Chapter 5

Defining Relationships

Learning Objectives

Upon completion of the chapter, the student should be able to:

- Define an organizational relationship and recognize the limited resources on which relationships rely.
- Differentiate a contrived relationship from an emergent relationship and acknowledge the benefits and potential drawbacks of each.
- Explain the advantages and disadvantages of the existence of relationships between superiors and subordinates.
- Describe the relational dialectics that might emerge between two employees as their relationship begins to develop.
- Compare and contrast the four types of network centrality and describe why certain types might be more beneficial from an employee perspective.
- Recognize the three methodologies for studying interpersonal relationships within the organization.

Key Terms

Centrality
Conflict
Limited resource
Minority influence
Organizational social network
Organizational tie
Power
Public relations
Relational dialectic
Relationship

Perhaps one of the most fundamental, underlying concepts of the term *organization* is that it is a function of the individuals part of it. That is, any definition of organizational communication explicitly or implicitly mentions the people who are unified around a common goal, common mission, and common work practices. To capture and appreciate the importance of communication in the organizational environment, it is necessary to understand the nature and function of the relationships in which employees find themselves embedded (Barry & Crant, 2000). This chapter focuses on the social construction of relationships and the role that these relationships play in everyday organizational practices, as well as the people who are affected by such practices.

relationship A symbiotic social connection between two people in which certain limited resources are shared, resulting in more effective and efficient productivity for both parties.

limited resources A certain advantage that exists within an organization, but one that not all employees have equal access to.

A **relationship** can be defined as a symbiotic social connection between two people in which certain limited resources are shared, resulting in more effective and efficient productivity for both parties. Key to this definition is the term **limited resources**, which reflects that certain advantages exist in every organization, but not all employees have equal access to them (Boyd, 1990). One of the most important limited resources within an organization is access to information, which, if any employee finds himself or herself without it, can make performing a particular task very difficult. For example, assume that an employee is told to create a new RGK file using the company's software system, although he or she has no idea what such a file is or how the system works. This, unfortunately, becomes a resource whose lack of knowledge impairs productivity. Scholars and practitioners who study the relational dynamics of employees have concluded that creating and maintaining relationships with people who have access to organizationally relevant information is extremely profitable as such information tends to get shared (Monge & Contractor, 2001). There is an old saying that the most important people in any organization are administrative assistants, as an incredible amount of information flows through them on a daily basis. This access to information and the subsequent ability to share it with others is a form of social power and is emblematic of organizational significance.

The fact that information is not collectively shared among all employees can be problematic as this inhibits work practices of some and accentuates the work practices of others (Davenport & Prusak, 1998). On the other hand, from an individual employee perspective, this becomes a networking opportunity: to find those who have necessary and limited information and create a social relationship with them. For example, if Lee has access to information and Sara has a social relationship with Lee, then Sara also has access to this information. This relationship between Lee and Sara exemplifies the importance of not only having access to information, but also having a relationship with those who have access to the information. In the end, the only reason that Sara has access to information is because of her relationship with Lee.

In addition to forming relationships in order to have access to information, employees have a desire to create relationships with those in powerful positions. According to John French and Bertram Raven, two social

Table 5.1 Types of Power

Type	Source
Reward power	Based on one's ability to provide incentives
Punishment power	Based on one's ability to administer negative consequences
Legitimate power	Based on one's hierarchical position
Expert power	Based on one's knowledge base
Referent power	Based on one's employee merit and social popularity

psychologists interested in the processes and effects of relational **power**, there are five primary reasons that people have power over others: reward power is based on a person's ability to provide incentives, punishment power is based on a person's ability to administer negative consequences, legitimate power is based on a person's official position within an organization, expert power is based on the knowledge that a person has about a particular topic, and referent power is based on a person's perceived worth and respect (French & Raven, 1959). Forming a relationship with a powerful other means, by definition, that the person in the less powerful position gains a more powerful status. For example, if Jodie has legitimate power and Mitchell shares a social relationship with Jodie, then Mitchell becomes more powerful. Just as employees seek to create relationships with those who have access to limited information, they also seek to create relationships with those who have power.

power An employee's ability to have certain control over others because of a limited resource that he or she possesses

A third reason that people form relationships is for access to the personal networks of the other person. That is, forming relationships with those who, themselves, have a lot of relationships or are popular translates into a desirable limited resource (Monge & Contractor, 2003). At a basic level, one who has relationships with others who are well connected within the organization's social structure increases the likelihood of access to more information as well as links to those who have at least one of the five sources of power. Therefore, by having access to information, employees become more relationally valuable; by having access to information, employees become more powerful; and by having access to and relationships with people who are well connected, employees find themselves embedded in social bonds that are rich in information, power, and opportunity. It should be apparent that constructing relationships with the *right* employees becomes advantageous and opportunistic and, some would argue, vital for success in the organization.

