

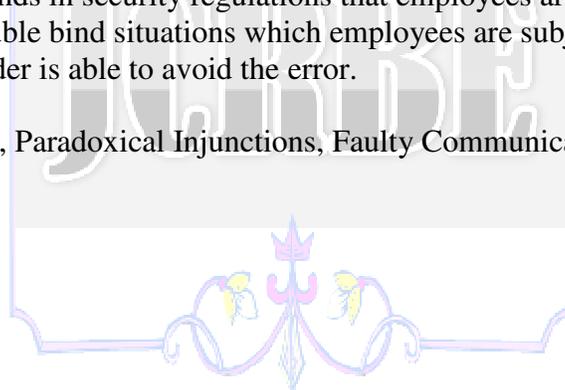
The double bind in organizational communications

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Abstract

Case study of a financial institution (anonymous) where employees were required to process high denomination corporate bonds and interest due coupons according to strict security regulations. The security regulations appear at first glance to be compliable, but the study attempts to demonstrate that the ability to comply with the security regulations is illusory and the security regulations constitute a double bind. The study introduces the concepts of context and descriptors to identify a double bind condition imbedded in the communication transaction to which the employees are subjected. The study delves into the cause and effect of a double bind communication transaction and presents the view that double binds are not the result of a paradoxical injunction inherent in the message conveying the double bind, but in the context surrounding the communication transaction. The study includes an interview survey of 150 employees who work in the department where they are required to process bonds and bond interest due coupons in strict compliance with the security regulations. The questionnaire survey reveals pathological behavior patterns exhibited by the employees. The study offer insights into how to identify double binds in security regulations that employees are expected to follow. By being able to identify double bind situations which employees are subjected to as part of their working conditions a reader is able to avoid the error.

Keywords: Double Binds, Paradoxical Injunctions, Faulty Communication Transactions



Introduction

The subject of this study was the Securities Processing Department of a financial organization. This department consisted of 150 employees, most of whom were operative workers, a dozen supervisors, one manager, and one operating officer in charge of the departmental operations. The activities of the employees centered around the receipt of marketable securities in the form of corporate bonds and interest coupons, documenting the receipt of the securities, crediting the account of the bank that sent the securities, placing the securities in the vault, and recovering the securities from the vault when called for by the organization's clients. The securities consisting of corporate bonds and interest coupons are easily negotiable. Anyone presenting a bond or an interest coupon to a financial institution would be paid cash in return for the bond or interest coupon. A bond or coupon could be worth thousands of dollars.

The operative workers were recruited from the general labor market and entered the department as clerks. The educational background of the operative workers was high school level. The supervisors were primarily long-term employees who had worked their way up in the organizational structure. The managers were primarily recruited out of college, and most of them had either an undergraduate or an MBA degree. The operating officer also had an MBA degree.

The physical working environment where the employees worked consisted of either glass partitioning or heavy steel mesh wire enclosures. Other employees worked within the vault which was located in the lower level of the building where there were no windows. The employees were under constant surveillance by closed circuit cameras.

History of the Problem

The department under study was one where the employees handled securities that were negotiable and could be easily converted to cash. For this reason strict regulations were necessary to avoid the theft of the securities. The department was under the strict scrutiny of the Audit Department. The Audit Department formulated strict security controls that covered every aspect of the employees' work. The employees considered the security controls to be unnecessarily time consuming and almost impossible to be productive and still be in strict compliance with them. Four elements of this situation seemed to bear striking resemblance to the structure of a double bind (Sluzki, 1972). The first element is the employees in this department were among the most trusted in the organization. Employees could not advance to working in the securities vault where they were responsible for processing millions of dollars in negotiable (payable to bearer) securities each day unless they were highly trusted by the organization. Yet, paradoxically, the more trusted an employee became, the more he/she was subject to surveillance, accountability, and verification checks. The second element is the employees in the department have authority and responsibilities in certain areas which exceed that of their superiors. For example, executive officers of the organization were not permitted to enter the vault or the work area where the securities were being processed or stored without the express approval of one of the employees, and unless one of the employees escorted the officer through the area. While in the vault or work area the officer was subject to the authority of the employees in regard to the enforcement of all security controls. This reverse authority caused problems when audit reports reprimanded employees for failing to exercise their responsibilities

to make executive officers conform to all aspects of the security controls while in the vault or work areas. A third example of a paradoxical element (Gibney, 2006) is that all employees must work under a security control requirement of full presence and view. This means that at all times one employee must work in the full presence and view of another employee, usually a partner with whom the employee works. The paradox (Koopmans, 1997) arises from the fact that when both employees are engaged in the work of processing securities neither employee can both process securities and watch his or her partner at the same time. Yet under the security controls employees are required to both process securities and watch their partner. Finally, the fourth element is that the possibility of theft creates a situation where management must assume that every employee will steal securities unless there are controls to prevent the theft. Security within the department must be based on the assumption of non-trust.

