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Organizational change as shifting conversations

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Abstract *This article explores producing and managing change within conversationally constructed realities. Conversations are proposed as both the medium and product of reality construction within which change is a process of shifting conversations in the network of conversations that constitute organizations. In this context, change entails bringing new conversations into a sustained existence and the job of change managers is to create the conversational realities that produce effective action rather than to align organizations with some “true” reality.*

What might be the implications for organizational change management if we took the idea of organizations as socially constructed realities seriously? Although some of the organization change literature adopts such a constructivist view (e.g. Czarnawaska, 1997; Tenkasi and Boland, 1993), most of it adopts a structural-functionalist view (Burrell and Morgan, 1979) in which the job of change agents is to align, fit, or adapt organizations, through interventions, to an objective reality that exists “out there”. The efficacy of these interventions is seen both as a demonstration of a change agent’s ability to accurately mirror reality, i.e. the world is as the agent knows it to be (Watzlawick, 1990), and the ability to apply the appropriate intervention(s) for that reality (Beer, 1980). Successful change, therefore, ultimately depends on the ability to accurately mirror or represent reality and to choose and implement interventions appropriate to that reality.

But what if we consider organizations as socially constructed realities in which the reality we know is interpreted, constructed, enacted, and maintained through discourse (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Holznier, 1972; Searle, 1995; Watzlawick, 1984a; Weick, 1979). What if our knowledge and understanding of reality is not a mirror of some underlying “true” reality, nor a reproduction of that reality? Rather, what if our knowledge of reality is itself a construction that is created in the process of making sense of things (Astley, 1985; Knorr-Cetina, 1981; Weick, 1995)?

In such a constructivist view, change agents would use interventions not to bring about a greater alignment with a “true” reality, but rather to construct, deconstruct, and reconstruct existing realities so as to bring about different performances. Since constructed realities provide the context in which people act and interact, shifting these realities opens new possibilities for action and the realization of new orders of results. The job of change agents, therefore, would be to create new realities in which people and organizations are more effective in achieving the outcomes to which they are committed (Block, 1993; Scherr, 1989; Senge, 1990).

Where organizations are viewed as socially constructed realities, a fundamentally different perspective on managing and producing change is needed than that found in structural-functionalist perspectives. More specifically, since socially constructed realities are constructed in, through, and by conversations and discourse, a conversational perspective is proposed. The intent in making this proposal is to open a conversation for what might constitute producing and managing change in organizations where the assumption is made that reality is constructed and that that construction occurs in language. As an opening, it is not intended to provide a comprehensive or exhaustive review of the extensive literature on social construction, language, discourse, or other linguistic based disciplines and perspectives. Rather, it seeks to contribute to the growing literature that focuses on language based approaches to organizations and their management (Boje, 1995; Czarniawska, 1997; Thachankary, 1993).

Two constructed realities

Constructed reality means that the world we know and understand is our invention (Maturana and Varela, 1987; von Foester, 1984; Watzlawick, 1984b). Though constructivists disagree on what is known and what is real (Spivey, 1997), they share in common the proposition that the world can not be known directly. Rather than discovering the language of the world, as if the world came with names already attached, we invent languages that allow us to talk about and create the world we know (Rorty, 1989). It is in and through these languages that we construct reality. In a constructivist perspective, there is no reality that can be known independent of being constructed. All reality is constructed reality.

Within constructed realities, it is possible to distinguish between what Watzlawick (1990) calls first and second-order reality. These realities correspond respectively with Bohm's (1996) presented and represented realities. First-order, presented realities refer to the physically demonstrable and publicly discernible characteristics, qualities, or attributes of a thing, event, or situation as illustrated by the following example from Watzlawick (1990, p. 135):

The physical properties of gold have been known since ancient times, and it is improbable that new studies will throw doubt on this knowledge, or that additional research will greatly add to what is already known. Thus, if two people had a disagreement about the physical properties of gold, it would be relatively easy to furnish scientific proof that one of them is right and one of them is wrong. These properties of gold shall be called its reality of the first-order.

First-order realities, therefore, are composed of uninterpreted facts and data that are accessible (i.e. in the world), measurable, and empirically verifiable. This means that there is some systematic and empirical way to demonstrate their existence or occurrence. Examples of first-order realities are the price of a competitor's product (e.g. \$4.99), a specific point increase or decrease in the

Dow Jones Industrial Average (e.g. 85 points), the number of people hired in a given period of time (e.g. 100), and how much someone weighs (e.g. 160lb).

Although first-order realities appear similar to the objective ontological realities of structural-functionalist approaches, they are not the same. First-order realities require a set of linguistic agreements, understandings, and vocabulary for their existence. For example, to be able to call something gold and to talk about its characteristics, qualities, and attributes presupposes an already existing discourse in which the use of these terms is understood. In a constructivist perspective, the discourse which constitutes first-order realities is itself a construction (Spivey, 1997; Watzlawick, 1984b) and different language games will give different constructions, understandings, and testings of reality (Astley and Zammuto, 1992; Mauws and Phillips, 1995; Wittgenstein, 1958). But this is not the case in a structural functionalist perspective where words and phrases are understood to literally mirror and represent reality and differences in understandings reflect misunderstanding and perceptual bias.

