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Utterance as a tool for change agents: implications based on Bakhtin

Utterance as a
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Abstract

Purpose – This paper proposes a perspective of change agency that builds on the regenerative power of language achieved through ongoing talk and conversations associated with managing change. It seeks to elaborate on the role of speech in helping one to see change as a continuous stream of socially constructed utterances.

Design/methodology/approach – Configurations have played a central role in determining the extent of fit or misfit between entities – a prelude for steering change and modes of intervention. Much of the reliance on the notion of fit or misfit between entities has been largely driven by conceptions of organizations as consisting of objective entities. But change is not separate from its own construction; conduct of change is deeply rooted in meanings people attach to events. The paper develops a constructionist perspective of change agency; one that builds on the role of language in constructing change.

Findings – The social construction of meaning remains crucial for building connections with organizational identity. The main finding is that there is a very rich meeting point where both language and social construction converge to find each other. For change to take root, change agents would need to emphasize the social co-construction of meaning and to focus on the role utterance plays in the formation of organizational identity.

Originality/value – The paper develops a constructionist perspective of change agency (regenerative and transforming qualities); one that builds on the role of language in constructing change.

Keywords Change management, Language, Social structure, Corporate identity

Paper type Research paper

Organization development and change interventions efforts are often launched after taking into account the extent of fit/misfit within an organizational configuration. An organizational configuration consists of organization-wide entities, including the environment, organization strategy, organization structure, and culture. Change agents and other consultants use the notion of organizational configuration for analyzing the extent of fit/misfit for the purpose of implicating the case for change and creating readiness for change effort to be launched. A basic assumption is that every entity in the configuration is viewed as dependent on the state of the other entity (Miller, 1987; Weisbord, 1992). The extent of misfit (lack of congruence) between entities is used for justifying the case for change, namely altering structural and/or process variables for the purpose of correcting the state of fit and with the ultimate purpose of enhancing the prospects of organizational development.

Configurations depicting interrelationships between strategy, structure, and culture have been classified in terms of typologies (Miller, 1987) and as the hardware-strategy



and structure – while others were viewed as the software for control (Pinder and Moore, 1979). For example, consultant Marvin Weisbord (1992) designs interventions to help organizational stakeholders probe the fit or misfit between structure, strategy, and culture. This is a common definition of configuration – every entity is bounded by every other entity. There is, however, a more systemic level that consultants are missing. The missing link is the focus on language relationships with change participants, rather than mere relationships between entities.

The research contribution this paper makes is twofold. First, it calls for the need to re-examine the assumptions we use in our conduct of organization development and other change efforts. Such a call involves the point that it would be of benefit to de-reify constructs, such as strategy and structure, by breaking up the habit of “naturalizing” them – that is by bringing them back to their own immediate context and social practices. Second, it builds on the regenerative power of language and its transforming qualities of change achieved through speech. For change to take roots, change agents would need to emphasize the social co-construction of meaning and to focus on the role language plays in the formation of organizational identity. At the same time it argues that while change agents focus on configurations (claiming to enhance fit): the more socially involved construction of meaning remains crucial.

This paper starts by presenting a brief account of the apparently most popular, or the most frequently used mode, namely that of the notion of organizational configuration (Miller, 1987; Mintzberg, 1983). Organizational configuration plays a central role in determining the extent of fit or misfit between entities as a prelude for steering change and modes of intervention. Section one elaborates on the role of speech as a continuous stream of utterances achieved through talk within discursive forms of communication. Section two develops a perspective of change agency (regenerative and transforming qualities); one that builds on the social construction of change. Section three elucidates some of the important tenets of social construction and its relationships with the formation of organizational identity.

Language: a conventional notion

Historically, numerous conceptions of configurations have been proposed. Diagrammatic representations, such as those of the McKinsey 7-S diagram (Peters and Waterman, 1982; Weisbord, 1992) have influenced the ways with which change agents go about initiating their interventions. Much of the practice has been largely driven by modes of thinking that are largely driven by conceptions of organizations as consisting of objective entities where the social construction of change is rarely given attention. But change is not separate from its own construction; conduct of change is deeply rooted in meanings people attach to events. Change agents following the naturalistic mode for the conduct of change take note of the change recipients making suggestions and asking questions, but they remain notably indifferent toward language.

The widespread reliance on the naturalistic mode for the conduct of agency prompts us to contemplate the role of language in the way change efforts are often pursued. Ferdinand de Saussure (1983), one of the founders of modern linguistic analysis, suggested that the study of language should be separated from our conception of speech. In line with de Saussure, all meanings are created inside language. A sign is the basic unit of language and so language consists of a complete system of signs. For

example, what strategy actually means is largely instituted and codified – based on societal convention. Thus, the idea of “strategy” is seen as having its own sign needed to signify sameness in its meaning across organizations. The separation of *langue* from speech meant that the notion of language would need to be approached as a social institution.

