STRATEGIC AMBIGUITY WITHIN MANAGERIAL COMMUNICATION: FRIEND OR FOE?

Brîndușa Maria Popa
Lecturer, PhD, The Regional Department of Defense Resources Management Studies,
Brașov, ”Carol I” National Defense University

Abstract: Communication is one of the key elements that compose the mechanism supporting organizational success. No matter the type of organization, be it private or governmental, profit or non-profit, they all aim at attaining their objectives and good communication helps in this respect since it is inherent in all activities, it influences the way objectives are perceived and consequently, carried to completion. Specialized literature agrees that efficient communication is based on two main characteristics: clarity and coherence. However, this is not always the case. There are numerous situations when communication is ambiguous or incomplete, often due to the lack of communication skills. Sometimes ambiguity is deliberately present, in which case we are talking about strategic ambiguity, especially when there are some plans or objectives to be accomplished. Ambiguous, but carefully constructed communication is necessary under uncertain circumstances when neither the audience, nor the environment is easy to understand, nor familiar and it can help gain advantage over the opponent / competitor by promoting confusion and concealing intent.

Keywords: communication, objectives, organization, ambiguity, strategy, change

Introduction
Effective communication does not refer only to the simple transmission of messages from the sender to the receiver, but also to the dissemination of meaningful messages that are understood the same way by both parties. The message will be decrypted, processed and then acted upon in accordance with the receiver’s understanding of it. As a consequence, the encryption of the information, the manner and the channel of transmission and the decryption influence how the receiver will react to the message. Thus, clarity and coherence are essential for the effectiveness of communication and facilitate the achievement of the objectives. Effective communication takes into consideration the receiver. Communication effectiveness means that the message delivered will be understood by the receiver exactly as intended. Effective communication is a two-way process, it provides the receiver time to analyze the message and ask for further information if necessary. Its purpose is to motivate the receiver to act as good as possible. On the other hand, communication efficiency means delivering the message in a quick way because time is of the essence when we talk about efficiency, but, at the same time, in a way that should permit the receiver to hear the message, interpret and make use of it as the sender intended. Communication efficiency is not always the best approach for it does not allow time for any further clarification. Not allowing time for clarification and validation could lead to confusions and reluctance to act.

Strategic ambiguity as part of organizational communication
Ambiguity appears in communication quite frequently and it leads to misunderstandings, confusion or multiple interpretations; ambiguity can be accidental or deliberate. This paper will analyze the use of deliberate ambiguity as part of strategic communication.
Strategic ambiguity is not a new concept; it has been around for some time, especially in political discourses where situations are never clear and stable, political environment being volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (VUCA) and it is considered wise and recommended to always have the possibility to change course. The notion of strategic ambiguity was first mentioned by James G. March and Johan P. Olsen and later elaborated by Eric M. Eisenberg. Strategic ambiguity is defined as "strategy for suspending rational imperatives toward consistency [that helps organization] explore alternative ideas of possible purposes and alternative concepts of behavioural consistency"\(^1\).

Eisenberg defines strategic ambiguity as "those instances where individuals use ambiguity purposefully to accomplish their goals"\(^2\), it is not uncertainty, it is calculated ambiguous expression developed in order to achieve specific objectives. It is well known that specialized literature agrees upon the fact that efficient communication is based on two main characteristics: clarity and coherence however, under certain circumstances, ambiguous communication may be more effective.

Ambiguous communication can be placed under two main categories: **perceived ambiguity** which refers to the way the individuals (receivers) perceive communication and messages. This is the case when the receivers are unable to select one message decoding from several possible or even the impossibility of decoding the message and thus, considering it void of clear message. The second category refers to **deliberate ambiguity** and it implies that the messages have a deliberately ambiguous meaning. They are not precise, neither very limited in meaning. Deliberate ambiguity is the basis of **strategic ambiguity**. Not all deliberately ambiguous messages have a strategic purpose, however all strategically ambiguous communication is intentional.

**Functions of communication ambiguity**

Organizations have also adopted this manner of communication and their missions and goals are often intentionally ambiguous since they "allow divergent interpretations to coexist and are more effective in allowing diverse groups to work together"\(^3\). According to Eisenberg, strategic ambiguity has four functions: promoting diversity under a general and common umbrella, securing positions, allowing deniability and facilitating organizational change. Of all the four functions the fourth could be considered the most important.

In the following paragraphs we shall discuss each of these functions. Among the four function we consider the fourth to be the most important because it offers the organization the possibility to develop.

