Organisational Narratives and Organisational Structure

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Understanding an organisation's stories may present valuable clues about the direction and progress of that organisation's change. In the past ten years, attention to structuration theory has linked an organisation's formal structure with its members' communications. This article will show how a new set of values sought after by flattening organisations are served with a similarly flat form of narrative structure — the plateau story.

A developing line of thinking in the past ten years has been the application of structuration theory (Giddens, 1984) to communication in organisations (Poole *et al.*, 1985; Riley, 1983). Structuration theory is a natural tie to communication in organisations because it emphasises both frameworks *and* member interaction to create a duality of structure. Both formal structures and communication are recognised as part of organising — hence the term structuration.

My purpose here is to present the change agent with a guide for tracking the direction and values of organisational change by attending to the organisation's narratives and, in particular, to show how one type of narrative, which may be the most difficult to find, may be an essential accompaniment to the flattening of an organisation's structure.

It is certainly not a new idea to suggest that narratives have structural properties that are parallel and reflexive to organisational frameworks. I will demonstrate in this article that just as organisational frameworks have either tall or flat properties (Weick, 1969), narratives are also tall and flat. The examples I present below will demonstrate that in addition to their reflexivity with frameworks, narratives can contain the structure that generates organisational change.

My way of demonstrating how narratives are a part of organisational structure is to focus on the trend of narratives because their pervasiveness in organisations is already a given (Boje, 1991; Pfeffer, 1981; Schon, 1979; Tompkins, 1987; Weick and Browning, 1986). Trend lines of narratives are the plot from one time to another on the direction of organisational progress (Klapp, 1973). The three narrative types identified in this article are ascent, decline and plateau. They were identified first by McAdams (1984) and extended by Polster (1987) and Deleuze and Guattari (1987). In this article I will first connect narrative trend lines to organisational structure and then identify their role in organisational change.

Connecting Trend Lines to Organisational Change and Structure

The paradigm of progress for organisations (Klapp, 1973) views firms according to the extent to which they are growing, solving problems, and applying technology

Journal of Organizational Change Management, Vol. 4 No. 3, 1991, pp. 59-67. © MCB University Press, 0953-4814

to the issues they face. The paradigm of progress interprets culture based on the direction the firm is going. What did it do in the past, what are its present circumstances, what does the future hold? When the direction of the organisation can be stated with a brief, simple statement that is widely held as ringing true (Fisher, 1984) the interpretation of the trend line of the organisation is a narrative. Three examples illustrate the point:

- A firm faced such a disastrous set of complaints from its major customer that it was told that it had six months to improve performance or the contract would be terminated. Six months grew into four years of progress in solving the root causes of complaints. The turnaround is entrenched in company lore. When faced with daunting market problems, the firm's employees say: "Our recent history shows we have the will and the tactics to respond to difficulties; our experience shows we can recover and go beyond what was originally expected of us".
- In a second example, a former market leader that is dramatically losing market share and dominance registered every one of thousands of employees in a one-day training on organisational transformation. The prominent theme of the training is: this firm is dying unless we make dramatic changes in the way we use human abilities. Staff trainers tell stories of how they handle company veterans who confront the trainers in the classroom, challenging both the reports of demise and the corporate strategies for transformation.
- In a third example, on Interstate 35 north of San Antonio, Texas, the Wal-Mart distribution centre posts a sign the size of a billboard, proudly stating that employees at this site have gone "328 days without an accident".

In these instances, the organisations are creating structure through narrative. These structures follow three types; the ascent, the decline and the plateau.

The Ascent

The first, shortest and easiest narrative to understand is the ascent, the story of rapid success, the incline. This is a vertical narrative usually focusing attention on a central person, a star. McAdams (1985) calls this the generativity script — it is the story of achievement, admiration, astronauts, entrepreneurs, the military leaders of the Gulf War.

The incline story has energy; it has vertical lift. The incline narrative demonstrates the thing done right. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Colin Powell, tells his story of sweeping the floor in a machine shop in New York earlier in his career. Because he was the best floor cleaner he could be, the next year he was made a machinist — the first African American machinist in the shop. His is a perfect story for Rawls' theory of justice; Powell did work beyond what was required at his job and was rewarded with a chance at the next level (Rawls, 1971).

