Abstract

This article presents ideas about language, power, and organizational change from the new academic field of Organizational Discourse. These ideas expand our understanding of the importance of conversation, context, and contention as critical variables in socially constructing change. Three key ideas include: 1) change is created by changing the discourse(s), 2) new shared realities are created by fostering social agreement on new discourses, and 3) power processes are central to the creation and change of discourses.

The purpose of this article is to introduce Organization Development (O.D.) practitioners to ideas about language, power, and organizational change from the new academic field of Organizational Discourse. Organizational Discourse has emerged in the past dozen years or so to become an important new way of thinking about a range of organizational phenomena including organizational change. For more detail, see Marshak and Grant (2008).

What is Organizational Discourse?

The term Organizational Discourse connotes a variety of perspectives drawn from many different disciplines where the central focus is the role of language in organizational settings (Grant, Hardy, Oswick, and Putnam, 2004). “Discourse” in this context includes not just “how we talk about things around here”, but any form of language based communication. For example, conversations, official narratives, stories, office chatter, documents, and plaques on walls. They can occur at more micro levels such as interpersonal or small group interactions, or at more macro...
levels such as policy documents, strategic plans, and boardroom positions. Discourses from the past can also shape present and future behavior in the form of established societal beliefs, theories, and stories about things. For example, the Newtonian “narrative” about a mechanical universe still shapes the way many managers think about organizations and change.

Although approaches to Organizational Discourse within the scholarly community encompass a variety of orientations, significant portions of the field embrace either or both a social constructionist and a critical perspective. We believe these two perspectives, in particular, relate to key assumptions underlying many leading edge O.D. practices. Specifically, they address how language, stories, conversations, texts and so on influence organizational behavior and shape organizational members’ mindsets. They also draw attention to the processes that construct common social meanings and agreements within organizations while asserting that there is no independent, objective reality. Instead, there are multiple social realities that offer alternative understandings of organizational phenomena. Finally, they emphasize how power and political processes are used to establish new “realities” or favored views of the world, thereby advantaging the interests and beliefs of some organizational members over those of others.

The Social Constructionist Perspective in Organizational Discourse

The social constructionist orientation in Organizational Discourse places discourse at the center of sensemaking and the ongoing social creation of reality. According to Mumby and Clair (1997, p. 181):

Organizations exist only as far as their members create them through discourse.
This is not to claim that organizations are ‘nothing but’ discourse, but rather that discourse is the principle means by which organization members create a coherent social reality that frames their sense of who they are.

What people believe is “reality,” “truth,” or “the ways things are,” therefore, is at least partially a social construct that is created, conveyed, and reinforced through discourse. This in turn reinforces or establishes organizational culture(s), structures and processes. How things are talked and written about is a significant context or container, framing how people experience and respond to any situation (Barrett, Thomas, and Hocevar, 1995). Different groups or levels in an organization develop their own discourses about a particular issue through stories, discussions and documents that define the way things are as they see and experience them. This can lead to competing versions of reality wherein no one version is “objectively” correct. Attention to the prevailing stories and storylines 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 becomes, as a result, a central aspect of Organizational Discourse theory and research. Naturally this also implies the possibility that there are multiple realities (different stories, different narratives, different cognitive constructs, etc.) in any given situation.

The Critical Perspective in Organizational Discourse

The critical perspective (so named because its adherents tend to question or look critically at dominant or “dominating” world views) draws attention to the ways in which contending constituencies and players use power and power processes to create, privilege and affirm stories, narratives, beliefs, theories, and so on that advance their interests and preferred view of the world. “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, p. 237).

Changing organizational mindsets or social agreements - for example about hierarchical structures, the role of women in organizations, different business models or product lines, or even about how change happens in organizations - would therefore require challenging and changing the prevailing conversations, stories, and rationales that are endorsed by those presently or historically in power and authority. The critical orientation’s emphasis on how power and interests intersect to create privileged versions of things suggests that more than just “awareness” may be necessary to find common ground or achieve a change in mindsets. Instead, an appreciation of the power dynamics involved in establishing the alternative discussions and storylines associated with different worldviews is necessary.

Potential Contributions of Organizational Discourse to O.D.

A quick review of a few current O.D. approaches suggests how this line of research and theory might be relevant to practitioners’ interventions and facilitation practices.

Appreciative inquiry. In appreciative inquiry interventions are explicitly based on social constructionist assumptions and are intended to shift system member thinking to a more positive and generative consciousness in order to achieve transformational change. In one sense, then, appreciative inquiry creates an alternative and competing way of talking and questioning that is
intended to challenge “deficit-focused” thinking while generating new possibilities through altered and more positive conversations.

