PRD GIFT Winner AEJMC 2020

Evaluating Organizational Culture and Courageous Communication

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Rationale

Corporate Communication Management is a capstone-style course designed to introduce students to practical theories that inform best corporate communication practices. This course serves seniors and advanced juniors who have already taken courses in research methods and public relations writing. As such, this final project is designed to give students an opportunity to apply theory in a multi-layered experience related to understanding the importance and influence of organizational culture. Students follow Lyon's (2017) framework for courageous communication to evaluate the culture in organizations of their choice.

The goal of this project is to scaffold a learning experience that allows students to build skills related to networking, researching, interviewing, and presenting. A key component also involves applying theory in practice. Students work in pairs to complete this project—encouraging collaboration—and practice networking skills to gain permission to research an organization of their choice. Then, students

interview employees to understand perceptions of organizational culture. The project encourages students to act as consultants, analyzing employee perceptions within a theoretical context, then offering recommendations regarding the quality of the organization's communication culture. Ultimately, students present the results in a short presentation. This consultancy-style approach gives students an opportunity to work directly with client organizations to concisely evaluate and communicate theory-based findings. Ideally, projects may be shared with organizations, and students can reflect gained skills in the job application process.

Student Learning Goals

Because this is a final project that students begin in the first third of the semester, there are multiple student learning goals. Ideally, the project serves as a summative assessment (Taras, 2005) of skills developed and theories learned during the semester. Upon completing this project, students should be able to accomplish the following goals:

- Apply networking and professional communication skills to gain organizational access.
- Build practical research skills by conducting and transcribing interviews and completing qualitative analysis.
- Apply theory (courageous communication) to understand qualities of organizational culture (Lyon, 2017).
- Refine presentation skills and develop professional presentation tactics.
- Gain consultant-style experience by combining secondary and primary research to evaluate and provide recommendations regarding strengths and weaknesses in an organization's culture.

Connection to Public Relations Theory and Practice

This project is designed to give students a variety of practical experiences while teaching them to identify and define theoretical concepts in practice. Using Argenti's (2016) *Corporate Communication*,

students learn the importance and influence of organizational missions and values and identity, image, and reputation. Students are challenged to combine an understanding of corporate functions (e.g., leadership, internal v. external communication) with a theoretical framework of courageous communication (Lyon, 2017). Specifically, courageous communication proposes that the strength of an organization's communication culture can be evaluated based on four dimensions including: controlling and collaborative; top-down and upward; secretive and transparent; and impersonal and engaging communication.

Overall, each step of the project gives students practice with commonly used corporate communication practices that are introduced through individual lessons built into the course. For example, students apply networking and professional communication practices to secure their organization and recruit employee participants. Because networking is considered "an essential skill for the PR communicator's tool kit" (Brownell, 2014, para. 1), a guest speaker from the university career center is invited to guide a lesson about LinkedIn and networking skills, which are then applied by students as they begin the project. While some students are comfortable with networking, others are more closely coached through the process. For example, they are encouraged to connect with organizations they are familiar with (such as through work or family members) or organizations they are interested in learning more about. Support is provided through the review and editing of pitch emails, development of interview schedules, and guidance related to follow-up calls and shifting gears if a client relationship falls through.

Next, students learn common tactical skills by conducting interviews. The process of talking with employees and transcribing interviews gives students experience that supports traditional expectations for creating content while also strengthening opportunities to make content more accessible (Miller, 2019). Next, by interpreting the interviews and

pulling exemplar quotes, students apply research methods and strategic decision-making skills. Finally, the short presentation format is designed to provide practice with concise business presentations (Brandon, 2015). During the semester, assignments have limited word counts and presentation times to help students practice clarity and conciseness. Ultimately, the final presentation encourages students to focus on creating engaging presentations that highlight key takeaways most appropriate for corporate settings.

Evidence of Student Learning Outcomes

Although initially skeptical of this final project, students ultimately express a true appreciation for having completed this assignment. Many students use their internship or job sites to complete this research. Not only do they find the results of their study illuminating, but also in some cases students share findings with managers and supervisors. Ultimately, they appreciate the new perspectives the assignment brings to their understanding of organizational culture and its impact on both external and internal relationship-building and relationship-management practices. Students also acknowledge that the presentation structure is challenging, but it helps them think strategically about communicating key findings.

A review of student work shows that through feedback and editing, students produce projects that pack a lot of information into concise packages. They clearly differentiate between dimensions of courageous communication, even using theoretical language when contributing to class discussions. More practically, although some students initially question the usefulness of conducting and transcribing interviews, they generally find the process beneficial. One former student sent an email to "apologize" for thinking the transcriptions weren't "worth the effort." Having to transcribe multiple interviews at work to create accessible multimedia content, the student expressed: "I appreciate that you push your students to learn what's common/expected in the industry."

References

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Appendix
Corporate Communication Management
Guidelines: Final Project, Organizational Culture

Project Proposal: Due XXXX
Final Project and Presentation: Due before final exam period XXXXX

Assignment

This semester you are expected to understand and apply practical
corporate communication theories to contemporary practices. This
includes analyzing the role of communication in corporate culture;
understanding organizational channels of communication; assessing group

and individual behaviors and their impact on communication strategies; and evaluating the role of organizational leadership.