What differentiates second-order reality from first-order reality is the attachment of meaning. Second-order, represented realities are created whenever we attribute, attach, or give meaning, significance, or value to a first-order reality (Bohm, 1996; Watzlawick, 1990). Second-order realities are not “in” the facts or data of the situation itself, but are interpretations put there by observers (Watzlawick, 1976) including their opinions, judgments, assessments, evaluations, and accounts (Harré, 1980). Even when first-order realities remain the same, it is possible to have different second-order realities, as when one physician diagnoses an elevated white blood cell count as an infection and another diagnoses it as leukemia.

Second-order realities create a reality apart from first-order realities because the “consequences” of these attributions of meaning create concrete results of a personal and societal nature, i.e. people act on the basis of their interpretations (Watzlawick, 1990, p. 313). An example of this consequence can be seen in the case of a patient with a temperature of 103° who states “My head hurts and I feel nauseous”. The physician who diagnoses the situation as the flu is replying to the first-order reality of the patient’s data with a second-order reality interpretation. The interpretation, in turn, calls for and justifies a specific medical course of action which actions become events in a subsequent first-order reality. These events in turn are explained and given meaning, forming the basis for subsequent action, and so on in a cyclical relationship through time.

The significance of these two realities lies in our failure to distinguish between them and to understand the nature of their interconnection. According to Bohm (1996, p. 55) the representation (second-order reality) fuses with the presentation, (first-order reality) so that what is “presented” (as perception) is already in large part a re-presentation. The result is what Bohm calls a net presentation in which the two realities fuse and mingle together, occurring as one, seamless reality. Representations infuse the presentation and we relate to our representations as if they are presentations that are “in-the-world”

independent of us. What we experience as presented depends on our representations, resulting in self-fulfilling prophecies in which representations begin to prove themselves by creating new “facts” (Bohm, 1996; Watzlawick, 1990).

If I have a representation of someone as “authoritative”, i.e. I attach the interpretation “authoritative” to them, then how I subsequently experience them (i.e. the presentation) is authoritative. Authoritative is not seen as an attribute I have attached to someone, but rather is seen as a quality that inheres in them as if it were a first-order reality that is right there for anyone and everyone else to see. I do not go around saying I have an interpretation (representation) that so and so is authoritative, I say they are authoritative and provide and seek confirmatory evidence. Representations are transparent, operating below our consciousness yet informing and shaping our interactions. An excellent example of the results of collapsing first and second-order realities is found in Rosenhan’s (1984) discussion of what happens to sane people who have been labeled insane and put in asylums.

Because second-order represented realities provide the context in which first-order realities are present, changes in second-order representations can lead to fundamental and practical changes in an organization regardless of what happens to first-order realities. The fact that there has been no alteration in a first-order reality does not mean that one is stuck with any particular second-order reality, i.e. facts do not dictate meaning. Indeed, constructivism suggests that the consequences of a particular second-order reality can be replaced by the effects of a different second-order reality, which results in different outcomes (Watzlawick, 1990). What is required, however, is that one is aware of and can distinguish between the two realities. It is this distinguishing that is at the heart of Bohm’s (1996) concept of dialogue in which hidden assumptions (representations) and their consequences are revealed.

First and second-order realities are rarely constructed solely by direct personal experience, but are inherited in the conversational backgrounds (e.g. cultures, traditions, and institutions) in which we are socialized. As Gergen (1985, p. 267) points out “the terms by which the world is understood are social artifacts, products of historically situated interchanges among people”. Both types of reality, therefore, are the result of current and historical stories, discourse, narratives, and arguments in which the claims and conclusions of others are engaged. As a result, we “know” about things for which we have little or no direct experience because the judgments and understandings (representations) of others have been passed on to us. Socialization gives us instructions on how to see the world, and we operate as if the world really is that way (Wanous, 1992).

Conversations: product and process

First and second-order realities are constructed and maintained in and through conversations. At the most basic level, conversations are “what is said and listened to” between people (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Zaffron, 1995).

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A broader view of conversations as “a complex, information-rich mix of auditory, visual, olfactory and tactile events” (Cappella and Street, 1985), includes not only what is spoken, but the full conversational apparatus of symbols, artifacts, theatrics, etc. that are used in conjunction with or as substitutes for what is spoken (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). The speaking and listening that goes on between and among people and their many forms of expression in talking, singing, dancing, etc. may all be understood as “conversation”. In this respect, facial expressions and body movements, with or without the use of instruments or tools, constitute speaking. Similarly, listening is more than hearing, and includes all the ways in which people become aware and conscious of, or present to the world.

