Understanding the Difficulties of Building Intersubjectivity among Members of an Organization

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In Public Administration in Today’s World of Organizations and Markets, Herbert Simon, the 1978 Nobel Prize winner in economics, points out the following:

“It is the organizational identification of members, more than any other of their characteristics, that gives organizations their remarkable power to secure coordinated behavior of large numbers of people to accomplish organizational goals” (December 2000).

In other words, individual members are the building blocks of an organization. Assuming that organizations usually exist for their goals or missions, the power of an organization derives from the collective effort of its large numbers of people. But how do these large numbers of people in an organization cooperate in order to achieve organizational goals? Jong Jun, in his book on titled Philosophy of Administration (1994), provided the answer from a philosophical standpoint: “What makes administration functional is the individual’s commitment to develop an intersubjective, shared experience with other members” (Hun, 1994, p. 8).

Thus, the power of an organization comes from its members, and it is the commitment to developing an intersubjective, shared experience with other members that makes the administration functional. But what is intersubjectivity? How is it constructed among people? What difficulties do administrators/members of a large, complex organization encounter in everyday organization life when constructing intersubjectivity? In this paper, I will attempt to answer these questions on the basis of my research, and over twelve years of public administration practice at the local government level within the United States. I will also conclude this paper with some recommendations for meeting the challenges of building intersubjectivity.

Intersubjectivity Defined

Aitken and Trevarthen (1997) define intersubjectivity as follows: “intersubjectivity is the process in which mental activity in including conscious awareness, motives and intentions, cognitions, and emotions is transferred between minds.” Richard Zaner defines intersubjectivity beyond the mental activity transfer process: this process builds a common world among

Abstract: The power of an organization comes from its members and it is the commitment of developing an intersubjective, shared experience with other members that makes the administration functional. To translate the intersubjectivity concept to an organization’s life, it can be interpreted as follows: to be a member of an organization is to think and act in a certain way, in the light of particular goals, values, pictures of the world, and to think and act so as to belong to an organization. In reality, because organization members have diversified backgrounds in cultural, sexual, educational, ethnic, and age — there are many difficulties in building an intersubjective understanding. To name a few, not recognizing the need for nor being willing and open to build intersubjectivity, lack of trust among members, lack of complete information when constructing intersubjectivity, ambiguity of language, cultural differences among members of an organization, action being different from words, lack of recognition of changing condition, and valuing efficiency over long-term commitment. Some tools, such as action skills, can be used to overcome these difficulties. Action skills can be acquired through continuous education.
human minds. According to Zaner, it is a phenomenon that, generally speaking, refers to what is cognitively common to various individuals. "Intersubjectivity signifies an interlocking of perspectives, motives, and behavior and ultimately of meaningfully connected actions into a system of meanings that constitutes 'the' world as a world common to you and me." (Quoted by Professor Jun in a California State University Hayward lecture, March 2002 from Zaner, R.M., 1970). To translate the intersubjectivity concept to an organization's life, it can be interpreted as follows: to be a member of an organization is to think and act in a certain way, in the light of particular goals, values, and pictures of the world, and to think and act so as to belong to an organization (Berlin 1976, p. 195). But how do individuals with various backgrounds "think and act in a certain way"? Let me examine how individuals communicate their ideas, perspectives, and values.

**Constructing Intersubjective Understanding**

How is intersubjective understanding constructed among people? To understand how mental activities transfer between individuals’ minds, we may employ Berger and Luckmann’s (1966) concept outlined in The Social Construction of Reality: a Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge. In this work, the authors describe how one’s idea is expressed through objective events and others perceive the meaning of the idea and transform their perception into their own subjective idea. Berger and Luckmann call this process internalization. Internalization is the immediate apprehension (i.e., comprehension) or interpretation of an objective event as expressing meaning, as a manifestation of another’s subjective processes which thereby becomes subjectively meaningful to oneself (pp. 129). This comprehension does not result from autonomous creations of meaning by isolated individuals, but begins when individuals "take over" the world in which others already live. This internalization makes it possible for the intersubjective, shared experience to be formed. However, this does not mean, they further argue, that "I understand the other adequately. I may indeed misunderstand him" (p. 129). They offer an example in their text: "He is laughing in a fit of hysteria, but I understand his laughter as expressing mirth" (p. 129). In other words, the intended meaning from one’s mind, expressed through language or action, might not be received as such in another’s mind. Only when the actors involved in the intersubjectivity building come to share the same meaning of the "common world" is intersubjectivity successfully built.

