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Commentary on Cushman and King

Issues for a Theory of High-speed Management

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MORE than a decade ago, James Coleman (1980) offered an insightful account of social science research in the twentieth century. His thesis was that trends in social research were directly related to broader changes in society, particularly to changes in social structures. The Chicago school, to use a single example, with its focus on the city, immigrants and adaptation, marginal persons and subgroups, and participant observation research methods was associated with a very specific period in the United States: transformation from rural to urban society, teeming immigration, disorder and marginality, and local philanthropists funding local studies of local problems. Hence, Coleman contended, the social research performed by the Chicago school—and that launched it into scholarly and policy prominence—was a reflection of the social fabric of the time. If Coleman's analysis is correct, and Delia (1987) has offered a quite similar assessment of the history of communication research in general, just as Putnam and Cheney (1985) have linked specific developments in organizational communication research to societal developments since the 1920s, then two implications follow for current organizational communication researchers. First, what world order changes are likely to affect organizations we study in this and the next century? Second, have our existing and emerging theoretical perspectives adequately captured resultant changes for organizational communication?

Notwithstanding the "dramatic change" pronouncements of popular writers (e.g., Toffler & Toffler, 1990), scholars and policy researchers offer detailed recent accounts of factors effecting fundamental changes in contemporary

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organizations. Johnston and Packer (1987) identify a variety of market, technological, cultural, and international forces shaping U.S. organizations and their work forces in the year 2000. They note key trends influencing work and workers into the **next** century: growth in the U.S. economy despite periods of recession; a decrease in manufacturing's share of the economy and an increase in the number of service industries (projected to create 90% of new jobs); higher skill levels required for new jobs (although some have claimed this will be bimodal, with just as many low-skill jobs being created in service industries); and significant changes in the gender, age, and ethnicity of the work force—away from the younger white males currently predominant in organizations. More globally, Morton (1991b) grounds predictions of organizational change in significant turbulence in those organizations' social, political, and economic environments, combined with rapid technological change. The rapid evolution and integration of information technology in the areas of hardware, software, networks, workstations, robotics, and smart chips has "reached a threshold of cost and ease of use that is having widespread organizational impact" (p. 5). These impacts include how work is done, integration of organizational levels and functions, changes in management structures, and reassessment of organizational missions and plans.

In view of the changes in information creation, aggregation, transmission, storage, and retrieval inherent in these technological and organizational developments, Coleman (1980) probably would not find it surprising that organizational communication has evidenced the emergence of a number of information-processing theories. As surveyed by Fulk and Boyd (1991), theoretical developments have been most evident in the areas of organizational members' media choices (Daft & Lengel, 1984; Fulk, Schmitz, & Steinfield, 1990; Fulk, Steinfield, Schmitz, & Power, 1987; Trevino, Lengel, & Daft, 1987), technology-supported decision-making groups (Poole & DeSanctis, 1990; Contractor & Seibold, 1992), organization design (Allen & Hauptman, 1987, 1990; Huber, 1990), and organizational networks (Contractor & Eisenberg, 1990). The most recent information-processing approach to Organizational communication is Cushman and King's high-speed management (HSM) theory, as presented in the preceding chapter.

Cushman and King root HSM heavily in analyses by researchers associated with MIT's Management in the 1990s research program (MIT90) (e.g., Rockart & Short, 1989; Venkatraman & Prescott, 1990) and sources influenced by MIT90. Conceived in 1984 as a close collaboration between academic researchers at the MIT Sloan School of Management and representatives of 12 major corporations and government agencies, MIT90 "was charged with the task of investigating the *impact* of the new information technologies (IT) on organizations with the goal of determining how the organizations of the 1990s—and beyond—will differ from those of today" (Thurow, 1991, p. v). Although a more complete and recent statement of the program's perspective and findings than individual papers utilized by Cushman and

King is supplied in Morton's *The Corporation of the 1990s* (1991a), Cushman and King's perspective on organizational communication in the 1990s is consistent with turbulence/technology assumptions that continue to undergird the MIT perspective: (a) IT breakthroughs have had dramatic impacts on organizations while simultaneously increasing trade possibilities and changing markets in a global economy; (b) correlatively, the IT "revolution" has created a "volatile business climate" (turbulent environment) that threatens contemporary organizations' survival; (c) consequently, these organizations' managers must employ new assumptions and practices that ensure innovative and rapid responses.