Conversations can range from a single speech acts, e.g. “do it”, to an extensive network of speech acts which constitute arguments (Reike and Sillars, 1984), narratives (Fisher, 1987), and other forms of discourse (e.g. Boje, 1991; Thachankary, 1992). Conversations may be monologues or dialogues and may occur in the few seconds it takes to complete an utterance, or may unfold over an extended period of time lasting centuries, e.g. religion. A single conversation may also include different people over time, as is the case with the socialization of new entry people in an organization (Wanous, 1992).

Although conversations are themselves explicit utterances, much of the way in which they support the apparent continuity of a reality is implicit, by virtue of a network of background conversations similar to Harré’s (1980) latent structures and Wittgenstein’s form of life (Wittgenstein, 1958). A background conversation is an implicit, unspoken “back drop” within which explicit conversations occur and on which they rely for grounding and understanding. Background conversations are manifest in our everyday dealings as a taken for granted familiarity or obviousness that pervades our situation and is presupposed in our every conversation. A conversation between a female manager and male worker, for example, may occur against a background for gender, manager and worker, oppression or exploitation, human rights, business, organization culture, family relations, or the singles’ dating market.

Background conversations are already and always there (Harré, 1980), comprising the intertextual links on which current conversations build and rely. As Bakhtin (1986, p. 86) points out, our speech is filled with others’ words ... which we assimilate, rework, and reaccentuate”. When we speak, our conversations are populated and constituted to varying degrees by what others have said before us and by our own sayings and ways of saying (Bakhtin, 1986). Through their intertextuality (Spivey, 1997), conversations bring both history and future into the present utterance by responding to, reaccentuating, and reworking past conversations while anticipating and shaping subsequent conversations. When we are asked to justify or explain our linguistic characterizations, we respond with other linguistic characterizations which are themselves based in still other linguistic characterizations, etc. (Searle, 1969).

It is this intertextuality of conversations, as well as an accumulated mass of continuity and consistency that maintains and objectifies reality (Berger and

Luckmann, 1966; Watzlawick, 1990). Objects exist for us as independent tangible “things” located in space and time and which impose constraints we can not ignore (e.g. brute force (Searle, 1995)); they are manipulable, and we can do something with and to them (Holzner, 1972; Watzlawick, 1990). When conversations become objectified, we grant them the same permanence as objects by assuming that they exist as some “thing” independent of our speaking them. But this is not the case. Conversations are ephemeral and have no existence or permanence other than when they are being spoken (Berquist, 1993).

Not only are conversations the process through which we construct reality, but they are also the product of that construction: conversations become the reality (Berquist, 1993). What we construct when we construct reality are linguistic products, i.e. conversations, that are interconnected with other linguistic products to form an intertextuality of conversations. Our realities exist in the words, phrases, and sentences that have been combined to create descriptions, reports, explanations, understandings etc., that in turn create what is described, reported, explained, understood, etc. When we describe, we create what is being described in the description. Whether the characterization is taken for granted or is a basis for argument, we have nevertheless created the objects and their properties in our conversations (Winograd and Flores, 1987).

Organizations as networks of conversations

Within a conversational context, organizations can be understood as networks of conversations constituting a variety of first and second-order realities. That is, organizations *are* networks of conversations rather than *have* networks of conversations. Conversations are and provide the very texture of organizations. Planning, budgeting, hiring, firing, promoting, managing, rewarding, etc. are all conversations that are interconnected and constitutive of organizations and which are themselves constituted by different first and second-order realities.

Organizations, therefore, are not discursively monolithic, but pluralistic and polyphonic with many conversations occurring simultaneously and sequentially (Fairclough, 1992; Hazen 1993). These conversations establish the context in which people act and thereby set the stage for what will and will not be done (Berquist, 1993; Schrage, 1989). In each of these conversations, there are directives (e.g. orders, requests, consultations, and offers) and commissives (e.g. promises) that are the working parts of all conversations (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969). Reports that establish the status of work, external circumstances, breakdowns, etc. are communicated using directives and commissives (Winograd and Flores, 1987). Directives and commissives are the basis of conversations among managers and employees and contribute to the creation of both first- and second-order realities.

Some of the conversations in organizations engender commitments that are fulfilled through special networks of recurrent conversations in which only certain details of content differentiate one conversation from another (Winograd and Flores, 1987). For example, recurrent requests for travel

reimbursements create a relatively predictable pattern of recurrent conversations called “travel reimbursement procedures” which include all attendant forms and protocols. Recurrent conversations are of interest because they become embodied in the offices and departments that specialize in fulfilling some part of the engendered commitments and because they become background conversations for other departments that are not part of the fulfillment, but simply utilize the recurrent conversations (Winograd and Flores, 1987). Although other departments may not be engaged in fulfilling “travel reimbursements”, they nevertheless may refer to, use, or in some other way rely on such procedures in the conduct of their conversations.

