

■ CHAPTER TWO ■

**THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF THE STUDY  
LINKS WITH THE SYSTEMS, CHAOS, POST-MODERN, CONTINGENCY  
AND COMPLEXITY THEORIES**

**2.1. INTRODUCTION**

Seeing that this study interrelates with human communication in the sense of communication management (public relations), this chapter firstly deals with defining the terms communication and communication management. A few definitions and views on the essence of human communication are investigated.

Theoretical approaches such as the systems, chaos and post-modern, contingency and complexity theories, the relationship management paradigm and their application in communication management are also investigated as the theoretical underscore of this study. Definitions of public relations and corporate communication will be investigated to further sketch the theoretical background of this study.

**2.2. A GRAPHIC PRESENTATION OF THE META THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK  
AND CONCEPTUALISATION**

<b>Meta theories</b>	Systems theory (Chapter Two) Chaos and post modern theories (Chapter Two) Contingency and complexity theories (Chapter Two) Specific communication models Relationship management paradigm and dialogic communication	
<b>Theories</b>	Strategic communication management (Chapter One)	
<b>Concept</b>	Achieving organisational goals (by means of informal communication feedback intervention)	
<b>Constructs</b>	Achieving goals of learning organisations (Chapter Three)	Achieving corporate communication goals (Chapter Four)
<b>Items</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Optimising learning as an integral part of every task and optimising opportunities for employees</li> <li>• Stimulating self-generating learning that stands central to everything employees do</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Optimising informal feedback opportunities for all stakeholders and publics</li> <li>• Providing opportunities for interaction with all internal stakeholders (Stakeholder Engagement)</li> <li>• Providing opportunities for interaction with</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Obtaining feedback from employees and other stakeholders – leads to organisational change</li> <li>• Welcoming vulnerability and diversity</li> <li>• Exploring best practices and benchmarking</li> <li>• Sharing a vision that guides the organisation</li> <li>• Acknowledging failures and learning from them.</li> <li>• Building and maintaining mutually beneficial relationships</li> </ul>	<p>all external stakeholders (e.g. media, stockholders, investors, pressure groups, government and community)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Providing efficient feedback media opportunities (internet, toll-free numbers, list servers)</li> <li>• Being sensitive to word of mouth, grapevine, rumours and gossip as a form of informal feedback</li> <li>• Building and maintaining mutually beneficial relationships</li> </ul>
--	--	--

### 2.3. DEFINING COMMUNICATION

Communication has been defined and described by numerous writers and theorists. Definitions of communication are therefore diverse and can often be classified according to certain elements or an element of the communication process as the viewpoint. There are almost as many viewpoints and definitions of communication as there are writers on this subject. For purposes of this study, only general definitions of human communication and public relations (communication management) will be investigated.

Tompkins (1982:60) defines communication as the process to lend *meaning* and *intention* to the deeds of people. Emphasis is placed in this definition on process, meaning and intention. Human communication is therefore part of a dynamic symbolic action.

Sereno and Mortensen (1970:5) define communication as the process through which senders and receivers of messages *interact* in a given social context. Nilsen (In: Sereno and Motensen 1970:16) is of the opinion that the huge pile of definitions and views on communication can mainly be divided into two categories: Definitions that limit the process of communication to stimulus-response situations (where stimuli are sent intentionally to lure response) and secondly, definitions of communication in communicative stimulus-response situations where there is no intention to cause a response when the stimuli are sent.

According to Fauconnier (1985:28), several views and definitions of communication exist as

the result of the multidisciplinary approach to the concept as well as the multiplicity of communication systems and fields in which communication processes occur. There is no all-encompassing definition of communication. However, a definition is in all probability a good one when:

- It is useful – operational with a specific viewpoint, approach, field, system and course;
- It is logical;
- It cannot be rebutted by observable reality;
- It can clearly be differentiated from other phenomena.

The most important definitions of communication can be categorised according to the characteristics of the Stapper's method (Fauconnier 1985:29):

- With emphasis on the receiver
- With emphasis on the source
- Binding
- Collectivity
- Transmission
- Usage of symbols

Fauconnier (1985:30) provides a couple of definitions that have been formulated by different persons over time:

- *John B Hoben*, 1954 - Communication is the verbal exchange of thoughts and ideas.
- *Barnlund*, 1964 – Communication develops from the need to decrease uncertainty, act effectively and to satisfy or strengthen the ego.
- *Steiner*, 1964 – Communication is the transmission of information, ideas, emotion and skills by using symbols, words, pictures, figures and graphics.
- *Schachter*, 1951 – Communication is the mechanism by which power is applied.

Frost, Vos and Dreyer (1993:3) state that a useful definition describes communication as the process of providing meaning and understanding between two or more people within a certain cultural context.

Steinberg (1994:12) states that there are more than 150 definitions of communication and that there are three main points of departure when defining communication: technical definitions, process definitions and transactional definitions.

This writer chose to define communication according to the transactional viewpoint. This is

because this concept of transaction demands that participants have a *communal agreement* about the meaning of messages in order to communicate effectively as well as for enjoying a satisfactory relationship.

The definition states that:

*"Communication is a transactional process of exchanging messages and negotiating meaning to establish and maintain relationships."*

(Steinberg 1994:13)

## **2.4. DEFINING PUBLIC RELATIONS, CORPORATE COMMUNICATION AND COMMUNICATION MANAGEMENT**

### **2.4.1. Public Relations**

Similar to the notion of communication, one cannot differentiate the ONE definition of public relations. Moore and Kalupa (1985:4) present the definition preferred by the *Public Relations News*, a leading newsletter for practitioners in the USA:

*"Public Relations is the management function which evaluates public attitudes, identifies the policies and procedures of an individual or an organisation with the public interest, and executes a program of action to earn public understanding and acceptance".*

The writers themselves suggest the following definition:

*"Public Relations is a social philosophy of management expressed in policies and practices, which through sensitive interpretation of events based upon two-way communication with its publics, strives to secure mutual understanding and goodwill".*

The official definition of the Public Relations Institute of Southern Africa (PRISA) states that

*"Public Relations is the management, through communication, of perceptions and strategic relationships between an organisation and its internal and external stakeholders" (PRISA 1998:1).*

Grunig (1992:4) states that public relations is merely the management of communication

between an organisation and its stakeholders. According to Moore and Kalupa (1985:11), public relations is *communication*. Through communication with its stakeholder groups, management explains, defends and promotes its policies in order to establish understanding and acceptance.

Newson, Van Slyke Turk and Kruckenberg (1996:4) quote the definition of the First World Assembly of Public Relations Associations, which was held in Mexico City in 1978:

*"Public Relations is the art and social science of analysing trends, predicting their consequences, counselling organisational leaders and implementing planned programs of action which will serve both the organisation and the public interest."*

According to Baines *et al.* (2004:27,31), the purpose of public relations is simply to *create understanding* by imparting knowledge and information. Communication is part of the learning process, and public relations is about informing, educating and creating understanding". According to these writers it is a misunderstanding that public relations is frequently thought to be the achievement of a favourable image, a favourable climate of opinion or a favourable mention in the media. Organisations can never please all of the people all of the time.

#### **2.4.2. Corporate communication and communication management**

Lubbe and Puth (1994:7) indicate that writers such as Cutlip, Center and Broom, Seitel and Wilcox, Ault and Agee debated the problems surrounding one single definition of public relations and corporate communication. There is agreement amongst them that corporate communication, conceptually, is:

- *A management function* – involved with advising the organisation on a planned and constant basis to reach its aims;
- *An interpreting function* – involved in interpreting the organisation's policy and actions for its publics and vice versa interpreting the public's needs to the organisation; and
- *A communication function* – to send and receive messages between the organisation and its different publics.

Harlow (1976:36) characterises corporate communication as follows:

- It is a management function that aims to create mutual two-directional communication between an organisation and its publics;
- It entails the management of all communication problems and issues (and communication opportunities) in the organisation's environment;
- It keeps management informed and sensitive about the public opinion;
- It defines and emphasises the company's responsibility to honour the public interest;
- It supports management to handle change in the business environment; and
- It serves as an early warning mechanism to anticipate trends in the business environment.

