Conversations and the Authoring of Change

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There are two basic approaches for understanding the way in which organization change is produced and managed. One approach is based in the objectivist, structural-functionalist tradition that there is an underlying, ordered pattern to the nature of reality, and that it is possible to come to know and represent this pattern (Burrell and Morgan, 1979). In this view, "true" reality exists independent of the observer, and increasing one's knowledge of this objective reality is tantamount to increasing the accuracy and scope of one's ideas, models, or representations of that reality. In this view, language is simply a tool for description in which words correspond to objects in the world.

In the structural-functional approach, the job of a change manager is to understand this reality and to align or adapt the organization to it through appropriate interventions (French and Bell, 1995). Since gaining knowledge is seen as creating an increasingly accurate understanding and reproduction of an objective reality, it is assumed that the extent to which a manager's representations are accurate and correspond with that reality is the extent to which the change interventions will be successful. This means that ineffective or unsuccessful changes reflect a misunderstanding or misrepresentation of "how things really work", prompting a search for bias in managers' misinterpretations of reality (Huff and Schwenk, 1990; Fombrun, 1992). Under these conditions, the management of change becomes a dual issue of the change manager's knowledge about the underlying reality and his or her ability to adjust the organization for correspondence with that reality.

A second approach is based in a constructivist tradition in which the reality we know is interpreted, constructed, or enacted through social interactions (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Holzner, 1972; Weick, 1979; Watzlawick, 1984). In this view, our knowledge and understanding of reality is not a mirror of some underlying "true" reality, nor is knowledge a reproduction of that reality. Rather, knowledge is itself a

construction that is created in the process of making sense of things. Since it is not possible for managers to know any "true" reality independent of themselves, what they come to know and understand as reality is an invention where the inventors are unaware of their invention and consider it as something that exists independent of themselves (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Weick, 1979; Watzlawick, 1984). In this case, change is not a response to a shift in understanding that corresponds more closely to some underlying "truth", but rather is a function of a shift in the constructed reality.

In the constructivist approach, change managers use interventions not to bring about a greater alignment with a "true" reality, but rather to construct, deconstruct, and reconstruct organizational realities, i.e., to author new realities. Since constructed realities provide the context in which people act and interact, shifts in these realities open new possibilities for action and the realization of new orders of results. In other words, shifts in context provide for shifts in action which provide for shifts in the results that are produced. By the same token, continuation of existing realities means a continuation of corresponding actions and results. In this context, the job of change managers is to author realities in which people and organizations are more effective in achieving desired outcomes (Block, 1987; Senge, 1990).

The Power of Conversations

The reality of organizations that we experience occurs in conversation. At the most basic level, conversations are "what is said and listened to" between people (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Zaffron, 1995). 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 (Berger and Luckmann, 1966) of symbols, artifacts, theatrics, etc. that are used in conjunction with or as substitutes for what is spoken

including emotion. 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". People speak nonverbally through facial expressions, emotions, and body movements, and with or without the use of instruments or tools. Similarly, listening is more than hearing, and includes all the ways in which people become aware of, or notice themselves and the world. When conversations are considered in this broader context, "one may view [an] individual's everyday life in terms of the working away of a conversational apparatus that ongoingly maintains, modifies, and reconstructs [their] subjective reality" (Berger and Luckmann, 1966).

Conversations are omnipresent in organizations and can range from a single speech act, e.g., "Do it", to an extensive network of speech acts which constitute arguments (Reike and Sillars, 1984) and narratives (Fisher, 1987). Conversations may be monologues or dialogues (Reigel, 1979) and may occur in the few seconds it takes to complete an utterance, or may unfold over hours, days, or months. 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 most of the conversations of which we are aware are explicitly spoken (verbally or nonverbally), much of the way in which they support the apparent continuity of a reality is implicit, by virtue of background conversations or what Harré (1980) calls latent structures and Wittgenstein (1958) calls the form of life. A background conversation is an implicit, unspoken "back drop" or "background" against which explicit, foreground conversations occur, e.g., "its hopeless". Background conversations are a result of our experience within a tradition that is both direct and inherited. They are manifest in our everyday dealings as a familiarity or obviousness that pervades our situation and is presupposed by every conversation. Yet, in spite of this pervasiveness, we are

unaware of these background conversations and they remain unnoticed until there is a "breakdown" in which a background presumption is violated (Winograd and Flores, 1987).

