

# INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION ASSESSMENT (IOCA) Message Analysis and Effectiveness for a Global Age

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Advances in technology, the Internet, and ease of mobility have increased modern organizations' global outreach and made it easier for companies to establish offices in other nations; however, with these benefits have come the challenge of working with overseas clients, dealing with language barriers, and navigating different cultural expectations. Organizational communication analyzes and addresses these challenges as it relates to message exchange. Organizational communication involves the creation, exchange, and movement of messages in an organizational context for a common goal. The purpose of this *teaching case study* is to review a graduate-level course (COM 7900: The Integrated Global Communication Capstone at Kennesaw State University) that focuses on an organizational assessment tool designed to examine today's global organization. This tool is termed the International Organizational Communication Assessment (IOCA). This study explains the IOCA, highlights its pedagogical approach to experiential learning, and critiques the IOCA based on the course's learning objectives.

**Keywords.** Organizational assessment, Global communication, Experiential learning, Graduate capstone.

While communication scholars are committed to understanding how individuals function in a world of unprecedented technological access, they seek to interpret how larger social units (i.e. organizations) operate as well. Organizational Communication (OC) inquiry is dedicated to this latter task by studying the “creation, exchange, and movement of messages and the meaning attached to



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them them by individuals within an organizational context who seek a common goal” (Lippert & Aust, 2004, p. 292). With OC’s roots dating back a century (Garner et al. 2016, Redding, 1985), its research has enhanced societal standards by improving employee training, satisfaction, and productivity (Bornmann, 2012), workplace diversity (Jackson, Joshi, & Erhardt, 2013), and organizational-environmental impact (Dubey et al., 2017). Organizational communication’s progress, as a professional specialty and academic discipline, has also produced the *organizational communication audit (OCA)*. Initially introduced by Odiorne (1954), the communication audit gained credibility as a tool for internal and external organizational analysis with Goldhaber and Rogers (1979). Collaborating with more than 100 communication professionals from over a dozen countries, Goldhaber and Rogers developed a set of research instruments to assess communication patterns in corporate, nonprofit, and institutional contexts.

Recognizing the increasing need to analyze workplace effectiveness, global messaging, intercultural competence (Matveev, 2016), and ethics (Baumann-Pauly & Scherer, 2012), universities began offering courses that included the OCA, routinely in Communication departments. Kennesaw State University (KSU), located in metro Atlanta, Georgia, is one such institution. In 2002, the School of Communication & Media (then a department) approved COM 4455: The Organizational Communication Audit course as the capstone for its undergraduate Communication majors in the Organizational Communication concentration. Since 2011, the School’s Master of Arts in Integrated Global Communication program (MAIGC) has used an expanded, globalized version of the OCA as one of two graduate capstone projects. Aligned with the program’s global orientation, the masters-level OCA course project was hence titled *International Organizational Communication Assessment (IOCA)* and adapted to serve the growing number of global<sup>1</sup> and transnational<sup>2</sup> organizations whose operational missions cross national borders and continents. Over the past six years, the IOCA has continued to evolve, taking into account current research on global organizations (Starke-Meyerring & Wilson, 2008; Starke-Meyerring, 2010) to address “the subtleties and complexities of managing others in a multi-

multicultural and multinational business environment” (Neuliep, 2018, p. 370). Additionally, a 2013 survey of the “professional communication literature [identified] no current publications about onsite international professional communication projects” (Johnson, 2013, p. 70). In response, this article describes how the IOCA capstone integrates graduate-level instruction for professional communication, organizational assessment, and intercultural engagement with onsite, service-learning engagement.

As consultants-in-training, the graduate students who complete the IOCA enhance their organizational communication skills, with a global perspective (St.Amant & Flammia, 2016). Given the IOCA’s usefulness, this *teaching case study* (a) explains the International Organizational Communication Assessment as a distinct, graduate-level project; (b) clarifies how IOCA pedagogy fosters experiential learning; and (c) critiques the IOCA based on COM 7900: The Integrated Global Communication Capstone’s learning objectives. While the IOCA course offers an option of conducting an integrated, global public relations campaign or an international organizational assessment project, this case focuses on the latter option, discussing a brief history of the MAIGC program and then describing the IOCA capstone’s development in the following section.

## **The Origin and Development of the IOCA**

The International Organizational Communication Assessment project exists as an extension of the organizational communication audit which has long been taught in the field of Communication and for the past 15 years at Kennesaw State University in its COM 4455: Organizational Communication Audit undergraduate capstone course. Kennesaw State University’s Department of Communication originated in 1990. Now a School of Communication & Media, students can earn a Bachelor of Science in the four areas of Journalism, Media & Entertainment Studies, Public Relations, and Organizational and Professional Communication. The Organizational Communication and Professional Communication’s (ORGC) major’s initial curriculum included *Introduction to*

*Organizational Communication, Interpersonal, Intercultural, and Group Communication, and Communication and Conflict* as core courses. Later the program added *Leadership Communication, Training and Development, and the Organizational Communication Audit* as more practitioner-oriented courses to prepare students for careers that emphasize OC knowledge and skills.