### 2.4.3. The relationship paradigm and communication management

Kuhn (1970:23,175) states that a paradigm is an accepted model or pattern. Kuhn uses the term in his book in two different senses:

*“On the one hand, it stands for the entire constellation of beliefs, values, techniques shared by the members of a given community. On the other hand it denotes one sort of element in that constellation, the concrete puzzle-solutions which, employed as models or examples, can replace explicit rules as a basis for the solution of the remaining puzzles of normal science”.*

According to Ströh and Jaatinen (2001:156), communication management helps the organisation achieve its goals by identifying and building healthy *relationships* with the strategic constituencies and it facilitates interaction. The quality of these relationships determines the effectiveness of the public relations function in the organisation. Learning organisations should treasure and develop these relationships. Horizontal communication across departments and organisational borders is necessary to achieve creativity and innovation. It is important to involve employees in relationships that fulfil their social and work-related needs.

Cilliers (2003:25) states that the relational approach to corporate communication is significant because it situates building relationships as the central corporate communication activity.

*Mutually beneficial relationships* are also central in the definition of Cutlip *et al.* (1994:2)

who define corporate communication as:

*“...The management function that establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organisation and the publics on whom its success and failures depends”.*

However, Vercic *et al.* (2001) challenge defining public relations just in terms of relationships, especially in terms of their research in defining public relations in Europe for the European Public Relations Body of Knowledge (EBOK). As marketing views an organisation from a market view, these writers state that public relations should view an organisation from *a public view*. They therefore suggest that the relational approach to public relations should be expanded into a *public or reflective approach*. A reflective paradigm is concerned with publics and the public sphere; not only with relational (which can be private in principle) but also with public consequences of organisational behaviour (Vercic *et al.* 2001:373).

Most commentators would agree that communication management should aim to achieve consensus between an organisation and its publics. However, as Holtzhausen (2000, In: Baines *et al.* 2004) argues, the *“Public Relations Officer should (also) strive to identify the tensions between the organisation and internal and external publics. Through the identification of tensions, practitioners will promote and create situations in which new meaning is produced through difference in opposition”*. This is where informal feedback has a constructive role to play in particular.

According to Cilliers (2003:9), corporate communication works as an interface between the organisation and various external groups or individuals. It supports the other subsystems of an organisation by helping them to communicate with both external and internal stakeholders. Dozier *et al.* (1995:27) went as far as saying that the overall strategic management of organisations is inseparable from the strategic management of relationships.

## 2.5. THE SYSTEMS APPROACH

### 2.5.1. Introduction

The systems approach provides the framework from which the working of all communication theories could be better understood (Sereno and Mortensen 1970:8). According to Gregory (1999:266), one of the predominant lines of thinking, underpinning much of public relations practice, is the systems theory. This theory states that closed and open systems can be defined by their interaction with their environment.

A system can be any gathering of items that are dynamically related – units that interact with their environment. Fauconnier (1985:100) calls it *an organised whole* that is in a relationship with its environment and which consists of sub-systems. The environment or outside world (E) consists of a collection of interactive elements that are in interaction with the system (S). The relationship between E and S is usually indicated by input and output (Fauconnier 1985:101).

According to Jansen *et al.* (1991:41), the systems approach offers the most complete description of communication from a process perspective. It developed from the work of the biologist, Ludwig von Betalanffy, and was later extended to include all possible systems. Von Betalanffy was first to advocate the general systems approach. Various other scientists later joined in and established the framework of the general systems theory.

The systems theory grew fast during the 1960s and originated as an alternative to structural functionalism. It originated from the physical sciences where both the organic and mechanical entities are viewed from the systems terminology. The society is regarded as one big system that is compiled with numerous interdependent parts. It is important to investigate the relationship between parts as well as the relationship of the system with other systems. It is equally important to take a closer look at the inputs in the social system, the way in which these inputs are processed by the society and the outputs that are produced (Ritzer 1992:220).

It is these interdependent parts or the complex interaction of elements that makes each system unique. Knowledge of parts of the system is insufficient when understanding the whole. The system's entities work together to form the whole.

According to Littlejohn (1983:35), a system has four entities. It has objects, attributes, internal relationships and an environment. *Objects* are parts or elements of the system while its *attributes* are qualities or characteristics of the system and its objects. There are also internal *relationships* between its objects and a system always has an *environment*.

The general systems approach describes the system as a whole that consists of interrelated subsystems. The subsystems have individual characteristics that cannot be derived from its parts. Although the system can clearly be identified from the environment, it keeps an important relationship with the environment – the input-output relationship. Information channels inside and between systems are emphasised because information output is so important in the system (Jansen *et al.* 1991:420).

Kofman and Senge (1995:27) also believe that the defining characteristic of a system is that it cannot be understood as a function of its isolated parts. The behaviour of the system does not depend on what each part is doing but on how each part interacts with the rest. One also needs to understand how a system fits into the larger system of which it forms part. For example: To understand the design of a car one needs to understand how it fits into a society of families who travel together. All the parts of a system need not be taken as primary. How the parts are defined is a matter of perspective and purpose and is not intrinsic.

Griffin (1997:6) states that the systems theory refuses to treat any conversation as an isolated event. According to this model a human communication system is seen as a set of interdependent people who work together to adapt to a changing environment. System theorists concentrate on patterns of relationships within the entire system while they regard the communication event as greater than the sum of its parts.

John Seiler's (In: Marion 1999:66) description of systems is more complex. He states that systems are composed of three broad, interdependent functions: internal inputs, activities and internal outputs. Each of these functions is composed of its own set of subsystems. The subsystems of each function are interactive and interdependent within the function. The three functions interact with each other.

### **2.5.2. Human communication systems**

According to Thayer (1987:105), the communication system consists of the individual together with that, which is currently learned from the environment or from another individual or organisation. This writer identified two characteristics of communication systems: the components of communication systems are interdependent and human communication systems are historical. Therefore the components of a specific human communication system are never the same in other communication systems, but are also never similar in the same communication system.

With reference to interdependency, Thayer (1987:105) states that in physical systems, as well as in information and data systems, the identity of the components would reacted the same in another system with the same characteristics. For example: A chunk of information is the same for an information engineer despite the time of day or the number of times that it is being used. However, this is not true of the components of human communication systems. An individual is not the same in one communication system as in another. A person's communication with his secretary might differ from his communication with his family.

There is, therefore, something unique in every communication system in which a person participates. The components of the human communication system are interdependent – These elements could only be defined in relation with one another. In human communication systems, information is what people do with data.

Fauconnier (1985:103) views the relation between the general systems approach and the cybernetics as conspicuous. In cybernetics, systems are studied according to their self-regulating characteristics and their striving towards homeostasis. Fauconnier was sure that the systems approach and the cybernetic orientation could be applied to human communication. Source and receiver can be seen as two systems that function as an environment with each other.

### **2.5.3. Characteristics of systems thinking**

According to Ballé (1994:37), systems thinking is highly analytic, holistic and pragmatic. It follows the following guidelines.

- It focuses on the relationships rather than the parts;

- It sees patterns, not events; and
- It uses circular causality.

Systems theory also focuses on certain 'operational' aspects of situations that are mainly about resources (renewable and non-renewable); actions; motivations; and conditions. Put together, these elements will assist us in drawing systems control loops. More about this will follow later.

- **Open and closed systems**

There is no interaction between the system and its environment in a closed system and it dies eventually. The system is predictable, there is no alternative, and it is isolated and can only react on change within the system itself. There is also no influence on the environment. In contrast the open systems approach to communication demands optimal interaction with the environment and is therefore dynamic, changing, adaptive and receptive of input from the environment. As a result conditions within the system are influenced by input from outside (Marais 1979: 156).

It is general knowledge that many writers of management literature believed that organisations are or should be open systems in the sense that the survival, growth and nurturing of the organisations depend on its interaction with its environment and the stakeholder groups within that environment. Organisations are considered to function as open systems when they regularly receive input from the environment. The input is information that identifies problems that have put the organisation out of balance (equilibrium). Information inputs are processed (throughput) and the information is organised and solutions for the problems that originally generated the inputs are formulated. Outputs are then released into the environment. The organisation seeks feedback after these outputs have affected the environment to determine if it has solved the problem (Grunig and Hunt 1984:94, 95).

