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The seven communication reasons organizations do not change

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Abstract

Purpose – Management attempts to transform organizations seldom succeed. This paper aims to describe seven common communication behaviors accompanying those failures.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper integrates material from three recent communication and organizational change studies, recent change theory, and complexity theory to model communication and change processes. All the studies employed traditional ethnographic methods, but one study employed quantitative methods as well as part of a mixed methods design.

Findings – Data describe six common communication behaviors during failed organizational change efforts. The combination of these behaviors suggests a seventh pattern. Communication during failed efforts seldom involves enough communication opportunities, lacks any sense of emerging identification, engenders distrust, and lacks productive humor. These problems are compounded by conflict avoidance and a lack of interpersonal communication skills. Members decouple the system, sheltering the existing culture until it is safe for it to reemerge later.

Research limitations/implications – The integration of data from three studies with theory improves transferability, but more studies would improve the veracity of the results. Only one study employed quantitative data along with qualitative data. Organizational change research may need to employ mixed methods and augment results through simulations to understand time-dependent processes.

Practical implications – Results point to the limitations of management and impersonal communication. Change is a messy business, and transformational change will not happen unless management is willing to tolerate the ambiguity and the sense that emerges in communication. Results also point to the importance of communication skills in hiring practices.

Originality/value – Few essays integrate results from several studies. This paper challenges accepted management practices and extends the growing understanding of the limits of individuals to control social change; it also adds to the literature on and application of complexity theory.

Keywords Communication, Organizational change, Qualitative methods, Complexity theory

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Practitioners and researchers have a continuing interest in communication and change. Organizational change, like all change, is about differences over time (Salem, 1999). There are two orders of change (Watzlawick *et al.*, 1974). First order change comes from simple learning – a continuous incremental process, involving differences in degree as behaviors become more efficient at producing outcomes (Adler, 1967; Argyris, 1992). Second order change consists of altering functions or goals, the reasons for having the behaviors in the first place. Second order change is a product of learning that challenges and alters basic organizational premises (Argyris, 1992) and second order change may appear to be discontinuous or episodic changes of kind (Adler, 1967). Second order



change is transformational change (Hernes, 1976), and the literature on organizational change has focused on accomplishing transformational change. Organizational transformations involve changes in core features such as goals, authority relationships and organizational structure, markets, and technologies (Aldrich and Ruef, 2006; Rao and Singh, 1999).

Management has made efforts to direct discontinuous second order change strategically (Nadler *et al.*, 1995). These strategic initiatives have been successful only about one third of the time (Cameron and Quinn, 1999; Meyer *et al.*, 1995). Enduring improvement appears to be impossible without a change of culture (Cameron and Quinn, 1999, p. 9). Culture is the set of embedded communication practices that distinguishes one group from another. Accomplishing transformational change involves replacing current competencies, routines, and rituals with other stable communication practices. Strategic initiatives whose purpose was to change the organization's culture have succeeded less than 20 percent of the time (Smith, 2002). What this data suggest is that most legitimate systems – the established cultures – are robust and resistant to strategic initiatives. What management intends as transformational change may be integrated into the organization as simple adaptations.

The purpose of this paper is to describe common communication patterns during attempts to direct transformational change. The next section will describe a perspective on organizational change that led to an analysis of qualitative data. The section following the theoretical perspective will describe themes reported in three recent studies related to change. The integration of theory and data point to seven communication patterns explaining how organizational members do not change.

The complexity of organizational change

The study of change in social systems has a long history. In the 1960s, Buckley (1967, 1968) argued that social systems continually experience natural tensions due to the variety in the system's environment, to the variety and behaviors of the members within the system, and to the interaction between external and internal sources. The tension stimulates learning and the regrouping of components or actions. The changes may assist adaptation to various tensions, but they may also lead to goals, states, etc. the system has never experienced (Buckley, 1968). Buckley thought of society as a "complex adaptive system," and he was concerned with how systems developed properties to insure their viability (Buckley, 1967, 1968, 1998). In 1968, Buckley hoped developments in mathematics would soon match the conceptual richness of these ideas.

Advances in non-linear dynamics would appear to be developments Buckley had desired. The two most recent bodies of work concern chaos theory and complexity theory (Holland, 1995; Kauffman, 1993, 1995). Both theories assume system interactions are part of an autocatalytic process. Autocatalytic or self-reinforcing processes have three properties:

- (1) the processes are iterative or repeated;
- (2) the processes are recursive, meaning the outputs for one iteration are the inputs for the next; and
- (3) the processes are multiplicative (i.e. non-linear or non-additive), suggesting that small effects may accumulate or aggregate to have bigger impacts later.

