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# Ethnography of Communication as on Organizational Communication Assessment Tool: A Test of the Method

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THESIS APPROVAL

The abstract and thesis of Francisca Inez Trujillo-Dalbey for the Master of Science in Speech Communication were presented May 8, 1997, and accepted by the thesis committee and the department.

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## ABSTRACT

An abstract of the thesis of Francisca Inez Trujillo-Dalbey for the Master of Science in Speech Communication presented May 8, 1997.

Title: Ethnography of Communication as an Organizational Communication Assessment Tool: A Test of the Method.

Professional organizational consultants and researchers performing organizational communication assessments with non-profit boards of directors have few tools available to them and many of these tools underemphasize the centrality of communication and overlook the power-as-dominance (Mumby, 1994) issues present in organizations. This study tested the ethnography of communication (Hymes, 1972) as an organizational communication assessment tool with a board of directors of a non-profit organization in Oregon and examined the results by employing Mumby's (1994) construct, thereby conducting a critical ethnography of communication.

This study offers important insights into boards of directors of non-profit organizations and has important implications for communication consultants seeking tools to perform organizational communication assessments or who are interested in examining organizational power issues.

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Interview data and other artifacts collected for an initial assessment of a non-profits' board of directors were used to conduct this additional analysis to answer; can the ethnography of communication be effectively used as a communication assessment tool for communication consultants to analyze and assess the communication practices and patterns of a non-profit organization's board of directors?, and what will I learn about power as constituted and communicated by this non-profit organization's board of directors?

Using the ethnography of communication, "the camp" emerged as the heart and soul of this board. The camp's beauty and amenities enchanted this board; and it was the focus of its financial discussions, its hope for "saving" the organization and offered its board of directors one of its greatest challenges. This important finding brought into focus and helped this researcher understand the behaviors, values and beliefs which motivated and nearly destroyed this group.

In the critical analysis, Mumby's (1994) three conditions of power were present in the data. It was shown how these conditions caused severe conflicts among the board members and how they were compelled to focus on these conflicts rather than examine the major cause of their difficulties; a faulty but traditional board structure.

This study adds to the growing body of ethnographies of communication and the findings illustrated the usefulness and importance of conducting applied communication research in organizational studies.

ETHNOGRAPHY OF COMMUNICATION AS AN  
ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION ASSESSMENT TOOL:  
A TEST OF THE METHOD

by

FRANCISCA INEZ TRUJILLO-DALBY

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<b>PAGE</b>
<b>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</b> .....	i
 <b>CHAPTER</b>	
<b>I INTRODUCTION</b> .....	1
<b>II REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE</b> .....	18
Ethnography of Communication.....	18
The Communication of Power.....	27
Critical Ethnography.....	30
<b>III RESEARCH METHODS</b> .....	35
History of the Board of Directors.....	35
Procedures.....	37
Human Subjects.....	42
Reliability and Validity.....	42
<b>IV FINDINGS</b> .....	49
<b>V DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS</b> .....	65
Final Analysis: Critical Ethnography.....	65
Comparison Between this Assessment and the Initial Assessment.....	81



Limitations of the Study.....	93
Using the Ethnography of Communication as an Organizational Assessment Tool.....	95
Implications for Future Research.....	99
<b>REFERENCES.....</b>	<b>104</b>
<b>APPENDICES</b>	
A    Organizational Assessment & Recommendations..... (Initial Assessment)	114
B    Informed Consent Letter.....	119
C    Sample Interview Questions.....	120

## **CHAPTER I**

### **ETHNOGRAPHY OF COMMUNICATION AS AN ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION ASSESSMENT TOOL: A TEST OF THE METHOD**

Julie<sup>1</sup>, interim board president of a non-profit youth organization, contacted me a few months after she attended a training I conducted for her employer. Julie explained briefly by phone and then in person at a meeting with two members of their conflict resolution task force, that their executive director had resigned but he wanted to rescind his resignation; the board president had resigned due to a conflict with the executive director, and that the staff were “very” unhappy.

The task force agreed to hire me to perform an assessment of the organization by conducting confidential interviews with the staff, the executive director, and the board of directors (including immediate past members), which I did. A written report based on the assessment was prepared and presented to the board of directors at a regularly scheduled board meeting. Following their review and discussion, the board of directors accepted the recommendations of the report and moved into the facilitation and training phase of the contract (see appendix A for a copy of this report). Due to the findings of this initial assessment, services were provided solely to the board of directors as it was crucial to the continuation of the

organization as a whole that the board of directors become functional once again. These services included training and group facilitation in the areas of roles and responsibilities, decision-making, analyzing the skills of the board members and identifying skills needed in potential board members. I also attended a selection committee meeting with three board members and helped them construct a screening, interviewing, and selection process for prospective executive directors. Approximately four months after the contracted work was completed, I was asked to become a board member and about three months later, I was voted Board President, an office I hold presently. Only three of the board members discussed in this study continue to serve on the board of directors, and none of the staff (including the executive director) remain employed by the organization.

This organization<sup>2</sup> is part of a larger, world-wide organization established in 1910. It was started in the northwest region of Oregon in 1929 and that same year a large parcel of land was donated to the local organization specifically for summer camping programs. The organization operates a variety of recreational and educational programs for young people throughout the year, in addition to residential, week long, summer camping programs.

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<sup>1</sup> All the names of the interviewees (including Julie's) are pseudonyms to protect their anonymity.

<sup>2</sup> To protect the anonymity of the informants and their organization, it will be referred to as "the organization" in this study.

As this is a non-profit organization, it must have a board of directors and officers such as a president, vice president, treasurer, and secretary (the executive committee) governing the organization. The by-laws set the term for officers at one year, and board members at two years. A board member can serve a total of three consecutive terms or six years. The board of directors, through its' president, directly supervises the executive director, who in turn is responsible for various staff positions. This is a membership organization and the board of directors is responsible and accountable to its members. The members of this organization are its "leaders" and volunteers. The "leaders' are adults who voluntarily take on the responsibility of organizing and holding weekly meetings for young people, usually in their homes. "Volunteers" are not necessarily leaders, but may assist the leaders at various events. All of the leaders and many of these volunteers were "voting members" of the organization in that they must join the organization (and pay dues) in order to be a leader or volunteer.

At the time of the initial assessment, the board of directors consisted of ten members. Julie, interim board president who had been on the board for six years and had been president three years prior to this time for a one year term. She had been on the executive committee as immediate past president for one year. Twelve years ago she was a youth representative on the board of directors, a staff member for six months at camp and had been

a camper as a child. She was talked about by one board member as a “key person.”

Ellen was board president for a few months until she resigned and was replaced by Julie. Ellen had been involved with the organization for over thirty five years and had been on the board of directors three different periods of time. She told this researcher, *I reluctantly volunteered to become president because of other issues*, “not because I wasn’t qualified.” She related she did not want the job, but “she intended to make it work,” even though Brad [the then executive director] “didn’t want me as president” ...*and I told him it was fine with me if he wanted to get people together to find a president*. Although she had “contacted people”, *no one would become president*. Ellen stated that she would return to board service but that “I’m not willing to beat my head against the wall.” She continued, “... If Brad were gone...if I felt I had support, I might return.” Ellen did return to serve on the board of directors after a new executive director was hired and remains on the board to this day.

Darrin was a board member for about a year until he quit board service along with his wife, Ellen. Before being a board member, he served on the property management committee as its chair. Darrin did not want to be a board member again, but he offered, “I’m willing to volunteer but not if I

have to work with Brad.” Darrin added that he really wanted to “bring camp up to snuff.”

Mike offered that he, *was a youth member of the ...board in 1989 to 1990 for one and a half years...and I became a board member* “in my own right” *as an adult member last March or May*. Mike went to camp for thirteen years, where he met Julie, who was his camp counselor and who introduced him to his future wife at camp. Because Ellen and Darrin resigned, Mike took over their committee assignments and he became the committee chairs of the selection committee, property management committee, and nominating committee.

Dan was treasurer of the board and had served for six years. He had to leave board service in a few months due to the by-laws which limited him to a six year maximum term.

Nathan returned to the board and had served just a few months. He was on the board about thirty-five years ago when his daughter was a youth taking part in the organizations’ programs. Nathan introduced himself saying, “I am a forester consultant and I was involved in the timber sale for the council.” He was clear that he was on the board “to provide forestry expertise,” and commits to, “work[ing] with the maintenance of the camp property and manage the timber.” Nathan continues to serve on the board of directors at the present time.

Mary had been on the board for one and a half years and had recently been voted in as vice president. She told me, "I am also a leader and I see the major strengths of the council from this standpoint."

Ted had been on the board a short time and had only attended four board meetings. His boss used to be a board member and, Ted explains, *My boss recruited me and he was recruited by Darrin because they both worked together.* Ted remains on the board of directors presently.

Ben was the president just prior to Ellen and had been on the board a total of three years. He apologized for not being "real available for board and committee meetings" *because I have two jobs and the time of the meetings are difficult for me to come.* He stated that when he was president he was "under supported and under directed by the board," and that "I took a position that was a major time taker and I was only on the board one year prior to this...I didn't know what was expected of me." He summarized his presidency by saying, "I did a good job but I wanted to do better and I could have done better if I had a second year."

This organization depended on timber resources growing on the camp site to support and supplement the income it received from charitable organizations such as the "Community Chest," and small fund-raising activities. Over the past several years, there was a change in the political climate over whether it was acceptable to cut down trees on the camp, or

whether trees were simply a source of revenue. Some members of the board questioned the organization's dependence on timber monies for such a large part of its financial base. And, the amount of timber that was available for cutting had decreased, contributing to a rather severe financial crisis. The organization had not applied for grants to support its programs nor did it have a strong donation or fund-raising program to diversify its operating budget; all adding to the growing operating deficit over a period of ten to fifteen years<sup>3</sup>.

In addition to its financial difficulties, the number of board members was dwindling. The by-laws require the board of directors to consist of a minimum of fifteen and no more than thirty persons, but at the time I was hired, the board membership was down to nine persons. Three of the nine members couldn't come to meetings and were resigning<sup>4</sup> (Ben and two others), and another three had to leave the board of directors in a few months as they had served the maximum of six consecutive years (Julie, Dan and Mary). In five months, the board of directors would consist of only three members.

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<sup>3</sup> At the time of the initial assessment, none of the board members were aware that the deficit had been growing for so many years. I believe they were under the impression that the deficit was a new problem that started in the past year or so.

<sup>4</sup> One of the three did not give permission to be included in this study and another board member was not interviewed as s/he had not attended a board meeting for months and had unofficially resigned from board service.



The board meetings were typically held in the evening, between 7:00 p.m. until after 10:00 p.m. on the last Tuesday night of every month. The meetings were held at one of two places, either the organization's conference room which had a small room with tables and chairs arranged in a rectangle or at Julie's (the interim board president) workplace conference room, which was quite a bit larger but with a similar seating arrangement. Julie once made a joke about the size of the organization's conference room, saying that *rather than move the board meetings to a bigger meeting space, they're shrinking the number of board members to fit their meeting space.*

The informants identified thirteen committees; finance, executive, nominating, newsletter, personnel, selection, property management, search, maintenance, council relations, fund development, conflict resolution task-force, and program. Committee meetings were held in the organizations' conference room in the evenings. Committees did not meet very often, possibly once a month at the very most, and some never met at all. Only the executive committee, the property management committee and the conflict resolution task force committee were active committees. Some had members assigned, but had never met as a committee, others were committees without members, and still others were mentioned as committees they wanted or needed.

All of the staff, including the executive director, were paid staff members. At the time of data collection, the staff consisted of the executive director (fictitious names): Executive Director - Brad (was asking to rescind his resignation and was serving as interim executive director), Previous Camp Director - Marian (terminated or quit), Program Director - Alice, Secretary - Esther, Camp Caretaker - Dick (who was on disciplinary action), Bookkeeper - Dora (planning to quit), and the past Camp Caretaker - George.

Staff (excluding the executive director) were characterized by board members as “good people” who give “way more time than they should be asked to give” and who are “hard working,” “do their best,” “provide services,” and “get the job done.” Only a few offered negative comments such as, “don’t work together as a team,” “[there’s a] lack of trust,” “they yell at each other,” and that “there are staff conflicts.” Talk about the executive director is quite different and separate from “the staff,” and he is discussed throughout the study.

To aid in understanding how this organization was structured, I have provided the following organizational flow chart. Note that the leaders and volunteers of the organization are also the voting membership as specified in the by-laws. While the non-paid leaders and volunteers are supervised by the program director, all leaders, volunteers and board members must be

members of the organization, which automatically gives them the right to vote.

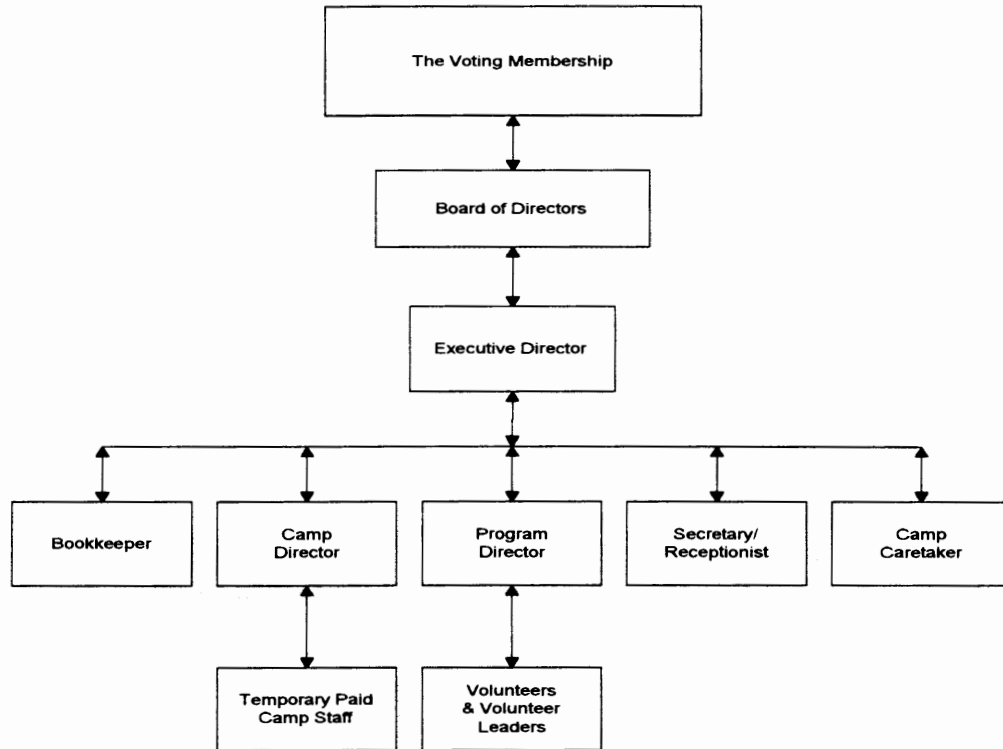


Figure 1. Organizational flow chart as the organization was structured at the time of data collection.