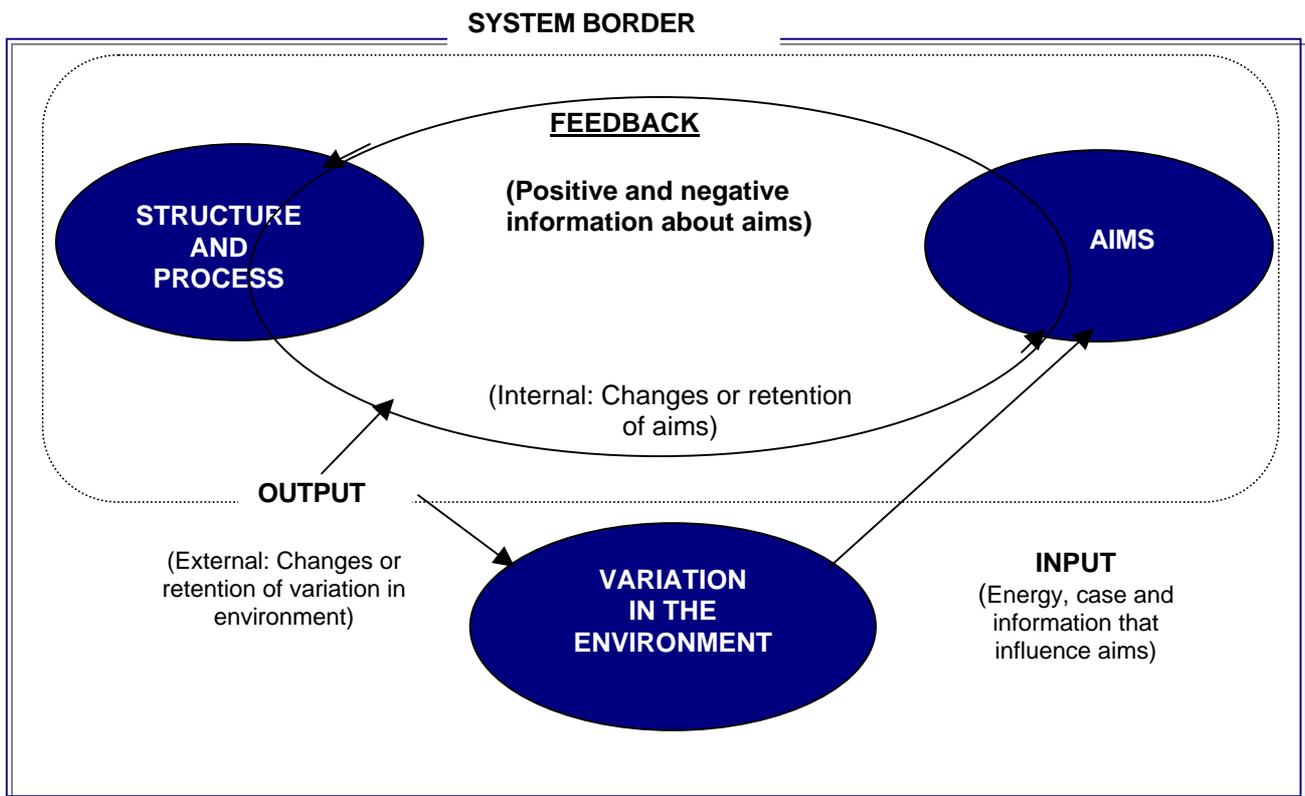
Thayer (1987:108) argues that human communication systems may differ from relative open to relative closed. A relative open communication system is one whose borders are relatively penetrable and open for participation by outsiders and in matters that can create, change, exploit or confirm central communication realities. For example, marriage can be seen as a relative closed system in a big part of the Western world.

- **Open systems and the Organistic Model**

Mink, Schultz and Mink (1979:8) state that organisational planning, according to the open systems approach, must take diverse motivations, values, perspectives and resources into consideration. The open system organisation is seen as the opposite of the bureaucratic organisation. Understanding of organisation dynamics is the key to the open system approach while it is also based on the principles of democracy. An open system anticipates and prepares for change.

Cutlip, Center and Broom (1984:212) state that all systems (mechanical, organic and social) might be classified in terms of their nature and the amount of interaction that they have with their environment. Open systems adapt and adjust themselves to accommodate or oppose variations in the environment in order to survive and grow. Feedback in a system causes adaptations in both the system's structure (what the system *is*) and system processes (what the system *does*). The output of adaptations can be internal or external (or both) while internal outputs change or retain aims and external outputs change or retain environmental conditions.

**Figure 1: An open system model**



**SOURCE:** Cutlip, Center and Broom (1984:213)

The circumstances that are essential for survival are represented by the aims of the model in Figure 1. Theorists refer to these changing aims as *homeostasis*: Aims are relatively stable but, at the same time, they are subject to change as a result of system inputs.

In open systems, units of an organisation affect and are affected by other units and the organisation as a whole is responsive to changes in the environment. Organisations as open systems are created by the relatively stable interaction patterns of their employees. These interaction patterns are the products of communication.

Cutlip, Center and Broom (1984:217) argue that sophisticated open systems anticipate changes in their environment and therefore initiate corrective actions, which are designed to neutralise these changes before they develop into problems. Compare Figure 1. In the same sense pro-active public relations programmes should collect information well in time, make adjustments and generate internal and external outputs to prevent or avoid problems. The collection of information could include informal feedback input.

Ballé (1994:xiv) concentrates his understanding of systems thinking around what he calls “*the feedback loop concept*”. He is of the view that systems thinking is a practical way to challenge old logic, to change the way we think and to approach the world in a very practical and down to earth manner.

According to Littlejohn (1983:35), open systems receive content and energy from their environment and also send content and energy to their environment while they are focused on life and growth. Biological, psychological and social systems follow an open model. The open systems approach demands research abilities to monitor stakeholders and other environmental powers as well as the powers within the organisation (Cutlip *et al.* 1984: 222).

Katz and Khan (1978: 32) state the key elements of open systems as follows:

- *Input* without which a system dies (entropy). Inputs can be the system’s own output or from the environment outside the system.
- *Throughput* or transformation that is the process of transforming inputs into outputs (for example by making a product).
- *Output* - whatever the organisation produces (the end product).
- *Interrelationship* or interdependence – the interlocking relationship between the parts of the system and the whole system.
- *Transactional relationship* with the environment - the environment is not constant and must be continually investigated.
- It has *boundaries* that both connect and separate the organisation from its environment.

Gregory (b) (1999: 268) states that an open system receives input from its environment that impacts on its ideal or desired goals or objectives. In response, feedback within the system causes adjustments in the system’s structure and processes. Externally, outputs may maintain or change the environment. In organisation systems the objective is survival that necessitates adjustments to maintain balance within themselves and with their environment. According to Buckley (In Gregory (b) 1999:269), variety, tension and the desire to develop or learn are essential to the adaptive system.

- **Open systems and the Adaptive Model**

According to Gregory (b) (1999:268), an adaptive organisation is not static but emerges from a network of interactions among individuals in which information is selectively perceived and interpreted in accordance with the meaning it holds for the people involved. This system has deep roots with cybernetic research and places a big emphasis on the role of adaptive feedback that is actively sought in order to change purposefully. The focus is on exploring the system's own changes.

The open system approach model makes use of a two-directional symmetric approach that means that communication occurs in both directions and information changes can occur in both sides of the organisation-public-relationship. Interaction between the organisation and its environment is not mechanical (a seeking of feedback to make adjustments to a self-perpetuating system), but rather an ongoing process where the development of shared meaning and mutual understanding is vital. This follows a cyclical process where information is given meaning by each participant in the communication process and is typical of the network approach. Adaptive systems carry the inherent quality of being able to transform over time.

Gregory goes on to say that while the two-way asymmetrical public relations model has relevance to the adaptive systems approach, it is the two-way symmetrical model that fits best here. The two-way symmetrical model proposes that organisations should be willing to change like their publics as a result of communication dialogue. The change, therefore, occurs on both sides.

Marion (1999:65) believes that open systems utilise feedback mechanisms to gauge the state of the environment and the environment's reaction to the system's output. The feedback mechanisms enable homeostasis in that they provide information needed to adjust to environmental changes.

- **Autopoiesis**

A key view of autopoiesis is its different view from systems thinking with regards to systems-environment relationships.

This approach sees systems as “self-referential” which means that organisations interact with the environment from its standpoint and therefore the environment is really a reflection of itself, because relationships with the environment are internally determined. The environment is seen as part of the organisation. When there is change, a circular pattern of interactions takes place that have no observable beginning nor end because of the system’s closed-loop of interaction. The main contribution of autopoiesis is:

- a) Perceptions of the environment are rarely objective. Different organisations and the people within them will have different perceptions of that environment regulated by their own internal reference points.
- b) The environment itself is part of the organisation. So-called *egocentric organisations* see themselves as the only ones to determine their own identity of who they are. They have non-negotiable and fixed notions of who they are.