When researchers model processes as autocatalytic, they employ formulas or algorithms with mathematical relationships that reflect these properties.

Weick's sensemaking model describes organizing as a function of such an autocatalytic process. Sense is a function of a cue plus a frame plus a connection between the frame and the cue (Weick, 1995). However, the framing cycle does not occur once. It occurs repeatedly until individuals remove equivocality and make plausible sense (Weick, 1979, 1995, 2001). When individuals communicate, they may make sense together, and so, communication draws attention to the social and cultural aspects of making sense. Sensemaking involves a framing process that may reflect or may change culture. The frames may come from culture, and local sensemaking may accumulate to alter cultural frames. When transformational change occurs, there are changes in cultural frames and communication practices.

The formulas also contain parameters or constants that determine the intensity of properties and, especially, the intensity of the interaction between properties or agents. Organizational researchers generally regard parameters as environmental conditions or as aspects of the strategic course of an organization (Thietart and Forgues, 1995). Common organizational parameters include leadership, the diversity of membership and organizational processes, and the richness of the connectivity between social actors (Stacey, 1996). These are common parameters, and a change in the critical values of these parameters would be necessary to reach a state where transformation was possible. These changes often accompany or are part of changes in core features mentioned in the introduction. Changes in second order parameters are inherent in major strategic initiatives and should produce transformational change. The initiatives, even the changes in second order parameters, have not produced the intended outcomes very often. Mostly, there was no change in the organization's culture.

Chaos and complexity researchers refer to the result of one iteration of an autocatalytic process as a phase and any pattern in a sequence of phases as an attractor. For example, a phase may be the configuration of agents after one iteration, and a repetition in a sequence of configurations would suggest an attractor. The pattern of phases around an attractor is a basin of attraction. Of course, the parameters, parameter values, and nature of the process itself limit what phases are possible. Chaos and complexity researchers refer to the range of all possible outcomes as a phase space. A particular account of a particular event would be comparable to a phase, and a pattern in several accounts would be an attractor (Stacey, 2001, 2003). The various accounts that lead to an organizing theme, the attractor, and the variations in the central theme would be part of a basin of attraction. A universe of discourse would be comparable to a phase space. One way of interpreting the failed efforts at transformational organizational change is to regard these strategic efforts as maintaining or just modifying the old organizing themes within the original universe of discourse.

A bifurcation point is a state of turbulence where second order change may be possible. The system may now move between at least one old basin of attraction and one new one (Polley, 1997). It is a time of great tension between the old and the new, and the system must "choose" its future (Prigogine and Stengers, 1984). Once at a bifurcation point, the system may move to one of five states. First, the old may dominate, and the system may return to the previous stable state. Second, the new may dominate, and the system may move to a new stable state. Third, the system

may maintain a tension and oscillate between two or more states. This pattern may be a relatively stable pattern of oscillation between points, but it may involve so many points in a cycle that it may appear to be unstable. Fourth, the system could pass through many bifurcation points, alternating patterns of stability and instability and leading to evolutionary changes in which one transformation builds on previous ones. A particular bifurcation point may be part of a transformational instability. Finally, the system might have passed through many bifurcation points leading to a continuous unstable pattern. What appears to be random is limited or bounded by the autocatalytic processes. The system's "choice" at a particular bifurcation point depends on the general nature of the system, the history of past "choices," parameters and their values, and the nature of autocatalytic processes. Studying an organization at a bifurcation point would be an excellent way to learn about communication and organizational change.

Stacey (1996) described organizational change as conflict between a legitimate system and a shadow system. In this model, the natural tensions of everyday life drive an informal and emergent structure, the shadow system, and the accumulation of tensions may challenge the already dominant culture and formal structure, the legitimate system. Stacey's description parallels Buckley's (1967) older description of social change involving in- and out-groups. A change in parameter simply speeds the process and movement to one or a succession of bifurcation points.

