



Organizations and Unusual Routines

Everyone working in and with organizations will, from time to time, experience frustrations and problems when trying to accomplish tasks that are a required part of their role. This is an unusual routine – a recurrent interaction pattern in which someone encounters a problem when trying to accomplish normal activities by following standard organizational procedures and then becomes enmeshed in wasteful and even harmful subroutines while trying to resolve the initial problem. They are unusual because they are not intended or beneficial, and because they are generally pervasive but individually infrequent. They are routines because they become systematic as well as embedded in ordinary functions. Using a wide range of case studies and interdisciplinary research, this book provides researchers and practitioners with a new vocabulary for identifying, understanding, and dealing with this pervasive organizational phenomenon, in order to improve worker and customer satisfaction as well as organizational performance.

RONALD E. RICE is Arthur N. Rupe Chair in the Social Effects of Mass Communication and Co-Director of the Carsey-Wolf Center for Film, Television, and New Media at the University of California, Santa Barbara. He is the author of several books, the most recent of which include *The Internet and Health Care* (with Monica Murero, 2006) and *Media Ownership* (2008).

STEPHEN D. COOPER is Professor of Communication Studies at Marshall University, where he teaches courses in business and professional communication, computer-mediated communication, group communication, organizational communication, and research foundations. He is the author of *Watching the Watchdog: Bloggers as the Fifth Estate* (2006).

Organizations and Unusual Routines

A Systems Analysis of Dysfunctional
Feedback Processes

RONALD E. RICE
University of California, Santa Barbara, California

STEPHEN D. COOPER
Marshall University, Huntington, West Virginia



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge University Press
 978-0-521-76864-1 — Organizations and Unusual Routines
 Ronald E. Rice, Stephen D. Cooper
 Frontmatter
[More Information](#)

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom
 One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA
 477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
 314-321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre, New Delhi - 110025, India
 103 Penang Road, #05-06/07, Visioncrest Commercial, Singapore 238467

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of education, learning and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521768641

© Ronald E. Rice and Stephen D. Cooper 2010

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements, no reproduction of any part may take place without the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 2010

First paperback edition 2015

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication data

Rice, Ronald E.

Organizations and unusual routines : a systems analysis of dysfunctional feedback processes / Ronald E. Rice, Stephen D. Cooper.
 p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-521-76864-1

1. Organizational behavior. 2. Organizational change. 3. Organizational learning. I. Cooper, Stephen D, 1950– II. Title.

HD58.7.R525 2010

302.3'5–dc22

20100218900

ISBN 978-0-521-76864-1 Hardback

ISBN 978-1-107-68314-3 Paperback

Cambridge University Press has no responsibility for the persistence or accuracy of URLs for external or third-party internet websites referred to in this publication, and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

Contents

<i>List of figures</i>	<i>page</i> viii
<i>List of tables</i>	ix
<i>List of boxes</i>	x
<i>Preface</i>	xi
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xiv
1 Crazy systems, Kafka circuits, and unusual routines	1
Two stories of mundane complexity and dysfunctional feedback	1
Crazy systems	5
Unusual routines	17
The rest of the book	19
2 Causes, symptoms, and subroutines of unusual routines	
in six computer information/communication systems	21
Causes of unusual routines in three ICTs	22
Causes, symptoms, and subroutines of unusual	
routines in three ICTs	40
Conclusion	60
3 Getting personal: unusual routines at the customer	
service interface	67
Customer service, dissatisfaction, and complaining	68
Examples and analysis of unusual service subroutines,	
routines, and organizational (non-)response	81
Conclusion	106
4 A multi-theoretical foundation for understanding	
unusual routines	107
Five foundational theories for a preliminary	
model of unusual routines	107
Developing a preliminary model of unusual routines	139

vi	<i>Contents</i>
Five propositions	149
Conclusion	152
5 A detailed case study of unusual routines	155
Method	155
Proposition One	160
Proposition Two	167
Proposition Three	173
Proposition Four	177
Proposition Five	191
Conclusion	199
6 Summary and discussion of the case study results	200
Proposition One	200
Proposition Two	201
Proposition Three	201
Proposition Four	202
Proposition Five	203
Discussion	204
Conclusion	215
7 Individual and organizational challenges to feedback	217
Feedback challenges inherent in human communication behaviors	218
Feedback challenges inherent in organizations	227
Conclusion	249
8 A multi-level and cross-disciplinary summary of concepts related to unusual routines	252
Cognitive and social processing errors	252
Social traps and dilemmas	266
Organizational complexity	269
Organizational paradoxes	274
Organizational deviance	280
Technological complexity	287
Conclusion	305
9 Recommendations for resolving and mitigating unusual routines and related phenomena	306
Encourage customer service feedback from all stakeholders	306
Apply socio-technical systems theory, involve stakeholders from design through workarounds	310