However, the problem with viewing language primarily as a social institution system of the word is that it invests *langue* with powers whereby meaning is held in place. Here, we need to be aware of the social opposition between an institution of the word as a code (*langue*) and the concrete act of speech (*parole*). Change management/agency has long embraced de Saussure’s (1983) approach in structuring language as an independent system of signs – a system in which each sign reflects a ready-made code (e.g. strategy, *per se*) and signifies a definite concept having its own standing, thus rendering constructs as fixed and enduring (Jabri *et al.*, 2008). There is an important consequence which results from the adoption of the word as a social institution.

Reliance on reification of entities exemplifies hidden conceptions of the organization whereby emphasis is placed on the use of the “word” as a code-making reference to the organization as if organizations are real linguistic entities. For example, the notion that strategy has its own formal (instituted) sign is resulting in a distortion of how strategy comes to obtain its meaning through discursive communication with social “others”, including change recipients at more than one level. With the emphasis on the word as a social institution (language represents reality), change agents (with or without awareness) become enticed to the habit of reifying an organizational construct, such as strategy. Hence, change agents become more captivated by building the case for change through use of objective analysis and expecting that change recipients would be able relate themselves to strategy as something that is largely given, hence concealing the more productive issues associated with the creative capacity of utterances.

Reliance on language as a code is often felt by the change recipients as they come to see the reason for the change, but not in terms of their own social languages, experiences, and meaning. This presents itself in intimations from change recipients that they have understood the reason for the organization to change, say through merger or reengineering, but fail to see as to why they themselves would need to embrace the change effort. When uttered by the change recipients, such hints are often made to pass as unnoticed. However, if and when they are noticed, change agents react to these concerns by rejuvenating organizational objectivity (configurations) and by bringing in more empirical evidence to bear on diagnosis.

Change agents often forget who will, in fact, be the one bearing the load of having to cope and manage change. They tend to treat change recipients as dispassionate external recipients. Why does this occur? Change agents have been socialized to the habit of reifying organizational constructs. Pondy (1980) has drawn attention to the habit of reification. Reification, which is the anticipation of organizations as if they were something other than participant’s products (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Burrell and Morgan, 1979), remains too frequent. Reification, according to Pondy (1980), means that change agents tend to form habit of reifying change plans. Reification involves seeing and talking about a construct, such as strategy, as if it is something that objectively stands out as an object that is external to the self and social others

(Schwandt, 1998). All this replaces the “world of organizational reality” by a relatively stable set of attributes having an identity of its own. The conventional understanding that language represents reality prompts us to search for a mode or an approach to change agency that takes into account individual meaning and freedom. There is a potential for change agents to lose an important base of knowledge if the inherent assumptions associated with a seemingly “objective” mode are not brought out into the open or made explicit or discussed (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2000).

The next section adopts a stance involving use of transgression (transposition) of utterances between change agents and organization members (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Boje, 2001; Ford and Ford, 1995; Gergen, 1994; Jabri, 2004). The proposed approach is of significance to change agents in their efforts to enact joint efforts between members through sense-making (Weick, 1995), and in the quest to understand transgressions of suggestions and other utterances (texts) as they are simultaneously constituted and interpreted.

Social co-construction of agency

At the heart of social construction is the notion that change is socially constituted (i.e. change activities are agreed on discursively). Gioia (2003, p. 278 notes that “the reality people confront is the reality they construe”. These realities are enacted (interpreted, perceived and negotiated) through social interaction (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). From a social construction perspective, the style of socially constructing change begins from the individual, but from the individual as an autonomous being, who is in search of postulates, rather than the individual as a passive subject who is a mere receptor of the pre-given meaning (Heidegger, 1962). For example, a change recipient is able to speak of culture in ways that would resonate with his or her own work experiences – it becomes the basis for relating the notion of culture down to the personal (concrete) level of experience. It is here where the notion of organizational culture becomes that of a “personal” construct that obtains its meaning through inhabitation and experiences of the person.

Gergen (1994, p. 49) notes that “the terms and forms by which we achieve understanding of the world and ourselves are social artefacts, products of historically and culturally situated interchanges among people”. (Gergen, 1994, p. 264) draws our attention to the point that “It is human interchange that gives language its capacity to mean, and it must stand as the critical locus of concern”. Even though emphasis is placed on meaning-making, social construction does not pledge any sort of truth. That is because an understanding of an entity, such as that of structure, is always seen to occur within an interpretive framework. Each of the entities is seen as structured by meanings achieved through discursive interaction.