There is usually a central character to push the ascent narrative forward. Heroes make things happen rapidly (Schmenner, 1988). For organisations the

easiest example is the founder, who has a vision and pursues it despite setbacks. When other, weaker players have doubt, the founder with clarity and purpose pushes forwards until achieving success. Schein (1985) makes a point of one characteristic of founders that appears universal despite other differences in their individual personalities: founders have definite ideas about how and what will be done in their firms.

Ascent narratives have power because their central figures have *reputational capital* (Harre, 1979) to go with their strongheadedness. Their stories do not need to be intricately interesting, because the combination of both financial and reputational power means that founders have much to say and many demands from others to say it. The popularity of the books by such organisational heroes (Scully, Iacocca and Donald Trump are good examples), despite their simplicity and one-sidedness, is accounted for by the readers' beliefs that there may be a missing part or a clue provided for how they might emulate the hero's success.

The most powerful form of the ascent story is when it is connected to its own previous decline, because of a penchant for underdogs, a sense of magical recovery, and generally because theories of recovery from decline are few (Hirschman, 1970).

The Decline

The decline is the most dramatic of the slope directions even though its contents are nothing new. "Throughout the ages the alarm bells have been rung in Greek Tragedies, the Old Testament, the New Testament, Shakespearean tragedies and modern tragedies" (Polster, 1987, p. 49). Because of the possibility for transformation, recovery from the decline is as powerful as it is familiar — the prodigal son returning, the alcoholic recovering, the tribes of Abraham emerging after 40 years in the desert. Since failure often leads to transformation (Weick and Browning, 1991), the upward spiral may be anticipated when a downward trend requires a response — "He bottomed out", "Something had to happen"; the jarring of reality is the fuel for change. The tragic story can be as incomplete as a tale of a black man stumbling down a road in Kansas with his guts in his hand, barely escaping his attackers and death. Just a snippet of information, but the meaning to the generations of his family that followed him was immense: we persist like he persisted (Stone, 1988).

Tragedy requires strength and dignity; it is also less controllable than the other slopes for a narrative. Like the uneven rock falling down hill, it is hard to predict where its next tumble will take it. Decline allows the narrator to build in context and milieu because this form of a narrative is susceptible to cumulative effects and to vicious cycles. When it is a downward spiral, the ground folds in around the hole until it expands into a larger pit. The person in the decline is a character with whom the reader can identify: "There but for the grace of God, go I."

The decline is marked by a break, the sudden loss, the fatal flaw, the downward movement that cannot be checked. Declines show performers responding under pressure and allow for observers to judge their character (Kohlberg and Power, 1981). The most dramatic part of the decline is when it leads to transformation,

as with Xerox Corporation when faced with a drop from 18 to 10 per cent market share and the discovery that it was costing the company more to make its copiers than its competitors' retail price. The company's response was so dramatic and effective that it recovered to capture the esteemed Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award in 1989.

Tragedy is a form of caution: "Be ready for life's changes; it will not go like you planned it to." Tragedy and paradox make the unbelievable believable. Tragedy is connected to many through religious beliefs. "The Jewish God invented the reprieve, existence in reprieve, indefinite postponement" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p. 123). This religious connection asks us to remember — "lest we forget". Tragedies reaffirm the value of the past. Tragedies allow us to move on, to make the loss transformed by the good that follows. The tragedy or loss may be the most resourceful of narratives because it marks a sequence; it creates a break, an end of one era and the beginning of another. Whether it was the Civil Rights Bill, passed after the death of President Kennedy, or a speech supporting the Brady Bill by a life-time member of the national Rifle Association, former President Reagan, individual tragedy has power that leads to organisational action.

For example, the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award, one of the most important influences on the change and development of organisational structure, would probably not have come into existence without a tragedy. In brief, the Baldrige award is a national programme approved by Congress and operated by the US Department of Commerce to evaluate and recognise excellence in organisational practice in the United States. The award had been proposed prior to 1988 and although Congress was impressed with the data collected by the Office of Technology Assessment that there is an average of 20 per cent waste in American firms, the legislation establishing the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award had little support for approval by Congress until the death of the then Secretary of Commerce, Malcolm Baldrige, in a rodeo accident in Wyoming. Baldrige had been immensely popular in Washington with a wide collection of political leaders, and once the national quality award was attached to his name, the legislation went from very little chance for approval to the top of the list for 1988 legislative programmes. The organisational history of the Baldrige award is based on the belief that the award would, at best, have been delayed for a number of years and, at worst, would not have been legislated into existence at all, if it had not been connected to the tragic death of Malcolm Baldrige. The tragedy was the resource for another start.

