

Running Head: Bottom-Up Constructionist Change

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### **Bottom-Up Instigated Organization Change Through Constructionist Conversation**

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### Abstract

A social constructionist practitioner approach for framing organizational change from a non-executive, non-managerial employee perspective is proposed that describes organizational change as conversational shifts. Social constructionist approaches to organizational life offer employees possible conceptual spaces within which to envision and proactively participate in organizational change in ways that structuralist-functionalist approaches do not. Sensemaking about resistance to change and possibilities for change using issue selling and other frameworks from the change literature provide ideas for shifting conversations and knowledge management in organizations. This paper provides a starting point for theoreticians and practitioners to articulate and explore potentials of bottom-up instigated organizational change.

*Keywords: bottom-up change, conversations, resistance, social constructionist theory, knowledge, sensemaking*

## Bottom-Up Instigated Organization Change Through Constructionist Conversation

Social constructionist approaches to organizational life offer low-ranking employees who do not have a high degree of positional power and authority possible conceptual spaces within which to envision and proactively participate in organization change in ways that structuralist-functionalist approaches do not. In my masters-level courses on organization change, students ask me how they, most of whom do not yet hold leadership positions in their organizations, can initiate organization change in a theoretically informed way. What these students – and many employees in general – seek is a framework with which to conceptualize and engage in bottom-up instigated organization change praxis.

I propose a bottom-up practitioner approach for framing change from the low-ranking employee perspective. The perspective taken continues the reasoning of Ford (Ford, 1999) describing organization change as conversational shifts and of Shaw (Shaw, 2002) as changing conversations. Because organization change emerges from individuals taking responsibility for conversational frames and shifting them to accommodate new ways of conceptualizing organizational ‘reality’ (Ford, 1999) – that is, new ways of defining what constitutes knowledge – I argue that organization change does not happen solely in a top-down, leader-led, strategic manner. Employees at all levels can and do engage in change that holds potentially broader implications for organizational culture and functioning beyond localized levels.

The term, instigate, connotes subversive potential of bottom-up change. More importantly, however, is the notion of the term that some process is stirred up and inspired. Bottom-up change must do both. Bottom-up change instigators must somehow use their limited positional power to stir up action. This will probably depend on social interaction with others that somehow inspires action for change.

Two broad areas of inquiry emerge in this paper. The first is the one my students raise: How may employees instigate bottom-up change that is theoretically informed? What theoretical frameworks and existing areas of research may employees, who are not high-level managers, use to engage in deeply considered, professionally-engaged praxis? The second area of inquiry is: if bottom-up instigated organization change is, by definition, localized, how extensive can this form of organization change be from an organization-as-a-whole perspective? That is, apart from the more instrumental effects of such change, should organization and knowledge management theorists take such bottom-up instigated change seriously, and why?

#### (Bottom-Up Instigated Change: Not a New Practice)

In the literature and training programs designed for organizational practitioners, such as publications for employees seeking to develop their skills, masters of business and public administration degree programs, and corporate training programs, there is a marked absence of models of bottom-up instigated OD approaches. The very pertinent question of what bottom-up instigated change might 'look like' and what approach might be theoretically prudent to adopt when embarking on change remains a gap in the literature.

This leaves employees with little but ad hoc notions of how to conceptualize organization change given their circumstances. It is not that the existing OD literature is wrong or misguided. Rather, employees at all levels require frameworks and training in organization change – as employees would apply them.

The existing literature related to bottom-up instigated change advances the theoretical constructs of organization change initiated by non-top management employees. This literature includes topics such as personal initiative and proactive behaviors (Crant, 2000; Fay & Frese, 2001; Morrison & Phelps, 1999; Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Paine, & Bachrach, 2000), upward management and issue selling (Dutton & Ashford, 1993; Dutton, Ashford, O'Neill, & Lawrence, 2001), influence without authority (Bellman, 1992; Fisher & Sharp, 1998), social networking, (Shirky, 2008), and strategic sensemaking and sensegiving by middle managers (Rouleau, 2005). From a social constructionist perspective, the impossibility of establishing a monolithic 'story' or a single picture of the organization given the multiple perspectives and conversations that make up the organization raises questions about any assumption of the paramount importance of top-down change. Also, the organization change literature provides some indications that change that is initiated within one's work group elicits more positive buy in and morale among employees (Griffin, Rafferty, & Mason, 2004).

