

# The contribution of a discursive view to understanding and managing organizational change

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- *Effective change management is not just about the 'hard' structural aspects of organizations; it requires an in-depth appreciation of the cultural, human aspects of organizations, and taking actions based on this understanding.*
- *Organizational discourse can provide access to this conceptual world of organizations and can also be used as an avenue for influencing it.*
- *Recent empirical research is used to illustrate the above points.*
- *Use of metaphor by change agents is then discussed as a prime example of how discourse can help to achieve effective organizational change.*

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## **Introduction: How can change be effectively managed?**

Organizations are characterized by both stability and change. While forces such as inertia, uncertainty reduction, minimization of transaction costs and the nurturing of social capital foster stability, other forces such as the need to adapt to the environment, to control costs, to gain or sustain competitive advantage and to satisfy impatient capital markets demand continuous change (Leana and Barry, 2000).

Even though some organizations are adept at managing change, sustained competitive success for most is fleeting. A study by McKinsey Consultants, for example, found

that over a 10-year period, only 3 out of 208 firms managed to sustain their superior profitability and rate of growth (Ghemawat, 2000: 20). This difficulty in sustaining a firm's competitive advantage over the longer term has been termed the 'Red Queen' effect, after Lewis Carroll's story of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* where the Red Queen said to Alice 'here, you see, it takes all the running you can do, to keep in the same place. If you want to get somewhere else, you must run at least twice as fast...'

There is an immense amount of practitioner-oriented literature on how to effectively manage change (e.g. Champy and Nohria, 1996; Kotter, 1996). Common prescriptions for effectively managing change include encouraging participation from as many employees as possible, addressing their concerns in the change program, tapping the energy and commitment of change champions, demonstrating the commitment of senior management by allocating time and resources to change programs, or ensuring

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that leaders act as role models for the changes. Even with ample advice, however, the vast majority of change-related programs fail to meet their objectives (Nohria, 1993). Many, such as downsizing or re-engineering, can lead to undesirable long-term consequences such as a weakening of the organization's knowledge base and low employee morale (Eliezer, 1996; Mabert and Schmenner, 1997).

Why is there such a high rate of failure? One important reason is that the soft cultural and social aspects of organizations often receive insufficient attention in organization change programs (Heracleous, 2001; Pascale *et al.*, 1997). Change-management approaches oriented to 'hard' understandings of organizations, such as business process re-engineering, are unlikely to be able to identify relevant cultural, political and social issues, understand their impact on proposed changes, or manage them accordingly. Organizational discourse is a useful way to both understand the conceptual world of organizations, as well as to influence this world in the context of organizational change programs.

### ***The need to gain a deeper understanding of change processes***

There is often an assumed dichotomy between 'understanding', associated with the interpretive paradigm, and 'managing', associated with the functionalist paradigm. Even though the theoretical constructs and motivations of researchers in these paradigms may indeed be different (Heracleous and Barrett, 2001), effective *management* of change also requires deep *understanding* of the subtle issues involved. In order to be able to improve the effectiveness of change management, therefore, we need a more refined understanding of not only the content of change, but also its context and process (Pettigrew, 1987).

The organization change literature contains analytical distinctions such as

anticipatory/reactive change, or incremental/organizational change (Nadler and Tushman, 1989), and describes several change management styles that can potentially be adopted based on contingency considerations (Kotter and Schlesinger, 1979). Such understandings, however, may need to be complemented by rich data deriving from in-depth, longitudinal methodologies, that can adequately shed light on some of the complex issues involved in organizational change (Pettigrew, 1987; Johnson, 1987).

Tan and Heracleous (2001), for example, explored the implementation of organizational learning in an Asian National Police Force in the context of a longitudinal action research program. The aim was to get an interpretive, in-depth understanding of the related processes of transformational change, and the barriers to change, in a machine bureaucracy with entrenched structure and culture not ordinarily conducive to learning and adaptation; and second, to explore the applicability of universalist change management prescriptions in this context.

This research found several structural and cultural barriers to transformational change. The structural barriers included inter-unit rivalry and turf battles, and consequently lower inter-unit coordination and cooperation, a rigid hierarchical organizational structure, and poor information flows inhibited by rivalry and secrecy. The cultural barriers included little participative decision making, vision directed from the top and not collectively owned, discipline motivated more by fear rather than by respect, a sanctioning rather than a learning attitude to mistakes, and unproductive internal status distinctions were enshrined in the culture, that favored plain clothes officers more than uniformed ones. These structural and cultural barriers were in the medium term successfully contested through a consciously designed bottom-up participative change process, the existence of change champions, tangible experiences that challenged the prevailing culture, and change actions that were

congruent with the organization's broader, political authorizing environment.