The morale in the department was low, and there was general employee discontent over the work environment. There was evidence of irritability and confusion associated with the general feeling of low morale. The employees also appeared excessively defensive and insistent upon an inordinate amount of detail in the description of their work activities. Employees frequently complained that they were not able to be as productive as they wanted to be or allowed to provide the type of fast courteous service that they felt should be given to their clients. The employees rationalized the loss of productivity and service by blaming the security controls under which they were forced to work. Additionally, the employees in general evidenced strong symptoms of work anxiety (Bateson, 1956) induced by what they perceived to be threats by management to discharge them if they failed to comply with the security controls.

A survey of the employees in the department, conducted by the Human Resources Department, showed that the employees' problems began to surface immediately following major changes in management policy regarding compliance with the security controls. Apparently following a series of audits conducted by the auditors, a shift took place from high emphasis on productivity and quick service to clients to strict compliance with the security controls aimed at establishing accountability for securities. The employee survey disclosed that the morale problems manifested themselves immediately following the replacement of the former departmental officer with a new officer, who initiated a policy of strict adherence to securities processing regulations. Apparently, the employee morale problems were associated with the changes in work context (Bateson, 1999) from an environment in which productivity and quick courteous service were stressed to an environment in which productivity and quick courteous service were secondary to strict compliance with the security controls. There was very clear evidence of acute employee problems such as low morale. This was related to confusion over the way tasks should be performed, even among experienced employees. There was confusion between operative workers and supervisors pertaining to work procedures and task performance. There was also a feeling of defensiveness and anxiety. Finally, there was an overall feeling of self-consciousness and lack of well being. In discussions held with operative workers and supervisory personnel, it became apparent that the department was not functioning smoothly. The cause of this lack of efficiency was attributable to problems among the operative workers, supervisors, managers, and the senior management of the organization. This overall lack of efficiency was markedly different from the operation of this department in previous years. Because of the radical change in employee relations and employee performance from the past to present years, it was apparent that something occurred within the last two years that was responsible for this change. It appeared that the troubled situation in the department resembled the structural characteristics of double binds (Putnam, 1987). Specifically, the characteristics

were that (1) the employees had a high dependency relationship to the organization and to each other; (2) there was a deterioration in the traditional contexts of interpersonal communication within the department; (3) controls were being issued that established goals which appeared to contradict the very purpose of the organization itself; (4) the behavior of the employees seemed to parallel the behavior of individuals under acute stress. Given these similarities to double bind situations (Kelley, 1973), senior management decided to undertake an extensive analysis of employee behavior to determine whether the problems between the employees and management might be attributed to the existence of double binds. The analysis was divided into three phases: first, to identify those external characteristics in the situation which seemed to best fit the definition and description of a double bind, second, to determine whether the employees, using an internal view, experienced the situation as a double bind, third, to analyze the behavior of the employees as they struggled to comply with the security controls.

An External View of the Communication Environment

From an external observer's perspective, it was apparent that double bind situations existed in the communication transactions and were causing employee behavioral problems in the organization (Stohl, 1991). The existence of such double binds was predicated upon the appearance of certain conditions that seem to be generative and symptomatic of a double bind (Folger, 1997). Four operational descriptors were employed to identify double bind situations. The first descriptor was incongruent messages that contradicted themselves or the context in which they were issued. Management seemed to be issuing directives in the form of security controls in various contexts which were self-negating. For example, employees were told they would have to complete the processing of an assigned number of securities at the end of the day, even if it meant staying overtime. The work could not be deferred because all securities received that day had to be processed and placed in the vault before the vault could be closed for the evening. Even though management said productivity does not matter, productivity did indeed matter, if employees were going to finish processing their daily volume of securities before being allowed to go home. From an outsider's perspective it seemed that the employees perceived that the context of the job had changed. In the past, management said, "Well, security controls are necessary, but we are not going to emphasize them. We will take a practical attitude and try to observe them as best we can, but not let them hamper us from getting the job done, especially when we are rushed because of a high volume of securities." Now the employees perceive management as saying, "You will lose your job if you disregard the security controls regardless of the pressure to get the securities processed before the end of the normal work day."