Background conversations are already and always there (Harré, 1980), contributing to the intertextual links on which current conversations build and rely. It is this intertextuality of conversations, as well as an accumulated mass of continuity and consistency that maintains and objectifies our reality (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Watzlawick, 1990). Objects exist for us as independent tangible "things" located in space and time and which impose constraints we can not ignore (e.g., brute force (Searle, 1995)); they are manipulable, and we can do something with and to them (Holzner, 1972; Watzlawick, 1990). Although conversations are ephemeral, when they become objectified we grant them the same permanence as objects by assuming that they exist as some "thing" independent of our speaking them. But this is not the case. Conversations have no existence or permanence other than when they are being spoken and it is we who speak them (Berquist, 1993).

The realization that conversations objectify and are themselves objectified is important to any manager interested in authoring new organizational forms because it means that conversations are both the process and product of objectification, i.e., conversations both create and become reality (Berquist, 1993). What managers author when they author organizational changes, therefore, are linguistic products, i.e., conversations, that are interconnected with or displace other linguistic products to form a new intertextuality of conversations we experience and talk about as organization. And, what managers use in the process of authoring these new linguistic products are linguistic products. We use conversations to create, maintain, or end conversations that create new contexts for action and results.

This process of authoring new conversations through conversations is evident in Barrett et al.'s study of the introduction of Total Quality Leadership into a Navy Command (Barrett, Thomas et al., 1995). As Barrett et al. point out, the introduction of TQL involved the introduction of a new language (set of conversations) through existing orders of discourse. Although everyone in the organization was exposed to the same new language of TQL, their responses to it were different. Initially some people questioned the new language, pointing out inconsistencies, questioning the authenticity of those proposing it, and complaining. As both the number of people speaking the new language and the degree to which the new language was spoken increased, however, people began to invent and add new language (what Barrett et al. call "nascent scripts"). This increase in TQL related vocabulary provided a new background set of conversations that provided a basis both for sensemaking and for taking new, novel forms of action. As the new vocabulary expanded, it replaced and transformed the "older" vocabulary, made new actions that were previously unimaginable possible and altered underlying assumptions and beliefs.

What is significant about the Barrett et al, study is that it clearly shows the progressive expansion of a conversation (TQL) within an organization through the use of and invention of other conversations. It also shows, as Shotter (1993) points out, that strong feelings can be aroused when the introduction of new talk undermines our already ways of talking. New talk can undermine our understanding of the world and the dynamically sustained context of the relations inside of which our life occurs. For this reason, new talk can be seen as dangerous and responded to accordingly. In the case of the introduction of TQL, the response was like a contest between the new language and the existing language as to which one will prevail. This contest was evidenced in the challenges to and complaining about the new language and whether or not it will "take" or be just another passing fad.

However, as the TQL conversation persisted in being spoken, it began to spread and events were interpreted and explained using the new vocabulary. As new conversations were added ("nascent scripts") and people became habituated to the new language, a new context evolved inside of which new actions that were previously unimaginable became possible and the background assumptions and beliefs of the organization altered. At this point, the new vocabulary had successfully established itself within the network of conversations and the change was "institutionalized".

The power of conversations, therefore, rests in the realization that they create our reality and the context inside of which action is or is not possible. Conversations provide the context in which the world occurs for people, and their actions are correlated to those occurrences (Winograd and Flores, 1987). When these conversations shift (or are shifted in the case of organizational change), reality shifts and with it what can and can't be done. Conversations modify reality by virtue of whether or not something is talked about. Dropping conversations or adding them to a network of conversations will weaken some aspects of reality while reinforcing others. If something is not talked about for a long enough period, it ceases to be an integral part of the organization's regular set of conversations. Certain management fads are an example of things that people once talked about but do no longer. By the same token, talking frequently about something makes it more real, particularly if a variety of different people do the talking.