Many change efforts initiated by low-ranking employees hinge primarily on their understanding of how work is conducted in existing conditions versus how it might potentially unfold in some transformed future set of conditions (e.g., Weldon, 2000). This idea of a localized focus on work and how to carry it out is similar to Schein's concept of

“operator culture” (1996). Understanding bottom-up instigated change from this perspective may be more instructive in the context of educational and training settings because of its frame of reference from the employee's situated experience rather than from a positivistic orientation promoted by managerial legitimization. Therefore, the intended primary audience of this paper is the employee seeking a framework to begin to think through and organize bottom-up instigated organization change.

### (Organizations as Conversation: Change as Conversational Shifts)

Social constructionist theorists generally agree that the world does not exist for us to discover and that language and our use of language do not mirror a fixed and ontologically demonstrable reality. Even the natural sciences have long been understood as a social activity (Pickering, 1984) influenced by professional concerns (Kuhn, 1996). What has traditionally been considered reality (e.g., what one sees, names, interacts with, thinks about) is socially constructed principally through language (Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Gergen, 1994, 1999). Reality is an invention of which we each strive daily to maintain an understanding, using language and dialogue with others.

Language in this case is not a private language (e.g., Wittgenstein, 1958) but refers to uses of language socially, historically, and culturally, such as in Gergen's following sense: “the terms in which the world is understood are social artifacts, products of historically situated interchanges among people...the process of understanding is not automatically driven by the forces of nature, but is the result of an active cooperative enterprise of persons in relationship” (1985, p. 267). We are each socialized within the

context of inherited background conversations, those collections of constructed realities that constitute assumed and received understandings “comprising the intertextual links on which current conversations build and rely” (Ford, 1999, p. 484). Background conversations are those implicit networks of received meanings among which we are socialized and that serve as a mostly “unspoken back drop” (Ford, 1999, p. 484) to our contemporary conversations. Collectively, we engage in dialogues that shift meanings through conversations. So, despite inherited conversations, change is possible through dialogue and shifts in our linguistic social artifacts. Similarly, as Wenger puts it in the context of communities of practice: “Communities of practice can be thought of as shared histories of learning” (Wenger, 1998, p. 86). Bottom up change occurs when these histories of learning are negotiated between experience and competence through practice, which “entails the negotiation of ways of being a person in that context” (Wenger, 1998, p. 149).

Organizations not only ‘exist’ through social constructions that emerge through collaboration (Ford & Ford, 1995) but they also operate in a state of constant instability (Pascale, 1999), polyphony (Hazen, 1993), and fluidity (Chia, 1995). The change process is not deterministic (Caldwell, 2005). Regardless whether one’s role and vantage point are that of low-level employee, change agent, strategist, or leader of an organization, the organization is in a state of change by the very social nature of its operations (Brown & Duguid, 2000) and everyday practices (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002). Moreover, depending on who defines the organization, the outlook on the state of an organization will vary (Bolman & Deal, 2003; Kilduff & Mehra, 1997; Schein, 1996). The collective construction of an

organization in ‘real time’ is not a monolithic entity, standardized with a grand narrative across all stakeholders (Gergen, 1994; Gergen & Thatchenkery, 1996). Different parties in organizations can, however, arrive at a collective shared working sense of the organization; but this is always a provisional shared sense that is fluid by the very social and cultural dynamics that constitute how members of an organization understand the ‘hows’ and ‘whats’ of their organization.

Organization leaders and their employees all conduct their work from their socially constructed perspectives. Change initiatives that have broad organizational reach will require a consideration of issues of power and authority. Nevertheless, because of the nondeterministic nature of change in organizations, bottom-up instigated organization change holds potential that has not yet been fully described in the literature. A central question in this paper is how non-executive, non-managerial employees may use language to shift how their peers and others within their organization understand how work could be accomplished in contrast to how it is accomplished and whether this may yield behavior change. If individuals are initiating their own projects to change (e.g., improve) how work is accomplished without a specific organization-wide mandate, what are some praxis implications from the individual’s perspective? I argue that framing bottom-up instigated organization change as change through conversations may provide opportunities that existing power and authority organizational structures do not formally afford.