<i>Contents</i>	vii
Reduce blaming and defensive approaches to cognitive dissonance	312
Manage paradoxes and sensemaking	314
Foster learning through feedback	317
Heighten awareness of predictable surprises and avoid overreacting to worst-case scenarios	319
Understand and resolve social traps and social dilemmas	320
Discuss and resolve conflicting goals, vicious cycles, and workplace deviance	321
Avoid simple and individual approaches to complex technology and system error	322
Apply and combine linkage and routines analysis	325
Conclusion	329
10 Summary and a tentative integrated model of unusual routines	331
The allure of unusual routines	331
Our preliminary models	333
A proposed integrative model of unusual routines	336
Conclusion	342
<i>References</i>	344
<i>Index</i>	373

Figures

1.1 Initial model of unusual routines, derived from Singer's crazy systems model	<i>page</i> 19
4.1 Extended model of unusual routines	153
6.1 Dynamics of single-loop and double-loop learning in unusual routines	208
10.1 Concept-level integrated model of unusual routines	337

Tables

3.1 Model of unusual routines, expanded from Singer's model of crazy systems	<i>page</i> 101
3.2 Aspects of unusual routines in the case examples	103
4.1 Aspects of routines, workarounds, and meta-routines	140
4.2 Conceptual rationales associated with each proposition	152
5.1 Interview guide	157
5.2 Examples of subroutines in the case	197
6.1 Working taxonomy of the single-loop process from the case	209
6.2 Working taxonomy of the double-loop process from the case	210
7.1 Development of defensive routines	246
10.1 Primary components of general concepts in Figure 10.1	338

Boxes

2.1 Summary of causes and symptoms of unusual routines in six ICT implementation cases	<i>page 60</i>
7.1 Summary of individual and organizational challenges to feedback	250
8.1 Individual processing heuristics, with example application to unusual routines	264
8.2 Organizational and social processes, with example application to unusual routines	301
9.1 Recommendations for avoiding, analyzing, mitigating, and resolving unusual routines and related processes	307

Preface

When something goes wrong
I'm the first to admit it
I'm the first to admit it
And the last one to know.
When something goes right
It's likely to lose me
It's apt to confuse me
It's such an unusual sight.

(Paul Simon, *Something So Right*, © 1973)

This book identifies, describes, and analyzes the pervasive and frustrating experiences people have with dysfunctional feedback in organizational and societal contexts, by showing that they are symptoms and consequences of unusual routines. An unusual routine is a recurrent interaction pattern in which someone encounters a problem in trying to accomplish normal activities by following procedures, then becomes enmeshed in wasteful and even harmful subroutines while trying to resolve the initial problem, creating and reinforcing unintended and (typically) undesirable outcomes, to some set of people, subsystems, organization, or society, either within or across system levels (or both). Often, the feedback loops about this initial unusual routine are either non-existent, dysfunctional, or deviation-reinforcing, creating a second-level, or meta-, routine. The term “unusual routines” is intentionally oxymoronic. The processes and consequences, when known, would be considered unusual, unacceptable, or negative by one or more stakeholders. Although the phenomenon is pervasive, any particular instance may be infrequent and difficult to identify. Nonetheless, the process and consequences are systematic, to the point where they become routinized and embedded in other routines. The subtitle emphasizes that the book takes a social systems analysis

perspective, although technical aspects of information and communication systems also play a role throughout the book.

Chapter 1 begins the book by reviewing the inspiration for this work, Benjamin Singer's concepts of crazy systems and Kafka circuits, and introducing an initial, more general, model of unusual routines. The following chapters provide a wide range of empirical case analyses, from implementation of information and communication technology systems (Chapter 2), and unsatisfying customer service interactions (Chapter 3), to a detailed analysis of the implementation of a university networking system (Chapters 5 and 6). Each of these attempts to advance an interdisciplinary model of unusual routines. The foundations for an interdisciplinary model of unusual routines, based in systems theory, sensemaking theory, diffusion of innovation theory, socio-technical systems theory, and, especially, organizational routines theory appear in Chapter 4.