When managers make "declarations of change", they create new futures (realities) inside of which existing relationships alter, get redefined, and unfold newly. Shotter (1993) gives an excellent example of this in his example of what happens when someone in a relationship declares "I love you". At that moment, a new reality is brought into existence and whatever relationship did exist is forever altered, following a trajectory given by the declaration. Although Shotter's (1993)

example revolves around a reciprocated declaration, it is important to realize that regardless of the second person's response, the relationship is altered in the moment the declaration is spoken. Given this power of conversations, it is no surprise that "declarations of change" can evoke powerful reactions and resistance (Hermon-Taylor, 1985; Bryant, 1989). Managers engaged in authoring changes are not simply engaged in communicating change, they are engaged in declaring new realities that alter existing relations.

Organizations as Networks of Conversations

Within the constructivist perspective taken here, organizations are networks of concurrent and sequential conversations (Berquist, 1993) that establish the context in which people act and thereby set the stage for what can/will and can/will not be done (Schrage, 1989). Planning, budgeting, hiring, firing, promoting, etc. are all conversations that constitute organizations and provide the context in which action is taken. Other constitutive conversations are conversations for and about authority, leadership, rewards, reengineering, competition, customers, resources, and management, among others.

Organizations as networks of conversations does not mean that there are organizations and there are networks of conversations among the people within them. Rather, it means that conversations exist and a particular network of these conversations **are** the organization. There is no organization independent of that which is authored, maintained, and referenced in conversations, including background conversations. If all the conversations for and about an organization were to cease, there would be no organization.

Many of the conversations in organizations engender commitments that can be fulfilled through special networks of recurrent conversations in which only certain details of content differentiate one conversation from another (Winograd and Flores, 1987). For example, recurrent requests for "customer service" create a predictable

pattern of recurrent conversations within the organization called "customer service". Recurrent conversations are particularly important in the authoring of organizations and organizational change because they are embodied in the offices and departments that specialize in fulfilling some part of the engendered commitments (Winograd and Flores, 1987). Indeed, jobs, offices, and departments are existence structures for the conversations they embody, thereby ensuring that those conversations, and their correlates and derivatives, continue to be spoken and engaged with. In a very real sense, jobs, offices, and departments are the protectors and purveyors of habitualized conversations and their commitments.

These recurrent conversations come to constitute a type of structural coupling between two or more participants (e.g., individuals, groups, and departments) in which the participants work to maintain that coupling, i.e., their recurrent patterns of conversation, in the face of environmental perturbation (Maturana and Varela, 1987). Since structural coupling is always mutual, changes in the conversations that constitute the coupling requires a change in the conversations of all participants so coupled. In this sense, we exist in a network of structural couplings that continually weaves our conversations, linking them in a network of conversations (Maturana and Varela, 1987). The phenomenon of structural coupling underscores the fact that no organization conversation can be treated in isolation, but only as part of a network. It also underscores that conversations and patterns of discourse "hold" other conversations in place, thereby contributing to what is experienced as resistance to change. Structural coupling implies that resistance in a network of conversations is not a function of individual attributes and conditions, but of the conversational context within which people are located. If this context can be revealed and shifted, resistance will disappear and change can move forward.

Not All Conversations Are The Same

Although what can and can't be done, and what will and won't be done is a function of the conversations within an organization, not all conversations are the same when it comes to the authoring of change. In our work, we distinguish two domains in which conversations may reside: committed and uncommitted.