The complexity of organizational change involves an accumulation of differences. Social actors construct novel behaviors or behaviors repeated with some modifications as part of autocatalytic processes. Some autocatalytic processes encourage greater novelty or modification while others discourage deviation. Various behaviors occur in relatively stable or unstable conditions. The tensions between these behaviors and the conditions are the basis for the relative stability of the social system, the system's structure. Communication patterns may suggest underlying organizing themes, attractors, or there may be permutations around central themes, basins of attraction. The local activities of social actors may disrupt the tension and lead to a state, a bifurcation point, where the system may change its nature. That is, alternative basins of attraction may develop. The localized variety within the system, the shadow system, may naturally accumulate to challenge the established structure and process, the legitimate system. However, there may be some external disruption of parameters that stimulates the shadow system to challenge the legitimate system.

The next section describes three studies providing data for this essay. The remainder of this paper will examine dimensions of organizational discourse, factors in the autocatalytic processes, and the potential basins of attraction that appear to develop. Data suggested seven communication patterns.

Methods

I will use data reported from three recent case studies. The first was a study of the state offices of a government agency in the South Western USA (Salem *et al.*, 2003; Salem, 2004). The agency, GOV, had moved from reporting lines within one larger agency to reporting lines within a different agency, changed the director of the agency (a change of leadership), initiated a re-engineering project, and moved 200 plus state office members to a new building to be closer to its new reporting agency. All these changes occurred within two years, and researchers conducted their study after the

announcement of the change in reporting lines and change of leadership and during the reengineering effort and move. This study occurred at an identifiable bifurcation point. Researchers employed a mixed methods design using both survey and ethnographic techniques. For qualitative methods, they employed stratified random sampling to conduct semi-structured interviews, gathered meaningful documents mentioned in the interviews, and engaged in limited observation of events suggested by the interviews. Researchers used Weick's sensemaking model and complexity theory to interpret and explain their findings, and they used a second set of qualitative data gathered nearly five years later as a negative case. They developed a survey from established instruments and attempted comprehensive samples of the offices three times over the five year period; response rates were often in excess of 80 percent. The quantitative data over five years led to specific questions in the ethnographic interviews at the end of the project.

The second study was at CQ, a 700 member Mid Western US food manufacturer (Sheil and Houser, 2003). In the early 1990s, a new company president changed hiring and retirement practices and moved the company to new buildings. A year later, the president created a senior management team to develop a strategic plan, allocate resources and make executive decisions. He encouraged cross-functional teams, removed several layers of hierarchy to flatten the organization, and developed a separate initiative to hire more women as managers. These first two years would be the most likely time to identify a bifurcation point. Researchers conducted their investigation ten years after the designation of a new president, but their results indicate persistent differences. They employed stratified random sampling to conduct semi-structured interviews, and they used structuration theory to interpret their qualitative data.

The last study was about a nonprofit coalition (Rausch, 2005). The coalition attempted to bring several smaller groups into an *ad hoc* organization. The organization, NNP, was an eight year old organization consisting of five coalitions joining to serve better a small community in the North Western USA. The researcher attempted to interview all the members of the coalition, and the researcher reported preliminary descriptive themes from qualitative data.

Each study employed differing theoretical frames, and although there were some methodological differences, there were similar approaches to gathering qualitative data:

- All studies used semi-structured interviews about communication and change as the primary method of gathering data.
- Although the first two studies used stratified random sampling and the last study attempted a comprehensive sample of participants in a smaller organization, all studies involved more than 20 subjects. For interviews such as these, data normally saturate between 15 and 20 participants. Extending interviews past saturation, a feature of all three studies, improves dependability and confirmability, the qualitative equivalents of reliability and validity (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Miles and Huberman, 1994).
- All three studies supplemented interview data with other data such as quantitative results, analysis of documents, or observation of events to check

interview results. Using alternative data sources is a well-known method of triangulation and improves credibility and validity.

- Finally, the common patterns across the reports highlighted in this paper emerge from reports of different organizations, using different theoretical frames but similar approaches to gathering data.

Such a situation improves transferability, the qualitative equivalent of external validity (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Miles and Huberman, 1994). I did not reanalyze the original data from these studies, but I reviewed the reports looking for commonalities. I then used labels reflecting those commonalities. Most labels were already in one or more of the original reports.

Results: the communication reasons organizations do not change

Insufficient communication

When organizational members communicate during intense change, they will generate organizing themes about uncertainty or a lack of information about specific changes. Uncertainty is an inability to describe, predict, or explain (Salem and Williams, 1984), and complaints of inadequate information are common in organizations (Daniels and Spiker, 1983). However, information is not part of artifacts such as memos, reports, or websites. Organizational members create information and knowledge as they make sense (Salem, 2007; Weick, 1995). Communication is a social process in which individuals can make sense together, and artifacts are only an opportunity for making sense, an opportunity for conversation. Complaints about inadequate information are complaints about the lack of opportunities to make sense together.

