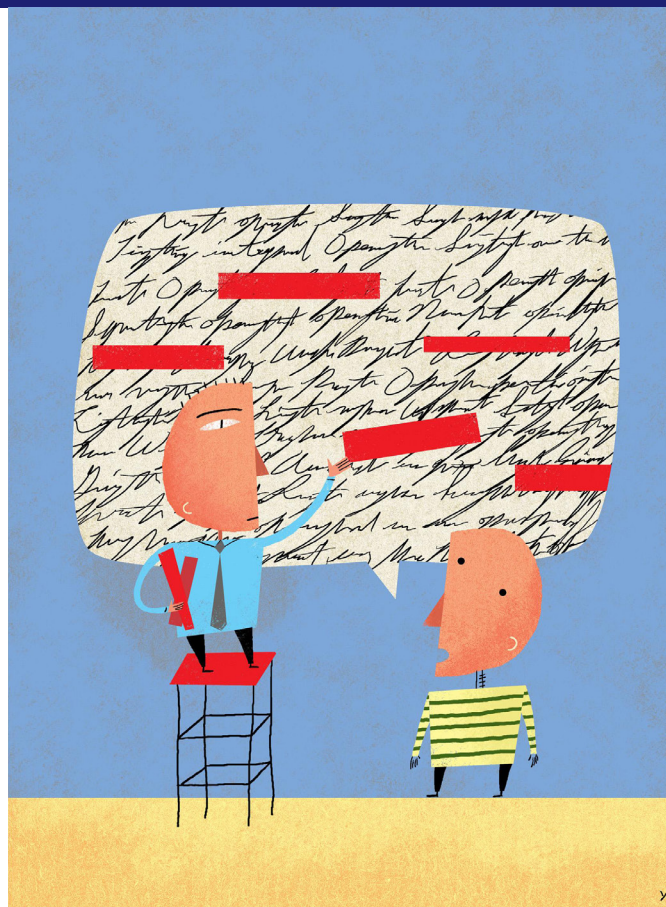# Actioning Organizational Discourse to Re-Articulate Change Practice

David Grant Ph.D. and Cliff Oswick Ph.D.

INTRODUCTION

In this article we seek to familiarise Organization Development (OD) practitioners with key ideas about organizational change from the academic field of Organizational Discourse. Organizational Discourse has emerged over the last two decades or so to become an important way of thinking about organizational phenomena, and discursive ideas and research are now featured regularly in scholarly journals around the world. Many of these publications will not be familiar to OD practitioners. Here, we seek to bridge this academic-practitioner gap by outlining some of the core ideas concerning discourse and organizational change, and by considering their implications for a practitioner audience.

There are three main parts to this article. First, we introduce and define organizational discourse. In doing so, we note that in several key respects it overlaps with what have been described as "new" OD practices. Second, we explore the potential for organizational discourse studies to contribute to new OD theory and practice by drawing on a discourse analytic framework for understanding change recently proposed by Grant and Marshak (2009). A final discussion provides some summary and concluding comments. As we move through the article we cite a range of readings that are designed to act as a starting point for those who might wish to examine the field of organizational discourse and its potential contributions to OD thinking and practice in more detail.

WHAT IS ORGANIZATIONAL DISCOURSE?

The term Organizational Discourse emanates from a variety of discipline-based perspectives where the central focus is the role of language and discursively mediated experience in organizational settings (Alvesson and Karreman, 2000a; 2000b; Oswick et al, 2010; Grant et al, 2004; Putnam and Fairhurst, 2001). "Discourse" in this context includes any form of communication through language, for example, conversations and dialogue or narratives and stories. These can be spoken or written or take the form of other more abstract types of media. They can occur at more micro levels such as interpersonal or small group interactions, or at more macro levels such as prevailing organizational stories (Grant et al., 2004; Putnam and Fairhurst, 2001).

