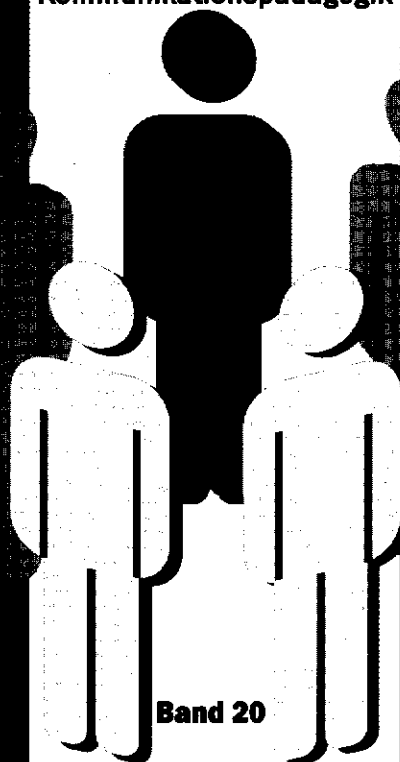Henner Barthel
Kevin M. Carragee (Eds.)

Communication and Political Change

SPRECHEN & VERSTEHEN

Schriften zur
Kommunikationstheorie und
Kommunikationspädagogik

Band 20

Röhrig
Universitätsverlag

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Business Communication and Socio-cultural Change: Problems and perspectives

"Customer orientation" is probably the best-known example of a concept of organization development which strongly influences the *external* communication of staff and executives due to its large motivating force. The concepts for organization development, however, primarily comprise the *internal* communication in organizations, e.g. the increasing importance of team communication. Both concepts are changing communication training: staff of an insurance company learn how to speak in a customer-oriented manner on the phone; members of staff and executives of a group learn how to have an open dialogue in a 'learning organization,' etc. (Bohm 2000).

How are these developments interrelated with changing socio-cultural conditions? Moreover, what effect will the change in values in our society have on communication culture and communication ethics in organizations? And as a result of this: What necessary action should be taken in the future concerning communication training?

These connections will be explained in the following three theses.

Thesis 1:

Political change can express and include a change in values. These changed values are implemented in organizations and influence their external communication, especially public relations work and marketing.

For example, the political party "Die Grünen" was founded in the 1970s in West Germany. The main goal of this party was to protect the environment and create new environmental values. Today, about 25 years later, environmental issues have become so important in Germany that consumer habits have changed. More and more consumers buy products with a so-called "eco-label," which is a symbol of an angel on the packing denoting a product that is environmentally friendly. Also politicians, authorities and businesses have started showing a new awareness of "sustainability."

SustainAbility, a London and New York-based consultancy, coined this term in 1997, and says "that it means not just looking at the economic value companies add, but also at the environmental and social value they add – or destroy" (www.sustainability.com).

Many companies integrate environmental aims in their business strategies and no longer regard ecological issues as an optional extra.

An example from the automotive sector is Audi, which publishes information about its environmental protection policy and protection measures on its homepage. One interesting principle is: "Research and Development is a vital element of Audi's environmental policy. Audi has developed for its products ecologically efficient concepts, thus increasing international competitiveness" (www.audi.de).

Others, like the beer manufacturer "Krombacher," have decided to sponsor certain projects and integrate these in their marketing methods. Krombacher has recently started a television advertising campaign where the company tries to raise money to help protect the tropical rainforest in the Dzangha Sangha-National Park in Central Africa. With the slogan "help and enjoy," they have started a unique rainforest project together with the World Wildlife Fund – Germany and one of Germany's most well-known television-presenters, Günther Jauch. In this campaign, they invite everybody to have a "Krombacher rainforest-party together with friends and neighbors to help stop the destruction of the second biggest rainforest area in the world. With every Krombacher crate you buy you help to protect one square meter of rainforest in the Dzangha Sangha-National Park" (www.krombacher.de, 5/7/2002). This advertising campaign was "the most successful consumer campaign in the brewery's history," according to a Krombacher press release in June 2002. "Already four weeks before finishing the project, 8.5 Mio. m² of rainforest are protected. Our initial target of 10 mill. m² will be exceeded by far." (see Krombacher website).

I think that with the help of these examples a special phenomenon has become evident: socio-cultural values are implemented in companies, due to consumers who think that businesses should not only maximize profits, but also consider ecological and human issues. However, the implementation of these values is characterized by an ambivalence: on the one hand, companies have to find a balance between value-oriented actions, and, on the other hand, they use this tool of ethical behavior for economic purposes. This ambivalence we can describe with Jürgen Habermas (1988) as the tension between communicative action (kommunikatives Handeln) and strategic action (strategisches Handeln).