The second descriptor was the high dependency relationship between employees and the organization. Although there were some young people in the department, most of the employees had been with the organization from 9 to 35 years. Because of the nature of their jobs, employees in this department had to be trustworthy. People were assigned to this department only when management believed in their trustworthiness. This situation showed a high dependency by the employees on the organization, and by the organization on the employees.

The third descriptor was that neither management nor the employees could easily step outside of the situation to articulate the nature of the problem. Both management and employees had been criticized by the auditors for not complying with the security controls. There was obvious pressure on both management and employees to reduce the number of breaches in the security controls. It was not a case of management versus employees or superiors versus

subordinates. Indeed, the fate of management and employees was tied to one another. But it was clear that management and employees found it difficult to communicate with each other about the problems in the way the security controls were written and communicated.

The fourth descriptor was the deterioration and ambiguity of the communication contexts. This deterioration in contexts was manifested in the following ways: by changes in departmental goals that were undertaken to improve audit report, by changes in operating procedures and requirements, by a shift in operating emphasis from high productivity and timely service to strict compliance with security controls, and by harsher punishment for violation of security controls including suspension or dismissal from one's job. These descriptors were examples of the profound changes in the basic environment or structure of the department. They are evidence of a change in the content and context of every interpersonal transaction occurring between the operative workers and management. For example, before the change in management's emphasis from productivity to compliance with security controls, operative employees were not punished for violation of the controls. At the time of the study, however, operative employees had been told they could and would be dismissed if they violated controls. This seemed to cause a radical change in the way security controls were perceived by operative employees. Because the department had to remain in operation until all securities were processed for the day, the employees were placed in an impossible dilemma. They had to choose between finishing their work on time or following the processing procedure according to the security controls.

An Internal View of the Communication Environment

Having described the external view of the organization in which it appeared that the operative employees were working in a double bind situation, it was now necessary to determine how the operative workers, from their internal point of view, perceived their own situation. Did the employees believe they were experiencing a double bind situation? The views of the operative employees were obtained through face-to-face interviews of the employees in the department.

Structure of the Employee Interview

The interviews consisted of a combination of open-ended questions designed to obtain information in each of the following three areas: cognitive knowledge of regulations, attitudinal impressions, and physical demands.

The following is a list of questions used to test the level of cognitive knowledge of the security controls held by the employees:

- What was the current level of knowledge that each employee, supervisor, manager, and officer had of the security controls involved in his or her job?
- What training had each person received?
- What were the cognitive areas in which each person felt deficient?
- What kinds of training did he or she feel would best rectify the deficiency?
- What was each person's evaluation of the level of knowledge of the security controls held by others in the same job?
- The following is a list of attitudinal questions affecting job performance asked of the employees:

- What was the attitude of the person interviewed toward the enforcement of organizational directives regarding strict compliance with the security controls?
- What did he or she feel were the attitudes of others in the department toward the enforcement of strict compliance with the security controls?
- Did the person interviewed feel there was greater emphasis on efficiency and productivity than on compliance with the security controls?
- If the person felt there was more emphasis on compliance with the security controls than on efficiency and productivity, did this emphasis come from the person himself/herself, from the supervisor, the managers, or from whom?
- What did the person think was the attitude of the people in the department toward strict compliance with the security controls?
- Which controls did the person consider to be the most irksome?
- Which controls did the person consider to be the most important?
- The following is a list of questions about physical requirements that affected job performance:
- Did the person interviewed feel that complying with any of the controls required physical movements or actions that were difficult to perform?
- Did the person interviewed feel that complying with any of the controls required him or her to perform their jobs in a way that was unnatural or awkward?
- If the person interviewed felt that complying with any of the regulations forced him/her to perform their tasks in an unnatural or awkward way, did performing the tasks in this manner cause anxiety or mental stress?

The Interview Population

Thirty-four employees and one officer at the vice president level were interviewed from the Securities Processing Department. Of the thirty-four employees, twenty-five were operative workers who processed securities of various kinds, six were supervisors, and three were managers.

