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Best Practices of Organizational Communication in Group Travel Planning

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BEST PRACTICES OF ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION
IN GROUP TRAVEL PLANNING

A Capstone Experience/ Thesis Project

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for

the Degree Bachelor of Arts with

Honors College Graduate Distinction at Western Kentucky University

By

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ABSTRACT

To succeed in the travel industry, professionals must continuously seek new ways to improve their service. In group travel, clients expect their tour director to meet and exceed all expectations. As I prepare to lead a tour group of high school students to Walt Disney World, I will put my knowledge of four organizational communication practices to the test. These best practices will be utilized in planning for challenges that may arise as well as handling any obstacles throughout the tour. Success will be measured through the thoughts of the clients during and after the trip and future recommendations will be provided as a way to continue improving service standards.

Keywords: Organizational Communication, Group Travel, Travel Planning, Tourism

Dedicated to the faculty and staff of
WKU's Department of Communication and the Honors College

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The travel and tourism industry has been my career interest since I developed a love of traveling with family and friends at a young age. Throughout my school career I have developed the organizational habits relevant to the industry and I have chosen classes that have equipped me to have success as a Group Travel Planner.

In my last semester of college, I was offered an internship for a travel planning company that would turn into a full time career after graduation. After only two months of working for this company I was tasked with completing the other major role of the job - tour directing.

For the past two months, I had been working on the plans for a Walt Disney World trip and now I would be the group's fearless leader. I am preparing myself to lead a group of 125 band and choir students to compete in the 2015 Festival Disney Music Competition, March, 2015. I immersed myself in the protocol for tour directors in my company and worked with my boss about potential challenges of the trip and her expectations. One of the most useful tools, however, came from my education in Corporate and Organizational Communication.

I knew that I could apply my event planning background and maybe even sales to this career field, but Organizational Communication didn't cross my mind until I got into

the planning stages for being a Tour Director. My background in Organizational Communication is mainly comprised of theories and the application of those theories in a corporate setting. Almost immediately, I was leaving behind the corporate stereotype and beginning to connect the theories I learned about in my courses to situations that could arise in my new career as a Group Travel Planner and Tour Director.

Now, as I prepare to lead this group, I will use what I know about the best practices in organizational communication to generate the solutions to the challenges that may arise on this trip and overcoming the obstacles I may face. I will focus on the application of the Uncertainty Reduction Theory, The Sensemaking Theory, and The Adaptive Structuration Theory. I will explain these theories in the way they would be discussed in a corporate setting and then connect it back to my tour and how different situations played out. During the tour, I will find out what some of the students and chaperones on the trip liked about the communication strategies I used and what could be improved for future trips. I will then provide recommendations for my company to use for future tours.

CHAPTER 2

TOUR OBJECTIVES

Throughout the process of planning this trip, I have developed a list of potential challenges I may face as a tour director. From this list of potential challenges, I have developed five objectives that I will meet in in the planning stages of this trip. These objectives include; (1) understanding the dynamic of the group and how to best serve their needs, (2) ensuring clear group communication at all times, (3) preventing breakdowns in communication such as being in the wrong place at the wrong time, (4) being prepared for crisis management, and (5) being prepared to handle confusion and complaints.

Understanding the Group Dynamic

First, understanding the dynamic of the group is critical to being able to serve the group well. In the case of this trip, I am working with 115 high school students, ages ranging from 14-18 years old. There will also be 10 chaperones, made up of parents, and a band and choir director, whom are my main clients. The group's purpose is to perform at Festival Disney as a band and a choir in hopes of receiving honors and recognition to bring back to their school. The two directors/clients have traveled with my tour company before and they will be expecting the same level of service they have received in the past

from a different tour guide. As I begin to make sense of the group dynamic, I can predict potential challenges that I will face as tour director for this group.

First of all, I am at least 10 year younger than the Directors, up to 30 years younger than the chaperones, and only four to seven years older than the students. I will have to present myself in a mature, positive, and professional manner in order to gain the respect of this group. I will need the students to take me seriously and the adults to trust my decisions in order for the trip to work.