The usefulness of change management approaches such as interpretively oriented action research, are that they help to uncover such barriers, in cooperation with the organization that is attempting to change. In the case of this National Police Force, unless such barriers were clearly identified, and raised to conscious awareness by candid discussion, then they could not be productively addressed. This process requires having not only appropriate expertise as a change agent or change facilitator but also the courage and determination on behalf of the senior levels of the organization to go ahead with what often becomes a long and uncomfortable process. Traditional hard change management approaches, or universalist change management approaches more broadly, may not be able to detect subtle cultural values and their behavioral consequences, and may therefore be unproductive in achieving effective organizational change.

Diagnosing and dealing with organizational culture is one of the key factors for achieving effective organizational change (Heracleous and Langham, 1996; Pascale *et al.*, 1997). In this context, Heracleous (2001) employed an ethnographic research approach, combined with a clinical element, to explore the nature and role of culture in the context of organizational change at the UK operations of a global human resources consulting firm, People Associates. Using Schein's (1992) levels of culture model, the author identified cultural assumptions and values, and explored how these related to employee behaviors, using his ethnographic/clinical relationship with the organization as a rich data source.

This study has illustrated how an organizational culture develops historically, is internally coherent and has potent effects on behaviors that should be studied and understood by managers and clinicians undertaking organizational change programs. For example, in People Associates, there were deep cultural assumptions relating to the organization's relationship to its

environment, the nature of reality and truth, the nature of human nature, the nature of human activity, and the nature of time. These assumptions were deeply ingrained in the culture, and were continually manifested in specific classes of behaviors. Understanding such cultural assumptions helps change agents assess the extent to which organization change is compatible with them, the expected levels of cultural resistance, and to identify cultural and behavioral areas where they should focus their efforts on so that they can effectively manage change.

The above studies illustrate the need of gaining in-depth, grounded understanding of the social and cultural issues involved in organizational change, and illustrate that gaining such an understanding is an important part of effective change management. Change-management approaches that downplay such soft aspects of organizations, are unlikely to be able to identify them, or understand their impact on agents' thought and action.

### ***What is discourse anyway?***

At a broad level, discourses are collections of communicative actions, both verbal and textual, that are patterned and underlied by certain structural features, and that are constructive of social and organizational reality (Heracleous and Barrett, 2001). These discourses create, embody and sustain conditioned local rationalities (Gergen and Thatchenkery, 1996), as opposed to universal rationalities that would apply to closed systems such as mathematics or geometry. In other words, discourses are intimately and causally related to ways of thinking and acting of members of particular social systems or cultures (Sherzer, 1987).

The interrelation between discourse, thought and action of organizational actors is a dynamic one. As Barrett *et al.* (1995) have put it, 'it is through patterns of discourse that relational bonds are formed; that action and structure are created, transformed, and maintained; and that values and beliefs are reinforced or challenged. The process

is recursive: Interpretive repertoires are extended to include various practices. At the same time, these practices augment and alter the interpretive code' (1995: 367). This interpretive perspective emphasizes that meaning is constructed, sustained and potentially challenged through discursive social interaction, and that discourse is not merely informational, but constructive of social and organizational reality (Heracleous and Tsoukas, 2002).

In the same way that different genres of movies can be identified (i.e. drama, action, comedy), discourses can be described as groups of texts that share certain common features. They can operate at the trans-national level (for example, the discourses of pro-globalization as well as anti-globalization), at the national level (for example, discourses of race and gender equality, immigration policy, or national security in different countries); at the industry level (for example, discourses embodying the 'industry recipes', to use Spender's (1989) term, the conventional wisdom of how business should be conducted in particular industries), or at the organizational level, where researchers employ in-depth qualitative methodologies to identify specific discourses within particular social and organizational contexts (e.g. Heracleous, 2002; Heracleous and Barrett, 2001).

There are different streams of discourse research, which employ different views of discourse and its relation to organizational change. The *functional* approach views discourse as language-based communication, used instrumentally by social actors to achieve their ends. It employs teleology as a dominant theory of change, where the key metaphor is purposeful cooperation and the orientation is prescriptive. The *interpretive* approach views discourse as communicative action, which is constructive of social and organizational reality; it has no strong connections with an ideal-type theory of change, and has a descriptive orientation. The *critical* approach views discourse as power/knowledge relations that are embedded in social practice; it has a

revolutionary orientation and is linked to a dialectic theory of change, where the key metaphor is opposition or conflict. The *structural* approach, lastly, views discourse as a duality of deep discursive structures and surface communicative actions. It aims to bridge dualisms of structure and action in social analysis and suggest that understanding of social change should focus, *inter alia*, on structural principles as manifested in discrete episodes; it has a descriptive orientation (Heracleous and Barrett, 2001: 756).