Through utterances, organization members come to make sense of change as they recall stories from the past and juxtapose them in the present. Based on the change situation, change recipients come to inhabit their own co-construction. Such co-construction gives way to talk and on-going streams of suggestions and conversations of what the change is, has been, and could be. Meaning is obtained through a “stretch of talk” as the exchange with other change participants takes place. Through conversations with others, the people are enabled to co-construct their own conceptions and be able to relate these conceptions through “joint action” (Shotter, 1998).

Conversations play an important role in giving meaning to the connection between people and organizational identity. Haslam (2001) and Haslam and Ellemers (2005) replaced the univocal tendency of “who we are”, with a way of thinking organizational identity where utterances are discursively seen in relation each other – a process of perpetual change able to take into account contextual features and attributes that lie on the borderline between one authoritative or cultural view of the organization “who we are” and another more persuasive view of “who we should be”, hence building on connections between people by continuously recasting their ideas of what the organization should be.

In an interpretive study of changes in identity focusing on divergent understandings of senior managers and two distinct cohorts of subordinates in a post-merger situation, Brown and Humphreys (2003) showcased how narrations of senior managers and the two cohorts are influenced by psychological processes (e.g. uncertainty reduction) as well as members’ understandings of their organizational identity and the way with which organizational identity is encoded in narratives, and shared in conversations.

Another related stream sees organizational identities as dynamically shaped by everyday use of language in explaining changes in organizational identities (Fiol, 2002) and the growing body of literature on the social construction of identity (Ford, 1999; Glynn, 1998; Harrison, 2000; Holmer-Nadeson, 1996; Jabri, 2004). A recent contribution by Beech (2008) showed how identities can travel through “dialogue” and the nature of dialogic identity. Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003, p. 1164) have noted that language shows itself clearly in identity struggles as discourses about the transitory sense of “who are we” – and that organizational identity is subject to change during conversations.

Connections between conversations and organizational identity

Through conversations, attributes and features get disseminated among multiple actors at more than one level (Taylor *et al.*, 1996). Organizational identity emerges as a discursive interpretation, thus giving way to other more persuasive utterances – some of which may or may not be in line with the prevailing centripetal tendency exhibited through an authoritative utterance where certain values are preferred over others.

Bakhtin (1986) argues that collective identities tend towards stability but they do change in the course of speaking – with meaning carried over from one word to another. Bakhtin (1984, p. 202) noted that “When a member of a speaking collective comes on a word, it is not as a neutral word of language, not as a word free from the aspirations and evaluations of others, uninhabited by others’ voices.” Applied to organizational identity change recipients come to hear of an attribute from another’s voice and filled with that other voice. The attribute and what it entails enters the context from another context, permeated with the interpretation of others.

Change is, therefore, conditional on the existence of a polyphonic process of exchanging utterances, hence dependent on the unpacking of a complex unity of differences – one centrifugal (internally persuasive utterances that disturb the status quo (present state), tending to flee existing ways of identifying or seeing the organization) and the other centripetal (authoritative utterances that unify, tending towards the centrality of the existing state: deviation-counteracting). A centripetal utterance thus tends towards a uniformity of attributes and features as these are being

experienced in the present state. It emphasizes the status quo, sameness, and evenness between organizational members – effectively reducing organizational identity to the familiar. In contrast, a centrifugal utterance is committed to “being with” change and contestation. For example, an utterance calling for a greater level of autonomy is an example of a centrifugal utterance pushing for members to have greater leeway or opportunity to manage their own initiatives.

Jabri (2004, p. 567) has also shown that organizational identities are not immune from the impact of “dialogic” social construction of attributes an organization might come to have. The constructions often occur as conversations are discursively stretched, hence enabling people to become conscious of themselves. It is only when change agents, conscious of themselves, conscious of their diagnosis and interventions *vis-à-vis* the views of others that an enriched meaning is given to change. This state of consciousness comes through speech. Bakhtin (1981) spoke of the importance of taking into account the views of the projective character of what others are saying, which he insisted is primarily a search for “double-voicedness” (or transgression).

Transgression

That is where the change agent can “cross-over” to change recipients. Each takes an element of the other, and each comes to illuminate the views of the other. For example, the fact that a change agent is “outside” a work situation means that the change agent can narrate things about change recipients that they cannot see. Also, the fact that change recipients are “outside” the change agent means that they can narrate things about the “becomingness” of change that the change agent cannot see. Here we have a phenomenon of being “outside” the other and yet being able to “commute” elements of one’s own situation to social others. Here we have a “surplus of insight” which is of significance to the conduct of change. Such “surplus” is obtained from seeing knowledge of change being obtained through the transgressions of utterances that are simultaneously constituted and achieved through seeing what the other cannot see.