The Plateau

Plateau is covered third in the ordering of slopes, because traditionally in literature and history it is the hardest narrative to give an interesting display. "How are you doing? Same ol' Same ol'." Organisations that have achieved routine are not the site of dramatic narratives. When characters are on a plateau in fictional examples, they are stolid — their growth and suffering are hardly visible. Max DePree, chief executive officer of Herman Miller begins his book *Leadership is an Art* (1989) with the story of the millwright, a key figure in

a furniture factory who performed dependably until he died. In an obligatory visit to the man's family, DePree's father, then a young manager, was surprised to learn that the millwright wrote beautiful poetry. The story still guides Herman Miller management:

> It is now nearly sixty years since the millwright died, and my father and many of us at Herman Miller continue to wonder. Was he a poet who did millwright's work, or was he a millwright who wrote poetry?
>
> In our effort to understand corporate life, what is it we should learn from this story? In addition to all of the ratios and goals and parameters and bottom lines, it is fundamental that leaders endorse a concept of persons (pp. 6-7).

Another example is from a Willie Nelson song about "A good hearted woman in love with a good timin' man who loves him in spite of his ways she don't understand". This theme suggests that patience is a plateau. The slow burn — the woman who remains committed without reciprocity or growth — is a plateau. Angst only becomes interesting when it is transformed, when the empty space is filled. Western songwriter Joe Ely tells of how he transforms the plateau into energy.

> . . .there's something about the horizon line, about being able to see unobstructed from where you stand that makes you a daydreamer. . .There is something about the desolation. . .I think it is the horizon that makes me start writing more (Patterson, 1990, p. 23).

Ely's example of the void that moves to action moves the idea of flatness closer to how it is used in organisations. Plateaus are harder to make into narratives because of the lack of a central character or because there are too many characters. "All multiplicities are flat, in the sense that they fill or occupy all of their dimensions: we will therefore speak of a plane of consistency. . .(Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p. 9). Deleuze and Guattari used "plain" and "plane" interchangeably in that both have removed all the texture and interest.

The plateau is a less dramatic narrative, but its structure is valuable in organisations. Flat structures may require even more stories than hierarchies (Boje, 1991). To have a flat surface for an organisation means you are also working on smoothness, networking and integration. The plateau is like a salt flat where you can increase your speed without disaster. The dimension of speed, so important to Lyotard (1984) becomes more understandable when organisations are laid out flat in *a thousand plateaus*. While the stories of heroes and tragedies travel quickly vertically in the organisation, formal communication has never travelled quickly up and down the hierarchy. In fact, the preponderance of evidence from the study of communication up and down the hierarchy is that vertical most always means slow.

In a flat organisation, the time distance between the leader and the most distant follower are greatly reduced; you can turn the wheel and make dramatic changes quickly, and the firm's members accept the action and make the turn behind the lead engine without toppling, because they have come to expect movement (Browning, 1991). The plateau allows for evenness and regularity — you can achieve with moderate rather than high risk. Larry Moore (1988) uses the example of a two-cycle boat motor to describe the plateau to his

teenage sons: "If you govern back on the motor, you will go almost as fast, but with less wear and tear and taxing on the engine". Fisher's work (Fisher and Ellis, 1990; Fisher *et al.*, 1977) on group interactions suggests that symmetrical routines, which are neither dominant or submissive, make up 80 per cent of interactions. Most of the time is spent on even ground.

The lack of drama from crisis in the firm on the plateau is handled with pseudo-events (Boorstin, 1964). The gold watch for 30 years of valued service even on the lowest level of the organisation sends a message to others that "keepin' on keepin' on" is a valued practice. Pseudo-events include recognition programmes and symbolic rewards (Peters and Waterman, 1982). They allow organisation leaders to tweak the emotional level of the firm without altering it sharply. When the firm is on a plateau, little narratives have more meaning than they would if it were in radical ascent or decline. While the significance of these symbolic reward systems may seem trivial to those outside the firm, they are collected, cherished, talked about and displayed by insiders.

Another feature that makes a plateau undramatic yet effective is that it is devoid of sequence; there are no clear beginnings or ends. The trend line is continuous. "A plateau is always in the middle, not at the beginning or the end...Gregory Bateson uses the word 'plateau' to designate something very special: a continuous, self-vibrating region of intensities whose development avoids any orientation towards a culmination point or external end" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, pp. 21-2).