Commitment, in the domain of communication set forth here, is not an experience, nor a deeply heartfelt sentiment, nor an obligation. It is a fundamental element in the acts of speaking and listening. Every language act has consequences for all participants, since by making a statement, a speaker is "entering into a specific engagement, so that the hearer can rely on him" (Habermas, 1979, 61). This is what we mean by commitment, an intention to be engaged in certain ways in the future. Speech act theory recognizes the importance of commitment as a first step toward dealing adequately with meaning (Searle, 1969; Searle, 1975).

Committed Conversations. There is a minimal implicit commitment in every conversation which is granted by the commitment in the speech acts that constitute the conversation (Winograd and Flores, 1987). In some conversations, there is an additional level of commitment associated with the conversation as a whole, which commitment is senior to and inclusive of the commitments of the individual speech acts. This is a commitment on the part of one or more of the participants in a conversation to be accountable for the content of the conversation as well as the form and for having the conversation make a difference. This additional level of commitment is not necessary for a conversation, but, when it is present, the conversation is called a *committed conversation*.

Committed conversations are conversations *for* something, as compared to conversations *about* something, and include a commitment to accountability in speaking and listening. As a speaker, the participant is willing to be understood and related to as their speaking, i.e., their word. That is, one is willing to be "held to

account" for their speaking and its effects and impacts. As a listener, the participant is similarly accountable for what is heard or noticed in the conversation. In a committed conversation, both the speaker and the listener are engaged in and accountable for moving the action forward. Committed conversations, therefore, are conversations that create, direct, and forward the action and for which the participants are accountable.[i]

Uncommitted Conversations. Uncommitted conversations are conversations *about* something and are spoken by people who are not accountable for taking action or producing a result in the area in which the conversation is being held. For example, someone who complains "They should do something about…." is talking about something that others should do and is not stepping up to or declaring themselves accountable for taking the actions needed to produce the result. In this context, uncommitted conversations are those conversations that offer commentary, opinion, evaluation, assessment, or judgment about what is being observed with no intent of taking any action to make something different happen. If someone offers a criticism about a proposal, for example, but does not offer a way to improve or move the proposal forward, they are engaged in an uncommitted conversation.

Understanding the difference between committed and uncommitted conversations is critical to anyone engaged in authoring change. Committed conversations move things forward, make things happen, and produce breakdowns or breakthroughs. Uncommitted conversations, on the other hand, slow things down or even stop the action altogether. We are all familiar with the person who raises objections without offering any constructive alternative, or who asks questions only to quarrel with the answer. Both are examples of uncommitted conversations that slow down what is happening, even though the speakers may insist that they are trying to help.

Oakley and Krug's (1991) work suggest that the rate at which changes are implemented is a direct function of the ratio of committed to uncommitted conversations. In particular, they suggest that as the ratio of committed to uncommitted conversations increases, so does the action and results associated with a change. Indeed, in both our educational and consulting work, we have been able to dramatically improve the effectiveness of hundreds of managers at implementing changes, including those considered impossible, with no change in other organizational conditions and circumstances, by having them shift from uncommitted to committed conversations. Shifting conversations has even been effective in those cases where people lack authority or other artifacts of position that are sometimes seen as necessary for change. For example, in one case a master's student was able to bring about a change in university parking policy and in another case a Ph.D. student was able to get a new major approved and implemented.

The authoring of change, therefore, occurs in committed conversations. And, since managers engage in conversations every day, they have the opportunity in each and every conversation to choose between having a committed or uncommitted conversation.

Fours Types of Committed Conversations

In their work on organizational change, Ford and Ford (1995) proposed that there are four different types of committed conversations that managers use in the effective implementation of change. These are initiative, understanding, performance, and closure conversations.