Many approaches to change assume management will direct and control the process (Miller and Cardinal, 1994). Often, it is impossible to involve many people in making everyday decisions, and managers or a small group tend to simply “download” decisions to others. Management expects compliance, but this approach fails to gain acceptance or support for routine management decisions or decisions during change processes (Clampitt and Williams, 2007; Robbins and Finely, 1996). Commitment to transformational change will not happen without communication, and lots of it.

Uncertainty, a lack of information, and a sense that there were few opportunities to reduce uncertainty were common themes in all the studies. At GOV, one organizational member commented on the move to a new building:

As far as moving to the building, I had to hear it from somebody else. I feel like my supervisor, since she had all that information, should have held a staff meeting and given us the information right then and there.

At CQ foods, staff had continuing doubts about the senior management team:

People know that [the senior management] is discussing certain issues or topics, and they never hear about what the result is. And the reason they don't hear back is because we don't think it is appropriate to communicate the results. A lot of times people are looking for some formal announcement, and we don't like to do it that way. We want it to kind of trickle out into the organization. It is less disruptive that way.

Organizations fail to change when many people believe they are not getting enough information about the changes. It may be impossible to meet everyone's information needs. However, the need to know more is less disruptive when there are many

opportunities for everyone to make sense of the changes. Without the entire organization participating in conversations about change, transformational change will not occur.

Local identification

When organizational members communicate during periods of intense change, they will generate organizing themes about identification. Self-concept is the organized set of perceptions one has about one's self (Cushman and Cahn, 1985). An aspect of self-concept is self-identity, and the organization of various self perceptions associated with organizational roles constitutes one's organizational identity (Pratt and Foreman, 2000). Describing one's self as female is part of one's self-identity, but describing one's self as a department head is part of one's self-identity and also part of one's organizational identity. A person may have multiple identities (Mead, 1934/1962), and multiple organizational identities (Cheney, 1991). For example, an organizational member may identify one's self by one's professional role, as part of a sub-unit, a unit, a department, a division, the company, or as a worker.

Individuals develop self-perceptions through interaction (Mead, 1934/1962), and organizational identification emerges in the communication members have with each other about each other. There are many ways members' communication works to develop identification (Cheney, 1991; Lammers and Barbour, 2006; Scott, 2007). One avenue during change efforts is to develop a shared vision and another is to involve many in strategic planning processes (Robbins and Finely, 1996; Senge *et al.*, 1999). Change will disrupt organizational identities, and members want to know what they will become and what the unit, division, or organization will become. Without communication that builds global and shared identification, members will resort to the older more local and independent identities.

At GOV, there were several variations of local identity. The most prominent metaphor was of a stepchild. This separated GOV from the larger agency that added GOV. The GOV members also saw themselves as working within separate "compartments":

You just have your different sections, and you have your different bosses in each section. You have your chiefs and all your Indians in different sections and tribes don't cross paths.

This pattern separates one section from another. GOV members had come to identify more with their own units rather than with GOV or the agency that now included GOV. At CQ, researchers identified several areas of dynamic tension and values contradictions about identification. There were problems integrating new members into the existing culture, and many members recognized contradictions in the organization's espoused values regarding family, work socialization, and risk aversion. Here, is a good example of the role ambiguity and role conflict members felt:

I came here because I was told we wanted to be the most innovative food company in the industry. Now the word out of (the management team) is that we want to be a "fast follower." When did the game plan change? Why should I knock myself out if all we're doing is following the industry leaders? I didn't come here to be a fast follower.

New female hires felt these problems most acutely. Many women managers were lured by the promise of an innovative and fast-moving organization but were blindsided by outdated stereotypical perceptions.

At NNP, many members communicated about their inability to define the role of NNP and the roles of their parent organizations in NNP:

I think that [...] the (NNP) bylaws put everything down on paper, it's so nebulous. It's really hard to understand who we are – what we are supposed to be doing. So, if someone else walks in and takes a look at it, they say “wait – this doesn't make any sense. What power do you have? What are you supposed to be doing?”.

