LANGUAGE, POWER AND IDENTITY IN ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE

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This paper provides a review of the literature on language and organizational change and suggests that a need exists for a new approach to change that considers the relationship between language, power and identity. Drawing on the methodologies of critical sensemaking and discourse analysis, the approach proposed in this paper will look at the power / language relationships of change and identity in organizations. This approach will be used in a future study of two organizations that have implemented empowerment initiatives to affect organizational change.

Introduction

The growing recognition of organizational identity as an ongoing process of social construction among change theorists (Karreman & Alvesson, 2004) requires a deeper analysis of the relationships that produce this construction. Fundamental in the relationships that produce change are the elements of language, power and identity. Drawing on the methodologies of critical sensemaking and discourse analysis, this approach will look at the power / language relationships of change and identity in organizations.

Foucault's work on discourse analysis introduces the concept of a discourse "as a set of ideas and practices which condition our ways of relating to, and acting upon, particular phenomena"(Knights & Morgan, 1991:253). The discourse of organizational change – dominant in contemporary management theory – presents a distinctive set of language and practices. This discourse both empowers and disempowers actors within the change process by privileging truths about organizations and change. As the organizational change process is predicated on identity construction, the discourse of change also constructs and deconstructs identities among organizations and individuals at work. This connection between power and identity is the foundation of organizational change.

The process of analyzing identity construction and change must occur on both an organizational and an individual level. Discourse itself provides the basis for individual identity construction among members of the organization. At the same time, it exists at a level of broader organizational or social understandings with which individuals may connect. Knights and Morgan (1991:254) define their use of discourse as "shorthand for a whole set of power/knowledge relations which are written, spoken, communicated and embedded in social

practices. These relations have power and truth effects and it is the consequences that follow which are a major concern of a discourse analysis." From this same perspective, the proposed study will identify and analyze a discourse of change that is specific to organizations and individuals within organizations. And by extending this analysis to include sensemaking (Weick, 1995), the study aims to provide insight into how individuals make sense of discourse and enact it on an individual basis. Weick's (1995) sensemaking presents a useful frame for analysis of this type of dynamic interaction. Sensemaking offers a retrospective process through which individuals interpret and make sense of events in the change process. Identity construction is central to this process of sensemaking as it highlights the complex nature of social construction reflected in contemporary organizational change processes. At the same time, sensemaking offers an appropriate framework through which to analyze language relationships. Language, as seen through this framework, is the substance of sensemaking. "Sense is generated by words that are combined into the sentences of conversation to convey something about our ongoing experience" (Weick, 1995:106).

However, Helms Mills and Mills (2000a:66) have identified limitations to the sensemaking framework and advocate a more critical approach to sensemaking. Although they advocate the usefulness of the framework for analyzing language and organizational meanings, they point to a lack of attention to power relations and a reliance on universalizing assumptions in the framework as it exists. This leads us towards an approach of critical sensemaking which will take into account the dominant discourse in which individual sensemaking occurs.

This combination of Foucault's discourse analysis with a critical sensemaking approach will provide an opportunity to analyze not just the meanings that inform the discourse of change in organizations, but the individual sensemaking processes that allow change to be enacted on both an individual and organizational level. Foucault emphasizes that any analysis of power must also acknowledge resistance as part of the same process. In essence, resistance is the irreducible opposite of power (Foucault, 1980:96). There exists, therefore, a discourse of resistance to change. This focus on individual enactment of change (or resistance) in the context of a dominant change discourse may also provide useful insight into the constraints inherent in transformational change processes.

The process of analyzing identity construction and change must occur on both organizational and individual bases. Discourse itself provides the basis for individual identity construction among members of the organization. At the same time, it exists at a level of broader organizational or social understandings with which individuals may connect. It is this relationship between individual and organizational identity construction that will be the focus of future analysis. The purpose of this paper is to identify gaps in the literature on organizational language and change and propose a way to address them.