Conversations take on various forms. They can consist of a single speech act or complex collections of speech acts, such as dialogues, narratives, informal chats, and formal encounters. Conversations can be ‘in-the-moment’ utterances or can span years

through a sustained series of linked linguistic events, such as a series of published papers responding to prior publications or the process of revising a decades-old policy.

Conversations can be linguistic acts (e.g., verbalizations, typing emails) and they may also be subtexts that serve as ‘background conversations’ (Ford, 1999) to in-the-moment conversations. Background conversations are

an implicit, unspoken ‘back drop’ within which explicit conversations occur and on which they rely for grounding and understanding. Background conversations are manifest in our everyday dealings as a taken for granted familiarity or obviousness that pervades our situation and is presupposed in our every conversation (Ford, 1999, p. 484).

This intertextual backdrop of background conversations provides a sense of continuity among in-the-moment utterances.

Because of the pervasive and immediate experience of conversations in our daily lives, conversations often become objectified and treated as representing a fixed reality. The intertextuality and vivid experience of conversations give conversations the appearance of tangibility and permanence that can often make them seem object-like. This is similar to Whitehead’s notion of the “Fallacy of Misplaced Concreteness” (as discussed in Chia, 1995). We use language to refer to a wide range of referents, including the referents that are by-products of our very use of language to direct attention in particular ways. Examples of this are professional lingo and evocative metaphors used as descriptors that seem to take on a life of their own (e.g., “war on terror”, “golden parachute”).

Therefore, conversations are “the process through which we construct reality, [and] they are also the product of that construction” (Ford, 1999, p. 485).

The modernist attempt to privilege a reality outside of language that is ontologically discoverable focuses on a structural-functionalist identification and naming of the world around us. In contrast, the social constructionist approach emphasizes the subjectivity of individuals and their efforts to arrive at shared meanings (Jun, 2006). In organizations, the challenge of constructing shared meanings arises from the disparate perspectives and experiences of individual employees across the organization. The attempt to arrive at shared meanings does not necessarily privilege concreteness as much as the process of employees at all levels and in all functions engaging in an evolving intersubjective understanding of the organization and their places in the organization. Through committed praxis, which I discuss below, conversations can be shifted to transform the organization. Because social constructionism posits that reality is not an ontologically discoverable entity but that it is constructed through engagement among people over time, organizations change through the shift in these constructions and the meanings they hold for people.

As a result, making sense of change in organizations also depends deeply on shared interpretations of complex, fluid, and often emotionally laden (e.g., frustrating, anxiety-provoking) conditions. Intersubjective agreements on shared interpretations of organization conversations requires in-depth and sustained dialogue throughout the organization. The history, objectives, politics, personalities, processes and methods of an organization change project, among many other matters, all involve elaborate and composite interpretations articulated from the different perspectives of organizational

stakeholders. Arriving at a shared interpretation of so much is no simple task.

Language and networks of conversations make up organizations rather than reside within them or simply describe their objective conditions (Ford, 1999). Ford proposes a conversational perspective on change in organizations in which organizations and conditions within them are comprised of networks of conversations that may be shifted through dialogue (Ford, 1999). The network of background conversations and active daily conversations

are and provide the very texture of organizations. Planning, budgeting, hiring, firing, promoting, managing, rewarding, etc. are all conversations that are interconnected and constitutive of organizations and which are themselves constituted by different [...] realities. Organizations, therefore, are not discursively monolithic, but pluralistic and polyphonic with many conversations occurring simultaneously and sequentially. (Ford, 1999, p. 485)

The organization is a rich tapestry of conversations that reflect the multitudes of perspectives and ideas among its employees. The various organizational functions, areas of expertise, and personal concerns found in organizations are reflected in these conversations.