The researcher classified this data as part of an “Amorphousness” organizing theme. All examples illustrated language use and communication between members about each other during change. These examples are instances of how members bracketed change. There were instances of metaphors and accounts that reinforced older patterns or rejected newer ones. The members had not learned how to communicate about a new global identity.

Global distrust

During periods of intense change, organizational members will communicate about trust. Trust is an expectation, assumption, or belief of positive or non-negative outcomes that one can receive from another person's future actions during uncertainty (Bhattacharya *et al.*, 1998). Uncertainty implies vulnerability, and most contemporary definitions of trust include some belief in the positive intentions, behavior, or outcomes of another (Rousseau *et al.*, 1998). Distrust is characterized by fear, skepticism, cynicism, and wariness (Lewicki *et al.*, 1998). Mistrust, undefined in the literature, would be an inability to predict the value of engaging with another.

When organizational members distrust the agents of change or each other, strategic initiatives fail. Employees often distrust management during periods of planned change. A common way for members to express this distrust is to discuss organizational politics and the distrust members feel about how management might distribute resources.

At NNP, members displayed trust as part of the themes of “collaboration” and “providing resources.” An NNP member noted:

I think we really do see the benefits of having people work together. Collaboration takes us miles, and the networking that goes on there. You know there are a lot of new people coming in or out of the services field and it's a nice way to get to meet those people in one stop and interact with them and get their ideas, and I've always felt like you get more when you are working in a group.

These themes may be separate trust themes, but they may also be variations on the same theme –members trust each other.

At GOV, distrust was at the center of a basin of attraction containing three attributions about the politics associated with this organizing theme. The first account was “Information is power.” A second account was “It's just politics.” A final variation was the account that “Decisions are based on favoritism”:

Everybody has a favorite. If you ask the staff, every manager has people who are favorites, and for whom they do more, or they have people for whom they do less. Oh yes, I think you'll hear it from everybody.

Researchers at CQ did not identify a theme directly related to trust, but many of their examples were of distrust and political activities. These examples were part of their

explanations of the tensions in agency, reflexivity, and duality of structure. The tension emerged from the differences between what managers said and did. One example is as follows:

Everybody sort of licks their fingers and holds them up to see which way the political wind is blowing. It comes down to whatever senior management wants. And I'm fine with that. I just wish they would stop telling us they want our input and commitment. All they really want is for us to do what they think is best, but they want us to think it's our idea. I'd rather it just be like the old days. "Just tell me what I'm supposed to do." I think we'd get a lot more done faster if we just stopped pretending to be inclusive and innovative.

Similar to GOV, CQ members were organizing their comments around the theme of distrust of management.

The two studies of larger organizations experiencing intense change suggest distrust organizing themes. In both cases, management or outside forces (e.g. legislative mandates on GOV) imposed the changes on members. Members might have communicated trust and support if changes had emerged from within the membership. However, any themes associated with politics would automatically be about distrust.

Lack of productive humor

Humorous communication increases during intense organizational change. Humor is a form of communication that promotes laughter from discordant meanings or relationships (Duncan, 1982). Humorous communication works as a reframing mechanism (Wendt, 1998), and humor can be a norm and value as part of the culture (Trice and Beyer, 1993). Humor can be productive in the workplace by bringing social actors closer together, reducing stress, managing paradox, and building cohesiveness, but it can also be negative by being self-defeating, derisive, or part of anger (Geddes and Callister, 2007; Malone, 1980; Martin *et al.*, 1993, 2003; McPherson, 2005; Romero and Cruthirds, 2006; Stacey, 1996). Organizational members can encourage or discourage change by how they use humor.

The most vivid examples of humor during change come from GOV. One instance involved the manager of a section serving on a reengineering team. The manager was rarely in the office due to the team meetings. The manager was also an avid birdwatcher, and the manager's workers knew that birdwatchers keep logs of their bird sightings. The employees posted a log of manager sightings on the manager's door as a way of saying they missed him. Another example involved an employee creating a "Bullshit Ribbon." The ribbon was comparable to ribbons people wear commemorating AIDS awareness, victims of breast cancer, or other noble causes. The employee's ribbon was brown, and he wore it to meetings as a humorous protest.

GOV researchers regarded these instances as positive humor reducing tension at GOV. There was no evidence of humor in the CV data, and humor was not a theme in NNP data, although the subjects were lighthearted. There were no reported instances of unproductive humor, and the data only suggest that a lack of productive humor would be a reason organizations do not change.