Types of Organizational Relationships

It was not until the early 1930s, when Elton Mayo and colleagues conducted experiments at the Western Electric Company's Hawthorne Plant in Chicago and concluded that worker productivity, motivation, satisfaction, and commitment are closely linked to interpersonal communication and quality organizational relationships, that scholars began to understand the importance of social connections (see Chapter 2). Among their findings was that workplace relationships were instrumental in fostering a sense of collective membership and a sense of psychological well-being (Mayo, 1933). Based on Mayo's (1933) findings, Gerald Goldhaber, an influential organizational communication scholar, claimed that organizations are an interdependent collection of the relationships in which employees find themselves embedded (Goldhaber, 1974). Simply put, relationships *are* the organization.

Since Mayo's studies of the 1930s, organizations have spent much time and energy not only determining which organizational relationships should and need to be developed, but also ways to facilitate such relational development. As research indicates, some organizational relationships are **contrived**, meaning that employees have no jurisdiction over them (McPhee, 1985). For example, departmental and team membership are often not under the volition of the individual employee, but rather those in administrative positions. The formation of departmental and team relationships are, in a sense, forced. For better or worse, it is rare that employees get to choose with whom they work. However, most organizational relationships are **emergent**, meaning that employees proactively determine with whom they network and construct relationships (Monge & Contractor, 2001). Ironically, these emergent relationships are often not task based, which are the primary means of organizational productivity, but socially based. The importance of emergent networks becomes evident when coupled with the fact that much of the social psychological research highlights the importance of relationships for the psychological and physical well-being of individuals.

To put the importance of quality social relationships in perspective, assume the average person works for 40 years (based on much data about the 65-year-old retirement plan) at 40 hours per week. Including vacations and days off, this means the average person works a total of 83,200 hours during his or her lifetime. Imagine you had to spend these 83,200 hours in social isolation. Is it possible you could remain productive and psychologically healthy? Probably, but not likely. Relationships, as interpersonal communication scholarship has dictated for the better part of the last 50 years, are essential to human functioning, with organizational relationships being no exception to this rule (Sias, Krone, & Jablin, 2002). Organizational downtime, or the time when employees interact about nonwork-related issues, has been found to be strongly correlated with organizational commitment, job satisfaction, morale, tenure, and productivity (Morrison, 2004). Although this discussion is not meant to imply that contrived (i.e., forced or assigned) relationships are never social and that emergent relationships are never task based, much scholarship has partitioned contrived and emergent relationships based primarily on the impetus for such connections (i.e., forced versus voluntary).

Superior/Subordinate Organizational Relationships

Regarding contrived relationships, the majority of research has focused on superior-subordinate communication (see, for example, Jablin, 1979). Research indicates that the nature of one's relationship with his or her boss has much to do with the organization's culture, centralization of authority and decision making, and the type of leadership (Krone, 1992). From a cultural perspective (see Chapter 2), an organization that is more horizontal, has informal lines of communication, and where information and influence are shared tends to contain relationships between superiors and subordinates that are more casual and relaxed in nature. By contrast, an organization that is more vertical or has many levels of hierarchy, tends to have more formal lines of communication, and where information and influence are in the hands of a few, likely fosters a relational situation that is task based, hierarchical, and formal in nature.

Assume, for example, that Jonathan works for a company that prides itself on cultural and communicative informality, wherein such things as title, hierarchy, status, and tenure are deemed insignificant. It is likely that Jonathan will create an informal relationship with his boss, creating a social situation rife with both task and social implications. In addition to speaking to Jonathan's boss about his job and the social processes that accompany it, he is also likely, based on the informal culture, to speak about "extra-organizational" topics, such as sports, food and drink, vacations, family, and recreational reading. Compare this situation to Bonnie, an employee of an organization that has a formal hierarchy and whose culture is more like a machine (see Chapter 2). It is unlikely that Bonnie, as compared to Jonathan, will cultivate a friendship with her boss, as her organization's culture is not conducive to such informal fraternizing. An organization's culture is clearly one of the predictors of informal superior-subordinate communication and the subsequent development of casual relationships (Kotter & Heskett, 1992). Simply put, there is a lot to be learned about organizational relationships based on the structure of the organization, the way people address one another, and the topics they speak about.

A second factor involved in the nature of superior-subordinate relationships is whether authority and decision making are centralized (Jablin, 1979). In other words, are power and influence in the hands of few or in the hands of many? If in the hands of a few, then this indicates an environment based on hierarchy and protocol. After all, it is power and influence that negate the introduction of a horizontal social structure and de-emphasize the creation of social relationships. With such a vertical structure in place, the relationship between a superior and his or her subordinate is likely to be task based only, representative of the time motion studies mentioned in Chapter 2. Among Frederick Taylor's (1911) results (see Chapter 2) was that formal, hierarchical figures are necessary in organizations to keep efficiency and effectiveness elevated. This, again, is not to say that an organization with a flattened hierarchy and informal superior-subordinate relationships is doomed to fail, while an organization with a vertical structure and formalized relationships is destined for success. It is to say, however, that much of the impetus for creating informal relationships is based on whether authority, status, position, tenure, and the power that accompany them are emphasized (Jablin, 1979). Taylor had a general distrust of the worker in that, unless supervised, the workers could easily adopt negative work habits, such as soldiering behavior.

