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AUTHOR McNamara, Catherine V.; And Others
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ABSTRACT

The Organizational Communication Culture (OCC) method, designed by Charles A. Bantz (1993) was utilized as the primary method for analyzing messages coming from the administration of California State University, Northridge, after the earthquake. Bantz feels that communication interactions in an organization bring meanings and expectations to that organization and that by analyzing these symbolic forms, the researcher has some insight into the culture of the group being studied. Results of the study were organized around three key constructs: harmony, family community, and spirit/dedication. It is important to note, however, that no single construct is representative of the entire culture of the university--this study concerns only the administration's vision as it is represented in its documents. First, the documents emphasized team work and collaboration as though the harmony displayed among the participants in the project reorganization were representative of an organism back in harmony with nature and not at odds with nature. Second, the university became a refuge or family for students who had lost their homes or were in some way displaced by the earthquake. Third, letters from the president's office explained, defined, and expressed how the slogan, "Not Just Back...Better" reflected an attitude of what the administration was trying to do. Key documents are analyzed according to themes outlined by Bantz: vocabulary, themes, temporality, and architecture. (TB)

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CELEBRATING THE "INTELLECTUAL HEART:"
EMERGENT MEANINGS FROM A POST-EARTHQUAKE
ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION CULTURE PERSPECTIVE

By

Catherine V. McNamara

Lynne P. Murray

and

Paul D. Krivonos

Department of Speech Communication
California State University, Northridge

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**CELEBRATING
THE “INTELLECTUAL HEART”:
*Emergent Meanings from a Post-Earthquake
Organizational Communication Culture Perspective***

**co-authored by Catherine V. McNamara,
Lynne P. Murray, & Paul D. Krivonos**

“When I am on the highway and I see a sign that says Pittsburgh, I am not in Pittsburgh yet, but I know I am on the way there.”

-Dr. Michael Jackson

Organizational communication can be defined as “the collective creation, maintenance, and transformation of organizational meanings and organizational expectations through the sending and using of messages” (Johnson, 1977, p.4). This definition implies that it is the communication that creates the organization. While it is obvious that one set of communication documents is not representative of an entire organization, one can get a sense of the culture of particular groups within an organization by looking at documents generated from their area.

The organizational group in which we were particularly interested, is the administration of California State University, Northridge headed by President Blenda Wilson. We were interested in examining what patterns would emerge from the administration. We know from an epistemological standpoint that rhetoric creates knowledge and the earthquake provided us the unique opportunity to stop the usual flow of rhetoric and wait and see what new or different patterns and symbols would emerge from this unexpected change; since it is "symbols [which] create reality because of their capacity to introduce form and law into a disorganized sensory experience" (Foss, p. 289). In the case of the campus after the earthquake the sensory disorganization was obvious and therefore the rhetoric and symbols that were emerging became noteworthy for analysis.

The Method

The Organizational Communication Culture (OCC) method, designed by Charles A. Bantz (1993) will be utilized as the primary method for analyzing the messages

emanating from the administration after the earthquake. Bantz (1993) feels that communication interactions in an organization bring meanings and expectations to that organization and that by analyzing these symbolic forms, the researcher then has some insight into the culture of the group being studied. In his preface he states, "Organizations are symbolic realities constructed by humans in communication" (Bantz, p. ix), thereby situating his perspective in culture. This perspective then moves the research from the more traditional pattern that relied on "general systems approach" toward a more interpretive model.