Struggling “against” the environment is viewed as self-destructive since the environment, and its stakeholders, are in reality an integral part of the organisation. (Gregory (b) 199:270)

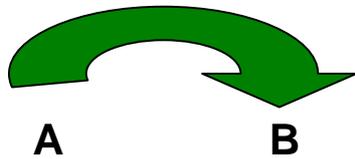
- **Closed systems (mechanistic systems)**

The closed system tries to take control over environmental powers while the open system approach suggests adaptations and adjustments as more realistic and applicable responses for the organisation. Closed systems are concerned with the internal workings and composition of the organisation and pay little attention to the external environment. It was used in the early development of management theory to describe “effective management”. No input or relationships from outside are considered.

According to Turner (1991:120), closed systems do not exchange energy, content or information with their environment. Open systems, however, move outside their borders into the surrounding environment.

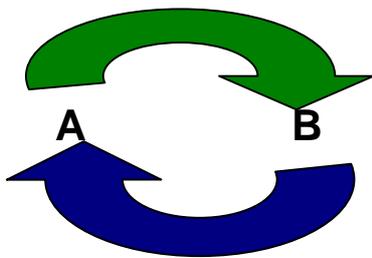
## 2.6. CHARACTERISTICS OF OPEN AND CLOSED SYSTEMS

For Ballé (1994:45) one of the major concepts of systems thinking is that of feedback. An effect has a cause, like if “A”, then “B”, as in Figure 2:



**Figure 2: Cause and effect** (SOURCE: Ballé 1994: 45).

However, according to systems thinking, if A causes or affects B, then in many ways, B is going to affect A. This circular causality is called a *feedback loop* (Figure 3).



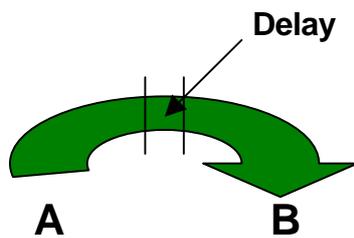
**Figure 3: Feedback loop** (SOURCE: Ballé 1994: 45).

*“Representations derived from a systems thinking framework are built on the interactions between parts rather than simple ‘because’ causality. Instead of one-way causal statements, one is then induced to build ‘systems’ or series of ‘feedback loops’ coupled with each other”* (Ballé 1994:45).

The feedback loop often stands against ingrained ideas such as linear causality. When one draws feedback diagrams one clearly sees that the concept of feedback allows one to link causal structure to dynamic behaviour and can highlight how the system itself causes its own behaviour. The systems approach investigates how the changing relationships between the elements of the whole system might be causing the observed behaviour. By modifying the relationships between the elements of the system one is able to have a significant influence over its behaviour. Changing the rules, therefore, changes the game (Ballé 1994:50).

Another important feature of systems is *delays*. In complex systems (such as organisations)

delays can be quite significant. Time plays an important role and is usually represented by delays between an action and its effects in different parts of the system.



**Figure 4: Delay** (SOURCE: Ballé 1994: 45)

The feedback concept's most powerful aspect is the way one can link causal structure to dynamic behaviour. For example: The organisation decides to increase its advertising output to attack a competitor's market share. Now the competitor launches an even bigger campaign to remain competitive. This is a positive feedback loop – the system causes its own behaviour. In systems thinking terms, exponential growth or decay is generated by a positive feedback loop. These loops are also known as *virtuous circles* or *vicious cycles*. The action increases the conditions that in turn reinforce the action. For example: More sales mean more satisfied customers, which generate a positive word of mouth, which in turn boosts sales to create more word of mouth and so forth (Ballé 1994: 69).

This is also how reputations (good or bad) are built and how rumours spread and can lead to total panic. However, positive and negative feedback loops occur together in the complex system's quest for balance and generate so called *S-curves behaviour*. The S-curve process limits growth and seeks balance. Complex systems are made up of a multiple of coupled positive and negative loops (Ballé 1994: 69).

Ballé (1994:66) calls positive feedback loops *the engines of growth* and negative feedback loops *the source of stability*. A positive feedback loop cannot exist for too long because everything is in constant change. Any system that will survive must be able to cope with change. All stable systems deal with change by acting to cancel or negate the change. This is called a *negative or balancing feedback loop*. It assists the system to return to a stable state. It creates a reaction that will limit the effects of change.

Senn and Childress (1999:9) describe a model, based on general systems theory, which sees a person, group or organisation as a system composed of subsystems located within

a larger system. Fabun (as quoted by Senn and Childress (1999:95) describes their model where the organisation is as an energy exchange system:

*“There is an input of energy from the environment, and a patterned internal activity that transforms the energy into output, which in turn provokes a new energy input. The organisation is thus seen as an open system engaged in constant transactions with its environment, which can be visualised as a system of systems. These systems include the sub-systems within the corporations (divisions, departments) which are constantly engaged in energy exchanges and the systems operating outside the organisation, but affecting it – other members of the same industry, members of competing industries, suppliers and government institutions”.*

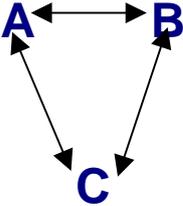
Thayer (1987:107) states that isolated communication systems could not exist inside a complex human society. There are numerous communication systems and sets of communication systems within complex human societies that overlap and which interpret one another through communality or through binding members or participants.

Cutlip *et al.* (1984:210) identify *subsystems and suprasystems*. Just as an organisation forms part of a larger system, the organisation itself can also be seen as a system. The organisation is a component of a higher rank social system. A subsystem within a system can act as a complete system in another context.

### 2.6.1. Patterns of open and closed organisations

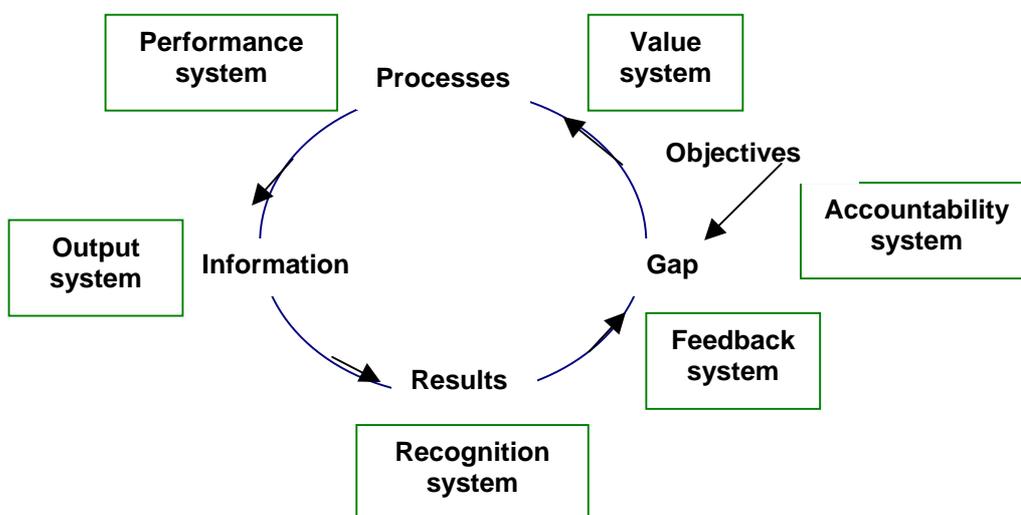
**Table 1: Patterns of open and closed organisations**

<b>An open organisation is more likely to:</b>	<b>A closed organisation is more likely to:</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Treat top positions in the hierarchy as broader in scope and more integrative in function but not implying overall personal superiority;</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Treat occupants of top business as if they possessed overall personal authority (omniscience, omnipotence);</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Seek external feedback and respond flexibly in light of the organisation’s mission;</b></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Avoid external feedback so as to avoid inconvenient changes in the status quo;</b></li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Base itself on higher motives (self actualisation, a desire to know and contribute);</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Base itself on lower motives (personal safety, comfort);</li> </ul>

An open organisation is more likely to:	A closed organisation is more likely to:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Encourage an overlap in planning and implementing;</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Make a sharp distinction between planning and implementing;</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>View top-level decisions as hypotheses subject to review and revision at lower echelons;</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>View top-level decisions as final unless review is initiated by top-level staff;</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Structure itself by temporary task forces, functional linkages, broad role definitions, mobile and regional property, brief amendable constitutes;</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Structure itself by permanent departments and echelons, fixed property, permanent detailed constitution and bylaws;</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Set an atmosphere which is goal-orientated, challenging yet informal;</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Set an atmosphere which is routine-orientated, deadening, formalistic;</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Manage through supportive use of authority, i.e. encourage experimentation, learn from errors, emphasise personnel development, use resources, tolerate ambiguity;</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Manage through intimidating use of authority, i.e. create caution and fear of errors, emphasise personnel selection, conserve resources and avoid ambiguity;</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Communicate up, down and across – unlimited chain of command. Promote an interactive mode.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Communicate one-way, downward through the chain of command – all other communication is viewed as insubordinate.</li> </ul>
	

SOURCE: Senn and Childress (1999:19)

Figure 5: The systems underlying the organisational loop



SOURCE: Ballé (1994:129)

## 2.7. THE SYSTEMS APPROACH APPLIED TO PUBLIC RELATIONS

According to Cutlip, Center and Broom (1984:206), the systems approach can be applied to public relations because communal, dependent relationships are formed and maintained between organisations and their stakeholders.