A third factor involved in whether one creates a more social, informal relationship with his or her superior is based on the leadership practices of those in administrative positions. An example of this is Blake and Mouton's (1964) managerial grid, which highlights whether and to what extent leaders have a concern for employees, a concern for task, a concern for both, or a concern for neither (see Chapter 2). Using this managerial grid, it is more likely that employees will create informal relationships with their superiors if their leader is either a country club-style manager or a team manager, as opposed to an impoverished manager or a task manager, for the former two styles place more emphasis on employee well-being, whereas the latter two styles emphasize task. In the end, among the important independent variables that predict and explain informal superior-subordinate relationships include the culture of the organization, the centralization or sharing of authority and decision making, and the style of leadership practiced by management.

Advantages of Organizational Relationships

Fifty years of scholarship has indicated the overarching benefits of creating both formal and informal, as well as contrived and emergent, relationships within the organization (Jablin & Krone, 1994). First among these benefits is the basic need for social interaction. Abraham Maslow, an influential psychologist best known for his research on human needs, argued that social beings have an innate desire for belonging. That is, people would be emotionally and psychologically unfulfilled if not for the relationships they create over their entire lifespan (Maslow, 1943). In fact, many scholars believe that relationships serve a survival function. For the most part, it is one's informal organizational relationships that fulfill this need for belonging, wherein communication about nonwork-related topics transpires and people are able to meet interpersonal needs within the organization (Bridge & Baxter, 1992).

Using the example of the average person's working hours over a lifetime provided at the beginning of this chapter, imagine spending 83,200 hours without any informal relationships. Maslow found that such social isolation was likely predictive of such things as depression, lack of motivation, and feelings of ill-accomplishment (Maslow, 1943). If employees feel a sense of depression, lack of motivation, and feelings of ill-accomplishment, this can have serious negative ramifications for organizational productivity, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment (Morrison, 2004). Thus, the creation of informal relationships, or what Maslow would call a basic human need, is necessary within the organizational environment (see Chapter 8). Not surprisingly, results from a study conducted by Markiewicz, Devine, and Kausilas (2000) found a significant correlation between work friendships and job satisfaction, meaning that having informal relationships within the organizational environment is linked to being more satisfied with one's job.

Another advantage of creating interpersonal relationships within organizations is to cultivate a social support system that can provide advice, comfort, and solidarity (Kirmeyer & Lin, 1987). Think for a moment about a time when you were internally conflicted about something or someone. In all likelihood, you asked a close friend or family member for advice and confided in this person. In the end, even if your decision did not prove fruitful or successful, you likely felt comfort in the fact that another person in your personal network supported and encouraged a particular action or set of actions. This, in essence, is the idea of **social support** and **social solidarity**. Social support is defined as the support system created by in-group or network members. Social solidarity is defined as a network's or small group's willingness to agree that certain behaviors are deemed appropriate and others inappropriate. If others with whom we interact encourage behaviors, we are more likely to engage in these than if social network members disapprove or discourage them (Albrecht & Adelman, 1987). For example, assume that Jason is clearly upset about a decision made by his boss, Alexis. Rather than directly confronting Alexis, Jason first asks for the advice of his coworker Amber. Based on research that links decision making and interpersonal relationships, Jason is more likely to confront Alexis if Amber agrees that such a confrontation would be, in the end, rewarding. This is not to say that all decisions that gain the social support of others are successful. In fact, social support is exactly the prerequisite necessary for Groupthink (see Chapter 7), wherein those part of a collective social unit are fearful of not promoting a behavior or decision because of the inherent social dangers of nonconformity (Jablin, 1979). It is safe to say that employees often feel more comfortable and more willing to engage in certain behaviors if relational others substantiate them.

A third advantage of creating interpersonal relationships within organizations is the opportunity for minority influence or the influence of those whose position, opinion, or perspective is not shared by the majority or by people in power (Wood, Lundgren, Ouellette, Busceme, & Blackstone, 1994). For better or worse, the majority of organizational decisions are made because a collective body of employees agrees that a particular action is warranted or just. Much small-group communication research indicates that for a minority opinion to be adopted, there must be at least two individuals who advocate for it (Hirokawa & Poole, 1996). Assume, for example, that a group of nine employees from Abercrombie & Fitch was assigned the task of creating a new summer design and color for its men's collection. Assume further that only one member of the group brings forth the idea to initiate a new tight-fitting, pink, collared shirt (a decision that was made over a decade ago and subsequently proved to have been a pivotal, successful corporate move). Such an idea would likely be received with much hesitation and perhaps even ambivalence. Why? If only one person out of nine favors such a decision, it is difficult to convince others of the decision's merit.