Initiative Conversations. An *initiative conversation* is the "call" or "proposal" that creates an opening for change. In an initiative conversation, someone communicates that there is an opportunity for change with an assertion (e.g., "We need to do something about the deteriorating situation in the East"), a request (e.g., "Will you approve our undertaking a new program to restructure the

department?"), a promise (e.g., "We will reduce the budget deficit by 25% this year"), or a declaration (e.g., "We will substantially increase the availability of health care."). The public promise of President Kennedy to put a man on the moon by the end of the 1960's was an initiative conversation sufficient to produce a massive change effort in NASA. The working components of initiative conversations are phrases like "I propose...", "Tell me what should we do about...", "We are going to...", "It is time we undertake....", and "What do you think about..?". Initiative conversations may arise in any of several different places: in informal meetings in which people discussing existing conditions and circumstances, out of the visions that individuals have for what could be (e.g.Kouzes and Posner, 1993), or as a result of other change processes within the organization. And, in any one interaction, several initiative conversations may arise, as in meetings where participants make multiple proposals, throw out multiple ideas, or suggest multiple options. While most initiative conversations die almost immediately, others are explored to a greater or lesser extent in conversations for understanding.

Conversations for Understanding. *Conversations for understanding* are the conversations in which people seek to comprehend or understand "what's behind" the initiative conversation and come to a determination regarding what, if anything, will or could change. It is in conversations for understanding that participants work to make sense of and test initiative conversations by examining the assumptions, evidence, etc. that underly it, and to reflect on the implications of that thinking by questioning, challenging, supporting, etc. what is said. Through conversations for understanding, participants develop and add language to initiative conversations (Barrett, Thomas et al., 1995), thereby creating a shared context (Ashkenas and Jick, 1992) that allows them to come to some understanding of the relative merits of a change, the reasons for it, and how they stand relative to it (e.g., support or resist).

Conversations for understanding are important in the authoring of change because they produce two important by-products. The first and most substantive by-product is the specification of the *conditions of satisfaction* for the change. Conditions of satisfaction give the measurable and observable conditions, requirements, or measures (Kanter, Stein et al., 1992) that must be met in order for the change to be declared successful. Although there will almost certainly be miscellaneous, unintentional, or unexpected outcomes, authors of change will want to specify the conditions that will exist when the change has been completed and the time frame within which these outcomes will be produced (Winograd and Flores, 1987). Generalities and ambiguity (cf.Eisenberg and Goodall, 1993), such as "establish a new allocation process to improve performance" are insufficient if change authors expect to determine whether actions taken are effective.

A second by-product is some degree of *involvement, participation, and support* on the part of those engaged in the change. This by-product is particularly important because it provides people with a rationale, context, or meaning for the change and an opportunity to express their concerns, ideas, and suggestions (Kanter, Stein et al., 1992; Kotter, 1996). Where these conversations are missing or are incomplete, people may not understand what is happening or know their role in the undertaking, and may resist change efforts (Beer, 1980).

Authors of change will want to be aware that the foundational commitment of conversations for understanding is understanding, not action. Only conversations for performance (discussed below) are committed to making something happen. This means that no matter how well someone understands a change, they can not be relied on to take action. And if they do act, understanding does not insure that the appropriate actions (i.e., ones that forward accomplishment) are taken. For example, just because someone understands the organization is moving to a team based approach, and can cite all the reasons why, does not mean that they know to

take action, what actions to take, or when to take them. The failure to recognize that the commitment of conversations for understanding is understanding can result in change authors spending inordinate amounts of time in trying to have people understand in the hopes that once they understand, they will act. If managers are really interested in action, they will want to use conversations for performance.

Conversations for Performance. *Conversations for performance* include what Winograd and Flores (1987) call "conversations for action," which are networks of speech acts with an interplay of requests and promises spoken to produce a specific action and result. Requests ask another to take an action or produce a result by some deadline, e.g., "Will you call my boss now and tell him I will not be at the meeting today?". Promises, on the other hand, specify the actions or results someone (including the speaker) has said they will produce by some deadline, e.g., "I promise to have the sales figures for you by the end of today." Together, requests and promises form the backbone of conversations for performance.

