**CHAPTER 5**

**ORGANIZATIONS AS COMMUNICATION SYSTEMS**

1. Chapter Overview & Introduction
   1. Systems approach marks radical shift from “reductionist” approaches to organization to put elements of organization in a more cohesive whole.
2. Situating Systems Perspective
   1. *System* challenged *machine* as the dominant metaphor for the natural and social world.
      1. *Machine* metaphor relies upon reducing a complex organism/process into its simplest parts (reductionism) in order to best control variables removed from context (determinism).
      2. “One Best Way” (Frederick Taylor) is the best example of reductionism and determinism in an organizational context.
   2. *Perspectivism vs. Reductionism*: Ludwig von Bertalanffy, a founder of **General Systems Theory**, explained that mechanistic worldviews rely on reductionism while systems worldviews rely on perspectivism, a way of looking at the complicated interrelations of forces.
   3. “World as Great Organization”: von Bertalanffy characterizes interdependence and indeterminacy of natural and social processes.
      1. Von Bertalanffy’s “world as great organization” had an overtly moral tone; desired to bring attention and care to others around us.
      2. Von Bertalanffy’s GST aims to restore humanity to us.
      3. Offers alternative to psychological approaches to organizing (human relations and HRM in the 1930s-1950s)
3. Principles of Systems Perspective: *The General Science of Wholeness*
   1. *Holism*
   2. *Organism* replaces “machine” as the dominant metaphor of GST.
   3. Boundaries of systems:
      1. *“Open system”:* Describes the relative openness of a system/organism to its outside environment. Entirely open systems cannot exist because then there would be nothing marking them as “systems” separate from anything else.
      2. *“Closed system”:* Describes a system/organism relatively (or completely) closed off from its outside environment. Entirely closed systems/organisms cannot exist.
      3. *Openness* and *closedness* are relative terms, depending on the permeability of boundaries that surround organizations/organisms.
   4. Basic elements/principles of GST, which are themselves all interrelated and interdependent:
      1. Interrelationship and Independence of Parts: A change of one part of any system has an impact on other parts/the rest of the system.
      2. Holism: Systems are *non-summative* – the sum of each of the interdependent parts does not equal the system itself, because the manner in which the parts are organized and function together occurs in a particular manner. *Groupthink* (psychologist Irving Janis) is a negative example of holism.
      3. Input, Transformation (Throughput) and Output of Energy: *Open systems* exchange information and energy with their environments in the forms of input, internal use/processing (throughput) and output.
      4. Negative Entropy: Refers to systems’ propensity to thwart chaos.
      5. Equilibrium, Homeostasis, and Feedback: *Homeostasis* refers to the process of keeping a balance between input and output in order to prevent entropy. Feedback helps to maintain/create an equilibrium:
         1. Deviation-amplifying feedback: positive feedback that enables the system to grow by taking in more energy than what is output.
         2. Deviation-counteracting feedback: negative feedback that enables the system to shrink/reduce in size by outputting more energy than what is taken in.
      6. Hierarchy: Systems consist of many interrelated layers, from *subsystems* to *suprasystems*, which impact one another and exist in relationship to one another.
      7. Goal Orientation: Feedback (negative and positive) enables systems to adjust in order to achieve their goals. May have competing goals.
      8. Equafinality and Multifinality: *Equafinality* is the idea that a system can reach the same goal through a number of paths (Kaths & Kahn, 1996). *Multifinality* refers to the ability to reach many goals/outputs from the same set of inputs.
4. Organizations as Systems of Communication
   1. Systems Approach to Communication
      1. *Communication systems* are groups of people collectively trying to make sense of what is happening in the world around them.
      2. Systems theory moves away from conduit model.
      3. Communication has meaning within, and creates, social contexts.
      4. Watzalawick, Beavin, & Jackson (1967) wrote “one cannot not communicate” (1967, pp. 48-51), which has implications for systems approaches to communication:
         1. All behavior is communicative.
         2. Communication does not depend on *intent*, interpretation matters more.
         3. Communication and interpretation are contextual.
         4. Sense-making and interpretation need *punctuation* in order to make sense.
   2. Karl Weick & Organizational Sense-Making
      1. *Retrospective Sense-making:* Weick’s notion that most people construct stories *after* sometimes has happened to provide a narrative arc to the events (rather than making rational and easily narrated choices in the process of doing something).