COM 4455's overarching objective is to train students to use a collection of scientific tools to analyze an organization's internal messaging and improve its operational effectiveness. While some students are tentative regarding the capstone's demanding rigor, they later acknowledge and appreciate how the course facilitates their career readiness and junior consulting experience by working face-to-face and in virtual teams for a client (e.g. nonprofits, small and corporate businesses, or institutional departments). Unlike some service-learning frameworks in which the professor recruits the client(s), students must find their own client based on designated criteria. This is required of students, because it simulates the workplace experience of bringing in a new account.

The greater Atlanta area offers an ideal setting for ORGC majors to complete the organizational communication audit project. After completing the OCA, some undergraduate student consultants have been contracted by their client to conduct additional research on a freelance basis or hired on a permanent basis. In short, since it was offered, COM 4455 has developed into a successful (a) training vehicle preparing ORGC majors for the workforce and a (b) pedagogical model for other Communication departments interested in offering similar coursework. Therefore, it is no surprise that KSU's MAIGC Program looked no further than its School's senior-level ORGC capstone course to design a graduate-level project, examining organizational communication in a global age.

## **MAIGC's Need for the IOCA**

In 2007, Kennesaw State University's College of Humanities and Social Sciences charged a planning committee to develop an innovative graduate-level, professional Communication program focusing on the organization's role in

society. The program was built on research exploring society's increasingly digital connectedness and growing reliance on internet technologies. After a lengthy review of existing graduate programs, the committee proposed a masters-level degree in global communication emphasizing organizational message exchange. The program combined professional, intercultural, and strategic communication instruction with global media principles to prepare graduates for transnational communication positions that use sophisticated digital platforms. When MAIGC launched in 2011, there were just three global communication programs in existence in the U.S.—Boston University, USC Annenberg School of Communication, and American University—and three aspiring programs in development (C.M. Mayo, personal communication, September 14, 2016).

From the beginning, MAIGC's focus, curriculum design, and pedagogical approach made it distinctive. MAIGC's mission is to equip aspiring Communication professionals with the theory, knowledge, and skills to competently craft, disseminate, and analyze messages across countries and regions with diverse cultural, political, and economic characteristics (C.M. Mayo, Personal Communication, March 11, 2016). This mission is articulated in the program's learning objectives, which include:

- To equip students with the communication theories and research methodologies to understand communication processes among multicultural audiences.
- To foster cultural awareness and sensitivity toward organizational stakeholders, both domestically and multinationally.
- To empower students to counter the challenges of communicating with global audiences through international, conglomeration media systems.

The MAIGC program embraces a “study-observe-do” organizing principle, training students to examine, critique, synthesize, and produce research on current global communication topics during their first two semesters in the program. Next, students complete a study abroad component during the summer following their first eight months of coursework. The study abroad experience gives students

an intimate understanding of global communication concepts taught during the first two semesters by having them work with or in an organization located in another country (Krishnan, Masters, Holgate, Wang, & Calahan, 2017). The experience prepares students for a final semester of upper-division, graduate-level courses, one of which includes the COM 7900: Integrated Global Communication Capstone as the MAIGC capstone course.

Giving attention to the impact of globalization on all aspects of society, the planning committee developed COM 7900 to address the rising need for professionally-trained and academically-grounded Communication experts with the knowledge and skills to maximize an organization's communication. A host of other factors (e.g., a university mission emphasizing global citizenship; a "Year of" program highlighting the culture of other nations; prominent, annual host- sponsorship of international conferences such as the Symposium on the Asia- USA Partnership Opportunities [SAUPO]) made Kennesaw State an ideal institution to offer such a course. With this in mind, the curriculum equips MAIGC students with the ability to conduct an organizational communication assessment as a service-learning capstone project.

### **MAIGC's Pedagogical Approach**

Prior to entering COM 7900, students must successfully complete three prerequisites: COM 7200 Foundations in Communication Theory and Research; COM 7500: Communication for Multinational Corporations; and COM 7400: Communication Research Methods. These prerequisites provide students a strategic curricular framework of global communication theory, multinational organizational communication research, and social science methodology. Additionally, MAIGC's cohort model requires that students complete COM 7300: International Public Relations and COM 7600: Communication and Technology Seminar prior to taking the Integrated Global Communication Capstone. By completing these prerequisites and the related coursework, students enter COM 7900 with a scholarly and professional grasp of factors characterizing

the modern global organization. In short, MAIGC students are trained to map, analyze, and evaluate communication in organizations with a multinational or global focus (St.Amant & Flammia, 2016).

Prior to COM 7900's beginning class, students must review the capstone's syllabus, learning objectives, and past IOCA reports on the course web page. In particular, the Capstone in Integrated Global Communication's learning objectives include:

- **Learning Objective 1:** To review organizational communication research principles and processes used to coordinate goals, objectives, strategies, and tactics for international organizations.
- **Learning Objective 2:** To apply management principles and research techniques used to coordinate a global organizational communication project.
- **Learning Objective 3:** To develop an awareness of [best] practices in global communication.
- **Learning Objective 4:** To foster multicultural sensitivity toward organizational stakeholders and varied cultural value orientations.
- **Learning Objective 5:** To gain practical, professional team-based experience addressing and solving organizational global communication problems.