Further, because organizations are created through constructions of communicated and conversational exchanges – interpersonal and intrapersonal – (given the varieties of forms conversations can take on, as noted above), Ford suggests that, instead of

conversation being a tool within the change process, language and conversations are the context in which change occurs (Ford & Ford, 1995). Change is therefore a process within the textual and contextual network of dialogues and meanings that people create about the organization and work that occurs through it. Social constructionist theory is based on the ‘linguaging’ (Postman & Weingartner, 1971) of shared realities constructed socially in dialogue and in understanding various existing background conversations. With conversation as context of change, conversations and other forms of communication are not simply tools for change. Conversations are the very tissue and connective fiber of an organization that must be shifted to create change. Communication tools are still important from this perspective, but the use of such tools is also contextualized in the organization-as-conversations.

Individuals use conversations to shift shared meanings and, associated action, based on these changing meanings in organizations. How an employee shifts the use of language in their conversations can help shift others’ interpretations of the organization. This is what Ford describes as “conversational shifts” (Ford, 1999, pp. 488-492). In this way nonexecutive employees may enact organization change.

The conversations of organization change are sustained series of linked linguistic events that depend also on a shifting set of background conversations. As noted above, conversations take on various forms, ranging from the simplest single speech act to linked linguistic events across various locales and time frames. The form of change enacted through shifting conversations is not a trivial or superficial change. Catalyzing change in others’ constructed realities about how they might think and act in their organizational

context can be the most powerful sort of change because it minimizes resistance that can be so common when change efforts are not persuasive (Ford, Ford, & McNamara, 2002; Garvin & Roberto, 2005).

### (Localized Conversations and Change Praxis)

As in the case when change in organizations is initiated by leaders, change initiated by non-executive, non-managerial employees is often carried out by collective individuals of the organization, not by ‘lone rangers’. Change is not carried out solely by a single, rational change agent or a project manager (Caldwell, 2005). Organization change involves cultural shifts in social, interactive networks that make up organizations and how work is accomplished through them. On a more rudimentary level, effective leaders, change agents, and employees of all types depend on the other members of the organization with whom they interact and must coordinate efforts as they carry out their work. No work is accomplished purely in a vacuum, and organizations are inherently social endeavors through which members of an organization realize their achievements. Therefore, the issue of what changes in the organization is probably not as dependent on who initiates it – whether executive or non-executive employee – as much as on what sort of change is involved and how people accommodate the conversational shifts and changes in shared realities.

But, how change is initiated does likely depend on who initiates it; differences in power, deployable resources, and authority will certainly pose differential options, whether a low-ranking employee attempts to shift conversations or a high-ranking manager invests

significant resources into transformational change. As mentioned above, most of the organization development and change literature is focused on the latter scenario. It is the former case – the low-ranking employee who attempts to shift conversations – that interests us here.

Because of the low-ranking employee's minimal formal authority and power relative to top managers, conversational responsibility and communicating persuasive alternative shared realities are important tools for change. Since conversations are the context in which change happens, low-ranking employees can shift conversations, underlying shared realities, and even background conversations to initiate change. Employees may begin to alter the conditions for understanding contemporary constructions of meanings by altering the conversations with which members of the organization recreate those meanings. Similar to Dutton's (Dutton & Ashford, 1993; Dutton et al., 2001) notion of selling ideas, these new ideas enter a marketplace of other ideas, including existing ones, and must be worth at least as much 'value' to others for the idea to become desirable and consumable (to use a market metaphor).

Beyond this transactional approach to organization change, however, the social and cultural aspects of conversational responsibility and background conversations involve issues of politics, tradition, ethics, and professional and personal accountability. The employee who wields the potential power of change through conversational shifts without considering these informal aspects of the organization is likely in for a rude surprise, loss of legitimacy, and intractable resistance. Broad considerations that are specific to the organization and the individual employee's circumstances, such as those listed above, are

important to address regardless of one's status, power, and social standing.

The foci of prevalent conversations within the organization can affect how an employee broaches a new shift in conversation. This can include social and cultural pressures such as taboos and traditions. Shifts in stories and conversations may or may not be simply cultural anomalies (Jones, 1991), and employees will need to remain aware of managerial background conversations and broader cultural considerations in attempts to maintain conversational responsibility and create organizational praxis opportunities.