Think, for example, about trying to convince your group of friends that *The Big Bang Theory* is the best TV sitcom presently aired, if you are the only one who believes this. You will likely realize that this is a difficult if not impossible feat. However, imagine that both you and another friend both endorse *The Big Bang Theory*. Merely because there are now two people in agreement, convincing others becomes more likely and, in a sense, easier. This, according to decision scientists, is known as **minority influence**, defined as a decision supported by few, but one that can be adopted if the "right" people use the "right" persuasive strategies. To have a decision result in adoption, often it is necessary to have at least two people favor it. These two people likely share a relationship and, as a result, minority influence becomes a possibility. Given the foregoing example, if two people favor the tight-fitting, pink, collared shirt from Abercrombie & Fitch, convincing the other group members likely becomes a more realistic task.

minority influence A decision supported by few, but that can be adopted if the "right" people use the "right" persuasive strategies.

A fourth advantage linked to organizational relationships refers to the necessary flow of information between and among employees. Much research in the early part of the 20th century indicated that information would flow throughout the organization based on hierarchical structuring (Glauser, 1984). That is, information would flow "down" the organization from top management, to middle management, then to nonmanagement employees. The problem with this is that information dissemination is time consuming and, as a result, inefficient. Assume that the president of a college or university needed to get an important piece of information communicated to all students concerning an incident on campus that requires rapid student feedback. Think about the time and energy needed to spread this message from the president to the vice president, from the vice president to the provost, from the provost to the deans, from the deans to the department chairs, from department chairs to faculty members, and from faculty members to students. This is a prime example of downward communication flow that becomes inefficient when there is a need for a message to be sent instantaneously. However, what if information flow and dissemination occurred based on friendship ties, rather than formal hierarchical positioning? Would such dissemination be more effective and efficient? In other words, if the president told the vice president, who told his friends, who told their friends, who told their friends, is it likely that the spread of such information would be eased? Based on much research of informal organizational relationships, the answer to this question is yes.

Complications Associated with Organizational Relationships

Although there are benefits associated with the creation of relationships within the organizational environment, such relationships are not without complications (Berman, West, & Richter, 2002). First among such complications reflects the negotiation of competing interpersonal needs (Baxter, 1988). A **relational dialectic**, defined as an inherent inconsistency between two salient variables, results when competing interpersonal needs surface at the same time. For example, in many interpersonal relationships that are intimate in nature, there is a need for both connection and separation. That is, people want to share their lives with others, but also want the autonomy to have social networks that extend beyond this specific, intimate relationship. In the movie *How to Lose a Guy in Ten Days,* Annie is romantically involved with Benjamin and she has trouble dealing with the fact that he routinely has a "guys night out." This is emblematic of a relational dialectic because there seem to be two competing needs for Benjamin. He seems to need both connection to and separation from Annie.

relational dialectic An inherent inconsistency between two salient variables, which results when competing interpersonal needs surface at the same time.

The same type of tension can occur within the organizational setting (Bridge & Baxter, 1992). As an example, assume that Joan and Kenneth share an interpersonal relationship with one another, though Joan is Kenneth's boss. This relationship is casual and informal, predicated on such things as humor, sarcasm, and jokes. This, according to much organizational communication research, is beneficial. However, assume that Joan calls Kenneth into her office to provide negative feedback about an organization-wide email that he had just sent complaining about certain organizational practices. What issues or needs could arise for either person? Relational dialectics would predict that Joan has two existing, yet competing, needs: the need to be "friend" and the need to be "supervisor." What might happen when Joan reprimands Kenneth for his email? Might he take such negative feedback sarcastically? Might he laugh about the issue rather than take it seriously? Might Joan have problems addressing such an issue because of the nature of their relationship? It is likely that the answer to all these questions is yes. In this case, the creation of such an informal, casual relationship between superior and subordinate becomes problematic because such competing dialectics might prove too difficult and because offering meaningful, constructive, effective feedback might become an arduous task. Recall that in Chapter 2, Max Weber's bureaucratic approach to organizing made a priority of separating work life from personal life. Although such a separation is difficult, if not impossible, it would negate such a dialectical tension as that being experienced by Joan and Kenneth.

A second complication associated with informal relationships within the organizational environment is the possibility for **upward distortion** and **downward distortion**. Upward distortion and downward distortion, in this context, are defined as one's decision to emphasize the positive elements embedded in a message when communicating with superiors and subordinates. In short, we are likely to distort feedback to/from others when we share an interpersonal relationship with them for a variety of reasons (Athanassiades, 1973). For example, assume that Jaclyn and Greg work for the same organization, but are also friends. What happens if Jaclyn has to offer Greg negative feedback about how he handled an interpersonal conflict with his departmental coworker Michelle. Jaclyn might engage in downward distortion, where she tells Greg that "it's not the end of the world" or that "it wasn't such a big deal" or "not to worry because others aren't upset about it." However, what happens if it is "the end of the world" or if it was "a big deal" or it is "something others are upset about?" Although Jaclyn might have done this as a way to soften such negative feedback so as not to embarrass Greg, this downward distortion could have a negative effect on him.

As another example, assume that Amy needs to tell Thomas, her boss and friend, that other organizational employees are disappointed with his recent decision to eliminate the holiday reception. Could a similar thing happen regarding the information distortion? Amy may tell Thomas that "it's not a big deal, but certain people are a bit perplexed about your decision" or "don't worry about them, I don't agree." This also illustrates the potential issues with creating relationships with coworkers, insofar as providing feedback might become overly problematic, especially when providing feedback that is inherently negative (Jablin, 1979). Being mindful of such potential distortions can help one create messages about sensitive issues.