As discussed at length in the findings of this study (see Chapter IV), “the camp” had a special significance for this board of directors. The camp itself has rustic cabins and other buildings, streams, trees, swimming pool and nature trails, and serves as a weekly residential camp for young people

during the summer camping season. It was more than just the beauty of camp or its amenities that appeared to enchant this board; it was also the focus of its financial discussions, its hope for “saving the council [the organization]” and one of its greatest challenges. A couple of months prior to gathering these data, a young camper made some serious allegations during the second session of the residential camping season, which was referred to by the informants as “the camp crisis,” the “incident at camp,” or the “lawsuit at camp.” Due to its confidential and delicate nature, the incident itself will not be defined, but its impact on the board of directors will be discussed in the next chapters.

The initial work with this organizations’ board of directors, my continuing involvement with the organization, my professional work with other boards of directors, and my desire to learn more about ethnography of communication as a researcher led me to the design of this study. As board president, my initial study provided me with a historical background of some of the problems facing the organization, but to successfully lead it, I required a more in depth analysis of the board of directors. As an organizational communication consultant and researcher, I wanted to see if I could discover a better, more complete technique to conduct organizational communication assessments, and I was curious if the ethnography of communication mnemonic could be utilized by myself, and other consultants as a tool to

discover and interpret the communication patterns and practices of a non-profit organization's board of directors in order to gain a greater understanding of the problems and issues facing a board of directors.

In brief, a board of directors is charged with determining organization goals and policies; selecting and evaluating the chief executive; monitoring the overall management of an organization; evaluating the organization's programs against its purposes; overseeing financial management of the organization; and, serving as a link between the organization and the people who support it and are served by it. (Grant Thornton Accounts and Management Consultants, 1993). There is little difference between the duties and functions of a for-profit and tax-exempt (non-profit) organization's board of directors as both are concerned with how well the organization is fulfilling its mission. A for-profit company's assets are its own, and its board is responsible to the company's shareholders. A non-profit board is responsible to its' members, donors, funding agencies, the government, and taxpayers. One major difference is that a for-profit board is guided by its "bottom line" or strong focus on production and profit. The non-profit board is less "bottom-line" oriented, but must rely more strongly on three other features: a) its mission of providing a necessary public service at a reasonable cost, b) that the programs are in line with the tax-exempt purpose and goals, and c) that the programs are worth the time and money

that the organization spends on them (Grant Thornton Accounts and Management Consultants, 1993). Clearly, boards of directors are important as they are charged with key responsibilities and functions whose enactment directly affects the organization as a whole. That is why my initial work with this organization was with the board of directors and why this study focuses on the board of directors, rather than the entire organization.

A number of books and articles have been written about boards of directors and specifically non-profit boards of directors, but they have been concerned with subjects other than communication. Instead, they examined such issues as the structure of a board of directors, roles and responsibilities, strategic plans, fundraising, and tips on running board meetings, committee meetings and so forth (Cumfer & Sohl, 1996; Zander, 1993; Carver, 1990; Houle, 1989; Herman & Van Til, 1989).

As this study is concerned with conducting organizational assessments, it is necessary to provide a working definition. One way to define an organizational assessment is as a diagnosis or snapshot of an organization at a particular point in time (Harrison, 1994, Burke, 1992; Morgan, 1986). And, there are many ways to gather information in order to perform an organizational assessment such as: survey questionnaires, focus groups, interviews, personal observations, tests, and examining records,

reports and work samples (Harrison, 1994; Burke, 1992; Arnold & McClure, 1989; Goldstein, 1986; Morgan 1986).

Assessments are sometimes performed for the purpose of identifying training needs or in response to a particular problem experienced by an organization, and they can be carried out by a person or department within the organization or by an “outside” private consultant. In the field of communication, applied uses of survey research are evaluation research, needs analysis, and feedback surveys and audits (Frey, Botan, Friedman & Kreps, 1991). Evaluation research measures the effectiveness of specific programs or products by examining the relevant experience and feelings of the clients and customers (Patton, 1990; Frey, et. al., 1991). Needs analysis uses surveys to identify specific communication problems experienced by a target group in order to develop intervention programs (Frey, et. al., 1991).

Feedback surveys and audits are designed to evaluate strengths and weaknesses of communication within organizations relating to adequate flow of information, the use of communication channels, the quality of information, the communication relationships and the communication climate (Frey, et. al., 1991). The early 1970's saw extensive development of organizational communication climate assessment tools (Redding, 1972, Dennis, 1975, Taylor & Bower's 1972, Roberts & O'Reilly, 1974, to name a few). And, subsequent to these was the “International Communication

Association's Communication Audit" which assesses communication needs within an organization for the purpose of developing training programs to solve any communication needs that exist (Goldhaber & Rogers, 1979; Frey et. al., 1991).

Outside of the field of communication many tools and techniques for assessing organizations have been developed, but the focus was not on communication. Among these are Beckhard, 1969; Baumheier, 1974; Farace, Stewart & Taylor, 1978; Steadham, 1980; Goldstein, 1989; and Witkin, 1995.

A review of the literature revealed that many ethnographers (Warner & Low, 1947; Whyte, 1948; Walker & Guest, 1952; Caudill, 1958, Dalton, 1959; Goffman, 1961; Dubinskas, 1988, Van Maanen, 1988, among others) have performed ethnographies of police, longshoremen, and construction workers, and at locations such as a rail yard, tavern, and life in a mental institution, clinic, or school, (Schwartzman, 1993). Schwartzman's study on The ethnographic evaluation of Human Services Programs: Guidelines and an illustration (1983) was one study where ethnographic methods were specifically used to assess an organization for the purposes of developing training and other consultation services to the organization.

The ethnography of communication literature revealed one researcher who had used the ethnography of communication in a school (Philips, 1983).



No studies were located that tested the ethnography of communication as an organizational communication assessment tool for outside consultants.

With these concerns in mind, this study was designed to ask the following three research questions:

1. Can the ethnography of communication be effectively used as a communication assessment tool for communication consultants to analyze and assess the communication practices and patterns of a non-profit organization's board of directors?
2. What additional information will I learn by using the ethnography of communication combined with my continuing involvement with the board of directors that I did not learn from the initial assessment and analysis of data from this non-profit organization's board of directors?
3. What will I learn about power as constituted and communicated by this non-profit organization's board of directors?

This study then, adds to the initial assessment done in the winter of 1995 by applying the interview, observational, and artifact data collected during that time and is informed by my experiences since then as a board member and president. These data are analyzed a second time by performing Hymes' ethnography of communication mnemonic as an assessment tool. In

addition, the ethnographic findings are applied to Mumby's power-as-  
domination construct to address the third research question.

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter I review the relevant literature related to this study, beginning with Hymes' ethnography of communication explaining the importance of the speech community, speech event, and speech act followed by a discussion of Mumby's power-as-domination construct. In the concluding section, I discuss critical ethnography and its connection to ethnography generally and ethnography of communication specifically and conclude by comparing and contrasting critical ethnography with the critical interpretative approach.

#### Ethnography of communication

"The ethnography of speaking is concerned with the situations and uses, the patterns and functions, of speaking as an activity in its own right" (Hymes, 1962, p. 16). Dell Hymes wrote these famous words in his seminal programmatic essay, "The Ethnography of Speaking," and the ethnography of communication was "conceived." This "descriptive theoretical framework" as Hymes (1972) christened it, grew out of a need to "... show ethnographers and linguists a way to see data as ways of speaking" (p. 51). As Hymes (1972) saw it, "except for occasional references in ethnographies or

grammatical descriptions of certain linguistically distinct special parlances...there is almost no systematic information on such matters" (p. 36). Hymes posits that what was needed were "...new types of discovery procedures and concepts designed to facilitate the empirical collection of data" (1972, p. 36).

Hymes felt it was crucial to focus on the social group as the basic unit of analysis of study, rather than language or dialect (Hymes, 1972). And, recognizing the "numerous instances across and within cultures where the speech repertoire and economy varies considerably from context to context, relationship to relationship, topic to topic, and so forth" (Braithwaite, 1991, p. 156), the ethnography of communication is based on "...the understanding that speaking, like other systems of cultural behavior – kinship, politics, economics, religion, or any other – is patterned within each society in culture-specific, cross-culturally variable ways" (Bauman and Sherzer, 1975, p. 98).

Hymes believed that what was needed to uncover and highlight this variety of patterns, was a descriptive theory which dealt with the notions of "speech community, speech situation, speech event, speech act, fluent speaker, components of speech events, functions of speech, etc." (1972, p. 53). Philipsen (1977) further defines this descriptive-theoretical framework as a "formal, general set of categories which guides discovery and provides

a format for descriptive statement...” (p. 45). And, Braithwaite posits that the ethnography of communication framework:

Is designed to serve as a theory of speaking as well as a guide for examining and describing speaking in particular communities; it delineates the necessary and sufficient features present in all communicative interaction and guides our inquiry of speaking in specific contexts” (1991, p. 146).

Philipsen (1977) tells us that before we are able to formulate a descriptive theory of speaking, that we must, “explicate the culturally distinct ‘common knowledge’ shared by a particular community” (p. 44). Hymes (1972) refers to this particular sort of community as a “speech community” saying that the “speech community is a necessary, primary term in that it postulates the basis of description as a social, rather than a linguistic, entity” (p. 53). He further defines “speech community” as a “community sharing rules for the conduct and interpretation of speech, and rules for the interpretation of at least one linguistic variety...” (Hymes, 1972, p. 54). Braithwaite (1991) offers that identifying a speech community is “partially a reflexive process” and that “...one needs to assess the presence of dimensions of a speech community before one can posit the existence of a speech community” (p. 146) by beginning to “analyze specific acts of speech” (p. 146). The

challenge is that “those speech acts must first be located within a speech community” and so the ethnographer

must make an initial gross generalization as to the location of a speech community while, at the same time, recognize that this generalization will need to be modified as more data concerning the presence of the speech community are collected” (Braithwaite, 1991, p. 157).

Within the speech community there are situations “associated with (or marked by the absence) of speech” (Hymes, 1972, p. 56). Speech situations can be identified as “contexts in the speech community marked by the observer as places for speaking....such as “parties, meetings, conferences, rallies,...”(Braithwaite, 1991, p. 158) or these contexts may be “naturally described as ceremonies, fights, hunts, meals, lovemaking, and the like” (Hymes, 1972, p. 56). Speech situations differ from speech events in that “they are not themselves governed by such rules [of speaking] or one set of such rules throughout” (Hymes, 1972, p. 56), but may be comprised of “both verbal and nonverbal events, and the verbal events may be of more than one type” (Hymes, 1972, p. 56).

The speech event(s) is embedded within the speech situation and is defined by Hymes (1972) as being restricted to “activities or aspects of

activities that are directly governed by rules or norms for the use of speech” (p. 56). Hymes (1962) states “One good ethnographic technique for getting at speech events, as at other categories, is through words which name them” and “clearly the material cannot be culled from a dictionary alone: instances and classes of speech events may be labelled [sic] by quite diverse means, not only by nouns, but also by verbs, phrases, and sentences” (p. 24). Speech events can include, “phenomena such as leave-takings, greetings, conversations, prayers, arguments, speeches, and so forth” (Braithwaite, 1991, p. 158).

The minimal unit of analysis as part of the speech situation is the speech act. A speech act “may be the whole of a speech event, and of a speech situation” (Hymes, 1972, p. 56). And, the same type of speech act may recur “in different types of speech event[s], and the same type of speech event in different contexts of situation[s]” (Hymes, 1972, p.56). For example, “a joke (speech act) may be embedded in a private conversation, a lecture, a formal introduction....A private conversation may occur in the context of a party, a memorial service, a pause in the changing sides in a tennis match” (Hymes, 1992, p. 56).

Hymes posits that “a descriptive theory requires some schema of the components of speech acts” and so to provide structure and guidance for constructing descriptive theory, and as an aid in doing fieldwork, Hymes

developed the mnemonic of SPEAKING (1972, p. 58). The letters S P E A K I N G refer to sixteen components of speech acts: the setting and the scene; participants (speaker/sender, addressor, hearer/receiver/audience, the addressee) ends (purposes – outcomes and purposes – goals), act sequences (message form and message content), key (tone), instrumentalities (channels and forms of speech), norms (norms of interaction and norms of interpretation), and genres (Hymes, 1972, p. 65).

Hymes (1972) describes the setting as referring to the “time and place of a speech act and, in general, to the physical circumstances” and the scene, “which is distinct from setting, designates the “psychological setting,” or the cultural definition of an occasion as a certain type of scene” (p. 60).

The component of participants constitutes the second letter of the SPEAKING mnemonic and it can refer to “age, sex, ethnicity, social status, or other relevant categories and their relationship to one another” (Saville-Troike, 1989, p.138) and may include those present and non present, ancestors and animals, depending on the cultural group being studied (Hymes, 1972).

Ends is the third component of the mnemonic SPEAKING. Hymes defined ends as both “outcomes” and “purposes – goals” (1972, p. 61). In regards to outcomes, Hymes included “conventionally recognized and expected outcomes often enter into the definition of speech events” (1972, p.



61). And for purposes – goals, Hymes (1972) offers that “the purpose of an event from a community standpoint, of course, need not be identical to the purposes of those engaged in it.”

Hymes (1972) tells us that this fourth component in the mnemonic SPEAKING stands for message form (how something is said) and message content (what is said). Hymes states that “Message form and message content are central to the speech act...and they are tightly interdependent” (1972, p. 60).

The key or tone is described as the manner, or spirit in which an act is done. Another way to think about it is that key and tone are “related to frames, [which is] a metacommunicative device which signals the interpretive context within which a message is to be understood...” (Bauman and Sherzer, 1975, p. 106).

