



Resistance and the background conversations of change

Resistance and
background
conversations

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Abstract *Resistance to change has generally been understood as a result of personal experiences and assessments about the reliability of others. Accordingly, attempts are made to alter these factors in order to win support and overcome resistance. But this understanding ignores resistance as a socially constructed reality in which people are responding more to the background conversations in which the change is being initiated than to the change itself. This paper proposes that resistance to change is a function of the ongoing background conversations that are being spoken and which create the context for both the change initiative and the responses to it. In this context, resistance is not a personal phenomenon, but a social systemic one in which resistance is maintained by the background conversations of the organization. Successfully dealing with this source of resistance requires distinguishing the background conversations and completing the past.*

Why is there resistance to change in organizations? An overview of the literature reveals that resistance occurs because it threatens the *status quo* (Beer, 1980; Hannan and Freeman, 1988; Spector, 1989), or increases fear and the anxiety of real or imagined consequences (Morris and Raben, 1995; Smith and Berg, 1987) including threats to personal security (Bryant, 1989) and confidence in an ability to perform (Morris and Raben, 1995; O'Toole, 1995). Change may also be resisted because it threatens the way people make sense of the world, calling into question their values and rationality (Ledford *et al.*, 1989), and prompting some form of self justification (Staw, 1981) or defensive reasoning (Argyris, 1990). Or, resistance may occur when people distrust or have past resentments toward those leading change (Block, 1993; Bridges, 1980; Bryant, 1989; Ends and Page, 1977; O'Toole, 1995), when they have different understandings or assessments of the situation (Morris and Raben, 1995), or are protecting established social relations that are perceived to be threatened (O'Toole, 1995).

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When taken as a whole, much of the literature on resistance to change takes a modernist perspective in which it is assumed that everyone shares the same objective and homogeneous reality. In other words, all participants to a change initiative encounter not only the same initiative, but they do so within the same context. Given this assumption, differences in participant responses (e.g. resistance) must reflect either misunderstandings about the change, or individual characteristics and attributes that are “in the way” of the change. Indeed, the literature on organizational development and change is replete with research on how individual differences influence responses to and experiences of the “same” change. Accordingly, resistance is objectified as a socio-psychological phenomenon that exists “over there” “in the individual”[1] (Dent and Goldberg, 1999). Successfully dealing with resistance, therefore, ultimately depends on an ability to represent accurately and describe the source of resistance “in the individual” and to choose and implement strategies appropriate for addressing and overcoming that source.

But what if we take a postmodernist, constructivist perspective in which there is no homogeneous reality that is everywhere the same for everyone? What if resistance is not a “thing” or a characteristic of an objective reality found “over there” “in the individual”, but is a function of the constructed reality in which people live? In constructivist and postmodern perspectives, the reality we know is interpreted, constructed, or enacted through social interactions (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Watzlawick, 1984; Weick, 1979). Within this view, it is not possible for participants to know any “true” reality independent of themselves, meaning that “different people in different positions at different moments live in different realities” (Shotter, 1993, p. 17).

Resistance, therefore, is not to be found “in the individual” but in the constructed reality in which individuals operate. And, since different constructed realities differ not only in their outcomes, but also in the kind of talk with which they are conducted and maintained, participants in different constructed realities will have a different sense of themselves and their worlds. As a result, they will engage in different actions, and give different forms of resistance, which depend on the reality in which they live.

We propose that resistance is a function of the socially constructed reality in which someone lives, and that depending on the nature of that constructed reality, the form of resistance to change will vary. Since constructed realities provide the context in which people act and interact, the nature of these realities establishes the opportunities for action, how people will see the world, what actions to take, etc. Accordingly, change, and resistance to it, is a function of the constructed reality; it is the nature of this reality that gives resistance its particular form, mood, and flavor.

This paper seeks to relocate resistance as a response to a change initiative that is a product of the background conversations that constitute the constructed reality in which participants live, rather than existing as some “true” reality found in an individual or their external conditions. As such, resistance is a systemic and public phenomenon found in the conversations

(interactions) in which people engage (Dent and Goldberg, 1999). Specifically, we propose that resistance is a socially constructed reality, constructed in, through, and by three different types of conversations that source and engender resistance to change, and that each one generates distinctly different experiences and relations to change. These three types of conversations are conversations for complacency, resignation, and cynicism and are chosen because of their historic appearance in the literature of change[2].

