EXPECTANCY VIOLATIONS: THEIR IMPACT ON ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE MESSAGES

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ABSTRACT

This study looks at expectancy violation theory (Burgoon, 1978), the application of the theory in organizations, and foundational pieces of organizational communication to address how violations impact the reception of change messages among non-managers. Organizations grow and downsize for various reasons, including business performance and economic climate. Regardless of the reasons, downsizing is a hard message to deliver. It can matter little if it is to the employees who will be leaving the organization or to the ‘survivors’ left behind. How the messages are delivered and understood are important for the organization to move their employees through change and move forward. Violating the expectation of employees can help or hinder those organizational change messages. Three focus groups, comprised of a total of 14 participants, were conducted and participants were asked to reflect on two different deliveries, face-to-face and e-mail communication, of layoff messages to determine how expectancy violations impact the reception of layoff messages. Results of this study indicate that face-to-face communication is the preferred method for hearing about layoffs and the impacts of violating that expectation with the use of another channel, like e-mail, includes the erosion of manager credibility and more questions about the decision made by the organization. Content of communication emerged as an important factor, especially for e-mail messages where content can be scrutinized.
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Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION

The Problem

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, the unemployment rate in October 2009 was 10 percent. Since then, the United States economy has seen the unemployment rate improve, if only by a little. As the economy added jobs, others were lost. It is a continuous cycle, and sometimes a consistent cycle in specific industries, like construction and manufacturing. Some areas, including healthcare, have added jobs over the past year. The reality is that some of those jobs are replacements for other jobs where current skill level did not align with organizational objectives. Downsizing was once only attributed to a decrease in business but more reasons have been noted, including more automation, a need to reduce overhead costs, and mergers/acquisitions (Eby & Buch, 1998).

All of these factors together mean that workers have received various messages about the need of their organization to “reorganize” or “restructure.” This leads to the questions about the decision to reorganize and what it means for everyone in the organization. There are impacts to those losing their jobs and the “survivors” left behind. Those left to deal with the aftermath of the change need to understand the reasons and not be left to wonder, gossip, or continually question the changes being implemented.

How the messages are delivered and understood are important for the organization to move their employees through change and move forward. A strong change communication plan starts and ends with knowing the audience and how reactions to message may impact their overall reception. Attention to the ethical, psychological, as well as perception of leadership is important so an organization can do its best to move forward during difficult times. Understanding employees’ expectations of communication is important. It is in the best interest
of the organization to find out what would help and what would hinder so programs can be put in place to mitigate any issues.

Judee Burgoon’s (1978) expectancy violations theory tries to explain how distance between people affects communication. The expectancy violations theory “holds that positive violations produce more favorable communication outcomes than conformity to expectations, while negative violations produce less favorable ones” (Burgoon & Hale, 1988, p. 65). It has been suggested that there are times when it is good to violate expectations.

The purpose of this study is to investigate the impact of violating the expectation of employees when delivering organizational change messages. How employees synthesize and react to these messages is important for the organization to minimize impact while moving forward. Communication expectancy violations can impact the ability of the organization to move forward if employees react negatively to the way in which they are told about important changes in the organization, especially changes that impact their jobs.

Definitions of Terms Used

Expectancy violations theory (EV theory). EV theory holds that positive expectancy violations produce more favorable communication outcomes than conformity to expectations, while negative violations produce less favorable ones. It suggests that there are times when it is good to violate those distances. Violating, or breaking, what the receiver expects can work in favor of the communicator, depending on how the violation is perceived (violation valence) and how the communicator is viewed in terms of what they have to offer (communicator reward valence).
**Organizational change.** For purposes of this study, organizational change is focused on layoffs or downsizing where organizational members are given notice that their jobs are being eliminated.

**Individual contributor.** An individual contributor is an employee who does not manage the performance of other employees. Those who manage functions, but do not have direct reports, are also individual contributors.

**Organization of Remaining Chapters**

This thesis is organized into five chapters. Chapter two looks at existing literature on expectancy violations and change management communications. The literature helps lay the foundation for the hypotheses. Scope and methodology for the study are found in chapter three. Chapter four contains a review of data from the study and discussion of the findings, and compares those findings against the original hypotheses. Finally, chapter five provides a summary of the thesis, discusses limitations of the study, and provides recommendations for further study in this area of communication.
Chapter 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This chapter reviews the philosophical assumptions and theoretical framework that form the foundation for the study on expectancy violations and their impact on layoff communications. Literature pertaining to these topics focuses primarily on three areas. The first focus is on the philosophical assumption related to how employees are treated in the organization. This assumption is centered on the ethics of respect. The second is literature on the Judee Burgoon’s (1978) expectancy violation theory, including its application across different studies. The third focus is organizational communication through the lens of organizational change (i.e. layoffs). These, together, provide a background on how expectancy violations may play a part in audience reception of organizational change messages.

Philosophical and Theoretical Framework

Philosophical assumptions. There are ethical components to layoff messages and it is good to look at these ethical components of communicating, especially when communicating change. Two great philosophical minds, Confucius and Kant, both touch on the ethics of respect. According to Wawrytko (1982), the solutions to the problems of human relationships, proposed by Confucius and Kant, both “revolve around the seminal concept of respect as the root of any system of ethics” (p. 237). Respect is imperative in the treatment of others. Respect is also important when trying to assess if something will conform or violate expectations of another person.

There are relational obligations when an organization restructures. When an organization focuses solely on its transactional obligations, it can be easy to forget the relational. The relational aspect is important in terms of how people are treated. It can be linked to any ethical standard we employ to treat others with dignity and respect. Poorly managed change efforts
“erode an organization’s relational wealth (its resources created from internal and external relationships)” (Sonenshein, 2009, p. 233). These relational obligations can include the practice of having the immediate manager or supervisor communicate the decision (Eby & Buch, 1998). While these relational obligations can be more closely associated with those leaving an organization, survivors should also receive consideration for relational activities that help address their needs as they continue with the company. How these obligations are approached have an expectancy element to them, particularly if a group of employees expect that their immediate supervisor is the person to reassure their fears and support their psychological needs following organizational change instead of someone from human resources, for example (Eby & Buch, 1998). These ethical and psychological components should be considered when assembling a strategic change communication plan. In summary, treating employees with respect provides a foundation for a healthy and stronger organization where organizational members feel valued. This study works to support the importance of treating others consistently by understanding audience communication needs and expectations during times of change. The expectancy violations theory is a lens into how those expectations impact communication.