Secondly, I will likely be compared to the tour directors that my clients have had in the past. I will have to go above and beyond in my level of customer service to ensure my clients have an equal or greater experience than their last. To prepare for this, I will look at the reviews from their previous trip and make note of improvements they wanted to see made and the things that they loved about their trip.

Lastly, I will need to overcome my lack of knowledge about band and choir jargon. Having no experience with the dynamic of a band and choir, their instruments, or their group goals, I will need to compensate with a humble desire to learn from the group. Though I may not be interested in the inner-workings of high school band and choir, I will need to do some initial research to prevent myself from being clueless and I will need to ask the group questions about their music and instruments whenever it is appropriate. The band will appreciate my interest in them as long as I do this in moderation.

Group Communication

Having clear group communication is the only way for this trip to be successful. In order to ensure that everyone knows what is going on in preparation for the trip, I will (1) create chaperone/director packets and expectations, (2) send out a detailed final itinerary packet to the students, (3) and have the group sign up for a mass texting system.

Two weeks before the trip I will assemble chaperone packets to be given out on the motor coach at the beginning of the trip. The chaperone packets will include a detailed final itinerary for the trip with exact times, a business card with my cell phone number, and the rooming list for the hotel with the room numbers for the whole group. There will also be a manifest included in the packet that provides each student's cell number, their parent's cell number, the number of the bus they are on, and their special needs or dietary requests. The chaperone packets will include maps of each Disney park, a performance guidelines packet, and a list of chaperone expectations. The chaperone expectation sheet is the best way to explain that the chaperones are responsible for keeping up with their chaperone groups, for conducting nightly room checks, and disciplining the students when necessary. My job is to serve the overall needs of the group so if there is a problem with a student, my first point of contact is their chaperone to handle the situation and if the chaperone is unavailable, I go to the directors next.

Two weeks prior to the trip the students will receive their final itinerary packet. This packet tells them their exact schedule for the trip and descriptions of each event on the timeline. This packet will also tell them how they can pre-plan their fast passes for

Disney Parks, who their roommates will be in the hotel, and which meals they have covered by the cost of the trip, and which they need to budget for.

The group will also be asked to join a mass texting system called “*Remind*.” *Remind* is used primarily by teachers to get messages across to students and chaperones on field trips without having a way for their students to reply or get a hold of their personal number. I will have a *Remind* system set up for the students, chaperones, and directors on the trip. Then, I will have a separate system for each student’s parent at home. Next, each participant will experience how *Remind* will be used to prevent breakdowns in communication.

Preventing Breakdowns in Communication

In a group of 127 people, there is likely to be potential for breakdowns in communication. My job as a travel planner and tour guide is to ensure that these breakdowns do not happen. The most common type of breakdown I need to be prepared for is the group as a whole or even just certain individuals is showing up at the wrong place at the wrong time. Several measures are taken to prevent this including the final itinerary packets and the *Remind* system. However, these measures may not always be enough.

With *Remind*, I can send out information about where to be and when to be there and I can keep everyone up to date on the day’s proceedings. Even though I’m sending out frequent texts and reminders, I will still need to make announcements face to face. At each stop I will need to make an appearance on each motor coach and go over the events of that time period and everything the group must have with them or remember to do. To

prevent breakdowns in communication, I will need to be constantly repeating myself and make time for questions.

To prevent the group from being in the wrong place at the wrong time or being late to a performance, I must personally be completely aware of the itinerary and timing of the trip. Before I leave for the trip I will create a detailed tour director itinerary for myself of everything I may need to know. This itinerary will be split up by days. Each event or venue will have the name and number of the contact we've been working with, directions for bus parking, routing to and from venues, and check in procedures. Throughout the itinerary, I will make note of when I should pass out items like tickets, dining cards, or room keys. I will note each of the things I need to remind the group about at each stage of the trip and when I should deliver those messages. I will make the itinerary detailed enough that if the day is hectic and I don't have time to think, my tour director itinerary will tell me exactly what I need to do and when to do it.