Conversations: constructed reality's processes and products

The realities we know as “organizations”, “change”, and “resistance” come to exist in the process of conversations and discourses that constitute those realities. At the most basic level, conversations are “what is said and listened to” between people (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). A broader view of conversations as “a complex, information-rich mix of auditory, visual, olfactory and tactile events” (Cappella and Street, 1985), includes not only what is spoken, but the full conversational apparatus of symbols, artifacts, theatrics, etc. that are used in conjunction with or as substitutes for what is spoken (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). The speaking and listening that goes on between and among people and their many forms of expression in talking, singing, dancing, etc. may all be understood as “conversation”.

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

Although conversations exist as explicit utterances, much of the way they support the apparent continuity of a reality is by virtue of the intertextual links on which current explicit conversations build and rely. Through their intertextuality (Spivey, 1997), conversations bring both history and background into the present utterance by responding to, reaccentuating, and reworking past conversations while anticipating and shaping subsequent ones. So our conversations are populated and constituted in varying degrees by what others have said before us, and by our own sayings and ways of saying (Bakhtin, 1986). This accumulated mass of continuity and consistency maintains and objectifies reality (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Watzlawick, 1990). When conversations become objectified, we grant them the same permanence as objects, assuming that the conversations themselves exist as “things” independent of our speaking. But this is not the case: conversations are ephemeral and have no existence or permanence other than when they are being spoken (Berquist, 1993).

Thus conversations are not only the process through which we construct reality, but they are also the product of that construction process (Berquist,

1993). What we construct in conversation are linguistic products, i.e. conversations that are interconnected with other linguistic products to form an intertextuality or network of conversations. Our realities exist in the words, phrases, and sentences that have been combined to create descriptions, reports, explanations, understandings etc. that in turn create what is described, reported, explained, understood, etc. It is these creations that constitute organizations as networks of conversations, and it is shifting these conversations that constitutes organizational change (Ford, 1999a).

In this context, resistance is a reality constructed in, by, and through conversations. This locates resistance in conversational patterns (e.g. orders of discourse) rather than “in the individual”. Further, resistance is a function of the extent of agreement (conversational support) that exists for it. In constructed realities, the more conversations that support, are attached to, or in some other way are associated with a particular conversation, the more “pull” there is to keeping that conversation in place and the more apparent support there is for that conversation. These patterns and agreement encourage psychotherapists to intervene in the network of conversations that constitute a family, since working with the individual alone is insufficient (Watzlawick *et al.*, 1974).

Background conversations and resistance

A background conversation is an implicit, unspoken “back drop” or “background” against which explicit, foreground conversations occur; it is both a context and a reality. Background conversations are a result of our experience within a tradition that is both direct and inherited, and provide a space of possibilities that will direct the way we listen to what is said and what is unsaid (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Harré, 1980; Heidegger, 1971; Winograd and Flores, 1987). These backgrounds are manifest in our everyday dealings as a familiarity or obviousness that pervades our situation and is presupposed by every conversation. Background conversations can be seen to constitute an organization’s culture (Schein, 1993), its operative set of assumptions, although no one conversation captures the culture in it entirely.

To participate in a reality is to be given by its background conversations, and to borrow from the idioms and appropriate forms of talk that are already in place, already there in the background (Gergen and Thatchenkery, 1996). Different realities have different frameworks and vocabularies, different rules and moves in which people speak and act and that constitute a particular form of life (Wittgenstein, 1958). In this context, a form of life is a consensual domain that “exists among a community of individuals and is continually regenerated through their linguistic activity and the structural coupling generated by that activity” (Winograd and Flores, 1987).

The notion of rules and consensual domain presupposes a community within which common agreement and convention fixes the meaning of what is said and determines whether a particular speaking is correct or incorrect (Wittgenstein, 1958). For example, to argue “rationally” is to play by the rules in some contexts, but not in others (Gergen and Thatchenkery, 1996). These

agreements, however, are not agreements that have been explicitly agreed to, but are “quiet agreements” that reside in the background conversations and are evident only in the practices and patterns of action and reaction (e.g. giving and taking orders) that constitute the given reality. And, since each reality is different, what constitutes correctness and incorrectness can only be established relative to the particular reality.