Expectancy violations theory. The role of uncertainty in communication has been addressed through theories like uncertainty reduction (Berger, 1975). This theory puts forward that individuals are motivated to reduce anxiety by reducing uncertainty. Other theories have been created using uncertainty reduction as a starting point to help to explain how people react to communication – verbal and nonverbal. One theory that comes from this socio-psychological tradition is the expectancy violations theory.

The expectancy violation (EV) theory, pioneered by Judee Burgoon, was inspired by Edward Hall’s (1963) proxemics theory. Hall categorized four conversational distances:
intimate, personal, social, or public and assigned the amount of space for each. These “zones” represent different distances around our personal space. It is worthy to note that these distances and categories were based on American culture. An intrusion of our personal space could cause distress. Hall (1963) recommended that to be effective, we should adjust our behavior to conform to the rules of our partner. Burgoon (1978) took it a step further and suggested that there are times when it is good to violate those distances. EV theory holds that positive violations produce more favorable communication outcomes than conformity to expectations, while negative violations produce less favorable ones (Burgoon & Hale, 1988). In other words, violating, or breaking, what the receiver expects can work in favor of the communicator, depending on how the violation is perceived (violation valence) and how the communicator is viewed in terms of what they have to offer (communicator reward valence). Communicators with a high reward valence can enhance their attractiveness, credibility, and persuasiveness by doing the unexpected (Griffin, 2009).

EV theory first focused on the consequences of conversational distance in communication (Burgoon & Hale, 1988). Further refinement and work lead to the extension of EV theory to include a range of nonverbal behaviors. The refinement of the theory downplayed the physiological and put emphasis on the cognitive side (Burgoon & LePoire, 1994). Studies using EV theory have included applying the theory to address expectancy violations in verbal communication. This refinement and other application of the theory provide an interesting way to look at the reception of organizational change messages. There is value of examining how violations may be used as strategic acts (Burgoon & Hale, 1988) to attain organizational goals. The value is in the understanding of how communication expectancy violations can impact the progression of change in the organization.
The delivery of change messages, particularly ones around downsizing/layoffs can be tricky and require strategic planning to deliver. The focus on employees leaving the organization is needed and there are impacts to others in the organization as well. Psychological data on the impact of layoffs has noted that individuals going through significant life transitions often exhibit behavior that is similar to grieving (Eby & Buch, 1998). This is why care and attention to communication is vital for those leaving the organization as well as those continuing their employment. Employees surviving a layoff may work harder to maintain their job while others may feel resentment and reduce their effort (Petzall, Parker, & Stoeberl, 2000). Another segment of the survivor population may not change their performance. This is why management operating in a change environment should be aware of the consequences of the actions of their organization. Organizations need to recognize that what workers perceive as happening will be what dictates their reactions (Petzall et al., 2000).

**Organizational change communication and EV theory.** Regardless of the reasons for downsizing, the message is hard to deliver. It can matter little if the message is directed at the employees who will be leaving the organization or to the survivors left behind. More than a majority of organizations have programs in place to help impacted employees handle their transition to the unemployment line (Appelbaum & Delage, 1997). Very few programs, however, have been identified for the “survivors” of the reorganization. The remedy for survivor syndrome is managing perceptions and communication (Appelbaum & Delage, 1997). Poor communication creates misunderstanding. Management communication about change often “falls short of fulfilling employees’ need for information and predictability” (Bordia et al., 2006, p. 604). How the messages are delivered and understood are important for the organization to move their employees through change and move forward. Part of managing communication is
balancing what people expect and what they respond to. Knowing the audience and communication expectancies can set the right foundation for strategic communication and is imperative to the health of an organization. This is especially true in times of change and uncertainty.

Organizational change creates uncertainty. As Deetz, Tracy, and Simpson (2000) summarize, “despite the difficulties of change, change does happen” (p. 42). Executives can communicate about anything they want, but they cannot communicate about everything (Clampitt & DeKoch, 2000). When communication groups target message retention at 20 percent (IABC, 2012), what an organization is saying becomes very important because it can be a gamble of what part of the message is retained and understood. Communication choices of executives become the perceived communication strategy and need to be closely reviewed when communicating about change. Executive and management reputation can impact the reception of change messages and these aspects need to be incorporated when building a strategic change and communication plan.

Strategic communication is an imperative to organizational success. Dolphin (2005) says that internal communication is a strategic imperative. Many factors, including employee engagement, consistently help organizations reach goals and foster a strong organizational culture where members actively engage in ways to help the business succeed. Organizational change can undermine culture which is why communication is important. Employee surveys have suggested that clear, honest communications are important to them as they look to navigate uncertainty and build a relationship with their employer (Towers Watson, 2007). Dolphin (2005) outlines a few areas that internal communication accomplishes: corporate identification, informing, change, and motivation. Since communication can accomplish these things,
communication plays a “central role in strengthening the understanding between the employee and the company” (Dolphin, 2005, p. 173). How an organization understands their employees will dictate which strategies are best for delivering tough messages. For example, a mix of high credibility tactics is better than using only one or two tactics with an audience (Potter, 2012). A key to effective communication is to understand how employees process messages and EV theory provides a way to look at how messages are processed based on the expectation of delivery.

Applying EV theory, one could say that violating the expectation of employees can help or hinder those organizational messages. Interconnections between relationship development and interactions can shed light on communicator reward valence, a key component of EV theory. An example is how a boss and subordinate perceive their relationship affects their work-related interactions. There are dynamics in communication that drive both close and arms-length relationships of organizational members (Barry & Crant, 2000). Relationships impact communication in organizations.

