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Organizational change as shifting conversation, narratives and stories

Julie Wolfram Cox

In his (1999) paper on Organizational change as shifting conversations, Jeffrey Ford examines the implications of a social constructionist view of reality for organizational change agents. Following Watzlawick (1990) and Bohm (1996), Ford differentiates between first-order, presented realities that "refer to the physically demonstrable and publicly discernible characteristics, qualities, or attributes of a thing, event, or situation" (1999, p. 481) and the second-order, represented realities that "are created whenever we attribute, attach, or give meaning, significance or value to a first-order reality" (1999, p. 482). In particular, Ford (1999, p. 483) draws on Bohm (1996) concept of dialogue as a means to distinguish between the two realities through the revelation of assumptions and their consequences.

Central to Ford's argument in this paper (and also developed elsewhere in Ford and Ford, 1995; Ford et al., 2002) is the notion of conversation, which can range from a single speech acts [sic], e.g. "do it", to an extensive network of speech acts which constitute arguments (Reike and Sillars, 1984), narratives (Fisher, 1987), and other forms of discourse (Boje, 1991; Thachankary, 1992). Conversations may be monologues or dialogue and ... may also include different people over time (Ford, 1999, p. 484).

He argues that both first- and second-order realities are passed on through implicit conversational backgrounds, and that conversations are both the process and product of reality construction, providing "the very texture of organizations" (Ford, 1999, p. 485). Building on this metaphor, he goes on to suggest that conversations are also the target of organizational change, for change agents may "bring about alterations in the existing tapestry of linguistic characterizations" (Ford, 1999, p. 486) in five ways: through redefining "a change", conversational shifts, conversational management, conversational responsibility, and reviewing resistance.

Change redefinition, the first of the five, involves a recognition that organizational change is neither monolithic nor independent of the conversations in which it is embedded and unfolds, and that organizational change conversations also affect the constitution of individual identities within the organization. Second, conversational shifts, which are central to the theme for this special issue, are pivotal in changing the organization or organizational processes. Ford proposes that while such shifts occur at different rates, the extent to which a language change occurs may serve as an indicator of the extent to which a change has been institutionalized (Barrett et al., 1995). He goes on to distinguish shifts in focus from reactive to proactive conversations, from monologues to generative dialogues, and from commitment to certainty to commitment to discovery as different ways in which
Little, prescriptive through negotiation that fixed identity of following involves his Bakhtian sustained (1999, Bakhtin, conversational argued, that conversational construction. is way action, influential created into Third, (Fairclough, change discourse conversational included, and change for Jabri papers and argue for a new conversational identity, as, questioning Bakhtinian notion of transgressionality - that is, the self as dialogical, and thus "saturated with otherness" - to examine the negotiation of meanings between change participants and the co-construction of change through shifting identities in speech. He places this work among process rather than prescriptive approaches to dialogue, similarly distinguishing Bakhtin from Bohm (Barge and Little, 2002), and then examines implications of a more complex notion of relationality for
the language of change, models of continuous change, and for change agents and participants.

In marked contrast to the gradual shifts within such dialogue, Bryant and Wolfram Cox present a study of dramatic change in stories told of employee experiences of organizational change in the Latrobe Valley region of south-eastern Australia. These tales describe shifts from descriptions of poor employment relations between managers and staff, parochial organizational cultures and low employee loyalty to descriptions of strong loyalty and identification with new management. Centering around clear turning points (Lofland and Stark, 1965), these very "positive" conversion stones are akin to stories of religious conversion (Snow and Machalek, 1983).

However, Bryant and Wolfram Cox then discuss the importance of inconsistencies and silence within the stories to suggest that although these tales of change may indicate a newfound affiliation with management and a shift in the order of discourse such that employees felt more heard and more able to make a contribution, such tales may also censor other possibilities and be a product of retrospective reinterpretation or impression management (Brown and Humphreys, 2003; Ford and Ford, 1995). In other words, there may not be a simple correspondence between dramatic organizational change and dramatic accounts of such change, and the authors draw on participants' reflexive discussions of the need to keep silent and of their career successes since organizational change in the complicating of the conversion narrative.

The authors' interest is in retrospective representation or second-order reality and how and why meaning is attached (Ford, 1999, p. 482) rather than in the extent that attachment either reflects or may influence any "deeper" first-order reality. As such, this paper can be seen as an extension of Ford's emphasis on change redefinition to include not only those facilitating and experiencing change but also to the authorship of change studies where further conversations are held and simple accounts are themselves worthy of redefinition (Boyce, 1996; Buchanan, 2003; Hawes, 1991; Wolfram, 2001).