In public relations the set of interactive units (systems) include the organisation and the publics with whom it has relationships or with whom it wants to establish relationships. They are also communally influenced or involved in some ways. John Bennet, a British scientist, led the development during the 1960s, of another level of systems thinking called *systematics*. Systematics is about the ongoing development of the *systems mind*. Charles Krone, a leader in organisation theory and practice, integrated systematics into the design of innovative organisations (In: Wood 1995:403). Here, developing a systems mind becomes an integral part of analysing, designing and evolving the organisation.

According to Gregory ((b) 1999:266), the systems theory states that mechanical, organic and social systems, which includes organisations, can be defined by their interaction with their environment. Three main systems perspectives are usually applied in the business context: mechanical or closed systems, organismic and adaptive systems. The last two are both open systems. All three of these provide communication management with valuable insights.

According to Lubbe and Puth (1994:41), the systems approach is an abstract perceptual framework that is an exceptionally good aid to understanding and practicing public relations. The approach identifies the principle common to all systems of which the most important are wholeness, hierarchy, self-regulation, openness and adaptability. The term 'theory' as it is often called is actually misleading when applied to general systems theory as it is widely accepted as a perspective or approach and not as a theory.

Littlejohn (1983:34) believes that systems theory emphasises the interdependent relationship of the parts of an organisation. The systems theory and the information theory contribute to the investigation of the various characteristics of the physical, biological, social and behavioural phenomena. They are not merely communication theories but also bear important communication implications. The closed systems approach forces communication practitioners to play functionary roles.

The open systems approach enables communication practitioners to fulfil either a functional or managerial role (or both) while they systematically plan and manage communication programmes and are part of the dominant coalition where they counsel and advise as well as make strategic policy decisions. Management needs strategic information in order to make strategic impact decisions. Stein (2003:6) states that the role of *the corporate communication strategist* should be to seek and listen for information (feedback) from the environment so that the organisation can adapt to stakeholder views and societal norms. The role of *the corporate communication manager and technician* is the dissemination of information to the environment about the organisation's views, policies and strategies.

This information is often provided by communication managers who act as boundary spanners that frequently interact with the organisation's environment and who gather, select and relay information from the environment to decision-makers in the dominant coalition. The communication manager, therefore, stimulates learning, which is in essence the aim and lifeblood of learning organisations.

An organisation's public system consists of the organisation itself and the people involved in the organisation or the people influenced by the organisation. Different publics and, therefore, other system borders, should be defined for every communication situation or problem. (Cutlip *et al.* 1984:107). If the systems of the organisations' publics do not adapt, they become ineffective due to the fact that the organisation acts or reacts in ways that are unsuitable in the new circumstances. The task of the communication manager is to bring the organisation's relationships in sync with the communal interest and aims of the organisation and its stakeholders or publics.

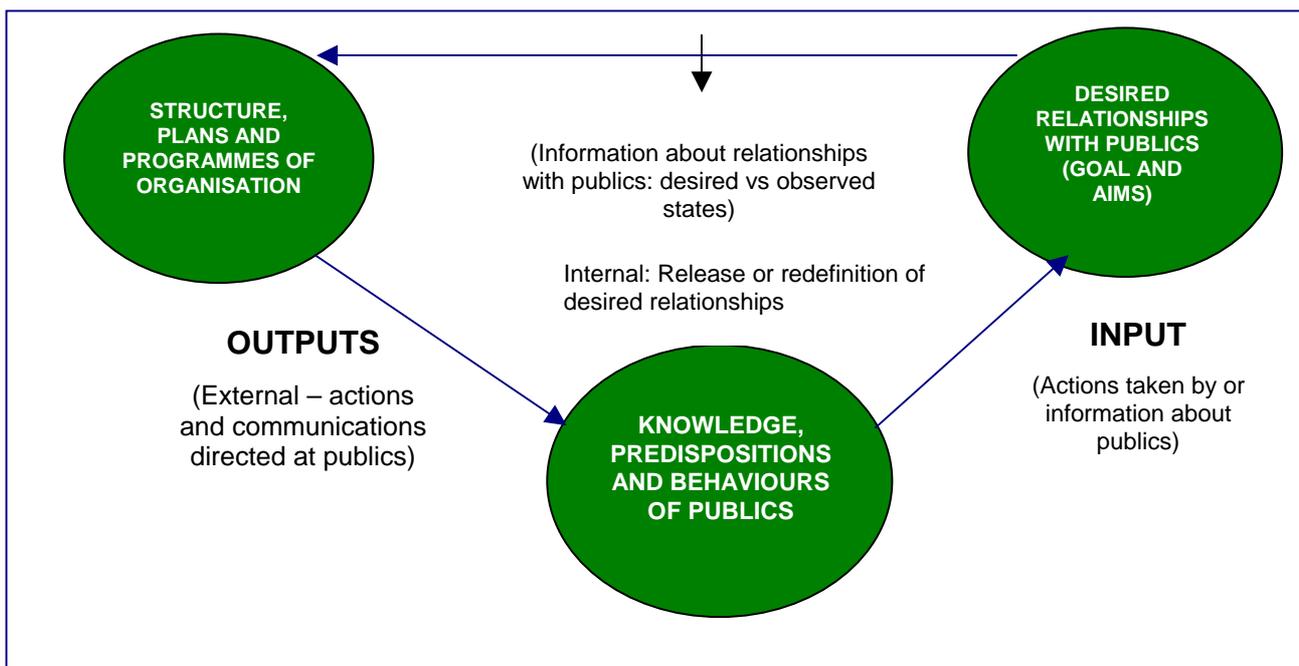
Broom and Dozier (1990:7) believe that the model of open systems exchanges processes that lead to structural and activity change and adaptation and depicts the function of public relations in organisations. If the input of information, energy and matter is closed off, the result will be a relatively closed system, which will be insensitive to environmental change pressures. Without inputs, most systems become dysfunctional and eventually cease to output.

Cutlip *et al.* (1984: 211) state that public relations and corporate communication are part of the adaptive sub-system that can be distinguished from the production, support, maintenance and management subsystems of the organisation.

An open or *functional view* of communication management asks for an open systems approach where change is initiated in both the organisation and the environment. According to this view public relations has an advisory role and it has an impact on decision-making. In contrast, a *functionary view* of communication management is equal to the closed systems approach (Cutlip *et al.* 1984: 217).

An open systems model of communication is graphically presented as follows:

**Figure 6: An open systems model of communication**



**SOURCE:** Open systems model adapted from Cutlip, Center and Broom (1984:223)

According to Ballé (1994:173), systems thinking provides a different method to make maps – it does not reject the validity of other maps, but merely contributes to our map-making capability.

## 2.8. DIALOGIC THEORY OF PUBLIC RELATIONS

The concept of dialogue in public relations casts an interesting view on public relations and the two-way symmetrical model of public relations and organisational involvement. In the following section issues surrounding dialogue as a concept in public relations and how it could serve as a useful theoretical underscore to the rest of this study is clarified. The dialogic theory of public relations and the relationships management paradigm discussed in paragraph 2.4.3. are interrelated.

The field of relational communication has previously considered the concept of dialogue as a framework for thinking extensively about ethical and fulfilling relationships. Dialogue is sometimes described in public relations as communicating about issues with publics. At other times it has been equated with debate or rhetoric. A theoretical shift from public relations as the management of communication to an emphasis on communication as a tool negotiating relationships has been evident for some time (Kent and Taylor 2002: 22,23).

According to Kent and Taylor (2002: 23), Ledingham and Bruning argue that Grunig's concept of public relations as "building relationships with publics that constrain or enhance the ability of the organisation to meet its mission" was instrumental in shifting the emphasis in public relations from managing publics and publics' opinions to a new emphasis on building, nurturing and maintaining relationships. According to Pearson (In: Kent and Taylor 2002: 23), "public relations is best conceptualised as the management of interpersonal dialectic". Cilliers (2003:25) stated that the relational approach to corporate communication is significant because it situates building relationships as the central corporate communication activity.

