



A FIRST LOOK AT
COMMUNICATION THEORY

**Transcript of Em Griffin's interview with Stan Deetz,
creator of Critical Theory of Communication in Organizations**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n4R-Q9wCRIo>

Griffin: I'm talking with Stan Deetz from the University of Colorado. Stan is the author of the *Critical Theory of Communication* applied to organizations. Stan, what's the essence of Critical Theory?

Deetz: I think that almost every critical theory believes that it's possible in a society that people don't have the opportunity to freely form meanings or freely express the kinds of ideas they have; and almost all critical theories try to look at those aspects of society and restrict either the way we think or the ways in which we express ourselves.

Griffin: Does that suggest that there's a power imbalance in there?

Deetz: Most of these kinds of restrictions take place around issues of power, some of them explicitly so in the sense that we feel centered or we feel pressured by someone; but a lot of them implicitly so in the sense that powerful people have had the opportunity to build the institutions and structures that exist. And to the extent that we live and work in those institutions, we inadvertently reproduce the kind of power that they have.

Griffin: And so it perpetuates itself.

Deetz: That's right; it perpetuates itself, but always with our own activities. The power has no way to affect us except as we in fact enact those power structures ourselves. If that were not the case, then we would probably be engaged revolution.

Griffin: Are there other things that most critical theorists critical of?

Deetz: Well, there are lots of people in society that are critical of lots of things, and perhaps some people call those people critical theorists. I don't take that particular view. There are a lot of people that are critical. A critical theorist is not one who, simply because of some position, dislikes something in society.

Griffin: Knocking down the blocks or something.

Deetz: That's right. If something happened to them or they have a grudge or they feel their people are oppressed or whatever else, all of those things happen in society. But a critical theorist is one who tries to investigate the various kinds of structures that lead to a distortion in the communication process, either because people can't seemingly create the kinds of meanings that would represent themselves well or find an opportunity to express them in decision processes.

Griffin: You have said you don't want your theory known just as a critical theory. Can you say more about that?

Deetz: Yes. It is a communication theory. It is not meant to be one of many; it is a complete communication theory. It is not a particular kind of view of it. And to understand communication, for me, requires understanding the ways in which human beings create meaning.

Griffin: But don't all communication theories deal with creating meaning?

Deetz: Most communication theories presume that meaning exists somewhere; and, therefore, the primary problem with communication is transmission – how do we get it from here to there. And the primary limitations then are either expression limitations or suppression. In my particular theory and other social constructionist-type theories the emphasis is on the ways in which those meanings tend to be developed between people. Expression becomes a second problem, but the first problem is what kinds of meanings do we have to express. Our field for a long time argued that meanings were in people, and I raised the opposite kind of question, "whose meanings are in people? How do those meanings become in people?" So, it's not a matter of getting them out; it's a matter of trying to figure out how they got in.

Griffin: So, conflict is necessary.

Deetz: Conflict is absolutely essential to this and one of my arguments against most communication theories. Most communication theories tend to be consensus theories, can we build ways in which we can come together.

Griffin: And play nice.

Deetz: And play nice. Instead of theories that say, "can we recover the conflict we should have had, the conflict that lets us see the arbitrary constructed nature of that which we believe so we can re-decide?"

Griffin: Is it hard for a critical theorist to be sensitive, or do you usually of necessity come on strong?

Deetz: Well, in one of my early books I argued that a full human being has to have three characteristics. One has to be careful, thoughtful, and filled with humor. And a critical theorist obviously plays off the thoughtful part of that – how do we reflect upon experience and critically engage it. But before one can be thoughtful, one has to be careful in the sense that one has to

allow or engage with others in such a way as they can challenge the way that you think and the way that you are.

Griffin: Do you lose your critical edge if you view with a sense of humor?

Deetz: If you can't at the same time understand the edge of being a human being and the frailties and mistakes that we make, and have fun with that, I think you lose something.

Griffin: In an organizational context what specifically are you critical of?

Deetz: I'm specifically critical of decision-making processes that are narrow and biased, that are filled with values that have not been carefully examined.

Griffin: How does that happen?

Deetz: It happens primarily in our corporations today because of a particular way we think about organizations and give managers control by virtue of their association with stockholders. Once managers have control, they don't necessarily represent the good of the company or necessarily the good of society. They frequently represent the good from how they see it within their values. And there's nothing wrong with that. A good manager, one would hope, would apply the best values they have into making decisions. But every value is from some standpoint, some point of view; and to make good decisions that work effectively on behalf of all requires, in fact, the standpoint of others and the ability to put standpoints in regard to each other so that new and creative ideas can come. A lot of managers talk about thinking out of the box, but they don't understand the communication process by which that happens. You do not think out of the box by commanding the box. You think out of the box precisely by bringing ideas together that don't allow dominant ideas to continue to dominate.

Griffin: Can managers in present corporate setups, whether large or small, or organizations really think about the whole?

Deetz: I don't think they can think about the whole. I don't think there's any hope that any individual can think through at all. In fact, my hope is in the other; that by, when we start admitting that none of us can find the truth alone...

Griffin: A communication theory with humility as...

Deetz: That's exactly a core part of that. Truth is a community product, and a community is aided by the addition of as many members of the community as possible, because they each give us an opportunity to test your ideas and finally emerge with ideas – not that we're the one of one or another – but, in fact, the ideas that couldn't have been thought without all coming together.

Griffin: Who are the people who should have a voice – not just a say – but have a voice in the decision in corporate matters?

Deetz: I believe every corporation has natural sets of stakeholders that exist on a continuum on out to a horizon of people who are only peripherally affected by the organization. And it's fairly easy in most contexts to really see who has made an investment in this, what is the character of their investment, and what right do they have to engage in decision-making. For example, the workers become a natural investor in a company; and as we get more high-tech companies, companies recognize this more. Their primary assets go down the elevator at night; their primary assets is not what the investors gave them, it's what the employees gave them. The question we ought to be asking is, "what collection of people can we bring together that gives us the optimal opportunity to take into account everyone's interests in making a decision?"

Griffin: But if you bring everybody together, so the argument goes, you'd have chaos. They'd never be able to decide anything, and then no work would get done.

Deetz: Well, if you brought everybody together on everything all the time, sure. But do we have or can we pick moments of intervention? I kind of present a ten-percent rule – and most people born of the Jewish or Christian faiths believe in tithing.

Griffin: Sure.

Deetz: And tithing is the concept that one gives back ten percent; and this is something – it isn't to be given to God, because God doesn't catch it when you throw it up in the air – this is, in fact, a giving back to the community. And I believe that, if we took the kind of concept that said if we took ten percent of our time out to be involved in a sort of stakeholder coming-together-and-making-decisions, we would find the ninety percent of the time is a lot more productive.