Recurrent conversations contribute to a form of structural coupling between organizational participants in which people are habituated to (Berger and Luckmann, 1966) or naturalized in (Fairclough, 1995) the conversations that connect them and work to maintain the coupling in the face of environmental perturbation (Maturana and Varela, 1987). Structural coupling holds conversations in place and contributes to the persistence of existing conversations and order of discourse. Order of discourse refers to the ordered set of discursive practices between individuals and groups within a particular organization such as informal conversations, one-on-one meetings, formal presentations, etc. (Fairclough, 1992).

Managing and producing change

In the network of conversations that constitute the realities called organizations, the focus and unit of work in producing and managing change is conversation (Lyotard, 1979; Pascarella, 1987). This means that change managers work with and through conversations to generate, sustain, and complete conversations in order to bring about a new network of conversations (i.e. first- and second-order realities) that result in the accomplishment of specific commitments. It is not that change agents simply use conversations to bring about alterations in some nonlinguistic internal human state or external environmental state, which altered states then produce the change. Rather, change agents bring about alterations in the existing tapestry of linguistic products and characterizations that constitute these states and it is this alteration in tapestry and its consequences which is the focus of producing and managing change.

Redefining “a change”

The adoption of a conversational perspective to the social construction of reality requires an alteration in our understanding of what constitutes “a change”. Traditional, structural-functionalist perspectives talk about “a change” as if it were a clearly definable and identifiable object or thing that is put in place, e.g. a computer system (Ford and Ford, 1994). Even if it is acknowledged that there are many parts, stages, or components, “the change” is nevertheless represented as if it has material properties and clearly defined parameters that exist independent of the conversations in which they are

embedded. Within the conversational context presented here, however, such a monolithic view of change is problematic.

Like the organization in which it occurs, “a change” is not monolithic discursively. Rather, it is more appropriately seen as a polyphonic phenomenon (Hazen, 1993), a story of stories (Sköldbberg, 1994), or thematic within which conversations are introduced, maintained, and deleted (Albert, 1983, 1984; Czarniawska, 1997). This thematic perspective is evident in Czarniawska’s (1997) studies of Swedish government agencies in which particular “changes” consisted of a series of conversational episodes organized around particular themes (e.g. decentralization or computerization). The name we give “a change” (e.g. “reengineering accounts payable”), therefore, may more appropriately be seen as a thematic title that brackets (Weick, 1979) guides, and directs the unfolding of sequential and concurrent conversations into a network of already existing conversations. Such an unfolding is evident in Czarniawska’s (1997) studies where current conversations were informed and shaped by both prior and anticipated conversations (e.g. possible objections or questions).

Similarly, when people give historical accounts of “a change” (e.g. “the new computer system”), they are not talking about a single phenomenon, but rather are offering a net presentation (Bohm, 1996) in which both first- and second-order realities are collapsed into a single, thematic narrative. Until these realities are distinguished and “pulled apart”, people relate to the narrative as a first-order reality, thereby confusing events with their interpretations and explanations for those events (Senge, 1990). It is for this reason that one can find different accounts for the same event (Harré, 1980).

Within a conversational perspective, therefore, there is no *the* change that is being produced. Rather, change is an unfolding of conversations into already existing conversations and how “a change” occurs to participants will depend on the second-order, represented realities within which they engage the unfolding dynamic. These realities, in turn, specify what can and cannot be done, what will and will not be done, who should or should not do what, etc. and thereby set the conversational dynamics of change.

The dynamic of change created by dual realities need not be problematic if change agents can remember first, there is no “true” second-order reality to which all must agree and second, that the evidence that “a change” happened is to be found in a first-order reality. First-order realities provide a basis for determining if something is happening independent of opinions and judgements about what is happening or why (i.e. second-order realities). In a conversational perspective, results are a function of a network of conversations. This means that specific results obtain only when and where there is a network of conversations sufficient to produce them. The difficulty is that we can not tell a priori which conversations will make the difference needed for the results to obtain. In this sense, producing change is like experimental theatre or improvisational jazz where the script (music) is being written while it is being performed (Boje, 1995; Czarniawska, 1997). Although there is a theme to the change, the specific conversations that are needed, with whom, and when, have

to be generated on a moment to moment basis. By specifying and agreeing to the first-order reality (e.g. measured result) that will exist if “the change” is successful, it is possible for all participants to determine if the conversation is shifting (has shifted) consistent with the intention for which the shift is being undertaken.

Finally, within conversationally constructed realities, the idea that organizational change can occur independent of individual change becomes problematic. If we employ Gergen’s (1985) concept of a distributed self in which identities rest not so much “in” the individual as in the conversations in which they are socially engaged and embedded, shifting conversations and discursive practices can have profound implications for the identities and relationships of those who operate within them. For example, a manager shifting to an informal mode of conversing with employees will take on and project a new social identity to employees.