#### (Sensemaking and Crafting Change Conversations)

In addition to this conversationalist approach to organization change, bottom-up instigated change requires additional conceptual tools to help change agents to think in action and guide practice (e.g., Schon, 1983). Bottom-up change instigators seek possibilities for change, while at the same time faced with resistance to change. Through sensemaking of the resistance and possibilities, bottom-up change agents may reconstruct the relationship between organizational resistance to and possibilities for change (Moon, 2008). As Weick and Quinn (1999, p. 382) put it: “[T]o understand organizational change one must first understand organizational [resistance].”

The social constructionist perspective on resistance is that it is not a phenomenon to be discovered but rather a constructed understanding about the state of one's relationship with the organizational environment. People and situations within the organization will create conditions that may be interpreted as ‘resistance’ and ‘inertia’, but how that interpretation is used is an area of recent literature about using resistance as constructive

information for use by change agents (Ford, Ford, & D'Amelio, 2008; Piderit, 2000; Val & Fuentes, 2003).

Possibilities for change are also constructions. As with interpretations of resistance, possibilities for change emerge from an interpretation of the conversational context in the organization. Possibility is interrelated with resistance because they have a roughly complementary relationship to each other. What one interprets as resistance will affect the possibilities for change, and vice versa. Therefore, for bottom-up change agents, understanding possibilities of change necessitates an understanding of resistance to change.

Bottom-up change agents are not the only ones constructing notions of resistance and possibility. Organizations, as they experience fluidity, flux, and even transformation (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002), are made up of individuals and subgroups that create resistance and change possibilities. Bottom-up change agents interpret these emergent constructions of the organization and change through reconstruction of resistance and change possibilities (Moon, 2008). An integral aspect of this reconstruction process is sensemaking (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005) with self-awareness about one's approach and process to instigating change (Moon, 2008). With the notion of reconstruction of resistance and possibility, I highlight the need for bottom-up change agents to consider their interpretations as an inexact, but sufficient, re-enactment or recreation of the background and daily organization conversations surrounding change.

In a literature review, Pardo del Val and Fuentes (2003) identify multiple sources of organization change resistance and inertia. Table 1 shows these various sources. As

bottom-up change agents explore avenues for instigating change, maintaining awareness of these sources to aid their reconstruction of organization resistance. Viewed from a conversational perspective, each of these sources of resistance is a form of narrative that tells a unique story about the organization and the constructed realities of different perspectives. To bring about change, the bottom-up change agents must consider the possibilities for altering these narratives, opening up new opportunities for change. This is an example of Ford's (1999) notion of shifting conversations.

Table 1

## Sources of Resistance or Inertia

<i>Inertia in the formulation stage</i>	
Distorted perception, interpretation barriers and vague strategic priorities	Myopia Denial Perpetuation of ideas Implicit assumptions Communication barriers Organization silence Direct costs of change Cannibalization costs Cross subsidy comforts Past failures Different interests among employees and management Fast and complex environmental changes Resignation Inadequate strategic vision
<i>Inertia in the implementation stage</i>	
Political and cultural deadlocks	Implementation climate and relation between change values and organization values Department politics Incommensurable beliefs Deep rooted values Forgetfulness of the social dimension of changes

Other sources	Leadership inaction Embedded routines Collective action problems Capabilities gap Cynicism
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Note. From “Resistance to change: A literature review and empirical study,” M. Pardo del Val and C. M. Fuentes, 2003, *Management Decision*, 41, p. 150. Copyright 2003 by MCP UB Limited.

Regarding the creation of possibilities for change, Moon (2008) offers the following:

By possibility, I mean the available directions that instigated change may take. From different vantage points within the organization, individuals will have different perspectives on what is possible. But, as with resistance, the change instigator will not be aware of all possibilities. These possibilities, as constructions, may not all be opportunities for action. Conversational exchanges will allow the change instigator to develop insights on resistance to change, and they will also allow some inklings for how to reconstruct possibility based on perspectives of what is possible. The relatively limited resources available to the change

instigator will probably require him or her to cull together input and available resources from others in an opportunistic manner. The process of reconstructing possibility also includes developing mental models and other communication tools, such as metaphors (Hill & Levenhagen, 1995), that may help the change instigator articulate and organize the change effort.

Conceptual frameworks that support the bottom-up change agents' sensemaking interpretations of possibility may facilitate their approach to instigating change.