This sixth component, instrumentalities is defined by Hymes (1972) as having two parts, “Channels and forms of speech can be joined together as means or agencies of speakings...” (p. 63). Hymes talks about channels as “oral, written, telegraphic, semaphore, or other medium of transmission of speech” (1972, p. 63). And, he describes forms of speech as “the verbal resources of a community... [and that] even where there is but a single “language” present in a community... that language will be organized into various forms of speech” (Hymes, 1972, p. 63).

Hymes separates the seventh component of the mnemonic, norms of interaction from norms of interpretation. To define norms of interaction, Hymes offers “What is intended here are the specific behaviors and proprieties that attach to speaking” (1972, p. 63). “Norms of interpretation implicate the belief system of a community...[and] an account of norms of interaction may still leave open the interpretation to be placed upon them” (Hymes, 1972, p. 64). Norms can also be thought of as implicit rules that are complete with sanctions when the norm is violated. In fact, this is one way to identify a norm; by determining what actions caused a person to be sanctioned or punished in some manner.

“Genres...are not in themselves the “doing” of a genre, that is, are not in themselves acts, events, performances” (Hymes, 1974, p. 423) but genres “can be categories such as poem, myth, tale, proverb, riddle, curse, prayer, oration, lecture, commercial, form letter, editorial, etc.” and narrative (Hymes, 1972, p. 65). Genres often coincide with speech events, “but must be treated as analytically independent of them” (Hymes, 1972, p. 65).

Braithwaite helps us understand how to employ the mnemonic when he states:

the framework is designed to serve as a theory of speaking as well as a guide for examining and describing speaking in particular communities; it delineates the necessary and sufficient features

present in all communicative interaction and guides our inquiry of speaking in specific contexts (1991, p. 146).

But Hymes cautions that the mnemonic is not "a system to be imposed but a series of questions to be asked" and that the categories "must be taken as ways of getting at individual systems...The intent is heuristic, not a priori" (1962, p. 24, 22). Thus all sixteen components may or may not be relevant to examining a specific speech situation, speech event or speech act. As Sherzer and Darnell (1972) suggest:

In different cases, different components and different numbers of components will prove to be relevant. It is the task of the ethnographer to show which are relevant, and in what relationships, in the society under consideration. These various relationships among components are the ways of speaking for that society (p. 548).

Hymes guides us to pay close attention to the relationship among the components and that "any component may be taken as [a] starting point, and the others viewed in relation to it" (1972, p. 66) Hymes suggests that the "heuristic set of components should be used negatively as well as positively, i.e., if a component seems irrelevant to certain acts or genres, that the consequences of the assertion checked" (1972, p. 66). And, that by doing

so, or “pressing the point” may lead to a discovery which may have been overlooked (Hymes, 1972).

In this thesis, the ethnography of communication was employed as a communication assessment tool of a board of directors for a non-profit organization, and the findings of which were used to conduct a critical ethnography.

### **The Communication of Power in Organizations**

Calling for an increase in critical organizational research, Mumby offers a theoretical framework that examines fundamental and subtle ways that power-as-domination is communicated in organizations (1994).

One of the central tenets of Mumby’s perspective of power-as-domination is the notion of organizational culture. Just as in the field of anthropology, the definition of “culture” differs greatly among organizational communication researchers (Smircich & Calas, 1989). While there is some consensus that the basic premise that organizations have a “culture” or can be thought of as a “culture” holds true, there is no one definition of “organizational culture.” Morgan (1986) defines organizational culture as “...a process of reality construction that allows people to see and understand particular events, actions, objects, utterances, or situations in distinctive

ways” (p. 128). Smircich and Calas, (1989) call this the “interpretative perspective,” where:

Culture is the process through which social action and interaction become constructed and reconstructed into an organizational reality. Culture and communication are vehicles through which reality is constituted in organizational contexts. Interpretive focus places communication at the center of organizational culture (p. 234).

Pacanowsky and O'Donnell-Trujillo (1990) illustrate this interpretative perspective when they explain that people do much more in organizations besides work, “[they] also gossip, knife one another, initiate romantic involvements, cue new employees to ways of doing the least amount of work that still avoids hassles from a supervisor, talk sports, [and] arrange picnics” (p. 143). These activities “constitute life in the organization” and thus the “culture” of the organization” (Pacanowsky and O'Donnell-Trujillo, 1990, p. 143). The organizational culture approach is concerned with all these things, “Just as an anthropologist might be interested in the workways, folk tales, and ritual practices of a culture, we are interested in the workways, folk tales, and ritual practices of an organization” (Pacanowsky and O'Donnell-Trujillo, 1990, p. 143).

Ethnographers are also interested in the “everyday routines that make up organizational life” and ethnographers of communication are specifically

interested in the everyday patterns of speech that are enacted during speech events and speech acts because “for the most part, these routines have been either taken for granted (like meetings) or dismissed as unimportant” (Schwartzman, 1993, p. 38). Ethnographers and ethnographers of communication would agree with the “cultural purists” believing as they do in the “interpretative perspective that relies on symbolic processes, social construction of organizations, and multiple view of social reality” (Putnam et. al., 1993, p. 233). Ethnography of communication is “concerned first of all with patterns and functions of speaking, patterns and functions that organize the use of language in the conduct of social life” (Bauman and Sherzer, 1975, p. 98), and it is through the identification and analysis of these patterns of language in a particular speech community that culture is illuminated.

Ethnographers and particularly critical ethnographers would agree with Mumby (1994) that studying organizational culture is a study in the ways the members produce, maintain and reproduce their “shared sense of organizational reality” (p. 6). As Mumby states, “...power is exercised in an organization when one group is able to frame the interests (needs, concerns, world view) of other groups in terms of its own interests” (1994, p. 3). Mumby tells us that a useful way of discovering power structures is to

“examine the ways in which the system of interests in organizations is produced, maintained, and reproduced” (Mumby, 1994, p. 60).

Mumby posits that “at the very heart of the notion of “culture” is a focus on the sense-making process of the organization” (1994, p. 9). He explains that “implicit in the concept of sense-making is the idea that there is a reciprocal relationship between “members of an organization and their organizational culture” and that “members’ behavior both frames and is framed by organizational reality” (p.10). According to Mumby it is the “power interests [that] frame the way in which organizations construct reality” and power operates on levels other than decision making (1994, p. 21). And, power is not just a part of organizational structure, but “it is both medium and outcome; it is both enabling and constraining” being both the “product of organizational activity *and* the process by which activity becomes institutionally legitimated” (Mumby, 1994, p. 63).

### **Critical Ethnography**

This thesis has combined three interpretative approaches; ethnography of communication, critical ethnography, and critical theory. To begin this discussion, critical ethnographers “describe, analyze, and open to scrutiny otherwise hidden agendas, power centers, and assumptions that inhibit, repress, and constrain” (Thomas, 1993, p. 2). Thomas helps us

understand some of the differences between ethnography and critical ethnography as “conventional ethnographers study culture for the purpose of describing it; critical ethnographers do so to change it” (1993, p. 4).

Moreover, the critical ethnographer has a political purpose and an added research task “of raising their voice to speak *to* an audience *on behalf of* their subjects as a means of empowering them by giving more authority to the subject’s voice” (Thomas, 1993, p. 4).

Charles Bantz, Stanley Deetz, Dennis Mumby, and John Van Maanan would agree with Thomas, as they articulate in their debate contrasting ethnography with critical theory in regards to whether ethnography was a “better way of understanding organizational communication than was critical theory” (Putnam, et., al, 1993, p. 222). A position taken by Bantz was that:

...the task of the ethnographer is to represent organizations and their communication. Ethnographers should not define organizations a priori as something that may or may not be present when we observe human interactions in organizations” (1993, p. 227).

The position on the “other side” as articulated by Deetz, was that:

Research should be part of a larger human struggle rooted in the right to participate in the construction of meanings that affect our lives...[and that] when we think about professional association as or



any other organization, we need to recognize that real structures of power exist (p. 227).

Putnam points out the similarities between ethnography and critical theory based on their mutual "opposition to positivism," when she states:

...both approaches favor an interpretive perspective that relies on symbolic processes, social construction of organizations, and multiple view of social reality. Both sides underscore the importance of meaning in organizational life, even though they differ in how meaning is constructed and what role it plays (1993, p. 233).

For ethnographers, "meanings are negotiated through a dialectical process between the researcher and the organizational actors... For critical theorists, meaning derives from a system of power that produce knowledge and privilege particular organizational groups" (Putnam, 1993, p. 233).

Hymes (1986, p. vii) recognizing the value of critical analyses, praises Katriel's study of Dugri speech because "it attends to the costs as well as the benefits, or, more neutrally, the trade-offs inherent in the adoption of any one cultural style" (Drew, 1996). He notes, "Too often accounts of language miss its ambiguity as a resource, praising or blaming and disturbing its powers, but neglecting the task of discovering the balance sheet in actual lives" (1986, p. vii). In Sherzer and Darnell's Outline Guide for the Ethnographic Study of Speech Use, (prepared by Hymes as the principle

investigator), the issue of power is discussed in section four, The Use of Speech in Education and Social Control as it asks the following questions;

- A. Does the society have an explicitly formulated philosophy of social control?
- B. What is the role of language and speech in social control?
- C. Do means of social control vary with recognized stages in the life cycle, membership in various social categories, setting, etc.? Do they vary according to the offense? (Sherzer and Darnell, 1972, p.553).

Thomas also supports language as a form of power, "...because symbolizing events isolates and communicates one set of meanings and excludes others" (1993, p. 45). This gives the speaker the power to name things and to give meaning to experience, as Thomas explains, "All linguistic exchange, and therefore all interaction, entails a form of symbolic domination in that pre-naming shapes cognition and discourse" (1993, p. 45).

Employing ethnography of communication as an organizational communication assessment tool addresses the first research question of this study: Can the ethnography of communication be effectively used as a communication assessment tool for communication consultants to analyze and assess the communication practices and patterns of a non-profit organization's board of directors? Combining ethnography of

communication's descriptive theoretical frame, the critical interpretative stance taken by Mumby, and critical ethnography, enables this study to answer the third question: What will I learn about power as constituted and communicated in this non-profit organization's board of directors? The findings of these approaches and the answers to the research questions can be found in Chapters IV and V of this thesis.

## CHAPTER III

### RESEARCH METHODS

This chapter is an explication of my research methods which includes a discussion of the initial data gathering and concluding with concerns of reliability and validity. This chapter begins with a brief history of the board of directors beginning with the sale of timber (about 1993-1994) up to the time I was hired to do an assessment and provide services to the board (1995). This history is included here to provide an overview of the events of this board of directors to allow for a greater understanding of the research methods chosen for this study.

#### History of the board of directors

In the year or so prior to the collection of data, this organization earned a substantial amount of money due to a large timber harvest at camp. The harvest was approved and handled by the board of directors, the property management committee, and the executive director, Brad. At that time, some of the board members (including the property management committee), believed the money was "earmarked" for rejuvenating the camp (Ellen, and others). However, the budget of the organization (which included the camp) was operating on an ever-increasing deficit. To stay solvent, timber money was used to keep the council operating. As Dan says, "Brad

was instrumental in making the timber sale *happen and then use the money* for operating expenses.”

Ben was president of the board at this time and when his one year term was up, (about seven months prior to these data being collected) Ellen, the nominating committee chair, and Brad, the executive director, could not find anyone willing to be president, and so Ellen reluctantly took the job, knowing Brad didn't want her in that office.

About three months after Ellen became president, the camp director, Marian and Brad got into a conflict. Marian asked for Ellen's help, and Ellen got in the middle of the conflict. This exacerbated the problems brewing between Ellen and Brad and after Marian left or was fired, Ellen and Brad had an altercation and he resigned shortly thereafter as executive director. A few weeks later, "the camp crisis" (see p. 11) closed the camp for the rest of the summer. This "camp crisis" caused the board to meet and ponder their problems for the first time. Ted explains,

*The first productive meeting was after the camp incident where everyone was in a state of shock, and the group came together due to the disaster. The group talked about needing to develop a focus and a sense of direction. They actually got through the majority of the agenda. This didn't happen prior to this meeting.*

Shortly after the camp incident, Ellen (and her husband Darrin) resigned when some board members blamed Ellen for Brad's resignation. Brad then offered to rescind his letter of resignation, however the board, now headed by Julie (a board member and past president) asked Brad to submit a plan outlining how he would reduce the deficit. Brad complied, but instead of a budget reduction plan, he asked the board to approve substantial salary increases for himself and the staff. This "plan" angered many (if not all) of the board members calling the correspondence "an extortion letter" (Mike). This letter motivated the board to turn down Brad's offer to rescind his resignation and they continued the search for a new executive director.

### **Procedures**

For the initial assessment (originally conducted in 1995) one on one interviews were conducted with the entire staff (4), the executive director, and the board of directors (10). For the purposes of the present study, just the interview, observational, and artifact data pertaining to the board of directors were used along with my personal experiences as a board member and president of the organization. The major reason for this was the staff and executive director's interview data were not available. When the board of directors did not rescind the executive director's (Brad) resignation, he was forced to quit. Brad, the executive director blamed the board of directors and myself for his termination and he threatened to file a lawsuit

against us. The other staffs' data were also not chosen for inclusion in this thesis because of the climate of mistrust and fear that existed in the organization. As of this date, none of these staff members are employed by the organization and with the exception of one, they were fired or quit under duress. Therefore, it seemed highly unlikely that I would be able to obtain permission to include the past executive director or the staff's interview data in this study (please see Chapter I for an overview of this board of directors and its staff).

Using only the board of directors data for this study unavoidably impacted the data that was used. While many of the staff had never even met most of the board members, they had all interacted with the executive director (Brad) at board and committee meetings. Without Brad's view of events or interactions, this study could only describe and analyze these interactions one dimensionally. Inclusion of these other perspectives would have provided a more complete and balanced picture of the organization and the board of directors. And, as a non-profit organization is structured to function as a three part team of board, executive director, and staff, it would be important to include all three sets of interviews when assessing the whole organization.

I chose to use just the board of directors data even though it could be interpreted as a weakness of this study. Having collected the data personally, my continuing involvement with the board of directors, and having the "subjective voice" (Philipsen, 1982, p. 11) I knew that many of the board of directors problems were based on a lack of leadership at the board level. And so I was aware that this non-profit board of directors promised to

be a very challenging and informative study of a dysfunctional board of directors. My assessment that this was a dysfunctional board reflects Houle's position when he states,

While it is true that, in most cases, the board is both legally and actually the dominant partner, the arbitrary exercise of power over its executive by a board should be considered a last resort, a signal that something has gone very much awry" (1989, p. 86).