Changing the conversations that constitute an organization necessarily changes the conversations that constitute individuals in the organization. For the network of conversations that constitute an organization to shift, people have to shift what they talk about, which in turn alters the context in which they find themselves, making new actions possible (Bohm, 1996; Watzlawick *et al.*, 1974). Within this perspective, “organizational change occurs simultaneously in our selves and in our organizations” (Haze, 1994, p. 72) and organizational change does not occur without individual change. Quite simply, in the absence of people’s willingness to speak and listen differently, there can be no conversational shift and no organizational change.

Conversational shifts

In a network of conversations where realities are ongoingly being constructed, producing and managing change becomes a matter of shifting conversations (Holmes, 1992; Lyotard, 1979). When someone shifts a conversation, they shift what people talk about and pay attention to (Oakley and Krug, 1991). Since conversational (constructed) reality provides the context in which people act and interact, shifting what people pay attention to shifts their reality and provides an opportunity for new actions and results to occur. For example, complacency conversations have been shifted by introducing and sustaining conversations for competition (Johnson, 1988). Even in the case of a mining company that appears to operate solely using tangible processes for taking rock out of the ground and turning it into metal, the reality of those processes occurs in the conversations of the organization. To change the organization or some process in it, the managers must shift the conversations in which the processes take place and are understood (Zaffron, 1995).

What is at issue is not so much a matter of “truth”, as in the mirroring of a statement with some extralinguistic, ready made world, but what is viable and works to achieve a goal (Rorty, 1991; Schwandt, 1994). Producing change begins with the existing network of conversations and then proceeds to add, weed out, supplement, reintegrate, and organize conversations in order to

construct a reality (set of conversations) that fits together with coherence and integrity, handles existing and new cases, and supports further exploration and invention (Schwandt, 1994). Producing organizational change, therefore, requires a type of language shift (Holmes, 1992) that produces an attractive and empowering reality (Block, 1987; Ford and Ford, 1994) in which the consequences of a shift fulfill the intentions for which it was undertaken.

When Holmes (1992) refers to a language shift, she is talking about a gradual process whereby the language of a wider community displaces the language of a smaller community. For example, immigrants shift from their native tongue to the English spoken by the wider community. As people speak in one language, the vocabulary in another language diminishes and there is a loss of fluency and competence by its speakers. There is a gradual erosion of the prior language and the minority language retreats in terms of the places in which it is used, who uses it, when, and for what purposes.

But in the case of organizational change, we are actually proposing something akin to a “reverse” language shift in which a nascent language displaces and becomes the principal language. That is, we are talking about bringing forth new conversations into an existing community and having those conversations prosper such that they become naturalized (Fairclough, 1992) within the network of conversations that constitute an organization. During such transition periods (Beckhard and Harris, 1997), people may have to be bilingual (or even multilingual). Although such bilingualism could be considered a potential source of friction, Czarniawska (1997) found that a government agency continued using both the new and old accounting system and ways of acting to the appreciation of all. In a sense, people were bilingual and were able to distinguish which language to use, when, and with whom.

But, there may be a limit to the rate at which language shifts can be produced. Czarniawska (1997) found that if there was too much old or too much new language, there was a problem. This suggests that there may be an optimal rate at which new language can be introduced such that people can assimilate it and become relatively proficient in its use. When this rate is missed (over or under), other conversations (e.g. questions, complaints, etc.) arise that must be addressed, thereby slowing the shift.

One factor that can influence the rate at which a language shift occurs is the extent to which the new language is used in other areas. Holmes (1992) points out that when a minority language moves to a majority and all the institutional domains (e.g. education, government, etc.) speak the same language, a language shift will be unavoidable unless the minority takes steps to prevent it. If someone is immersed in a network of conversations in which a language is spoken, the likelihood of a shift to that language increases. Applying this proposition to an organization implies that the degree to which a new language is incorporated into the recurrent conversations of an organization (i.e. departments, offices, procedures, etc) will influence the likelihood and rapidity

with which a language shift occurs. Indeed, it might be possible to determine the extent to which a change has been institutionalized by determining the extent to which the language of that change exists within the organization.

Shifts in focus. Language and conversational shifts involve changes in focus. We always have a choice in what we talk about. People can be reactive, complaining about what they see as wrong, the obstacles they perceive as inhibiting or stopping them, or the way things should or should not be. People can also be proactive, talking about what they want to accomplish, what will make that possible, and how they can get it done. Since what people talk about reflects what they pay attention to, the choice of whether to speak complaints or possibilities can make a difference in the progress of change.

When the proportion of proactive, or facilitating conversations increases against the proportion of reactive, or inhibiting conversations in an organization, the velocity of change increases (Grant, 1995; Oakley and Krug, 1991). This suggests that if change agents focus on introducing proactive conversations into a network of conversations while ignoring or reducing reactive conversations, there will be a shift in the velocity of change. It also suggests that one way to resist change is to speak reactively, raising complaints and objections so as to slow progress.

