workers.

Anthony argues that complexity, sudden shifts in the basis of competition and global competitors are the “new norms” of constant change which face tomorrow’s global leaders (2010, para. 4). Whilst giving people more responsibility helps them refine skills, the acquisition of new skills as the result of ambiguous threats and challenges may also be

a driver of business capability. Thus Anthony suggests rather than ‘scaling’ being a measure of success, giving leaders “smaller ambiguous challenges” may instead result in the acquisition of competencies necessary for climbing the corporate ladder (2010, para. 7).

Conclusion

There are many effective business writing books which will tell the student how to structure a written report and lessen ambiguity in the discursive business environment (for example see Piotrowski’s *Effective Business Writing*), but these frequently do not provide a full account of the characteristics and utility of ambiguity in business communication. Ambiguity in business and organisational communication needs to be understood more thoroughly as the inevitable result of communication in high and low context workplace protocols; the changeability of meaning as the result of language use in interpersonal and strategic communication contexts; and as a consequence of the uncertainties of change management in organisations.

Managers and staff may need to be trained to be able to use conflict management strategies effectively and deal with situations of ambiguity and uncertainty. This may involve deeper understanding of aspects of interpersonal communication or the uses of strategic ambiguity within an organisation. As Robbins (1993) points out, conflict may result from incompatibility over goals, differing interpretations of facts, disagreements about behavioural expectations, and from arguments over resources. However, as Sayers suggests, sometimes conflict “cannot and should not be resolved” (2005, p. 83). Whilst one strategy for dealing with ambiguity is simply to learn to ‘tolerate’ it, by gradual frequency and acclimatisation to exposure from the people who employ it, there is also a creative element in strategic communication which can work to an organisation’s advantage. To use strategic ambiguity takes confidence because it also contains a risk of indirect communication or that the audience simply will not understand it.

Many working environments may go through periods of structured antagonism in which general staff values of freedom may conflict with values of managerial control. Conflict may arise from semantic difficulties, misunderstandings, lack of information or information distortion. Skills that managers of ambiguity in business organisations require are: being able to reconsider boundaries of people's positions, thinking creatively to find new solutions, emphasising relatedness rather than polarising views, the willingness to work through any problem, and not necessarily to seek to end conflict but to "manage it properly" (Sayers, 2005, p. 93). Whilst there may be an important practical consideration in maintaining clear and unambiguous communication in everyday procedural matters within organisations, when managed carefully, both tactical and strategic ambiguity can add value to an organisation's communication if used in an ethical manner. Finally, the best practical advice is that when language use seems interpersonally ambiguous, it is far better to interpret it positively than negatively.

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