Kent and Taylor (1998) (In: Kent and Taylor 2002: 23) address dialogic relationship building on the internet and argue that dialogue is a product rather than a process. They view the two-way symmetrical model as a procedural way to listen or solicit feedback. A discussion of the principles of dialogue and how public relations practitioners and scholars could use dialogic approaches had been missing from discussions of dialogue in public relations literature until Kent and Taylor's review.

### 2.8.1. Principles of a dialogic public relations theory

According to Kent and Taylor (2002: 24), there are five features of dialogue as an orientation:

- *Mutuality* or the recognition of organisation-public relationships;
- *Propinquity* or the temporality and spontaneity of interactions with publics;
- *Empathy* or the supportiveness and confirmation of public goals and interests;
- *Risk* or the willingness to interact with individuals and publics on their own terms;
- *Commitment* or the extent to which an organisation gives itself over to dialogue, interpretation and understanding in its interactions with publics.

#### **Mutuality**

It refers to an acknowledgement that organisations and publics are inextricably tied together, which is characterised by an “inclusion or collaborative orientation” and a “spirit of mutual equality”. By *collaborative orientation* is understood that unlike bargaining and negotiation, dialogue is NOT about winning, losing or compromising but that everyone involved in dialogue should have their own viewpoints, which they should advocate vigorously. Dialogue is built on intersubjectivity and seeks to understand the positions of others. No individual or group engaged in a dialogic exchange can therefore possess absolute truth.

Under *spirit of mutual equality* is understood that participants in dialogue should be viewed as persons and not objects and that the exercise of power or superiority should be avoided. Participants should feel comfortable and free to discuss any topic. Ethical dialogue necessitates acknowledgement of the other party (Kent and Taylor 2002: 25).

#### **Propinquity**

Propinquity argues for a type of rhetorical exchange and is an orientation to a relationship. Translated to organisations it means that publics are consulted in matters that influence them, while publics should be willing and able to articulate their demands to organisations. Propinquity is created by three features of dialogic relationships: *Immediacy of Presence*; *Temporal Flow* and *Engagement*. These features clarify the process of dialogic exchanges.

*Immediacy of presence* suggests that parties involved are communicating in the present about issues, rather than after decisions have been made and that they communicate in a shared space.

*Temporal flow* is characterised by the fact that dialogic communication is relational – it involves an understanding of the past and the present and is also aimed at future relationships. Dialogue seeks to build a future for participants, acceptable for all.

*Engagement* is the third feature of dialogic propinquity. It demands that dialogic participants are willing to give their whole selves to encounters and that they must be accessible. When an organisation is fully engaged in its community (local or global), it will have broader contexts and wider perspectives to draw upon in its decision-making. All parties involved benefit from engagement because decisions serve multiple publics. Successful organisations consider the needs of publics and consult and consider publics on matters that affect them. (Kent and Taylor 2002: 26)

According to Kent and Taylor (2002: 27), there are the following possible positive outcomes for organisations that embrace dialogic relationships:

- Firstly, organisations will know in advance of public disagreement on issues.
- Secondly, organisations can use their open, two-way relationships with publics to improve organisational effectiveness.

## **Empathy**

The third dialogic principle is the concept of empathy. This feature is characterised by supportiveness, a *communal orientation* and *confirmation or acknowledgement* of others. Empathetic communication is important because practitioners can improve their communication by ‘walking in the shoes’ of their publics.

By *communal orientation* is meant that dialogue presupposes a communal orientation between interactants, whether they are individuals, organisations or publics. Publics and citizens of the world are becoming inextricably linked by new technologies each day. Globalisation demands that organisations must engage in local as well as international relationships.

By *confirmation or acknowledgement of others* is meant that the values of others are an essential feature of humanity (Laing, In: Kent and Taylor 2002: 27). It entails recognising the voice of others and to build trust with them. Organisations also need to acknowledge that individuals and groups, who do not agree with the organisation, also need to be heard. It is difficult to regain trust once it has been lost. A sympathetic orientation to publics may assist to improve relationships with external groups. (Kent and Taylor 2002: 27).

## **Risk**

Leitch and Neilson are quoted by Kent and Taylor (2002: 27) in saying that “*genuine dialogue is a problematic concept for system(s) public relations because it has the potential to produce unpredictable and dangerous outcomes*”. However, some risk is implicit in all organisational and interpersonal relationships. The notion of risk is characterised by three features in dialogic exchanges: *Vulnerability, emergent unanticipated consequences and recognition of strange otherness*.

## **Vulnerability**

Dialogue involves the sharing of information, individual beliefs and desires with others. Because information is power and dialogue involves risk, it makes participants vulnerable to manipulation or ridicule by other parties involved. Dialogic participants can emerge from exchanges as new and reborn as each encounter offers the possibility to grow.

## **Emergent unanticipated consequences**

Dialogic communication is unrehearsed and spontaneous but not predictable. It is the interpersonal relationship between participants that facilitates dialogue. Dialogic interactants avoid the urge to manipulate others.

## **Recognition of strange otherness**

Kent and Taylor (2002: 28) describe this feature of risk as the “*unconditional acceptance of the uniqueness and individuality of one’s interlocutor*”. It is not limited to interaction with strangers, but also with those who are well known. Individuals are accepted as unique and valuable in their own right and because of their differences.

## **Commitment**

Commitment is the last principle of dialogue described by Kent and Taylor (2002: 29). Commitment describes three characteristics of dialogue: *Genuiness and authenticity*, *commitment to the conversation* and a *commitment to interpretation*.

### **Genuiness and authenticity**

Dialogue is by heart honest and forthright while interlocutors endeavour to place the good of the relationship above the good of themselves (or the client or organisation). Organisations and publics that deal truthfully with one another are much more able to come to mutually beneficial solutions.

### **Commitment to the conversation**

The second characteristic of commitment is *commitment to the conversation* that states that conversations are for the purposes of mutual benefit and understanding and not to defeat the other. Sharing the same meanings or working towards common understandings is crucial to dialogic relationships.

### **Commitment to interpretation**

Since dialogue is intersubjective, it needs interpretation and understanding by all parties involved. It also means making an effort towards understanding the positions, beliefs and values of other participants. Dialogue occurs when the individuals (or sometimes groups) agree to set aside their differences in order to come to an understanding of the others' position.

## **2.8.2. Dialogue and public relations**

According to Kent and Taylor (2002:30), public relations often has to negotiate relationships with publics holding diverse positions. For organisations to build community relations requires commitment to conversations and relationships, genuineness and authenticity. These are all strengths of ethical public relations.

Dialogue also needs to be pragmatic and accessible to the people who practice it. Although it involves risk, dialogue can also lead to greater organisational rewards like increased public support, enhanced image and reputation and decreased governmental interference.

Kent and Taylor (2002: 30) describe three ways in which dialogue can be incorporated into day-to-day public relations: The interpersonal, the mediated and the organisational.

### **Building interpersonal relationships**

Organisational leaders, as well as all organisational members, must be comfortable engaging in dialogue with integrated levels of business and society. Skills needed are: being able to listen, empathise and conceptualise issues within local, national and international frameworks; being able to identify common ground between parties; thinking about long-term objectives; seeking out groups or individuals with opposite viewpoints, and soliciting a variety of internal and external opinions or policy issues.

### **Building mediated dialogic relationships**

According to Kent and Taylor (2002: 30), organisations can reinforce their commitment to dialogue and foster more interaction with publics by using mass mediated channels to communicate with publics. They must publish all their contact details like postal addresses, e-mail addresses and contact numbers regularly. The internet is indispensable in modern public relations. The internet is one place where dialogue can inform relationship-building because it comes closest to being interpersonal.

Pearsons (In Kent and Taylor 2002: 32) identifies six dimensions of dialogic organisational systems:

- An understanding of and agreement on the rules governing the opportunity for beginning, maintaining and ending interactions, and:

Public understanding of and agreement on the rules for:

- Governing the length of time separating messages or questions from answers.
- Governing opportunities to suggest topics and initialise topic changes.
- When a response counts as a response.
- Channel selection.

- Talking about and changing the rules.

Not everyone agrees that dialogic public relations is possible. It is often called more ethical without real proof to support this claim, say the critics. Dialogue is, however, a very complex and multifarious process. It is called the “next stage of public relations theory development” (Kent and Taylor 2002: 33).