The advance, and potential contribution, in Cushman and King's high-speed management perspective rests in their emphasis on the *communication implications* of these environment-organization changes. In brief, Cushman and King theorize as follows. Environmental changes, especially those in the global economy, threaten organizations' survival if they cannot respond rapidly and innovatively. Management information/communication systems that *can* operate at "high speed" are therefore vital. In turn, such systems (conceptualized in both structural and technological terms) underscore the traditional importance of management communication, as well as require new forms. Communication can serve to improve organizational responsiveness continuously (through operations inherent in environmental scanning and value chain theory) by managing "coalignment" between internal and external organizational resources. In particular, four information-related processes can be incorporated into organizational communication practices to enhance HSM: negotiated linking, town meetings, cross-functional teams, and benchmarking studies. In the limited space available for this commentary, we wish to highlight several "issues" that HSM proponents might address in order to exploit the perspective's full potential as a macro-level theory.

ISSUES

In their chapter, Cushman and King do not explicate, or appear even to acknowledge, the possibility that *conringencies* moderate the communicative coalignments central to HSM. Indeed, the Bumper Works and General Electric case studies provided as evidence of HSM through continuous improvement monitoring suggest that the theory is general, applying to both small and large organizations. However, there is considerable organizational research supporting theories proposing that organizational structures and functions *are* contingent on their size and age (Kimberly & Miles, 1980) as well as the nature of their environment (Burns & Stalker, 1968; Emery & Trist, 1965; Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967). Cushman and King do not discuss size and age at all. And although they acknowledge the importance of information technologies for scanning the environment, they do not appear to incorporate

into HSM the established contingency that selection of information technologies for scanning depends on the nature of the organization's environment. For example, Daft and his colleagues (Daft & Huber, 1987; Daft & Weick, 1984; Huber & Daft, 1987) describe an organization's environment as varying along two dimensions. The environment is considered "equivocal" when the organization has difficulty identifying and interpreting significant elements in that environment. It is considered "uncertain" when the organization has difficulty attaining the amount of information it needs from the environment. Daft and colleagues note that, in order to be effective, organizations must match the IT scanning with the nature of their environments. For example, organizations located in environments with high equivocality and high uncertainty are better served by rich media (e.g., face-to-face communication). In contrast, organizations in environments with low equivocality but high uncertainty are better served by media with low richness (such as MIS data bases). The four communication processes highlighted by Cushman and King as endemic to organizational coalignment are amenable to contingency theory reframing (e.g., town meetings and cross-functional teams would be most suitable in high-equivocality/high-uncertainty environments, while negotiated linking programs and best-practices benchmarking case analyses would be best suited for low-equivocality/high-uncertainty environments). At present, however, HSM is too general as even a macro-level theory of organizational communication, and central tenets of established organizational theories are notably absent.

Paradoxically, while the innovative HSM theory ignores traditional organizational theory touchstones, it relies on traditional *assumptions* that limit HSM from being as innovative as it must be in order to cope with the "volatility" posed as part of the theory's scope conditions. Cushman and King propose that, in order to survive in a volatile business environment, organizations must demonstrate "speed" and "rapid reorientation" in scanning, and must be "adaptive," "flexible," and "quick to react" to changes detected. These claims rest on an assumption that changes requiring such responses are continuous and that linear quantitative adaptiveness by organizations is therefore necessary. However, recent perspectives on organizational change suggest that organizations are in the midst of *discontinuous* change as they enter a new phase of the information age (Davis, 1987; Davis & Davidson, 1991; Ferguson, 1980; Handy, 1991; Johansen, 1991). By extension, if change is discontinuous, then qualitative changes in organizations' structures and processes more innovative than those proposed by Cushman and King are necessary. For example, in a study of the British work force, Handy (1991) points out that more than one-third of British workers are not full-time employees. He predicts that by the year 2000 less than half that work force will be in "proper" jobs. This represents a sea change in the received view of organizing structures—away from hierarchies and matrix-styled organizations that still inhere in Cushman and King's HSM. Handy (1991) calls for

the emergence of the "shamrock" organization, in which a small core of executives and employees are supported by contractors and part-time help. Johansen (1991) describes the new organization as a fishnet—hard to break but flexible. Ferguson (1980) depicts the "2001 organization" as a network of relationships that are self-generating, self-organizing, sometimes even self-destructing. Davis and Davidson (1991) describe how a leading commercial bank opened a new headquarters where employees were provided with all the information necessary for their tasks, but were given no specific organizing guidelines.