Thesis 2:

In addition, the process of implementing values also affects the internal communication of organizations. "Staff orientation" as a significant feature of company culture as well as the concept of a "value-oriented staff policy" are both reactions to the change in values in society.

Change in Values in West Germany (1945 – 1984)

Old Values	New Values
Discipline	Self-determination
Obedience	Participation
Hierarchy	Team orientation
Performance	Orientation towards employees' needs
Career	Personality development
Efficiency	Creativity
Power	Willingness to compromise
Centralization	Decentralization

(Wever 1989, 26)

The objective of BMW's "value-oriented staff policy" is to cover the wide spectrum of values among its staff, so that they can identify more easily with their company and, as a consequence, are more motivated to increase efficiency. "For 16 current basic social values in Germany BMW has developed measures on staff policy, to enable the company to co-ordinate the aims of the employees with the goals of the company" (Seidler 1997, 77).

BMW's Value-oriented Staff Policy

For example, the values

"independence and individuality":

Implementation of Values in Specific Staff Policy			
Society/ Staff		Staff Policy	
Basic values	Objectives	Strategies	Specific Measures
Independence	Creating more individual freedom and ability to choose		
Individuality	Promoting independent thinking	Taking individual and team responsibility	Management style Delegation Project management Teamwork
		System of agreement on operational targets	Participation of staff when agreeing on operational targets
		Participation of staff in decisions	Quality circles

(Rosenstiel 1990, 148)

In 2001, the BMW-Group stressed the fact that it wanted to continue its value-oriented staff policy and published the following:

Principles of staff policy (BMW Group; www.BMW.de)

1. Mutual respect leads to a positive settlement of conflicts.

2. Going beyond national and cultural boundaries is valued highly by us.

3. Performance and operating results of our staff are directly linked to the company's compensation.

4. Team performance is rated higher than the sum of individual achievements.

5. Safe and attractive jobs for committed and responsible staff.

However, in 2001, a value-oriented staff policy is explicitly linked to the goal of increasing staff performance and increasing the company's efficiency.

> The most important external influence on company and staff policy is a result of a fast growing international competitive pressure. Increase in competitiveness has become the central factor for success.
> ... Because in future employees will decide whether organizations are successful or less successful, and so staff for us is not a cost factor, but a success factor. We can only achieve a higher efficiency by increasing staff performance..." (www.BMW.de, 2001, 2)

Elements of increasing performance are assigned to specific strategy fields:

Elements of Increasing Performance	**Strategy Fields**
Achievement potential	Securing staff potential
Willingness to achieve	Leadership and co-operation
Achievement opportunities	Personnel systems and structures

Concerning "leadership and co-operation":

> Everything the employees have to solve together has to be done in a more process-oriented way. Hierarchical and function-oriented working methods are replaced by team- and process-oriented co-operation (p. 3).

Changed management style:

> Because of their confidence good team leaders are able to develop efficient structures and communication in a team.
>
> On the other hand, employees have to develop new qualities as well. They have to take responsibility for their contribution to the company's success, especially for the quality of their work. They have to be willing to achieve and to contribute their individual abilities to their teams and projects. (3)

Putting it in a nutshell, I would say that a "value-oriented staff policy" is connected with the "old" value "performance." By this measure the achievement principle is placed in a new context. The salary, for example, "is a financial appreciation of work and correlates with achievement, team orientation and success" (4).

Thesis 3: Conclusions for Communication Training

The main conclusion for communication training is to extend the implicit value-orientation of communication training[1] in order to reach an explicit value-orientation. This means integrating the aspects "value" and "value-orientation" more consciously and making the significance of values for communication behavior more transparent.

Central goals for explicit value-orientated communication training:

In connection with thesis 1:

To reflect together with the participants of communication training on the following questions: Which set of values is important for a company? How are these values communicated in internal and external communication? Is the communication of values credible?

In connection with thesis 2:

To reflect together with the participants of communication training on the following questions: Which values dominate the principles of leadership, which values are important to executives and other members of staff? How do managers and other members of staff realize their values and principles in communication, for example, in staff meetings?[2]

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[1] See e. g. Geißner 1986, Geißner1992, Slembek 1998, Mönnich 1998, Mönnich 1999
[2] Wever 1989; Haßelmann/ König 1997; Kießling-Sonntag 2000

Or, from a different point of view: how do members of staff and managers communicate? What intentions, based on particulan principles, and what values are expressed when communicating?