This mandatory review of past communication assessments provides students a sense of what the IOCA entails prior to choosing a semester-long capstone project. With this background, a summary of COM 7900's course design clarifies what makes the IOCA unique, as a multifaceted set of tools for modern organizational communication assessment.

## **IOCA Course Structure and Design**

### **Initiating the Course and Assessment Process**

Three action items are initiated during the first week of the semester in COM 7900. *First*, the two professors who team teach the course welcome students to the capstone—an academic milestone. The professors then review the curriculum students have completed thus far, clarify its relevance to the capstone project, and present a cursory overview of the course. *Second*, instructors take turns explaining what the organizational communication assessment and public relations campaign entail. Since many students have often been exposed to the public relations campaign, most questions focus on the organizational communication assessment. For example, “What is an IOCA? How long does it take to complete? What is a client’s reaction to the IOCA? And what are the potential challenges of completing an IOCA?” Once these questions and others are addressed, students must choose to complete an International Organizational Communication Assessment (IOCA) or the Integrated Public Relations Campaign (IPRC). Based on this choice, students are assigned to a professor with corresponding expertise for the project components. During the next 14 weeks, students meet with their assigned professor to plan the capstone project, develop a research design, collect data from a client, analyze data, and generate findings for a formal report. The final report is delivered to the client both in print and by way of a professional presentation made to primary stakeholders (e.g., routinely this includes the Chief Executive Officer and upper management).

Beginning with the first phase of the assessment, students who commit to the IOCA are recognized and addressed as “communication consultants,” possessing the knowledge and expertise to effect positive organizational change (Redding, 1979). In the first week, IOCA students must form a team and self-select a project leader. (Since students are together for three semesters as a cohort prior to COM 7900, they typically are well aware of their individual and collective areas of expertise). During the second phase of the assessment process, the organizational client is confirmed. While the course instructor may suggest

potential clients, each consulting team is responsible for recruiting its own organizational client that meets the course's service learning criteria for partnership and global reach. (*Client Criteria:* The organization must have 15 or more employees, be ideally headquartered in the Atlanta metro area, and have prominent global or transnational organizational characteristics.) Past IOCA clients include *McDonnell Douglas, The Global Soap Project, and Home Depot.*

Next, students must draft a 5-page client profile report, using credible mass media sources, trade and industry publication articles, and business databases (e.g., databases such as the Business Market Research Collection, Lexus Nexus, and Business Source Complete). The profile must address the organization's mission, vision statement, core values, market influences, and general operating structure. High-quality reports include information detailing a company's history, pinpointing office and plant locations, and summarizing past news coverage. Students must scour databases to understand the client based on external media sources. A copy of the client profile is due the next class session.

In addition to forming an IOCA team during the first week, students are assigned to a separate Course Readings Presentation (CRP) Team. (To simplify things, it is easiest to make consultant teams and CRP teams one and the same, but based on the number of students in the course, this may not be possible.) The CRP teams study and present journal articles and assigned chapters (e.g., Block, 2011; DeWine, 2001; Downs & Adrian, 2004) that detail the IOCA project. Based on the number of students who choose the IOCA option (i.e., 8-12), Course Reading Presentation teams routinely have 2 or 3 members. Since the international organizational assessment training includes eight learning modules, teams normally present two modules during the semester for a separate presentation grade. A course instructor oversees the presentation, evaluation, and discussion of CRP team presentations to ensure that each topic is covered properly. Students complete peer evaluations to verify that all team members participate equitably in the preparation and delivery of CRP presentations.

## **Course Modules and Learning Activities**

The second week of the course begins with students identifying their client and delivering a client report to the class. Once all students have presented their reports, the instructor facilitates a class discussion noting the importance of this information to the assessment. This content serves as a segue for the first CRP readings. CRP Team 1 is responsible for facilitating a discussion on the assigned readings that address *initiating the assessment*. To thoroughly process this content, CRP teams must distribute a 1-2 page outline of each article or book chapter. Outlines include 8-10 discussion questions. The facilitator covers each article in 8-10 minutes and leads a separate 20-minute discussion about the reading's content. The CRP team also conducts a learning exercise reinforcing findings or insights from the readings. Having completed all the readings, the facilitator notes the articles' similarities and differences and explains how the research can be extended theoretically, pragmatically, or both.

Course readings are categorized according to eight modules, as described in Table 1. Each module is integral to understanding the IOCA and knowing how it is applied. A synopsis of each module clarifies what students learn in each phase of their training.