A Preliminary Analysis of the Interview Data

The interview data were used to determine whether the internal perception of the situation held by the operative workers coincided with the external perception formed by the author based on an analysis of the set of descriptors of double bind situations (Bateson, 1970). The diagnostic interviews were intended to evaluate the behavioral dimensions and implications of the controls and their effects on operative personnel. Specifically, the interviews were designed to assess the attitudes of operative employees and supervisors toward contradictory controls and the difficulties posed in complying with them. In analyzing the interviews, the author was looking for employee perceptions of potentially binding situations, and evidence that employees might be shifting or oscillating between alternatives because they failed to recognize the illusory nature of the alternatives presented. Additional information that the author sought was: (1) examples that employees were attempting to select an alternative without realizing that the illusory nature of the alternatives precluded any selection; (2) examples of faulty or incongruent logic in the response to a double bind situation. The author searched for evidence of a behavioral pattern that the employees were responding from within the framework of the

double bind, or to the contrary, that the employees recognized the fact that the alternatives were invalid and illusory. The nature of the problem was to determine the impact on workers of continuous exposure to controls which appear, to an outside observer, to be contradictory and impossible to comply with to the satisfaction of management. In the case of the processing employees, they had to satisfy a managerial hierarchy consisting of supervisors, managers, officers, and auditors. An additional aspect of the problem studied was to determine if the employees experienced the situation as paradoxical and double binding. These were the questions that the interview survey was designed to answer.

Responses by Employees Evidencing Their Perceptions of Double Bind Situations (Grouping I)

Category A - Multiple levels of controls which are perceived as contradictory

This category of responses reflected the employees' perception that what was correct or acceptable by way of compliance with the controls varied from one management level to another. The different levels of management which issue controls were senior officers of the organization, auditors, managers, and supervisors. An additional contradiction which was also reflected in these responses was the change in emphasis from the employees' prior conditioning which stressed a high volume of productivity and quick courteous service to the organization's clients, to the present emphasis on compliance with the security controls. The following are statements made by employees during the face-to-face interviews:

"There are differences in ways of interpreting controls that accounts for some violations."

"The problem is that after you have done something for six months you are not aware of the controls. You just assume you are following them in your routine. That's the problem."

"Written controls are good for management. It allows them to point to something they have produced and make themselves feel like they have done something. When it comes to accountability they have something they can point to. That is well and good. But the average employee doesn't really read them, even when you have to sign that you have. Management has time to read; the poor employee is too time conscious, or work conscious to be into reading."

"Managers stress that we should not get behind to where we cannot catch up. But generally, productivity is second to controls now."

"We have this incident where someone tried to explain to the auditor that there is confusion because of the continual changes in the controls. Well that got changed around when it was told to senior management and it came out they don't know what they are supposed to do down there. Well we are not stupid. We know the controls, but they are always changing, and from day-to-day you are not sure that you aren't violating something that has been changed, but that you weren't told of. Like the present situation where the written controls were wrong, and we haven't received the corrected written controls. We're left waiting for someone else to make the determination of what is the correct procedure."

Category B - Employees' perception of contradictory behavior on the part of management.

"A supervisor will do things wrong, then after the audit will come back and then say: 'From now on we are going to do everything by the book.' Then will not do things the right way

himself. You can't run a department that way, when you say one thing and do another.”
“In August, we were really busy. We had controls before, but every time we got busy they threw them out. Then when normal times came back in we got the controls again. This led to a situation where there was no respect for the controls. You can't just suspend them when business is good and expect people to respect the controls. Management means controls now. People know management means it.”
“The concern by supervisors is mostly after the fact. After audits when it's too late.”

Category C - Explicit statements by employees reflecting their perception of the contradiction between emphasis on compliance with management's controls and pressures to maintain high productivity.

“There is a great deal of frustration with jobs here because of the conflict between productivity and controls.”
“There should be some happy medium. Now we don't even try to accommodate the clients we serve. This causes problems with our clients. They want their securities, and we say, sorry, but we can't process this faster because of our controls.”
“Everything is slowed down because of the controls. But we do have deadlines. They don't want productivity—just controls. I have never worked in an organization where you couldn't get your work done and they didn't care. But you can't ignore productivity. We still have to get things out when our clients need them.”

Category D - Employees' perceived inconsistencies between the written controls and how these regulations must be applied to their specific jobs.