What is significant for our purposes is that each reality produces a particular view of life within which what is said derives meaning from the background conversations or context in which it is said, not from a one-to-one relationship with the objects and actions they denote in the observable world. There is no inherent meaning, no inherent essences that we uncover, only the meaning that is created through our ongoing interactions and understandings within the historical development of specific realities (Rorty, 1989). These meanings and understandings are contained within the vocabularies and communication protocols that comprise different realities. The meaning of a word, therefore, is in its use within a particular reality and only within that reality does that meaning take place. Isolated from a context of use, words are meaningless, and within different contexts, they have different meanings.

We act and correlate to the conversations that give us the world, not to an external world of objects, nor to an internal world of feelings, thoughts or meanings. Different background conversations constitute different contexts and give different realities that frame any change initiative and “give” people their vocabularies for action and reaction. People within different background conversations draw different conclusions from the same physical evidence (Schrage, 1989). Economists, for example, see the world they do not because the world is that way, but because the language of their discourse, their background conversations, gives them that world.

Resistance to change, therefore, can be seen as a function of different background conversations, which conversations constitute different realities for their participants. And, there is a particular coherence given by the background conversations such that within that reality, everything is appropriate. This means that it is very difficult to challenge one reality from the point of view of another. Yet, within the studies of change and resistance, this challenging is ongoing (e.g. Dent and Goldberg, 1999). Such challenges presume that “resistance” exists independent of the conversations that constitute it, and further, that it is a response to still other independently existing conditions or circumstances. In the constructivist view, neither of these assumptions is valid.

Three generic resistance-giving backgrounds

For any particular conversation that proposes or initiates an organizational change, there may be several different background conversations (realities) that contextualize, color, and characterize it. We propose three generic types of socially constructed background conversations that engender distinct types of

resistance to change. These background realities are complacency, resignation, and cynicism.

What is important about these backgrounds is that they are constructed in and through conversations about success and failure that are supported with and through other background conversations regarding those successes and failures (e.g. the exploitation of workers for the benefit of management). Accordingly, each reality includes attributions of causes for and effects of those successes and failures, as well as what is possible in the future.

The complacent background

A complacent background is constructed on the basis of historical success: the organization that has been successful, whether by innovation or by persistence, has established a background conversation that is a variant of “We will succeed in the future the way we have in the past”. People refer to past success(es) to justify that current success(es) will continue or that they can be easily repeated (Hedberg *et al.*, 1976; Johnson, 1988) if we “just leave things as they are”.

In this reality, historical success is seen as evidence for the efficacy of what has been and is being done (Hedberg *et al.*, 1976) and people avoid making “disruptive” changes (Gutman, 1988). A proposal for a substantive change in goals or operations introduced in a complacent background engender conversations that reinforce complacent resistance, e.g. that new goals are unnecessary in the face of presumed continuation of prior successes (Nichols, 1993). Thus the complacency background gives a “success breeds failure” syndrome (Whetten, 1980) where people continue to practice once-successful strategies and actions assuming that that is all that is necessary to continue producing success.

Complacent resistance conversations, therefore, reflect a theme of “nothing new or different is needed”. There is talk about relative comfort and satisfaction with the way things are, the way things are done, and their preferred continuation to ensure success in the future. People express satisfaction and contentment with the way things are (Gutman, 1988; Johnson, 1988) through such clichés as “If its not broken, don’t fix it”, “Why mess with success?”, and “Don’t rock the boat” (Ends and Page, 1977; Evans, 1988) and attribute success to personal or group attributes, capabilities, and actions (Bettman and Weitz, 1983; Kelley, 1973). As a result, any attempt to inspire or produce a change will be regarded as unnecessary at best and threatening future successes at worst, making Complacent Resistance conversations among the most difficult to displace or shift (Hedberg *et al.*, 1976; Johnson, 1988; Nichols, 1993).

The resigned background

Resigned backgrounds are constructed from historical failure, rather than from success. In the organization where things have gone wrong, the conversations that constitute a resigned background have accumulated to establish a theme of “This probably won’t work either”. Things are not the way people want them

to be, or believe they could or should be, but conversations in this reality reflect that people have no hope of being able to change them (Reger *et al.*, 1994).