Expectancies gain importance in social interactions because of the fact that they persevere and influence information processing (Burgoon & Le Poire, 1993). Expectancies and expectancy violations have a role in the evaluation of communicators and their communication behavior and play a part in how the recipient processes information. It has been further suggested that the communication itself is not inconsequential (Burgoon & Le Poire, 1994). This is an important factor in setting a communication strategy to support organizational change through appropriate messaging. Key messages are important and need to be supported by credible communication behavior, which include delivery by sender. In summary, messages and
the delivery by senders can produce positive communication processing by the recipients (Burgoon & LePoire, 1994).

There is very little research applying EV theory to organizational communication, specifically organizational changes. One study that applied EV theory to expectancies in the workplace involved the perception of swearing. Johnson and Lewis (2010) suggested that “hearers” view swearing in formal settings more unexpected than swearing in social situations. This study proposed a link between degree of surprise of the swearing and the perception of the speaker being incompetent. The study’s findings were consistent with the point that messages influence speaker evaluations (Burgoon & LePoire, 1993). However, this study had limitations in the sense that the sample consisted of college students and evaluating their perception of violations in a workplace environment could be limited due to life and professional, on-the-job experience. This study also did not factor in third-party perceptions of messages, which can be an important aspect of organizational change messages when survivors of the change are also processing what was told to their departing colleagues.

Another look at EV theory in the workplace focused on the generational perspective of how expectancy violations are reflected among the Millennial generation. Millennials are motivated to have an impact on their organization and favor open communication with their supervisors (Meyers & Sadaghiani, 2010). It was noted that Millennials are more likely to have different perspectives about supervisor-subordinate relationships and ways that communication and information technologies can be used. This difference is seen as a broader perspective of these organizational components and that these Millennial perspectives and behaviors can be seen as opportunities, not obstacles (Meyers & Sadaghiani, 2010). If an organization has a significant employee population of Millennials, for example, they would want to look at how
violating what Millennials expect could help or hinder the messages they want this audience to understand. Another aspect to the generational differences is how an organization may modify or adapt their communication style in the attempt to accommodate a multi-generational workforce. What may violate one generation’s expectations may not have the same effect on a different generation due to their generation-specific preferences. This can be important to note for organizations with a multi-generational workforce where change initiatives may require a multi-channel approach to a communication strategy that include strategies for particular segments of the organization.

When applying EV theory in a business setting of organizational change, those delivering the messages will need to find a balance between message, delivery method, and how they are perceived by the recipients to determine the most effective way to communicate and factor in how expectancy violations can help or hinder what they are trying to achieve. A step in the assessment process is to look at the structure and relationships within an organization and how these relationships influence or impact how communication is received among organizational members. This will help management have a better understanding of what may violate, positively or negatively, the expectations of their employees.

**Foundations for effective organizational communication.** We create relationships through conversation and organizations are created through conversation (Conrad & Poole, 2005). These conversations create shared views of organizational life, which is why a component to effective organizational communication is the impact of leadership on the communication process. How an organization approaches change can depend on its organizational structure. For example, a bureaucratic organization can change its rules and processes or a relational organization can involve employees in change initiatives (Conrad &
Poole, 2005). These aspects are important to take into account if using EV theory as a strategic tool to communicate. Knowing how the organization operates is important to get a general idea of what could violate employee expectations. A bureaucratic organization may surprise employees in a positive way if it takes a relational approach to change messages. A relational organization may violate expectations in a negative way if employees were taken out of change activities in favor of management-dictated changes communicated in a top-down fashion. For example, members of an organization where they have historically had a say in the implementation of new customer service programs may feel as if their role in the organization has changed if management makes a decision to implement a new program without their input. Regardless of the type of organization, poor communication can occur “when upper-managers preach the values but do little to get directly involved in the change effort” (Deetz, Tracy, & Simpson, 2000, p. 45). Poor communication can impact how leaders are perceived which is an important to how messages are received.

The concept of communicator reward valence from EV theory is another factor in change communications. The notion of communicator reward valence is a key to how expectancy violations can help or hinder organizational change messages. The reputation, either positive or negative, of the person delivering the tough messages can impact message reception beyond the method of delivery. This is why leadership and communication are so closely linked. Leadership style includes communication and it is rare for communication not to be mentioned. This is also why employee engagement surveys, employee satisfaction surveys, and leadership reviews (employee, peer or 360 reviews) include questions about communication competency.

Employees may view certain leaders as being key influencers in an organization. Employees also see leaders as a source of information and this is why “constant, candid, two-
way” communication is important (Wetlaufer, 1998, p. 34). Deetz, Tracy and Simpson (2000) echo the importance of two-way communication by stating “communication takes two – one to have meaning and send as message and another to hear it and decide what it means” (p. 45). While surveys may show that immediate supervisors are the preferred source of important information, “skip-level” leaders also may influence in employee message retention (Detert & Tevino, 2010). Supervisors and skip-level leaders have influence and are both resources for subordinates to “speak up” to. This is important when implementing change in an organization. Communication is multi-directional and feedback mechanisms are important to close the loop between management and employees.

Skip-level leadership often influences beliefs and behaviors in direct and indirect ways (Detert and Trevino, 2010). A direct example given is when a sales agent refers to a regional manager. Knowing that skip-level leaders have this influence is important. When ignored, it can cause employees to feel that they do not have a voice in their organization and that leadership is caught up in hierarchy and not listening to concerns. Managers must acknowledge their own responsibility in the flow of communication. It is important for leaders to know how hierarchy impacts voice and how that relates to their own identity within the organization. Their communication reward valence in respect to EV theory is tied to this reputation. Knowing and embracing the importance of employee voice can be considered a component of overall organizational health and that has consequences on areas including engagement and retention of the survivors of organizational change.