Preparing for a Crisis

An important reality of being a tour guide is understanding that crises may occur and I need to be as prepared as possible if they do. In the event that we miss a performance, someone goes missing or gets hurt, or there is any type of unforeseen accident, I must take measures towards planning how I will deal with those situations. One way I can prepare for sickness or injury crisis is to administer first aid forms on each student to the parks that they will be visiting each day. If a student shows up to the first aid office or has an emergency, their chaperone will be contacted immediately and they will have consent to treat the issue immediately.

In the event that we hit major traffic, get lost, or any number of things that would cause us to miss a performance, I must know each and every loophole that Festival Disney offers to give us a new performance time. I need to establish a productive relationship with the Festival Disney staff before the trip in order to ensure they will want to help me in a time of crisis or emergency.

Additionally, I will need to be prepared on how to communicate a tragic or unfortunate circumstance to my group. Depending on the situation, the best option would be to go first to the directors and see how they think the situation should be expressed to the group.

Handling Confusion and Complaints

If something on the trip were to go wrong, I will need to be mentally and professionally prepared to handle complaints. In the hospitality and tourism business, the customer is always right. My purpose is to facilitate their needs, even if it means doing something that I don't see as the best option. In planning for this trip, I faced the dilemma of scheduling time in the parks around the group's performance on one of the days of the trip. The group had back to back performances scheduled that would last from mid morning to late afternoon, a couple hours of free time in the early morning and the late afternoon, and then an awards ceremony to attend in the evening. Rather than focusing entirely on their performances for that one day, the group was insistent upon visiting the parks in the morning and the late afternoon. At Disney, spending a couple of hours anywhere is easier said than done because it takes so long to get from point A to point B and you never know how traffic will be when you have a mandatory performance time.

So even though I knew going to a park for a short amount of time would make the day more complicated and stressful, I had to agree to it and do everything in my power to make the quick transitions and timeline look seamless.

Even if I do my best to make the client's request work, I still may face complaints about the fast pace of the day and confusion about where exactly to be and when. I will need to be ready to face these complaints with a smile, accurate information, and positive attitude. If I let anyone see me look stressed out, then I have failed as a tour guide. I must look like I have everything under control and that there is nothing to worry about at all times in order to keep the group feeling secure and content.

CHAPTER 3

ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION THEORY

Planning for breakdowns in communication and handling crisis are not skills that come naturally to most people. With my background in organizational communication theory, I have come to know and understand the specific processes and literature behind the subjects of these objectives. Organizational communication studies are highly important in the hospitality and tourism. In group travel planning, we use organizational communication to work with our clients and lead tours that serve their needs. We need organizational communication theory to better understand virtually every process that occurs within a group of people. I will use my knowledge of these theories to help better plan for this trip and handle any obstacles that occur along the way.

In the following chapters, I will explain each related theory, its key findings, and how the theory played out in handling obstacles during the tour. I will discuss (1) uncertainty reduction theory, (2) sense making theory, (3) and adaptive structuration theory.

CHAPTER 4

UNCERTAINTY REDUCTION THEORY

Overview

Uncertainty reduction theory relies on the core assumption that uncertainty, in general, is unpleasant and that motivates people to communicate to reduce uncertainty. In the context of an organization, a new employee to an organization goes through several stages of progression; the entry, personal, and exit stage.

The entry phase is where an employee learns the general information about their company, co-workers, and tasks of the job. This information only reaches the surface level and includes mainly demographic information. Communications at this stage is guided mainly by following the rules and norms of the organization.

As an employee moves through the entry stage and gets to know their surroundings and co-workers, they become a part of the personal stage. In the personal stage an employee learns more about the values, attitudes, and beliefs that their company, boss, and co-workers hold. They become more comfortable and begin to communicate more freely. Typically, at this stage they are no longer considered the ‘newbie’ and they have begun to fit in and identify with the organization.