Poor interpersonal communication skills

The level of interpersonal communication skill will affect the direction of organizational change. Communication competence is an ability to accomplish goals with appropriate communication behaviors (Spitzberg and Cupbach, 1984).

Appropriateness refers to meeting the normative expectations of others in the social situation as well as using those behaviors most appropriate for the task at hand. Competence requires the performance of various communication skills and the perception of others that the performance was appropriate.

Three skills appear on most lists of communication skills related to competence. Responsiveness refers to those behaviors that attempt to understand the other and to communicate that understanding. These include verbal behaviors such as paraphrasing, validating, and asking questions and nonverbal behaviors such as head nods, vocal encouragers, and back channeling. Openness refers to those behaviors an actor employs to improve the other's understanding of the actor. Behaviors such as using personal language, being specific about experiences and feelings, and self disclosure may be part of openness. Flexibility is the ability to change communication behaviors in different situations. Being flexible means adjusting to different goals, tasks, people, and situations, and the competent communicator makes these adjustments in an appropriate way. There are alternative expressions for these skills (Cushman and Cahn, 1985; Duran, 1983; Monge *et al.*, 1982; Spitzberg and Cupbach, 1984).

The best evidence for the importance of communication skills comes from the quantitative data at GOV (Salem, 2004). Researchers used standard scales with norms. GOV employees described themselves as low to very low on openness and responsiveness across the entire five year period. In the qualitative data, they described themselves as friendly on non-organizational matters or topics unrelated to the changes. When asked about the low ratings, GOV employees confirmed their generally low opinion of each other's skills and of managers' skills.

At CQ, employees highlighted skill deficiencies when describing how long it took an upper management team to make decisions. The following observation demonstrates problems with all three basic skills:

You know, if you take three months to make a decision, people will talk and they will call you the "black hole." It's funny because when the senior management team wants something, they want it yesterday. We have to drop everything we're doing and get them research, but when we want to know where a project stands, senior management closes ranks and says nothing.

When members lack communication skills, communicating about change will be more difficult. Members will have difficulty making sense of change, feel greater uncertainty, identify less with the organization and its changes, and distrust others more.

Conflict avoidance

Intense change is a turbulent time, and the likelihood for conflict increases. Conflict is an expressed struggle over perceived differences (Folger *et al.*, 2005). Individuals manage conflict in one of three general ways. Avoidance means never having to confront differences directly. Competitive tactics involve direct confrontations but may vary from argument about positions and ideas, to bids and counter offers, to verbal aggression and even violence. Integrative communication involves creating common goals, offering to help each other achieve individual goals, brainstorming to develop action plans, and creating common systems of accountability. People perceive integrative conflict communication as competent, competitive or controlling strategies as effective but inappropriate, and avoidant strategies as least competent (Gross *et al.*, 2004).

In a time of intense organizational change, confronting differences is important. Conflict should exhibit a clash between newer conversational themes and older ones. Such conversations provide an opportunity to test strategic initiatives against older assumptions and expectations, and these conversations are the means for constructing emerging alternative identities, relationships, accounts, routines, and values (Griffin, 2002; Shaw, 2002). Members contrast emerging communication practices with older ones.

One of the curious findings in the GOV quantitative data was that conflict avoidance was positively correlated to coworker, supervisor, and organizational relational perceptions. This is the opposite of most organizational data about conflict avoidance. This positive correlation at GOV persisted over the five years with three different sets of data using different measures of avoidance. When asked about this pattern in the final qualitative interviews, the members described how they relied on immediate supervisors to manage local differences rather than working the differences out between themselves. They also felt that they had no choice but to make the best of the changes rather than voicing their own opinions.

At CQ, the workers had reached a point of resignation. Most regarded participation on teams as a waste of their time, and numerous new hires felt marginalized. Many employees felt a lack of autonomy, and the risks for confrontation were greater than the rewards for integration.

At NNP, collaboration and integration were prominent:

The very fact [...] we were working [...] (with) 59 different programs and [...] (we) did not have any transportation and without that communication between [...] agencies we wouldn't know that we were duplicating services [...] (One) poor person was scheduled to death and had 59 case workers and because of the efforts and our abilities to talk with one another, we can say, "Oh! We can take care of that." That is not unlike what we can do with all community efforts.

The non-profit had established a norm for mutuality, and most members expected to confront differences productively.