“What we have to do is follow the logic of the controls. On the surface, they seem to make sense, but when you really look at them, they are really absurd. For example, you are supposed to work in full view of someone else. Well, if you are working rather than observing the other person at all times, you are not able to see what he is doing anyway. You have your head down, and he is not in full view. How can I watch my partner and still cut my coupons? It is just not possible.”

Category E - Employees' perception of a contradiction between their perception of themselves and their perception of management's perception of them. Employees perceive that management's perception of them is that they are not competent or responsible.

“They treat us like children. They don't leave responsibility on your shoulders. We're able to complete daily work without being told by others what you are to do.”
Employees perceive that management's perception of them is that they can't be trusted.
“I don't understand why they feel we have to have all of these new rules. We never lost a thing. It's like we are being punished for our good records. After 30 years here, I'm suddenly treated like a thief. I never was before.”
“The regulations make you feel like a thief. We never felt like that before. No organization ever ran without security, but this really is too much.”
“I don't object to controls, but to the way they are implemented. Controls are necessary, but when controls get to a point where they make you feel like a thief, then they cease to be decent controls.”

Category F - Employees' perceptions of contradictions between management's controls and management's actions.

“Enforcement of controls changes with the mood of the managers involved. If someone is in a bad mood, they will hold you to the letter of the controls. If they are in a good mood, they may not call you on it, just say, OK. But that is not the way it's supposed to be.”

Interpretation of the Responses in Grouping I Categories A through F

In this first grouping the responses seem to form a pattern indicative of a general impression, held by the operative employees that they were working in an environment permeated with inconsistencies and contradictions. These inconsistencies were present in various forms: The injunctions, orders, or controls emanating from different levels of the organizational hierarchical structure appeared to be at odds with one another. The representatives of the different management levels behaved in such a manner that their decisions and actions were seen as inconsistent and/or contradictory.

The emphasis on compliance with time consuming controls was perceived by the employees as being made at the expense of productivity despite the obvious need to keep up productivity. There was a perceived inconsistency between the manner in which a task was prescribed to be carried out in the regulations and the way that representatives from the various levels of management specified that the tasks should be performed. This was because of deficiencies in the interpretation made by management of the controls which were drafted in rather broad general terms.

There was a contradiction in the way the employees saw themselves in terms of their job performance, and honesty, and the way these same employees believed that management saw them, as evidenced by management's emphasis on tight security controls.

There was an inconsistency in the way representatives from the various levels of management advocated one course of action, such as strict adherence to controls, but in their personal encounters with the controls they did not always practice the same strict adherence at all times under all circumstances.

The responses in the first group tended to form a pattern that was indicative of the elements usually found present in a double bind situation. The first element was that the operative employees were involved in an intense relationship in which there was a high need or desire to survive. They wished to avoid being fired or otherwise severed from the organization. The second element was that the controls were viewed by the employees as injunctions which asserted a course of action with which to be complied. The third element was that the operative employees perceived themselves as not being able to step outside the framework of the situation for fear of being labeled as uncooperative, resistive to authority, or lacking in understanding of the job procedures. The fourth element was that the employees were also constrained from stepping outside the confines of the situation by years of conditioning not to question authority. The responses implied that the operative employees did perceive that the controls and their administration were inconsistent and contradictory. But for all practical purposes, it was a pragmatic reality that they could not decline to comply with them, nor could they appropriately comply, because the controls and their administration were paradoxical. The result of chronically

subjecting employees to such apparent double bind situations caused them to manifest behavioral effects associated with the double bind. The responses in the following second group of categories support the finding that these behavioral effects were present among the operative workers.

Responses Describing the Behavioral Effects of Double Bind Situations on Employees (Grouping II)

Category A - Low morale as reflected by rising irritability and confusion

“The big problem is in interpretation. Everybody is a little confused. Not about what the controls are, but on how to put them into effect. People ask themselves does this apply when I am doing this”

“All this overtime just to catch up. People just can’t do it. You have no time to yourself. People have obligations outside of the bank and you can’t work weekends all the time. Strange thinking going on around here and it is hurting our morale. It really gets to you after a while.”

“We have all had prior experience in the bank. The problem is you can’t work comfortably. Morale is low here because of lack of production.”

“People are getting themselves worked up because of the threats. Getting irritated and excited with one another instead of being smooth and calm in their work.”

“It is hurting our relationships. Someone walks away from their coupons accidentally and someone else calls out to remind them, and they get very irritable.”