If an employee begins to feel unattached, has workplace tensions or stress, or for a number of reasons they may want to leave the organization, they enter the exit phase. This where the employee decides to end the relationship with the organization and move on. Communication becomes brief and potentially harsh between employee and employer.

As an employee moves through the uncertainty reduction process, they are seeking information in a number of ways. They can seek information passively by simply observing the actions and behaviors of their co-workers. In this case, the employee would be watching what their co-workers wear to work and how they interact with one another and listening to how they speak and handle conflicts without getting directly involved.

They may choose to seek information actively which consists of asking others questions about the appropriate ways to behave and the ins and outs of the company. This could mean asking your co-workers what your boss gets really mad about and things to avoid doing.

Interactively seeking information is the most direct option, but a lot of times people are not comfortable with it until they reach the personal stage. Interactive information seeking is communicating directly with a person. Rather than asking your co-workers how your boss would feel about a request for a few days off, you're going directly to your boss and asking if it would be okay to take a few days off. The problem

with interactively seeking information is not knowing how that person will react to your question.

Uncertainty Reduction During the Tour

Uncertainty can have many causes in the context of a tour. Each student is leaving behind their parents and their homes to go across the country, possibly for the first time. Many of the students may not have ever been away from home or had to be responsible for themselves. My job is to make them feel as comfortable as possible.

How can I be the one to make students feel more comfortable if they haven't even met me yet? This is where the uncertainty reduction theory comes in. There are a couple of initial challenges I will face in reducing the uncertainty of the group and reducing my own uncertainty in the process.

First of all, this is my first tour. I have planned day in and day out, but it is essentially the first time I have ever been responsible for 120 people. I have a list of everything I need to remember, my routing mapped out, and the details taken care of, but I still have some underlying uncertainties in myself when it comes to leading the tour. Will the group like me? Will they take me seriously? What if something goes terribly wrong? These are all questions that I have to take into consideration and things that I can't plan for in advance.

Secondly, the group doesn't know me. They don't know a single thing about me ahead of time except that I work for a travel company and will be their tour guide. These students, chaperones, and directors might feel uncertain about my abilities to lead them or about my character in general. They will have to rely on someone they don't even know to ensure they make their performances and get their money's worth out of the trip. Will she be nice? Will she be on time and organized? Will she make sure this trip is fun? These are all questions that may cause uncertainty for the group. The following is a detailed account of the uncertainty reduction theory played out on this trip.

The way that the itinerary worked out and because I'm still in school and couldn't take an additional day to drive to Illinois, the group boarded their motor coaches in Illinois and picked me up in Bowling Green, Kentucky at about 2AM on the first night of the trip. Because it was so late, I was with the group over night without having a chance to introduce myself. The next morning I paid a visit to each bus to wake everyone up for our breakfast stop. A lot of the students looked puzzled about who I was and what I was doing there until I introduced myself as their Tour Director. Already off on a bad note because I woke everyone up, I made the effort to push through the entry stage of uncertainty reduction and into the personal stage. I walked around McDonalds saying hello to each group of friends and introducing myself. I wanted to go ahead and use interactive tactics to get to know the group because I only had a short amount of time to

let them get to know me before the trip really began at Disney. I tried to relate to them by asking the students if they had ever been to Disney, which instrument they played if they were in the band, and several other questions that reached more into the personal stage. Some of them were willing to disclose and others were more standoffish toward me. After breakfast, I quickly visited each bus to tell them a little bit more about me and how excited I was to be with them before we got back on the road.

On the rest of the way to Florida I got to know know the chaperones and students on my bus. I brought some fun t-shirts from my company's office with me and decided to play Disney trivia to give them away. Right away I had all of the students laughing and engaged in the game. I knew that I had moved past those initial barriers of uncertainty with most of the students and chaperones on my bus, but I would need to work throughout the week to maintain an open rapport with the students. I wanted to ensure that my relationship with the group would never reach the exit stage. while I would have to eventually say goodbye to them, I wanted each member of the group to want to take another trip with my company in the future.

