CHAPTER 15

Conclusion and Future Development

The sky is the daily bread of the eyes.
—Ralph Waldo Emerson

The preceding chapter shows why theory development and refinement are so vital to the business communication community. Theory significantly impacts research, learning, and practice. In a grander sense, well-constructed theory heightens the identity and impact a field has. Too often, people treat communicative behaviors in organizations implicitly instead of explicitly, and do not award communication fair credit for their significant influence on the well-being and key outcomes of organizational stakeholders (J. Mayfield & Mayfield, 2017; M. Mayfield & Mayfield, 2017b; Men & Sung, in press). In many organizational investigations, communication remains the unstated elephant in the room with vague recommended interventions such as encouraging openness and clear directions in company speak. Nothing could be further from this distorted image (J. Mayfield & Mayfield, 2018b; M. Mayfield & Mayfield, 2017a). We know that communication constructs most work experiences and results, and that such constructions occur through multiple organizational layers, cognitive screens, and peer interactions (Fairhurst & Connaughton, 2013; Gronn, 1983; Hanke, 2020; Tengblad, 2006).

These observations are reasons why advances in theory make a big difference (Ma, Mayfield, & Mayfield, 2018; M. Mayfield & Mayfield,
Establishing strong theory spurs insightful research that showcases the scientific rigor, relevance, and applications of business communication to practice as well as to other scholarly disciplines (Mayfield, Mayfield, & Neck, in press; M. Mayfield & Mayfield, 2017b). This book contributes toward this goal through canvassing expert opinion and literature to consolidate, categorize, and share a body of business communication theory. The fruits of our effort can be accessed for future theory building and research, classroom learning, and practice.

The road to this catalog has been challenging. We humbly acknowledge that we have missed some important theoretical works despite our diligence and resolve. We were simply unable to gather feedback from all relevant scholars and to review all germane literature. Another challenge translated into a significant aspiration, an additional contribution of this book. Simply put, we encountered many research silos which dot the landscape of a multi-disciplinary field. These silos refer to the discipline specific preferences for literature, methodology, and inquiry foci which understandably occur. Good examples of these divisions are the psychological and discursive schools of business communication research. The psychological lens (most often used in management, information systems, and other business disciplines) highlights goal-oriented investigations which can benefit organizational and employee outcomes. Psychological inquiry often operates by deductive (inferential reasoning based on stated law), quantitative methodology which seeks broad generalizability (Fairhurst, 2001; J. Mayfield & Mayfield, 2017; Walker & Aritz, 2014). In comparison, the discursive lens is more fluid and emphasizes how organizational communication constructs reality through emergent messages. Discursive inquiry is often more inductive (gathering evidence to uncover truth[s]) and closely linked with organizational communication, linguistics, writing, and rhetorical scholars. Frequently, the discursive lens embraces qualitative methods such as discourse analysis, content analysis, and ethnography to explore how meaning occurs through communication (Fairhurst, 2009; Fairhurst & Connaughton, 2013; Keyton, 2017; Keyton et al., 2013).

Disciplinary culture is not the only reason for our field’s research silos. Publication policies, especially those of scholarly journals, and academic reward systems reinforce these divisions. Many journals will not publish interdisciplinary scholarship which can sometimes draw unfavorable reactions during academic evaluation for career decisions such as tenure and promotion. To boot, there is a third major silo, ethnocentrism
(J. Mayfield & Mayfield, 2012; Mayfield, Mayfield, & Genestre, 2001; Mayfield, Mayfield, Genestre, & Marcu, 2000). Even though we live in a global, networked world, business communication theories tend to have a focus on the USA—despite the fact that many organizational communication behaviors vary according to national culture (Ang et al., 2007; Babcock & Du-Babcock, 2001; Gelfand, Erez, & Aycan, 2007; Hofstede, 2001). Just think about how employee silence may have divergent meanings in China compared to the USA (M. Mayfield & Mayfield, 2014; Robbins & Hunsaker, 2012).

So how do these silos create the opportunity which we noted earlier? The answer is convergence for a richer, more mature field. Intersection and blending of these silos through theory creation and evolution is one of the main discoveries made in writing this book. Diversity adds value to our field. Some investigations need to be inductive while others are best designed deductively or as a combination of the two depending on the nature of the questions asked. A commendable example of such a combination happens in The Call Center Agent’s Performance Paradox: A Mixed Methods Study of Discourse Strategies and Paradox Resolution (Clark, Tan, Murfett, Rogers, & Ang, 2019; J. Mayfield & Mayfield, 2019b). Similarly, certain studies add more value in a single nation setting (not confined to the USA) while others add more insights in a cross-national comparison. There is still more work to be done toward convergence which we will discuss next along with other aspirations.