**Challenges to Constructing Intersubjective Understanding**

Having defined intersubjectivity and described how it is constructed? Let us examine some difficulties we encounter in everyday organizational life while building intersubjectivity and the reasons these difficulties exist.

**Lack of recognition of the need for building intersubjectivity**

Before intersubjectivity can take place, individuals must recognize the need for intersubjectivity, and be willing to build it. Many administrators often assume that members of an organization automatically work toward the organizational goals based on the members’ job descriptions, organization structure, and administrative orders. They do not see the need to build an intersubjective understanding among members. Large numbers of organization members need to work as a team on its goals; all members need to buy in to the value of its goals. To operate an organization more effectively, administrators need to initiate intersubjectivity building. As we have discussed above, what makes administration functional is the members’ commitment to developing shared experience.
Besides recognizing the need for building intersubjective understanding, members of an organization must be willing to open to each other prior to constructing intersubjectivity. To be open is to be sincere, truthful, and honest, and to set no restrictions or obstacles in the way of communication. A lack of openness can exist in various ways. For example, members may be allowed only to communicate with their immediate supervisor for issues relating to their work. Such an approach discourages employees from building intersubjectivity horizontally within the hierarchy of an organization.

Lack of willingness and openness to build intersubjectivity may be caused by not seeing its benefits. Helga Hohn (November 2000) presents a discussion that links intersubjectivity and leadership style and that makes clear the necessity for open communication. In her discussion of intersubjectivity and leadership models, Hohn identifies the importance of honesty and clear communication. The benefits, as she describes them, include goals being clear, a focus on performance, efficient team work, and originality.

Lack of trust

Lack of trust is another difficulty faced in building intersubjectivity. As I have explained in the previous section regarding the process of building intersubjectivity, individuals need to express their ideas to each other. In many cases, ideas can be unpopular opinions or criticism. It takes trust for an individual to express these. Why? Fernando Bartolome (1999) puts it this way: “Almost any organization would operate more effectively with completely open and forthright employees, but absolute frankness is too much to hope for. Candor depends upon trust, and, in hierarchical organizations, trust has strict natural limits.” By natural limits, Bartolome means “people keep their mouth shut in order to protect themselves or their subordinates” (Bartolome, 1999, p.79). Bartolome argues that open communication among members of an organization helps it to perform effectively, but that this often does not happen because people keep their opinion/criticism to themselves in order to protect themselves. Bartolome implies that employees might be vulnerable when they openly express their opinion/criticism, especially when the opinion is against or is not in alignment with a supervisor’s views, behavior, or values. The one who raises the opinion/criticism may be perceived as a challenger to the superior instead of a valuable colleague. The superior may, in turn, take actions such as eliminating promotions for the “challenger.” The fear of retaliation is very real in organizations. The fear may not be based on reality. However, real or not, with such a lack of trust, the building of an intersubjective reality is extremely difficult.

Lack of complete information

Another difficulty in building intersubjectivity is the lack of complete information. Individuals comprehend others based on event-observation or information exchange through language. “Being only partially informed, the actors run their own programs on the basis of their perception.” (Leydesdorff, L., 2000). If individuals make their own assumptions to fill in the unknown information, it is likely to cause a failure in building intersubjectivity. Let me take the example of an administrator who instructs her staff to develop a job-training program to help unemployed citizens. Her staff could easily interpret this directive in ways that the supervisor did not intend. They may decide that the program is to serve “all” unemployed citizens regardless of the geographic boundary, whereas the supervisor may have meant the program to serve only the unemployed citizens in certain cities. In this case, because the supervisor did not specify the geographic limits, her staff filled in the all unemployed assumption. The resources intended for unemployed citizens of certain cities may not be sufficient for all unemployed citizens. When the limited resources are exhausted, some of the intended unemployed citizens will not have been served. Intersubjectivity requires careful and thoughtful communication that includes complete information.
Ambiguity of language