**Developing common ground and social agreements.** Large group interventions are used to find common ground and obtain simultaneous agreement among multiple constituencies, all of whose points-of-view are considered legitimate versions of reality. However, the underlying power and political dimensions involved in multiple constituencies reaching common agreements is perhaps currently underemphasized by practitioners. For example, analyzing the results of a Search Conference (SC), Clarke (2005, p. 42) comments that “...it was found that the most important outcome from the SC was its predominately political effects.” Organizational Discourse studies of how power is used to establish prevailing narratives among differing constituencies could provide additional insights and ideas for the facilitation of these types of interventions.

**Changing mindsets and consciousness.** In another stream of work, some O.D. consultants advocate practices for promoting shifts in mindsets and/or consciousness as the principal method to address change dynamics. For them, organizational transformation requires a change in consciousness, often starting with the leadership and extending throughout the organization. The ways in which mindsets and consciousness are formed and reinforced, or challenged and changed, through stories, myths, metaphors, conversations and so forth could be an important source of ideas for these approaches.

**Diversity and multi-cultural realities.** Many O.D. practitioners are interested in diversity and multi-cultural realities, including how various groups establish or reinforce standards, practices and paradigms that may favor their own interests and versions of reality. Some, but not all, approaches to addressing diversity and multi-cultural dynamics include recognition of, and interventions to address, how power is used by dominant groups in the establishment of versions of reality that favor their group and interests over others. The critical perspective in Organizational Discourse which emphasizes processes whereby some storylines, beliefs, conversations, and so forth come to be the dominant or privileged version of reality could offer additional insights, theories and research to these approaches.

These O.D. practices, in combination, place emphasis on socially constructed realities, transforming mindsets and consciousness, operating from multi-cultural realities, and forging common social agreements from the multiple realities held by key constituencies. They also all share an important characteristic. Instead of attempting to seek change solely through techno-structural or human processes interventions, they implicitly focus on meaning making, language, and “discursive phenomena” as the central medium and target for effecting change. In this regard they especially overlap with the new field of Organizational Discourse. In brief summary, Organization Discourse:

- Turns away from the more classical, objectivist sciences of the mid-twentieth century towards newer and alternative theories and orientations.
- Examines how stories, texts, metaphors, conversations, and other forms of communication influence and shape organizational processes, behavior, and change.
- Pays attention to the ways in which talk and texts create and reinforce mindsets.
- Considers the potential existence of multiple socially constructed realities.
- Recognizes that power structures may need to be addressed in order to challenge
and change the “storylines” that create and endorse the prevailing way things are experienced and understood.

A Closer Look at Organizational Discourse Ideas about Change

We believe Organizational Discourse can help inform O.D. theories of change in four important and inter-related respects.

1. Discourses shape our prevailing change concepts. In the broadest sense, discourses (stories, metaphors, theories) bring certain concepts into being, such that they become the established way of thinking about organizational change efforts (for example the need to first “unfreeze” before “moving” and then “refreezing”). In other words, established discourses “rule in” certain ways of thinking and talking about organizational change while also “ruling out” other ways. This can lead to limiting views of what change itself is and how it might be achieved. For example, consider the potential differences in approaches to an organizational change that is described as “incremental” and/or “episodic” versus “transformational” and/or “continuous” (Marshak, 2002).

2. Discourses set the context(s) for change. Studies of organizational discourse and change demonstrate how the multiple layers and contexts of meanings that frame any particular change situation influence how that change and change process are understood and unfold. Many of these studies show how micro-level discursive actions are located in the context of other macro-level, “meta” or “grand” discourses that exist within or external to the organization (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2000).

For example, local discussions about how best to organize and provide off-shore services are often framed by organizational discourses about “efficiency” and “survival” that are in turn framed by more macro-level narratives about “globalization and the need to lower costs in order to stay competitive.” Consequently, intervening at the local level to change the conversation from being primarily focused on economic survival can be made more difficult by the broader discourses at the organizational, industry, and even societal levels. Thus in some cases effective change interventions will need to address multiple layers of discursive context. Indeed, not aligning interventions to the multiple discursive contexts in which they take place is a recipe for limited success or even failure (Grant, O’Donnell, and Shields 2004).

3. Power dynamics shape discourses and change. We believe an understanding of the dynamics of power, discourse and change is an important orientation for the successful practice of O.D.. Achieving this will involve an appreciation of the relationship between power and discourse and integrating this more into O.D. practices and interventions.

One of the more informative ways of understanding the dynamics of this relationship comes from Hardy and Phillips (2004, p. 299):

…power and discourse are mutually constitutive: …the power dynamics that characterize a particular context determine, at least partially, how and why certain actors are able to influence the processes of textual production and consumption that result in new texts that transform, modify or reinforce discourses. In other words, discourse shapes relations of power while relations of power shape who influences discourse over time and in what way.

They also point out that multiple actors in a variety of positions are involved in establishing the
extent to which a particular storyline or interpretation comes to dominate the meaning attached to a particular issue. Often there is a considerable power struggle among these actors to establish a dominant meaning, such that “closure” is never complete leaving space for the production of “counter” discourses and alternative storylines that may in turn come to dominate.