**Aspirations**

We put forth some aspirations here which can synthesize the field of business communication theory and promote its recognition as a mature, unique field of scholarship. Let’s begin with an overarching aspiration: Communication has a purpose to enhance our life experiences, including at work (Breton, 1997; M. Mayfield & Mayfield, 2012b, 2016). Then let’s look at what scholars can do to make life at work better and grow the field of business communication to garner the considerable respect it deserves. The encouraging truth is that we have already seen researchers move the field forward in recent theoretical refinements and innovations within this book, especially those discussed in Chapter 12. These creative researchers have drawn from a cross-disciplinary literature base and multiple methodologies to adapt theory which reflects a dynamic workplace. In short, these thought leaders have transcended disciplinary
silos. For example, ERO, symmetrical communication, and peer motivating language achieve these purposes (Bisel & Adame, 2019; Hanke, 2020; Men & Sung, in press). In addition, scholars have crafted theories such as Business English as a Lingua Franca (BELF) (Du-Babcock & Tanaka, 2017; Takino, in press) to address the inequalities presented by an English dominated world business environment.

Duly noted, we need to keep forging this path. Certainly the COVID-19 crisis and global climate change have informed us to build flexible theories which can incorporate rapid changes in organizations, embodied by crisis communication (Coombs, 2014; Marsen, 2020) and corporate social responsibility messages (Heath, Saffer, & Waymer, 2017; Jaworska, 2018). Along these same lines, since communication has a purpose to truly make lives better, we should also welcome more stakeholder inclusive business communication theories, such as the Theory of Communication Resilience and the Theory of Respectful Inquiry (Buzzanell, 2018; Van Quaquebeke & Felps, 2018).

We turn to another aspiration: solidifying the field of business communication theory through construct clarification, investigations at multiple levels of analysis, and broader generalizability. We have shown this step can be accomplished via theoretical evolution (digital dialogic theory) and Communications Network Theories (Kent & Taylor, 2002; Latour, 1996). Moreover, leading business communication journals such as the International Journal of Business Communication and Management Communication Quarterly now publish more studies by international authors and/or in global settings. We should applaud this trend and we hope to see it expand.

The next aspiration is to continue the field’s focus on utility in practice (Cascio, 2000; J. Mayfield & Mayfield, 2019a). We use the term utility in a stakeholder context, not just for organizational owners or managers (J. Mayfield & Mayfield, 2018a). Stakeholders are all the major participants in the organizational environment, including employees, society, customers, suppliers, retailers, government, in addition to owners and managers (Carroll et al., 2020). Stakeholder utility is championed by communication theories of responsible management (Coombs, 2014; Heath, 2011). Congruently, business communication theory builders can highlight how owners and managers benefit from shared power and nurturing the well-being of other stakeholders in the tradition of symmetrical communication (Men & Stacks, 2014; Yue, Men, & Ferguson, in press).
A final aspiration is for continued support of the preceding ones through our professional associations. Prominent business communication associations including the Association for Business Communication (ABC), the Modern Language Association (MLA), the National Communication Association (NCA), the International Communication Association (ICA), the Institute for Public Relations, and special interest groups from the Academy of Management and the American Marketing Association are all examples of scholarly/professional communities which advocate for business communication theories. These and other associations can recommit their vigor to nurture business communication theories which make stakeholders’ lives better, transcend silos, adopt global perspectives, incorporate rapid changes and flexibility in organizational environments, and hone utility and validity through construct clarification. We also encourage these associations to persist in their promotion of relevant business communication research skills to major academic accreditation bodies and in the classroom.

**Concluding Thoughts**

We are deeply grateful that you read this book and hope that you found it both useful and enjoyable. At the very least it can be a handbook to access business communication theories. On another level it can help guide your research, teaching, and practice. There are many limitations to be sure. Our book does not claim to be all inclusive. It is certainly a journey, not a destination. We were motivated to build the groundwork for a collected body of business communication theory. In this voyage, we acknowledge missing significant research, but aimed to start a conversation instead.

Where do we want this conversation to go and who should it engage? Our long-term vision is that this rudimentary map will be refined, embellished, and replenished by business communication scholars from all related disciplines. Also important, our goal is that students and professionals can participate in this ongoing development. We humbly ask you to consider and adopt the preceding aspirations where you can. Together, we can elevate business communication theory to its rightful contributor status in our service as enthusiastic, collaborative stakeholders.
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