A third complication with forming relationships is interpersonal conflict. **Conflict**, defined as a disagreement that accrues within a relationship based on divergent viewpoints and perspectives, if constructive, task-based, and properly managed, provides a wealth of information and can be framed as something organizationally beneficial. However, conflict becomes problematic when it is unmanaged and character based (Putnam & Poole, 1987). For example, assume that Matthew and Pamela enter into a discussion-turned-argument about how to best market a new type of rechargeable battery. After Matthew explains to Pamela that she neglected to consider such things as market segmentation, price, placement, and media outlets, Pamela responds with a personal attack by telling Matthew that he does not belong in his administrative marketing position. This personal, socially based attack is likely to escalate and is likely to provide neither party with any benefit. Such interpersonal conflict is unwanted in any social situation, but is exponentially more difficult in organizations. Unfortunately, such interpersonal conflict might make the work environment bleak and unpleasant (Putnam, 1995).

conflict A disagreement that accrues within a relationship based on divergent viewpoints and perspectives.

Closely related to interpersonal conflict is **relational dissolution,** the fourth unwanted complication of friendships within organizations. Relational dissolution is defined as the process by which relationships come to an end, either through a gradual process (passing away) or an isolated incident or event (sudden death). I am sure that you can think of a time where interpersonal conflict resulted in the destruction of a relationship

Table 5.2 Advantages and Disadvantages of Relationships in Organizations

Advantages	Disadvantages
Fulfills basic need for interaction	Potential dialectics
Provides a system of social support	Upward distortion
Potential for minority influence	Downward distortion
Flow of information	Conflict
	Relational dissolution

and, for better or worse, you disentangled your life from your former friend's life. This was likely a difficult decision and the effects of such relational destruction were likely unfortunate. However, within the organizational environment, relational dissolution is overly problematic because the people whose relationship ends still must work together daily (Sias & Perry, 2004). Unfortunately, we rarely, if ever, are able to choose with whom we work and if such conflict results in relational dissolution, we are often told to "deal with it and manage." Clearly, as Frederic Jablin, a prominent organizational communication scholar, claimed, it is important to harness the benefits and eliminate the unwanted negative consequences of interpersonal relationships in the organizational setting (Jablin, 1979).

Although easier said than done, if employees can find ways to fulfill basic social needs, provide a social support system, become influential regarding a minority opinion, expedite the flow of information, alleviate potential relational dialectics, reduce the likelihood of upward and downward distortion, and reduce the likelihood of interpersonal conflict and relational dissolution, the benefits of organizational relationships will outweigh the potential difficulties associated with them (Sias & Cahill, 1998).

Organizational Social Networks

One area that has received a lot of attention, and whose practical implications are of great use to both management and workers, is the **organizational social network**. An organizational social network is a representation of how social actors within an organization are socially and structurally connected to others, providing an answer to the "who communicates with whom" question. By mapping an organization's social network, one can determine the presence (or absence) of relationships between and among organizational employees. Not only does such a social representation indicate where relationships do (and do not) exist within the organizational environment, but it also indicates who has potentially more influence and power (Monge & Contractor, 2001). For example, an employee who has connections to, or relationships with, nine others is potentially more important and more influential than the employee who has connections to only four.

organizational social network A representation of how employees are structurally and socially connected to each other.

Table 5.3 Types of Centrality

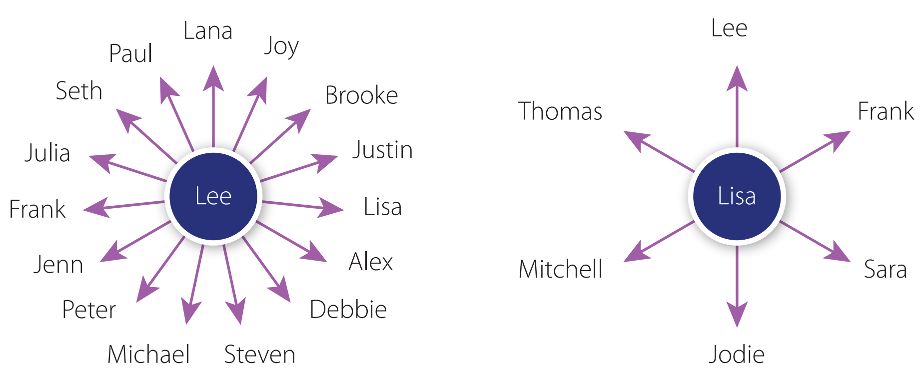
Type	effect
Degree	More social ties as compared to others
Betweenness	Ability to connect previously disconnected people together
Closeness	Ability to reach all other in fewer steps as compared to all others
Eigenvector	Connected to others who are, themselves central

centrality The level of importance based on one's position within a given social network.