“Language, which may be defined as a system of vocal signs, is the most important sign system of human society.... An understanding of language is essential for any understanding of the reality of everyday life” (Berger and Luckmann, 1966, p 36). Language also typifies experiences, allowing one to subsume them under broad categories. As it typifies experiences, it also anonymizes experiences, for the typified experience can, in principle, be duplicated by anyone falling into the category in question (Berger and Luckmann, 1966, p39). For example, a supervisor gives a warning to a staff member who has been constantly late to work. This could be typified as “supervisor-staff-conflict.” This typification process, through language, opens the doors for individuals to interpret the meaning of the language with their own experiences; Simon Glynn calls this interpretation “imaginary free variation” (1998). This process of interpretation can result in employees categorizing such disparate situations as sexual harassment and tardiness under the same rubric as “supervisor-staff-conflict.” But, indeed, the situations would have very different implications for an organization’s operation.

Let me give another example. In an organization, one supervisor may evaluate his staff’s performance and rank them between Standard and Above Standard for the jobs he perceives as “well done.” Another supervisor in the same organization ranks her staff Outstanding for jobs that are also “well done.” The rationale for the former is that no one should get an Outstanding rating so that his staff will work toward improving performance. As for the other supervisor, she believes that all staff who do their jobs well should be rated Outstanding; this supervisor believes that what the improvement staff should look for is a promotion. In other words, differing interpretations of words and concepts can have important implications within an organization.

The above examples show that the ambiguity of language creates difficulty in building intersubjectivity among individuals of an organization. Individuals transmit the “individual-historico-socio-culturally” relative instance of their life-world to the others when they engage in intersubjectivity building (Glynn, August, 1998). Life-world is the total sphere of experience of an individual, which is circumscribed by the objects, persons, and events encountered in the pursuit of the pragmatic objectives of living. It is a “world” in which a person is “wide-awake,” and which asserts itself as the paramount reality of his/her life (Schutz, A., 1967). The receivers interpret ideas from the others with their own life-world. If the actors involved in the intersubjectivity building do not have a similar “individual-historico-socio-cultural” background, what was intended to be expressed might not be the perception of the receivers. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) put it this way: we are prisoners caught in the framework of our theories, our expectations, our past experience, and our language (p. 39). This leads us to the next topic discussion, which is cultural differences.

Cultural differences among members of an organization

In the past, most human beings were born, lived, and died within a clearly defined geographical area. Seldom did they come in contact with people of other races or cultural backgrounds. Such a world no longer exists (Samovar, L.A., Portr, R.E., Stefani, L.A., 1998). Six billion of us who occupy this planet are inextricably interwoven. Each of us brings our cultural world from family to workplace, from home country to nation of residence. The same event can be interpreted in different ways depending on the interpreters’ cultural background. For example, individuals who bring constructive criticism in an organization are likely to be viewed as normal because this behavior coincides with western up-bringing. In western society, individuals are taught to think critically, independently, and creatively; they are also taught to freely speak their minds. However, bringing constructive criticism is viewed as lack of respect towards authority in the eyes of those with an Asian up bringing. Therefore, the same event will be viewed differently depending on cultural norms.

With respect to culture, a common problem is ethnocentrism. Ethnocentrism is the tendency to believe that one’s own culture and its values are superior to others. Very often, such tendencies are accompanied by an unwillingness to try to understand alternate...
Past intersubjective, shared experience is certainly valuable. Members involved in communication do not have to rebuild assumptions each time they communicate.

The importance of coping with changing conditions. Herbert Simon (December 2000) states: “If complex systems must operate in a constantly changing environment, or in competition with other systems that are changing, they must modify their structures at a corresponding pace.” Failure to recognize changing conditions could create difficulty in constructing intersubjectivity among members of an organization.

Short-term efficiency verses long-term commitment

We have discussed the value of building intersubjectivity among the members of an organization. In a large organization, it takes resources to construct intersubjective understanding. Many administrators choose a top-down-order approach in their decision-making and problem solving instead of a participatory approach. Giving coercive orders sometimes can achieve the goal efficiently for the short-term. However, in the long run, if all members of the organization subscribe to the idea that the administrators want to share with the members, the members’ collective efforts could achieve the goal more efficiently. That is, administrators of an organization may choose to adopt a sexual harassment prevention policy (a top-down approach) to its members. This approach only costs the organization some policy development time and printing expenses.
It seems efficient if a few people at the top make the policy, and then pass it down for implementation. But do individual members understand the policy? Do they now subscribe to the importance of preventing sexual harassment at the workplace? If not, the policy is just a piece of paper. Another approach administrators can take is to conduct training sessions, which convey the harmfulness of sexual harassment to an organization. Through the trainer-trainee communication, the common understanding between the administrators, who want to prevent sexual harassment, and the members of the organization, who implement the sexual harassment policy, can be realized. A common understanding of the importance of preventing sexual harassment, though more costly than a top-down directive in the short-term, is more likely to avert sexual harassment and reduce costly litigation.