Although approaches to the study of Organizational Discourse among scholars vary widely, most of them share either a social constructionist or critical perspective, or both. These two perspectives, in particular, relate to key assumptions underlying a number of contemporary, and what have been called "New" OD practices (Grant and

Marshak, 2008). What is particularly noticeable is that they focus on the role of language and other discursively mediated experiences in transforming social reality for organizational members, influencing their behavior, and shaping their mindsets. They also emphasize the processes that construct common social meanings and agreements within organizational contexts while asserting that there is no single, objective reality; rather, there are multiple realities that might offer alternative understandings of organizational phenomena. Finally, they emphasize how power and political processes are often used to establish new "realities" as the established or favored view of the world, thereby advantaging the views and beliefs of some organizational members over those of others.

THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONIST AND CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES

Organizational Discourse places discourse at the centre of sensemaking and the ongoing social creation of reality. What people believe to be "reality", "truth," or "the ways things are" is at least partially a social construct that is created, conveyed, and reinforced through discourse in the form of theories, stories, narratives, myths, and so on in action (Gabriel, 2004). This in turn reinforces or establishes organizational culture(s), structures and processes (Mumby and Clair, 1997). In effect, how we talk about and frame things shapes how we think about and respond to a situation (Gergen et al., 2004). Within an organization different groups might, of course, develop their own discourses about a particular issue. This can lead to multiple, often competing, versions of reality wherein no one version is "objectively" correct. Thus, at the heart of Organizational Discourse theory and research, is a focus on the prevailing discourses within an organization, how they are created and sustained, what impacts they may have on perception and action, and how they may change over time (Marshak and Grant, 2008; Oswick et al, 2010). We believe that these are clearly OD concerns too.

The critical perspective draws attention to the ways in which contending constituencies and players use power and power processes to create, privilege and affirm discourses (stories, narratives etc.) that advantage their interests and preferred view of the world (Fairclough, 1995; Hardy and Phillips, 2004). "In this sense, organizations are conceived as political sites, where various organizational actors and groups struggle to "fix" meaning in ways that will serve their particular interests" (Mumby, 2004: 237). The critical orientation's emphasis on how power and interests intersect to create the privileged versions of things helps us to understand that more than just "awareness" may be necessary to find common ground or achieve a change in mindsets. Instead, we need to recognise that power dynamics may be involved in establishing the narratives and alternative storylines associated with a different worldview.

Combined, these two perspectives, with their central focus on the role of discourse in the processes of

organizing and of organizations, create an emerging social science field of great potential value to a new ensemble of OD practices that have emerged in recent years. These include practices associated with Appreciative Inquiry, large group interventions, changing mindsets and consciousness, and interventions concerning diversity and multicultural dynamics (Marshak and Grant, 2008). Instead of attempting to leverage solely techno-structural or human processes for change, these practices implicitly focus on meaning making, language, and "discursive phenomena" as the central medium and target for changing the way people think and behave (Bushe and Marshak, 2009; Marshak, 2002). As such, they overlap with Organizational Discourse in ways that suggest this new field offers sympathetic concepts and research that could provide them with additional theoretic rigor and enhance their applied value.

A DISCOURSE-BASED FRAMEWORK FOR UNDERSTANDING ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE

We believe that there are several important ways in which the new field of Organizational Discourse might be used to help create more informed and valuable new OD practices. As a starting point, we propose OD practitioners might want to consider a discourse-based analytical framework for understanding organizational change recently proposed by Grant and Marshak (2009). This framework comprises a number of key constructs and associated propositions that highlight the need to take into account and understand the significance of discourse in relation to planning and effecting organizational change. In doing so, it demonstrates the importance of considering the role and impact of discourse when seeking to practice change.

At the core of the framework is an understanding of discourse in relation to organizational change that reflects the social constructionist and critical perspectives outlined above. This central premise sees discourse as constructive and as shaping behavior by establishing, reinforcing, and also challenging the prevailing premises and schemas that guide how organizational actors interpret experience. It also suggests that power dynamics help to shape which of the many potential narratives or storylines will become the dominant, prevailing, or privileged discourse that leads to either support for, or resistance to, organizational change. The framework also identifies several key dimensions, nuances and intervening factors that extend and elaborate further on this fundamental premise. It is to these dimensions that we now turn our attention.