The OCC methodology entails gathering messages; analyzing those messages in terms of vocabulary, themes, temporality, and architectural issues; symbolic form analysis consisting of determining significant metaphors, stories, and fantasy themes; inferring organizational expectations through the evaluation of norms, roles, agendas, motives, and styles; and finally, inferring organizational meanings by viewing relationships among key constructs that emerge throughout the process (Bantz, 1993). At best, any theory is only a partial look at the complete picture. In bringing some symbolic forms into focus, we are blurring others. This is necessary to do because any one method cannot be a "cookie cutter" approach to research whereby the researcher can discuss all possible symbolic meanings and expectations for a given culture. This would be an impossible task, and one that lacked insight into any one particular theme or trend. Therefore, of all the possible methods from which to choose from and all the symbolic forms that were being generated after the earthquake, we began to see if there was a "fit" between any of many communication interactions that were being presented. While the process is presented

here in a chronological manner, it should not be assumed that the method is a linear process. OCC is designed as a guide and therefore all studies that employ the use of the approach may not include every aspect listed above and certainly do not follow a standard progression each time (Bantz, 1993). The results also should not be generalized to the whole organization but rather remain a lens with which to view the specific group of focus.

The group that we were particularly interested in focusing upon was the Administration or more specifically the Office of the President, Blenda Wilson. The rhetorical approach that began to arise as we looked at these documents was Bormann's fantasy-theme. We chose this theme for several reasons, one of which Bormann suggests. "It is designed to provide insights into the shared world view of groups of rhetors" (Foss, p. 289). In addition, fantasy-theme is a process by which there is a chaining out of communication that attempts to establish reality for the parties involved. From these attempts, there is a "convergence" of these themes that begin to emerge through the rhetorical process, which then effect the messages. This is based on a subjective view of the constructed fantasy-theme which leads to a "rhetorical vision," a dramatic structure based on specific values of the group being studied. The factors that are salient to this criticism are that the message then informs the value structure and the message takes on a dramatic form in terms of "setting, action, and actors." After the earthquake the administration developed a slogan that was the basis for their rhetorical vision.

To the community of California State University, Northridge, the slogan "Not Just Back . . . Better" was not merely a superficial saying being printed on t-shirts sold at

freeway entrances, but rather as a beginning point from which to proceed. The slogan came out of the Administration's office only a week after the January 17, 1994 earthquake. This slogan was only part of the communication basis for the rhetorical vision. Another group of documents we looked to were the letters that were generated out of the President's office which were sent at a rapid rate to faculty, students, and alumni in the weeks ahead, then to the official ceremony on the Oviatt Library lawn to re-open the library, and finally, to the visible signage "decorating" the re-construction areas of the campus.

Organizations experience crisis situations all of the time. The reason that we chose to look at the messages from the administration of CSUN post-earthquake as being something different than the usual crisis situation was because the physical damage was so obvious to the situation. The campus as we knew it could not open as scheduled. The regularly scheduled start of the Spring semester was delayed two weeks while workers toiled non-stop for four weeks receiving and securing the over 400 temporary trailers brought on campus to be used as classrooms, offices, and restrooms because of the extensive nature of the damage to the 54 permanent buildings on campus. The quake gave us the unique opportunity to stop the usual flow of rhetoric and adopt a "wait and see" attitude as to what new or different patterns and symbols would emerge from this never-happened-before event. From an epistemological standpoint, "rhetoric creates knowledge." Foss (1989) notes, "symbols create reality because of their capacity to introduce form and law into a disorganized sensory experience" (p. ?). We certainly had a disorganized sensory experience on campus. From the slogan, "Not Just Back . . .

Better," through the letters to the faculty, students, and alumni, to the dedication ceremony for the re-opening of the Oviatt Library, to a few of the more recent visual symbols that are unique to our campus, we began to see how these documents, in relation to fantasy-theme would then tell us something about the meanings and expectations of the Administration office at California State University, Northridge.

It is important in any organizational communication study for the reader to be introduced to the organization, therefore, before offering our results it is necessary to include some basic information about the organization.

California State University, Northridge (CSUN)

On June 1, 1972, San Fernando Valley State College - which when founded on July 1, 1958, with 3,300 students and 104 faculty members - was renamed California State University, Northridge which is now one of the largest institutions of higher learning in the state of California enrolling 27,282 students and employing 1,853 faculty members and 1,569 staff members. These numbers are reflective of the Fall, 1993 semester. Since only approximately 10 percent of the enrolled students live on campus, Cal State Northridge is considered a commuter school meaning that the majority of students live off site. Because students lives are not centered only on the campus but in the businesses in the area as well, the University is a very integrated part of the community.

