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Dissent in Organizations, by Kassing, J

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Book Review


“If everyone is thinking alike, then someone isn’t thinking.”
—General George S. Patton, Jr.

Without people who will voice their opinions and push for reform, organizations would have a hard time changing. Almost all people at some time have had dissenting thoughts, voiced or unvoiced, about an organization with which they are affiliated. It could be against a management style, a new policy, or even an unethical practice at the organization. Dissent can lead to promotions, policy changes, or even lawsuits. Because of its prevalence in all organizations, dissent is an important part of communication in the workplace. Jeffrey Kassing offers a contemporary theoretical exploration of dissent as well as insight into the use of dissent for employees and management. Kassing argues that dissent is crucial in the study of organizational communication: “The antidote for conformity, dissent allows us to think and speak for ourselves rather than to ingest and reiterate the positions of others” (2011, p. 17).

Kassing opens his discussion of dissent in organizations by explaining how it is relevant in today’s society. He presents modern case studies, including the famous whistleblowing cases of Coleen Rowley of The Federal Bureau of Investigation and Cynthia Cooper of WorldCom, that support the concept of dissent as a current, useful tool in organizations. These case studies examine how dissent exists in all types of organizations, yet there is still stigma attached to it. This discussion shows how dissent is a valuable part of organizational communication that can often bring about important reform in organizational structure and can also bring problematic issues to light. Kassing outlines theoretical explanations of the definition of organizational dissent and how it relates to conflict, upward influence, employee resistance and voice, and whistleblowing in organizations. For example, he argues that dissent is a subset of employee resistance, while whistleblowing is a subset of dissent (p. 53). Kassing also situates dissent comfortably within classical and contemporary approaches to organizational communication theories, clearly relaying the importance of dissent in the field of communication.
After providing a thorough explanation of dissent, Kassing then provides more practical advice for readers. How exactly is dissent communicated? Using previous research and firsthand accounts, Kassing explores what causes dissent and how employees express it. He also discusses factors—including economical, political, and sociocultural—that could influence the expression of dissent. He offers a model that employees would follow when deciding whether to dissent (p. 120). The deciding factors include the following: the seriousness of the issue, personal responsibility, and the feasibility of response.

Kassing then considers in detail different types of dissent expression. These types of expression can occur upwardly or laterally and include circumvention, repetition, threatening resignation, and others. The use of firsthand accounts throughout these explanations helps illustrate how these types could be used correctly by employees. Kassing stresses that for dissent to be effective, the correct type of dissent expression should be used. Whether the correct method is used depends on the organization and the possible response, the people expressing and receiving dissent, and the severity of the issue. Last, Kassing supplies practical advice to the people who are on the receiving end of dissent. He explains that organizations handle dissent differently, and how it is handled matters. Because Kassing argues that dissent is a crucial part of organizational growth, he emphasizes that dissenters and those who receive dissent should know what to do with it. Dissent can provide growth for the individual and the organization.

Throughout his book, Kassing strongly links dissent to the field of organizational communication. He presents dissent as a form of communication that depends on the structure of the organization as well as on how the communication is expressed. He also states the ubiquity and importance of dissent: “It can ensure sound decisions through thoughtful reflection. And it can lead to innovation through honest and introspective consideration of alternative perspectives” (p. 22). Using well-known theories of organizational structure, he explains how dissent would work in specific types of organizations, allowing readers to see how dissent would function in their respective workplaces. For example, from a classical management perspective, dissent would not occur easily; however, from a cultural interpretive perspective, dissent would become a normal function of the organization. Kassing also gathers the research on dissent and synthesizes it to illustrate its main components: what triggers dissent and what might keep it from occurring. The book’s practical implications also serve as valuable information for organizations that may need advice on dealing with dissent. For communication scholars, this discussion of dissent reinforces the link between the study of communication and people outside the field.

Kassing uses two effective writing strategies to describe dissent: an explanation through recent case studies and the book’s organizational style. Application to recent cases of dissent illuminates how dissent is still a
prevalent issue in today's society and thus, research on this topic is valuable. Kassing presents an argument for why dissent should occur if the triggering factor is strong enough. For example, in the case “The Tobacco Industry,” management did not want to accept the dissent of Dr. Jeffrey Wigand. However, because he went public with the information that cigarettes contain cancer causing ingredients, changes occurred in the industry. Also, Kassing organizes the book in a clear, concise manner. He begins by placing dissent in previous literature and ends with practical uses for the subject matter. Beginning with a theoretical background provides a solid foundation on which to give advice on dissent, making the book informative as well as helpful.

Although Kassing adequately discusses the theoretical background and the importance of dissent, one topic that would help complete the research on dissent is knowing more about how much it happens in organizations: “While speculation about the value of dissent abounds, little is known about how much routinely occurs within organizations” (p. 178). This statement opens the door to future research on this topic and leaves the reader wanting more. Whereas high-profile cases of dissent receive detailed study, the more routine cases that occur on a day-to-day basis have not been well documented. Knowing about these more routine cases could give insight into the cases of dissent where a moral dilemma is not the driving factor. Although the more high-profile cases often bring about organizational changes as well as social impact, the low-profile cases paint a better picture of the communication that occurs within organizations on a more routine basis. Thus, having more of this information would complete the book’s explanation of dissent.

Overall, Kassing gives readers an interesting and informative view of organizational dissent. His previous work in this field makes him a competent and credible source. The use of examples and firsthand accounts as well as the organization of the book enhance the reader’s understanding. Those seeking information about the concept of dissent and how it functions to enhance communication within organizations would benefit from reading this book.

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