      2. *Language and communication* organizes systems; they create organizational possibilities and realities. Believes that communication creates or enacts environments/systems vs. communication as something that happens *in* organizations.
   3. Weick’s Model of Organizing: Enactment, Selection, and Retention
      1. Model of organizing based on the ways in which people *cope with uncertain and equivocal information* in the communication environments in which they find themselves and participate.
      2. Defines organizing as an agreed-upon use of symbols and sense-making in order to reduce uncertainty and ambiguous meanings.
      3. *Equivocality (uncertainty) reduction* contains three stages:
         1. *Enactment:* Organizations as systems exist and interact with environments, but also create their own environments through what they pay attention to. Selection and perception enact the communication environment of an organization as system.
         2. *Selection:* Once the communication environment is enacted, members select interpretation rules and sense-making processes.
            1. *Double-interact*: A-B-A – First person says something, second person asks an equivocality-reducing question, first person answers (for example). This interaction is a three-step communication process of output-clarification-response that works to reduce equivocality in communication.
         3. *Retention:* Once equivocality is reduced, the need for double-interacts decreases and people can rely on the rules that they learned/created through equivocaltiy-reducing double-interacts in order to guide communication and sense-making. When rules replace double-interacts, this is called “retention” and people have a relatively high ability to cope with the organizational environment.
      4. Other important ideas:
         1. Organizing is improvisational, like jazz – needs some structure but otherwise is an ongoing series of double-interact cycles and experimentations.
         2. Action plans are more tools for collective action than rational decision-making documents.
         3. Organizations can “think” and make sense of actions *only after the fact*, as communication and sense-making unfold.
         4. There are myriad ways to reach most solutions, and there are myriad solutions to most problems.
   4. Critical Perspective on Weick
      1. Some argue that Weick emphasizes too many of the “non-rational” elements of organizational life.
      2. Weick does not give us an accounting of power and control and how they might be used in “non-hierarchal” or “concertive” communicative environments he advocates.
   5. Niklas Luhmann and the Autopoietic Organization
      1. *Autopoeisis:* At its basic level, autopoeisis means “self-production.” Biological systems reproduce themselves on the basis of life, but organizations reproduce themselves on the basis of communication.
      2. All social systems are *nothing but* communication, and every social system creates and reproduces the basis of its existence.
      3. *Difference:* The key feature of systems; a system can exist, according to Luhmann, because it can maintain a way of marking itself as different/distinct from its larger context.
      4. A system’s environment is specific to that particular system, because it sets the communication expectations and processes in it.
      5. Autopoiesis reduces uncertainty by constructing the environment of the system (distinct from the larger world), but this act of selection produces irritations that require attention (and the cycle continues).
      6. *Permanence*: Luhmann sees autopoietic systems as only existing when they communicate, so their existence requires them to always produce new communication.
   6. Critical Perspective on Autopoietic Organization
      1. Autopoiesis is a helpful perspective for critical scholars because it allows us to look at the ways in which discourses are self-reproducing (discourses of managerialism or professionalism, for instance).
      2. Decenters the idea of a coherent human communicating when he argues that “only communication can communicate,” which opens a lot of possibilities for asking new questions of our communication processes and practices and rejects psychological explanations
5. Conclusion
   1. Important because shifts from an individual/psychological explanation of behavior to a more holistic and dynamic understanding of action/interaction.
   2. Critiques of general systems theory:
      1. Difficult to apply the principles of systems theory to actual organizational studies. (It’s hard to capture a holistic image of a system when using reductionist methods.)
      2. Leads to the idea of “organizational Darwinism,” or the “survival of the fittest,” because it’s based on a biological model that advocates adaptation to change in order to survive.
   3. Weick and Luhmann’s work move us beyond general systems theory (and the critiques of it) because they emphasize precarity, non-rationality, and communication processes that are at the heart of organizing.