

# **Organizational learning and organizational communication starting to merger breakdown**

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## Abstract

Why should a project about an organizational merger be interesting? What do the Petit Prince and the fox teach us about the mergers? Antoine de Saint-Exupéry tells us a story about to become friends. Knowing the Petit Prince the fox breaks its life style; it learns a new verbal and emotional language and consequently re organizes tis life In this paper, I argue that reading a merger event as a breakdown inside the organization may increase our knowledge about two important areas of sociological studies: organizational learning and organizational communication. I will show with my case study that organizational communication and organizational learning are intertwined. The case around which the argument is made is the development of organizational project realized by the organization, born by horizontal merger, in order to overcome post – merger crisis.

Key words: merger, organizational learning, organizational communication

## **Introduction**

Recent decades have been characterized by a growth of merger and acquisition (M&A) in the same or different markets (Angwin, Vaara, 2005). The point of departure of this paper is the Duncan Angwin and Eero Vaara's introduction to the Special Issue "*Connectivity*" in *Merging Organizations: Beyond Traditional Cultural Perspectives* (2005) where the two scholars stress the need of new theoretical perspectives to overcome the limitations of M&A prevailing economic theoretical perspective and to enlarge the theoretical discussion. According to Angwin and Vaara, the aim of this work is to enhance the M&A event theoretical framework by arguing that seeing behind the scenes (Vaara, 2003) of organizational merger may increase our knowledge about two important areas of sociological studies: organizational learning and organizational communication.

Starting from post merger problems, this paper examines the relationship between organizational learning (O.L.) and organizational communication (O.C.). The central point is to demonstrate that O.C. may be a tool to analysing the organizations and encouraging the O.L. The argument is made around the narration, first, and the deconstruction, then, of the development of organizational communication change project in a merging involved company.

In this paper, I will first review the theoretical literature on M&A event. Then I will present the understandings of organizational learning and organizational communication. I will finally present an empirical study in which I dealt with a communication organization change project. I will try to analyze the CEO's definition of organizational communication as a problem. I will eventually tempt to demonstrate why organizational learning process did not occur. In the discussion I show how a different O.C. conceptualization may help an organizational learning process.

## **M&A literature**

Antoine de Saint-Exupéry tells us a story about the friendship between the Petit Prince and the fox. Getting to know Petit Prince breaks the fox's life style; it learns a new verbal and emotional language and consequently re organizes its life. The organizations

involved in a merger experience a breakdown in their organizational history, but M&A literature shows how their re – organization hardly becomes a mutual learning.

The dominant literature in the M&A dynamic has a managerial orientation that underestimates the social implications of these contemporary phenomena (Vaara 2002). In the early M&A literature the central issues were the organizational integration problem after the breakdown caused by the M&A. Therefore researchers have attempted to discover and to understand the factors that can encourage/hinder the economic and organizational integration of emergent organizations (Larsonn 1990; Pablo 1991). Among them, some researchers have pointed to the problems springing from cultural differences (Buono et al. 1989; Datta 1991; Chatterjene et al. 1992; Schweiger 1992, Weber et al. 1992; Cartwright, Cooper 1993, Weber et al. 1996). Other researchers have illustrated how employees's (Buono, Bowditch 1989, Napier, 1989; Cartwright, Cooper 1990, Larsson et al. 1999; Birkinshaw et al. 2000) and management's reaction is important to the M&A success (Cartwright, Cooper 1993; Greenwood et al. 1994, Fried et al. 1996). Pablo (1994) and Shrivastava (1986) have concentrated their efforts on the technical and administrative factors underlining the key role of spatial dimension and information platform. By examining this literature we can find a problematic omission: researchers have focused on the economic aspects of M&A and have underestimated the social implications of these events (Vaara 2002). Only in the last few years have Nordic researchers started to study post-M&A organizational integration as social construction process (Vaara 2000, 2002, 2003) reading the organizations not only as structured entities, but as results of organizing processes.