LEVELS OF CHANGE-RELATED DISCOURSE

Discourses operate at several different levels. It is possible to identify five that merit attention in relation to organizational change – the intrapsychic, the micro, the meso, the macro and the meta (Alvesson and Karreman, 2000b; Broadfoot, Deetz & Anderson, 2004; Putnam & Fairhurst, 2001; Gergen, 2000). At the *intrapsychic level* a discourse might manifest itself in the form of internalized

stories and introjected beliefs that an individual tells himself or herself. It can also refer to cognitive frames and schemas.

Analyses of discourses at the *micro level* focus on the detail of language in use by individuals. Such analyses can offer a range of insights into the attitudes, affiliations, orientations, motives and values of a given organizational stakeholder.

Beyond the individual focus of the micro-level, it is possible to consider discourse at the *meso-level* to explore the interpersonal. Such analyses concern talk-in-interaction and explore the role of discourse in shaping social order in everyday organisational conduct. At this level discursive interactions will impact on the actions and behaviour of individuals within a localised context, e.g. a department or among a specific group of actors who socially interact on a regular basis.

Macro level discourses can be viewed as an aggregation and accumulation of an amalgam of meso-level discursive interactions in organizations. Here, interactions such as conversations and texts coalesce to form the dominant thinking, institutional practices and collective social perspectives within an organization.

Meta level discourses have been described as discourses that are recognised and espoused at the broader societal level and across institutional domains. As such they might address "more or less standard ways of referring to/ constituting a certain type of phenomenon" (Alvesson & Karreman, 2000b: 1133).

Any level of discourse may be informed by discourses that operate at other levels (Boje, 2001; Robichaud, et al. 2004). This inter-discursivity means that it is important to identify and analyze specific, micro-level discourses pertaining to change, within say a conversation, and to then place them in the context of other meso, macro or even meta discourses.

THE CONSTRUCTION THROUGH CONVERSATION OF A PREVAILING NARRATIVE OF CHANGE

Narratives are discursive devices that focus on common themes or issues and which link a set of ideas or a series of events (Boje, 2001; Gabriel, 2004). In particular narrative constructs that relate consequences to antecedents through event sequences in context over time appear to be particularly relevant to understanding the unfolding of complex organizational change processes. A key discursive practice in the construction and dissemination of narratives of change is conversation.

Conversations communicating a narrative pertaining to organizational change often assume story-like qualities. That is, they might evoke a plot in which the characters play out key events as the narrator experienced them or wishes them to occur. The significance of story-lines or narratives to effecting organizational change cannot be underestimated for they convey the prevailing or intended rationales supporting change or stability. As Marshak and Grant (2008: 14) have noted "changing consciousness or mindsets or social agreements - for example about the role of women in organizations, or about hierarchical structures, or even about how change happens in organizations - would therefore require challenging or changing the prevailing narratives, stories, and so on that are endorsed by those presently and/or historically in power and authority".

DISCOURSE, POWER AND CHANGE

We have already observed that the ways in which power dynamics help to shape the prevailing or privileged discourse about a specific change and the phenomenon of organizational change, is a central concern of organizational discourse research. One way of understanding the dynamics of this relationship and how it affects a discourse based framework of change is to utilise a perspective proposed by Hardy and Phillips (2004: 299) in which: "…power and discourse are mutually constitutive: … In other words, discourse shapes relations of power while relations of power shape who influences discourse over time and in what way".

Hardy and Phillips (2004: 306-307) go on to assert that the ability of a particular group to produce and disseminate influential discourses will be impacted by whether members of the group are able to draw on: formal power (occupation of a formal hierarchical position that enables the holder to privilege their discourse); critical resources (the ability to use rewards, sanctions, expertise, access to organizational members higher in the authority structure, control of finances, etc., in order to promulgate a discourse); network links (social relationships and a capacity to constitute alliances with, incorporate, and win the consent of other groups that might otherwise oppose the discourse that is being promulgated); and discursive legitimacy (the ability to produce a discourse that is authenticated by other people who by virtue of their number or position validate its dissemination and extend its reach).