Another form of shift in focus occurs when people move from monologues to dialogues (Bohm, 1996; Brown, 1995; Isaacs, 1993; Schein, 1993). Dialogue is a form of consciously constructed conversation in which participants engage in a sustained and collaborative investigation into the underlying assumptions and certainties that underlie their everyday experiences and relationships with the intent of creating more effective interactions. Dialogue provides an opportunity for people to examine and authentically deal with their conversations as the fundamental presumptions, presuppositions, assumptions, and backgrounds in which they dwell and to reflect on the implications of those conversations (Bohm, 1996; Zaffron, 1995).

The purpose of dialogue is not to locate and define some problem or issue with ever increasing accuracy, but to enter into conversations that take people out of the daily discourses that generate “the way things are” and provide them the opportunity to generate a new second-order reality through reframing and the creation of new conversations (Fairhurst and Sarr, 1996; Gergen, 1985; Watzlawick, 1990). In dialogue, conversations are examined reflexively and recommitted to and kept, modified, or discarded. New metaphors, narratives, or images are generated, and discursive capacities and resources are expanded, thereby increasing the number of voices that can be spoken and creating new options for action (Gergen and Thatchenkery, 1996). Dialogue is consistent with double and triple loop learning in which people search for underlying predispositions that determine ways of seeing, thinking, talking and doing (Argyris and Schön, 1978; Bateson, 1972). Dialogue is one of the key components to an ontological approach to change in which people come to experience their realities as constructions, giving them the opportunity to generate new conversations and realities (Marzano *et al.*, 1995).

A third shift in focus occurs when people are willing to abandon tried and true recipes and operate in a place of uncertainty and not knowing (Pascale, 1990). It is possible to commit to a future without knowing how it will be accomplished, and to work for its accomplishment in a dialogue of discovery during which old conversations and realities are challenged and replaced or supplemented with new ones (Hamel and Prahalad, 1989; Mills, 1995; Zaffron, 1995). By suspending our attachment to what we know and the certainty of our answers, we can try something that is counterintuitive, unsolved, or never before experienced, thus acting our way into “a new set of conversations and a different reality. This will permit us to be vehicles for a new step hammering itself through the memory of another” (quoted in *Riverdance: The Show*).

Shifts in orders of discourse. Conversational shifts can involve alterations in the orders of discourse which comprise discursive practices (Fairclough, 1992). Orders of discourse refer to a set or clustering of underlying conventions which embody particular ideologies and which form the basis of discursive practices (Fairclough, 1989). Discursive practices involve how texts (the product of discourse) are produced, distributed, and consumed. As such, orders of discourse establish a context in which discourse and practice occur, giving a social order or structuring to a social arena. Orders of discourse differ in discourse types (e.g. seminars, counselling, etc.) and in the way these types are related to each other. Although the same type of discourse (e.g. gossip) may be found in several institutions, its relationship (e.g. complementary) with other discourse types may differ. As a result, different types of discourse are considered appropriate in different social settings at different times and it is these differences which give a social setting its particular order.

Shifts in orders of discourse alter the patterns of participation and contribution within an organization. People’s willingness to participate in conversations may be influenced by their “perception of impact”, i.e. the ability to make a difference in a conversation, which is influenced by the order of discourse. People do not get involved in or withdraw from conversations in which they do not have a sense that their contribution will be acknowledged. People do not get involved where they are excluded from participation. It is no surprise, therefore, that controlling the order of discourse is an issue of substantial interest (e.g. Fairclough, 1989; Fairclough, 1992) and could be one of the factors in resistance to change. Indeed, since the order of discourse constrains conversation and action, shifts in this order alter what is possible in an organization and are likely to constitute a more significant change than where content alone shifts, but order is preserved. In fact, alterations in orders of discourse may be another way to think about second order change (Levy and Merry, 1986).

Failure to change the order of discourse could be one reason why people become cynical about organizational change (Reichers and Wanous, 1995). If only the content of what is said alters, but the order of discourse in which it is said does not, people may come to believe “the more things change (content), the more they stay the same (order of discourse)” and conclude that “nothing

ever really changes around here". This would explain why attempts at empowerment (an acknowledgement that you are not) are met with cynicism, apathy and criticism (Kanungo, 1992) and why people are cynical toward management in change (Reichers and Wanous, 1995). It could also explain why certain conversations come to be occupied by people whose participation has the most marked effect in those conversations (Baker and Kolb, 1993).

Conversational management

In a conversational context, "a change" does not unfold as some well written script. Rather, it is more like experimental theatre in that the script is being written while the play is being performed. This does not mean that there is no intent or purpose, only that the purpose (theme) sets the context in which the play is performed and participants operate consistent with that theme while dealing with what presents itself on stage. There is an inherent fluidity that is demanded which can be unsettling for those with a commitment to certainty. But within a conversational context "What's next?" is a persistent question requiring that participants take stock of where they are, where they want to be, and what action is appropriate now, under these conditions and circumstances. There is no formula, only that conversations be conducted and their effectiveness in fulfilling the intent be reviewed so that subsequent conversations can continue what is working and modify what is not.