Normally when people encounter failure, they blame the failure on factors outside of themselves (Bettman and Weitz, 1983; Caldwell and O'Reilly, 1982; Kelley, 1973; Salancik and Meindl, 1984). In a resignation background, however, conversations for self-blame dominate, and individuals blame themselves or their organization for the inability to succeed, i.e. we are deficient in some fatal way. In this reality, an individual might say: "My position doesn't give me any power", or "I don't have the skills, background, or luck", whereas members of a group could say: "We never get the support we need", "Our group never gets included in the big decisions", or "Why should we do this? It won't make any difference anyway". Conversations of a resigned background are characterized by having given up trying, knowing we will fail (Kouzes and Posner, 1993), and being unable to make things better even though they wish they could (Martin, 1991). Resigned background conversations convey a sense of despair, apathy, hopelessness, depression, sadness, and listlessness (Steer, 1993), e.g. we expect to fail even as we long for success.

Introducing a proposal for change into a resigned background will engender resigned resistance conversations, characterized by half-hearted actions having no life or power in them, and reflecting a lack of motivation and an apparent unwillingness to participate. People may even appear to be deaf to proposals for change, apparently unable to hear or respond, as they attempt to avoid dealing with those areas in which they believe themselves to be powerless. People who ignore the areas in which their resignation is operative may also effectively deny their own resignation (Martin, 1991). Even trying to overcome the resignation cannot be heard as an opportunity for action.

Resigned resistance conversations, in addition to expressing discouragement or even hopelessness, contain the suggestion that another individual or organization could likely succeed, even in these very same circumstances. The problem, therefore, is not with some external reality; the problem is with the fixed reality of ourselves. Resigned resistance conversations justify and reinforce not attempting change or improvement, since there is no effective action possible for us, and we can only wait for someone else to step forward to handle the problem (Block, 1993). A change proposal is not heard as a genuine opportunity against a background of resignation.

The cynical background

The cynical background is constructed, like the resigned background, from historical failure either directly or vicariously experienced through stories and narratives of others' experiences. But conversations about the cause of the failure give us the difference: in the resigned background conversations, the cause of failure is assigned to oneself or one's group or organization, but in the cynical background, the cause of failure is assigned to a "real" or fixed external reality, and to other people and groups. Statements like "Who are they kidding, no one can make this work", "I don't know why they bother, this won't work either", and

“This is just more of the same old stuff” illustrate a cynical background. These conversations reinforce a reality in which no one can change things, i.e. it’s not just us, it’s the way things really are. When a change initiative fails, its failure serves as a validation of the cynical background (Vance *et al.*, 1995; Reichers *et al.*, 1997), thus expanding or strengthening the construction.

The cynical background is a pessimistic context in which expectations are frustrated and disappointed (Reichers *et al.*, 1997). Failure and inauthenticity are expected, due to shortcomings in others, in the organization or larger systems, or in the world, and nothing can be done to right the wrongs. Nothing can change until “it” changes, one cannot trust the human and systemic elements of “it” to do what they should do, and the future will continue to be dissatisfying, frustrating, and unfulfilling. The cynical background gives a reality in which failure will happen because the world IS a particular way, despite any attempts to change it. Further, anyone who thinks otherwise is unwilling to recognize the truth about the way things are, and is inauthentic about recognizing their own inability to be effective in the face of that reality (Vance *et al.*, 1995; Reichers *et al.*, 1997).

Conversations in a cynical background are likely to include references to being let down, deceived, betrayed, or misled by powerful others (Kanter and Mirvis, 1989; Kouzes and Posner, 1993). These conversations insist, with varying degrees of subtlety, that others knew or should have known the truth about the fixed external reality: they should have known what would happen, or they didn’t tell the truth about what they knew. This ignorance or deceit on the part of others is held responsible for setting up or contributing to the failure (Block, 1993; Goldfarb, 1991; Kanter and Mirvis, 1989; Kouzes and Posner, 1993; Reichers *et al.*, 1997).

Where both the complacent background (“I’m already doing the right things”) and the resigned background (“I can’t make any difference”), involve self-directed explanations for resisting a change initiative, the cynical background includes attacks on others, portraying those responsible for the change as incompetent, lazy, or both (Reichers *et al.*, 1997). People in a cynical reality “know” that no one and nothing can make a difference, and may even claim that proponents of the change are dishonest, selfish, and untrustworthy, with questionable and inauthentic motives (Goldner *et al.*, 1977; Kanter & Mirvis, 1989; Reichers *et al.*, 1997).