Therefore, I believe that focusing on just the board of directors and their speech situation was an appropriate and useful unit of analysis for this study.

Out of the ten board members, nine of them agreed in writing to allow their interview data to be analyzed as part of this study (see appendix A). All of the informants names, and any other identifiable symbols have been changed in order to protect the confidentiality of the organization, its board of directors and its members (past and present), including the pseudonyms previously used.

The interview data consists of hand-written field notes. As is customary for a private consultant conducting an organizational communication assessment, audio and/or video tape equipment was not used in gathering the initial organizational assessment data. Contained in these field notes are hand-written phrases, paraphrases and quotations made by the interviewees; actual quotations are indicated in this thesis by



the use of quotation marks. For example, during my first contact with Julie, she told me that “there have been concerns from an employee about the E.D.” (executive director). Statements that I have paraphrased will be indicated by the use of italics, such as; Julie offered that *the E.D. is an interim now, but he may not be the E.D. later.*

I also collected artifacts such as copies of the board’s by-laws, personnel policies, some correspondence, and personal notes taken while observing a board and a committee meeting while in the role as consultant. Also, I have continued contact with this organization as a board member and I am presently the president of the board of directors. At the time I was providing services for the board of directors, I had not considered the possibility of becoming a board member, much less the board presidency. When I agreed to join the board, it was with the board of directors knowledge and consent that I was considering using the data previously collected as their consultant for the present study. The new executive director relayed to me that the board of directors had no problem with my researcher status and I was sworn in as a member of the board. When the board was seeking a new president, I was told I was nominated because of I knew so much about the organization and the board of directors based on my previous consultancy with them.

There have been instances as a board member and as president that my understanding of past events was and is useful for providing context on a particular issue, and I believe that many of the board members saw my previous experiences with the board of directors helpful in conducting board business. Of course, I did not and do not violate the confidentiality of the

interviewees, yet I can sometimes clarify events or illuminate issues when no one else can. Thus the transition from consultant to board member and president has been viewed favorably by both the board members and myself. And, clearly, my continued involvement with the organization has positively informed this analysis allowing for a richer, deeper understanding of past events and the participants in the events.

To begin this additional analysis for this study, I started with eight copies of the interview data corresponding to the eight components of the mnemonic. Starting with the mnemonic of S, then P, then E, the data were coded according to each component of the mnemonic. During this first (and subsequent) analysis, careful notes were kept on the connections between the components, the utility of using the particular component, and any other methodological concerns or insights that came to mind. For this additional analysis, again starting with S, then P, then E, I looked for patterns that emerged from the data for each particular component. These patterns were discovered by using a simple tally method to determine how many of the interviewees said or demonstrated a particular issue or item, as indicated by their initial by that item. In this manner I was able to see the patterns as well as the deviant cases (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) for each component. It also ensured that the pattern really existed in the data, rather than just in my perception of the data. These patterns were then organized and analyzed to determine the speech events and speech acts as:

It is at the levels of speech events and speech acts that one uses the specific descriptive features of the ethnography of speaking

[communication] framework to discover and describe how speech is used in the community" (Braithwaite, 1991, p. 158).

Next, an overall summary of the data was compiled (see Chapter IV) and finally, using this description of the board of directors, Mumby's organizational theory of how power is communicated, maintained, and reproduced was applied to the data. This last step constitutes the critical shift and consists of an analysis of the relationship between communication and power-as-domination in this particular organization's board of directors, (Hymes, 1986; Thomas, 1993; Mumby, 1994).

### **Human subjects**

This study required approval from Human Subjects even though it utilized secondary data as its data set. Out of the ten persons interviewed as members of the board of directors, only one person did not grant approval. Therefore, nine interviews were included in this data set. A sample consent letter can be found in appendix B.

### **Reliability and validity**

Kirk and Miller (1986) state that "Objectivity is the essential basis of all good research," and that, "the objectivity of a piece of qualitative research is evaluated in terms of the reliability and validity of its observations" (p. 13).

In all types of research, "reliability is concerned with the replicability of scientific findings" (LeCompte & Goetz, 1982, p. 32). Kirk and Miller (1986) define reliability as "the degree to which the finding is independent of accidental circumstances of the research" (p. 20). This is challenging for both qualitative and quantitative research, but it poses particular concerns for the ethnographer, (LeCompte & Goetz, 1982). As LeCompte and Goetz (1982) stated:

Because of factors such as the uniqueness or complexity of phenomena and the individualistic and personalistic nature of the ethnographic process, ethnographic research may approach rather than attain external reliability. (p. 37)

There are specific ways to increase the reliability and validity of ethnographic studies. LeCompte and Goetz (1982) point out the necessity of providing complete descriptions "of design, data collection and data analysis" (p. 36). In addition, "for the ethnographer...sources of bias or contamination must be discovered as the study proceeds" (LeCompte and Goetz, 1982, p. 49) thus reliability and validity concerns are not just issues to be considered before and after the study, but as part of the ongoing process. For this researcher, bias or contamination based on my continued involvement with the board remained a concern throughout the process of analysis and when composing the findings for this study. One way I dealt

with this was to attempt to provide a full explanation of my involvement with the board of directors in this study and how my continued involvement may have impacted the process of conducting this study.

Threats to reliability overlap into issues of validity. Kirk and Miller (1986) talk about validity as "the degree to which the finding is interpreted in a correct way" (p. 20). Specifically in regards to ethnography the "correct way" is defined by LeCompte and Goetz as, "Validity necessitates demonstration that the propositions generated, refined, or tested match the causal conditions which obtain in human life" (1982, p. 43).

It was somewhat difficult to assess the reliability and validity of this study for several reasons. One reason is that I collected the data personally for the purpose of conducting an organizational assessment. Stewart offers that data that were collected with a specific purpose in mind, "...may produce deliberate or unintentional bias, the design or conclusions of the primary research may be flawed, category definitions may not have been the most appropriate, and, that secondary data is old data," (1984, p. 14). Even though this is primary data, Stewart's cautions still apply. In an effort to lessen potential threats to validity and reliability, Stewart (1984), offers a list of questions to be answered by the researcher conducting a secondary analysis. Stewart's questions are listed below along with this researcher's response.

What was the purpose of the study? Please see Chapter I for a full discussion of the answer to this question.

Who was responsible for collecting the information? As previously stated, the data were collected by this researcher who conducted the actual interviews, observations, data analysis, and report generation.

What information was actually collected? As part of the assessment phase, handwritten interview data were collected on all board of directors (10) and all staff (5) including the executive director. After the assessment phase was completed, and the board of directors accepted the recommendations at the one board meeting I attended, I led two meetings wherein the board of directors received training and group facilitation in decision making and the roles and responsibilities of their board, their staff and their executive director. I also attended a selection committee meeting, acting in the role of consultant regarding their interview and selection process. Observational data were collected and brief handwritten notes were made after these meetings took place. Additional artifacts of policies, procedures, and by-laws were also collected.

Four months after completing my contract with this organization, I accepted a position on its board of directors and a few months later, became the president of the organization, a position I have held for nearly one year.

When was the information collected? The interviews were conducted, observations made, and artifacts collected between October of 1995 and December 5, 1995. And, as I have continued to be involved with this board of directors as board president, I have learned a great deal about this board of directors and the organization as a whole.

How was the information obtained? The interview data were obtained in one on one confidential interviews which took place at a location of the interviewees choosing. The staff and executive director interviews were held at the organization in a private office. Three board members were interviewed at local restaurants, one at the person's place of business, and the remainder of the interviews were conducted over the telephone. The interviews lasted approximately 1 ½ hours each and three open-ended questions were asked of each interviewee. They were:

1. What are the strengths of this organization?
2. What are the weaknesses of this organization?
3. What would you like to see different about this organization?

Follow-up probing questions were asked depending on the answers offered.

Another consideration regarding the reliability and validity is that this study tested a research approach (ethnography of communication) in a new way (as an assessment tool for communication consultants), in a different context (with a nonprofit board of directors). This meant there were no outside comparitors or models by which to measure this test, other than my primary analysis of the data.

I addressed these potential threats by comparing the findings of this study to findings of the primary study (appendix A). This comparison can be found in Chapter V (p. 61). In addition, it was important to the validity of this study to note that I have conducted this study after completing course work in interpersonal communication, ethnography of communication, and communication consulting. And, I have been working with organizations for many years as a job developer and civil rights investigator as well as a professional organizational communication consultant and trainer for non-profit organizations. I have also continued to be involved with this particular board of directors almost since the time I completed my contract with them, giving me close to two additional years of information pertaining to the board of directors and the organization. While these experiences have allowed me to perform this study with a wealth of knowledge, it is nearly impossible (but not necessarily desirable) to separate my experiences and information from the data under analysis. What this may have meant to this study is that an additional assessment and analysis of this organization's board of directors may not have been significantly different or that this study is biased or contaminated.

In response to these potential threats, this study was conducted differently than the initial study as only the board of directors interview data were used (see p. 35). This meant I examined a different unit of analysis, providing some analytic distancing to lessen the potential for my "blinding familiarity" further, with the board of directors, this organization, its activities and members (McCracken, 1988, p. 23). And, the primary study did not attempt to describe the board of director's in such detail and depth, nor did it



take a critical stance by assessing and analyzing the power dynamics of the board of directors. Finally, the members of my thesis committee as well as the thesis supervisory group acted as peer reviewers in that they provided a fresh view of the data and the analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

## CHAPTER IV

### FINDINGS

In this chapter I present my findings of interviews, observations, and artifacts pertaining to a non-profit organization's board of directors. The narrative of "camp" emerged as a central theme as talk about camp had shared meaning for this group; appearing to be the "glue" which bound this board of directors together as a speech community.

The camp consists of many acres of beautiful, wooded land which was willed to the organization for the expressed purpose of being a summer camp where youth could gather and enjoy nature. There are rustic cabins, outhouses called "suzies" rather than "johnnies" and other buildings named after benefactors and past executive directors and board presidents.

Natural streams flow throughout the camp and there is an abundance of trails, swimming holes, bridges and pastures. Children aged five to eighteen years old pay or earn their fee to attend one-week sessions of activities including crafts, horseback riding, swimming, archery and nightly singing around a bonfire. There are camp caretakers that live on the camp grounds throughout the year performing routine maintenance and security.

The camp has been operated by the organization for nearly thirty-five years and the timber on the camp site has supported the organization in

times of budget shortfalls for at least ten to fifteen years, if not more. The camp had become very run down and was neglected for about ten years. I heard rumors of about a past executive director who simply cut out parts of decks that were rotten, leaving decks that started and ended in the middle of buildings, rather than either tearing down or rebuilding the entire deck. Even though the camp had clearly suffered through tough financial times, the camp was still thought of as “the backbone” of the council (Julie), “our niche (Ben),” and “the foundation of the program...our greatest strength, (Darrin). Others believed that it is because of camp that they were involved in the organization as Darrin offers that “...board members choose to be involved with [this organization] as adults due to their camping experience.”

When “camp” is examined as a metaphor, one interpretation is that it stands for the heart and soul of the group, the pure ideals, standards, and values for why this group exists in the first place. “Camp” may have been talked about at board meetings so much, as it may have symbolized a “safe” topic for the board of directors, one on which they could all agree, especially when other conflicts (e.g., Ellen and Brad) were damaging their sense of unity and cohesion. And, it may be when the board members talked about the neglected and run-down state of the camp, they were really talking about themselves as a board of directors as “getting old, run down, abused,

neglected and we need to decide if it [the board?] can be brought up to standards” (Ted).

An alternative, but similar interpretation to the preceding one is also based on the camp as a root-metaphor which is defined as:

symbolic frames that provide an inferential base for understanding more discrete attitudes and behavior. They capture a fundamental, underlying world view, but are often unobtrusive with regard to their frequency of usage in ordinary discourse” (Smith & Eisenberg, 1987, p. 369.)

The camp appeared to be a special place and the stories told about camp were emotional and personal accounts. Julie explained that she “worked at the summer camp and was a camper as a child.” Mike stated that “camp was set up about 35 years ago,” and that he attended camp for “thirteen years.” Julie was Mike’s counselor at camp and she introduced him to his future wife at camp and later, after they were married, his wife worked at camp.” Ben also attended camp as a youngster and then worked at camp when he became of age.

The camp<sup>5</sup> in its’ primal and incredibly beautiful state lent itself to symbolize holiness and sacredness; as if the camp was a sanctuary and the ground was hallowed ground. It would be logical then that rites of passage

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<sup>5</sup> To this day, the camp enchants board members who have visited the site.

rituals should take place at camp. Rites of passage rituals are defined by van Gennep (1908/1960) as “ceremonies whose essential purpose is to enable the individual to pass from one defined position to another which is equally well defined”... and these ceremonies recognize the transition from “group to group and from one social situation to the next” and “marks the successive stages in a person’s life such as birth, social puberty, marriage, parenthood, change in social standing, occupational or educational achievement and death” (van Gennep, p. 3) For camp, the rituals may have included such events as; young children being separated from their parents for the first time, an adolescent returning year after year; thus “growing up each summer” at camp.

Philipsen (1987) defines a communication ritual as “a communication form in which there is a structured sequence of symbolic acts, the correct performance of which constitutes homage to a sacred object” (p. 250). I believe that the sacred object is the “camp” and the rituals just mentioned constitute paying homage to “the camp.”

Another ritual that appears to pay homage to the camp was demonstrated at several meetings I attended during the time of my consultancy. Whenever a new person was present at a meeting, self-introductions would take place. The ritual began when each person would include as part of the introduction, his/her personal history with the

organization (either locally, or nationally) and its camp. The act sequence would go like this:

Hi, my name is Franki and I have been with the organization as a \_\_\_\_\_ for \_\_\_\_\_ years. I got stated in the organization when I was \_\_\_\_\_ years old and I held the rank of \_\_\_\_\_ for \_\_\_\_\_ years. After attending camp for \_\_\_\_\_ years, I worked at camp as a \_\_\_\_\_ for another \_\_\_\_\_ years. Then I joined the board of directors as a youth member for \_\_\_\_\_ years and I have been an adult member since \_\_\_\_\_.