The mutually constitutive relationship of discourse and power and its significance to the framework proposed by Grant and Marshak (2009) is apparent in several respects. For example, conversations about change-related issues held among actors with differing interests will involve the meanings attached to these issues being negotiated, reinforced and privileged by those actors drawing on their various power resources. Assuming there is some social agreement resulting from these tacit discursive negotiations, a dominant narrative emerges that will influence how the change is conceived, understood, and should be implemented.

COUNTER DISCOURSES OF CHANGE

The extent to which any individual's or group's particular discourse and associated narratives come to dominate the meaning attached to an organizational change related

issue is linked to power dynamics as discussed above. Often however, there is a considerable struggle among different actors and interests to establish a dominant meaning, such that discursive "closure" is rarely complete. This leaves space for the production of "counter" discourses that may, in turn, come to dominate. These counter discourses may be "localised" i.e. more prevalent and representative of views about the change among a particular group within an organisation or they may be more widely held. The extent to which they take hold will vary from individual to individual and group to group (Ford, et al, 2009). Furthermore, they could be expressed in several forms. Outright resistance would of course be one form, but so too would be discourses that express denial or ambivalence towards change. In short, discourses that are counter to the prevailing discourse of organization and/or change will exist. These may be drawn upon in ways that work to the detriment or benefit of the change process and its outcomes (Ford et al, 2008).

DISCOURSE AND REFLEXIVITY ON THE PART OF CHANGE AGENTS AND RESEARCHERS

Considering "discourse," at multiple levels, to be an important target and lever for organizational change requires researchers and change agents to be more reflexive about what they say and hear in relation to change than is often the case. In particular, change agents need to be sensitive to the emergence of discourses that are counter to their own, and if necessary respond to, or even draw upon and appropriate, these counter discourses in ways that benefit the change process (Ford et al, 2008).

This suggests that for change agents there is a responsibility to reflect constantly upon and, if necessary, adjust their language in response to its effects upon the intended audience (i.e. those charged with implementing and practicing the change) (Marshak and Grant, 2008). Here notions of argumentation, rhetoric, issue selling and other linguistic and semiotic devices related to dramaturgy, impression management and influencing tactics might come into play.

CHANGE, DISCOURSE AND RECURSIVITY

For the authors and various co-locutors of change-related narratives, these discourses are not a "one off" experience. Rather, they are used on an ongoing basis to maintain and further the interests of particular groups or individuals; and people continually draw on them in order to make sense of events that are continually unfolding around them. Accordingly, discourses at multiple levels are produced, disseminated and consumed as a continuous, iterative and recursive process (Grant & Hardy, 2004; Robichaud et al., 2004).

It is essential then that any discourse-based understanding of change include an appreciation of recursivity and these critically important dynamics. Change practitioners will need to recognise that discourses of change are, over time, produced,

disseminated and consumed as a continuous, iterative and recursive process. As part of this process, changes occur in the meanings that these discourses convey, along with the socially constructed realities, agreements and mindsets that they construct. While this point may seem somewhat obvious, many analyses of discourses in organizational settings, though based on theories that emphasise recursivity, seem to take it as a given. As a consequence, they insufficiently reflect on, and demonstrate, the significance of recursivity and the actual processes by which it plays out. Instead, discourses are often studied as if they are constructed at a fixed point in time without considering how it is that the discourse has, over time, evolved into its present form. In short, it appears that discourses tend to be studied in such a way as to imply stasis and to downplay their more dynamic characteristics.

This emphasis on stasis is contrary to models of organisational change that see it as having a temporal dynamic – one in which change whether planned or unplanned, continuous or episodic seeks to take effect over a period of time.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Our discussion of Organizational Discourse along with the presentation of a discourse-based analytical framework for understanding change has several important implications for current OD practice. Ideas and innovations from Organization Discourse might be especially helpful in expanding understanding of the importance of conversation, context, and contention as critical variables in effecting change. Incorporating theory and research from a discipline that is self-consciously focused on understanding discursively-mediated experience as the core variable in organizational change, would also add an important philosophical base to new related OD assumptions and approaches.