If conversations maintain and objectify realities through an accumulated mass of continuity, consistency, and relatedness to other conversations (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Watzlawick, 1990), then bringing new conversations into existence and maintaining them will require similar attention. Because conversations are ephemeral, their existence is a function of the attention given to the continuity, consistency, and relatedness that is required in order to bring about a sufficient speaking and listening that the conversation becomes natural and habitual (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Fairclough, 1992). The job of a change agent, then, is to initiate, maintain, and complete conversations so as to bring into existence a new conversational reality in which new opportunities for action are created and effective action takes place.

This dynamic means that change involves movement among different types of conversations and orders of discourse. Ford and Ford (1995) propose that the change process is constituted by four types of conversations:

- (1) initiative;
- (2) understanding;
- (3) performance; and
- (4) closure.

Each of these have a different focus and plays a different role in producing organization change. Initiative conversations start changes, conversations for understanding produce awareness, performance conversations generate action, and closure conversations provide completion. Although many change efforts

tend to be dominated by conversations for understanding, these conversations, by themselves, are insufficient for producing change (Beer *et al.*, 1990). What is needed are conversations for performance and closure (Ashkenas and Jick, 1992; Beer *et al.*, 1990; Bridges, 1980; Ford and Ford, 1995).

The conversational framework proposed by Ford and Ford (1995) implies that managers' effectiveness in producing change is a function of their ability to distinguish among and effectively use and move among each type of conversation. Since each type of conversation creates a different reality, moving from one type of conversation to another constitutes a type of conversational shift in which different actions and outcomes become possible. Thus, for example, it was not until people moved from conversations for understanding to conversations for performance, in which specific actions were identified, requests were made, and people were held accountable, that actions were taken in GE's work-out program (Ashkenas and Jick, 1992). It is this ability to move among conversations such as those identified by Ford and Ford (1995) that is needed to manage and produce change.

Another perspective on this issue of conversational management can be derived from Fairclough's (1995) proposal that language in texts always functions ideationally in its representation of experience and the world, interpersonally in its constitution of social interactions, and textually in its relating the parts of a text together into a coherent whole. This implies that while managers may believe they are engaged in explaining the need for a change (ideational), they cannot ignore that they are also engaged in a social interaction (interpersonal) or with how what is being proposed relates to what has been proposed before (textual). Indeed, it may well be that when managers profess they experience resistance, what they are experiencing is a response to a poor idea, a strained relation, or missing coherence, all of which are contained within the conversations they are having. Managers confronted with the introduction of change, therefore, are engaged in each of these functions simultaneously.

Conversational responsibility

Producing change as a conversational phenomenon opens a new opportunity for people to be responsible for their speaking and listening in organizations. Where conversations are understood as reports on some "true" reality, the speaker is seen as simply a reporter of "the truth" or "the way it is". Like young umpires, speakers are simply calling things the way they are (Weick, 1979). But the power of conversationally constructed realities lies in people speaking and listening as creators, rather than as reporters. What one says brings things, ideas, and relations into existence, rather than reports on them as if they were somehow "out there" on their own. Like older umpires, there is not anything until we call it (Weick, 1979).

Through our conversations, we create realities and we can be responsible for what we create. There is no idle speaking in conversationally constructed realities since everything that is said affirms or modifies reality in some way.

Organizational
change – shifting
conversations

Where reality is not as we would want it, the question is not “Why is it this way?”, but rather “Why do we say that?”. Constructivism inevitably leads to the conclusion that we are responsible for the world in which we appear to be living, even if we are unaware that we built it (Holzner, 1972).

Hazen (1993, p. 21) addresses the issue of conversational responsibility when she points out that people “can take courage to speak, locating their authority in their own voices rather than outside themselves in bureaucratic rules, roles, and hierarchy”. Similarly, Bakhtin (quoted in Hazen, 1993, p. 22) asserts “that each voice is a source of authority for the one who embodies it, and thus power is centered in each being, rather than in a socially created power structure”. Conversational responsibility, therefore, has to do with our willingness to own how or what we speak and listen and to accept the consequences of that speaking and listening. An unwillingness to speak, for whatever reason (e.g. fear of consequences), is different than inability to speak. Conversational responsibility makes it possible for us to own both our speaking and our silence as choices we make rather than attribute either to the persistence or absence of forces outside ourselves.

Where we are conversationally responsible, we can openly inquire into the extent to which our discursive practices (e.g. turn taking), orders of discourse, representations, and constructions are hegemonic and result in the systematic exclusion, subjugation, or disempowerment of others (Fairclough, 1989, 1995). We can also inquire into the extent to which we are engaged in using those practices to persist or expand that hegemony. Although there are clearly cases where people are intentional about maintaining existing discursive orders and practices for their advantage, such is not always the case, and to assume otherwise is to take a cynical view. Indeed, one of the values and purposes of dialogue is to reveal and alter such practices and their assumptions. When applied to the production and management of change, conversational responsibility raises such questions as “What will I say, to whom, and for what purpose?” and “What are the consequences of my speaking and listening?”.