The following reflects the variation of the speech act sequence. Julie's told about how when she was very young, she got interested in being a member of the organization because she liked the way the uniforms looked. While growing up, Julie attended camp, later became a counselor in training at the camp, and as a young adult, she was hired as a camp counselor. Mike talked about how he was the first male member after the organization began admitting boys and that Julie was his camp counselor who, after he grew up, introduced him to his wife at camp. Ben was a member when he was a boy and like Mike, had gone to camp for years. Ellen and Darrin's children had been members of the organization and the entire family had been involved in some way or another for over 35 years. The camp held many memories for Ellen, Darrin, their children, and their grandchildren.

Shortly after Ellen became president, a very tragic incident occurred during the second week of camp which may have threatened the sanctity of the camp. The incident tainted and defiled the sacred ground and it now required cleansing. The cleansing process may have included the board president and the executive director both resigning their posts.

To extend this metaphor one step further, the fight over how timber money was to be spent, and the belief that timber money was to be spent only on camp, could be interpreted as atonement for cutting the timber on the sacred ground; and that it is only permissible to deface the camp if the money the timber earns is spent to fix camp.

Narratives about timber and how to spend the money earned from cutting timber was a popular story among those interviewed. A review of all the timber and money stories indicated that timber and money were viewed as interrelated and possibly inseparable. While Julie talked about money only once, it was in reference to "timber money." Nathan, who is a timber cruiser and appraiser (assesses the timber as a crop and determines its value), clarified that "Actually the council has quite a lot of money due to timber sales." Ted discussed timber also in terms of money when he said they were "bleeding money out of the timber sale," referring to the belief that, as Nathan says, "There is lots of timber that could be sold and there is still a substantial volume of timber." He also talked about the council not

wanting to “rely on timber” but to keep it as a “reserve,” and that, “It [timber money] should be used to improve camp and to make it a more desirable camp” (Nathan). Others agreed with Nathan, as Ben strongly offered, “cutting down trees was just for camp,” and that he did not believe that [money from] “cutting trees should be used for council [the organization].” Darrin explained that “The timber money was being used to run the council [the organization] and it was down to less than half in three years.” Dan stated “camp and its’ timber resources have been used to address the financial problems of the council [the organization]....there is a limited amount of dollars and a large number of programs” and “Brad was instrumental in making the timber sale happen and then use the money for operating expenses.”

The board of directors changed their mind about whether it was a politically correct thing to do to cut trees at the camp. Ben brought up the issue when he said the board began exploring the question, “Are trees a renewable resource”? He answered that it was “not good to cut down trees.” There was a plan, “we’re going to make some land self-supporting by timber management” but Ben did not mention what happened to this plan. Ben also shared that “some guy [member of the public] called and complained about cutting down trees,” and the man thought that instead of cutting down trees to make money, Brad should “produce in grants and fund-raising, his



salary.” It seemed that this conflict about cutting trees was somehow settled by the notion that when trees were cut, the money would only be spent on the camp. Nathan offered, “It is referred to as a “renewable resource, and to harvest it is a wise use of a resource,” but that some members on the board were “preservation oriented,” and that the money from “timber sales” should be used...to improve camp.” Although as Nathan pointed out, “there is a long range plan regarding spending the timber money, there is no consensus.” Julie who was president at the time of the cutting states, “The timber money is not earmarked for camp rejuvenation.”

Throughout the discourse about this “timber and money talk”, the actual financial health of the organization was not discussed; instead what seemed to be the focus was how to spend the timber money. Nowhere was the deficit talked about as a separate problem. The problem was always framed “how do we spend the timber money”? This appears confusing as some of the informants reported that a decision had already been made that the money would be spent only on camp, yet another said that the money was not earmarked for the camp. And, the board did not agree on the issue of whether to cut more timber.

The board of directors had shared norms of interaction at board meetings which focused on the camp and its resources. One of these norms was “we don’t talk about the operating expense deficit” As Julie said, “the

board always works on proposed solutions, *rather than asking the* questions first....The question of how to deal with the operating expense deficit was not asked, and [the money from] timber became a trust fund issue.” Darrin added, “I brought up the deficit and that started the problem being addressed finally,” and, “Current members are beginning to understand the financial difficulties *and the need to do* something about them” (Mary). Based on minutes of past board meetings, not dealing with or talking about the operating deficit is a norm reaching back at least fifteen years.

All of this talking about the camp took place at board meetings; the primary setting for interactions between the board members and the executive director. Everyone interviewed exhibited frustration with the board, (“There is a lack of personal responsibility” and “the board meetings are bitch sessions”); the executive director, (“I see people upset, myself included, with Brad due to the letter he sent to the board”); themselves (“[the board] talks about wonderful things [but] when looking for people, all have a lot of commitments, I feel guilty about this”); and each other (“Ellen needed Brad to be different as an executive....Brad and the board looked to each other for stability, both got their feelings hurt”) (Mary, Ted, Ben, Julie).

The board members appeared to share a common understanding for “board of director” jargon, such as committee, executive, quorum, president, nominating, strategic plan, mission, vision, roles and responsibilities,

functions, leadership, long range plan, among others. All of the subjects used the term, “the board” when referring to any or all of the board of directors in their stories. Being “on the board” or “board members” were accepted terms to use when a person had volunteered or accepted a request to join the organizations’ board of directors. When the subjects told stories about the problems being experienced by the board, the phrase “board roles and responsibilities” was used by virtually every interviewee.

There was consensus among the board members that they were unclear about the board’s, the executive director’s, and the officers of the board roles and responsibilities. And, they all expressed concern that they did not know what they were supposed to do as board members. Some cited being new to the board as the reason, “I don’t know what my responsibilities are yet, I try to interact as best I can, *I’m inexperienced in my knowledge of the organization and being a board member*” (Ted), and “...new members aren’t trained well and they don’t know enough about parts of the programs to speak; they don’t have enough information” (Nathan). Ellen stated, “the board needs to know what’s expected of them and need information put in front of them to know what to do.” Regarding the executive director, Nathan offered, “The executive director isn’t clear about his roles and responsibilities either.... The board hasn’t laid down a clear picture and he hasn’t asked.”

Examples of references to board meetings fell under two headings; what happened during the meetings such as, "...works on proposed solutions," and "...acts as a committee" (Julie). And, what did not happen during the meetings, such as; "...no content to meetings," or "...people are reluctant to talk...afraid to hurt others" (Nathan).

In their stories, the informants described what happened during board meetings in strikingly similar terms. While not all of the board members gave reasons for the board meetings being "bitch sessions," where "fingers get pointed," and they "fight" and they "blame each other for not following through," three believed that the president (Ellen) was responsible (Nathan, Ted, Dan). Given this setting for the meetings, it is little wonder that others reported that "few people attend," "key people are gone," "not everyone talks," and the "same decisions are talked about month after month" (Mary, Nathan, Ted).

There were also stories were about how the meetings were "not well run by the president," and "the board and the executive director didn't follow through on decisions/assignments." The members (including those who were themselves guilty), were "not accountable" to each other, to staff, or to the executive director and vice versa. As Ellen put it, "We have gone as much as four months without approved minutes because the secretary didn't want to do them... same with the treasurer... haven't gotten a report for

months....there's no accountability of board members." This lends to the assertion that, "nothing gets done," and "decisions don't always get made" (Ted, Ben, Ellen).

In addition to these comments about what did and did not happen at board meetings, there was one meeting that most of the board members talked about which took place at a local restaurant. No explanation was given as to why this particular meeting was not held in a conference room as usual. This was a particularly memorable meeting for most board members, as Ellen tells it, "*At the board meeting*, the camp crisis was discussed and Marian was discussed... Brad *had already given his* resignation, Dan was supportive of Brad, and Dan questioned my contact with Brad." The other board members who were present did not talk specifically about this meeting, but talked about interactions between board members that were quite similar to Ellen's account. Nathan summed up their frustration, sadness, anger and lack of leadership when he said, "We are floundering," and Dan's statement that *there is* "no horsepower to getting the council in order," seemed to support Nathan's assessment.

In addition to the norm off not talking about the operating deficit described above, nearly every person blamed someone or something (the board) for the problems, rather than themselves. Many of the interviewees were quick to lay much of the blame for their predicament at Brad's feet.

Others blamed Ellen for Brad's resigning his position and others faulted her lack of leadership as president. Ellen blamed "the board" for their lack of commitment and cooperation as well as the officers of the board for not following through.

Most of the informants explained that "communication" was the main reason for their problems and described situations (norms of interactions) where board members didn't listen to each other, board members didn't listen to the executive director (and vice versa) and board members didn't listen to the president (and vice versa). Some informants talked about communication as a skill which was done well or not well, such as, "Ellen's communication skills are not strong" (Julie), and "I don't think he communicated well with a lot of people" (Nathan) or, "Communication is the major weakness of the board" (Ellen). And, communication was blamed for the task force's nine-phase camp rejuvenation plan being "stuck in phase one due to poor communication."

Communication was also talked about as if it were a commodity, such as, "The newsletter should create communication with people," or "they have talked about things people have felt and they have increased their communication" (Julie, Dan), and "Dick, Brad, and myself need to communicate more" (Darrin), or "we need to communicate more...Brad should have been communicating more with the board about problems"

(Nathan). And, communication was talked about as something people did or did not do. “The board isn’t communicating with Brad...Brad may not have been communicating with her,” or “the executive director...helps the board and the staff respect and communicate with each other,” (Nathan, Julie). And, for one person a particular event pointed out, “this was the first sign that there were communication problems” (Mike). Further, the reason this researcher was asked to do the initial assessment with this organization was because, “some of the problem is communication, *but* your being here is addressing this” (Mary).

My observations included attendance at one board meeting, two training and facilitation meetings, and one selection committee meeting. I attended the board meeting to present the findings of the assessment and to discuss my recommendations. This meeting was presided by Julie, interim board president and this was the only meeting I went to where Brad was in attendance. Since Ellen and Darrin had resigned from the board, they did not attend nor were they invited to this board meeting. I did not witness any of the negative behaviors described in this study, possibly due to the changes in board president and the absence of Ellen and Darrin. At this board meeting there were two new youth board members who were not part of the interview data as they had just become new members. An attorney was also present to discuss the camp lawsuit. At the beginning of the

meeting, the act sequence ritual of telling our personal stories about our involvement with the organization (local or in other communities) was enacted. Everyone participated in this ritual except for the attorney. I did not observe any sanction or reaction from the board members towards the attorney for his lack of enactment.

The attorney spoke first before other board business started, such as approval of minutes, committee reports, and the executive directors' report (the first time he had ever done one, I was told later). My turn came last and the majority of the meeting time was spent on discussing and approving the recommendations followed by a commitment to contract with me for two facilitation and training sessions. The board of directors made decisions according to Robert's Rules of Order per their by-laws and the group unanimously came to agreements, for the first time in a very long time. I believe this was due to Julie who was clearly in charge of the board meeting and the board members willingly followed her lead.

As just stated, I provided training and facilitation services to this board of directors at two separate meetings, I again did not personally witness any of the behaviors described in the interview data and the board, following a consensus model of decision-making made agreements easily without dissension from any of the members. Ellen and Darrin were invited to attend these meetings to provide a historical perspective, and also to



encourage them to continue their involvement with the board of directors. Brad was not present at any of the training meetings as the board of directors felt they needed some time to re-group, strengthen, and reclaim their sense of identity without staff being present.

And, I attended one committee meeting where three board members came together to craft a screening, interview and selection process for prospective executive directors. Again, this group worked extremely well together, with none of the negative behaviors previously described surfacing.

And, as a board member and now as president, although the make-up of the board has changed considerably, the board of directors treat each other and the executive director with respect and consideration. It appeared that after Julie returned as interim president in late 1995, the norms of interaction changed considerably and the blaming, fighting, and denial of financial difficulties virtually disappeared.

## CHAPTER V

### **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS**

In the following section, I provide a critical analysis of these data discussing what I learned about power-as-domination as constituted and communicated in this board of directors. Next, I compare the analysis in this thesis with my initial analysis to demonstrate the efficacy of the ethnography of communication as an organizational communication assessment tool.

The second section in this chapter highlights study limitations, directions for future research, and implications for applied communication research and communication consultation.

#### **Final analysis: critical ethnographic explanation**

Mumby (1994), states that “The role of the organizational researcher is to expose and critique the process by which a particular organizational ideology produces and reproduces the corresponding structure of power within the organization” (p. 146). Mumby posits that there are three conditions that must be present for power to be exercised in organizations (1994, p. 63-64). They are as follows.

“First, a situation of interdependence is necessary, in the sense that the behaviors of organization members interlock such that the actions of one

person can affect others, and vice versa.” According to Oregon State Statutes, a non-profit organization must be governed by a president or chairperson and a board of directors. This board of directors complied with this statute as it was and is governed by a president and other officers. Article XI, Section 1a of this boards’ by-laws state that the board of directors “by a two-thirds vote, shall be responsible for the employment of an executive director” and 1b states that the board of directors, “by a two-thirds vote, shall have the authority to release the executive director.” The by-laws also state that “the executive director shall be accountable to the board through the president” (Article XI, Section 2d). And in Article XI, Section 2a it states that “the executive director shall administer the work of the council [organization] as delegated by the board.” The by-laws then, bind the board of directors and the executive director together making them interdependent on one another to function effectively. The by-laws also explicitly charge the president with the duty of directly supervising the executive director.

However, in the case of Brad and Ben, rumors indicated that because of Ben’s age and lack of experience as a board member and then board president, Brad was able to (or had to) run the board of directors and guide the presidency. Ben admits “I didn’t know what was expected of me... Brad offered his support and leadership but, I wasn’t sure what to ask for... [Brad] picked up on signals and he did help.” However, while Ben was one of

Brad's supporters, he mentioned that "Brad talked down to me... because I'm younger."

When Ellen became board president against Brad's expressed wishes, Ellen changed the power dynamics between herself and Brad by making it clear that she was Brad's boss and that she was now in control of the board of directors and Brad. Even so, Brad continued to exercise his power over the board by controlling the topics and amount of information he gave to them. Brad and Ellen's problems peaked when Ellen got involved in a staff conflict between Brad and Marian, the camp director. After Brad and Marian had a fight, Marian called Ellen and told her what happened between them. Ellen took Marian's side of the conflict and Ellen then accused Brad of acting inappropriately. During Marian's last two weeks of employment, Marian faxed her completed work to Ellen, instead of to Brad, which angered him tremendously. After Marian quit or was terminated, she applied for unemployment and Ellen and Brad fought over this also.