CHAPTER 5

SENSEMAKING THEORY

Overview

The sensemaking theory is rooted in the assumption that managing life is about making sense. Sensemaking is about designing and implementing communication practices that are responsive to human needs. Often sensemaking deals with understanding and facing sudden change or crisis. The way people think about and view the world are factors that determine how someone will make sense of a situation. (Maitlis and Sonenshein, 2010) conducted a study about sensemaking in turbulent times. First, their studies showed that “crises and change highlight the importance, but often elusiveness, of shared meanings within a group (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010, p. 311).” They also found that “emotions can often play a key role in the process of sensemaking in environments that are dynamic and unpredictable (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010, p. 311).” Identity, commitment, and expectations are the main ways that sensemaking is shaped in a turbulent environment. During organizational change, employees must have a sense of identity, commitment and expectations of that organization in order to make sense of the situation and adapt accordingly. Commitment could take its form in a variety of way. Employees would be committed to a group of people (co-workers or the company itself), they could be committed to their line of work, or they could be committed to a certain

attitude. An employee with a commitment to having a positive attitude about change and an optimistic approach will have a clearer vision and ability to make sense of a major change.

Identity comes from the way an employee feels tied to or connected with an organization. If an employee feels like they can identify with the organization they work in, they will likely adjust to the organization's changes. Identification could come from the use of "we" language, shared values, or even the satisfaction with the employee's role in the company. If an organization falls into crisis or sudden change, an employee who feels they are part of the team and really likes the organization will be more adaptable to change and sensemaking.

Expectations are key in how an employee will make sense of situation of sudden change or crisis. It isn't good for the organization for an employee to have overly optimistic expectations or negative expectations. Overly optimistic expectations can easily lead to disappointments. If something is out of an organization's control, the overly optimistic person will expect the organization to figure it out anyway and will likely end up disappointed. A person with negative expectations isn't good either because they are expecting the organization to fail and are less likely to trust the organization enough to be able to identify with the organization and make sense of a situation. These type of people tend to stay surprised when an organization does well. It's best for an organization to give

it's employee security and high expectations that they can handle crisis and sudden change. They also need to ensure that they aren't perfect and there will be things that could happen beyond their control.

Sensemaking During the Tour

In my position as Tour Director, it is essential that I am adaptable to change and can do so without anyone seeing me stress or get upset. The way that my group will make sense of change or crisis during my trip is a direct reflection of the commitment, identity, and expectations they have for me and my company in handling that change.

I will achieve commitment by maintain a positive attitude, making positive remarks and always having a smile. This kind of attitude is contagious and will help my group commit to having a positive attitude, to go with the flow and to have a great time no matter the circumstance.

I will establish a sense of identity by creating ways for my group to connect with my company. The iconic brand of my company is made up of two vibrant colors that we use to our advantage in creating promotional materials and "swag" for our group. On every trip, we give away items that students like in our company's signature colors. Distributing items like sunglasses, earbuds, and backpacks will help my group identify with my company even if they don't realize it is happening.

Because this school has travelled with my company before, they have high expectations of the level of service they will receive and they also expect for the trip to run smooth and flawless. I will have to work to meet the expectations of the group and ensure that everything goes as planned. If don't achieve this, they will be less likely to trust me and to be adaptable to change. The following is an account of how the sensemaking theory played out during the trip.

During the trip, many there were many conflicts that occurred that were a cause of my environment or a cause of human error. My group had to adapt to changed plans frequently and make sense of a new situation as a result. I reminded everyone frequently to maintain positive and to trust my judgement when it came to changes in plans. For the most part, I was successful in gaining the group's trust and meeting their expectations. However, I did have a number of difficult situations that caused difficulties that I can learn from.