A proposal for change, introduced in a cynical background, will be received by people who are confident that not only will the initiative fail, but that no attempt by anyone can ever succeed owing to real and immutable external circumstances or operating principles (Vance *et al.*, 1995). The conversations that constitute cynical resistance include more overtly hostile and aggressive attacks on the proposed change than those of resigned resistance because they include attacks on the credibility and integrity of the people who are proposing or affiliated with the change initiative (Stivers, 1994). Cynical resistance conversations reflect a distrust and disbelief in others (Block, 1993; Goldfarb, 1991; Kanter and Mirvis, 1989) and are likely to include anger, resentment,

scorn, derision, and contempt (Greenfield, 1994; Kopvillem, 1996; Kouzes and Posner, 1993; Stivers, 1994). In a cynical reality, anyone who argues for or supports a change initiative must be engaged in some form of deception or ignorance and should not be trusted. Accordingly, “one must show contempt for the stupidity and absurdity” of others (Stivers, 1994, p. 90) who either fail to recognize or be honest about the way things really are.

Discussion and implications

This paper proposes that the form resistance to change initiatives take are given by the background conversations that have been constructed from historical relationships to success and failure, including the attributions for the causes of success and failure. Different backgrounds give different resistive conversations, actions, and behaviors. A background of complacent conversations constructs a complacent reality, in which a change initiative is responded to with complacent resistance: denial of the need for change, accompanied by procrastination, avoidance, and withdrawal. A background of resigned conversations creates a resigned reality, where a change initiative is greeted with resigned resistance: lack of attention to the proposal for change, along with reduced morale, non-participation, and other forms of covert withholding. A background of cynical conversations creates a cynical reality, in which a proposal for change engenders cynical resistance: some overt rejection of the change proposal with a likelihood of less visible sabotage, hidden agendas, and politicking.

If the backgrounds that engender resistance are generated and sustained through conversations (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Ford and Ford, 1995), then the task of changing these backgrounds entails changing what is said. This means that people could come to recognize that they are constructing their reality in their everyday conversations, realize that they do not need to continue saying what they have said in the past, and start saying something different (Rorty, 1989; Johnson, 1988). Others have shown that shifting the focus of conversations can produce breakthroughs in organizational performance and change (Oakley and Krug, 1991; Scherr, 1989). These authors propose that it matters more that new things are given utterance than whether they are true, real, or accurate in some objective sense. It is in the saying of something new that one is given the opportunity to challenge, engage, explore, and create, thereby discovering underlying assumptions and opening new opportunities for action. Indeed, such exploration is at the heart of dialogue (Isaacs, 1993).

From the perspective of constructed realities, it makes a difference what people say and to whom they say it. Much of what people know about their world comes from conversations passed on by others, rather than from direct experience. Conversations that include complaining, gossip, undermining and other forms of reactive speaking (Oakley and Krug, 1991) contribute to the construction of complacent, resigned, and cynical backgrounds. Managers and employees who engage in such conversations are strengthening these realities in their organization, “infecting” and re-infecting themselves and others with those conversations, and displaying the symptoms of those backgrounds (Ford,

1999b). These conversations are not simply reports on reality: they are the process of socially constructing, or generating, the reality of the organization with which everyone must deal and it is possible for all participants to be responsible for what they are creating.

Present resistance to past change

The three constructed backgrounds presented here portray resistance as a response to an assemblage of conversations about the nature, meanings, and causes of past successes or failures, rather than as a response to the actual conditions and circumstances of the change initiative itself. Each background provides a coherent and complete sense-making structure that integrates the past and the background construction seamlessly: the individual is engaged in conversations that are given by the past. This means that resistance to change is never only about what is happening now, but is also about what has happened before, and the meanings that have been assigned to possibilities for the future.

Traditional approaches treat resistance as a response to the current change situation only, i.e., to what is happening now, with this change. This view implies that if managers can handle the current change situation properly (i.e. the foreground conversations), then resistance will be minimized and ultimately overcome. Accordingly, managers use resistance reduction strategies to address those issues that appear to arise in response to the current change (Kotter and Schlesinger, 1979; Morris and Raben, 1995).