The significance of this is that the University is a means to improve the quality of life for the San Fernando Valley, socially, economically and politically. This institution is a primary influence. This is our community. CSUN serves the Valley. No other institution

has this impact. In economic terms, CSUN is the largest employer in the San Fernando Valley pumping \$100 million per year into the community. It shapes the future for jobs.

Thus, when, on January 17, 1994, at 4:31am, the most destructive earthquake in the modern history of the city struck the Northridge area, the neighboring communities, the students and businesses and the University pulled together as one, took a deep breath, and began to rebuild. A newfound loyalty replaced the prior apathy on campus. A community of two very diverse groups was formed on the campus between students and construction workers. Tradition was thrown to the wind and we started over.

Organizational Meanings at CSUN

We focused our paper on three key constructs that emerged from our research: harmony, family community, and spirit/dedication. It is important to note that any one construct is not representative of the entire culture of California State University, Northridge. The organization consists of many parts and therefore it would not be appropriate to generalize our findings to the whole University. Our findings then are purely representative of the vision that the Administration of the school perceived of themselves and represented in the documents that they created.

Harmony

The documents emphasized team work and collaboration as though the harmony displayed among the participants in the project or reorganization were representative of an organism back in harmony with nature and not at odds with her (Mother Nature). We can

think of the community of CSUN as functioning as an organic whole once again.

Harmony with each other is a fundamental principle of an organization especially after the community had experienced a near devastating situation that left not only all 54 buildings on campus needing some repair, but the Oviatt Library, the main organ within the organism "broken, still, and empty."

Family Community

When most people think of a university they imagine a place that confers degrees upon students who meet the requirements. It is only when all of the extra curricular activities become unavailable do people realize that there is far more to university life than attaining a diploma. CSUN became a refuge for students who had lost their homes or were at minimal displaced by the earthquake. Blenda Wilson realized that people needed some kind of stability among all the disarray and that stability would come from the school stepping in as the administrative "family."

Spirit/Dedication

The letters generated from the President's office attempted to explain, define and express how the slogan, "Not Just Back . . . Better" reflected an attitude of what the administration was trying to do. Wilson explained through media interviews, in letters to the faculty and alumni. She wrote a letter in the class schedule talking about the progress and improvements that she envisioned. She concentrated on the concepts of moving forward decisively, to strive to be better.

Messages

Most organizational culture studies include an examination of two key message forms: documents and communicative interactions. Therefore, our research focuses on two key document areas: [1] letters from the "Office of the President"; and [2] the Oviatt Library dedication ceremony.

Key Documents

Letters from the "Office of the President"

The communications from the Office of the President were designed to keep the Northridge "community" in touch with the workings of the California State University, Northridge Administration. After the Northridge Earthquake, this correspondence became of utmost importance in reporting on the restoration progress of the campus, answering questions posed by the university community, and instilling a sense of confidence in the community. Various letters from the Office of the President were examined for this study including letters sent to three distinct groupings: alumni, parents, and friends; the Northridge Student; and finally, the Northridge Faculty.

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progress and improvements that she envisioned. She concentrated on the concepts of moving forward decisively, to strive to be better.

Dedication of the Oviatt Library Ceremony

One area that demanded considerable attention this year was the library. The library's exterior had extensive damage when the expanded wings on either side of the main building fell inward onto the main structure. The library was in-operable with millions of books laying scattered on the floors. Students and faculty were forced to travel on off-campus shuttle buses for an entire semester to do their research. Although libraries in the area (especially UCLA) were generous in offering accessibility, research activities took more time and patience.

The dedication was videotaped and was the document used for this analysis. The camera focused on the speakers and did not pan the audience or the celebration area showing who attended the ceremony or the extent of the entertainment. Information taken from the Los Angeles Times estimated a few thousand were in attendance.