Linton Freeman, an influential sociologist best known for his research and theory of societal networks and how groups of people are socially connected to others, explained that social network positioning is extremely important for such things as social movements, community outreach, community leadership, and organizational practices. Among his important contributions to the study of social networks is his conceptualization of **centrality**, which is defined as the level of importance based on one's position within a given social network (Freeman, 1979). One's level of centrality (i.e., importance) in a network is based on the social relationships that he or she has with others. Therefore, the establishment and maintenance of organizational relationships is critical to network centrality.

One measure of centrality, according to Freeman (1979), is known as **degree centrality**, which is a quantitative measure of the number of relationships that a single employee has compared to all others. For example, assume that Lee has a social connection to 15 employees, whereas Lisa has a social connection to six. According to this example, Lee has more degree centrality when compared to Lisa. Having a high level of degree centrality has been linked to influence (Ibarra, 1993). In terms of Lee and Lisa, assume the organization for which they work is interested in creating a new organizational mission statement, and both Lee and Lisa have, independently, come up with ideas. Is it more likely that Lee's or Lisa's mission statement will be adopted by the collective body? Since Lee has more than twice as many connections, or relationships, as Lisa (15 vs. 6), it is likely that his statement will be seen as a better solution when compared with hers. This preference for Lee's decision

Figure 5.1
Degree Centrality



Figu Re 5.2
Betweenness Centrality

is largely based on the quantitative difference in relationships that each has created. Clearly, having many relationships becomes beneficial within the organizational environment (Higgins, 2000).

A second measure of centrality, known as **betweenness centrality**, is defined as one's level of importance based on his or her ability to socially connect previously disconnected people. According to Freeman (1979), if Timothy is friends with Jessica, and if Jessica is friends with Rachel, then it is likely that Timothy and Rachel, too, could be friends with one another. This thinking is much aligned with Fritz Heider's (1958) balance theory, which argues that the friends of your friends are friends themselves. Given the previous example, Timothy and Rachel would be friends because Jessica socially connected them. In other words, Jessica has a high level of betweenness centrality. What becomes advantageous about connecting previously disconnected people within the organizational environment? Research indicates that being such a connective agent promotes a sense of reciprocity or feelings of obligation (Brass, 1984). That is, since Jessica connected Timothy and Rachel, both Timothy and Rachel owe Jessica something in the future. It becomes evident that all three parties are now happy and satisfied. Jessica is happy because she is now connected to Timothy; Timothy is happy because he is now connected to Rachel; and Jessica is happy because both Timothy and Rachel owe her something in the future for having been the linchpin connecting the two of them.

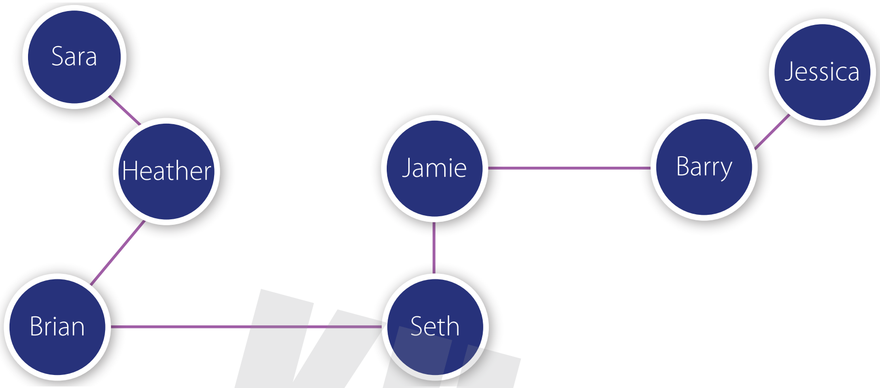
These two measures of centrality indicate that the creation of organizational relationships has benefits, but for different reasons. It is beneficial to create the greatest number of relationships possible (degree) because of the amount of influence that surfaces as a result, though it is also beneficial to create relationships where one is able to become a bridge (betweenness), connecting others, because of the norm of reciprocity that emerges.

A third measure of centrality, according to Freeman (1979), is **closeness centrality**, defined as the number of steps necessary to reach all other parts of a given social network. Assume, for example, that an organization consists of 50 employees. If each employee had a direct social connection to all 49 others, this would mean three things. First, no individual employee has more degree centrality than anyone else, since all employees are socially connected to the same number of people. Second, no individual employee would have any betweenness centrality because there would be no employees disconnected from the organization's collective social network. Third, all employees would be able to reach all other employees in only one communicative step, meaning that each employee would have the same measure of closeness centrality.