The proposal that constructed backgrounds engender resistive behaviors independent of the situational factors of a change initiative suggests that unless and until these backgrounds are themselves addressed and changed, resistance will continue. In fact, traditional attempts at reducing resistance themselves will be seen through the perceptual filters of the different backgrounds. For example, involvement, education, and participation are among the strategies recommended for dealing with resistance (e.g. Kotter and Schlesinger, 1979). But in a complacent reality, such strategies are likely to be seen as unnecessary; in a resigned reality as futile; in a cynical reality as malicious or manipulative. Similarly, attempts to increase the credibility of management (e.g. Kouzes and Posner, 1993) will be received with resistance tempered by complacency, resignation, or cynicism. Traditional situation oriented attempts to overcome resistance that is a product of constructed background conversations will only serve further to reinforce that background and expand or strengthen the resistance. What is required are strategies that address the background conversations.

Personal resistance and background resistance

Where resistance to change is a function of the background conversations that have accumulated from past responses to prior changes, the different qualities of each type of background will provide its own unique kind of resistance conversations. These conversations will be public and observable, unlike the internal states of individuals that must be inferred to explain resistance as a

more personal phenomenon. It may well be that the subjective experiences and assessments that have been posited as sources of resistance are simply the ways we interpret conversational expressions given by the three constructed backgrounds for change.

When employees say “The risk of change threatens everything good that we have built”, we can either posit personal fear as the cause of resistance, or we can look to the background of complacency conversations in which their utterance makes sense. When someone says, “The change is a good idea, and I wish it could work, but we don’t have the know-how or the resources to do it successfully,” we can explain the resistance in terms of the individual’s reluctance, or we can consider the background conversations for resignation in which the individual operates. Another statement, “I know what they are telling us, but I don’t believe they are giving us the whole picture,” could be considered to reveal a personal lack of trust, or it could simply be an expression from a background of cynical conversations.

From the constructionist perspective, the reason that traditional resistance reduction strategies are unlikely to work is because they tend to rely on some form of increased understanding or involvement from those individuals who appear to be resisting (Kotter and Schlesinger, 1979). The difficulty with applying strategies for improving understanding or increasing involvement for people who are operating in complacent, resigned, or cynical realities is that neither understanding nor involvement is the issue. What is at issue is a shift in the background conversations.

It is our assertion that complacency, resignation, and cynicism are realities to which people are blind. People do not see their world as a product of their conversations, but, conversely, they see their conversations as a factual report on an existing world. Changing the background involves making people aware that they are operating in a socially constructed context and that they are not limited to that context (Marzano *et al.*, 1995), but can create another one.

Changing the background

Background conversations remain in the background until they are revealed to us as constructions, i.e. something that we have put there. Indeed, the power in dialogue is the ability to bring background constructions (assumptions, conclusions, decisions, etc.) into the foreground so that they can be examined. Until this is done, the conversations remain transparent and unrecognized, existing below our level of consciousness where they are neither examined nor understood (Levy and Merry, 1986; Lincoln, 1985). As a result, we act and react consistent with the background conversations that give our reality and the hidden strategies used for dealing with life (Goss *et al.*, 1993). Altering these background conversations shifts the context in which the very content of our thinking and feeling occur and our beliefs and perceptions are organized (Marzano *et al.*, 1995). When the background conversation shifts, the foundation on which we construct our understanding of the world shifts too, and we can feel, think, and behave in new ways.

We propose that one way to deal with complacent, resigned, and cynical backgrounds is through reinvention (Goss *et al.*, 1993). Reinvention differs from change in that it is not about changing what is, but undoing what is and creating something new. Reinvention involves reframing (Dunbar *et al.*, 1996; Fairhurst and Sarr, 1996; Levy and Merry, 1986), and inquiring into the context in which we are interpreting and interacting with the world, with the intent of uncovering that context. Once the context is revealed, and people can take responsibility for having propagated it, a new context can be designed. Creating this new context constitutes a second order (Levy and Merry, 1986), or ontological change (Marzano *et al.*, 1995).

Conversations for closure (Ford and Ford, 1995) enable and facilitate reinvention. Bridges (1980) proposes that where prior changes have not been closed or completed, people are left dissatisfied. All subsequent attempts to introduce change will occur within this “conversational space” of incompleteness and dissatisfaction. Given that the backgrounds are proposed as the origin of resistance conversations, and these backgrounds are constituted by past responses to success and failure, it can be said that the incomplete past has defined the future. People are bound to the existing background until the conversations of the past have been brought to a close (Albert, 1983, 1984). Resistance, whether complacent, resigned, or cynical, is a reaction to an incomplete past; in fact, it is the past made present.