The board of directors knew that Ellen and Brad were embroiled in conflict and they all talked at length in the interviews about Ellen and Brad. The conflict had divided the board members into Ellen or Brad supporters and it appeared that a primary "end" of virtually all the interviews with the board members was to convince me that the person they supported (Ellen or Brad) was "right" or "innocent" and vice versa. There were many examples

of this taking sides, but only Ellen was candid about her goal of terminating Brad when she said, "I believe Brad should be gone" and she shared those beliefs with John at the "National Office"<sup>6</sup>. Julie was nearly as direct as Ellen had been when she stated, "*I feel the e. d. doesn't know about kid-development programs and has never run a volunteer organization and has never worked with a board.*" She stopped short of saying he should leave the organization, however she did say "It's a mismatch." Nathan agreed with the Ellen supporters when he said, "Brad can be a difficult person... he has a poor attitude toward the board and the board isn't communicating with Brad and Brad isn't the greatest director."

Other board members supported Brad and provided reasons why Brad should be asked to stay, such as; "Brad *really* [her emphasis] tried in plain language but we didn't totally understand him... we may have misunderstood" (Mary) and "I see Brad as a major strength... *he's very* business oriented and gets things done" (Ben). Another Brad supporter, Dan, would have preferred that Brad got another chance when he said, "Brad experienced a lack of follow-through by us and *I would like* a year's time to give Brad a chance," he concurred that Brad made a "politically incorrect" move when he resigned, but he believed that "Brad could lead."

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<sup>6</sup> This organization is under a charter agreement with the "National" organization which allows it to use the name of the organization. The "National Office" assigned a representative "John" (a pseudonym) to assist this local organization with a variety of issues.

Thus, Ellen and Brad were interdependent based on their positions as president and executive director, but their actions affected the board of directors as a whole, as well as each other. And, it was not long after the Ellen and Brad conflicts began taking place, that the board members began fighting with each other.

According to Mumby (1994, p. 63-64), the second of the three conditions that must be present for power to be exercised in organizations is, "...inconsistent goals must be present in order that competing interests may arise." Clearly Ellen and Brad had competing interests about who was going to run the board of directors, and these interests affected the board of directors as a whole. This was evidenced by the norms of interactions demonstrated by the board members.

One norm of this board was that that they did not talk about the operating expense deficit. Examples of this were, "The board always works on proposed solutions, *rather than asking the* questions first....The question of how to deal with the operating expense deficit was not asked, and [the money from] timber became a trust fund issue" (Julie), "I brought up the deficit and that started the problem being addressed finally" (Darrin), and, "Current members are beginning to understand the financial difficulties *and the need to do* something about them" (Mary).

As with all norms, when they are violated there are consequences. The consequence for this norm may be that when the subject was brought up, the person was either ignored, not heard, or blamed for the deficit, "Brad really tried in plain language but we didn't totally understand him, we may have misunderstood" (Mary), "Brad is at the key center of the problems... Brad should have been communicating with the board more about problems" (Nathan), and "Brad should be implementing ways to make money" (Ted). This led to the next norm of blaming problems on Brad and/or "the board" or each other, rather than taking personal responsibility. Nearly every person blamed someone or something (the board) for the problems, rather than themselves. Many of the interviewees were quick to lay much of the blame for their predicament at Brad's feet. While there was no indication within the data that anyone actually told Brad he could not spend timber money to meet payroll, it does seem as though he ended up being blamed for doing just that. Blaming Brad for the operating deficit was ironic, because the board had never actually dealt with the issue of the increasing operating deficit, yet, they were quick to blame it on Brad once they became aware of it.

Ellen's ability to persuade a majority of board members into believing that Brad was responsible for their problems illustrates the power of controlling the organizational reality (if even for a short time). Others

blamed Ellen for Brad's resigning his position and others faulted her lack of leadership as president. Ellen blamed "the board" for their lack of commitment and cooperation as well as the officers of the board for not following through. However, no one wanted to be president, and so maybe, no one spoke publicly about Ellen's lack of leadership because they didn't want the job. The exception to this was the board meeting that was held at the local restaurant where two people spoke up and blamed Ellen for Brad's resignation, however unlike some of the other members, these two knew they were leaving board service in a few months.

Mumby guides researchers to "explicate the system of rules, beliefs, values, and so forth, that individuals generally take for granted as members of a particular organization" (1994, p. 9). In the data, there were at least two sets of beliefs and values that created competing interests among the board members. The conflict had to do with the camp and its timber resources. Some believed that the board of directors should preserve the ecology of the camp and not cut anymore timber. Others saw timber as a crop which periodically needs to be harvested. And, still others argued about what to do with the money once timber had been cut.

Ben characterized the conflict as "camp and cutting down trees....Are trees a renewable resource....not good to cut down trees." The "preservationists," as Nathan called them believed that trees should not be



cut down. The group in power, the property management group, viewed trees as a renewable resource, but wanted the income “earmarked” for camp rejuvenation.

These conflicts and norms of interaction are directly related to Mumby’s third condition, “... a scarcity of resources produces conditions in which actors with various goals compete with each other to have their demands met” (1994, p. 63-64). For this board of directors and its executive director, a scarcity of resources included the budget shortfall, dwindling harvestable timber, and the quality and quantity of information shared by Brad with the board of directors and vice versa.

Ellen and the property management committee were pushing (successfully) for the board of directors to share their value and belief that timber money was going to be used only for camp. During the few months that Ellen was president, one of the only committees that had been meeting was the property management committee, which oversees the camp. The chair of this committee was Ellen’s husband, Darrin. Mumby offers that “... the group in power can provide the frame of reference for all organizational activity” (1994, p. 3). It is my analysis that during this time, the group that controlled the board of directors and thus the timber money was the property management committee. Darrin and his wife Ellen, (the board president) attempted to direct all the boards resources, energy and

discussion around “camp.” Darrin clearly supported camp and stated, “the strength of the council [organization] is the great talent we have, but [we] need to bring it together to *be more interested in camp*” (italics added), and that “camp is the greatest strength...the alumni supports it and if programs were developed around camp, it could save the council,” Ellen shared her husband’s strong beliefs about camp and has made it her crusade to protect camp and its timber money to this day. Other comments were made about the primacy of camp as board and council business, such as *we decided* “our niche was camp program... so *that’s* where we should pump our money” (Ben). And, as stated in the previous chapter (p. 49), “camp” held special significance for this board of directors.

Information was also a scarce resource for the board of directors. Mumby (1994) guides the critical researcher to examine “...the ways in which vested interests can potentially limit discursive choices...” (p.35). One committee, property management, was able to limit the discursive choices whenever finances were discussed. The data analysis has shown that talk about money, camp and timber money were inextricably bound together (see p. 54) and that it wasn’t until the “camp crisis” that the board discussed the operating deficit as a separate issue.

And, Mumby (1994) offers, “organizations... distort and constrain communication in such a way that those interests are maintained and

reproduced” (p. 35). As long as the property management committee was able to maintain this control of the discourse, other voices (like Brad’s) couldn’t or wouldn’t be heard, until the “camp crisis” meeting. It took the devastation of the “camp crisis” to open the board members’ eyes and ears to the reality of their responsibilities allowing them to see themselves and the board of directors from a different perspective, unfiltered and undistorted by the president and the property management committee.

Some informants talked about communication, and I posit that one possible interpretation of their meaning is that they were referring to the transfer of certain types of information, rather than their process of behaving toward each other. For instance, Ted expressed his lack of information when he stated, *I’m inexperienced in my* “knowledge of the organization and being a board member.” Nathan agreed with Ted when he said, “...new members aren’t trained well and they don’t know enough about parts of the programs to speak; they don’t have enough information.” And, Ellen concurs “the board needs to know what’s expected of them and need information put in front of them to know what to do.”

As previously stated, it is in the executive directors’ job description to provide new board members with an orientation about the board and the organization and to provide the board members any and all information on on-going issues and concerns of the board and the organization. But as

Nathan commented on Brad's communication "I don't think he [Brad] communicated well with a lot of people... The board isn't communicating with Brad....Brad may not have been communicating with her [Ellen], "we need to communicate more....Brad should have been communicating more with the board about problems." Ted brings up another communication issue involving Brad "The board is responsible for helping Brad make decisions to do that, guide and assist board level decisions and explore issues of funding methods." But, if as Ellen states, "Communication is the major weakness of the board," this would be difficult to accomplish.

Dan talked about the board's lack of sharing information with each other when he stated, "we [the executive committee] have talked about things people have felt and we have increased our communication." And Darrin concluded that the camp could have been rejuvenated but "Dick [camp caretaker], Brad, and myself need to communicate more."

Mumby's three conditions clearly contributed to a "situation of potential conflict" for this board of directors as outlined above, but the conflicts (and Ellen and Darrin's power struggle) came to a climax at the "camp crisis" meeting, where some of the board members publicly blamed Ellen for the mess they were in. It appeared that support for Ellen and her property management committee waned and it was no longer in the boards' self interest to allow Ellen to continue to lead. Now that the fight with Brad

was over and he had resigned, the board of directors seemed unwilling to continue to follow Ellen, as they once were. The board's willingness to allow Ellen to lead was evidenced by both the board's silence while Ellen was president, and the interview data indicating the board members blamed "the board" for their problems, rather than taking any action to address the problems, or to hold Ellen responsible. Allowing Ellen to lead or not holding Ellen accountable for her actions can be interpreted as willingly participating as subordinates. Mumby and Giddens talk about the "dialectic of control" (Giddens, 1986), wherein, "...those who are in power are also in a situation of dependence in that they are only powerful to the degree that others will recognize and hence legitimate that power" (Mumby, 1994, p. 64). I do not believe that Ellen was aware that her ability to lead depended quite so much on the board's willingness to follow her. But when it was clear to Ellen that the board members were not going to defend her actions in regards to Brad's resignation, she too resigned.

In addition to the board meeting where Ellen did not feel supported by the board members, an earlier indication that she was losing their support was demonstrated by the dwindling attendance of board members at board meetings; resulting in a lack of a quorum at most meetings. Mumby tells us that "meetings are symbolic insofar as those people who occupy positions of power in the organizational hierarchy use this context to signify their power,

and thus to reaffirm their status” (1994, p. 68). If board members were not showing up at meetings, the business of the board and thus the council could not take place, and Ellen (and the property management committee) could not exercise their power.

Fortunately for the board of directors, Julie was willing to step back in as interim president. The entire board of directors supported Julie and they put a lot of hope in her leadership abilities. This new found hope enabled the board to move beyond their crisis-induced paralysis, and they began to make some important decisions. Mumby (1994) discussed decision making saying that it:

...fulfills an essentially symbolic function in organizations; that is, it is not so much *what* is accomplished through decision making, but rather significance lies in the process of decision-making per se. It is therefore the *procedure* that is meaningful rather than the issues that are dealt with through this procedure (p. 65).

The first decision that the board made was to reject Brad's offer to rescind his resignation, and this act of making a decision (right or wrong) was a symbolic one for this board of directors. This decision demonstrated that the board was getting back in control (once again) and functioning as a board of directors after months of “floundering.” Julie set up committees which began meeting, hired a communication consultant (me) to work with the board, and

the board of directors began making decisions about their roles and responsibilities, recruiting a new executive director and board members, and planning for the future.

A structural issue emerged from this analysis. In regards to this board, the data are clear that their traditional board of directors structure had become dysfunctional and that the board of directors were not working together as a board or with the executive director. And, a crucial part of the board system requires board committees to do much of the board's work outside of the board meeting structure, enabling the board meetings to run efficiently and effectively. And, when board members lose interest in board service and quit attending meetings, there is a lack of a quorum, meaning under Robert's Rules of Order, (which this board adopted) and according to their by-laws, they could not officially make decisions. The Oregon State statues governing non-profit organizations is silent on the issue of decision-making processes, and in no way requires boards of directors to follow Robert's Rules or anybody else's rules. In fact, many of the board of directors I have contracted with as a consultant are searching for different ways of making decisions and conducting business at board meetings. A few are trying to make decisions by consensus, rather than following a majority voting system. Others use a "super" majority voting system that sets the passage of a proposal at more than the "majority" of the board members.

Others combine the consensus model and the majority vote system by using consensus first, and if they fail to reach consensus after a specified amount of time, their “fall back” position is to then accept a majority rule vote on the issue. In terms of structure, some boards are rejecting the traditional hierarchical structure of a president who is ultimately in charge, followed by the executive committee, then board members, then executive director and instead are attempting to “flatten out” the hierarchy by having the president and officers of the board be non-voting members, or as an alternative, one board gave everybody; president, officers, executive director, and staff one vote to be used on all issues coming before the board of directors. These variations are attempts at creating a form of governance that complies with the state statutes and yet meets the unique needs of their particular organization and its board of directors.

Even though this board and its committees were dysfunctional, they held on to the board-committee, executive director, and staff structure. What finally made it functional again was getting a new president who could make the traditional board-committee system work. At no time during their crisis and conflicts did the board of directors question whether this system was failing them and needed to be changed, instead they thought each other needed to be changed. Thus, this board of directors unknowingly allowed



themselves to be dominated, ruled and practically destroyed in part by a structure that did not serve their needs.

In this section I have taken the ethnography of communication description of the board of directors to a critical, interpretative location. By using Hymes' mnemonic of SPEAKING and identifying the speech community, speech events and speech acts, a descriptive theory of this board of directors has emerged from the data. This descriptive frame was then used to address Mumby's power interests. Hymes' mnemonic and Mumby's power constructs allowed me to look deeper into the board of directors' power structure which lent insight into why Brad and Ellen were in such conflict and why that conflict caused the board of directors to become divided. The critical approach also offered reasons why the money, timber, and camp issues were such emotional and non-negotiable topics of discussion. And, the denial of certain issues and problems was illuminated as well. As the current board president of this board of directors, I am the one who is now in a powerful position. This analysis has heightened my awareness of some of the pitfalls that boards fall into, especially board presidents. One issue that is salient in my mind, is that Ellen was only allowed to lead as long as the board was willing to follow her. Over the past few months (especially at board meetings) I remind myself that I am only allowed to serve as president and I can only be an effective leader if the

members are willing subordinates. Therefore I am respectful and accountable to the members at all times. Another caution that came out of this analysis was how easily divided and swayed the board of directors can become and how destructive a polarized and factionalized board of directors can be to the entire organization. Thus I am ever mindful of unresolved conflicts and issues that have the potential to divide the board. And, I have developed a healthy attitude toward the camp and attempt to honor those who feel it is their duty to protect the camp and its assets. In conclusion, I do my best to keep roles and responsibilities clear by continually negotiating them whenever necessary.