### ***How discourse can contribute to effective organizational change***

How is discourse related to organizational change? If we accept Pondy and Mitroff's (1979) suggestions to view the nature of organizations as going beyond the orthodoxy of open systems theory, as composed of 'self-conscious language users' who possess 'a sense of social order, a shared culture, a history and a future, a value system' (1979: 9), then it becomes apparent that any significant organizational change will affect and be affected by these softer aspects of organizations. Therefore, change agents need to both understand and shape these softer aspects towards the desired directions. Organizational discourses (with their own vocabularies, root metaphors, or rhetorical strategies) are both the mirror of the conceptual world of the organization, as well as a central avenue by which it can be influenced.

There is a significant amount of research on how change agents can use communication to achieve more effective organizational change.<sup>1</sup> Armenakis *et al.* (1993), for example, have argued that the change message is the primary means of creating readiness for change in an organization. Lengel and Daft

<sup>1</sup> Communicative actions are the building blocks of discourse. They occur at specific points in time, are functional, situational and explicit. Discourses are constituted of collections of communicative actions; they are longitudinal, constructive, transcend situations, and their features are implicit (Heracleous and Hendry, 2000).

(1988) stressed the importance of employing rich media (e.g. face-to-face communication) by change agents if the issue addressed is non-routine and complex, such as organization change. Chesley and Wenger (1999) suggested that strategic conversations can foster organizational transformation by helping organizational members surface their assumptions through dialogue, create shared understandings and learn how to learn.

Conger (1991) argued that great leaders will not only need to be effective strategists, but also rhetoricians who can inspire, persuade and energize their audience. They must be able to articulate and communicate a compelling organizational mission, explain convincingly its rationale, sketch an image of the 'enemy' that compels people to expend discretionary effort, and build up the organization's confidence that it can succeed in spite of all the obstacles. The use of stories, analogies and metaphors is a key feature of effective rhetorical discourse.

Recent research by Heracleous and Barrett (2001) illustrates the unique capability of organizational discourse to contribute to in-depth understanding of organizational change, and to help in its effective management. This research explored the role of discourse in shaping organizational change processes through its influence on actors' interpretations and actions, using a longitudinal field study of electronic trading implementation in the London insurance market. Through a focus on both discourse and its context the researchers were able to make sense of the multiple perspectives of different stakeholder groups and their interrelations. They were able to explore actors' own argumentations, interpretations and actions with regard to the proposed implementation of electronic trading in order to gain in-depth hermeneutic understanding of change processes. These interpretations and actions shaped the trajectory and ultimate failure of the process of electronic trading implementation.

This study sought to address the research challenge of exploring multiple discourses, their interrelations, and their impact on

practice (Boje, 1995; Grant *et al.*, 1998). It found that the discourses of each stakeholder group were pervaded and patterned by relatively stable deep structures which functioned as organizing mechanisms that guided myriads of surface communicative actions which might otherwise appear unconnected and disparate. There were discursive clashes among stakeholder groups over contested terrain, illustrating both conflict and discursive interpenetration and influence among their discourses. There was fragile agreement and cooperation at the surface communicative level, which was based on potentially conflicting deep structures that could assert themselves in different ways under different contextual conditions. There was discursive fragmentation, leading to conflicting actions, even within the same stakeholder group sharing the same deep structures, arising because one actor can deem that their key goals can be better served by actions that are in conflict with the actions of their own stakeholder group. Lastly, stakeholder groups talked past each other, rather than to each other, because of their almost diametrically opposed discourses, at both the deep structure levels and communicative action levels, with little common ground on which to base a dialogue.

Discourse in this perspective is far from 'just talk'. It is central to individuals' interpretation and action, and it can help change agents both understand the intricacies of the organizational setting as well as manage the change process. Discourse itself becomes action that can either aid or hinder change processes, and paying insufficient attention to organizational discourse also means foregoing the richness that this lens can provide.