**Module 1: Initiating the assessment.** The first module involves understanding and being able to explain the international communication assessment, in general (i.e., a focused organizational study; Harrison & Shirom, 1999). CRP Team 1 is tasked with clarifying the importance of “framing” an assessment (i.e., identifying the major theoretical perspectives to guide the analysis) and detailing what a project leader should know when initiating contact with a client. Given the importance of first impressions in the consulting process, IOCA project leaders must prepare thoroughly for and be professional when interacting with a potential client. The initial client contact and follow up meeting is crucial, because it establishes a consultant's competence and credibility. This is

**Table 1**

*IOCA Course Learning Modules*

<b>Module 1:</b> Initiating the Assessment	<b>Module 5:</b> Analysis & Results
<b>Module 2:</b> Client Criteria & Recruitment	<b>Module 6:</b> Assessment Findings & Recommendations
<b>Module 3:</b> Coordinating the Assessment	<b>Module 7:</b> Assessment Report
<b>Module 4:</b> Data Collection	<b>Module 8:</b> Oral Presentation and Feedback at Client Site

when the project manager, or the team member appointed to meet a client, prepares to offer a client an overview of the IOCA.

The first client meeting typically lasts 60-75 minutes. It involves no more than two consultants. Having more than two consultants present in the meeting can overwhelm a client. During the meeting, the consultant team leader or project manager (a) explains the merits of an assessment to the client (Vahouny, 2009), (b) agrees upon the nature of the client and consultant relationship, (c) identifies possible foci for communication analysis (e.g., the effectiveness of a given department, use of a medium, and/or method of employee training), and (d) clarifies the delivery of a final report. The nature of the client and consultant relationship is also discussed. A client/consultant relationship can emphasize a *purchase model* (i.e., the *client* diagnoses the strengths and weaknesses and the consultant is entrusted to verify and fix them), a *medical model* (i.e., the *IOCA team* diagnoses the strengths and weaknesses, reports these to the client, and then makes recommendations for improvement), or a *process model* (i.e., the client and consultant share responsibilities of diagnosing and evaluating the organization based on the consultants' documented data; Downs & Adrian, 2004). The first meeting also includes the client and consultant discussing a tentative timeline for

the IOCA. Based on this meeting, the client may immediately give approval to move forward or ask for additional time to confer with other members of the organization before proceeding. If a client decides to move forward, the second meeting involves answering follow-up questions and establishes a formal client/consultant agreement in writing.

**Module 2: Client criteria and recruitment.** The second module provides more focused information regarding client recruitment during the third week of the semester. For this module, the Course Readings Presentation team, CRP Team 2, reviews the information to conduct an effective IOCA. Having secured a client, a team then proceeds to a next assessment phase. With a confirmed client, the project manager must detail the assessment timeline (Adrian & Downs, 2004; p. 32), finalize *focal areas* (e.g., information flow, media technologies, communication and links to strategies), and propose an *organizational logic* (i.e., “the listing of task processes and a description of how the organization functions”; Downs & Adrian, 2004, p. 51).

An organizational logic establishes the directions that messages flow within an organizational system. This preliminary assessment tool clarifies an organization’s actual structure and active communication channels. At this point, the consulting team also gives attention to cultural factors that impact organizational member performance as an organization operates as a system in a broader (cultural) environment (i.e., a suprasystem). For example, the location or context of an international office or plant is critical in accurately analyzing an organization’s day-to-day processes. Whereas Hofstede’s (1980) individualistic and collectivistic, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, and masculinity and femininity scales are arguably an effective means for distinguishing an organization’s makeup, an additional cultural assessment may be warranted to corroborate initial findings (e.g., Jameson, 2007). The Diversity Perspectives Questionnaire (DPQ) and the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) for instance, are both reliable instruments (Krishnan et al., 2017) with relevant scales and dimensions for organizational assessment. (The IDI is addressed in the latter

part of this article.) With the second learning module complete, IOCA team members are ready to proceed to the next step in communication assessment.

**Module 3: Coordinating the assessment.** During the third module (CRP Team 3), students determine what research methods are best suited for the client's needs. Consultants often use multiple quantitative and qualitative methods or tools to accurately determine an organization's communication processes and outcomes. For example, Goldhaber and Rogers' (1979) five International Communication Association's (ICA) diagnostic tools offer a professional, standardized approach for analyzing an organization's message exchange. The ICA tools include a questionnaire survey, critical communication event analysis (i.e., describing a particularly effective or ineffective workplace event), field interviews, network analysis (i.e., tool to track messages within a system), and communication diaries analysis (i.e., a tool clarifying different media members use to communicate each day). Consultants may also recommend that other methodological tools such as focus group analysis, content analysis, or participant observation be used to sufficiently assess an organization's internal communication. Whatever the methods chosen for analysis, organizations benefit most when data are triangulated (i.e., use of "a variety of data sources in one study"; Keyton, 2015, p. 269) in the diagnostic phase of an assessment.

While each tool merits careful consideration, the ICA questionnaire survey is arguably the most thorough method of analysis, because of the number of ways it measures message exchange. The survey instrument is a 122-item questionnaire designed to diagnosis how competently organizational members communicate with one another. The questionnaire's nine scales (i.e., receiving of information from others, sending of information to others, follow-up on information sent to others, sources of information, timelines of information, organizational communication relationship, organizational outcomes, channels of communication, and demographic information) offer a comprehensive snapshot of the quality of message exchange. A key value of the questionnaire is that it establishes a benchmark for current communication practices and fixes a metric

for optimum organizational communication within a company. While the International Communication Association survey is a highly comprehensive tool, its 122 questions take extensive time to complete. Therefore, many clients prefer a different instrument.