Showcasing the plateau here invites identifying some applied and diagnostic lessons for understanding narratives in flat organisations. Since flat organisations have fewer bosses, there are fewer examples of individual heroes. The story is more likely to be about a team rather than an individual. This is important for those of us who have looked to literature and history for traces of the mythical structure that leads to organisational narratives, because there are very few positive examples of teams who have been celebrated for their joint effort. The individual, rather than the team, has always been the hero. Because of the intent to generate an organisation where authority is widely scattered and people are empowered to act, the total number of actions that lead to stories is going to expand, even though they are "little narratives" (Lyotard, 1984) rather than grand narratives. Stories on plateaus are less dramatic because there are so many more of them told and so many more people in them. For example, Boje's (1991) (personal communication) work on narratives in a California utility firm shows that, in a response to a disaster, the crew that faces danger to put the power back on line is the hero.

Types of stories change agents can identify in flat organisations include the following:

(1) Stories of rotating leadership, where a highly invested person steps out of being in charge and hands the reins to another, are more likely than stories celebrating being in charge. There will be more examples where a person gave up power to others and got more of what he/she wanted as a result.

(2) Stories of individuals doing any action that helps the group towards the goal. Jack Mouton, one of the original partners in Scientific Methods,

Incorporated, died almost four years after his wife, Jane Mouton, of the original Blake and Mouton pair who created the managerial grid. His eulogy centred on the theme that long before switching gender roles in professions to meet individual needs of participants was heard of, Jack remained at home in Texas to be a parent to his and Jane's daughters, because "that was the job that needed to be done".

(3) Stories celebrating conscious levelling. The huge DuPont corporation has a long history of collaborating with smaller, younger firms in joint venture projects, and one of their key success indicators is the satisfaction of their much smaller joint venture partners.

(4) Stories of power shifts from turf to larger goals — where emphasis on territory and politics is redirected towards goals of quality or customer service. Motorola's Integrated Circuit Division has a monthly cross-functional team meeting to review progress and make new commitments to meet customer needs. A practice emerged from a group that once adjourned next door to a smaller meeting room to work out a thorny issue while the main meeting continued. Now "going to the woodshed" is such an accepted practice to work out live issues, while the meeting continues, that the group always arranges for one room large enough for the 30 to 50 team members and a small breakout room for the woodshed. Action in the woodshed group is lively, and in a recent instance the leader in charge of the larger meeting next door looked up to an oddly quiet room to realise that he was the only one left in his meeting. Everyone else had, one by one, moved next door because they were invested and interested in what was going on to solve the problem. The tiny room was packed with watchers and supporters (France *et al.*, in press).

Conclusion

Awareness of the importance of narratives in reflecting and even facilitating organisational change is well-founded. With the drive towards flatter organisations to achieve benefits of speed, safety, stability, distributed risk, shock absorption and better use of corporate players, the stories have changed as well. The previously ignored plateau story, with its lack of dramatic quality, has particular value in the flatter structure. Just as the character Rocky advocated a new American hero tale of not wanting to win as much as he wanted to "go all the rounds", the plateau story celebrates the consistency, exquisite execution and predictability of the multitude of players that do the real work of the corporation. The main theme of Peters and Waterman's (1982) chapter on "Productivity through People" is that 80 per cent of the firm's work is done by the average player.

Structuration is the point of integration for narrative and organisation theory, and a closer view of the meaning of structure confirms the recent interest and value of the plateau:

> "Structure" derives from the Latin *structura*, the substantive formed from the past participle *structus*, out of the verb *struere*, "to heap together, arrange" or, as in the English cognate,

to strew. The common meanings of "arrangement", "construction", and "building" are etymologically at some odds with the common meaning of "to strew". In its modern usage, "structure" more commonly suggests "to build up" than to "scatter, spread here and there as by scattering or sprinkling", in the conventional usage of the verb *strew*. The contrast in modern usage between the scientific connotations of *structure* and the decidedly less systematic implications of *strew* may not quite qualify as an instance of what Freud termed, after Karl Abel, "the antithetical sense of primal words", but it serves to introduce some of the chief issues in the use of the term "structure" in modern critical theories (Lentricchia and McLaughlin, 1990).

When the structure is scattered, structuration theory would elevate the importance of communication. While ascent and descent narratives will continue to enhance both hierarchical and flat structures, the values pursued by flattening organisations are supported effectively by the flat version of the narrative, the plateau story.

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