These perspectives, in several cases found in the same popular management literature from which HSM draws heavily, imply that any organizational communication theory seeking to respond to the dynamics of a global economy (as HSM expressly attempts) must simultaneously move beyond traditional and even current conceptions of organization *structure*. They bring into question, for example, Cushman and King's attempt to classify the impacts of technologies based on conventional distinctions among manufacturing, marketing, and management. As a macro-level theory, HSM must be more explicit about the structural implications of organizations' successful achievement of "coalignments" among its internal and external resources and creation of "value-added configuration and linkages between units." Researchers in MIT90, which HSM parallels, have identified IT-induced business "reconfigurations" (Venkatraman, 1991), "redesign" (MacDonald, 1991), and "networked" configurations (Rockart & Short, 1991). HSM must clarify, in structural terms, its own implications if other researchers are to exploit its potential. Johansen (1991) has observed that the buzzwords of the 1960s were *organize, control, plan, and global village*. In contrast, he notes, buzzwords for the 1990s are *uncertainty, coordination, partnership, teams, and global villages*. Until recently, theorists have viewed organizations as having problems that need to be managed. Now, Johansen suggests, theorists must recognize that the future presents dilemmas that must be managed. Terms such as *competitive collaboration* and *mass customization* evidence these dilemmas. These are the conceptual challenges to which HSM must be responsive if its potential is to be realized.

Despite its contemporary framing, HSM is curiously behind the (theoretical) times in another respect. A core proposition advanced by Cushman and King is that successful managers' *responses* in volatile environments require assumptions and practices that emphasize innovative, adaptive, flexible, and rapid *responses* to environmental changes. Current theory, research, and practice emphasize that the most effective organizational strategies are *proactive*. Daft and Weick (1984) describe this as "enacting" the environment. In this view, organizations construct their environments and market rather than respond to assessments of demand. Davis (1987) suggests that the implementation of organizational strategy is considered in the "future perfect" tense. Polaroid and Federal Express are examples of organizations that have successfully enacted their environments.

Another area in which HSM theoretical tenets must be more clearly specified is in the distinction between short- and long-term **consequences** of the relationships posited between information technology and organizational effectiveness. One of the most significant implications of HSM is that organizations and new information technologies are increasingly entrenched in a recursive relationship. Cushman and King argue that information technologies have facilitated the emergence of a global market. They further note that in order to survive in this global market, organizations increasingly rely on information technologies. This recursive relationship suggests that the adoption of a new information technology by an organization is likely to meet the organization's goals in the short term, but may result in longer-term impacts that are unintended (Poole & DeSanctis, 1990; Contractor, in press) and perhaps less beneficial to the organization (Sproull & Kiesler, 1991). For example, Hirschhorn (1985) describes the implementation of an electronic mail system at a brokerage firm that allowed the transmission of information to its customers more efficiently. The firm believed that the time saved by allowing customers to access this information electronically would permit brokers to sell new accounts. However, as customers became familiar with the newly available information, they were able to make more critical evaluations of the brokers' performance. As a result, the brokers often spent more time justifying their actions or risked losing their customers' accounts. As this example suggests, any organizational communication theory based on the premise of a recursive relationship between organizational structures and the use of new information technologies must distinguish between immediate and long-term consequences resulting from changes brought about by adoption of the technology. HSM must address this duality in terms of the organizational effects of information practices utilized for environmental scanning (e.g., in the negotiated linking and best-practices case studies).

High-speed management theory also provides an incomplete view of organizations' **linkages** with their environments. In their review of interorganizational linkages, Eisenberg et al. (1985) observe that any organization's links to the environment vary on at least two dimensions—the content of the link and the level at which it exists. Links may be used to transfer materials or information, and they can occur among individuals in an informal context (such as computer professionals in Silicon Valley), among individuals acting as representatives of their organizations (such as sales representatives), or at the institutional level (such as computer consortia). These links each serve specific tasks and impose different constraints on organizations and their members. Clearly, any theory of high-speed management must focus more on the nature of these links and their potential benefits for the organization than simply positing their existence. Based on a study of the interorganizational links at GM and IBM, for example, Badaracco (1991) suggests that in today's knowledge-based society, organizations are much better served by alliances that provide access to "embedded knowledge" than by those that provide

products. **Embedded knowledge** refers to an organization's knowledge base in designing, manufacturing, and testing advanced technologies. Badaracco notes that GM was able to reduce the cost of manufacturing subcompact cars by gaining access to product-based information from joint ventures with Toyota, Isuzu, Suzuki, and Daewoo. However, GM's allies gained market share by using the same links to gain instant access to embedded knowledge developed by GM through decades of research.