Working in pairs, you will use background research and interviews to examine the organizational culture of a company of your choice. To do this, you will conduct interviews with members of your organization to evaluate the quality and characteristics of that organization's culture. Placing your findings in the context of courageous communication strategies, you will produce a comprehensive report aimed at evaluating the degree to which your organization practices courageous communication. Your evaluation and recommendations will be based on a combination of primary and secondary research. This project will include a final presentation of your findings and evaluations. This project is designed to give you an opportunity to critically evaluate an existing organization's corporate culture.

Organizational Proposal
The first step of your project includes the organizational proposal. In this proposal you should outline which organization you would like to examine, providing a thorough organizational background and information confirming your ability to use this organization as an example. You should also provide drafts of the data collection tools needed to conduct your research.

How you choose and find an organization is up to you! You might evaluate an organization you're familiar with or you might choose to reach out to an organization you're interested in learning more about. Regardless of how you choose your organization, you will need to build a project proposal before you can begin conducting primary research. This proposal should include the following components:

1. **A thorough background about the organization**. You should highlight information including a historical overview of the organization and what it does. This should include presenting and evaluating information about the organization such as its mission and values. To the best of your ability, you should begin evaluating the organization's identity, image, and reputation.

2. To the best of your ability, **identify and describe the corporate communication structure that appears to be in place** (e.g., is there a Chief Communications Officer, specific communication departments, etc.). Explain if this information is not available at this point of the project; however, you should have this information before the project is complete.

3. Provide information about your **primary point of contact**. Begin by establishing how you connected with this person. Next, include contact information (email and phone number) for this individual, then provide a brief bio about their experience and what they do for the organization.

4. Finally, **provide the initial draft of your recruitment email and interview schedule**. You should compose a professional email that explains the scope of the project for potential interviewees. Include information such as how long the interview will take and that it will be recorded and transcribed, but information will remain confidential. For the interview schedule, provide an overview of the script you will use to open and conclude the interview. Also include the list of open-ended questions you plan to ask interviewees.

Interviews

The core findings of your project will be based on interviews with at least 10 employees at the organization. Through these interviews, you will learn about the perceptions of the organization's corporate culture.

Interviews should be designed to learn about what the company does and the company's communication structure. You should also ask questions about how communication occurs. Tapping into your knowledge about the four dimensions of corporate communication, you will want to explore the degree to which the organization exhibits the four dimensions presented by Lyon. Remember, however, that questions should broadly reflect the topics of interest—you can't presume that interviewees will use the same jargon presented in our textbook. Make sure the instructor has reviewed your interview schedules prior to conducting any interviews.

Ideally, interviews should take place in person and be recorded:
- If additional arrangements need to be made, you should be able to explain why.
- Remember that prior to starting the interview you must confirm that you have permission to record.

After interviews are completed, you will need to transcribe and analyze them to better build your evaluation of the company.

Note: Each person must conduct and record five interviews. Part of being a professional means learning how to connect (network!) with people you may not know. Additionally, you might be surprised with the number of corporate communication practices that rely on the ability to interview people. This often involves recording and transcribing interviews and identifying the most impactful comments made by interviewees. Interview

recordings should be uploaded to your group's file share on the course site to confirm that each team member participated in the interviewing process. Failure to participate in the interview process will result in a minimum of a letter grade deduction on the final project.

Final Organizational Culture Project

Your organizational culture project should be a comprehensive report that describes the quality and characteristics of the culture at the organization of your choice. For this project, you should emphasize the four dimensions of courageous organizational communication outlined in the Lyon text (aka: all the stuff you and your classmates presented this semester). This includes evaluating how the dimensions of controlling and collaborative; top-down and upward; secretive and transparent; and impersonal and engaging communication emerge in your chosen organization.

To complete this project, you should build out your organizational background (edit what you presented in the proposal), adding information you have learned through additional secondary research and interviews with organizational employees. Then, using outside academic and professional resources, you should make a case for the degree to which your organization exhibits courageous communication strategies. You should critically evaluate the organization's culture, evaluating the strengths and weaknesses you've identified. If the organization is doing work that is particularly courageous, explain why and how. If there appear to be weaknesses in the organization's communication culture, identify solutions that could help strengthen their communication function.

Format

The final submission of this paper should use 12-point, Times New Roman font. The paper must be double-spaced and should use APA format guidelines for headings, tables, in-text citations, references, etc.

- This paper should include a title page and reference list. No abstract is required. Appendices containing data collection materials should be included.
- Separately, in your group's File Exchange, you should upload all recorded interviews and the accompanying transcripts.
- **Note:** Only one submission of the final project is needed per group. Please upload ONLY Word document files.

Final Presentation

A major component of the final project will be your team presentation. During the final exam period, your team will present a brief overview of your project's findings. Presentations should highlight the degree to which your organization exhibits courageous communication. However, this will be a very short presentation—for this, you will be challenged to provide a high-level overview of your findings in a clear, concise manner. Think of this as a brief presentation to a busy member of the C-Suite. A few notes about the presentation:

1. Presentations should be between 5-7 minutes long.

2. The presentation should cover the following material:
   - Give a brief overview of the organization.
   - Evaluate how your organization performs on each dimension of courageous communication.

- • Provide a concise evaluation of whether your organization uses good, courageous communication practices. You should either illustrate how your organization serves as an example of good corporate communication practices or discuss solutions to strengthen its existing practices.
- • Share a brief conclusion, wrapping up the presentation.

3. Presenters should have equal speaking time. The presentation should appear practiced.

4. Upload your presentation deck to the course website prior to our final exam meeting time. For this presentation, you should use PowerPoint or similar presentation software to supplement your presentation.