As soon as our motorcoaches entered Florida, we were dealing with torrential rain conditions. The plan was to check in to our hotel at 2PM and be headed to Magic Kingdom by 3PM. However, I looked at the weather forecast and radar for the evening and saw that the torrential rains would continue until 4PM that evening. We arrived at the hotel and I exited the coaches to check my group in and collect our pre-assigned keys. The woman at the front desk told me that she had no record of our group's reservation and I immediately began to panic. I asked to speak with the sales manager whom I had been working with, but she had gone home for the day. I then asked to speak with any manager on the property and was directed to an office across the hotel. That manager was

thankfully able to locate my reservation, but the hotel hadn't pre-keyed our rooms even though I had just spoken with the sales manager to confirm everything the day before.

While they keyed our rooms, I went back to my busses and had everyone unload their luggage into a large space at the convention center entrance to the hotel. We were fighting torrential rain as we unloaded and by the end of the process everyone was soaking wet and unhappy. By that time, I had room keys and sent everyone to their designated rooms. At that point, I made the executive decision to give everyone an extra hour to freshen up and relax from the long day on the bus and hauling luggage through the rain. I changed the plans to leaving for Magic Kingdom at 4PM when the rain was supposed to stop.

After I made the announcement, I heard some complaints about not having enough time in the parks that evening and I heard others praising the extra time to freshen up. The group was making sense of the sudden change in plans and handling it in different ways. When we did make it to Magic Kingdom, it turned into a nice evening and I heard several members of the group mentioning that they were thankful we waited until the rain stopped.

Another scenario that involved sudden change and sensemaking occurred the following morning on our way to Animal Kingdom. The original plan for the day was to spend four hours that morning at the park, change into performance attire, travel to the choir and band performances, and then go to Hollywood Studios for the Festival Disney Award Ceremony. On our way to Animal Kingdom, we hit traffic that was backed up all the way to entrance to Walt Disney World. I knew this wasn't a good sign. I looked up traffic reports online and saw a breaking news report about a fatal accident that occurred near the entrance of the parks. At this point, I knew I had lost 1.5 - 2 hours of park time because of traffic and no way to turn around and go back to the hotel.

This day was scheduled specifically to maximize the group's time in the parks. I now had three motorcoaches full of disappointed students and no plan B. While I developed my new plan for the day, I played Disney radio over the intercom on each motorcoach. In hopes that these musical students would see an opportunity for a fun sing-along until the traffic moved. Many of the students were all for it and seemed to be enjoying themselves. However, my chaperones still seemed annoyed by the situation and by the singing. After two hours of sing alongs and trivia, we were headed to Animal Kingdom with a maximum of two hours to spend there. The students needed to eat lunch during this time frame as well so the ability to ride rides was very limited.

To make sure I would get the group to their first performance on time, I skipped out on park time and made a dry run to the location with my bus drivers. We followed the directions and were able to find the location and GPS the amount of time it would take to get there. I got off the bus and spoke with the Festival Disney reps to confirm the check in procedures and then went back to Animal Kingdom to pick up the group.

In order to extend the amount of time in Animal Kingdom, as the directors requested, I had to plan for the group to change clothes on the motor coaches rather than driving to the nearest rest stop about 10 miles in the wrong direction from the performance locations. After park time, the group came back to the busses, grabbed their performance clothes, and split into two girl changing busses and one boy changing bus. This situation was chaotic! Girls were leaving clothing items on the boy bus and vice versa. The group was in a huge hurry to change so we could leave for the performance. Some people were complaining about the change while others were adapting to it and were thankful for the extra park time.

I ended up delivering the group to their performance right on time and all was well. After the performance, the group had forgotten all about the stressful situation that morning and everyone seemed to be positive again. In short - I remained positive and calm as I could throughout the events of the entire day. During these hours, I answered the same questions over and over to ensure that my group was making sense of the different situations. As a result, my group was able to trust my decisions, whether they liked them or not, and I met their expectations by getting them to their performance on time.

CHAPTER 6

ADAPTIVE STRUCTURATION THEORY

Overview

Adaptive Structuration Theory is based upon the role of advanced information technology in organizational change. Information technology is often criticized for taking away from face to face communication in groups of people. However, the Adaptive Structuration Theory challenges this view, pointing out the social aspects of IT and its benefit to organizations. A group or organization can use this theory to determine the role of technology in meeting their tasks while making a decision about whether they should incorporate or replace their daily routines with more efficient technology.