### **Comparison between this assessment and the initial assessment**

In the methods section on reliability and validity, I voiced a potential threat to validity based on the fact that I had already done an assessment of this organization. The fear was that I may have unconsciously used some ethnography of communication techniques in the first assessment, and so I would fail to discover anything new or different in this second analysis. In response to this potential threat I proposed comparing the findings of both assessments, thereby answering my second thesis question, what additional information will I learn by using the ethnography of communication combined with my continuing involvement with the board of directors that I did not learn

from the initial assessment and analysis of data from this non-profit organization's board of directors?

**What I already knew from the initial assessment.** The problems caused by unclear or unknown roles and responsibilities were evident immediately in my initial assessment (see appendix A). Also evident was the fact that new members had not been integrated into the group, had not received any orientation, and felt they didn't know what was going on. The conflict between Ellen and Brad had been explained prior to data gathering, and so I had expected that the board of directors had split into two factions. The initial findings led to the obvious assessment that the board of directors had become almost entirely dysfunctional and were in a serious crisis situation. Additionally, it was clear that the board of directors were exhausted and could not be asked to do much more as board members.

**What I learned about the organization using the ethnography of communication.** The initial assessment gave me a quick, thumbnail sketch of the major issues and a preliminary plan of action for the organization. This second, more complete assessment reached depths of emotion, structural problems, and philosophical differences not attended to before.

Using the mnemonic as a series of questions to be asked led me in very different directions than the first assessment.

First and foremost, the genre of narratives, specifically the camp narratives when analyzed in relation to the other components of the mnemonic, revealed the camp as a crucial organizing symbol of the board of directors. As discussed in Chapter IV, the data strongly suggest that the camp had attained the status of a sacred object of the board of directors and Mike and Ben's ritual stories illustrate this. Mike talked about how he was the first male member after the organization began admitting boys and that Julie was his camp counselor who, after he grew up, introduced him to his wife and Ben talked about being a member when he was a boy and like Mike, had gone to camp for years. Viewing the camp as a sacred object is also supported by the manner in which camp is discussed and by the amount of talk about the camp (see p. 54 for more details). The greeting ritual where camp stories are told is one way of paying homage to camp, reinforcing the image of camp as sacred in the minds and clearly the hearts of whomever is present during this speech act. It can also serve to teach newcomers and be a reminder to others that the board and the organization's highest valued object is "the camp" thus reinforcing and reifying the organizations' core value.

There are many other possible interpretations as to why “camp” had reached a reified status in the board of directors’ discourse. These interpretations have enabled me to understand the importance of “camp” and what it may have meant to this group of people. These interpretations may also help explain some of the board’s communication behaviors as well as how these feelings about camp contributed to the hopelessness and powerlessness they felt. In addition, as a consultant it is crucial to know what motivates a group of people to work together and what values they share as these can then be used to help the group focus their efforts and come together. For example, I recently worked with a board of directors of a non-profit organization who were having a difficult time making decisions and finding common ground. One of the first activities I asked them to do was to individually identify the core values they wanted the board to reflect and demonstrate. These value statements were compiled into a list and using a consensus model, they formed shared values for their board of directors. The next day and half was spent on facilitating clearer roles and responsibilities, always comparing their work with their shared values for consistency. This exercise allowed the group to work together and come to decisions easily, as they were based on their shared value and symbol system.

In regards to the board of directors in this study, if I had known that “camp” was (and probably still is) one of their primary symbols, I could have helped them develop a stronger sense of identity, purpose, and vision by exploring the meaning of “camp” and used it as a focal point in discussions.

An examination of the norms of interpretation gave me important insights into the board of directors. I did not realize how deeply in denial they were about the operating deficit, and how any talk of money got transformed into a conflict about how timber money was to be spent. Most likely, these norms were not started by the board of directors in this study, as norms this well entrenched would have taken some time to get so firmly established.

I learned valuable information when I examined the norm of “blaming.” It was obvious in my initial assessment that Brad, the executive director and Ellen, the ex-president were being scape-goated, but not at the level that was revealed in this additional assessment. It would have been useful to have used this and other norms to guide follow-up questions with the interviewees. If this group of people were to continue working together, it would have been crucial to be aware of this scape-goating behavior and explore it more completely with the group.

Some of the data that were analyzed as norms were found to be “accounts episodes.” Buttny defines accounts as “a naturally occurring explanation about one’s meaning in the context of a problematic event” (1987, p. 69). Examples in the data of accounts regarding board and committee meetings were, “I haven’t been real available for board and committee meetings” (Ben), or “I’m out of town a lot” (Nathan). And, accounts were given in regards to why the board of directors and the organization were failing. I believe that the members used their accounts of lack of planning or not following the plans they had as a “face saving” mechanism for explaining why they had not been able to act as a board of directors (see p. 61 - 66). These are just a few examples of accounts that came to light while examining the data for norms. And, the component of norms played an absolutely crucial role in building a descriptive theory of this boards communication. As a consultant, I urge my clients to identify the spoken and unspoken (or implicit/explicit) rules for their organization. This leads to a lively conversation about the organization and how it does business. However, I have never used this exercise during an assessment, meaning I have never included as part of the assessment process, an identification and examination of the organizations norms. After using this component during the assessment phase, I now see how terribly significant it will be to my work in the future.

As board president of this particular board of directors, being aware of past norms of interaction and their effect on the functioning of the board as a whole, has raised my awareness level. I am now alerted to some of these norms and I hope I can monitor the boards interactions so that we do not slip back into past communication patterns and practices that were so harmful and destructive.

For the act sequence component, I examined the speech act of the greeting ritual of board members, which included the telling of a personal story about the organization as part of a self-introduction (see p. 53). Braithwaite (1991) suggests that "ritual is a form used to affirm a sense of shared identity by providing a culturally prescribed ordering of behavior that members can follow" (p. 159). I believe that the telling of one's story in the organization (starting if possible as a child) helped the board of directors develop, maintain and reinforce a sense of shared identity as board members and contributed to it being a speech community.

In my observations of the board members, I do not recall a person ignoring this powerful ritual, consequently I do not have any information about what sanctions (if any) would have been applied. At the one board meeting I attended this ritual was performed. It was interesting to note that Brad, the executive director did not have a personal story to tell and thus could not share fully in the enactment of this ritual. Instead, he talked about



how much he had learned about the organization and how much he supported its' work with children. It is unknown whether Brad's lack of a personal story affected his relationship with the board members, but one could speculate that a stronger personal connection may have allowed him to more fully participate in the shared identity of the board of directors and maybe they would have been more likely to follow him.

I must sadly report that this ritual has not been enacted with the present board of directors. I was not aware of its power until I did this study, and so I have not modeled its enactment. Neither has anybody else, as many of the new board members do not have the strong personal connection with the organization and the camp as did the majority of the board members in this study. While not enacting the greeting ritual has not seemed to effect the commitment or bonding of the new board of directors, it remains to be seen what effect if any losing this ritual may have on the board.

However, I recently have been attending "leader" meetings and I have witnessed the leaders enacting the greeting ritual during introductions. So, it appears the ritual is not dead, at least not among the members of the organization. The board of directors will be approving a new board member who is also a leader, and it is interesting to speculate on whether the new board member will revive the ritual.

An analysis of the act sequence component proved to be quite illuminating as the previous paragraphs illustrate. This component combined with norms and genres proved to be one of the most useful components of the ethnography of communication as an assessment tool.

The key and tone encouraged me to pay close attention to how people were feeling about the events that had taken place. I was aware that folks felt frustrated (*there's no "horsepower" to getting the council in order*) sad (*They have also had "enough trauma in the last few months"*), tired ("The attendance is poor...key people are gone") and angry (*We haven't done "a good job of determining our mission"*), however I did not know how they had lost their sense of hope and faith in themselves and the organization's future. And, I had not paid enough attention to the overall deep sense of powerlessness they felt as a board of directors. Examining the component of key and tone reminded me that this was not just a group of board members, but individuals with emotions and feelings. Sometimes as consultants we can become quite fixated on solving problems and forget that the emotions that people bring to the problem need to be recognized and dealt with as part of the problem-solving strategy. Having to spend so much time on each person's key or tone helped me rediscover this important feature of consulting.

Examining the ends of the interviews gave me valuable new information about the members' interactions with each other, as well as insight about the interview and assessment process itself. Briggs (1986) posits that the interview itself is a particular type of speech event and that "The interview moves the roles that each normally occupies in life into the background and structures the encounter with respect to the roles of interviewer and interviewee" (p. 2). During the interview interaction and the analysis of that interaction, it is difficult to separate the informant's "ends" of the interview as a particular type of speech event, and the informant's "ends" of a speech event or act they are describing to me. However, it is important to do so if we are to heed Hymes' caution, "the conventionally expected or ascribed must be distinguished from the purely situational or personal and from the latent and unintended" (1972, p. 61-62).

I used an inferential process of determining the informant's ends and attempted to support my inferences with examples from the interview data. In this manner I used the "self as instrument" where "the investigator serves as a kind of "instrument" in the collection and analysis of data...[and it is] used simply to search out a match in one's own experience for ideas and actions that the respondent has described in the interview" (McCracken, 1988, p. 18-19).

When I started these interviews with the participants, I carefully explained that my role as a consultant was to gather their individual perspectives in order to gain a group perspective about problems, strengths, and so on, but not to determine who was right or wrong. An analysis of the ends component, indicated that a main purpose of the interviewees was to convince me that Ellen or Brad was “the problem.” This set up an expectation for the interviewees that I was going to make or influence their decision about whether or not to “keep” Brad or Ellen, putting me the consultant/researcher, in the role of “being the bad guy.” But, more importantly, it may have influenced the type and quantity of information the board members shared with me. Stated another way, the Brad and Ellen stories used up most of the time allocated (by contract) for the interviews, and while these stories are obviously crucial, there may have been other stories that were just as important for me to hear. The implication for consultants is that we must always be aware of what “ends” our audience has and how they might differ from our own ends and what effect this differing of ends may have on the information we gather. While I did observe the board of directors at one board meeting and at one committee meeting, Julie had already taken charge as interim president, and the ends described above were not repeated.

The participant component was difficult to separate out from the other categories, but it proved to be useful to do just that. I found that by concentrating solely on who was talking and being talked about, I found there were many more participants involved than I thought. Of course I knew how many staff and board members there were but I did not get a bigger picture of the organization until I listed *all* the participants involved. A more complete assessment of this organization would have entailed interviewing or somehow surveying some of these other participants, such as the volunteers, the leaders, and alumni. While this component forced me to identify participants I may have overlooked, I found its usefulness limited to providing a laundry list of participants and their roles or titles.

This study caused me to reflect on the participants I did not include in my initial study, but who were persons crucial to the board of directors and the organization. And so as board president I have been contacting volunteers, leaders and alumni in an effort to include their voices in the discussion. And, I have also started to actively recruit leaders to become board members. I feel that by having leaders and volunteers on the board will allow the board a more direct connection with the leaders, volunteers and alumni. But also, by having leaders who have a personal connection with the camp, they could revive the telling of personal camp stories, helping to motivate and strengthen the board of directors.

The component of instrumentalities did not prove to be particularly illuminating for this study. Hymes pointed out that all of the components may not prove useful for every single speech community, but he cautioned researchers to not overlook what could not be easily detected (1972).

Taking Hymes advice, I applied this component to the data which indicated a shared use of “camp” and “board of director” jargon. I found a few terms that the group shared and this sharing of language usage reinforced my “guess” that the board of directors constituted a speech community (Braithwaite, 1991), however, no other useful information was uncovered.

In conclusion, it is clear that the initial study and the present one seem hardly comparable. The initial assessment is a mere skeleton of the board of directors, but this additional study contains the meat, vital organs and most important of all, the heart of the board. As board president, I now have crucial information about the board of directors which will assist me in this challenging position.

### **Limitations of this study**

For the data to have been of the highest quality, it would have been tape-recorded speech, with non-verbal nuances noted in hand-written notes (for keys and tones). Also, a board meeting or two, and possibly a committee meeting would have been tape recorded in order to study

interactions between the informants (instrumentalities) and for act sequence analysis.

However, the data that I used for this study was more authentically and typically the kind of data a consultant would gather and analyze when doing an organizational communication assessment. When conducting one on one interviews with clients, I have found them to be somewhat nervous and concerned about what ends I have for their interview data. In my experience, getting permission to tape record the interview can make the client even more nervous and wary of the process. I have found it much more comfortable and useful to make hand-written notes and observations. This is also the norm in the field of consultants when conducting interviews. Thus, this reflects the “real” not artificially constructed context within which to consider using the ethnography of communication. For the reasons just cited, I do not believe that the use of hand-written notes of the interviews were a serious limitation to this thesis.

Another limitation was that these data were restricted to just the board of directors. In order to have presented a fuller, richer ethnographic account (of even the board of directors), it would have been desirable to have access to at least the executive director and the staff’s interviews.

And, it is important to recognize that I have over twenty years of experience working in non-profit organizations, I have my own organizational

communication consulting company which contracts specifically with non-profit organizations and their boards of directors, my undergraduate and graduate studies have been in the field of communication, and I have continued to be involved with this board of directors as president. These experiences have enriched and informed this test of the ethnography of communication theoretical descriptive framework. These experiences have strengthened this study, but also bring into question whether this was a true test of method. The question then becomes, could a communication consultant without these experiences use the ethnography of communication as an organizational assessment tool as successfully as I did? This question will be discussed further in the next section of this chapter.

### **Using the ethnography of communication as an organizational communication assessment tool.**

For an organizational communication analysis and assessment tool to be useful to the consultant, the tool must be simple and efficient to use but not simplistic, adaptable to the needs of the consultant and client, and provide a complete picture of the organization. In communication consulting as in any profession, consultants' skill levels range from well trained, educated and experienced to those with little if any training, experience or education. Therefore it is with many reservations that this researcher



recommends using the ethnography of communication descriptive theoretical frame as an organization assessment tool. One reservation I have is that to perform an ethnography of communication takes a combination of education, training, practice and skills that many consultants are not likely to possess. While I am still a novice at ethnography of communication, my undergraduate and graduate studies in communication aided my understand in this perspective.