The Discourse of Organizational Change

Although there are some identified gaps in the literature, organizational change has emerged as one of the most written about aspects of business theory and practice. Van De Ven and Poole (1995) identified more than one million studies of organizational change almost 10 years ago. Since that time, the field has continued to grow (Sturdy & Grey, 2003). Nevertheless, the

demand for more and better information on how to manage change grows. Organizational change has become a requirement of modern business management, with firms routinely struggling to manage, embrace, facilitate, or embark upon change. And as Sturdy and Grey (2003:653) point out, the underlying assumption that connects this plethora of work on organizational change is that change "should, can and must" be managed. This assumption reflects the dominant perspective which "gives voice to managerial perspectives but neglects others" (Sturdy & Grey, 2003:653). These authors voice a concern "about the dominance of the view that organizational change is inevitable, desirable and/or manageable and that this view seems to be taken for granted, receiving relatively little critical attention" (Sturdy & Grey, 2003:659).

From the managerial perspective, language is viewed as a management 'tool'. Organizational leaders are advised to manage language and communication by choosing the 'right' vocabulary to reflect the desired organizational identity. Typically in this perspective language is teamed with other management tools to facilitate a more efficient change process. Fiol (2002) suggests that;

> Words must be consistent with resource allocations and other leadership behaviors. However, behaviors themselves do not have meaning without the language we assign to them. It is through rhetoric that leaders make a series of powerful change tools more powerful – selection systems, budgets and the like. Language gives them all specific meaning (Fiol, 2002:655).

In this vein, the language associated with change itself over the past few decades reflects a vocabulary of mainstream efficiency and control. Butcher and Atkinson (2001:562) describe terms such as "transformation, intervention, change strategy, vision, facilitation, coaching, change agent, culture change programme" as representations of change that is planned and done to organizational members. This designates change management as a technical process which can be applied to an organization. The authors also emphasise the resulting isolationist nature of the 'jargon' which surrounds change. "In this sense the language of change itself reinforces the inertia it is attempting to overthrow" (Butcher & Atkinson, 2001:562). They further assert that the contemporary language of organizational change has failed to achieve its promise. "…fundamentally, the language of conventional change is striking in its inability to create change. It has failed as a call to action for practising managers, being either rhetoric that is divorced from the reality of organizational life, or else well worn phrases that have become banal 'changespeak'"(Butcher & Atkinson, 2001:562).

But, "to criticize organizational change management for being managerialist is hardly a profound contribution – indeed it is almost a tautology" (Sturdy & Grey, 2003:656). What is needed is space for alternate voices in the study of change. In searching for a more complete understanding of the nature of change, alternative forms of analysis like discourse analysis or critical sensemaking theory may indeed offer insights that have eluded mainstream research to this point. Likewise, as researchers begin to move away from the traditional behaviourist theories of organization to more social constructionist approaches, the need to understand the relationship between language, power and identity has come more clearly into focus.

Although organizational change theorists have long acknowledged the relevance of language to change initiatives (Butcher & Atkinson, 2001; Ford & Ford, 1995), research on the relationship between language and organization has really begun to expand in popularity in the past several years (Taylor & Robichaud, 2004). As a result of this increased attention to the field, language and communication are now seen as central to any discussion of organizations(Cossette, 1998). As well, there is a growing recognition of the relationship between language and organizational change (Butcher & Atkinson, 2001).

Within this context, discourse analysis as an approach to studying change has begin to grow in popularity in organizational studies (Sturdy & Grey, 2003). This approach offers an alternative to the traditional analysis of change, and is seen " as a way of providing a different voice in OCM" (Sturdy & Grey, 2003:657). Discourse analysis has emerged to redefine the organization as socially constructed and language is central to this characterization of organization. Tietze (2005:49) describes organizations as "ongoing social processes" which are constructed and performed in language (Doolin, 2003). Language, in this sense, becomes much more than just a vehicle of communication. It is the process that generates and changes organizations by shaping individual understandings of identity and meaning (Hardy, Palmer, & Phillips, 2000).

Ford and Ford (1995:541) suggest that the traditional mainstream view of the relationship between organizational language, communication and change misses the point. They suggest that the dominant view of language as a tool that is used within a change process fails to recognize that "change is a phenomenon that occurs within communication."

This definition of change as a phenomenon that occurs within a process of socially constructed understandings of language and organization demands a deeper look at the relationship between language and change. It also underscores the importance of power and identity in this relationship as these elements are evident in the language associated with change.

Language, Power and Identity

The focus of any change initiative is essentially to re-define identities. Either from an individual or organizational perspective, change initiatives endeavor to provide a new way of conceptualizing "who we are" as an organization (Marshak, 1993). Typically, identities result from prior beliefs and experiences, ongoing interactions, and the retrospective process of sensemaking that individuals use to reconcile changes in their social, organizational identities. These new identities take form and exist as they are put into language by individuals and organizations (Fiol, 2002).