As an alternative quantitative tool, the Downs-Hazen Communication Satisfaction Questionnaire (CSQ) is often more readily chosen by COM 7900 clients, because it is shorter—with just 42 questions—and takes considerably less time for employees to complete. Additionally, it generates similar results as the ICA survey. Clients and consultants routinely agree that a survey (whether it is the ICA Questionnaire Survey or the Downs-Hazen Communication Satisfaction Questionnaire) is useful, because it is easy to distribute, convenient for employees to complete, and effective for collecting a large amount of data.

**Model 4: Data collection.** Having established the assessment plan, the consulting team begins data collection in this phase. Data collection must be completed in such a way that it does not interrupt the client members' work routine. This is addressed in CRP Team 4's reading. Downs and Adrian (2005) contend that the preferred sequence of data collection entails a (1) field interviews, (2) focus group session(s), (3) questionnaire survey, and (4) follow-up focus group(s) sequence. Years of assessment confirm that this sequence works well, particularly for onsite data collection; however, variations of this pattern might be requested by the client.

Focus groups typically follow the *organizational logic* identified in Module 2. It is important that consultants schedule multiple group interviews to ensure that responses are reflective of an organization's broader communication themes and not the views of a few biased employees. In terms of specific focus group procedures, consultants should be prepared with an interview agenda or protocol of 10 and 12 questions for discussion. The focus group session should optimally include 7-10 participants without competing interests, representing different levels or functions of the organization. Once the initial focus group phase is

completed, the resulting data can be used to develop custom items for the survey questionnaire.

Internet technology has made online survey distribution convenient and affordable; therefore, sites like Survey Monkey are highly recommended for assessment. IOCA consultants may modify an existing survey or build their own survey based on results of the organizational logic and the initial focus group phase. The best surveys combine both open- and closed-ended questions, for instance, by adding open-ended critical communication event items to Downs and Hazen's (1977) Communication Satisfaction Scale or Goldhaber and Rogers' (1979) the International Communication Association questionnaire survey. Once survey data are collected, a second round of interviews is encouraged (i.e., phase three of data collection) to affirm and refine results generated from the first two rounds of data collection (i.e., the initial focus group method and the survey method). A last round of focus group or field interviews is useful to substantiate earlier results. In terms of best practice, consultants should schedule data collection over several weeks to prevent overwhelming organizational members during the communication assessment process.

**Module 5: Analysis and results.** Once consultants have (a) determined the methods that are best suited for a given client (Module 2), (b) scheduled data collection as a series of phases based on client input (Module 3), and (c) obtained all quantitative and qualitative data (Module 4), Module 5 then begins when consultants analyze the communication assessment data. Within Module 05, CRP Team 1 addresses this analytic process in their presentation of assigned reading and discussion facilitation. (At this point, the Course Reading Presentation teams routinely begin a second and final round of discussion facilitation duties.)

Whereas the treatment of data analysis could fill books on methodology, and certainly have, Module 5 highlights three principles of data analysis a consulting team should follow to generate valid results. First, the data from each method must be analyzed independently to ensure the results of each method are

accurate and not influenced by results from other methods. IOCA's are of greatest value to a client when a consulting team takes the time to understand qualitative and quantitative results separately, then later in unison. Second, once consultants generate results for each method, the consulting team must take a macroscopic view of the results of all methods using triangulation (Downs & Adrian, 2004) to identify broader organizational assessment themes. For example, if initial focus group results indicate that an organization's decision-making practices rarely include input from lower-level employees, and such practices are affirmed in both the survey results and a final round of field interviews, then decision making would be identified for the client as a key finding. (Assessment experience confirms that exclusively upper-level decision-making is often a pattern of mediocre or good companies, but not great ones. This is one of many helpful points that consultants can raise when presenting IOCA results to a client.) During the third stage, external organizational factors such as the surrounding environment (i.e., suprasystem) should be considered prior to moving to a final evaluative stage when interpretations and recommendations are made specific to the focal organization (Katz & Kahn, 1978). In short, consultants benefit most when all three principles of analyses are prioritized.

**Module 6: Assessment findings and recommendations.** This critical phase focuses on the interpretation of results to establish overall findings and make recommendations for improved organizational effectiveness (CRP Team 2). This is when interpretation of the results takes place. Interpretation "requires the construction of an answer that makes practical sense, rather than the discovery of one 'right' answer" (Downs & Adrian, 2004, p. 228). Interpretation moves beyond surface level results; it requires that a consultant team revisits the initial focal areas and answer questions like, "What are the needs of the organization? And what is the most useful diagnosis in this case?" Furthermore, in this phase of the assessment, consultants give particular attention to a client's unique (internal) organizational culture and how it is restructured through message exchange (Giddens, 1979).