“Tension is so bad we get irritable. You get to feel that you are annoying other people in just trying to do your job. And you are, because they have to interrupt what they are doing to go with you. You can see in their faces that they don’t want to quit their work because you are ready to move on to something else.”

Category B - Feelings of resentment.

“The whole area seems to be at odds with the current controls.”

“I guess, because we are all older, they feel they can get by with treating us this way Younger people would not stand for it.”

“I don’t know who wrote the controls. He must have been an idiot. Things in the controls don’t relate to our work. They just don’t make sense. We can’t follow through with them.”

Category C.

Preoccupation with excessive detail. Responses indicating that the employees want more detail. “For a new person coming in, training consists of handing them the controls manual and saying ‘Read the manual.’ We have no direct training, and I believe we should. We are supposed to learn the controls from the supervisor. But we didn’t have time because we all had to get back to work.”

Responses showing employees have a preoccupation with wanting everything put down in writing.

“Mostly, we are told the controls by word-of-mouth. But there are differences in what people tell you. That’s not what we need. Put it in writing.”

“Everyone is aware of the controls. It’s always on your mind. We have to follow them. But when we have to follow them, we should have them in writing from the time they are effective, not a long time afterward. “There is no manual on procedures.”

Category D.

Attempts to rationalize perceived drops in productivity and quick service by blaming management for forcing them to comply with time consuming controls.

“We are production oriented and are being held back by silly controls. You feel that you are hurting the organization by not doing a good job.”

“There’s no production here now as we used to know it. Production went out the window for controls.”

“We have many complaints about falling behind because of the controls. We also have complaints about the overtime.”

“There is a great deal of time wasted. We have very little production.”

Category E - Expressions of feelings of fear and withdrawal by employees.

“When the controls first came out, you were afraid to make a move. Afraid to take a bond out or anything.”

“You really get afraid to do things with all those controls. I get afraid to do my work. Others get afraid to do it.”

Interpretation of the Responses in Grouping II Categories A through E

The responses in the second grouping of categories show that the following behavioral effects and feelings were wide spread among employees:

High irritability, confusion and job dissatisfaction manifesting itself in the form of low morale. Resentment toward the organization for attempting to administer the controls. Preoccupation with excessive detail, particularly in the spelling out of procedures, duties, responsibilities and accountabilities.

Fearfulness and withdrawal by excessive defensiveness or wariness.

All of the following behaviors and feelings were described in the responses in Grouping II: high irritability, confusion, job dissatisfaction, resentment, deterioration of long friendships, and preoccupation with detail, fearfulness, and withdrawal. These behavioral effects similar to those associated with double binds and acute mutual distress were clearly evidenced in the responses arrayed in this second grouping. But not all of the responses made by the employees in this grouping fit into this behavioral pattern. Some employees had none of the effects listed in Grouping Two. These responses which helped make an important inference were put into Grouping III.

Responses Made by Employees Who Did Not Perceive Any Double Bind Situation (Grouping III)

This group of responses was made by a small number of employees who were new to the department, having come in either as new employees or as transferees from other departments. “There is no conflict between getting our work done and the controls. The controls do not interfere with production in our case. It is very important that we follow through on the controls at all times.”

“There seems to be no problem with controls in this department. I take them as a matter of course. I don’t see any conflict between the controls and production in the area. The job seems to be relatively simple and there seems to be few problems with the controls while doing the job.”

“Most people hate change. I’m not that rigid. I’ve been here three years, not 30 or 25 years old like some of the others. So what is change to some is not change to me. It is merely learning new procedures.”

Interpretation of the Responses in Grouping III

All of the employees in Grouping Three were new to the department. Because they were new to the department or to the organization, they were not influenced by any change in content or context of the job and job environment. The responses by the employees support the premise that change is a very powerful factor in determining if people will manifest behavioral effects similar to those associated with double binds when placed in potentially binding situations. An additional explanation is that for the pathological effects of the double bind to take effect a person must have continued exposure to a situation which is experienced as paradoxical (Gibney, 2006). Also, the double bind is most likely to be experienced in situations in which the context of communication is changing, and where changes in the context of communication may be experienced as threatening to the parties involved (Folger, 1997). In this case study, the respondents in Grouping III were employees who were new to the department and its situation.

They were employees who had been transferred from other departments or newly hired employees. For this reason, there was no change in context to affect them, and they did not perceive any incongruence. For these employees there was no deterioration in communication context, and consequently, no experience of threat caused by changes in communication context. The importance of this inference is that double binds are most likely to arise in organizations where there are shifts in communication context and where one of the parties involved in that shift perceives some implicit or explicit threat to the continuance of the relationship between him or her and the organization.

