

ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE

● The beginning Framework

An Organization as a “Network of Conversations” and The Implications for Leading, Managing and Producing Desired Results

“When you change the way you *talk*, you change the way you think; when you change the way you *think*, you change the *world*.” -Howard Sherman

1. THERE ARE MANY DIFFERENT WAYS TO VIEW AN ORGANIZATION:

An organization can be viewed as structures and processes, as an array of resources, as a set of goals, etc. A useful perspective that gives an access point to effective leadership is that an organization is a “*network of conversations*.” James Champy in his book “Reengineering Management” says, “People like to think that businesses are built on numbers (as in the “bottom line”), or forces (as in “market forces”), or things (“the product”), or even flesh and blood (“our people”). But this is wrong... Businesses are made of *ideas* (italics added) – ideas expressed as words.”

- a) While we don't often recognize it, our *life* – our work, our decisions, and our relationships with friends, with associates, with our commitments – is achieved through speaking and listening, that is through “*conversations*”. In particular, it is through “*conversations*” that we manage: we decide on goals, we monitor results and assess whether they are good or bad, we decide, we relate, we guide, influence, etc. Speaking and listening – “*conversations*” – are often so commonplace that we fail to notice how vital they are, how it is that we use them, and in fact, *how they shape – design, make – the world for us*.
- b) From that perspective, an organization can be viewed a “*network of conversations*”, people speaking and listening – whether verbally or on paper, whether to themselves or to others. What does it take to manage, align and organize – make sense even – of the mass of words that make up any organization's *lexicon*? If we could take the roof off organizations and listen in, we would be able to discern the patterns and contents of this “network of conversations”. We would be able to discern the conversations that are consistent with the espoused principles, values, strategies, models, practices and behaviors, and those that are inconsistent. We could even speculate about *missing* conversations, the conversations one would expect given the espoused principles, models, practices and behaviors.
- c) So managing becomes managing what is being said and listened – the “*conversations*” of an organization. Every effective leader *knows* (even though they may not know that they know) how to manage the “network of conversations”. They know what conversations are effective in creating and sustaining the fast moving, entrepreneurial, market-altering, breakthrough performing, enterprise they want. Equally they know which conversations, if they gathered momentum, would stop, block or thwart what they want. And, leaders are always at work generating new conversations, new *ideas*, to further what they want.

2. WE LIVE IN A WORLD OF INTERPRETATIONS AND REASONS - THE IMPLICATIONS FOR OUR SPEAKING AND LISTENING

- a) Most of the time, we think that we are “blank slates” when we listen to others and that we have heard them fully when they finish speaking. What is invisible to us is the “pre-thinking” that we bring to the conversation. One of the ways this pre-thinking manifests itself is in the form of *interpretations*, which act as filters through which we listen, such that what is communicated, and the interpretation, become one and the same. These interpretations come from our background – family, education, and experience –, from models, and from the culture of the organization. They limit our capacity to hear what is really being said, especially new ideas and thinking.
- b) An intractable point of view is not arrived at from the cumulative experience of “what happened”, but from the decisions, conclusions and beliefs that are *derived from* (and indistinguishable from) what happened, and that we hold as true.

For instance, if our past (experience, knowledge, etc.) tells us “something” is not possible, we will automatically reject that “something” as impossible to the point that it will not be even be considered, no matter how valid or invalid our view of what happened was.

- c) We have *reasons* for everything, and the reasons tend to obscure the facts: for instance, we are rarely just late for a meeting. We are late because there was traffic on the road, we got lost, there was an accident, etc. In our mind the traffic, getting lost, the accident becomes the fact, rather than being late. *For most people no result, plus a good reason for no result, equals the result.*

3. HOW DO WE MANAGE A NETWORK OF CONVERSATIONS?

The key is to recognize that:

- 1) An organization needs *different types* of conversations to achieve its goals
- 2) Each type of conversations uses a *different language*
- 3) Managing the conversations means managing the language being used and managing each type *to its completion* – being clear about what its purpose and intended outcome are.

Three major downfalls in organizations:

- 1) We are not good at having *completed* conversations, which means that we have to have them again and again, which is inefficient.
- 2) We mix types of conversations – we could say that we “*ramble*”. Mostly, we devolve to exchanging points of view, for much too long, with no resultant action.
- 3) We view our points of view, and what we call facts, as *the truth*, rather than *our truth*, which inhibits our ability to engage in a conversation to resolve the problem. Rather, we try to persuade the others that we are right, with arguments and counter-arguments – or we command.

4. A FEW KEY CONVERSATIONS TO MANAGE IN ORGANIZATIONS

- a) Conversations for the Future, for “Possibility”, for “Context”. The language for these conversations is “*declarative*”, as in “we will...”, “we could...”, “I say that...”. The downfall in these conversations is that they are not maintained long enough for the value to be obtained and they are not moved through their “*paces*”. In particular, they are not followed by conversations for alignment, and they are interrupted by iterations of points of view already expressed and the need to agree/disagree.

- b) Conversations for Exploring an issue, or look at possible solutions: These conversations deal in facts, opinions and “grounded assessments” – each needs to be correctly identified. When the same opinions and assessments keep being repeated, it is time to move on. Too often a series of arguments and counter-arguments keeps the conversation “stuck” in place.
- c) Conversations for Deciding: Having heard all about an issue, all there is to do is choose and align on the choice – not re-speak all the arguments. The criteria needs to be the quality of the decision in forwarding commitments, not the best compromise we can agree on.
- d) Conversations for Action: These are designed to have people act. The language is “I promise”, “I request”, “I offer”, *with* an appropriate reply, yes (promise), no (decline), or counter-offer. This makes the accountability, and what is to be accomplished, clear to all. The pitfall here is not to be specific in the promise or request or, not waiting for the acceptance or decline of a request, which leaves the conversation incomplete and therefore ineffective.
- e) Conversations for Relationship: Designed to enhance or create a relationship. These can “ramble” and have feelings expressed, etc.

Beware: The habitual tendency *in all* conversations is to devolve to opinion swapping and ungrounded assessment exchanges, over and over again – which does not produce action or value for the organizations.

5. CONCLUSION

- a) An individual can be viewed as the sum of his/her spoken and unspoken conversations.
- b) Language shapes a person’s view of his/her world, and in turn, a person’s view of the world determines his/her actions.
- c) Our actions determine our outcomes.
- d) Given the huge variety of worldviews in an organization, conversations for creating and aligning first on vision (organizational, project, etc.), then on strategy and plans of actions is critical to performance. The objective of these conversations being *not to reduce* the variety, but *to create* powerful solutions.
- e) Effectively managing the organizational network of conversations allows for creating alignment, collaboration, and effective action.
- f) Leaders need to know at all times what conversation(s) they are forwarding, and what the conclusion of the conversation(s) looks like.
- g) Powerful leadership can be viewed as the effective management of the organizational network of conversations – including the leaders' own conversations.

"The phenomena of communication depends not on what is transmitted, but on what happens to the person who receives it."

The Tree of Knowledge, Maturana & Varela