### **“Merger” of literatures**

The research that combined the M&A literature and organizational learning is actually scarce. When it occurs, the researcher's aim is to demonstrate that the phenomena of learning constitute an important component of the post M&A integration process (Fiol; Lyles 1985; Inkpen, Crossan; 1995, Villinger, 1996; Leroy; Ramanatsoa, 1997). Merlene Fiol e Mariorie Lyles (1985) consider a merger event distinguishing between types and level of learning: mergers are characterized by a high level of behavioral change and low level of cognitive development. In *“Believing is seeing: Joint*

*ventures and organization learning*” Inkpen and Crossan (1995) integrate behavioural and cognitive prospective of O.L. and give a multilevel view of O.L. process. The aim of their work is to show that rigid set of managerial beliefs and the resistance to leaving past practice can limit an O.L. process. Other authors such as, for instance, Frederic Leroy e Bernard Ramanatsoa (1997) study a merger case focalising on the theoretical part of the paper on literature about individual and organizational learning. The two researchers study an empirical case of merger through the conceptual opposition between behavioural and cognitive changes. Their conclusion is that the phase post - M&A may be characterized by more complementary learning process. The socialization process is central in the other Leroy’s work, in which the author argues that “(socialization) can also be understood as a process of learning and sharing of tacit knowledge” (Leroy, 2002, 2). Villinger (1996) shows the crucial factor for successful learning processes after an acquisition; emphasizing the role of the communication and language.

In addition, referring to the works born by integration of M&A and organizational communication I assume that their authors’ aim is to demonstrate that the organizational communication may be a facilitator in order to resolve internal conflicts post – merger (Sinister 1981; Black, Mouton 1985, Shirivastava, 1986, Scheweiger, DeNisi, 1991). David Scheweiger and Angelo DeNisi examine the impact of the “*realistic communication*” (ibidem, 110) on employees prior to the merger and conclude that “*realistic communication*” is a tool to reduce the anxiety post merger in order to obtain productive merger.

### **To learn and to communicate: verbs to read organizing processes**

I introduce here the concepts upon which I stand. I start from two areas of study – organizational learning and organizational communication – which if intertwined, create an area of common study: organizing process.

### **To learn and organizations**

The organizations are often studied through organizational learning metaphor but behind the O.L. label. there is a dense and impenetrable definitions jungle (Prange, 1999). In this sense my work is not an exception. I will use the metaphoric instrument to conceptualize the movement between familiar and emergent organizing process and

*"between established and emergent social relations"* (Blackerl, McDonald, 2000, 833). By looking at an organization in order to understand if a organizational learning process occurs I expect to observe a change on organizing processes and on the network structures. The focal point will be the origin of change project and its development. In my work I will consider the organization as an emergent entity created by the collective construction and definition of the organizational practices. The learning process is situated on social and interactive dimension (Yanow, 2003), but not only. In the same time the learning is conceptualized as process and result. According to the social constructivism approach, organizational learning is interpreted as social constructivist process (Gherardi, Nicolini, 2001), but in the same time as the result of the process – *"what is achieved in the process of learning"* - (Nicolini, Meznar, 1995, 741) that the researchers can study exploring the forms of discontinuities of organizing practices.

Anna Sfard introduces two metaphors to reassume the way to study the organizational learning: acquisition metaphor (first way) versus participation metaphor (second way) (Sfard,1998). I will not summarize the Sfard's work, I will rather introduce the Elkjaer's *"third way"* as a synthesis of two metaphors. Rooted on pragmatic learning theory, the *"third way"* focal points are: 1. thought is a learning instrument as well as the participation; 2. learning takes place during social process; 3. both content and process (of learning) are invisible but 4. are constructed through the learning conceptualization; 5. the organizations are social worlds. In this approach the key words are experience, inquiry, and transaction (relationship between the organizations and individuals). The definition of organization as social world *"held together by commitment to organizational situations and events, which can be traced in time (trajectory) and space (conditional matrix)"* (Elkjaer, 2004, 430) gives an important methodological implication. The scholars can take as point of departure the trajectory of concrete events and situations in order to study an organizational learning process. Upon this reflection I chose an organizational project as unit of analysis.

### **To communicate and organization**

In this paper I use organizational communication as an analytic tool for investigating the organizational learning process. I use the organizational communication

in metaphoric sense to explore the link between “*to communicate*” and “*to organize*”. With the communication term I do not refer to interpersonal communication but to “*the practice of communicating as a routine organizing activity*” (Orlikowski, Yates, 1994, 541). The relevance of communication practice as organizing activity has been underlined by Orlikowski and Yates (1994) and Yates and Orlikowski (1992), but also by Maryan Schall “*without communication and communicating there would be no organizing and organization*” (Schall, 1983, 560).