The importance of recognizing and managing power relations and the various discourses that surround them would seem to be essential to many types of O.D. work, for example, work on diversity or forging common ground from among multiple stakeholders.

4. Discourse is a means to create change. We also believe that the field of Organizational Discourse has an important contribution to make with respect to discursive interventions and organizational change. Indeed, many O.D. practitioners already engage in discursive activities such as “changing the conversation” in order to frame new shared meanings and thereby create change in organizations.

A number of studies illustrate the potential for discourse to be used in this way. These include the work of Gergen, Gergen, and Barrett (2004) who have explored the transformative capacity of dialogue. For example, in the public conversations project, opposing factions involved in the abortion debate were brought together in small groups over a period of time. Their dialogue was guided in such a way that at their first meeting they were not allowed to discuss issues pertaining to abortion. In subsequent meetings their conversations with one another focused on how and why they became involved in the issue and they were allowed to tell stories about events and experiences that had shaped their views. Participants in this and similar projects have reported that they were better able to understand the views of the opposing party and not to over-react or be disparaging of those views.

Another example is research into how conversation and narrative can be used to instigate changes in organizational strategy and behavior in the form of inter-organizational collaborations (Hardy, Lawrence, and Grant, 2005). This work may be particularly relevant to those O.D. practices that seek to create common ground and social agreement among contending stakeholders. A key finding of this research is that inter-organizational collaboration emerges out of a two-stage process through which new meanings about a key issue are established and existing mindsets are significantly altered. In the first stage, participants engage in conversations that are intended to establish a collective identity among themselves. The second stage involves participants translating this collective identity into effective collaboration through further conversations that produce common and private constructions of the key issue. Effectively facilitating this two-stage conversational process requires a diversity of skills, structures and processes. It requires careful orchestration of the conversations so as to create the space and opportunity for collaborations to develop. It also requires facilitation that encourages cooperative styles of talk amidst conflict and legitimates assertive talk despite a group’s desire to “get along.”

Organizational Discourse, Power and Change

In sum, we believe there are important ways in which the new field of Organizational Discourse might be used to help create more informed and valuable O.D. practices. Ideas from Organizational Discourse could be especially helpful in expanding our understanding of the importance of conversation, context, and contention as critical variables in socially constructing change.
Incorporating theory and research from a field of study 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 O.D. assumptions and approaches. A brief review of some of the key ideas about discourse, power and change may help underscore this point.

Create change by changing the discourse. The application of many newer O.D. practices, for example appreciative inquiry, involves adopting a social constructionist orientation. This, in turn, implies that a primary way to effect change in social systems is by changing the prevailing discourse. Changing the discourse involves changing the rationales, stories, metaphors, texts, and conversations that create, sustain, and provide the enabling content and context(s) for the way things are. This, in essence, explicitly adds “discourse” as an important target and lever for organizational change, in addition to such factors as strategies, structures, rewards and processes.

Create shared realities through social agreement on discourses. From a social constructionist perspective, change agents should also pay attention to ways that help contending parties socially construct new shared agreements and mindsets about the “reality” of a situation. For example, does off shoring save costs, cost jobs, or something else? This will primarily involve discursive interventions such as the inter-organizational collaboration example described above. O.D. practitioners should also keep in mind that interventions to help reach agreement on a prevailing storyline or narrative may differ from many traditional interventions based on an educational orientation wherein more facts or information are provided to alter perceptions, create greater alignment, and thereby reach agreement. Instead, power dynamics may need to be explicitly recognized and managed.

Power processes are central to the creation and change of discourses. Aspects of the critical perspective help us to understand how power is used to create, sustain, and change the prevailing or privileged discourses, discussions, and documents guiding how situations are experienced. This means O.D. practitioners 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 social agreements becomes an ethical if not practical imperative. This is true, even when the dominant approaches used by O.D. practitioners are to help foster “power equalization” among the participants.

Concluding Comments

Given our last point, we also believe that increasing the influence and relevance of O.D. may require a professional discourse that is more accepting 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 O.D.. Even where they acknowl-
edge the significance of power relations to effect-
ing change, O.D. practices and practitioners still
tend to almost exclusively embrace collaborative
and generative assumptions about change in
human systems. These assumptions reflect the
strong values in O.D. against uses or abuses of
most forms of power and in favor of using ration-
al, fact-based processes.

Despite the ambivalence towards power that has
been a hallmark of most forms of O.D., the recent
emphasis on reality and mindsets being socially
negotiated highlights the need for theories of
power and discursive processes to be more explicit-
ly incorporated into O.D. practice. In that
regard, aspects of the critical perspective in
Organizational Discourse could be especially
helpful in drawing attention and legitimacy to the
power dynamics involved in socially constructing
change.

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