A term often used in human resources revolves around the employee life cycle. This cycle starts with recruitment, follows through stages of employment, and ends with exiting the organization. Many companies have programs that address new employees, including new-hire
orientation and probation periods. This focus on the new employee and making them feel welcome and assisting them in becoming acclimated to their new work environment makes sense. Reducing new-hire uncertainty helps the organization keep moving and is critical to organizational adjustment (Teboul, 1995). Likewise, when the life cycle ends for an employee, the organization needs to keep moving with the incumbents left behind. Again, most organizations have programs in place for departing employees (Appelbaum & Delage, 1997), but not many programs for change survivors. Effective organizational communication needs to bridge this gap to ensure forward progress. There is a gap if an organization focuses on new-hire orientation and off-boarding programs and ignores those who continue to do the work on a daily basis. It should be no surprise to organizations that have undergone tremendous change that results of employee engagement surveys reveal less than ideal results when the focus is on new-hire and reorganization activities. Brockner et al. (2004) note that employees can exhibit “lower organizational commitment in the presence of a layoff” (p. 95). The remedy to “survivor syndrome” (Appelbaum & Delage, 1997) is managing perceptions and communications. Employees cannot support changes if they do not know or do not understand what is going on. Wetlaufer (1998) stresses the importance of investing in the survivors. A company must create a way to help change. Wetlaufer also mentions in a case study that there is a “golden opportunity” to have the workforce by tapping into top employees to help peers. This can lead to the “emergence of a group of energized leaders of change” (p. 36).

Seeking understanding can help reduce uncertainty and help the organization overall (Gallagher & Sias, 2009). This is very applicable to survivors of reorganizations or restructures. Management has the opportunity to help reduce uncertainty if they understand that information-seeking is a process that affects everyone. Survivors are considered to be in a good position to
look at the fairness of the organizational change. Surviving employees have been found to be more committed to the organization if they thought impacted employees were equitably treated (Appelbaum & Delage, 1997). This, in turn, impacts how surviving employees approach their jobs and react within the organization. Keeping uncertainty reduction and understanding in mind can help organizations with productivity, especially in the long run (Gallagher & Sias, 2009).

One way for an employee to reduce their uncertainty is to evaluate the sender of the message to determine how credible they are. This perception will impact how the employee processes the message. If the climate of the organization is one of openness and trust, controversial communications are more likely to viewed or interpreted favorably (Appelbaum & Delage, 1997).

A strong change communication plan starts and ends with knowing the audience and how reactions to message may impact their overall reception. Attention to the ethical, psychological, as well as perception of leadership is important so an organization can do its best to move forward during difficult times. The Opinion Research Foundation’s “Ouch Point” survey (2009) indicates that employees are two times as likely to go the extra mile for the organization if they are satisfied with the ways in which their organization communicates difficult decisions. This extra mile includes the behavior of being four times as likely to recommend their company to others.

Connecting this together means that understanding how violating employee communication expectations may help or hinder what the organization is trying to communicate. It is in the best interest of the organization to find out which way that could go so programs can be put in place to mitigate any issues and move forward, successfully, during a time of change.
Rationale

The purpose of this study is to investigate the impact of violating the expectation of employees when delivering organizational change messages. While there is some research that applies expectancy violations in organizational settings, this study applies EV theory in a different way through the lens of organizational change. How employees synthesize and react to change messages is important for the organization to minimize impact and move forward. Violations can negatively impact the ability to move forward. These are the following research questions:

1. What do employees consider a communication violation for organizational change messages (layoff messages)?
2. How do expectancy violations impact the reception of layoff messages?

Based on prior research on EV theory and organizational change communications, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1: Employees prefer organizational change message be delivered in a face-to-face format,
H2: If channel expectation is violated, it will cause employees to feel more uncertain about the change occurring.
Chapter 3: SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY

Scope

The sample for this study came from an insurance company by targeting a certain population. The first parameter is that employees are in roles where they do not manage people, known as “individual contributors.” The definition of “manage” at this company is that they are not responsible for performance management, salary and bonus administration, hiring or firing of employees. This does mean they may have “manager” in their title because they manage a function, but are considered individual contributors since they do not directly manage people. Employees in roles where they direct work of project teams are not considered managers and were included in the sample. The reason to exclude managers is that they are often the senders of layoff messages. They also can have additional context about the changes in the organization and may understand or react differently to the change messages compared to employees who are impacted (losing their job) or those continuing with the organization (survivors).

The insurance company has roughly 3,000 employees. Of these employees, approximately 450 manage people in supervisor, manager, director, or executive roles. These 450 employees would be excluded and a sample would be drawn from the remaining 2,550 employees. Of these employees, roughly 900 work in one location, which will be more convenient for face-to-face focus groups. This location will be referred to as “Location A.” This is the second-highest concentrated population of employees for this company. Of these 900 people, about 650 are employees of the company and about 500 of those are in individual contributor roles.

A list of individual contributor employees from “Location A” was obtained. This list included name, role, gender, location (to ensure accuracy), and e-mail address. A first cut of the
list was done to identify how many male and female employees are listed. A random-number table was used to identify a sample to invite to participate in the study. This tabulation of gender helped compare sample demographics and have a reference point to see how the random-number table sample compared to the overall population of the original list. Literature and published tables indicate that a representative sample from this group would be about 300 employees (Neuman, 2005). For the qualitative nature of human behavior and reactions and to promote a manageable focus group schedule within the given time constraints, the sample for this study was in the 20 employee range.

Invitations to participate in this study were submitted via e-mail to this sample of the population and asked for their preference of day and time to attend a focus group. Fourteen of the 20 responded and attended a focus group session.

**Methodology**

The methodology for this study made use of focus groups. EV theory is interpersonal in nature and focuses on how interpersonal messages are received. Feedback from recipients about these messages is important to ascertain if the violation helped or hindered the message. Focus groups can allow for observation and provide a venue for activity, which can help provide answers to the research questions. The questions about expectancy violations require more than a survey could help answer. There are reactions and emotions involved and getting a group to talk about their reactions would be meaningful data. It could bring up items not thought of to capture on a survey.