Conversations for performance call for a commitment to produce specific actions and results in time, not on the transmission of a request or promise, and not on their meaning. When someone makes a promise, or accepts a request, they are committing to taking the action or producing the result specified in the request or promise by the time specified. Conversations for performance, therefore, are intended to make things happen by having people in action. This means that by increasing the frequency with which they use conversations for performance, change managers can substantially increase the velocity with which changes are implemented (Goss, 1996).

Conversations for Closure. *Conversations for closure* (Ford & Ford, 1995) are characterized by the use of assertions, expressives, and declarations to bring about an end to an event or happening. Bridges (1980) proposes that where changes have not been closed or completed, people are left dissatisfied with the lack

of closure. All subsequent attempts to introduce change will occur within this "conversational space" of incompletion and dissatisfaction. In a sense, the incomplete past defines and colors the future, and people are not really free to move on until closure has been brought to the past (Albert, 1983; Albert, 1984). Conversations for closure are committed to completing the incomplete past, with all its attendant expectations and interpretations of failure and fulfillment. 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 what's next (Goss, Pascale et al., 1993).

Closure is essential to change. It implies "a sense of harmonious completion" wherein tension with past events is reduced or removed and balance and equilibrium are restored (Albert, 1983). One important aspect of conversations for closure is acknowledgement. Conversations for closure acknowledge accomplishments, failures, what has been (was) and has not been (was not) done, thereby allowing people to complete their contribution to the change and the results of that contribution, favorable or unfavorable. Conversations for closure also acknowledge that, whether the change was completely, partially, or not at all successful, there is now a different future available, that contains new opportunities and problems that were not available before the change.

Conversations and the Authoring of Change

Authoring change within a network of conversations calls for an alteration in our understanding of what constitutes "change" in general and "a change" in particular. Traditional, structural-functionalist perspectives talk about "a change" as if change mangers were removing or replacing one object or object like thing with another (Ford and Ford, 1994). Even if it is acknowledged that there are many parts, stages, or components, the "change" is nevertheless represented as if it has object-like properties and clearly defined parameters that exist independent of the

conversations in which they are embedded. At best, conversations are simply a tool that are used to put the change in place (Ford and Ford, 1995). Within the context considered here, however, such a monolithic view of change is problematic.

A change, like the organization in which it occurs, is not monolithic discursively. Rather, a change is more appropriately seen as a polyphonic phenomenon (Hazen, 1993) within which many conversations are introduced, maintained, and deleted (Barrett, Thomas et al., 1995; Czarniawska, 1997) in such a way that a particular outcome is realized (Ford and Ford, 1994). This perspective is evident in Czarniawska's (1997) study of Swedish government agencies where "changes" were constituted by a series of conversational episodes organized around particular themes (e.g., "decentralization" or "computerization"). It is also evident in Elden's (1994) observation that the transformation of Magma Copper occurred in a "myriad of many, mostly small, local activities" initiated on a local level within a common commitment to a possible future. Barrett et al. (1995) have also found that the implementation of a change occurs through a myriad of local conversations in which new conversations are invented inside a specific commitment or theme; in their case, a commitment to the implementation of total quality leadership (TQL).

Within a conversational perspective, there is no <u>the</u> change, like an object, that is being produced. Rather, change is an unfolding of many conversations within a general theme (Czarniawska, 1997), new vocabulary (Barrett, Thomas et al., 1995), or metalanguage (Elden, 1994), most of which can not be anticipated and must be generated locally "in the moment". Indeed, every time change managers introduce a conversation, they need to engage in a variety of conversations depending on who they are talking to, where, and when. In this sense, change in a conversational context is like experimental theatre or improvisational jazz where the script (music) is being written while it is being performed (Boje, 1995; Czarniawska, 1997). Although there is an intended result or outcome that is to be achieved, the

specific conversations that are needed, with whom, and when have to be generated on a moment to moment basis. Indeed, as Barrett et al. (1995) have found, an entirely new language, the specifics of which can not be anticipated, is generated as a change grows and spreads within an organization. For this reason, managers and the people they work with are ongoingly engaged in authoring the context in which they will work, and as this context shifts, the work that can and does get done also shifts.