On August 27, 1994, just 7 months and 9 days after the earthquake, the main building of the library was once again being opened to students and faculty. This event was 60 days before President Wilson's anticipated opening and years earlier than other estimates. This document recorded the first official ceremony on campus since the earthquake. The desire to preserve this day was evidenced by the engineering team video taping the event which was the way in which we were able to obtain a copy.

The re-dedication took place on the lawn in front of the Oviatt Library. The occasion, hosted by the construction companies rebuilding the campus, was a festive one that included food and entertainment (jugglers, bands, mariachi groups, clowns, etc.). When the speeches ended, the audience was invited into the renovated facility for tours. President Blenda Wilson emceed the event.

Each speaker had a few minutes to speak and each thanked lists of people for their support and commitment to getting the library back up and operating so quickly. The audience heard words from staff, student and faculty representatives, as well as spokesperson from engineering, the mayor's office and two elected officials. President Wilson acknowledged Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) agents, custodial and physical plant management workers. With each acknowledgment, Wilson asked the person to stand and often offered explicit examples of their efforts, for example, when she mentioned the physical plant management she said "they are responsible for the grass in front of the library."

The document emphasized teamwork and collaboration as though the harmony displayed among the participants in the project was representative of an organism back in harmony with nature and not at odds with her (mother nature). We can think of the community of C.S.U.N. as functioning as an organic whole once again. Harmony with each other is a fundamental principle of an organization especially after the community had experienced a near devastating situation that left not only all 54 buildings on campus needing some state of repair, but the Oviatt library, the main organ within the organism, "broken, still and empty." To express the gravity of the situation from the perspective of

the administration Sue Curzon, Vice Provos and director of library services, impassioned, "The library is the heart of university life . . . people don't die of a broken heart but universities do."

Analysis of Messages

Bantz (1993) concluded that the basic elements of a message include: vocabulary, themes, temporality, and architecture. In trying to determine the basic organizational communication culture we began with an analysis of these aspects of our documents. Since it is through these messages that the culture of an organization is created and transformed we agree that this is an appropriate start.

Key Vocabulary

Learning the specialized vocabulary for an organization is sometimes very difficult, however, becoming familiar with the vocabulary of the CSUN organization was not as difficult as usual for these researchers since we are consecutively alumnae, current Masters candidates, and part-time and full-time faculty of the University. We feel that this positioning made our examinations more fruitful in that each document could be surveyed from three possible points of view. In the documents from the Office of the President the following words appeared consistently: family members, community, our students, damage, structural problems, repairs, restoration program (as well as extensive statistics regarding destruction and rebuilding), priority, survival to recovery, "not just back . . .

better!," continued quality, "one stop student success center," excited, energy, creativity, and "the intellectual heart of the campus" (regarding the Oviatt Library).

The language used by several of the speakers at the rededication ceremony created the aura of significance on having the library back open. The Oviatt was "a sacred place," "with treasures," for all to explore." Yet, "it [had been] was still, dark and empty." It was a "workplace of the mind," "the intellectual center," "the cultural center," "the architectural center." The campus logo showing the library's columns, was "representative of the library's position on campus," it was the physical and symbolic heart of the campus." Student leader Fabio Escobar referring to the library said "this is CSUN . . . the social center of the campus." The university relied on the library as an being the core organ within the organization and it became the "broken heart," as staff members were "heartbroken" by the discovery of the extent to the damage it had sustained. There was a moment in the ceremony when Sue Curzon, Vice Provos and director of the library thanked all those who "have repaired our broken heart" with a delivery full of emotion. She wanted the library to be "full of people again."

While the language used at the rededication ceremony and in the letters from the Office of the President have given us an excellent basis for analysis, the visual signage that "decorated" the barriers around reconstruction sites on campus is also worthy of inclusion in this study. Colorful borders have been painted on the now permanent divider walls between the buildings. On these borders the silhouette of a graduate running with her/his diploma alternated with the profile of a construction worker running in the same direction holding a hammer. Both are in quest for the completion of their tasks. In addition to this

signage that is inclusive of both groups are new signs that signal caution but inside the sign is a picture of a construction worker's hard hat sporting a graduate's tasseled cap. This signage creates a unique sense of the place.