Another issue is that not all communication consultants have experience working with non-profit organizations and their boards of directors. As previously stated I have worked in non-profit organizations for over twenty years and I have worked extensively with non-profit organizations and their boards for over four years as a private communication consultant and mediator. This knowledge and experience helped me understand the board of directors under study as I could compare and contrast their experiences with other boards I have worked with. For instance, a common problem faced by boards of directors is the lack of clarity regarding roles and responsibilities between the members, the members and the executive director, and the board, executive director, and staff. A consultant who may be less experienced than I, may not be aware of some of the more common challenges encountered by non-profit

organizations and their boards and may overlook them or not understand their significance.

And, if the communication consultant was performing an organizational communication assessment with a new client, would it be possible for them to gather enough information to enable them to actually do an ethnography? This study revealed the depth of findings that it did because the initial interview, observational and artifact data were supported by nearly two additional years of information as a board member and then board president of the organization. Without these additional years of experience, it seems doubtful that “the camp” for example, would have emerged as the central theme of this board of directors, and pivotal for understanding some of the significant, underlying conflicts and divisions.

This is true also for the critical analysis included in this study. Mumby provided a framework for looking at power as domination, and this analysis was greatly informed by the depth of knowledge about this particular board of directors and other boards of directors I have worked with in the past few years.

Even if the communication consultant possesses the skills and experiences as I have just related, there are some drawbacks to using ethnography of communication as a communication assessment tool. The major one is the vast amount of time required to take the already gathered

data and use another interpretative frame to analyze the data. The reality for most consultants and their non-profit clients is that they tend to have very fixed budgets (read small); it can be challenging to get a client to agree to an assessment in the first place, and when they do agree, they tend to not want to spend the time and money for what is usually just the beginning phase of a bigger project.

While the communication consultant would not need to write as extensive of a report about their findings as I did for this study, s/he would still need to spend a considerable amount of time analyzing the vast amount of data necessary to properly use ethnography of communication as an organizational communication assessment tool. However, a communication consultant such as myself with my skills and experiences, could benefit from such an application.

As previously stated elsewhere in this study, the ethnography of communication allowed for crucial communication norms, genres, and other issues to emerge. While it may be impractical and even impossible to duplicate the efforts of this study for every assessment performed, this study has highlighted the importance of paying attention to the components of the mnemonic and factoring the emergent issues into a holistic "picture" of the board of directors. I firmly believe that if organizational communication consultants included in their assessment procedures for example; a focus on

norms of interaction, an examination of power-as-domination, a broader description of the setting - scene, a fuller account of the participants involved, and most importantly a discovery of the organization's or board of directors primary symbol(s), that their work would be more informed and thus more valuable to the client.

### **Implications for future research**

In this study I set out to answer the three research questions articulated throughout this study:

1. Can the ethnography of communication be effectively used as a communication assessment tool for communication consultants to analyze and assess the communication practices and patterns of a non-profit organization's board of directors?
2. What additional information will I learn by using the ethnography of communication combined with my continuing involvement with the board of directors that I did not learn from the initial assessment and analysis of data from this non-profit organization's board of directors?
3. What will I learn about power as constituted and communicated by this non-profit organization's board of directors?

To answer these three research questions, I did an additional analysis of data gathered while in the role of an organizational communication consultant for a non-profit organization. After completing the initial assessment for this organization, the board of directors accepted my recommendations and I worked with the board of directors on a number of issues to enable them to be functional again as a board of directors and as an organization. Now a few years later, I find myself as the organization's president. When I accepted the presidency, I made a commitment to assist this organization become healthy and functioning as it once was during its' thirty five year history. By conducting this study, I was afforded an opportunity to learn all I could about the board of directors, thus enhancing my ability to lead the board as its president.

What I learned about the board of director in this study can be useful for organizational communication consultants working with non-profit organizations' boards of directors. First and foremost, boards of directors (and the organizations they serve) possess some shared values (in this study, it was the camp), which can greatly inform, explain, and provide a context for the communication patterns and practices of the board of directors. For example understanding the symbolic importance of the camp helped me understand how the board members made sense of their priorities as a board, their conflicts and norms of interaction, their power

struggles and their challenges. For this board, their communication was almost entirely camp or camp related. I believe that other boards of directors possess and are motivated by a particular symbol or symbols, and that this study indicates to consultants the importance of discovering what the symbol(s) may be when assessing a board of directors.

The importance of effective leadership (or lack thereof) was a crucial lesson learned from this study. Whether it was the executive director or the president's lack of leadership (or both in this study), the results were dramatic and nearly destroyed this board of directors. It is imperative then, that we assess the power-as-domination issue when assessing the communication of a board of directors.

Another implication of this study for communication consultants is the importance of clear and continually negotiated roles and responsibilities of the board members and its officers, of the executive director and how s/he interacts with the board, the role of staff and their interactions with the executive director and the board, and how these participants interact with the most important members of the organization, in this case the leaders and other voting members of the organization.

And, specifically in regards to the structure of the board of directors, communication consultants need to familiarize themselves with various models of decision-making and how the board wants to function, rather than

assuming that the only structure that is effective is the traditional, hierarchical officer, board member, committee, executive director, staff configuration. As revealed in this study, the traditional structure did not work for this board of directors and it is interesting to speculate if a different structure (designed with the board's input) would have served them better.

While this study was limited to assessing the board of directors of a non-profit organization, I believe that the implications of its findings could be extended to a board of directors of a profit-making board of directors. It would seem that many of the communication challenges faced by the board of directors in this study are similar to those experienced by any board of directors, whether for-profit or non-profit. However, this remains unclear, unless or until someone attempts to duplicate this study with a for-profit board of directors.

In addition to this study's implications for organizational communication consultants, it adds to the growing body of applied communication research. Plax (1991) defined applied communication inquiry saying it "...involves making and executing decisions which lead to the systematic, controlled, empirical, and critical investigation or evaluation of human communication phenomena" (p. 3). And that conducting effective applied communication research "...will serve the communication discipline by demonstrating the clear, pragmatic value of communication knowledge to

scholars in other academic disciplines and to the public, thereby increasing the external acceptance and respect for communication research, theory, and practice” (Kreps, Frey, & O’Hair, 1991, p. 9). This study examined the communication patterns and practices of a non-profit board of directors in order to test ethnography of communication as an effective tool for consultants to use while in the field conducting organizational communication assessments. By doing so, I was applying my years as a student of communication to my professional occupation as organization communication consultant in order to enhance my skills as a consultant and researcher. As Kreps (1989) posits, “Responsible organizational development and planned change efforts,... are always examples of applied research since they demand carefully gathering and analyzing relevant data to guide intervention efforts” (p. 5). It is my sincere desire that this study has represented the fields of communication, applied organizational communication, and organizational communication consulting, in a responsible and valuable manner.



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## APPENDIX A

### ORGANIZATIONAL ASSESSMENT & RECOMMENDATIONS

October 1995

#### Introduction

Communication Works (Franki Trujillo-Dalbey) interviewed a total of 18 persons comprised of Staff, Board members (past and present), and \_\_\_\_\_. Communication Works also reviewed the Board and Staff questionnaires distributed by the Management Task Force. Interviews lasted approximately 1 to 1 1/2 hours and interviewees were asked to respond to questions focusing on the strengths and weaknesses of the organization, the Staff and the Board of Directors. All interviewees were assured that their responses were confidential.

#### Strengths

1. Staff and Board members share a strong commitment to \_\_\_\_\_, which, for many, stretches back to when they were young. \_\_\_\_\_ holds years of good memories and experiences for many as they were growing up, or as volunteers watching their own children grow. For the few who were not involved in \_\_\_\_\_ in such an intimate way, \_\_\_\_\_ provides them an opportunity to be personally involved in youth development in their communities.
2. The Board recognizes that the Staff work hard and are dedicated to the mission of youth development.
3. Staff and Board members agree the \_\_\_\_\_ provides excellent programs for youth.
4. The \_\_\_\_\_ has the potential to utilize a large pool of volunteers
5. Although the \_\_\_\_\_ is experiencing financial problems, the recent timber sale has provided the \_\_\_\_\_ with "breathing room".
6. The Board has developed an excellent two year strategic plan.
7. The \_\_\_\_\_ has good support from the national organization.

## **Problem Areas**

1995 has been a challenging time for the organization. To date, the organization has its third Board President for the year due to a conflict between Board President and the Executive Director. Both the President and the E.D. have resigned, although the E.D. continues to serve as interim director. Two Staff members have resigned, leaving three persons to staff the office (including the E.D.). The organization is incurring a deficit each month without a clear plan as to how to proceed. And, summer camp was closed due to an allegation of sexual abuse of a camper which has resulted in an impending lawsuit.

These events happened in a short period of time and there is no consensus as to how this all happened. All agree that the organization is in crisis and that the Board must take quick action. Thus the formation of the Management Committee (AKA Conflict Resolution Task Force). Questionnaires were developed and distributed to Staff and Board members with 7 Board members and 8 Staff responding.

Communication Works believes the present situation (excluding the lawsuit) is in part due to the following issues:

### **Board of Directors**

- The interviews and the questionnaires indicated that there is no consensus among Board members and among Staff regarding the roles and responsibilities of the Board to the Council, Staff, or executive director.
- The Board is unclear regarding its priorities, resulting in a diffused focus.
- New Board members have not received an orientation to the organization or to the Board and are unclear about their roles and responsibilities as Board members and as committee chairs. They have not had an opportunity to get to know one another (especially the newer ones) and some feel their talents cannot be utilized if they remain unknown. And, newer Board members have not had an opportunity to meet or get to know the members of the Staff.
- The Board as a whole takes a very long time to make decisions or puts other decisions off. Many feel only a few members participate in the sometimes lengthy and tangential discussions that precede a decision or

that information needed to make decisions is often lacking. Others feel that the Board decides on solutions before exploring the problems.

- The Board membership has decreased making it difficult to make a quorum at the monthly meetings. The decreased membership has also meant that the remaining members take on being chair of more than one committee. Some committee chairs are unclear about their roles as chairs or the purpose of their committees. Some committees have not met or are inactive.
- It has been difficult recruiting new Board members and new committee members. The Board has not identified the type of diversity (in terms of skills, interests, etc.) needed to help the Board move forward with its strategic plan.
- The Board has many good but widely divergent ideas on how to save the organization. Some feel the camp is the answer and want to put resources there, and others feel a combination of camp and club is the answer. Others feel the organization needs to be more responsive to the youth of today and develop programs that better meet the needs of today's youth and the challenges they face.

#### Staff:

- Conflicts between Staff members have not been managed or resolved in a positive manner.
- There are high expectations for Staff who are underpaid, work very hard and who are dedicated members of the organization.
- Some of the Staff aren't acquainted with the newer Board members.
- Staff want to see the Council grow and be a stronger force in youth development.
- Staff are concerned about the future of the organization and feel the current financial crisis indicates a lack of Board support for them and for youth.
- Staff want to be involved in working with the Board to bring about financial stability and growth, but feel that the Board doesn't communicate with them.
- Staff is unclear about their relationship with the Board.

## **Recommendations:**

Based on our assessment, Communication Works makes the following recommendations:

1. The Board needs to first clarify its roles and responsibilities as a Board, and then clarify the Staffs' roles and responsibilities.
2. The Board needs to prioritize its goals using the strategic plan as it was intended to be used.
3. The Board needs to clarify what qualities the Executive Director must have in order to survive and grow as an organization.
4. The Board needs to identify the qualities and skills lacking in its membership and target those who might be potential Board members.

Communication Works believes the accomplishment of the above tasks will require 8 to 16 hours of focused, group work with the help of professional facilitation. We strongly recommend that in light of interviewing candidates in November for the E.D. position and the need to recruit new Board members, that the Board have a clear and agreed upon understanding of the above issues first, to avoid repeating past problems and conflicts. Once these issues have been negotiated, the Board will be in a much better position to make decisions based on a shared set of understandings which will enable it to increase its membership. *Communication Works further recommends that \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, and \_\_\_\_\_ be invited to participate in this process to provide their historical perspective and lend continuity to the organization..*

As the Board becomes clearer about its responsibilities and the Staffs' responsibilities, then it would be appropriate to bring the two groups together to determine appropriate channels of communication, clarify roles and expectations, and begin working together strengthening the organization.

Finally, Communication Works recommends distributing this report to all Staff and Board members.

## APPENDIX B

### INFORMED CONSENT

I, \_\_\_\_\_, agree to serve as an informant in the research project entitled *Ethnography of Communication As An Organizational Communication Assessment Tool: A test of the method*, conducted by Francisca (Franki) Trujillo-Dalbey under the supervision of Susan Poulsen, Ph.D. I understand this participation involves only the use of the information that I have already provided to this researcher.

It has been explained to me that the purpose of this study is to better understand the issues present at the \_\_\_\_\_.

I understand that there are no risks to me associated with this study and any inconvenience to me as far as having given up my time to participate has already occurred. I may not receive any direct benefit from participation in this study, but my participation may help to increase knowledge which may benefit others in the future.

Francisca (Franki) Trujillo-Dalbey has offered to answer any questions I may have about the study and what is expected of me. I have been assured that my identity, and the identity of the \_\_\_\_\_, and the information I have given during the interviews will be kept confidential.

I understand that I am free to withdraw from participation in this study at any time without jeopardizing my relationship with Francisca (Franki) Trujillo-Dalbey, Portland State University or \_\_\_\_\_.

I have read and understand the above information and agree to participate in this study.

Participant Signature \_\_\_\_\_  
Date \_\_\_\_\_

*If you experience any difficulties that are the result of your participation in this study, please contact the Chair of the Human Subjects Research Review Committee, Research and Sponsored Projects, 105 Neuberger Hall, Portland State University, 503/725-3417. If you have any questions about this study, please contact Franki Trujillo-Dalbey at 503/588-8880 or Dr. Susan Poulsen at 503/725-3544.*



## **APPENDIX C**

### **Sample Interview Questions**

The following questions were asked of each of the persons interviewed. Follow-up questions were asked where appropriate and are not listed here.

1. What are the strengths of this organization?
2. What are the weaknesses of this organization?
3. What would you like to see different about this organization?