Because the conversations required for producing a new intended outcome (i.e., a change) can not be anticipated, the production of any change involves the generation and dynamic unfolding of many conversations that interplay in different ways. The failure to recognize change as this unfolding of micro conversations within a macro conversation robs change agents of their power in conversations and shelters them from their responsibility for authoring the conversations. Indeed, it is the very inconspicuousness of individual conversational events that generate and sustain change, that makes their actual relevance little noticed and underestimated (Lynch, 1996; Hatch, 1999). Yet, as can be seen in the case of epidemics, transmission need not proceed conspicuously to amass an enormous host population or produce dramatic conversational shifts (Ford, 1999).

Where organizations are network of conversations, authoring change becomes a matter of shifting (e.g., changing the content, type, and focus) conversations (Pascarella, 1987). Shifting conversations is accomplished by abandoning the speaking of some conversations (e.g., "Why we can't") and deliberately introducing and repeating new conversations (e.g., "What needs to happen?"). For example, the executive of one organization was able to overcome complacency and increase the competitiveness of a utility by introducing and sustaining a conversation for phantom competitors (Johnson, 1988). Even in the case of a mining company that appears to operate solely using tangible processes for taking rock out of the ground and turning

it into metal, the reality of those processes occurs in the conversations of the organization. To change the organization or some process in it, the managers must shift the conversations in which the processes take place and are understood (Zaffron, 1995). Since conversational (constructed) reality provides the context in which people act and interact, shifting conversations shifts reality, thereby providing new opportunities for action and results. A key to making these shifts is to move from uncommitted to committed conversations.

Change managers always have a choice in what they talk about. They can be reactive, complaining about what they see as wrong, the obstacles they perceive as inhibiting or stopping them, or the way things really should be in some idealized world. They can also be proactive, talking about what they want to accomplish, what will make that possible, and how they can get it done. Since what change managers talk about reflects what they pay attention to, the choice of whether to speak complaints or possibilities will make a difference in the progress of change (Oakley and Krug, 1991). When the proportion of proactive, or facilitating, conversations increases against the proportion of reactive, or inhibiting conversations in an organization, the velocity of change also increases (Oakley and Krug, 1991; Grant, 1995). This suggests that if change managers use proactive and facilitating conversations in their authoring of change, while discontinuing the use of reactive and inhibiting conversations, there will be a shift in their effectiveness. Consistent with this observation, we have found in our own work that where managers focus on what is needed to make something happen, and then engage in committed conversations for having it happen, they are far more successful. Others have found similar results (e.g.Scherr, 1989; Oakley and Krug, 1991).

Conclusion

The authoring of change occurs within and via conversations (Ford and Ford, 1995) in which new contexts are created and new actions taken. Rather than simply

a tool in the production of change, conversations are the medium through which the construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction of realities occurs. In a network of conversations, change is a recursive process of social construction in which new realities for effective action are created , sustained, and modified in conversations (Ford and Backoff, 1988).

In this context, change managers are engaged in bringing into existence, expanding, and managing new conversations until they become part of the organization's network of conversations and are able to provide a framework for effective action. Rather than bringing about a new alignment with the environment, or a correspondence between the organization and some "true" reality, change managers work to create and shift networks of conversations to produce intended results. The effectiveness of an organization change is thereby a function of the change manager's ability to identify the network of conversations that is operative in the organization, and to add, modify, and delete conversations in that network until the desired outcomes are realized or the project is ended.

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[i] While it is possible to hold anyone to account for what they say, regardless of whether it is a committed or uncommitted conversation, we are using accountability from the standpoint of who the speaker and listener are *being* in the conversation. In uncommitted conversations, people are "just talking" with no intention of *being* accountable and if you call them to account, they are likely to be upset. However, in committed conversations, both the speaker and the listener are *being* accountable for moving things forward and willing (intentionally) do so knowing that they can and will be held to account.