Focus groups also allow the ability to role play or put something in front of participants, like an e-mail or memo, and get their reactions to the content and delivery which could support the impact of violations. Past EV theory research used these types of methods where behaviors
were observed in settings where expectancy violations were manipulated (Burgoon & Hale, 1988; Burgoon & Le Poire, 1993; Burgoon & Le Poire, 1994). The goal of this focus group is not to manipulate situations, but rather collect information from the group and their points of view on the topic of layoff message delivery. How the focus group discusses layoff messages and how they expect to receive them can lead to rich discussion. Focus groups provide insight into what people talk about and how they talk about it (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). A survey, or similar quantitative approach, would not allow for rich responses because of the risk that respondents usually focus on the goal of completing the survey vs. spending quality time with providing answers.

Focus groups were structured to have 4-5 participants in each session and last between 60-90 minutes. Three separate sessions took place in a company conference room. Each participant had a questionnaire to fill out and takes notes on to reflect on their responses to the activities. These note sheets were collected at the end of each session.

The goal of the focus group was to present organizational change messages that align with and violate expectations. Focus groups, and the depth of discussion resulting from them, provided insight about how participants felt about the methods of delivering difficult layoff messages. The impacts of layoffs are complex, as are the reactions and information processing done by non-impacted employees who can experience “survivor syndrome” (Appelbaum & Delage, 1997). These reactions are the key to answering the research questions and to find the links between expectancy violations and the reception of layoff messages. Much like the manipulation of violations in past studies where behaviors were observed and monitored, the analysis of focus group data provides similar, if not more in-depth, information about reactions to expectancy violations relating to layoff messages. To get to that point, the focus group
discussions were based on these scenarios presented to each group based on the hypothesis of wanting to receive organizational change messages face-to-face:

- Layoff information is given face-to-face. The face-to-face would be role play with a participant volunteering to be the “manager” giving the message. Ask for feedback on the message and the person delivering the message.

The violating scenario would be hearing about the layoff via e-mail:

- The e-mail/memo example would be distributed in the focus group for participants to read during the session and react and give feedback.

The questionnaire/note sheet was utilized for participants to reflect on their thoughts that they then report out in the focus group. Additional follow up questions were asked and answers noted and/or audio recorded for text transcription after the session. See Appendix A for the focus group notes sheet template. In-session notes also included notes about nonverbal behaviors associated with the group conversation to help provide additional context when analyzing data after the sessions.

**Analysis**

Based on the overall topic of expectancy violations and organizational change messages, a key was created in expectation of particular themes relating to the two research questions that could arise in the focus group discussions. In particular, comments about how participants felt about layoff messages and the impact of the delivery of those messages are most important as it relates to EV theory. Themes around understanding the message and how participants would feel about the person delivering the message were also important. There is a difference about how participants felt about delivery and how they felt about the person delivering the message and analysis of the data looked for differentiation in those types of comments. This relates to EV
theory because the violation in delivery can impact how a person views the one delivering the message. If this is negative, it can impact the ability of the organization to move forward, as discussed in the previous chapter.

When reviewing the audio recordings and notes, comments relating to the themes were tallied. While reviewing the combined sources of data, if other themes came up that were not expected, those were noted and tallied as appropriate during the review of the audio recordings, focus group participant notes, and researcher notes from each of the session.

The themes were then ranked, based on tallies, to get a sense of the popular reactions or the topics of layoff communications that the focus groups gravitated toward. These themes were then reviewed a second time against the audio recordings to ensure that the comments and anecdotes aligned with the actual conversation (represented original intent of the respondents). This helps to ensure accurate representation of the data.

Confidentiality and Anonymity

While participant identity was known to be able to facilitate sending invitations to the focus groups, pre-focus group and focus group materials did not ask for information that can identify who the participants were. Answers to questions were not linked to a particular participant. The only role that could be ascertained from the sample would be that of “individual contributor” since the sampling method of the participants already fell into the predetermined category of individual contributor for purposes of the study.

Confidentiality is linked to the anonymity of any reported information through survey or written materials. Also, participants were told in advance when invited to participate that confidentiality is a part of the process by reinforcing confidentiality messages in the pre-focus
group survey and focus group materials. They were also reminded verbally of confidentiality participating in the actual focus groups.

When focus group data was transcribed, names were not associated with the transcribed content. All written notes on focus group materials were reviewed and any identifying information was blacked out before consolidation and examination of the information was performed.

**Reliability and Validity**

The reliability of the data is centered in the method. The discussions of the focus groups are dependable because the data is coming directly from the participants in the discussions. Dependability also comes from the consistent manner of the multiple focus groups, asking the same questions, and consistent facilitation style. The method is repeatable and reliability could be influenced by moderator bias or difference in facilitation style.

Validity is based on using methods that provide valid data (Rubin, et al., 2010). The validity of the data from the focus groups is strong because the method of collection. Focus groups allow the moderator to include member checking as part of the process. Member checking of participants contributions to the conversation during the focus group sessions strengthened validity to ensure the statements were understood in the right context. Evaluation and use of verbatim statements also increased validity since the data and any quotations are from the direct source. There is some external validity because employees in other companies in this economic climate will most likely have experience dealing with organizational layoffs and similar focus groups with those employees could share similar themes.
Chapter 4: THE STUDY

Introduction

This study explored how expectancy violations impact layoff messages in organizations. Focus groups were used to gather data on reactions to layoff messages given face-to-face and via e-mail. Three focus groups were held over the span of two weeks. Two focus groups consisted of five people each and a final focus group had four participants. This chapter will detail the process of collecting and analyzing the data and discuss the findings as they relate to the expectancy violations theory and organization change communications.

Results of the Study

The focus groups, as outlined in the previous chapter, utilized two activities in order to compare reactions of face-to-face versus e-mail communication of organizational change messages. Each focus group started with the face-to-face role play of a manager giving the news to his/her department. After reflection of that role play through writing notes, each focus group read the e-mail communication of the same organizational change. Each focus group spent time reflecting on both exercises, individually, on their notes sheet (See Appendix A) before group discussion.