The data in Grouping III strongly suggest that double binds and the behaviors attributable to double binds are most likely to arise when there are significant shifts in the communication contexts within organizations. Conversely, the double binds do not appear; not do the symptoms appear, when the communication contexts within the organization are experienced as relatively stable and unthreatening to relationships. The existence of two different kinds of response to the same stimulus situation within the department raises an interesting question. Why did some employees see the situation as binding, generative of discord, and fraught with deteriorating relationships while others said, in effect—I can’t see any problem here? The answer to this question is given by the definition of the double bind present earlier in this paper. There, it was

explained that the double bind is dependent largely on an individual's experience in order to produce the behavioral phenomenon. The double bind does not exist in the structure of the message per se. It is not strictly a behavioral response to a logical paradox. Rather, the double bind functions as a result of the meaning which an individual places on a communication transaction—which includes not only the language of the statement, but roles, rules, metacommunication, and multiple perspectives.

Summary

The case study presented in this chapter of employees working in a department where negotiable securities, such as bonds, were processed is an attempt to extend the concept of the double bind to an organizational communication situation. The case study presents the results of interviews with the employees who worked in the department. The tasks performed by the employees were to count and clip the coupons from corporate bonds. The bonds and coupons which can be redeemed (cashed in) at any bank or financial institution are the same as cash. Anyone in possession of the bond or coupon can cash them in. Obviously, these coupons in denominations of thousands of dollars and the bonds which are redeemable for very large amounts of money pose a risk of theft by the employees or others who might have access to the securities. For that reason, strict rules or controls are needed for processing the coupons and bonds. The controls for processing the securities were disseminated and enforced in such a way that they constituted a double bind; or at least, the employees perceived themselves as being placed in a double bind situation. The reason the case study is helpful from an organizational communication point of view is that it provides an insight into the reasons why employees find it difficult to comply with controls that place them in double binds. An understanding of the effects of double binds provides managers and human resources specialists with important insights to be considered when drafting controls to ensure that the controls are free of double binds and that compliance with them is not seen as impossible or onerous.

The survey of the employees in the Securities Processing Department, described in the case study, shows the kind of problems that these employees face on a daily basis as they try to comply with controls that have double binds in them. To use a crude cliché: the employees are damned if they do and damned if they don't. One of the unfortunate effects of a double bind is that employees exhibit poor morale that is brought on by the confusion they experience as they attempt to carry out their processing tasks. In identifying double bind situations it is useful to use operational descriptors. There are four operational descriptors that help to identify a double bind situation. The first is a control that contains an incongruent message that is contradictory. This is a directive that is self-negating. For example, "Get the work done on time. I don't care how you do it. But I won't authorize any overtime." In this example the work cannot be done in the allotted time and the order is to do the impossible. The second descriptor is that the employees are in a highly dependent relationship. They don't want to lose their jobs or to get in bad with their boss. The third descriptor is that neither the employee nor the supervisor/manager can easily step outside the double bind situation to point out that they are in a double bind situation.

The employee is afraid to be thought to be insubordinate or to have a negative or bad attitude toward management. The supervisor/manager is equally afraid of senior management considering him/her as non-supportive of senior management's decisions or worst yet—unable to carry out orders. The fourth descriptor is the deterioration and ambiguity of the communication context covered by radical changes in objectives, goals, procedures, and the operating

environment. These radical changes, coupled with harsh punishment for non-compliance, have a profound effect on the employees and are symptomatic of the double bind.

Conclusion

An analysis of the employee interview data showed that the employees perceived management's controls to be contradictory. Furthermore, that supervisors and managers showed contradictory behavior in telling the employees they had to comply with the controls. But the employees perceived that the supervisors and managers were behaving in a way that was contradictory to the controls. The employees observed that the supervisors/managers would say one thing but do something else. The employees perceived inconsistencies between the written controls and how the controls applied to their specific jobs. The employees also perceived a contradiction between how they saw themselves and how management saw them. For example, they consider themselves trustworthy, but perceived that management did not trust them. The interview data demonstrated that double binds could be identified through the descriptors that employees could perceive the inconsistencies in the controls, but they could not step outside the context of the communication transaction to point out the inconsistency and avoid its consequences.

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