Key Themes

As the University attempted to reorganize after the quake, a common theme in the vocabulary of the correspondence emerged. This theme was quite evident in the vocabulary of the letters from the Office of the President, including the use of the terms Cal State Northridge family members, extensive use of the term "we," our own faculty and staff and volunteers, our students, relationships, and members of the university community. We can infer from this that the Administration felt that many people needed to be involved in this reorganization, including faculty, students, and our Northridge neighbors. Just as those in a family share common interests and goals, we all had a common interest in the success of the Administration's plan toward recovery.

The sense of community was established between those who played an instrumental role in the rebuilding of the library as well as mention of the library as the "social center" of the campus. As President Wilson introduced each speaker, each spoke of "sharing" in the efforts involved in the reconstruction. President and CEO of the engineering company hired to repair the campus, spoke on behalf of 250 consultants and contractors. He talked of the "team effort," and said it was as though the "A Team" had been sent to do this job. He continued to say that it was crucial for the students, faculty, and staff of CSUN to feel the "stability" they once had and the efforts were motivated by

the desire for CSUN to enjoy the "continuity and continued participation in the community." An elected official spoke of "this special place, this community... which proved that working together can produce miracles," which he called "partnering at its best.

The theme of spirit and community rang true throughout the rededication ceremony. The coming together of people "created a unique place." We had the "can do spirit...the hallmark of team effort." With people working together we can "make miracles...miracles do happen." It was the spirit of the vision stemming from the slogan that caught the attention of the Major, VP Gore and Clinton. But, it was not a simple thing. It did take an effective leader.

Speakers spoke of the "can do" spirit. City Council person Burnsome spoke of the "spirit of the community...to bounce back so strongly." The mayor's representative expressed how the "spirit and energy of Wilson" were instrumental in having the library ready for operation so soon after the quake. President Wilson expressed "we are happy" with the "spirit of success."

Key Temporality Issues

In her March 10, 1994 to the CSUN faculty letter (approximately 7 weeks after the earthquake) President Wilson stated that it had come to her attention that the daily briefing information generated in various Administrative meetings was not being distributed widely or quickly enough, one solution to this problem was to increase publication of the Office of the President letters to at least three times per week. This

increase in frequency allowed more information to be disseminated at a much more rapid pace to more people.

Key Architectural Dimensions

The most consistent architectural component of the letters from the Office of the President was the presence of the new CSUN logo in the upper left hand corner. According to the "Message from the President" in the 1994-1996 Student Catalog, President Wilson states:

The university logo is based on the intellectual heart of the campus - the University library, located at the center of California State University, Northridge campus. This logo represents the library's 46 striking structural columns, standing 55 feet high. The bold vertical lines attest to the success and personal achievement that can be realized through higher education and represents the strength and vitality of our young university.

So, not only by her words but also symbolically, Wilson exemplified the main concern of the administration as the rebuilding of it's central organ - the Oviatt Library.

Symbolic Forms

Metaphors and fantasy themes were very evident in the documents that we chose to look at for our study. They are very closely related to the information that we found in our message analysis. In fact, enough information came out of the analysis of one symbolic form to create an entirely separate paper. While it would be very easy at this point to include that information here, we will maintain and be brief.

Key Metaphor

Heart

This suggests that the organization of CSUN is like a biological organism whereby the overall organization of the organism, rather than the functioning of individual organs, is the principle or exclusive determinant of every life process. Great efforts were made to acknowledge every facet of the entire campus. The harmony between those involved in the project may also have been the opportunity to project a feeling of control over the environment once again giving us the security that many so desperately needed to feel. The control is evidenced by a who's who of representatives sitting behind the speaker on a raised podium at the re-dedication ceremony. The people represent those in power at CSUN, local government officials who are able to secure \$350 million in funds for the restoration of the campus, the mayor of Los Angeles' office, FEMA workers, OES and a federal government representative who tells a quick story of how he happened to see Vice President Gore while Gore was on his way over to see him - suggesting the chain of command goes all the way up to the highest office in the United States.