Of the 14 participants, all were confirmed via their complete note sheets to be individual contributors at the company. Individual contributor is a person who does not directly manage people. Ten participants were female and four were men. Those are the only two demographic questions asked of the group to identify on their individual notes sheet before starting the session. The gender breakdown did not match the demographics of the company. Company-reported gender is 56 percent female and 44 percent male. Gender demographics at the location
used to obtain the sample is 58 percent female and 42 percent male. Focus group gender breakdown was 71 percent female, 29 percent male.

The role play instructions and e-mail communication used in the focus groups are below:

### Role Play Instructions

- **Your Role:** Manager
- **Role Summary:** You are the manager and have to bring your team together to share the news that the decision has been made to reorganize, which means some departments have been impacted by layoffs – including your department.
- **Attendees:** Your entire department/direct reports, minus those impacted by the layoffs

### The Script

Thanks, everyone, for taking the time to meet in person today. As you know, our company has faced some tough decisions lately due to the economy. Our leadership teams have been meeting regularly to decide what kind of change is needed to endure this downturn and every area has been asked to look at their expenses. The reason I have brought you together today is to share some of the decisions that have been made that impact our group.

Earlier today, two members of our department were notified that their jobs will be eliminated in the next 60 days. We are committed to helping them with transition services and they will be with us until their last day. We want to respect our colleagues during this difficult time and be as supportive as we can as they go through this change. It is a change for us as well.

I know this is hard news to hear and I want to hear your questions or concerns.
E-mail Read by Participants

To: My Direct Reports

Subject: Important Org Announcement

These have been difficult time for our company, and like every other area, we have been tasked with reducing expenses. We have been thinking about our work and how we can continue to improve through automation, redistribution of work, reducing duplication of effort and other activities.

Earlier today, two people on our team were informed that their roles have been impacted. Each employee will have a formal, 60-day notification period to give them as much time as possible to prepare. We are committed to supporting our employees and treating them with respect and consideration during this transition. I know that I can count on you to support your colleagues as they prepare to transition.

I am available if you have questions. Feel free to stop by or set up time to talk.

When reviewing the data from all three focus group sessions, three themes emerged: communication preferences (expectancies) for layoff messages, what happens when expectancy about layoff messages is violated, and the importance of message content of layoff communications. Each is explained below.

Communication Preferences (Expectancies). Focus group participants made it clear in every session that face-to-face was the preferred communication channel for organizational layoff messages. For purposes of this study, “preference” is the equivalent of “expectancy.” In a
specific follow-up question during group discussion, a verbal poll was used to ask “which method was the more expected method to deliver these types of messages?” Thirteen out of 14 participants indicated “face-to-face” and one participant said that both methods were expected and needed. See Appendix B for the wrap-up/additional questions used in the sessions.

E-mail delivery of a similar message was met with more uncertainty and more questions about the decision to lay off colleagues. The difference of face-to-face and e-mail messages in terms of preference revolved around credibility and sensitivity. E-mail felt “too impersonal” and was identified in two out of the three sessions as a follow-up mechanism instead of the primary communication vehicle. Two participants in two different focus groups mentioned the need for both vehicles to provide a more comprehensive approach to such a difficult topic. This spurred discussion in the first group to identify their preferences, sequencing, and message content. Message content will be discussed later. Preference and sequencing in that focus group leaned toward face-to-face as the first method, with e-mail and/or face-to-face follow-up. Some focus group participants mentioned how beneficial a multi-faceted or multi-channel communication strategy would be to help them navigate the change coming to the organization. Those discussions made it clear that face-to-face would be the channel that would need to come first for this type of message.

**Themes of Violating Expectations.** Upon reflection of the two delivery methods, participants gravitated to their feelings about layoffs and how they would want to receive those messages from their manager.

The expectancy violation in these focus groups emphasized some word choices. In the role play, most participants mentioned “worry” or a synonym. There was worry about their job, the future of the company, and worry about their departing colleagues. When asked to reflect on
the e-mail communication, the word “worry” was replaced and sometimes re-emphasized by saying words like “angst” or “concern” or other words with stronger connotation. See Appendix C for common reactions to the focus group questions in Tables 1, 2, and 3.

Participants were asked to reflect on the person delivering the messages. Most participants mentioned that the person delivering the face-to-face message had a “hard message to deliver” and that the decision to lay off staff did not reflect on the person delivering the message. Some comments got to the point: “She was the deliverer of the message” and “Someone had to tell us and it wouldn’t be top management.” The difficult to deliver message resonated across all three focus groups. In some cases it tempered the feelings of worry and “what about me” messages, but those two feelings were still apparent. For example, participants felt that an in-person approach to such difficult messages allows for the opportunity to ask questions and maybe reduce the worry they felt. Some acknowledge it would take more than one face-to-face session to feel better about what was going on. However, the ability to hear the news with fellow colleagues at the same time was appreciated.

Where violations had impact was in the reflection of the person delivering the e-mail message, as well as how that reflected on the organization as a whole. While both delivery methods produced worry among the participants, some of the words used to express feelings toward the person sharing the bad news included “coward” and “lack of trust.” Those words were not mentioned in the notes or debrief of the face-to-face role play. The word choice was markedly more negative as participants mentioned that credibility was an issue. Integrity and a lack of respect were also mentioned. Participants also questioned the confidence of the manager and how if an employee questions credibility and confidence of management, it only causes, as three participants mentioned, “more questions than the communication answers.”
Content of Communication. Expectancy violations can create more questions than answers and lead into another theme for the layoff communications. Message content was mentioned in all three focus group sessions. A lot of the content discussions tied back to the two delivery channels they were asked to reflect on and compare. The overarching theme of the groups revolved around the need for honest, open, and consistent content. It did not matter if it was face-to-face, e-mail, or a combination of both. All three groups spent time talking about what was being communicated, even though content was not a direct question asked in the focus groups.