The information technology that we incorporated with this group was a smartphone application called “*Remind*.” *Remind* is used primarily by the school system for teachers to send information in mass to the students in their class or their parents without having everyone exchange phone numbers or being able to respond back to the teacher’s phone number. Before the trip, I sent an email to all of the students and their parents to register for *Remind*. All the group has to do is download the app to their smartphone or text the registration number on a regular cell phone and then they will be registered. At this point, I could send messages with updates on where to be and when to the group. I could also schedule messages to to be sent at times that I know I’ll be really

busy and might not be able to write out a message. Another great feature of this system is that I can have a separate group for parents. In their group, I can update them on what their kids are doing with group pictures, videos of their performances, and much more. *Remind* is a useful media device to keep parents in the loop and make them feel secure about sending their kids to travel with my company.

Adaptive Structuration Theory During the Tour

During the trip I thought *Remind* was really helpful. For example, I used *Remind* to give 15 minute warnings on when we would be stopping at a rest stop, leaving the hotel, and making our way to the front of the park. I also used *Remind* to tell the group where they needed to meet by taking a picture of the spot in person or on a park map. I sent positive messages throughout the day to say I hoped everyone was having fun and offered info about short wait times for popular rides and desserts they should try in the parks. *Remind* was incredibly useful to keep everyone on the same page about what was expected and where they were supposed to be without having to huddle the group together and give a ton of information at once. *Remind* was effective for the tour in that they were able to better retain bits and pieces of information at a time than they were when I gave the daily itinerary speech each morning. The little reminders throughout the day kept things moving effectively and less questions and confusion took place.

There were however, challenges for me and my group as we learned to adapt to new technology. First of all, *Remind* doesn't provide a way students with a way to respond to me or for me to message them individually. This task was solely up to the chaperones to make sure their chaperone groups were checking in when they were

supposed to. I think that the text messaging from *Remind* made students feel like they had more freedom because their information was coming through me. In turn, they were less likely to check in with their chaperones throughout the day. The freedom that the students felt like they had frustrated the chaperones, especially at the end of each day when they were tired. They had to make sure their entire group was accounted for before getting on the motorcoaches, but some students were going ahead to the motorcoaches and even ignoring messages from their chaperones. By the second day, I suggested that the students meet with their chaperone groups virtually rather than in person. I said they should take a “selfie” with whichever ride they were in line for as a way to check in with their chaperone. They liked this idea and made it fun and silly. The picture funny messages eased the tension between students and chaperones by the end of the trip.

Another challenge with *Remind* was the technology itself. On the last night of the trip, my bus drivers were supposed to meet us in the bus parking lot outside of Epcot. After the park’s firework show, I sent a *Remind* to the group to head to the Epcot bus parking lot, check in with their chaperones, and board the coaches. Because Epcot was extremely busy and the whole park was trying to leave at once, there was no way for everyone to walk together. I called my drivers after I sent the message and made sure they were waiting and ready for us as they were instructed. They told me they were at Disney’s Ticket and Transportation Center, which is the same place they had dropped us off that morning. It would require my group to take a monorail to get to them and then driving across Disney to get to us. I decided the busses had to come to us and went to send a *Remind* letting the group know to wait on the sidewalk for the motorcoaches because they weren’t out there, yet, but my *Remind* was unable to send because I lost

service. I was really worried at this point because I knew half of my group would be wandering around looking for our busses before I could get to them and they would be confused. There were a lot of confused faces as I walked up to the motorcoach lot. I walked around assuring everyone that the motorcoaches would be there shortly. Once I found service, I send the *Remind* apologizing for the confusion and let everyone know to hang tight.

With any type of technology, errors can be expected. I'm sure there were points during the day where students didn't have service and therefore weren't getting my text messages. For the most part, my group was adaptive to the use of technology rather than frequent group meetings because it maximized their free time and served as a frequent reminder. I think it was effective for our group and it didn't bother the majority of people that it took away from face to face interactions.