To establish client findings, consultants must synthesize the information gathered from the initial client contact, the organizational logic, and all methods of data collection. Consultants must give attention to symptoms that may mask otherwise deeply rooted limiting tendencies, thus inhibiting an organization's ability to maximize productivity, employee satisfaction, and output. Ultimately, consultants must determine what the results suggest in terms of organizational strengths and weaknesses without getting caught in a false causal relationship trap (i.e., just because something happens early, does not mean it exists as a major finding). The work of Deal and Kennedy (1982), Peters and Waterman (1982), and Collins (2011) are relevant here because often organizational leaders want to improve organizational communication function and processes, but they are unclear on how to go from *good to great*.

Once the consulting team establishes the findings (e.g., typically 3 - 5 findings) they must be supported by empirical data (e.g., quantitative and qualitative results) and coupled with recommendations to benefit the organization. Finally, the implications of communicating IOCA findings and making recommendations to a client must be considered. Ultimately, the consultant must bring to light—gently—what is factual, particularly results that might be unanticipated by the client. In short, the consultant must rely on data in all aspects of interpretation.

**Module 7: Assessment report.** Keyton (2014) advances that science is not science until it are written up. This claim is particularly relevant to the seventh module—developing the client's final report (CRP Team 3). The best organizational communication assessment is of no benefit unless it can be clearly explained to a client in writing.

As each consulting team nears the end of its assessment, the research purpose (explaining why an assessment was undertaken) must focus on the assessment's major findings and recommended actions to enhance internal organizational communication. In particular, the written IOCA must offer clear rationale for a communication assessment, offer justifications for the methods

agreed upon by the client and consulting team, describe—in detail—how data were obtained, explain the results in an objective manner, distinguish several major findings of the assessment, note the limitations of the research, and offer the client recommendations aimed at improving the focal organization's communication. The client's final assessment report should also contain reference and appendix sections. The appendix provides the client with copies of pertinent documentation from the assessment (e.g., client/consultant agreement) as well as duplicates of the research instruments (e.g., survey questionnaire) and organizational charts, tables, and graphs that support the IOCA's narrative. Further, the IOCA report must be written in the client's language and be professionally printed and bound.

**Module 8: Onsite verbal presentation and feedback.** Finally, module eight (CRP Team 4)—the oral presentation of the IOCA report—typically takes place at the client site. It is the culminating activity of the assessment. In order to be well prepared for the client, each COM 7900 team must present its assessment first to the course professor and those in the class for constructive feedback. Assessment presentations average 20 minutes in length with an additional 10 minutes for client questions. The client should receive the complete written assessment and a concise one- to two- page executive summary (for potentially wider distribution in the organization) a week prior to the oral presentation.

A top-quality presentation includes a succinct introduction and overview of the IOCA. This overview should refer to the organization's (global) background and history. A complete assessment report describes research methods used for the assessment, data collection, results, analysis, assessment findings, and client-specific recommendations. The consulting team should move through these sections succinctly, offering enough explanation so the client understands each one, but not so rapidly that the client misses important details. As a best practice, consultants should give attention to two or three communication strengths of an organization prior to noting communication weaknesses to help make unexpected

or less favorable results more palatable. While some presentations are data heavy, consultants should take time to highlight each finding and provide supporting evidence to back conclusions. This evidence can come in the form of a (nonidentifiable) quote or series of quotes, a table, or a visual aid that vividly illustrates the point being made in the IOCA. The consultants' presentations should conclude with a summary of assessment outcomes and a compelling call-to-action for client consideration.

### **Assessing IOCA Outcomes**

The current age of technology and Internet connectivity has forced a reconceptualization of the modern multinational organization as it increasingly expands across borders and cultural regions. The IOCA project was developed to equip aspiring consultants with the tools to assess an organization's effective alignment of communication and task. Given the IOCA's relative newness, this section evaluates the IOCA based on COM 7900's five learning objectives in addition to (a) written and oral client feedback, (b) course evaluations, (c) graduate program exit interviews, (d) instructor reaction, and (e) the latest academic and professional research.

**Learning objective 1.** *To review organizational communication research principles and processes used to coordinate goals, objectives, strategies, and tactics for international organizations.* Strategic planning expertise is one of several outcomes from the IOCA graduate capstone. Downs and Adrian (2004) posit that “even the decision to undergo an assessment of communication can be a strategic decision, often reflecting a very definite leadership orientation” (p. 11). Early in COM 7900, consultants are taught that company documents and various forms of media exist as separate data sets to analyze an organization communicatively. In particular, organizational training modules, employee handbooks, executive speeches, internal videos, and other operational messages may each be examined, for example by using content analysis for manifest or latent communication

themes that structure and shape anything from an organization's identity to its internal task processes. Based on past analyses of these messages, consultants have been able to identify reoccurring fragmented, uncoordinated, or ineffective communication exchanges integral to organizational production. From these findings, consultants have been able to recommend client-specific strategies to avoid these errors, wordsmith long overlooked policy changes, or offer interpersonal training to ensure that organizational members do not resort to detrimental communication patterns in the future. In short, consultants are trained to detect missed opportunities for organizational effectiveness and provide practical solutions for improved message exchange.