Key Fantasy Themes

Fantasy-theme, as pointed out by Foss, is "in the context of symbolic convergence theory, [and] is not used in its popular sense--something imaginary and not grounded in reality. Instead, fantasy is the "creative and imaginative interpretation of events and a fantasy theme is the means through which the interpretation is accomplished in communication" (Foss, p. 290). From this working model, we looked at the slogan, "Not Just Back...Better" as the fantasy theme which was designated by the administration only a week or so after January 17 and then looked at the document of the video of the re-

opening of the Oviatt library just over seven months later. In addition to analyzing this one document, we wanted to include a visual component of the signage that has recently been seen around campus.

Inference of Organizational Expectations

Bantz (1993) states, "Organizational expectations are manifested as the taken-for-granted patterns of members' coordinated behavior" (p. 135). In order to function in an organization with many people some behavioral patterns must be commonly understood. But, since organizations are dynamic these expectations can change constantly and therefore the process of determining organizational expectations is ongoing. The results we have included pertain to our findings in relation to harmony, family community, and spirit/dedication.

Significant Norms

The re-dedication ceremony acknowledged those who worked on campus actually doing the reconstruction work, those who were active in government who were securing monies, those who were documenting the damage as to assure the needed funds as well as acknowledging the members of the community of students, friends and supporters who had come to the campus that afternoon with lots of music, food and festivities, in essence a "party" for all to enjoy with the added pleasure of being invited into the library after a ribbon cutting ceremony to officially open it.

Significant Roles

Throughout the reorganization process President Blenda Wilson has been referred to as the "General leading the troops;" and her leadership has been described as "inspirational." Leadership means taking a difficult problem and choosing one direction. It is analogous to the Civil Rights movement, with Martin Luther King, Jr. when there wasn't a unanimous opinion. It is more difficult to be a leader in disagreement when things are less clear and you cannot force people to follow. It is easier for a general leading an army troop because the general has the force behind him/her. It is different when you lead by moral power.

Significant Motives

In many letters addressed to the Northridge Students, Faculty, and friends mailed during the Summer, 1994 break, Blenda Wilson states, "Our first priority has been the restoration of the Oviatt Library - the intellectual heart of the campus." By determining that the library is considered the heart of the campus it is obvious that the library would be the first structure to be reconstructed. While, this was a symbolic gesture in that the university did exist for one semester without a library due to the generosity of other Los Angeles schools such as UCLA and Loyola Marymount lending their facilities in support it definitely identifies the priorities of the administration regarding reconstruction of the campus.

Future Research

Our assessment of the documents and signage that we considered is that the administration's overall rhetorical vision was based on the action theme that was initiated with the slogan, "Not Just Back . . . Better." Although the letters and dedication ceremony show that a strong effort towards harmony and heart, the physical signs of the rapid rebuilding and the signage "marrying" the construction worker and the student reveal that the community is rushing to continue the progress of the university in terms of rebuilding physically. The push to finish the library 60 days ahead of schedule, to get the school open only four weeks after the worst natural disaster in the history of a university campus, and the volume of updated information reveal this motive of progress towards "better." There is a large American flag flying atop the Oviatt Library these days, designating us as an American institution symbolically adopting the "American Way" of progress.

Our study supports culture as interpretive research as opposed to systems.

Our academic community was expanded to include a group who played a visible and ongoing role in the restoration of the campus, the construction workers. We heard the sounds of machinery as over 2,000 men and women joined us on campus daily. At this point in our research there are so many roads we could take. A more thorough analysis of the signage on campus is definitely one route we could take. As mentioned before, entire papers could be written on fantasy theme or metaphor analysis alone. Finally, as the slogan indicates, we are better. This statement is an intriguing one from an organizational communication perspective because it requires an answer to the question "But, are we?"

and if we are, what are we better *than*. We have a long way to go before we can answer that question.

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