According to Orlikowski and Yates (1994), I will adopt the organizational communication as an essential factor of the organizing process of organizational texture (Gherardi, Strati, 1997). When I use the organizing verb I have an intellectual debt with Emery e Trist (1965), Weick (1993), and with all authors of the Special Issues “*The texture of organizing of Journal of Management Studies*” (1990).

I introduce two other concepts: communication genre and community’s repertoire. (Orlikowski, Yates, 1994; Yates, Orlikowski 1992). Recalling the Orlikowski and Yates’s definition the communication genres are “*socially recognized types of communicative actions – such as memos, meetings, expense forms, training seminars that are habitually enacted by members of a community to realize particular social purposes*” (Orlikowski Yates, 1994, 542). Each organization has its genre repertoire that gives information about how the organization organizes some of its communicative practices and its activities (ibidem). For instance, Orlokowski and Yates (ibidem) write that by observing different genre routinely enacted in two company emerge two different organizing processes: a democratic and an autocratic one.

### **Organizational learning and organizational communication: discovering the link**

In this work I argue that the organizing verb is the link between the literature on organizational learning and the one on organizational communication. Previously I have defined organization learning as the movement between familiar and emergent organizing process and “*between established and emergent social relations*” (Blackerl, McDonald, 2000). After that I have included the organizational communication among organizing activities. I propose to use communicative practices, explored during an organizational

project, as an analytic tool in order to understand if organizational learning processes occurred inside the organization. In the following section I will illustrate the empirical case. In the discussion I will analyze why the organizational learning did not occur and I will reconstruct the change project adopting a different conceptual lens.

### **Research design and methods**

The case around which the argument is made is the development of organizational project realized by the organization, born through domestic horizontal merger, in order to overcome post – merger crisis. This paper is not a completed, rather a working in progress one. This case study was characterized by continuative access to the company and by my active participation to the project’s realization. The unit of analysis for the inquiry is a project; I spent two years following the project. In order to understand various aspects of the project a qualitative methodology incorporating some inquiry techniques was chosen. The primary data for this case study are 1. field notes written during the access to the company and during the meetings; 2. informal conversations with CEO components (chairman and both the directors) and with the employees (sometime while having a coffee), 3. 20 semi structured interviews with key managers and 4. documents analysis. The project could not be understood without earlier knowing organizational communication: the data were collected before the starting of the project.

Scarborough and colleagues write “*the limits of qualitative research involving a single case are well documented.(...) However, the value of the research lies in its ability to provide insights through rich detail as well as to offer directions for future inquiries.*” (Scarborough et al, 2004, 496). I contract intellectual debt taking this one as my support idea.

### **Empirical case**

The herewith case presented here is a public local transit company, T&T, with 1200 employees. Prior to the merger, both companied were operating in the same service as competitors of different size. The competition was limited to bus transit, since F&M worked both as bus transit company and railway transit company, while A&T only as bus transit. A&T company was born in 1922 on the initiative of public bodies such as province and municipality. Before mergering, the company had 850 employees. F&M

company was older than T&A since it was born in 1909 as public entity. In 1936 it became private, but after the second world war the local municipalities got the control of it. Prior to the merger, F&M had 250 employees.

Currently the T&T is in the hand of public bodies. According both to law European 1893/91/ CEE and to Burlando's Italian decree - law (D.lg. 19 November 1997 n. 422), the new company's structure was divided into two parts under two directors. After the merger, the new company 1. adopted the A&T information technology system, procedures and control system embedded in a System Quality; 2. F&M team group manager was subordinated to A&T team group manager; 3. F&M machine shop was integrated into A&T's machine shop. All employees were involved into physical integration in a new building, except for the employees that used to work in the railway service. Railway service remained the same, far (physically and culturally) from the company's central building. The structural changes after the merger of the A&T and F&M companies were seen in different way by the employees. On the one hand, the ex A&T employees perceived the merger as an acquisition of the F&M. "*Once they (ex F&M) arrived here they needed to learn out to work*". After the merger, ex A&T employees perceived the future as more uncertain, but they shared the idea "*new logo, old problems*". On the other hand, also the ex F&M employees described the merger as acquisition and felt themselves as second class citizens.