**Learning objective 2.** *To review management principles and research techniques used to coordinate a global organizational communication project.* The primary purpose of COM 7900 is to equip students with the rare ability to diagnose the communicative strengths and weaknesses of a global organization and advance recommendations that improve organizational processes and outcomes. To do so, the student is reminded that asking the right questions and listening well are essential to organizational improvement. Regrettably, too few organizational leaders give this tactical effort proper attention; instead, too many of them operate independently of their employees' input, rather than seek feedback necessary for significant and lasting growth.

MAIGC students are equipped with a range of methods as part of the IOCA toolbox and, relevant to our technologically advanced, modern age of rapid communication via the Internet, are taught that culture plays a significant role in all organizational processes, especially for organizations with offices or plants in other nations. COM 7900's innovative curriculum equips students with a comprehensive research skill set: particularly one that emphasizes logistical research design and strategy including a wide range of methodologies. This is what sets MAIGC graduates apart. Unfortunately, too many human resource departments or managers rely heavily on ill-crafted or untested surveys billed as audits (Piskurich, Beckschi, & Hall, 2000). By coordinating focus groups and

field interviews, conducting content analysis, and engaging in ethnographic participant observations, students have a more diverse methodological toolbox to address global communication challenges with precision, applying managerial objectives as internal criteria to evaluate effective messaging. Clients have repeatedly voiced surprise to COM 7900's course instructors for the work done by graduate students and appreciation for the debilitating communication patterns detected and addressed by consulting teams.

**Learning objective 3.** *To develop an awareness of [best] practices in global communication.* Over the past six years, COM 7900's instructors have diligently worked to update the capstone's content (e.g., identify new tools for analysis), in general, and course literature, in particular, so students are well versed in the latest communication research focusing on global and transnational organizations. Given the capstone's strategic design, course instructors continue to emphasize applied research for problem solving. As a result, each successive class has grown increasingly adept at diagnosing the communicative strengths and weaknesses of a focal organization.

Without question, the greatest advances to COM 7900's content are derivatives of student, client, and instructor interaction during a time when advances in cross-cultural theory and practice scholarship are greatly needed (Wang, 2013). In light of this trend, the IOCA professors have progressed in their ability to draw upon prior consulting experience, academic expertise, and *industry best practices* as critical supplements to limited global, organizational communication scholarship in current texts. Consequently, capstone meetings are characteristically highly participative, dynamic exchanges involving the consultants and the instructor. The aim of this collaboration is to accurately diagnose a particular organization's communication shortcomings. These discussions, in times past, served to unveil an organization's opportunities and threats in one case, and in another case, make clear a company was uniformed of some industry trends and *regulations*. (With regard to varying regulations in multinational organizations, Browne, Dreitlein, Ha, Manzoni, and Mere [2016]

suggest that managers be thoroughly familiar with the “laws, regulations, and permits required by the local country” as a critical best practice [p. 45].) The net result of the approach taken in COM 7900 is a course that reflects Weick’s (1995) concept of requisite variety. In other words, COM 7900 functions as a learning environment where parties collaborate to generate communication solutions as complex as the problems themselves.

Course Evaluations, MAIGC Exit Interviews, and client and instructor feedback have made clear COM 7900’s emphasis on best practices has not gone unnoticed. Many IOCA graduates have acknowledged their appreciation for the course’s pedagogical approach. One student, for example, noted in the course evaluations that the instructors “were helpful and passionate about their research, work, and interests” (COM 7900, Fall 2014). Based on the quantitative student ratings from 2012, 2013, and 2105, the instructors were deemed “knowledgeable about the course materials” reflecting an average rating of 3.86 out of a 4.0 rating scale.

**Learning objective 4.** *To foster multicultural sensitivity toward organizational stakeholders and varied cultural value orientations.* The increased globalization of consumer markets and mass media demonstrates the critical need for greater internationalization in higher education curriculum (Ainsworth, 2013), especially for business and communication graduates seeking to compete in a global economy. Six years of course evaluations, MAIGC Program exit interviews, instructor experience, and client feedback confirm that students who complete the IOCA frequently experience improved intercultural competence (i.e., “the ability to function effectively in another culture” for appropriate or shared meaning or consciousness; Bird, Mendenhall, Stevens, & Oddou, 2010, p. 811.) based on personal feedback and posttest measures. As the IOCA requires students to assess organizational members’ communication patterns working in multiple regions and cultures (sometimes speaking different languages), students in COM 7900 are therefore pressed to recognize their own cultural biases in order to effectively explain how culture impacts the client’s communication processes occurring in a

multinational and transnational organization. In short, the IOCA students' COM 7900 assessment project (preceded by their earlier study abroad experience) immerses them into interactive, cultural contexts with people of different ethnic, socio-geographical, and linguistic orientations. This course outcome, articulated by multiple MAIGC graduates over the years, is reflected in a student's response from the first cohort: "[The program] exposed me to communication barriers to overcome, and first-hand experience in another culture" (MAIGC Cohort Exit Survey, 2012).