Dutton and her colleagues (Dutton et al., 2001) have developed an instructive framework for middle managers to sell issues upward in the organization that may generally also be applied by lower level employees. The framework consists of three categories of 'moves' to optimize the chances of selling one's ideas: 1) packaging, 2) involvement, and 3) process-related moves. Packaging involves considerations about how to present the logic of the issue and whether to bundle it with other larger issues in the organization, such as profitability or key stakeholders. Involvement includes decisions about who in the organization to involve and what the nature of their involvement should be. Process-related moves include considerations about formality of the proposal, preparation, and timing of the moves. The value of using such a framework is that conversational topics may be coordinated within the larger organizational context that inevitably involves power, politics, and other considerations that change agents must remain aware of. One use of this framework might be to use it as a checklist to ensure that

some important areas of managing a change project are not overlooked. Another use may be to guide bottom-up change agents to understand certain background conversations within the organization that may inform their sensemaking of resistance to and possibility for change. Dutton and her colleagues (2001) also provide organization contextual knowledge that is important for increasing issue selling success (see Table 2). Again, as with Pardo del Val and Fuentes' (2003) sources of resistance and inertia, these are areas of conversational consideration for bottom-up change agents.

Table 2

## Contextual Knowledge Important to Issue Selling

Type of Knowledge	Questions
Relational	<p>Who will be affected by the issue?            Who has experience with the issue?            Who cares about the issue?            What groups can help with advocating for the issue?            What groups might object to this issue?            Does this issue threaten anyone or any group?            Who has decision authority relevant to the issue?            Who has power to promote or to hinder this issue?            When will people be ready to hear about this issue?</p>
Normative	<p>What kinds of data do people use? In particular, what kinds of data do important people use?            How are data normally presented?            How are arguments made against an issue?            What kinds of protocols are followed?</p>

	What kinds of meetings or social gatherings are considered legitimate decision forums? How much time does it usually take to sell an issue? Have similar issues been sold (or failed) before?
Strategic	What are the organization's goals? How does the organization plan to achieve these goals? What are the critical strategic issues for top management? What is our broader competitive context?

Note. From "Moves that matter: Issue selling and organizational change," J. E. Dutton, S. J. Ashford, R. M. O'Neill and K. A. Lawrence, 2001, *Academy of Management Journal*, 44, p. 727. Copyright 2001 by Academy of Management.

Whelan-Berry, Gordon and Hinings (2003) make the case for differentiating between various levels of organization change: organization, group, and individual. Because conversations about an organization infuse all levels of an organization, bottom-up change agents should remain clear on what levels their focus will be. Reconstructing possibilities for change on an individual, task level will require a very different approach than, say, on a more organization-wide strategic level. Issue selling (Dutton et al., 2001) will also be very different for each of these levels because they affect and are affected by different conversational contexts. For example, involvement moves from Dutton's issue selling framework would cast different size nets for recruiting change collaborators in the organization. An organization-wide initiative would require a larger critical mass of collaborating individuals. For bottom-up change agents, the question of which level of the

organization to focus one's conversational shifts (Ford, 1999) is clearly an important one.

Finally, a couple of books on creating change when, as both book titles put it, "you are not in charge" (Bellman, 1992; Fisher & Sharp, 1998). Bellman (1992) discusses various strategies for enlisting others to cooperatively create change in an organization. Communication strategies, politics, relationship building, consulting to 'internal customers', earning the respect of managers, and understanding one's role as a leader from a 'support position' are topics discussed in Bellman's book. Fisher and Sharp (1998) present similar content as a process of three stages: build and enhance interpersonal skills, collaboratively clarify a vision for change, lead through influence and 'purpose-setting'. The crux of Fisher and Sharp's book is what they call 'lateral leadership' which involves influencing others and negotiating mutually desirable change outcomes with them.

In sum, bottom-up organization change is instigated through sensemaking about resistance to and possibilities for change (Moon, 2008). These processes of sensemaking are contextualized by the conversational tapestries that interweave background and daily conversations that all members of the organization engage in. As bottom-up change agents make sense of and engages in these conversations, the interrelations between resistance to and possibilities for change may be negotiated using frameworks such as developed by Pardo del Val and Fuentes (2003), Dutton and her colleagues (Dutton & Ashford, 1993; Dutton et al., 2001), Bellman (1992), and Fisher and Sharp (1998).