## **2.9. CHAOS, POST-MODERN, CONTINGENCY AND COMPLEXITY THEORIES**

According to Ströh and Jaatinen (2001:163), approaches such as the chaos, post-modern, contingency and complexity theories all emphasise the importance of interconnectivity between subsystems of societies and organisations as well as the role of relationships. These relationships create energy in the form of information and dialogue.

Transorganisational development emerged in management literature because it was realised that organisations all form part of a bigger system and are interdependent. According to this view, transorganisational development is a form of planned change that assists organisations in collaborating with one another in order to share resources and risk. Organisations are seen as “living systems”, with characteristics of less control and a more organic, holistic and ecological approach to management. Organisations that operate as living systems are more open, flexible, balanced, creative, innovative and respond more easily to environmental changes (Ströh and Jaatinen 2001:152).

These organisations also strive towards healthy relationships with groups that could be influenced by the organisation or that could influence the organisation in turn. Relationship-building, therefore, becomes an important strategic management process and the central task of communication management within the organisation.

Both chaos and complexity theorists propose that a system’s dynamics involve more than ‘if A, then B’ relationships in which outcome is the simple function of inputs. They argue instead that system behaviour more often results from complex, non-linear interactions among parts, of which the behaviour is difficult or impossible to predict.

Non-linearity is a central concept in chaos and complexity theories and means that

response is disjointed with cause (Marion 1999:5).

### 2.9.1. Chaos theory

Murphy (1996:96) argues that the chaos theory appears relevant to such a broad scope of disciplines that some people view it as a scientific version of post-modernism. It is important for public relations because this field of study takes its assumptions and methods from the social context in which it operates. The term *chaos theory* is somewhat misleading and, therefore, some researchers prefer terms like *non-linear dynamics*, *bifurcation theory*, *change theory* or *self-organising theory*.

The chaos theory evolved from the basic principles of the systems theory. Different definitions are summarised by Overmann (In Ströh and Jaatinen 2001:153) as:

*“The study of complex, dynamic systems that reveal patterns of order out of seemingly chaotic behaviours, the study of complex, deterministic, non-linear, dynamic systems...so complex and dynamic, in fact, as to appear chaotic”.* It can be described as a state where *“a system can no longer sustain a stable pattern of behaviour because of an increasingly unstable environment and subsequently leads to the system reorganising itself to adjust to these changes”.*

According to Marion (1999:6), the chaos theory tends to focus on systems in which non-linearity is intense and mechanical, e.g. weather systems. These systems are stable but their behaviours are not repetitive and they only have limited memory of their past. Chaos theory seems more appropriate for describing physical systems than for describing human behaviour because the element of life is missing in this theory.

Chaos theory tries to explain why systems do not seem to function in linear, predictable and conventional ways but indeed display patterns and structures when studied from a distance. Examples are phenomena such as weather patterns, economics and traffic patterns. Out of what seems to be chaotic and out of control, new relationships and structures emerge.

Over time the chaos theory attempts to understand the behaviour of systems that do not

act in a linearly predictable, conventional cause-and-effect manner. Although these systems have definite patterns and structures, their future direction cannot be predicted from their past history at any single point in time. An example is that of a stakeholder member's opinion on an issue that cannot be exactly predicted. However, it is possible to locate an underlying order in public opinion over the long term.

According to Murphy (1996:97), even non-linear systems with unpredictable outcomes possess a deep structure that is called an *attractor*. An attractor is an organising principle or an inherent shape or state of affairs to which a phenomenon will always tend to return as it evolves. This is almost like the so-called intelligent alloys that exist. When heated they will always return to their original shape, which is usually straight and flat. We can differentiate between static attractors and strange attractors.

The straight line of a *static attractor* leads to an outcome that continues unchanged at a certain level. However, chaotic situations are identified by *strange attractors* where outcomes change constantly and are unpredictable within a bound range. On a social level, attractors have been seen as indicators of human nature and free choice. Some writers and researchers view organisational culture as a strange attractor. Systems may also be chaotic in some phases in their evolution and quite linear during other phases (Murphy 1996:97).

Murphy (1996:97) concludes by differentiating between the Newtonian logic that teaches us that we can generalise from the part to the whole, while chaos theory tells us that we must study the whole before we can draw accurate conclusions. This is true even about parts. Characteristics of a system at a single point can mistakenly be generalised to the system as a whole. The reality at a given moment is described by the human observer who chooses the scale and not by universal qualities. Such concepts have created convergence between chaos theory and post-modernism.

Complex systems like organisations and their environments have multiple systems of actions that are both chaotic (unplanned communication) and ordered (planned public relations). This complexity causes random disturbances that ripple out unpredictably through the system, creating novel patterns of change along the way. Order always eventually emerges despite all the chaos.

This can partly be described by the emergence of *potentials* that act as attractors while providing a focus for self-organisation. These potentials can be very small, incremental changes (in themselves insignificant) that, together with combined effort, can start major change by creating disturbances in the system. The systems, on the other hand, also have their own increasing dynamic. In complex, random systems all changes together can lead to significant shifts that have a clear direction (Gregory (b)199:272).

According to Ströh and Jaatinen (2001:153), the emergent approaches of chaos, post-modernism, complexity and contingency serve as an important background for understanding approaches for change and communication management. Investigation of change management, in which feedback intervention plays a major role, is an important element of the learning organisation. This will be further explained as this study unfolds.

Chaotic systems can be both determinate and unpredictable as well as self-organising and self-renewed. The theory of chaos maintains that most natural events violate expectations and that irregular changes in some systems' initial conditions may be amplified as they unfold so that end results bear little resemblance to the beginning. As a result, predicting final outcomes becomes impossible.

In contrast to the Newtonian view of modern science, which states that systems maintain their stability by means of *negative feedback* that leads to corrective action, (where stability is seen as the norm), a chaotic system evolves by means of *positive feedback*. As chaotic systems evolve, every step's output provides the material for a new formulation and outcome. This trend toward destabilisation in a chaotic system can lead to sudden changes in the system's direction or character, called *bifurcations* (Murphy 1996:96).

According to Ströh and Jaatinen (2001:154), the chaos approach differs from the complexity approach in that it is seen as a state where no patterns can be distinguished and that does not have any order or understandable detail. There is also a great presence of confusion. This is in contrast with the belief of the complexity approach that there are patterns and models if viewed over time and from a distance. According to Cilliers (In: Ströh and Jaatinen (2001:154), 'complexity' also refers to a much broader category than 'chaos'. There are, however, also a lot of similarities.

According to Ströh and Jaatinen (2001:155), the order behind the apparent chaos lies in the adaptation, renewal and growth of organisations through self-organisation brought about by the chaos. The contribution of this theory to management lies in the appreciation of change, chaos and uncertainty and not in control, as well as the interdependency of subsystems and their natural cooperative nature. This interdependence means that all subsystems should take part in the processes of the system.

*“Participation could add to the richness of information, shared responsibility, more trust and transparency and, ultimately, to healthier relationships”* (Ströh and Jaatinen 2001:155). This is in essence the role that stakeholder feedback should take on.

Relationships and the investment and maintenance thereof, are central to the chaos theory. It also states that the development and maintenance of these relationships is more important than the outcomes, participants or objects themselves. Relationships lead to the creation of meaning and are often an indicator of successful public relations and communication management (Ströh and Jaatinen 2001:155).

According to Ströh and Jaatinen (2001:155), an important element of the chaos theory is that the strong connections between the diverse elements contained in a system cause it to be more capable of sustaining itself at a state away from the point of balance (equilibrium). They further argue that the organisation’s ability to change lies in the challenges of relationship management and not in changing the structures or functions of individuals. Communication plays a central role in relationship-building and strengthens the connection. Open systems have better self-organising abilities because the instability enables the system to respond to the demands of the environment.

Applied to organisational management, it means that open systems organisations can adjust and respond much faster to new challenges and opportunities, and be sensitive to emerging markets and changing consumer needs as well as threats from pressure groups. Internal structures and processes should be aligned with the environmental demands. Open systems organisations can, therefore, respond faster to the needs of all its stakeholders.

### 2.9.2. Post-modernism and complexity

According to Holzhausen, as quoted by Ströh and Jaatinen (2001:153), post-modernism is characterised by the coexistence of different discourses and paradoxes. These discourses and paradoxes are, however, characterised by the important distinction of being part of a complex set of relationships and interlinked networks. This network of society generates knowledge and leads to an explosion of information. The clusters in the network of society have constant interaction, change and self-organising processes by which meaning is created. Diversity (and not structure) is necessary for systems to create meaning. Diversity creates rich information that could become knowledge and wisdom if managed properly.