This QR code will direct you to the International Network for Social Network Analysis, where you will be able to learn more about studying social networks in organizations.

http://www.insna.org/

Figu Re 5.3
Closeness Centrality



However, it is not realistic to assume an organization's social network is composed of employees who are connected to all others. Assume, therefore, that Sara is connected to Heather, who is connected to Brian, who is connected to Seth, who is connected to Jamie. Assume further that Jessica is connected to Barry who is connected to Jamie. Given these two examples, both Sara and Jessica have a social connection to Jamie, though Jessica, structurally speaking, can communicate with Jamie more easily than Sara, as the degree of separation between Jessica and Jamie is one, and the degree of separation between Sara and Jamie is four. As such, Jessica, compared to Sara, has a higher level of closeness centrality, as she can reach Jamie in fewer steps. From a relational perspective, closeness centrality is a salient measure of importance. It is easier to spread information to those with whom one creates a "close" network connection as compared to those with whom one shares a relationship with several degrees of separation embedded in it (Monge & Contractor, 2003).

A final measure of importance within a given network is **eigenvector centrality**. This is the idea that rather than being connected to the most people (degree), or being able to connect otherwise disconnected people (betweenness), or being able to reach all others in the social network in the fewest steps possible (closeness), a person's importance is based on whether he or she is connected to people with degree, betweenness, and/or closeness centrality (Bonacich, 1987). Thus, it becomes necessary to be socially connected to and share an interpersonal relationship with others who are important. For example, assume that Loryn has a social connection to 65 organizational employees. If Jason has a connection to Loryn, who, in this example, has high degree centrality, then he, by extension, has access to all the people connected to Loryn. As such, Jason, merely by having a connection to Loryn, becomes an important member of the organization's social network. Given this example, since Jason is connected to an employee with high degree centrality, he has a high measure of eigenvector centrality.

In the end, Freeman's scholarship has been extremely informing concerning relationships and social connections, and has pointed to the advantages of both the quantity (degree) and quality (betweenness, closeness, and eigenvector) of interpersonal communication within organizations.

Strength of Organizational Ties

An **organizational tie** is defined as any type of relationship that one employee shares with another. For example, employees have both formal organizational ties (supervisors, coworkers, team members) and informal organizational ties (friends). An important question surfaced in the early 1970s when Mark Granovetter, another important figure in the field of social psychology, asked whether it is more beneficial for organizational employees to cultivate strong or weak relationships with others. In other words, is it necessary to create strong friendships with others or is it equally beneficial to have merely organizational acquaintances? In Granovetter's (1973) strength of weak ties argument, he claimed that having weak ties, or relationships with others, characterized as being non-intimate, low on the time-consuming continuum, and emotionally non-intensive, can be beneficial. That is, having access to many people (degree centrality) becomes more important than cultivating strong, intimate relationships when it comes to such things as information dissemination and the accumulation of various resources.

organizational tie Any type of relationship that one employee shares with another.

Nearly 20 years later, David Krackhardt, a scholar of management and organizational behavior, argued the opposite: that the importance of creating relationships with others that are intimate, time-consuming, and emotionally intensive can be equally beneficial, but determining the benefit of any relational type must be based on the specific context and not applied as a general rule. For example, Krackhardt (1992) argued that strong ties are more effective than weak ties in situations that require social solidarity, such as organizational change and organizational development, whereas the opposite would be true in situations that do not require social solidarity or in times of organizational stability.

For example, what would happen if Alexander was in charge of disseminating information about a new organizational procedure? If he was asked to obtain input from others about a new organizational prototype? If he was asked to survey his fellow employees about perceptions of the organization's culture? Would Alexander likely be more effective if he had many weak ties or few strong ties? Since all three of these examples imply the dissemination or accumulation of information, weak ties would be acceptable (and even preferable), as access to more people would necessarily imply more feedback. However, what if Alexander was asked to create a new organizational procedure or create a new organizational prototype or change the organization's culture? Might Alexander benefit more by consulting his strong ties rather than his weak ties? Certainly. In fact, this is one of the major arguments made by Krackhardt (1992). Alexander would need his friends, those with whom he shares a strong relationship, if such change is to occur. In the end, therefore, there is credibility and utility to both the strength of weak ties argument and the strength of strong ties argument. The difference depends on the role of such relationships. If the relationship is needed to spread information, then weak ties would be acceptable and suitable. If the relationship is needed to create organizational change, however, strong ties would be necessary. The key is to understand that both strong and weak relationships are important, just for different reasons and under different circumstances.

Relationships and Public Relations

Although intra-organizational communication is of great interest to scholars and practitioners, organizations need to cultivate relationships outside of the organization as well. Many students of organizational communication will find themselves in careers within the field of **public relations**. In short, public relations involves the communicative construction of an organization's public image and the goodwill that results for such external bodies as government officials, social activists, consumers or potential consumers, investors or potential investors, and media outlets. All these stakeholders are important for organizations, and public relations professionals are employed to create, strengthen, and/or solidify relationships with them. For example, in the wake of its 2010 oil spill, British Petroleum was forced to remedy its public image and regain the allegiance of its consumers, lobbyists, and investors. Although there is much debate about the effectiveness of BP's public relations behaviors after its 2010 oil spill, including its public apology, it is evident that the organization spent much energy rectifying its image through the recreation of important extra-organizational relationships, which Tony Hayward, the former Chief Executive Officer, knew were important for the organization's continued success.

public relations The communicative construction of an organization's public image, and the goodwill that results, for such external bodies as government officials, social activists, consumers or potential consumers, investors or potential investors, and media outlets.