#### (Conclusion: Some Implications for Knowledge Management)

The previous sections begin to address my students' question mentioned at the

beginning of this paper: how can low-ranked employees initiate organization change in a theoretically informed way? There is much else to explore and consider in the future regarding bottom-up instigated organization change. However, I wrap up this paper with the question, why should knowledge management theorists take bottom-up instigated change seriously?

The most direct answer to this question is that employees already initiate organization development and change that is not directly mandated and orchestrated by managers. It is not uncommon for employees in organizations to engage in dialogue that leads to organization change. This dialogue often leads to experimentation and tinkering with how things are done in organizations that occur even in the most bureaucratic of organizations. Even prior or without need to ask permission (e.g., sell ideas) to top management (e.g., Dutton & Ashford, 1993), the theoretically interesting issue is this area of organizational activity from the practitioner's vantage point, not from the manager's perch. Rather than promote compliance with subservient compunction for having raised issues from the non-managerial perspective, a theory of bottom-up instigated organization change emphasizes the dialogical action (Freire, 2005) and hermeneutic significance of conversational responsibility (Ford, 1999), organizational praxis (Jun, 2006), and fully engaging in work (e.g., Lawrence, 1979).

In a sense, bottom up instigated change is the transformation of tacit knowledge (Irick, 2007) into external, physical knowledge by those who typically are not authorized to deploy many organizational resources. Put another way, it is a self-initiated attempt to convert "tacit, human capital into explicit, structural capital" (Irick, 2007, para. 2). Just as

knowledge sharing is a form of communication (Gumus, 2007), bottom up instigated change is a form of knowledge sharing. It may be difficult, if not impossible, to make the distinction between the 'individual' tacit knowledge and the community of practice knowledge. If, as Coakes and Smith (2007) argue, communities of practice are the where innovation takes place in organizations, then bottom up instigated change is less about individual initiative than a bottom up practice of change on a social network level. Still, the discussion of a social constructionist approach to bottom up change remains viable for employees to frame possibilities for change and learning.

Much of the OD literature explicitly states that OD is a top-down endeavor (e.g., Armstrong, 2006). Even where change leadership acknowledges the need for buy-in and distributed authority (Kotter, 1996), the underlying paradigm is top-down (Caldwell, 2005). Yet, clearly employees initiate change in organizations and much of it can be described as developing the organizations in planned and constructive, positive ways. Because change can and does emerge on a localized, bottom-up instigated scale, the social and cultural impact that such conversational shifts may make on a broader organizational landscape dovetails with the postmodern polyphony and fluidity described in organizational literature (Chia, 1995; Hazen, 1993). The so-called tacit or interpersonal dynamics within organizations can progress into large-scale transformation if the conversational shift holds broader organizational power and applicability. Rationalist ideals of organization change conforming to a systematic program led by strategists no longer fits viable practice or research (Caldwell, 2005; Wenger, 1998).

Tsoukas and Chia (2002) urge an increased research focus on what they call

“microscopic change” (p. 580) in organizations. This is the incremental change that occurs constantly through human action. They suggest that “[i]t is subtle, agglomerative, often subterranean, heterogeneous, and often surprising. It spreads like a patch of oil” (p. 580). Objectifying what I have called localized conversations and organization change, Tsoukas and Chia are describing the likely nature of bottom-up instigated change. But from the employee perspective, this description and theoretical approach are still unsatisfactory for guiding praxis and conversational responsibility.

Therefore, considering organization development and change from the employee’s vantage point requires theories and metaphors that employees may use to shift the traditional conversations and shared meanings about change in organizations. Providing usable frameworks, methods, and metaphors will be helpful for employees eager to engage in reflexive and theoretically informed change initiatives. The importance of theoretical exploration of bottom-up instigated change is not solely a utilitarian matter, however. It also provides critical thinking tools that may be emancipatory for employees interested in personal growth. After all, a theory of organization change from the employee’s vantage point must also inherently involve the nexus between the personal and the professional – that which has traditionally been sliced into a strained duality.

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