

Organizational Alexithymia & Miscommunication

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Under increasing levels of organizational stress, the vital communication that is the lifeblood of an organization, starts to break down. As stress increases, perception narrows, more contextual information is lost, and circumstances deteriorate to more extreme levels before they are noticed, all of which leads to more puzzlement, less meaning, and more perceived complexity. Communication is necessary to detect error and crises tend to create vertical communication structures when, in fact, lateral structures are often

more appropriate for detection and diagnosis of problems. Research has shown that organizations are exceedingly complex systems that can easily drift toward disaster unless they maintain resources that enable them to learn from unusual events in their routine functioning. When communication breaks down, this learning does not occur [1].

Organizations that already have poor communication structures are more likely to handle crises poorly [2]. Instead of increasing interpersonal communications, people in crisis are likely to resort to the excessive use of one-way forms of communication. Under stress, the supervisory structure tends to focus on the delivery of top-down information flow largely characterized by new control measures about what staff and clients can and cannot do. Feedback loops erode under such circumstances and morale starts to decline as the measures that are communicated do not alleviate the stress or successfully resolve the crisis. Complex and complex collective responses are all more vulnerable to this kind of disruption than are older, simpler, more over-learned, cultural and individual responses.

As communication structures become more compromised, important topics become "undiscussable", spoken about only in the "meetings after the meetings". As a result, the issues that are associated with the greatest emotional charge are separated from normal organizational function, a process we call "organizational alexithymia".

Excerpt from Bloom, S. L. (2010). Trauma-organized systems and parallel process. In N. Tehrani (Ed.), *Managing Trauma in the Workplace* (pp. 139-153). London: Routledge.

For more see: Bloom and Farragher, *Destroying Sanctuary: The Crisis in Human Service Delivery Systems*

- [Link to Silencing of Dissent](#)
- [Link to Commitment to Open Communication](#)
- [Link to Collective Disturbance](#)

References

1. Marcus, A.A. and M.L. Nichols, *On the Edge: Heeding the Warnings of Unusual Events*. *Organization Science: A Journal of the Institute of Management Sciences*, 1999. **10**(4): p. 482.
2. Kanter, R.M. and B.A. Stein, *The Challenge of Organizational Change: How Companies Experience It and Leaders Guide It*. 1992, New York: The Free Press.