### **Organizational communication in T&T**

Interviews and informal conversations demonstrate that no explicit discussion of genre rules, interaction norms and communication media rules took place after the merger. As top managers interviews indicate, the managers appear to have initially imported into the company the communicative practices they were used to their original company. The ex F&M managers told continued to work out their service through participative communication genre, but they adopt the A&T's genre – more directive – in the other communicative practices. As a result of it, the community's repertoire was composed by two different communicative genre.

The analysis of company widespread communication media– circular letter, e-mail, Intranet red, meeting between CEO and top manager group – shows how they share

a directive communicative genre. The directive genre is characterized for its aim to set actions in motion. The directive genre with the predominance of the top – down directionality in the communication practice reveals how organizing processes are rooted on hierarchical role and on power. Such as affirmation is confirmed by empirical instance. The directive style is dominant in company communication practices, there was a different style in the work unit. By analysing the exchanged e-mails between the head clerk and collaborators, I observed that there was a collaborative style in the work unit where headed was an ex F&M clerk. On the contrast I observed a directive style whereas the head clerk was an ex A&T. The communication between the two units was characterized by directive style following hierarchical role.

### **Organizational communication as a problem**

The company communication organizational change project was born on the initiative of CEO (chairman and two directors). After the merger, CEO needed to understanding the nature of the organization problems sourced out by the top manager team's complain. As a consequent of it, CEO started such actions to re-create a sense of the organization. The change effort started from make sense process (Gioia, Chittipeddi, 1991). The CEO contacted a consultant to obtain an analyze of the organizational problems. After a month, the consultant persuaded the CEO about the necessity to change the organizational communication cause of post merger problems. In the consultant's report the CEO read:

communication system not developed and inefficient: the idea that in the company there is a internal communication lack about the company's mission, value and strategy is widely spread . The approximate knowledge about company's strategy produces divergent expectations and creates different sense of the organization. The intermediate managers complain about the information lack on the future. It does not allow to give coherent indications to the employees. This causes a loss of authority.

The CEO decided to realize a project in order to resolve the problems. *“The project’s aim is to resolve the communication problems producing a more efficient communication system and increasing the knowledge about the company’s mission and value between the employees”* (chairman during informal conversation). The problem was conceptualized in terms of efficiency communication system and information (quantity) lack. Ruth Smith (1993) uses metaphorical tool to understand the Organizational Communication focus. The author affirms that *“organizational communication has been understood, in one form or another, in terms of a relationship between organization and communication”* (Ibidem, 9). The containment metaphor includes the communication inside the organization explicated in terms of *“formal versus informal channels, modes of linkage, tangible hierarchies”* (Smith, 1993, 12) and so on. Bordow and More’s assertion *“organizational communication can be used to describe, analyse, as well as determine ways to change and improve communication in any organizational context”* (Bordow, More, 1991, 9) explicit the materialist ontology embedded in this metaphor. The Ceo’s O.C. idea may be expressed with this metaphor which tends to give primacy to issues related to the communication efficiency and media diffusion. As the results of it, Ceo did not include the communication actions inside the organizational organizing processes and it did not problematize the relationship between to communicate and to organize.

### **Communication organizational project change**

The CEO entrusted to Quality and Training unit(QT) the project development. The project was divided into three actions: internal schedule, meeting between director, QT head clerk and employees divided into 40 groups and introduction of company’s newsletter.

The internal schedule did not lead to a change in the communication practices; consequently, a organizational learning did not take place. The internal schedule was composed by issues in order to know the employees’s perception about some organizational aspects. By analysing the internal schedule, I observed that the CEO used this to reinforce its vision of organization and to revision part of this. It’s correct to read this step as another action of sense making.

The director, along with QT head clerk, realized 40 meetings involving the 90% of the employees. The meetings were connected by a leit motiv: the same content and the same stories. The meetings were divided in two parts: speakers “*lesson*” and discussion. I use the word “*lesson*” since the orators spoke as they were in front of students. They gave new helpful meanings to give sense to the reality. Through the analysis of this first part, speaker’s interpretations emerge: 1. merger as necessity; 2. the necessity to create an unique company culture to fight the enemy (competitors); 3. Quality System as the best way to work. Gioia and Chiappetti write “*sensegiving is concerned with the process of attempting to influence the sensemaking and meaning construction of others toward a preferred redefinition of organizational reality*”(Gioia, Chiapeddi, 442, 1991). The same process occurred during the meetings in which the orators showed a clear intent to provide a viable interpretation of the merger and to influence employees to adopt it as their own. During the last part of the meetings there were discussions between orators and employees originated by the employees’s different perception about the reality. “*Listening to them It feels like being in the moon; the reality is completely different*” (employee informal conversation after a meeting). “*I would like to see the company with their eyes, but our working condition is different*” (employee during a meeting). The analysis of the meetings communicative practices let me to affirm that the directive style is dominant one. The participative style characterizing the final part of the meeting was not extend to the meetings between CEO and team management group. During some informal conversation after meeting some employees affirmed the meeting made the relationship between the employees and team management group harsher. After the meeting the employees expected to see change some decision making processes, but it did not occur. The case study shows what by Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991) wrote about the initiation of strategic change effort. The changing project starts from a sensemaking process and develops through a sensegiving process.