CHAPTER 7

RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

Recommendations

During and after the tour I was able to collect feedback from my clients and students about the trip and the way I communicated with them. Due to confidentiality issues, I was unable to provide them with a survey or use direct quotes. Therefore, in this section, I will give examples of communication that was seen as ineffective and suggest ways to improve it next time. I will also discuss some of the positive feedback I received about my communication skills during the trip.

The first issue that came up numerous times in my reviews was the confusion people experienced when plans had to suddenly change. As previously explained, the first night and the second day saw some unforeseen issues (torrential rain and traffic). I had to think on my feet to change the plans to benefit the group. There was a complaint that I didn't stick to the itinerary as much as they expected. The biggest lesson I can learn from that scenario is that I shouldn't assume my group is making sense of a situation if they aren't directly complaining about it to me at the time. In retrospect, my group felt confused about why plans were changing. In the future, I should focus less on making changes look like they aren't a big deal and focus more on explaining why a change is happening in addition to what they need to do differently. I wanted to seem like I had

everything completely under control and have my group feel they were never out of the loop.

Another complaint that I received was that the group felt rushed. When planning these trips, my company takes careful consideration into the timing of every activity. Everything is pretty much timed on the dot. For performances like Festival Disney, you are required to be on time, not late or early. I wish I would have known that some groups I work with are going to be chronically late and will require a little more time to get from point A to point B. In the future, I need to take the size of my group into consideration and think about how long it will take them to assemble and load onto the bus. This group typically showed up 5-10 minutes late to every meeting point. Next time, I should tell them to show up 10 minutes early to account for lost time. Projecting lateness is something that I failed to think about when initially gaining a better understanding for this group's dynamic. Changing clothes on the motorcoaches is also something I would never want to do again. The situation was chaotic and stressful. Instead of that extra 30 minutes of park time, we would have been better off changing at a rest area and the group would have felt a lot less rushed to get to their performance on time.

With every suggestion for improvement, I received positive feedback. Overall, the group thought I communicated well with them and always had a positive and upbeat attitude. They thought I was high energy and kept the group excited and entertained, even in difficult circumstances. I was told that I seemed to really care about the group and about making everyone happy. I think having this kind of attitude can do a lot to make up for my shortcoming in other areas. I also heard that never seemed stressed out and that allowed the group feel at ease and to relax.

The use of *Remind* was also a big hit with the group. The group at Disney loved being able to have information and reminders sent to their phone rather than walking across the park to get information as a group. The parents at home also really enjoyed staying up to date on all of the fun their kids were having. I would definitely use this technology again on future trips, keeping in mind that technology can and will fail from time to time, and I should always confirm information before sending it to everyone.

The group also began to identify with my company throughout the week. They wore their sunglasses, carried their backpacks, and listened to the earbuds that all held our logo. Many of the students and chaperones wanted to know more information about the other places we take groups and they wanted to discuss opportunities for future trips. A couple of the chaperones even asked if I could be requested as their Tour Director for their 2016 Festival Disney Trip.

Overall, my first experience as a Tour Director went well. I went into the trip with the idea that everything would work out because I planned it to work out, but I didn't consider external factors like major traffic and bad weather that would hinder my perfectly planned itinerary. My background in organizational communication was essential to my success during this trip. These theories taught me that there is a method to reducing uncertainty and making my group feel more comfortable around me. I learned that there are several factors within my control that determine whether or not my group will adapt to changes and be able to make sense of hectic situations. I also learned that technology can sometimes replace face to face communication for the better, but we should never become solely dependent on technology that could fail. Organizational Communication theory has allowed me to better understand the inner workings of groups

other than corporations. The real purpose of an education is to be able to take the knowledge and skills you develop and transfer them to whichever career path you may take. I feel confident that organizational communication can be connected to each and everything I do in my future career as a Group Travel Planner.

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