Yet another issue of concern for HSM developers is the fact that one of the four **communication mechanisms** specified for managing coalignment has such significant disadvantages that one may question its utility for achieving high-speed organizational response. The concept of the "New England town meeting" is akin to processes suggested by advocates of workplace democracy and participative management systems (Rothschild & Whitt, 1986). Broadly speaking, there are two ways in which organizations can benefit from town meetings. From a human resources standpoint, these meetings provide a forum for an organization to draw upon the resources and expertise of employees to improve organizational productivity. From a human relations perspective, participation in these meetings can improve employees' attitudes about their role in the organization. They are also likely to be more committed to implementing decisions that they helped to make. However, there is considerable evidence that the benefits of such participative practices come at a price. In reporting on their study of five organizations that had adopted participative schemes, Rothschild and Whitt (1986) document some of these constraints. They observe that participative schemes are very time-consuming—an obstacle that would be particularly serious for high-speed management. They also note that while New England town meetings may be more satisfying than the impersonal relations of bureaucracy, they can be emotionally straining for the participants. For instance, in a study of New England town meetings, Mansbridge (1973) found that members reported headaches, trembling, and even fear for one's heart. A quarter of the people sampled spontaneously reported being disturbed by the conflictive character of the meetings. Further, Mansbridge (1982) observed that fear of conflict forced members to engage in avoidance practices, such as withholding information, thereby defeating the very purpose of the meetings. Mansbridge found that even members who had received considerable training in group processes were not immune—a particularly troublesome finding from an HSM perspective.

Finally, HSM currently fails to provide a **full** theoretical account of the communication processes and other dynamics required to achieve successful "coalignment." For example, the data presented in Cushman and King's tables offer compelling evidence that automobile manufacturers with shorter model replacement cycles and fewer worker hours per car are more profitable. However, there is nothing in HSM that explains **why** some automobile manufacturers were able to shorten their model replacement cycles. HSM must supply a communication-based generative mechanism that "explains" organizational

effectiveness. Similar issues and promising solutions are evident in the concurrent engineering literature. For instance, Lu (1990) has examined the use of group-support technologies that facilitate decision making among engineers involved in the design, fabrication, and assembly-line stages of automobile production.

Space considerations preclude discussion of other problematic theoretical issues that HSM must address: the overly rational model of information processing and effective outcomes posited (compared with information processing predicated on institutionalization theories; see the review by Euske & Roberts, 1987), ambiguities surrounding the organizational level at which the communication mechanisms HSM proposes should be implemented, and the need for comparative evidence that the four communication practices recommended are theoretically and empirically superior to the use of perennial agenda committees, quality teams, and a multitude of other processes prevalent in total quality management and just-in-time manufacturing for achieving the high-speed response central to HSM. Suffice it to say, in closing, that for the theoretical promise of HSM to be realized, Cushman and King might consider these matters, as well as those raised above concerning the theory's scope, assumptions, contingencies, effects, explanatory power, and generative mechanisms. If these issues can be addressed, HSM offers the promise of being one of the only macro-level organizational communication theories—and one that reflects the complexities of its time and changes in social structures (Coleman, 1980).

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Commentary on Cushman and King

On the Joys and Sorrows of Predicting the Future of Organizational Communication

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IN "High-speed Management: A Revolution in Organizational Communication in the 1990s," Cushman and King take on the uncertain task of trying to forecast the future. A central premise behind their chapter is that organizational communication scholars should try to identify trends and study emerging organizational practices that are likely to change the nature of organizational communication. I find this a refreshing and innovative recommendation. Too often, organizational communication research has focused on traditional topics while ignoring interesting new trends. New phenomena on the U.S. scene that attracted surprisingly little attention from communication researchers in the 1980s included the quality movement, changes in communication practices brought about by computerized automation of the workplace, the internationalization of organizations, and the astounding changes in organizations wrought by new communication technologies. To be sure, some scholars paid attention, but their studies were in the minority, vastly outnumbered by network analyses, organizational culture studies, and studies of traditional topics such as interviewing, motivation, and commitment. There seems to be about a five-year lag in the attention focus of organizational communication researchers. We seem to want to wait until we are sure something is really important or until someone outside our field—Peter Drucker, for example—says it is important before committing time and energy.

I can think of no reason we should have such a lag. Scholars in our field such as Ron Rice, Jim Danowski, Charles Steinfield, and Janet Fulk were among the first to recognize the importance of new communication technologies. They have done some excellent research devoted to elucidating the

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