Interestingly, while many theoretical and pragmatic approaches to problems such as unusual routines recommend increased feedback, Chapter 7 shows, through a broad review of literature, that the process of feedback itself is often quite problematic, and even implicated in the generation and reinforcement of unusual routines. Feedback is treated from both a communication and an organizational perspective as a complex and often dysfunctional process, involving activities such as ignoring available information, seeking versus receiving, discourse and language, multiple layers of content and relation, reflexive loops and undesirable repetitive patterns, skilled incompetence and competence contradictions, reporting errors, feedback timing, tensions between behavior and learning, organizational memory, the unreasonableness of rational systems, vicious circles, and defensive routines.

Chapter 8 is specifically intended to show how this common and pervasive experience is related to, and a generalized example of, many other issues, such as tragedy of the commons, social traps and social dilemmas, personal heuristics, cognitive dissonance, errors in logic, predictable surprises and worst-case scenarios, organizational complexity, unanticipated consequences, organizational paradoxes, organizational deviance and employee mistreatment, technology complexity, system manipulation, normal accidents, automated systems and system error, system drift and workarounds, among others. Chapter 9 reviews a variety of recommendations, derived from the

research and theories underlying the prior chapters, about ways to help avoid, mitigate, resolve, or at least identify, unusual routines. Chapter 10 integrates the main arguments and insights from each chapter, providing a tentative comprehensive model of, and initial suggestions for analyzing, unusual routines. The reference section provides an extremely broad and diverse set of sources for these chapters. Both the table of contents and the index provide multiple access points into the materials.

The first intended contribution of this book is an identification and articulation of a set of core concepts, terms, and recommendations about unusual routines, leading to an integrated model of unusual routines, that will help researchers, practitioners, designers, customers, and clients identify, analyze, and possibly mitigate this pervasive but sometimes invisible phenomenon. The second intended contribution is an implicit critique of the idealizing of functional approaches to systems and routines, and of sensemaking theory, as social, communicative processes that necessarily counter organizational dysfunctions and necessarily create social benefits for all concerned. The third intended contribution is an emphasis on the experiences, perceptions, and implications of users, consumers, clients, employees, supervisors, and administrators, rather than, as is usual in information systems or organizational behavior books, executives, strategists, and industries, or, as are often the focus of psychology or user interface books, specific individuals.

Acknowledgments

We are grateful to Ms. Paula M. Parish, Commissioning Editor in the Business & Management series of Cambridge University Press, for her support and guidance in getting this book published. She managed several iterations of seeking, providing, and framing reviewer comments. We also thank the anonymous reviewers for their focused insights and very helpful suggestions about related literature. We also thank Gail Welsh for the great copyediting job.

The cases in Chapter 2 are substantially edited, reorganized, and integrated versions of six course projects. In these projects, the graduate students, all working professionals, were asked to use the initial unusual routine model to interpret and critique behaviors and events in their own organizations. The first three systems examples are derived from papers written for Rice's 1995 course on "Social Aspects of Implementing Technology" at the Macquarie University Graduate School of Management, Sydney, Australia. The labor cost management system is based on Richard Hale's study, Martin Dare provided the analysis of the Home Sale Automation system, and Elizabeth Barclay reported on the voicemail system. The next two cases came from projects for Rice's course, "Management and Information Technology", at the University of Southern California Annenberg School of Communication. The technical issue help system case was provided by Tina Phoenix, and the online database query system case by Brian McGee. Finally, the employee time reporting systems case came from a study by Ann Bemis for Rice's course "Social Aspects of Implementing Information Systems" at Rutgers University's School of Communication, Information and Library Science. We appreciate the contributions and insights of Elizabeth Barclay, Ann Bemis, Martin Dare, Richard Hale, Brian McGee, and Tina Phoenix, and their permission to allow us to work with their case materials.

Acknowledgments

xv

Materials in Chapters 5 and 6 are significantly adapted from Cooper, S. D. (2000). *Unusual Routines and Computer Mediated Communication Systems*. Unpublished dissertation. New Brunswick: Graduate School, Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey. A considerable portion of Chapter 8 is adapted from Rice, R. E. (2008). "Unusual routines: organizational (non)sensemaking." *Journal of Communication*, 58(1), 1–19 (with acknowledgement to the journal, the International Communication Association and Blackwell Publishing).

Ron thanks Claire Johnson for her routine support of this topic, and of her tolerance for the unusual time and effort devoted to the book.

Stephen thanks Sandy Hamon, for believing in me, and God, from whom all my blessings flow.