A discourse-based framework of change such as that proposed by Grant and Marshak (2009) extends these contributions to the theory and practice of organizational change and, more specifically, to new OD, in three important respects. First, it invites OD practitioners to approach organizational change with an understanding that language in its many manifestations is constructive and central to the establishment, maintenance, and change of what is and what should be. A discourse-based practitioner, therefore, might engage organizational change situations by asking questions and taking actions that other more objectivist perspectives might not consider or even notice. More specifically, OD practitioners engaged in the types of new OD practices outlined earlier, might like to pay particular attention to ways in which they can help involved parties negotiate and socially construct new shared agreements and mindsets about the "reality" of a situation. This will primarily involve discursive interventions that help negotiate agreement on a prevailing narrative. Such an approach differs from the range of traditional interventions based on an educational orientation wherein more facts or information are provided

to alter perceptions, create greater alignment, and thereby reach agreement.

Second, the analytical framework combines the insights from a range of studies that can be used by practitioners to generate a multidimensional and comprehensive understanding of the complex role and impact of discourse in its many manifestations on organizational change processes. In particular, it emphasizes the interactive and recursive aspects of all of its components. Often, the study and practice of change focuses on only one or a few of the model's components and not infrequently with an implied or actual linear, cause-effect orientation. Although perhaps difficult to achieve, the framework clearly shows that practitioners should think about organizational change in more contextual, non-linear, and on-going terms.

Finally, and in line with aspects of the critical perspective of organizational discourse a discursive framework of change draws attention to the need for OD practitioners to understand how power is used to create, sustain, and change the prevailing or privileged discourses or narratives guiding how situations are experienced. This means they should explicitly recognize and attend to the power and political processes underlying the situations they address, and the methods they employ. From the critical perspective, change methods assuming consensual processes among presumed "equals," facilitated by "neutral" consultants, will, at best, "misread" the underlying power dynamics. Instead, understanding how various forms of power and persuasion are used to help facilitate negotiated agreements becomes an ethical if not a practical imperative. This is true, even when the dominant approaches used by OD practitioners are to help foster "power equalization" among the participants.

The implicit emphasis on reality and mindsets being socially negotiated within new OD practices, highlights the need for theories of power and discursive processes to be more explicitly incorporated into these approaches. This may require a professional discourse that is more accepting, if not embracing, of power dynamics. Premises and practices related to the uses of negotiation, power, and political processes to establish socially constructed realities, agreements and mindsets are in stark contrast to those prevailing in most current forms of OD. Instead, most OD practices and practitioners tend to embrace collaborative and generative assumptions about change in human systems. These assumptions reflect the strong values in OD against uses or abuses of most forms of power and in favour of using rational, fact-based processes. In short, we believe power issues have been neglected in favour of less confronting and more "optimistic" or "positive" approaches. In that regard, aspects of the critical perspective in Organization Discourse could be especially helpful in drawing attention and legitimacy to the darker side of socially constructed change.

BIOGRAPHIES

David Grant, Ph.D., is Professor of Organizational Studies at the Faculty of Economics and Business, University of Sydney. His research interests focus on organizational discourse theory and analysis, especially where these relate to leadership and organizational change. In 2008 he was elected a Fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences in Australia. He is a member of NTL and has worked on research and consultancy projects in Europe, Australia and Asia.

Cliff Oswick, Ph.D., is Professor in Organization Theory and Dean of Law & Social Sciences at Queen Mary, University of London. His research interests focus on the application of aspects of discourse to the study of management, organizations, organizing processes, and organizational change. He is a member of NTL and the European Editor of Journal of Organizational Change Management.

November 2010

REFERENCES

Alvesson, M., and D. Kärreman. (2000a). 'Taking the Linguistic Turn in Organizational Research: Challenges, Responses, Consequences'. *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science,* 36(2): 136-158.

Alvesson, M. & Karreman, D. (2000b). 'Varieties of Discourse: On the Study of Organizations Through Discourse Analysis'. *Human Relations*, 53(9): 1125-1149.