As a concept for change, change agents stand to benefit from embracing utterances and their surplus. All this provides more opportunities for learning and re-learning to occur. Such learning is about a “surplus of seeing” – a sort of capability which manifests itself through social construction, by which diagnosis and issues associated with interventions are enriched by insights being brought to bear from more than one angle. A “surplus of seeing” develops in a back-and-forth manner within a “stretch of talk” as people exchange utterances and as words are transposed among con-texts and situations. A “surplus of seeing”, along these lines of thinking, is instrumental in the social co-construction of change (Jabri, 2005). Change is constructed through conversations (Ford and Ford, 1995). Change communication is about social co-construction and multiple points of view (polyphonic). Harris (1997, p. 144) captured the rationale of why change managed through an awareness of how speech could impact co-construction of meaning. A change agent can help know himself or herself better. The truth lies not in any particular point of view but in the dialogue between the change agent and the change recipients, including those who may have been “othered”, or suppressed, by the change effort. In order to listen to their point of view, a change agent does not have to abandon her or his point of view. But the mere act of exchanging utterances could help surpass important limitations and conceptions. If understanding is what we are after, then an

awareness of the importance of the role of the “Other” change recipient becomes essential for getting change to take roots – we cannot change our views till we come to know of the view of others. Our views remain temporary and tentative until we can recognize that other views are possible.

Discussion

The distinction between naturalism and the social construction of change has very important implications. Following the naturalist mode, change agents maintain that entities such as structure can be objectified and measured and change can proceed on the basis of fit/misfit between entities. Following the social construction approach, change agents maintain that an entity can be understood only through interpretation and that conversations have a role to play in producing intentional change (Ford and Ford, 1995). The reality of the configuration, in this view, is not seen as an objective entity to be broken down and measured through correlation approaches but as a socially constructed reality to be jointly explored and interpreted (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Shotter, 1998).

This paper argued for a social construction perspective of change agency (regenerative and transforming qualities); one that builds on regenerative power of speech and its transforming qualities through the social construction of entities impacting on the change effort. It called for the need to re-examine the assumptions we use in our conduct of change efforts. Such a call involves the point that it would be of benefit to encourage the effort to de-reify constructs by breaking up the habit of “naturalizing” constructs.

Change agents would need to work through the social experiences of the persons undergoing the change effort. This means that experiences in their varied forms have to be recovered critically in order to reveal their socially constructive meaning. Change agents could make these experiences the object of dialogue; it means legitimating such experiences and providing change participants with the opportunity to trust their own co-construction.

The naturalistic conception may be characterized as problem-solving oriented. Here, the change agent uses perceptual and/or objective measures in order to fully justify the case for change. The change agent analyses the objective reality into component parts to reach some conclusion on what determines fit/misfit between entities, such as structure or technology. This is achieved by breaking down the configuration into entities or variables in the hope that this would help in the development of an intervention plan for the re-alignment of entities. With all the above, the assumption is made, explicitly or implicitly, that entities are certain and immutable with the possibility of replication.

The social construction conception may be characterized as problematizing change through others – one that emphasizes change achieved through conversations, rather than mere problem-solving through objective measures and the conscious alignments of entities. “Problematizing” involves using conversations with change participants in an attempt to de-reify constructs. It is based on on-going talk – an iterative process of going back and forth from how an entity has been affecting the individual, how the individual sees the impact on structure. A change in structure could easily go unnoticed as the individual who has been affected by change no longer feels committed to voice his or her concern. Moving from part to whole and from whole to part is not

sufficient unless an attempt is made to reach out questioning, redefining, or buttressing key themes and patterns (Kets de Vries and Miller, 1987; Thatchenkery, 1992).

A broad interpretation of the social construction of change places emphasis on communication. Spending time getting people to understand the problem is one important step, but this is insufficient unless it is accompanied by an equal willingness to spend time in altering the relations between people. The paper challenges change agents to understand people as irreducibly social beings, to focus change on conversations, and to embrace the notion that meaning is generated collectively. Focusing on the social construction of change through communication can be far reaching. It influences not only how we think and feel about ourselves, but also how we relate to others.

For change agents, communication would benefit from a new emphasis where “truth” is seen to hold not in any particular point of view, but in the dialogue between points of view. Dialogue could become a new focus for the management of change where the relational nature of change is emphasized and sustained through enhanced forms of interchange out of which meaningful action is made possible (Anderson, 1997; McNamee and Gergen and Associates, 1999; Spreitzer and Quinn, 1996). What is required is the creation of opportunities for people to discuss the progress of negotiated relations – what is happening, what is not happening, and what is likely to happen.

Utterances create opportunities for shared understanding of the word. Organizational change is actually driven by the richness of the word and the way with which the word is made meaningful as a practice to be adopted and shared. As Gibran (1923, p. 112) notes: “And what is the word without its shadow of knowledge?”. Such a view encapsulates the central theme of the paper – that the challenge for change agents is to work through utterance of the word and the way with which words are made meaningful through conversations. A change that is led through word knowledge is a change that is more likely to take roots.

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