Communication is based on the usage of symbols in order to render meaning and accomplish goals. Symbols can also be used to provide a common point of reference for the diversity of individuals who form an organization. Organizational core values are not presented explicitly, they are transmitted through stories and metaphors, using symbols because their imprecise expression permits multiple interpretations and at the same time promotes a sense of unity. Consequently, each person can maintain its own individual interpretation of a common value thus, creating a sense of unity. People are not directed towards the same views, but the ambiguity contained in the statement of the values permits them to maintain personal interpretations while at the same time believing that they all concur.

---

Strategic ambiguity permits the co-existence of multiple points of view in organizations. The use of strategic ambiguity is commonly found in organizational missions, goals, and plans because it allows for more movement. When goals are declared concretely and described in much detail they become very constricting therefore, ineffective. Applying different interpretations to the same statement, symbol or image helps avoid frictions within the group by providing a common point of reference.

Securing position is maybe the least important function, it is mainly used to save face and to allow the speakers to go back on their words without serious consequences.

Strategically ambiguous communication permits deniability. In organizations, very detailed and clearly set policies and norms narrow the liberty of “movement” and increase the number of norms’ violations. Managers who have been very thorough in setting policies, have found themselves in delicate situations when the slightest violation of a rule by an employee places the person in charge in the position to take the best decision about sanctioning or not the employee and, at the same time, remaining consistent to the norms and regulations. “Ambiguity can be used to allow specific interpretations of policies which might do more harm than good to be denied, should they arise. Rather than being entirely secretive or clear, organizational communicators often employ some form of deniable discourse, such as strategic ambiguity.” Strategic ambiguity can maintain open way for future options. Disclosure of information in clear terms limits options and blocks any survival and adaptation plans. Such situations are common in the realm of international politics.

However, strategic ambiguity makes the interpretation of a statement/ requirement more difficult for the receiver and therefore, the accomplishment of any task it entails less possible. So, even though it is an opportunity, when used in stating the mission of an organization, ambiguity can become a liability when assigning specific tasks. Strategic ambiguity appear as a flow, from most clear to most ambiguous; the more ambiguous the communication, the easier it is to deny specific interpretations.

Strategic ambiguity facilitates organizational change. If goals are not very restrictively presented there is always the possibility to adapt, adjust, enlarge, and change them if the environment changes. The socio-environment is very volatile, turns of events can occur rapidly therefore, organizations should be able to adapt in order to survive. Whenever the limits are too strict, the possibility to adapt and evolve is reduced or inexistent.

Strategic ambiguity, as defined by Eric Eisenberg5, allows an organization to express its mission and goals in a way that offers the freedom to modify operations that have become inappropriate or malfunctioning or to adapt to the challenges of the environment. Organizations that face troubled times can maintain firm perception of their identity and goals while beginning change. The essential thing is to remain relevant to the new requirements and to be able to seize future opportunities and your statement to broad enough to permit change e.g. “We aim at training highly qualified specialists through education programs for anyone from this region and beyond, who is interested in self-development and higher training”. Such a mission statement does set any limit the educational activity to a specific type of education (traditional or on-line, for example), region, gender, age. This is how universities, could introduce online/ distance learning courses without requesting student presence in class and managed to have higher enrollment rate and to survive the market competition in the domain. Such universities never limited their activity by mentioning specific types of courses or, age, gender or regional limit, e.g.: “The mission of the University of Cambridge is to contribute to society through the pursuit of education, learning, and research at the highest international levels of excellence. (…) Study at Cambridge wherever you are in the world,  

5 Idem 3.

Section: Social Sciences
with a short online course. Study anytime, anywhere - all you need is a computer with internet access. Join a community of learners around the world. Get personal feedback on your work from an expert tutor. Gain a Certificate of Participation if you complete work and take part in discussions. Access class resources for two years after your course finishes. As it can be seen from this mission statement, the University of Cambridge tries to have a manoeuver space as large as possible without limiting itself to a specific region or type of education.

Conclusions
To conclude, we can say that being ambiguous and being strategically ambiguous are two completely different situations. Strategic ambiguity implies a plan, as the name says, a strategy. Generally, it is used to permit movement, change and development, while ambiguity is either a mistake due to lack of communication skills or a way to hide things. Strategic ambiguity helps identify new ways of expanding in different contexts and from new perspectives, especially under uncertain circumstances when goals must be changed or adapted, it permits the existence of multiple opinions and impedes organizational fragmentation.

Nonetheless, it is essential to maintain the ethics of ambiguity and to use it for development and organizational survival and not for inappropriate activities even though, avoiding blame and escaping from uncertain circumstance is another common and frequent reason for using it. Maintaining the proper balance between clarity and ambiguity allows any organization to attain its goals and overpass challenging situations. Strategic ambiguity can be part of the strategic control and could be used when contrary goals are targeted and reaching them openly is not easy or advisable.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


---