Boje, D.M. (2001). *Narrative Methods for Organizational and Communications Research*. London: Sage.

Broadfoot, K., Deetz, S. & Anderson, D. (2004) 'Multi-levelled, Multi-method Approaches in Organizational Discourse', in D. Grant, C. Hardy, C. Oswick and L. Putnam, *The Sage Handbook of Organizational Discourse.* London: Sage.

Bushe, G. R., & Marshak, R. J. (2009). 'Revisioning Organization Development: Diagnostic and Dialogic Premises and Patterns of Practice'. *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science,* 45(3): 348-368.

Fairclough, N. (1995). *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language*. Longman, London.

Ford, J. & Ford, L. (2009). 'Resistance to Change: A Reexamination and Extension', In Woodman, R. Passmore, W. & Abraham, S (Eds.) *Research in Organization and Development* Vol. 17. Bingley UK: Emerald Group Publishing.

Ford, J. F., Ford, L. W., & D'Amelio, A. (2008). 'Resistance to Change: The Rest of the Story'. *Academy of Management Review,* 33 (2): 362-377.

Gabriel, Y. (2004). 'Narratives, Stories and Texts'. In. D. Grant, C., Oswick, & L. Putnam (Eds.), *The Sage Handbook of Organizational Discourse.* London: Sage.

Gergen, K. (2000) *The Saturated Self: Dilemmas of Identity in Contemporary Life* New York: Basic Books. (2nd Edn.)

Gergen, K. J., Gergen M. M & Barrett F. J. (2004). 'Dialogue: Life and Death of the Organization'. In: D. Grant, C. Hardy, C. Oswick, & L. Putnam (Eds), *The Sage Handbook of Organizational Discourse*: 39-60. London: Sage.

Grant, D and Marshak, R. (2009). 'A Discourse-based Theory of Organizational Change'. Proceedings of Academy of Management Annual Meeting. *Green Management Matters.* Chicago, August.

Grant, D., C. Hardy, C. Oswick and L. Putnam (2004). 'Introduction - Organizational Discourse: Exploring the Field'. In: D. Grant, C. Hardy, C. Oswick, and L. Putnam (eds), *The Sage Handbook of Organizational Discourse*. Sage, London.

Hardy, C. and N. Phillips (2004). 'Discourse and Power'. In: D. Grant, C. Hardy, C. Oswick and L. Putnam (eds), *The Sage Handbook of Organizational Discourse.* Sage, London.

Marshak, R. & Grant, D. (2008). 'Organizational Discourse and New OD Practices'. *British Journal of Management.* 18(1): 7-19.

Marshak, R. J. (2002). 'Changing the Language of Change: How New Concepts are Challenging the Ways we Think and Talk about Organizational Change', *Strategic Change,* 11(5): 279-86.

Mumby, D. K. (2004). 'Discourse, Power and Ideology: Unpacking the Critical Approach'. In D. Grant, C. Hardy, C. Oswick, and L. Putnam (eds), *The Sage Handbook of Organizational Discourse*. Sage, London.

Mumby, D. K. and R. P. Clair (1997). 'Organizational Discourse'. In: T. A. Van Dijk (ed), *Discourse As Social Interaction.* Sage, London.

Oswick, C, Grant, D., Marshak, R. and Wolfram-Cox, J. (2010). 'Organizational Discourse and Change: Premises, Perspectives and Prospects'. Journal of Applied Behavioral Science. 46(1): 8-15.

Phillips, N., & Hardy, C. (2002) Discourse Analysis: *Investigating Processes of Social Construction*. London: Sage Publications.

Putnam, L. & Fairhurst, G. (2001). 'Discourse Analysis in Organizations: Issues and Concerns'. In *The New Handbook of Organizational Communication: Advances in Theory, Research and Methods*, F.M. Jablin and L. Putnam (eds.). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Robichaud, D. Giroux, H. & Taylor, J. (2004). 'The Metaconversation: The Recursive Property of Language as a Key to Organizing'. *Academy of Management Review*, 29(4): 617-634.