The idea of creating "new" identities is an interesting one. Gioia and Thomas (1996:394) found that organizational leaders readily accepted the idea of identity as 'changeable' over a fairly short period of time. This conceptualization of identity as fluid was, in fact, what made the prospect of organizational change plausible. However the existing change literature does little to address the contradiction between this view of identity as fluid and the commonly held definition of identity as being quite stable and lasting (e.g. Albert & Whetten, 1985).

This departure from the traditional understanding of identity has important implications for those engaged in change. "The definition of identity as enduring obscures an important aspect of identity within the context of organizational change: for substantive change to occur, some basic features of identity also must change"(Gioia & Thomas, 1996:394). This suggests that identities may not be fixed either for individuals or organizations involved in change processes.

Beech and Johnson (2005:32) also emphasize that fluidity in identity:

> Organizational change situations are not populated by fixed identities operating according to fixed routines, but are ongoing processes in which actors' beliefs are interwoven, habits and new actions collide, new experiences are encountered and have to be accounted for in the sense-making of actors.

One of the most sought-after identities in the realm of organizational change today is that of the 'empowered' workforce, organization or employee. But although the concept of empowerment is very appealing to organizational leadership, there are few examples of the successful operationalization of this within organizations (Forrester, 2000; Foster-Fishman & Keys, 1995). As a result, the critique of empowerment initiatives has come from both mainstream organizational theorists, who feel that the initiatives introduced have been flawed, and critical theorists, who view empowerment strategies as methods of increased organizational control which employees may choose to resist (Wilkinson, 1998).

Critical theorists argue that management theorists have failed to address the concepts of power and disempowerment in their discussion of employee empowerment, choosing to use language that promises power without addressing the practices that limit the devolution of power within organizations. As Hardy and Leiba-O'Sullivan (1998:472) point out, "rather than avoid power, it would appear that it is, perhaps, time for mainstream management research to address it more directly."

Researchers have noted that this "promise-making language" (Rosseau and Parks, 1993; Hardy and Leiba-O'Sullivan, 1998) creates beliefs about fairness (Rousseau & Aquino, 1992); and creates a psychological contract (Rousseau & Parks, 1993). These promises are rarely fulfilled, however, as organizational practice has failed to embrace the systemic changes that would be necessary to transform existing power relationships (Appelbaum, Hebert, & Leroux, 1999).

Wendt (2001) asserts that the mainstream view of power as a commodity or possession which can be used 'rationally' fails to address the apparent paradox of organizational empowerment. He suggests that,

> By appreciating the counterintuitive dimensions of organizational and group power dynamics and by continuously building a trusting environment, employees can begin to empower themselves and each other. However, just as organizational power relations are not always rational or linear, neither are they stagnant or ephemeral; empowerment, like communication itself, is thus an end never to be fully realized. This may be the hardest learned lesson of all, that communication and power and leadership are interrelated, unreachable endpoints

enacted through struggles over meaning, and not means or modalities (Wendt, 2001:52)

This struggle to make sense of power, empowerment and change takes place within a broader context of social and organizational meanings. Sturdy and Grey (2003:660) describe a "shifting, ambiguous and inherently political arena lying beneath and beyond the bland clichés, pious nostrums and simplistic recipes that are the stock in trade of organizational change management." Traditional views of organizational change that take place in isolation of these political/power relationships fail to acknowledge that the meanings created through organizational language will be informed by these discourses and the power relations which sustain them. Analysis of organizational change must, therefore, include an analysis of power within the organization as well as outside of it. It must also investigate the conditions which allow those power relationships to exist.

A New Approach to Understanding Language, Power, Identity and Change

The research reviewed so far in this paper helps to expand our understanding of the role of language in both identity construction and consequently organizational change processes. However, it also leaves some important questions unanswered. Specifically, the relationship between language and power in the process of identity construction in an environment of change has not been fully explored. The traditional managerial focus on change, language and identity as tools that can be managed in the pursuit of organizational goals has left little space for a more in depth analysis of the political landscape on which change happens. As individuals and organizations endeavor to make sense of ongoing change, the broader context of this landscape must be taken into consideration. As well, there has been relatively little work done on change from the perspective of the individual employee. Since employees were mainly viewed as 'components' of the organization from this perspective, underlying assumptions of shared organizational values and identities negated the need for an understanding of how individuals made sense of identity and change through processes of language and power relations.