**Recommendations**

**Acquire action skills**

There are many obstacles to building intersubjectivity within an organization. However, there are ways to overcome these difficulties. There are skills that can empower employees in taking conscious and effective steps toward creating a shared reality. These include (1) reflexive skill, (2) skills in interpersonal and group interaction, (3) communicative action skill, (4) persuasive power, (5) therapeutic skill, and (6) skill in action science and social inquiry can help (Jun, 1994, pp.198-203). The descriptions of these action skills are summarized in Table 1.

The action skills described above are essentially self-explanatory. We can easily relate how useful the

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<tr>
<th>Action Skill</th>
<th>Descriptions</th>
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<tr>
<td>Reflexive skill</td>
<td>A form of critical thinking and self-awareness: a person thinks about his or her actions and critically examines his or her assumptions and biases in his or her interpretation of a problem and its solution.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Interpersonal and group interaction</td>
<td>A skill needed in interpersonal and group interaction in order to include members of an organization for participatory problem solving and decision-making.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Communicative action skill</td>
<td>A form of speech that individuals use as an active vehicle for the exchange of subjective experiences, for reciprocity of perspectives.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Persuasive power</td>
<td>An essential skill needed in order to influence the behavior of other actors and to seek the commitment of others in accomplishing organizational goals.</td>
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<td>Therapeutic skill</td>
<td>Public administrators as therapists must not only interact with the various organizational members, such as minorities, women, the elderly, and the disabled, but also provide a positive setting where organizational members feel free to express their opinions and where support is mutual, both hierarchically and laterally.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Skill in action science and social inquiry</td>
<td>This skill is an approach to organizational problem solving. It is the application of the scientific method of fact finding and experimenting to practical problems requiring action solutions, which involve the collaboration of participants and change agents.</td>
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Source: Jun, 1994, pp. 198-203
skills can be in solving some of the difficulties discribed in the prior sections of this paper. For example, the therapeutic skill can help actors suspend their own judgments for the moment when attempting to build consensus with others having different viewpoints. As another example, the communicative action skill can be used to minimize the ambiguity of language.

If we are convinced that the action skills are some of the tools for actors to use in building intersubjectivity, then acquiring such skills is in order. How? This leads our discussion to the next recommendation: continuous education.

**Continuous education helps us to meet the challenges**

Continuously recognizing and understanding the changing world calls for continuous learning. Greenwood and Levin, in their *Introduction to Action Research* (1998), pointed out that one of the most important and frequent paths leading people into the practice of action research has been the field of education (Greenwood and Levin, 1998, p. 215). Similarly, understanding the importance of building intersubjectivity, identifying the difficulties, and learning skills to overcome these difficulties in building intersubjectivity can be achieved through continuous education. This education can be in the form of college education, seminars, workshops, and on-going trainings conducted by organizations.

**Conclusion**

The power of an organization comes from its members, and it is the commitment to developing an intersubjective, shared experience that makes the administration functional. To be a member of an organization is to think and act in a certain way, in the light of particular goals, values, pictures of the world; and to think and act as to belong to an organization (Berlin 1976, p. 195). In reality, because organization members have diversified backgrounds—cultural, sexual, educational, ethnic, and age—there are many difficulties in building an intersubjective understanding. Some of these difficulties are as follows: neither recognizing the need for, nor being willing and open to building intersubjectivity; lack of trust among members; lack of complete information when constructing intersubjectivity; ambiguity of language; cultural differences among members of an organization; action being different from words; lack of recognition of changing condition; and valuing efficiency over long-term commitment. Some tools, such as action skills, can be used to overcome these difficulties. Action skills can be acquired through continuous education.

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**References**