**Learning objective 5.** *To gain practical, professional team-based experience addressing and solving organizational global communication problems and cultural aptitudes as they address the opportunities and challenges of a global organization.* In addition to learning about the organizational client's strengths and weaknesses, IOCA students also learn about their own individual and collaborative competencies and cultural aptitudes as they address the problems and opportunities of a global organization. In that the IOCA is conducted in teams, students develop their abilities to work with others on face-to-face task-based challenges associated with the assessment process. Over time, they grow in their decision making and integrative communication abilities. Ultimately, a team's productivity is a product of shared information, professional trust, support, and cohesiveness, which students are required to do in face-to-face and virtual contexts. Without question, these skills serve them well. As Adams and Galanes (2015) advance, the ability to work in teams is ranked as one of the top four abilities for ideal MBA graduates. As a student in MAIGC's third capstone noted, the IOCA project not only "empowered" her to conduct similar assessments in the future, she also gained critical knowledge of leadership and group project completion that she can directly transfer to the workplace. Adams and Galanes (2015) assert that "[p]rofessionally, the higher you go in any organization...the more time you will spend working as a member of small groups" (p. 5).

Flexible intercultural communication also “emphasizes the importance of integrating knowledge and an open-minded attitude” (Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2012, p. 28). IOCA students are tasked with applying an ethnorelative mindset (Wang, 2016), using intercultural flexibility to research and assess an organization’s communication patterns and operational effectiveness. In contrast to ethnocentrism (i.e. that one’s own cultural group or worldview is superior to other cultural groups), ethnorelativism is described as the “means to understand a communication practice from the other person’s cultural frame of reference” (Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2012, p. 301), as evidenced in the three stages of acceptance, adaptation, and integration. In brief, the IOCA experience is a resume builder and evidence of effective collaboration for problem solving, within domestic and international communication contexts. One graduate’s response from the program’s first cohort, quoting a company interviewer, confirmed as much. In her words, the interviewer stated, “Your education is outstanding. This is why I kept looking at your resume.”

## **Summary and Recommendations**

Since 2012, MAIGC students and their clients have overwhelmingly voiced approval for COM 7900 and the benefits of the IOCA; however, COM 7900, in general, and the IOCA, in particular, have not escaped criticism. Subsequently, the main limitations of the IOCA have been addressed two ways. First, course evaluations have made clear that students would like to be exposed to the IOCA earlier in the graduate program. To this end, COM 7900 instructors have made it routine to preview the International Organizational Communication Assessment and the Integrated Public Relations Campaign each fall semester in COM 7100: Survey of Global Communication—MAIGC’s introductory course. COM 7100 is the ideal MAIGC course for explaining both projects since graduate students take 7100 during their first semester in the program, and COM 7100 focuses on content germane to both projects. Students who have heard the IOCA and IPRC explained in COM 7100 report they benefitted from these presentations because

it let them know, well in advance, what their final project entailed, and it gave them time to identify a potential client for their capstone project.

Second, course evaluations have established that some students feel overwhelmed learning the theories and various methodological tools used for the IOCA in one semester. Here, too, COM 7900 instructors have taken steps to ensure that the theories used with the IOCA appear at the beginning of the MAIGC program, for example in COM 7200: Foundations in Communication Theory and Research. Like COM 7100, students must also take COM 7200 early in the program. As its name indicates, Foundations in Communication Theory and Research examines scientific theories—like systems theory (Katz & Kahn, 1978)—that facilitate IOCA’s application; therefore, it is well suited for addressing these theories. In terms of introducing IOCA methodological tools earlier to students, COM 7900 instructors have worked to include instruments like the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) in COM 7200 and COM 7400: Communication Research Methods that serve as prerequisites for COM 7900. The IDI is designed to measure both an individual’s cultural mindset and skills (Hammer 2011). According to Krishnan et al. (2017) the IDI is “one of the most robust and valid measures of intercultural competence” (p. 2). In addition to the covering of theory and empirical tools earlier in the program, instructors have also taken steps to make contact and coach graduate students at specific points during the program to ensure they are equipped with the knowledge necessary for completing the capstone project. In short, these steps have helped MAIGC students better prepare for the IOCA.

In the future, COM 7900 instructors plan to review the course’s pedagogy and rubrics and update them, as needed, based on the latest organizational, instructional, and professional communication research (e.g., Garner, et al., 2016). Building on the findings of Lucas and Rawlins (2015), this appraisal aims to improve COM 7900’s design and delivery. Ultimately, these steps seek to benefit MAIGC students, their clients, and—through documentation and publication—other graduate and undergraduate programs that focus on organizational communication assessment as it occurs in cross cultural contexts in the modern age. ■

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Global Organization: an organization with a headquarters in one nation and regional offices in other nations (Hines, 2007).
- <sup>2</sup> Transnational organization: an organization with a global headquarters and national headquarters in other nations (Hines, 2007).

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