It can be assumed that in practice there is a whole range of "old " and "new" values in company communication. Moreover, it is important to recognize the conflicts between proclaimed values and prevailing structures, for example the conflict between "team-orientation versus hierarchical structures."

To examine: What emphasis is placed on these values in corporate culture and how are they related to corporate ethics (Lehtonen 1999; Ulrich/Wieland 1999)? In what way does culture determine corporate ethics? (Löhnert 1998).

To recognize if conflicts in communication are at the same time conflicts in values. This aspect does not only concern intercultural communication (Helmolt & Müller-Jacquier 1993; Niemeier, Campbell & Dirven 1998), but also intra-cultural communication as well as interpersonal and intrapersonal conflicts.

For example, during communication training, a participant asks whether s/he is allowed to interrupt another participant during a staff meeting. In Germany this question hides the intrapersonal conflict between the values of politeness and participation. (Mönnich 2001, 26)

For example, during a meeting, a manager criticizes another colleague: "I am not criticizing the result of your work, but I require more transparency." This request is not only a request for Grice's maxim of conversation "Try to contribute to a conversation in a way that is true" (*maxim of 'quality'*) (1975), but it is also a request for participation. Interpersonal conflicts of values become obvious here:

"truth *versus* concealment" and "participation in a team *versus* hierarchy."

For example, during a meeting, a manager criticizes another colleague for not having been informed earlier about a specific item on the agenda. His criticism about the missing information expresses the conflict "team versus hierarchy." When we take into consideration that the manager has had the experience of not belonging to the "inner circle" and that he nearly always gets relevant information for important decisions during the meeting, not earlier, we realize that this criticism also expresses a conflict among the members of the team.

Another aim of value-oriented communication training is to try to predict which difficulties might arise in communication because of the connection between achievement, team-orientation and success. If, for example, the members of a team have to motivate or assess each other, this will undoubtedly lead to conflicts in the team.

Another goal is to recognize difficulties in communication behavior which are caused by the connection of value-orientation and effectiveness. Here an example from 'telephoning': A secretary always answers the phone with the following phrase "Büro Dr. Kupfermacher guten Tag" (" Dr. K's office, hello"). The higher pitch and the intonation in her voice, repeated in a stereotype way, is remarkable. This has no particular purpose concerning the message. With the higher pitch and the intonation in her voice, she simply wants to express friendliness and a closeness to the listener. However, she achieves the opposite effect because the listener keeps his/her distance.

Habermas (1996, 147) points out: Whoever rejects an act of speech offered in a clear and understandable way disputes the

acknowledgement of this remark from at least one of these three aspects: *truth, correctness and veracity*. In the above-mentioned example, the listener disputes the truthfulness of the remark and implies that the speaker did not mean what she said.

The phenomenon of using speech patterns in a stereotyped way as in the example, in my opinion is the result of trying to solve the conflict between "value-orientation *versus* efficiency." From Habermas's point of view, we could say it is the tension between communicative action and strategic action. The example shows that this tension can obviously create ways of acting which are not credible and not successful. For communication training, it is therefore essential to show ways for credible communication.

Final Conclusions

In the interrelation between business communication and a changing socio-cultural context, the socio-cultural context seems to dominate business communication. But companies also have to be aware of the fact that they is a socio-political factor for an ethical-conscious society.

In order not to minimize ethics as an economic factor for profits (Ridder 1993, 128), as is the case in pragmatic strategies of companies, it is important to maximize corporate ethics as part of a "humane-oriented economy" ("lebensdienliche Ökonomie"; Ulrich 1998, 427).

> We are confronted with the ethical-political crunch question, whether we still have the political will to renew the unsurpassed free-democratic ideal of a civil society and its values 'equality of opportunity, justice and solidarity' and to initiate political reforms, or whether we want to sacrifice the ideal of a 'respectable and well-organized society' to constraints and submit everything to the pressures of the economy. (Ulrich 1999, 18f.)

Peter Ulrich's concept of "Integrative Business Ethics" says that companies should account for their actions, especially the ethical basis of their actions, when having discussions with the critical public. (Ulrich 1999, 26)

In addition, especially conflicts in international companies show how important it is to reach a consensus on the valid norms and values in internal company communication. That is why Kreikebaum/Behnam/ Gilbert plead for "communicative-ethical conflict management" (2001, 121ff. For an understanding of business ethics as communicative ethics, see Zerfaß 1994, 301).

The purpose of explicit value-oriented communication training is to support these processes critically and courageously.

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