All participants recognized that the decision to embark on layoffs is not an easy one for a company to make. These decisions are not made lightly and that means that there should have been a strategy as to why these changes were made. All three focus groups mentioned that the content of the communications needed to explain what was going on and what was going to happen. As much as participants wanted to know what would happen to their departing colleagues, they also wanted to know about their jobs and the future direction of the organization. A well-crafted communication would include these things in the content to address concerns and the overall worry of those left behind to deal with the aftermath of the layoffs. The communication, ideally, would help them ease their fears, “worries” for themselves, and concern for those impacted by the decisions.

Discussion

The study identified a preference for receiving layoff communications. It was apparent, in all three focus groups, that face-to-face was the preferred method of delivery. The study also identified issues and concerns that could arise if that method of delivery was changed in a way that violated their expectations.
Reviewing the hypotheses of the study is helpful when looking at the themes of the focus groups and how they reflect on the expectancy violations theory and organizational change messages. The first hypothesis stated that employees would prefer face-to-face delivery of layoff messages. The feedback from the focus groups supports this hypothesis. Face-to-face was indicated as their preferred method, 13 to 1, when polling the group in each session.

The second hypothesis of the study was about the impacts of channel expectation violation and that this violation would cause employees to feel more uncertain about the change occurring. While the focus group feedback consistently brought up uncertainty through mentions of “what happens to me” type of messages, the violating scenario of e-mail delivery brought up more uncertainty. There was uncertainty about the change, uncertainty about the person delivering the message, and uncertainty about the organization. The lack of trust and credibility due to how the message was delivered lead participants to feel uncertain about the change and what that change would accomplish in the organization.

One of the themes was more interesting than the rest due to the way it came about in the sessions. Content of the layoff communications was not a question that was directly asked in the focus group sessions, but became a topic of discussion in all three focus groups. It became apparent listening to the participants, and in reviewing the notes, that the content of the change communication is about as important as the way in which the communication is delivered. This was an interesting theme considering the difference in perception between face-to-face and e-mail communications. The discussion of content touched on both delivery methods, as if to suggest that great content could make an e-mail a little more tolerable as a channel for change communications. However, even in those discussions, face-to-face was still preferred and
expected over e-mail delivery. It was also noted in all three groups that solid content coming from their manager would help them navigate the upcoming change.

Expectancy violations theory suggests that there are times when violating expectations can be beneficial (Burgoon, 1978). In this example of layoff messages, it is apparent that violating expectations does not work in the benefit of the communicator and may lead to more uncertainty than the topic of the communication naturally brings to the surface. What this data supports is that organizations should make sure they understand their audience. They need to do this to make organizational change more bearable and easier to implement. Understanding that violating how employees want to receive these types of messages will hinder their efforts to move forward. Focus group participants repeatedly mentioned how the e-mail channel caused issues of credibility. This aligns with the earlier mention about trust. If there is organizational openness and trust, controversial communications are more likely to viewed or interpreted favorably (Appelbaum & Delage, 1997). Again, keeping uncertainty reduction and understanding in mind can help organizations with productivity, especially in the long run (Gallagher & Sias, 2009).

The philosophical framework for this study was also apparent in the focus group discussions. The word respect was brought up numerous times by participants and indicated as a something that was lacking in the scenario where e-mail delivery violated their expectations. This is a reminder for organizations to keep in mind that the decisions they make regarding the delivery of difficult messages have a respect component. According to these focus groups, employees will want to feel respected and if they do not feel that respect, they will feel more uncertain about the changes the organization is making. This uncertainty would make it difficult to support the decisions being made by the organization.
Chapter 5. SUMMARIES AND CONCLUSIONS

Limitations

The first limitation of this study is the gender breakdown in the focus group participants. Males were not represented in comparison to the overall male demographic in the company. This leaves one demographic voice perhaps slightly muted in the discussions, even though all males in the focus groups participated openly and actively in the activities and feedback.

Another limitation was time. The discussions provided rich content but did feel limited due to the time available. The set-up of the study laid out up to an hour and a half of focus group time, but with the constraints of professional work schedules, being able to use that entire time was difficult due to work constraints of the participants. This leads to the question about uncovering other themes if discussions could continue for more time.

The final limitation was around the topic itself. Again, while the discussion provided great insight and content, the sensitivity of the topic required role play of a fictional situation. Participants did well to reflect on the role play as fictional, but true emotional reaction to an organizational layoff could not be achieved. Ethically, this was the right decision. From a true reaction to expectancy violations, it may not be perceived as a complete, true reaction to the situation due to the role play aspect.

Further Study Recommendations

Further studies of expectancy violations and organizational change messages could include a look at generational differences. As mentioned in Chapter 2, differences in generation can require different approaches in a communication plan to address each segment of the organization. It would be interesting to see if there is a difference in preference between older
and younger generations for hearing about organizational change messages and how any difference in preference is impacted by violating those expectations.

Other study recommendations can include differences in gender and reactions to violating expectations. Of interest could be a difference in how men and women view violations, the level of emotions, or impact to how work is approached after change messages are shared. Gender differences could give insight into message content and organizational follow up strategies with “survivors” as part of the overall communication and change management plans.

**Conclusion**

The results of the study support that face-to-face is the preferred method for delivering organizational change messages and that violating that expectation will produce uncertainty among surviving employees. This uncertainty will undermine the work done by those who plan and execute the changes. All work done to mitigate fears will not be as effective as planned because employees will ask questions to other employees, possibly gossip and speculate about the changes, instead of going to the sources they should approach for their questions and concerns to be answered. There is also the possibility of making employees feel less valued and respected. The “survivors” are important to moving forward and their uncertainty will make that process take longer. Possible outcomes include decreased productivity and lack of respect or reputation damage to senior leadership.