According to the above-mentioned writers, complex systems have the following characteristics within the framework of post-modernism:

- Complex systems consist of a large number of elements, while organisations consist of varied elements of different dimensions;
- These elements all interact dynamically: The different departments and levels interact constantly in striving to reach the organisational goals;
- The levels of information-sharing and interaction are fairly rich: The different networks of organisations interact formally, informally on different levels and with different abilities;
- The interactions are non-linear and asymmetric. Small causes can have large effects and power differences exist that feed this non-linearity. Organisations have many internal levels of power and constant competitions for resources;
- The interactions cluster together in networks. This is because there are no controlling levels: Organisational information-sharing is usually centred around groups that have to perform the same function – have shared goals and expectations;
- Feedback loops are interlinked in large networks and information forces the system to constantly transform. For example, organisations use environmental scanning (which could include informal feedback variables) to bring new information into the system, which in turn forces it to adjust and transform;
- Complex systems are open systems that interact with the environment and other systems;

- These systems do not strive for conditions of equilibrium as generally accepted in systems theory. Applied to organisations, this means that organisations that are too stable and have no free flow of energy that forces them to change continuously, will eventually cease to exist;
- The complexity of the system has the effect that individuals within the system will never fully understand or know everything about the system. CEOs of organisations will never know everything about the system and therefore need lower rank information-sharing as well.

The core of the complexity approach exists out of the interaction of all subsystems of a complex system. This is further enriched by the relationships that are formed and the creation of information and knowledge that follows as the result of relationships. It is believed that power is spread throughout systems in society. The challenge thereof could inherently cause transformation. Post-modern public relations should involve all stakeholders, also the marginalised groups, to create diversity and dialogue, and recognise differences and dissent between the organisation and its publics. A strategic and holistic view of public relations is emphasised by the post-modernists (Ströh and Jaatinen (2001:154).

According to Marion (1999:7), a complex system is more stable and predictable than a chaotic system. Even though it borders on the state of chaos, it possesses sufficient stability to carry memories and sufficient dynamism to process that information. This balance between order and chaos enables the ability to reproduce orderly change as well as to self-organise or emerge without outside intervention.

Mickey (1997:271) describes the media theory of Jean Baudrillard which illustrates the kind of society in which the signs of the media become their own reality and do not stand for any real reality. The signs and symbols demanded by media are their own reality. Media technology today gives us the facts as presented simply because they are presented and have little or no reference to truth. The writer examines how a public relations campaign can produce results like involvement in a war. Post-modern thought posits the rejection of meaning in its affirmation of the image as signifier, while images exist in an infinite chain of intertextuality. Jean Baudrillard said that we live in a hype reality of simulations in which images, spectacles and the play of signs replace the logic of production and class conflict as key constituents of contemporary capitalist societies.

According to this viewpoint, Mickey (1997: 273) argues that public relations could be called “*symbol production in so far as communication strategy is an integral part of the work, whether work be a speech, a news release or a press conference. The focus will be on the public relations text which can be defined as the public communication vehicle or event produced for some pre-determined objective*”.

Complex system outcomes cannot be easily predetermined, yet there is a sense of the predictable about them. Their dynamics do not necessarily favour efficiency and once stable, the system tends to lock into that steady state and to exclude other possible steady states. The emergence of culture, organisational climate and technologies can be described by complexity (Marion 1999:27).

Post-modernists do not consider language or symbol as a tool, but rather a cultural artefact with political or economical reality for the individual in the culture. They argue that the mind is constitutive rather than reflective of reality. Post-modernism also focuses on culture and the acquisition of knowledge in the culture, primarily through signs of art, language and media. It rejects the view that signs are a *representation of reality*. Because of the media age in which we live, signs are therefore our reality. This makes the argument of representation largely irrelevant (Mickey 1997:275).

In this sense Jean Baudrillard’s (In: Mickey 1997:275) theory of simulacra further argues that we have shifted from a society of representation to a *society of simulacra*. We have copies of originals that never existed. For example, people whose exercise in getting the ‘right’ vacation pictures becomes an exercise of picture hunting rather than enjoying a vacation. They go where they can take the best pictures. Where they are at that moment in time becomes secondary to the perfect shot. What is presented does not represent reality – it is a sign of a sign. Similar to this: Television commercials are not about products but about images of desire and pleasure that override the products they represent.

Before post-modernism, the sign represented reality, but now the sign has become reality. It is therefore argued that signs are what motivate us and not reality. Journalists and publicists are therefore seen as manipulators of signs, therefore of reality, and therefore they are manipulators of myth. Mickey (1997:280) argues that perhaps much of public relations is a simulation of substituting the signs of the real for reality itself. The field of public relations deals with images that have no reality as their basis.

Society looks at the sign and not at any representation of reality it may or should have, as

signs have become more and more removed from the reality of the sign.

Complexity theory (like open systems theory) focuses on environment as well, but is also sensitive to the internal dynamics of a system and how they relate to its external dynamics. Internal dynamics play a more important role in structural elaboration, change and fitness than in systems theory. Complex structures are also more resistant to environmental pressures than the structures of systems theory (Marion 1999:72).

### **2.9.3. The contingency approach**

Ströh and Jaatinen (2001:156) state that this approach also has its roots in general systems theory that originated from the theories of, amongst others, Ludwig von Bertalanffy. The traditional thinking of controlling information in times of disorder is replaced by the opposite idea of providing too much relevant and important information, which then overwhelms employees. This could eventually cause them to give up and let go in accepting the discomfort of change. The flow of information in a system strengthens the system and keeps it alive.

Marion (1999:84) defines *structural contingency theory* as an efficient organisation that has been properly tuned to environmental contingencies.

According to McDaniel (In: Ströh and Jaatinen (2001:162), managers will not be able to predict accurately if they manage according to the chaos theory or the contingency theory. These theories argue to rather do scenario planning (looking at future by plotting possible outcomes). This planning should be very flexible and adjustable. In this sense the role of two-way symmetrical communication, dialogue and environmental scanning (feedback collection) emerges once again as being really important.

## 2.10. CONCLUSION AND APPLICATION OF THESE THEORIES TO THIS STUDY

The systems approach is one of the most valuable theoretical approaches to communication management. Striving towards balance, order and mutual understanding between the organisation (the system) and its diverse internal and external stakeholders, forms the backbone of this study. This approach has significant similarities and links in its fundamental departure with the value of feedback intervention and management notions such as the learning organisation.

However, having said that, according to Gregory (b) (1999: 272), the major lesson of the chaos, self-organisation and complexity theories is that in large organisations, while some sort of order will feature, patterns have to be allowed to emerge, and order cannot be forcefully imposed in any lasting way. This writer asked the question whether or not the realisation of the above, could partly explain an organisation's obsession for structural change.

The theories of autopoiesis, chaos, self-organisation and complexity show that organisations need to consider systems (including communication systems) as loops that give transforming negative and positive feedback. They should also pay attention to mutual causality where small, multiple changes cause ripple effects that can quickly escalate in an uncontrollable way.

This point has particular significance for this study and will be further investigated during the development of this study. In this regard it must be examined whether seemingly unimportant information, gained from informal communication feedback (e.g. from rumours and the organisational grapevine) could have a major ripple effect on the organisational system. Gregory (b) (1999:273) agreed with this line of thinking and said that *"in the public relations arena it is readily observed that comments and actions of seemingly little significance can quickly escalate and become hot issues and crises with an uncontrollable life of their own"*.

Gregory (b) (1999:275) argues that the complexity of the working context in which today's public relations professional operates, precludes any of the analytical approaches that might apply to a more ordered and predictable world.

An appreciation of the insights afforded by approaches and theories such as systems thinking, does, however, lead to exciting possibilities. The professionals must understand that

complex feedback within and between systems and the environment can create resonance that cannot be controlled and that may diminish or even contradict the desired results of communication.

For example, no matter what the organisation spokesperson says about his or her company's viewpoint on genetically modified food, he or she will be misunderstood and disbelieved because of multiple other louder and conflicting messages and emotions that are in the environment at the time. This makes it even more imperative for communication professionals to be part of the decision-making corps in an organisation.

These kinds of communication situations and issues may call for unusual methods and mediums of communication. It can also be argued that it is precisely these types of communication issues that can proactively be noticed or that could proactively have emerged through the exploration of informal communication feedback. Proactive intervention on emerging issues could assist the communication manager with planning and the maintenance of a positive organisational reputation.