### ***How metaphor can foster effective organizational change***

There has been a significant amount of research in organization theory on the role of metaphors in facilitating organizational change. Metaphors can offer new ways of looking at existing situations (Crider and Cirillo, 1991; Lakoff, 1990; Morgan, 1980, 1983),

while simultaneously acting as a bridge from a familiar to a new state (Pondy, 1983). The high latitude of interpretation afforded by metaphorical statements can help to accommodate the interpretations of organizational groups perceiving their interests to be mutually incompatible (Crider and Cirillo, 1991), and unstructured situations can be made more concrete and comprehensible through the use of metaphor (Sackmann, 1989). Researchers have shown that the metaphors used by organizational actors are empirically related to such areas as the extent and speed of organizational change (Oswick and Montgomery, 1999) or to aspects of organizational and national culture (Gibson and Zellmer-Bruhn, 2001). Change agents can employ an organization's prevalent metaphors as a diagnostic tool that reflects actors' ways of thinking about their organization and the need for change; as well as a facilitating mechanism for change by introducing metaphors that can align organizational participants' interpretations and actions towards a desired direction (Marshak, 1993).

Constructionist views of metaphor suggest that metaphor shapes agents' thoughts by projecting 'associated implications' of a secondary subject on a primary subject. Agents creatively select, emphasize, suppress, and organize features of the primary subject by applying to it statements isomorphic with the secondary subject's implicative complex (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980). If a change program is portrayed as a journey, for example, actors can see it as a long-term effort which has a desired destination and which will involve interesting learning experiences along the way. If a competitor's actions are interpreted as 'war', then employees may perceive the situation as one that demands immediate, coordinated response and full commitment to staving off the threat.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Constructionist views of metaphor are aligned to the interpretive stream of discourse research in their assumptions about the potency of metaphor to redefine social reality. Metaphors *per se* are paradigm neutral, however, transcending individual discourse streams. Metaphors, for example, can be functionally utilized in organization change programs, they can be employed

Metaphors have been typologized according to their potential for affording creative insights. Schön (1979), for example, distinguished generative metaphors from non-generative ones by the former's ability to generate new perceptions, explanations and inventions (1979: 259) and Black (1979) distinguished strong from weak metaphors by the former's possessing a high degree of 'implicative elaboration' (1979: 27). Metaphors' creative potential is derived from sufficient differences between the source and target domains for a creative tension to exist (Morgan, 1983). As Aristotle has put it, 'metaphors should be transferred from things that are related but not obviously so' (*Rhetoric*, 3: 11: 5). Metaphors and stories are more memorable and impactful than literal language because they appeal simultaneously 'to the emotions, to the intellect, to imagination, and to values' (Conger, 1991: 39). In terms of research on persuasive communication, organizational actors are more likely to both understand the message, take it as having personal relevance, and spend more time thinking about it (Petty and Cacioppo, 1986).

Metaphors can move agents to action because of their evaluative loading which points implicitly towards what 'ought' to be done under situations framed metaphorically, the 'normative leap' resulting from metaphors' naming and framing processes (Schön, 1979: 264–5). As Hirsch and Andrews (1983) have noted in the context of their analysis of the language of corporate takeovers, 'once the roles and relations are assigned, proper procedures and/or proper outcomes can be readily deduced. Sleeping Beauty must be liberated and wed; the shark must be annihilated; the black-hat brought to justice; the honorable soldier must fight doggedly, and so on' (1983: 149).

Metaphors can thus facilitate organizational change by creatively redefining reality for organizational actors and enabling them

as tools of critical analysis, or their deep features can be identified and analyzed in research programs following the structuralist paradigm.

to see familiar situations or actions in a new light; metaphors can help to mediate political conflict by providing mutually acceptable visions of the future; they can make otherwise abstract organizational futures appear more clear and desirable; and they can spur agents to action through their evaluative loading, and their memorable images.

### Conclusions

This paper has highlighted that effective change management is not just about the 'hard' structural aspects of organizations; it requires, rather, an in-depth appreciation of the cultural, human aspects of organizations, and taking actions based on this understanding. Organizational discourse was discussed as a useful way to gain access to the conceptual world of organizations and also as a central avenue that can be used by change agents for influencing it. This suggestion was based on an interpretive perspective which emphasizes that meaning is constructed, sustained and potentially challenged through discursive social interaction, and that discourse is not merely informational, but constructive of social and organizational reality. Recent examples of empirical research were drawn on to clarify the importance of understanding the soft aspects of organizations in the context of organizational change, and the role that discourse can play in this process. Lastly, the use of metaphor by change agents was discussed as a prime example of how discourse can help to achieve effective organizational change.

### Biographical notes

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