This study can help inform strategic communication plans to factor in how messages are delivered. Channel selection is important and these plans should factor that into key messages, sequencing, and delivery. Furthermore, the results should help communicators counsel and coach senior leadership when they start planning to make changes in the organization. A strong strategic plan can help guide leadership to success and take the steps necessary to keep the
remaining workforce engaged. While it seems impossible to say that any layoff feels successful, how the organization emerges from the change is important for continuity and progress toward goals and strategy.
References


Appendix A - Focus Group Questionnaire/Notes Page

Thank you for participating in this focus group. Please answer the first two questions. The remaining portions of this questionnaire correspond to activities and discussions that will happen during the session and you will answer/make notes for those at that time. These activities do not represent actual activities at the company. You will be given directions to turn to certain pages during the session. Please refrain from moving ahead. As always, your answers are confidential. With that in mind, please do not write your name on this notes page.

Gender:

[  ] Male  [  ] Female

Role: Are you…

[  ] Individual Contributor (no direct reports)  [  ] Manager (with direct reports)

Activity 1

What is your reaction to the message given during the exercise?

How did it make you feel?

How did it make you feel about the person who delivered the message?

Did you have any questions?

Activity 2

What is your reaction to the message you read?

How did it make you feel?
How did it make you feel about the person who delivered the message?

Did you have any questions?
Appendix B: Wrap-Up/Possible Additional Questions

Which method was the more expected method to deliver these types of messages?

How did the non-expected method compare in terms of how you felt about the message?

How did it make you feel about the delivery?

How did it make you feel about the organization?

How did it make you feel about the decisions that were made by the organization?
## Appendix C: Focus Group Reactions to Questions – Tables 1-3

### Table 1: Common Reactions to Activity #1: Face-to-Face Delivery

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions: What was your reaction to the message given during the exercise?</th>
<th>Focus Group 1</th>
<th>Focus Group 2</th>
<th>Focus Group 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Worry” “Shock” “Serious news and glad hearing it in-person” “What is going to happen next?”</td>
<td>“What’s next?” “Sort of shocked” “Wondering why this decision was made” “Glad I heard it from my manager”</td>
<td>“Surprised” “Given the economy I guess it makes sense” “This is probably the beginning of more discussions” “Good to hear it in-person even though it is tough to hear”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| How did it make you feel? | “Sad” “Worried for my job” “Will this happen to me?” “Uncertain about the future” | “Sad for those leaving” “What does it mean for me” “Worry” | “Concerned about my job” “Is this it? Is there more?” “Sad about the changes” |

| How did it make you feel about the person who delivered the message? | “They are just delivering the message” “They didn’t make the decision” “Has to be tough to do this. I wouldn’t want to do it” “They didn’t have a choice” “Glad it was my manager sharing this with me and not someone I don’t know as well” | “Hard to deliver, especially when you have no control over the situation” “Only the messenger” | “Not their fault” “They are delivering and it must be tough” “Doesn’t make me feel differently about them as a person” “They had to do it” |
Table 2: Common Reactions to Activity #2: E-mail Delivery

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions:</th>
<th>Focus Group 1</th>
<th>Focus Group 2</th>
<th>Focus Group 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| What was your reaction to the message given during the exercise? | “E-mail?”
   “This wasn’t ideal for me”
   “I have questions”
   “Do I get to ask questions?” | “That is a lot of change to have to read via e-mail”
   “Would have preferred hearing it in-person” | “Great, another layoff”
   “What’s next for me?”
   “What’s happening to others?” |
| How did it make you feel?                        | “Frustrated”
   “Angry”
   “Confused”
   “Anxiety” | “Indifferent…and that’s not good”
   “Angst”
   “I don’t trust them” | “Upset”
   “Angry”
   “Confused”
   “I don’t feel respected and that doesn’t feel good” |
| How did it make you feel about the person who delivered the message? | “Mad at them. This could be handled better”
   “Cowardly”
   “This is just too impersonal for how important the message is” | “I’m not pleased, this is so important”
   “I don’t feel respected by my manager or the organization for making this choice” | “Our manager is a chicken”
   “This is not appropriate for e-mail” |
| How would you compare the two different methods of delivery? | “In-person is best. It may not be the easiest, but it is the best for everyone”
   “A manager is a coward for using e-mail for this” | “E-mail is impersonal”
   “I don’t like e-mail for this. I feel a lack of respect”
   “I don’t have faith in the organization” | “E-mail is not right for this”
   “Face-to-face is needed for sensitivity reasons”
   “Face-to-face would help me reduce my stress.” |
## Table 3: Common Reactions to Follow-Up Questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions:</th>
<th>Focus Group 1</th>
<th>Focus Group 2</th>
<th>Focus Group 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Which method was the more expected method to deliver these types of messages?** | Face-to-face: 5  
E-mail: 0 | Face-to-face: 4  
E-mail: 0  
Both: 1 | Face-to-face: 4  
E-mail: 0 |
| **How did the non-expected method compare in terms of how you felt about the message?** | “It was colder”  
“Impersonal”  
“Lacked respect” | “Very impersonal”  
“Makes me want to tune out” | “I don’t get it and I want to talk to others about it”  
“Felt very impersonal and a weak way out” |
| **How did it make you feel about the delivery?** | “Why e-mail when you can talk about it?”  
“E-mail is not ideal” | “Think before you announce. E-mail, really?”  
“E-mail is not great for this” | “I wouldn’t do it this way.”  
“Delivery is important. Don’t they see that?” |
| **How did it make you feel about the organization?** | “Lack of respect for employees”  
“Makes hierarchy more apparent”  
“Anger” | “Why are you hiding behind e-mail?”  
“I feel like a minion”  
“Where is the respect for our work?” | “Someone is chicken”  
“They didn’t think this through”  
“This is going to be a mess” |
| **How did it make you feel about the decisions that were made by the organization?** | “There is an issue of integrity”  
“Maybe this wasn’t a smart decision, but I guess we’ll find out”  
“Not sure I would support this change” | “Credibility. It is that simple”  
“Leadership failed on this one. They don’t know us” | “Sounds like a rushed decision if they delivered it via e-mail”  
“I would question if it was the right decisions”  
“Lack of leadership” |