One of the implications of this perspective is that people can be supported in completing the incomplete past. Conversations for closure are constituted by a dialogue in which people examine the assumptions and expectations that underlie their actions and afford people the opportunity to reflect on their responsibility for what has happened (Block, 1993; Senge, 1990) and the ways in which it has been interpreted, i.e. what they have made it mean. In this dialogue, people explicitly state what is incomplete about the past and explore ways to resolve the differences and misunderstandings arising in the conversation. These conversations also give people a new opportunity to be acknowledged for what they have done and not done, and to recognize the expectations that have and have not been fulfilled in the organization’s past, and to discover and express their commitments for the future. This acknowledgment and discovery brings new recognition and perspective to the contributions, actions, and outcomes of past changes (Ford and Ford, 1995), and opens an opportunity for celebration (DeForest, 1986; Morris and Raben, 1995).

Conversations for closure are essential for creating “a sense of harmonious completion” wherein tension with past events is reduced or removed and balance and equilibrium are restored (Albert, 1983; Bridges, 1980). As Jick (1993, p. 197) states “disengaging from the past is critical to awakening to a new reality”. Closure allows the past to remain in the past, which makes possible a new recognition of what is actually present, and thus a new opportunity to create a background independent of yesterday’s points of view (Goss *et al.*, 1993).

Closure conversations allow people to reassess their responsibility in generating and sustaining different background conversations, and thereby to

choose a different response (Block, 1993). People do not naturally see that it is their own expectations, their own responses to success and failure, and their own conversations about these things that are the source of the three backgrounds in which they speak and listen and behave. People do not see that it is the meaning or interpretations they have given to events that is at the source of their speaking and that they can take responsibility for being the author of the meaning and speaking. The process of reclaiming responsibility brings a new opportunity to create different responses to proposals for change.

At the heart of the completion conversation is the understanding that there are two different aspects to a constructed reality, the first and second order reality (Ford, 1999a; Watzlawick, 1990) and that these are frequently confused and treated as if they are one and the same. First order realities refer to the events that happened devoid of any meaning, interpretation, etc. An example of a first order reality is, “the new computer program that was to be implemented by June 30 was implemented September 15”. Second order realities refer to the meanings, interpretations, values, etc. that are added to first order realities. An example of a second order reality is “the new computer program was not implemented because of incompetence and poor planning – management (labor) doesn’t know what they are doing”.

First order realities are just “what’s so”, whereas, second order realities are what we say about what’s so, i.e. the explanations, the accountings, the stories, etc. In this framework, complacency, resignation, and cynicism are second order realities for which people are not being responsible, i.e. they are not related to them as something that they are adding, but as the truth about the way things are. In conversations for closure, these realities are separated and people come to see that they can chose to be responsible both for what’s so (e.g. the computer program *is* late) and for the meanings that they gave to that (e.g. management (labor) is incompetent). When this realization happens, people see that they can create different meanings that do not alter the first order reality (the computer program was implemented when it was implemented), but that do provide a different context for subsequent action and new speaking (Watzlawick, 1990).

The completion dialogue includes an explicit acknowledgment that new possibilities and new backgrounds now exist, however tenuously, as a result of the conversation (Ford and Ford, 1995). The new background will be built in the same way as the old one: by an accretion of conversations about success and failure, past and future, people and circumstances. What is said from this point forward matters more than ever, because it is now done more deliberately, with a new recognition of building a reality. The new background contains possibilities, opportunities, and problems that are different from those that existed before the conversation for closure and that provide new openings for future change. Similarly, it contains pitfalls: the greatest being a return to old speech habits, vocabularies, explanations, and behaviors. Conversations for closure provide an opportunity to clear the records of the past to make way for new backgrounds to gain a foothold.

Notes

1. The phrase “in the individual” should be construed broadly to include groups, teams, etc. Thus, resistance can be seen as “in the group” when resistance is a function of group norms or cohesion.
2. It is worth noting that the whole notion of resistance itself is a constructed one and that by using the historical conversations of the extant literature as a basis for exploring this issue, we both “objectify” that literature as reflecting some underlying reality as well as calling it into question as a constructed reality.

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