An inappropriate mix of loose and tight coupling

Getting to a bifurcation point capable of producing transformational change involves an accumulation of differences and a natural loose coupling of current behaviors. But when the system moves to a transformed state, it exhibits tighter coupling and the emergence of order from disorder. The development of some hierarchy of activity is common when systems emerge from transformational phase transitions such as the bifurcation points far from equilibrium (Barabasi, 2002). Decentralized structures may be best at initiating innovation and change, but there must be some centralization to implement (Rogers, 1995). The combination of factors noted above suggests organizational members may resist transformational change by loosening the couplings between each other as they cope with the initial disruptions of change and failing to construct tighter couplings as part of moving to a different set of routines and rituals.

Organizational members can decouple their system in three ways (Kingdon, 1973):

- (1) Fragmentation is a process of decoupling goals. Fragmentation is a process of emphasizing local or individual goals at the expense of organizational wide

goals, and fragmentation is the last type of decoupling to occur. There was little evidence of this in any of the studies, but goals were not an issue in any of the organizations.

- (2) Dissociation is a process of decoupling horizontal units. There was evidence of dissociation in the tendencies to localize identities. Members identified with their local units and had little appreciation for other units or the whole.
- (3) Segmentation is a process of decoupling vertically. The evidence for segmentation is the global distrust, primarily of management. The distrust plays a role in the tendency to avoid conflict. Organizations experiencing dissociation and segmentation will have a difficult time accomplishing a unified effort.

Sustaining transformational change involves the proper mix of loose and tight coupling. GOV absorbed the various changes over five years, and the legislature recently “broke up” GOV but left parts in place as part of newer agency. Since most the former units of GOV must continue to communicate with each other as they complete their legal responsibilities, the members of the units continue to maintain old contacts and relationships despite where they find themselves in the bureaucracy. NNP disbanded before the researcher presented the final report. Although the loose confederation created trusting relationships and a climate of collaboration, it was difficult to maintain coordinated efforts except in some minor functions. CQ still exists, but the tensions of the ten year old changes remain.

Discussion

This essay sought to identify communication patterns explaining how organizations do not change. The essay began with a description of change from complexity theory and then followed by identifying patterns in the data from one to three recent studies. Communication during failed change efforts seldom involves enough communication opportunities, lacks any sense of emerging identification, engenders distrust, and lacks productive humor. These problems are compounded by conflict avoidance and a lack of interpersonal communication skills. Members’ communication decouples the system, sheltering the existing culture until it is safe for it to re-emerge later. No change in the intended direction is likely.

Comparing the results from three studies and comparing the results to the literature suggested the seven patterns summarized in the last paragraph. There are data and theories to support the conclusions in this paper. There may be other potential communication reasons, but these seven are a start.

It is difficult to gather data about social change. Qualitative approaches provide rich data, but the veracity of such data is suspect because it takes so long to gather and analyze. It was fortunate that the three studies in this report were comparable in some ways. Quantitative methods provide greater precision and quicker results with a loss in richness. The results may be significant but meaningless. Mixed designs are another approach, but such methods still take time.

Fundamental problems with any social change research include how to bracket time and how to explain differences over intervals. Investigating one case can only result in credible explanations limited to that case. Linking explanations from one case to other cases improves matters but can only lead to limited propositions similar to those

made here. Agar (2004) suggested anthropologists could not claim validity for their work unless they could demonstrate findings with a simulation. For an organizational researcher, this would mean gathering data, making conclusions, and demonstrating the transferability or generalizability of conclusions through a simulation. Simulations range from traditional mathematical models to agent modeling, and different simulations are more appropriate for demonstrating different conclusions (Gilbert and Troitzsch, 2005).

Results from this research point to the limitations of management communication and impersonal communication. Much of management literature assumes an exclusive place for management, as if managers were not a part of the organizations they manage. There is also the tendency to associate communication with the production of a message, as if finding the right words in the announced change would automatically bring commitment to the changes. Changing an organization's culture is a task in and of itself, a task in addition to the tasks already going on as part of the routine business of an organization. Changing the communication practices of organizational members involves a give-and-take in which the change agents might change. Change is a messy business, and transformational change will not happen unless management is willing to tolerate the ambiguity and the sense that emerges in communication.

Results also reinforce the importance of communication skills in hiring practices. Communication occurs when two or more people in a social relationship create messages to make sense of the episodes they are creating. The process is inherently interpersonal. Hiring people with basic communication skills and training people in these skills not only improves the chances for sustaining a vibrant organization, but it also assists people in the rest of their lives as well.

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