This QR code will direct you to the homepage of the Public Relations Society of America, where you will be able to learn more about the role of public relations in organizational communication.

http://www.prsa.org/

Methods for Studying Organizational Relationships

There exist three important, yet very different, methodologies for studying relationships within the organizational setting. The first method for obtaining relational data is Nielsen, Jex, and Adams' (2000) *workplace friendship scale,* which assesses both opportunity for and prevalence of relationships. Although this questionnaire does not delve into who communicates with whom, it does assess the extent to which organizations endorse the formation of internal friendships. Some of the items include the following: "I have the opportunity to get to know my coworkers;" "In my organization, I have the chance to talk informally and visit with others;" "Communication among employees is encouraged by my organization;" "I have the opportunity to develop close friendships at my workplace;" "Informal talk is tolerated by my organization as long as the work is completed;" "I have formed strong friendships at work;" "Being able to see my coworkers is one reason why I look forward to my job." The workplace friendship scale has, according to Morrison (2004), become a reliable, valid, and useful tool for studying interpersonal relationships within organizations. Many scholars interested in workplace relationships use this scale in conjunction with other scales to determine the link between interpersonal relationships and such variables as job satisfaction, organizational commitment, intention to leave, organizational culture, organizational climate, and job involvement.

Although Nielsen et al's (2000) scale does not provide researchers with information about who, specifically, communicates with whom, many organizational scholars interested in workplace relationships have used Burt's (1984) **name generator technique** to gain such data. Through this technique, organizational participants are asked to name the five people with whom they communicate most often. From this, researchers will be able to extrapolate more about the nature of such relationships (e.g., level of trust, level of intimacy, level of reciprocity). Such a technique allows the organizational researcher to determine not only who has formed relationships with whom, but also allows the researcher to determine measures of centrality (i.e., degree, betweenness, closeness, eigenvector). Thus, whereas Nielsen, et al's (2000) scale provides data about nonspecific relationships and employees' rationale for their creation, Burt's (1984) name generator technique provides specific interpersonal data that provides the researcher the opportunity to track both individual relationships and overall organizational structures.

A final way to study organizational relationships is by using a conversation analytic approach (see Chapter 4), wherein the researcher gains access to verbal dialogue between employees to assess what the nature of talk says about the relationship among the interactants. As Watzlawick, Beavin, and Jackson (1967) noted, all communication has both a content element (what is said) and a relational element (how it is said and what such communication says about the interactants' relationship). By analyzing the communication that surfaces during interpersonal interaction, researchers are able to make conclusions about the nature of the employees' relationship (e.g., the levels of comfort, intimacy, respect, and openness).

Although each of these three methods is unique and advantageous in its own right, the combination of the three provides researchers with information about the rationale for the creation of organizational relationships, relationships themselves, and the nature of talk as informing of relationships.

Summary

Relationships are a necessary component of organizational communication. After all, the term *communication* implies that at least two social actors are involved in the dialogic process and being part of this process necessarily entails that a relationship has been created. Relationships serve basic human needs, are necessary for the creation of a social support system, help increase the likelihood of minority influence, and expedite the process of information flow within organizations. At the same time, however, relationships provide the opportunity for competing needs, increase the likelihood of upward and downward distortion, provide the potential for interpersonal conflict, and may create uncomfortable social situations if relationships dissolve. The key, therefore, is to magnify the benefits and minimize the potential disadvantages of interpersonal relationships within the organizational environment. Social network scholars have been able to identify the opportunities that accrue for social actors based on the relationships they have cultivated, whether it be influence, level of reciprocity, ease of information flow, or a combination thereof. Clearly, employees benefit from the relationships (both the quantity and quality) they create. Organizational communication scholars and practitioners are aware that relationships and communication are the ties that bind an organization together. Without relationships there is no such thing as communication and without communication there is no such thing as an organization. In the end, understanding relationships within the organizational setting is often the difference between success and failure for both the individual and the organization as a whole.

Questions for Discussion and Review

1. Explain the difference among the five sources of organizational power and give an example of an employee who has each source.
2. Explain the difference between an emergent relationship and a contrived relationship and give an example of each.
3. Explain the benefits and potential problems associated with informal relationships created between superiors and subordinates.
4. Differentiate between the advantages and disadvantages of creating organizational relationships. Make an argument either favoring or dispelling the idea that informal relationships within the organizational environment are good/beneficial or bad/disadvantageous.
5. Explain what is meant by a relational dialectic. Give an example of a dialectic related to organizational relationships, as well as a strategy for overcoming such a dialectic.

6. Differentiate among degree centrality, betweenness centrality, closeness centrality, and eigenvector centrality. Give an organizational example of an employee who has each.
7. It might seem as though having degree centrality is more beneficial for an employee than having any other type of centrality. However, betweenness centrality is also beneficial. Explain whether degree centrality or betweenness centrality is more beneficial and explain why.
8. Explain whether you think that weak ties or strong ties are more beneficial within the organizational environment. Provide examples to strengthen your arguments.

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