Weick's (1995) sensemaking framework provides an important opportunity for researchers to analyse the ways in which individual employees make sense of organizational change. The seven properties of sensemaking reflect a process that is; 1) grounded in identity construction, 2) retrospective, 3) enactive of sensible environments, 4) social, 5) ongoing, (6) focused on and by extracted cues, and (7) driven by plausibility rather than accuracy. As illustrated by Helms Mills (2003), Weick's (1995) framework allows researchers to investigate 'sensemaking' among employees and within organizations.

"Sensemaking in Weick's model is a cognitive process that is influenced by inter-subjectivity but we get little understanding of how inter- subjectivity is structured (e.g. systems of organizational co-ordination and control) and what impact it has on the sensemaking process" (Helms Mills & Mills, 2000b:7). Because sensemaking happens within a social, organizational context, power relationships must be present. Weick's (1995) framework does not acknowledge the fact that although everyone in the organization may take part in sensemaking – there is an inherent inequality among organizational members that may affect the realities they construct (Helms Mills & Mills, 2000a:67).

Like all social discourse, the nature of the language and practices represented in the discourse of organizational change may reflect a plurality of discourses on change, society, power and identity. But by assuming that a sensemaking process may lead to any range of plausible outcomes, the framework does not acknowledge the fact that all experiences and understandings of language are informed by a dominant discourse. The critical sensemaking approach takes Weick's framework as a starting point for analysis. This approach then includes an analysis of organizational rules (Mills & Murgatroyd, 1991) and activity theory (Blackler, 1992) which together help to address the broader context in which individual sensemaking will occur (Helms Mills & Mills, 2000a). In this way, critical sensemaking as an approach to understanding the language/identity relationship in the context of organizational change offers an opportunity to view the discourse of change from the perspective of the individual employee.

Further Study

The study proposed in this paper aims to address the gaps in the current literature by drawing on methodologies of critical sensemaking and discourse analysis to more fully investigate the relationship between language, power and identity in organizational change.

This research will provide insight into the discourse of organizational change through a case study analysis involving two organizations which have implemented empowerment initiatives to affect organizational, cultural change. The two cases presented in this thesis, the Nova Scotia Community College and the IWK Health Centre, were both faced with the challenge of transforming their organizational identities

In each of these two organizations, designated agents of change were made responsible for facilitating the development and/or implementation of language which reflected a culture of empowerment throughout their organizations. In fact, approximately 40 change agents were identified by each organization, for a total of 80 individuals. This group includes the CEOs and Senior Leadership Team for each organization, as well as the public relations department, organizational development consultants within the organizations, and coordinators of the various change programs. These change agents played visible roles in both organizations, and in each case these individuals used 'empowering' language in their efforts to communicate change.

This study will employ a qualitative research methodology (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Phase one of the research process will involve in-depth interviews (McCracken, 1988) with change agents at both the community college and the health centre. These interviews will gather perspectives on the language of change and empowerment, and the state of change in the organizations. The interviews themselves will be semi-structured and use a combination of 'grand tour' and 'mini tour' (Spradley, 1979) questions and prompts. All of the interviews will be audio-recorded and then transcribed. The transcriptions will be coded to identify common themes and interpretive categories. The next phase of the research process will include textual analysis of the transcripts of the interviews and content analysis of organizational documents, both internal and external.

Conclusion

The relationship between language and organizational change has become a popular topic of study in recent years. However, the vast majority of work in this area comes from a mainstream, managerialist perspective which characterizes language as a 'tool' to be used when implementing change programs. This perspective fails to recognize language as much more central to change. It acts, in fact, as the context in which change occurs. This paper suggests that an analysis of language and change cannot be complete without recognition of both the role of identity construction in producing change and the broader power relations which influence organizations and individuals.

This paper proposes the need for future study which will identify and analyze a discourse of change that is specific to organizations and individuals within organizations. And, by extending discourse analysis to inform critical sensemaking, the researcher will attempt to provide insight into how individuals make sense of discourse and enact it on an individual basis.

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