Conversational responsibility can open new opportunities for effecting self-fulfilling prophecies, which can have broad implications for the conduct of change (e.g. Madon *et al.* 1997; Smale, 1977). A self-fulfilling prophecy is “an assumption or prediction that, purely as a result of having been made, causes the expected or predicted event to occur and thus confirms its own ‘accuracy’” (Watzlawick, 1984c, p. 95). Since an essential element of the self-fulfilling effect is an unshakable conviction that everything that has a name actually exists (Watzlawick, 1984c), any time that we name something (i.e. create a second-order reality conversation) we create an opportunity for a self-fulfilling prophecy. The prediction of some future event that has not yet taken place, e.g. “people will resist change”, creates actions in the present, e.g. use of resistance reduction strategies, which in turn bring about and thereby “prove” the prediction.

From a structuralist-functionalist perspective, self-fulfilling prophecies are evidence that things “really are that way”. But if we are conversationally

responsible, and are aware that it is we who create these realities, then we do not have to be bound by them. According to Howard's existential axiom, "if a person becomes 'aware' of a theory concerning his behavior, he is longer bound by it but is free to disobey it" (quoted in Watzlawick, 1984c, p. 113). But this freedom requires a willingness to be responsible for the theory and for generating a new one.

It perhaps goes without saying that just because people can be conversationally responsible does not mean that they are conversationally responsible. People do lie and deceive (Ford, 1996), engage in defensive speaking (Argyris, 1990), and communicate so as to create favorable and self-serving impressions (Leary and Kowalski, 1990). Ironically, it is the effectiveness of these very practices that serves as a demonstration of the power of conversations to create realities and to mold actions consistent with those realities.

Resistance

Producing change within a conversational context has implications for how we view resistance. From the two-realities standpoint, "resistance" is an attribution (second-order reality) given to some event occurrence (first-order reality) which, like the diagnosis "flu", calls forth and justifies a particular course of action (e.g. Kotter and Schlesinger, 1979). But, because resistance is a representation, any form of action (including non-action) can be interpreted as an attempt to undermine or sabotage change rather than as a neutral action or a contribution to the change. If change managers can be responsible for their role in generating the conversation "resistance" by seeing it as a second-order, rather than a first-order reality, they can be free to create and choose a more empowering interpretation that reframes the conditions and circumstances and permits things to move forward in a different way. For example, the question "Why are we doing this?" could be interpreted as an opportunity to support the change by making its need more evident or as a cynical comment intended to reveal flawed thinking and thereby undermine the change, i.e. "resistance". In the later case, "resistance" (the second order reality interpretation) is put there by the change manager in response to the question (first order reality).

When change is understood as a language shift, resistance can be seen as an issue of language maintenance (Holmes, 1992). For a variety of reasons, users of a language may feel that there is something to preserve in an existing language. Traditions, for example, are contained "in" a language and the loss of the old language brings about the loss of those traditions. Similarly, in Gergen's (1985) concept of distributed self, one's social self is located "in" the language and conversations of others. Language shifts, therefore, may seem tantamount to shifting one's identity and resisted to maintain that identity.

Language maintenance and structural coupling not only make shifting conversations more difficult, but imply that resistance is not an individual based phenomenon. The more conversations that support, are attached to, or in some other way are interconnected with a particular conversation, the more

“pull” there is to keep existing conversations in place. In this case, resistance becomes a function of conversational patterns (e.g. orders of discourse rather than individual characteristics). It is because of this coupling that psychotherapists intervene in the network of conversations that constitute a family when working with a particular member of that family since working with the individual alone is insufficient (Watzlawick *et al.*, 1974). Kotter points out that the failure to take this coupling into account contributes to the failure of organizational transformation efforts.

Finally, resistance may be seen as an issue that stems from orders of discourse and the power associated with them (Fairclough, 1989). Such factors as turn taking, who gets to speak (voice), on what, and when are all affected by order of discourse and the power it grants to some and not others. All of this in turn influences the realities that get constructed and the actions to be taken. People, therefore, may object not only to the focus or content of the change itself, but also to the order of discourse through which it is produced and managed.

Conclusion

It is possible to consider organizations as networks constituted in and by conversations. Accordingly, producing and managing change involves shifting that network of conversations by intentionally bringing into existence and sustaining “new” conversations while completing (and removing) current conversations. Rather than being simply a tool, conversations are the target, medium, and product of organizational change. Indeed, in a network of conversations, an organizational change is itself a series of sequential and concurrent conversational episodes held together by a theme (Czarniawaska, 1997).

Although there is a considerable literature on organizational change and transformation, relatively little of it is devoted to language-based perspectives. Consequently, there is considerable room for expanding the inquiry into organizations as phenomena in language. The extensive literatures in linguistics, critical theory, etc. are rich resources for that expansion and should be explored for their possible applicability to the conduct of change.

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