Last but not least, a limited number of employees noted the introduction of the company newsletter. Introduced in the Intranet, the newsletter camouflaged between the other information.

The project was just like a stone thrown into the lake causing any waves.

## **Case analysis and Discussion**

The empirical case analysis tempts to demonstrate why the project did not bring an organizational learning process. My thesis is that the reason for this failure is the CEO's limitative definition of organizational communication. The community's repertoire did not change during and after the project development. Consequently it reveals that no changes occurred neither in organizing processes nor in the social relations. The project failed in terms of organizational learning. I interpret the project steps in term of closures and openings for O.L (Elkjaer, 2005) in order to explicit the failure.

First of all, the project developed without a previous discussion within the group management team. CEO informed the employees about the project through a circular letter written in the shared communicative genre. The project was imposed to the employees and team manager group; I observed the continuity on the CEO's communicative genre. I believe this is a first enclosure element to O.L. Secondly, the CEO did not extend the project's meeting participative genre to the meetings between the CEO and top manager group.

The CEO limited its project to the communication media development as it was convinced of the equivalence "*more media = more communicative efficiency*". I adopt the organizational communication definition as organizing process discloser that understands – obviously – another conceptualization of organizational communication as problem. Following this approach, organizational communication problems need to be understand as organizing processes problems. As the result of it, obtained the report, the Ceo needed to know the organizing processes in which strategic decisions were taken and widespread. The CEO should have introduce new communication genre or genre's variations inside these organizing processes through communicative actions. The new communication actions's lack is another closure element. This aspect is linked to an other important absence: the CEO did not assume the commitment of changing through communicative actions.

## **Conclusion**

The idea on reflecting on the relationship between organizational learning and organizational communication through a merger case derives by the idea to enlarge the theoretical discussion inside the M&A field. The paper is based on understanding of O.L. as conceptualization of the movement between familiar and emergent organizing process and "*between established and emergent social relations*" (Blackerl, McDonald, 2000, 833) and on understanding of O.C. as organizing process discloser.

The community's repertoire analysis reveals the failure in terms of learning of a change project; it did not change during the project development. The cause of it is the Ceo's O.C. definition and its implications. Through containment metaphor Ruth Smith (1993) includes the communication inside the organization explicated in terms of "*formal versus informal channels, modes of linkage, tangible hierarchies,*" (Smith, 1993, 12) and so on. The Ceo's O.C. idea may be expressed with this metaphor which tends to give primacy to issues related to the communication efficiency and media diffusion. Following the project I note how closure element to O. L. occurred. The first closure element is the continuity on the Ceo's communicative genre; the group team manager and the employees were informed about the project through a circular letter written in the shared communicative genre. Secondly, the CEO limited the project's meeting participative genre to the meetings with the employees and it did not extend the new genre to the meeting with top manager group.

Limiting its project to the communication media development, the Ceo did not consider the relationship between to organize and to communicate. As result of it, there was a lack of communicative actions finalized to introduce new communicative genre inside the organizing processes in which the strategic decision were taken and widespread. This aspect is linked to an other important absence: the CEO did not assume the commitment of changing through communicative actions.

Consequently the failure in terms of learning of a change project based on this O.C. approach shows its limitations and the opportunity to analyse the relationship between O.C. and O.L. in terms of communicating – organizing: in other worlds to focusing on communication practices as organizing process. Following this conceptual change, the O.C. study is moved from communication channel and communication

efficiency to communication practices as organizing process. It is important to pay attention to communicative genre embedded in the organizing processes that emerge as opening elements for O.L. Another focusing point is the need of ones who assume the change effort to taking the responsibility with communicative actions.

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