The two remaining papers include examinations of organizational change conversations with external constituents. In their empirical work, Palmer, Wilcox King and Kelleher present a detailed analysis of letters to shareholders in the annual reports of GE including periods of transformational change from 1980 to 1999. Coding these letters for speech acts, they identify five consistent change conversations:

(1) warnings;

(2) actions;

(3) explanations;
(4) achievements; and

(5) predictions.

These were underpinned by three types of speech acts: assertives that are assessable in terms of whether they are true or false, expressives that express a psychological position about a state of affairs, and commissives that commit the speaker to a course of action (Searle, 1979). The authors distinguish the five external, supportive change conversations they found from what they define as the more internal, operational change conversations described by Ford and Ford (1995). In their 1995 paper on intentional change, Ford and Ford had argued that speech acts are the foundations of conversation, suggesting that particular combinations of assertives, directives, commissives, expressives and declaratives (Searle, 1979) comprise the various conversations for initiating change, generating understanding, change performance, and change closure.

In relation to this work of Ford and Ford (1995) and also of Ford (1999), the paper by Palmer, Wilcox King and Kelleher extends the very notion of the change conversation, for not only may such a conversation take place within an organization across time and across many participants, it may also take place external to an organization where the interaction is between speaker/senior managers and audience/shareholders through the medium of letters to shareholders. The authors also found that GE's change conversations with shareholders did not vary over the 20 years covered by their study, for each of the five core conversations was present in each year. They then suggest avenues for future research into the effects of such conversations on shareholder satisfaction, into the relative importance of shareholder letters compared with other media for communication with shareholders, and into the distinction between operational and supportive change conversations with different organizational audiences for whom different combinations of speech acts may assist cognitive and/or emotional connectedness. Parting company with Ford and Ford (1995), Palmer, Wilcox King and Kelleher suggest that while day-to-day operational conversations may vary, external, supportive conversations may be more effective and more reassuring when they remain constant.

Also taking an external perspective on conversational shifts, but from a discursive perspective, Leonardi and Jackson examine the press reporting of two company mergers in the high-tech and telecommunications industries occurring from 1998 to 2002: US West and Qwest, and AOL and Time Warner. Their interest is also in how executive communication shapes perception of an organization, but rather than examine the particular speech acts within such reports these authors look at the stories told by organizational executives as embodiments of certain politics and ideologies, focusing on stories of technology particularly relevant to high-tech organizations. In particular, they coded for the extent to which three themes relevant to a discourse of technological determinism were used in
public stories told by company officials about each merger; technology as a change agent that acts upon the social world, inevitability in the development and consequences of technology, and reliance on progress as an unarguable social value. Defined by "the belief that social progress is driven by technological innovation, which in turn follows an 'inevitable' course" (Smith, 1994, p. 38), technological determinism was of interest to Leonardi and Jackson to the extent that it was used in executive stories as a discursive strategy to justify certain choices, actions and policies, and to develop accounts of reality in which organizations lose both agency and culpability.

Like Palmer et al. Leonardi and Jackson found consistency in their examination of external organizational communications and use Deetz’s (1992) concept of discursive closure to argue that use of this discourse, as exemplified in the two cases, operates as a kind of conversational closure at the public level, suggesting that change is inevitable and eliminating alternative stories. Following Deetz (1992), they demonstrate how technological determinism frames discussion through six mechanisms of: disqualification of some voices; naturalization of the social influences on technological development or consequence; neutralization of the discussion of values related to the mergers through the appeal to their "inevitability"; topical avoidance of the collapse of the telecommunication sector during the period covered, and of US West’s poor reputation for service; legitimation of the mergers through riding the wave of the "new Economy" discourse; and through pacification of concerns about effects on competition.

Ford (1999) suggests that discourse can be understood as the background conversations in which organizations are embedded, and in this paper Leonardi and Jackson explain how such background conversations of change (in this case technological determinism) may serve as robust organizational narratives to silence other conversational possibilities and suppress controversy. They suggest that there should be future research into how stories are appropriated to communicate across organizational boundaries, not simply within them, and into how discursive closure operates in public as well as interpersonal communication.

In conclusion, each of these papers can be seen as an elaboration of themes presented in Ford’s (1999) work, which itself has extended earlier discussions of narrative within the pages of this journal (Boyce, 1996; Hawes, 1991). In combination the papers present change conversations at different levels of analysis both within and beyond the organization (Demers et al., 2003; Watson, 2003). They address the interplay between conversation, silence and silencing and, through the latter, illustrate effects of power and resistance. They point to the importance of conversational consistencies as well as conversational shifts, both of which may have multiple meanings. And in examining rather than promoting change conversations, they disrupt the very premise that shifting change conversations necessarily
signify organizational development, either as a presented or represented reality. May such examinations (and conversations) continue.

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Sidebar
Editor's note. The papers by Palmer et al. and by Bryant and Wolfram Cox were reviewed under a separate blind process.

References


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