

CONVERSATIONS FOR CHANGE

How talk can create healthy organisations

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We cannot live for ourselves alone.
Our lives are connected by a thousand
invisible threads, and along these sympathetic fibers,
our actions run as causes and return to us as results.

Herman Melville

The history of Leadership, Management & Organisational Development shows a concentration on the personal growth of the individual. Using models largely based on Maslow's Hierarchy, we seek to change human beings by supplying and appealing to their physical, emotional and psychological needs. In this way we set visionary statements of purpose, we design appraisal processes, we motivate people through pay, reward and career structures, we build great offices to work in, and we might have a chill out room or Sports & Social Club to appeal to that part of us that wants to be together with others.

None of this concentration, clearly, is wrong. In my opinion, however, it is insufficient. It ignores the fact that human beings are not just personal, they are inter- and intra-personal. I am as I am not just because of my genes, my upbringing, my formal education and my experience. I am as I am because of my genes, my upbringing, my formal education, my experience AND as a result of how I have been moulded by others' explanations, questions and statements. I do not operate in a vacuum, I operate as part of a social context, which I shape and am shaped by.

How human beings are shaped by the everyday interactions they have with each other is my personal passion and area of interest.

This is known as a social-constructionist or narrative approach to change. From a social constructionist perspective, our 'reality' is constructed in everyday conversations and behaviours (and out of the thinking that we give form to in our talking and behaving). Reality is not 'out there being experienced from in here' but 'being made'.

A possible result of understanding this is that if we have made our reality (as opposed to it being out there, fixed and unaffected by our agency or power), we might be able to un-make and re-make it.

So your marriage is a social construction, *being made* by your everyday thinking and talking. You don't experience your marriage, you make it.

So is your company.

So is your boss



...from *Conversations for Confirmation to Conversations for Change...*

THE PROBLEM

A narrative approach to change is as interested in the conversations that happen outside the change workshop – at the water cooler, the café or the gym – as those that go on within the workshop. Because it's those outside the workshop that can kill the change stone dead.

Here's a simple example. Suppose you are called upon to speak to your company or team. The success of your communication is clearly not simply a result of how much clarity and passion you bring to your words, although those things help a lot (and that is the realm of individual development approaches). Success is also measured by how each individual interprets what you say: do they understand, agree and nod internally? We might seek to gauge and capture those audience responses in a feedback form. But there's still another level of success, and the one that is most often over-looked on change programmes. Twenty-five individuals leave your talk, and then what do they say together at the coffee-machine? Is it 'Sarah gave us a compelling account of the future strategy, don't you agree!?' Or is it 'Same old, same old...'? This exchange is, in effect, your presentation's informal feedback form, and, just as a feedback form is designed to do, it shapes what happens in the future...

If there is a *default conversation* within your community that *the future is painful, or, this programme won't make a difference, or we're not up to it*, or similar, the impact of the formal part of any change programme you design on the individual's development will be severely limited. We can only ever implement what we learn on a course in a social context, and we won't do that if we feel the social context won't allow it.

Look again at the water cooler conversation:

He says:

'Hey did you hear what she said about the new strategy?'

and you say

'Yeah'

and he says

'Same old same old'

and you say

'Yeah – I bet nothing really changes'

and he says

'Yeah'

'See you'

'Bye'

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Ok, so let's stop the article and have a vote. Put your hand up if you think this is 'a harmless piece of human social interaction, it's just a couple of people making small talk at the coffee machine'.

And put your hand up if you think this is 'a critical incident in the future of the organisation and the success of the corporate strategy'.

Actually, you're all right: the answer is both. It's a critical incident in the guise of small talk (we couldn't have designed it better if we'd tried). Look at what's going on in that interaction. What does 'He' get from that Conversation for Confirmation at the water cooler? He gets:

- (i) To be right
- (ii) To be understood
- (iii) To have Himself separated from the issue ('strategy, eh!')
- (iv) To be assured – without it being said – that the issue remains separate and unfixable and beyond his influence

He gets to be innocent and right! What a gift we get from these Conversations for Confirmation in an increasingly difficult and stressful world!

And so do You. Because a reality is not being described here, it is being made. A world is confirmed where You and He's influence is not going to make a difference, and where Those Who Are Really In Charge are wrong. That's a reality with some pretty solid boundaries and rules, which might help us all understand why organisations are so profoundly difficult to change, and why up to 70% of major change programmes fail to deliver their proposed benefits. Multiply this single exchange by the number of informal interactions people have over the course of a month, and you have a case study in Viral Marketing.

AN ALTERNATIVE

We need conversations that can move us out of our conditioning to complain about others, to exile ourselves from the origins of our problems and to find social approval for our personal interpretations. *Conversations for Change* is a methodology designed to help people create intentional change through everyday conversation – a way of talking which produces change rather than maintains the status quo.

Conversations for Change, at one level, is an approach, a way of being in the world that can allow for a strong sense of belonging in communities without having to have that community fool itself. On another level it is a process – a set of 11 apparently simple questions which take the speaker out of complaint and into solutions. And on still another level, it is a skill, a talent that needs focused development for two reasons:

- (i) because we are not used to having conversations this way
- (ii) because we are so used to Conversations for Confirmation and other default conversations that our proficiency in those constructs approaches mastery (or unconscious competence).

In this article I'd like to focus on three of those 11 questions and explain something of the thinking behind them.

Question number 1 is **'What's the problem?'**

It asks the speaker to delve into the detail and nuance of their problem, to make it very real again in the telling. When I'm working through a Conversation for Change with someone, I encourage them not to edit or to sanitise, because I have found that the more someone gets to feel how upset or angry they are about an issue, the more likely they are to find the resources to change it.

Question number 2 is **What's the unexpressed request?**

Questions like this one ask us to realise that at the heart of our complaints there are requests trying to get out. My complaint about *a lack of information around here* becomes more grounded and possible to change as soon as I realise that in fact I am asking for *an honest conversation with my boss*. The latter, of course, is more challenging and potentially risky for many reasons, which perhaps explains why Conversations for Confirmation provide that buffer of innocence and distance from our problems.

The third question is **'What are you thinking, saying or doing which helps create the problem exactly as it is?'**

This is the contribution question, and one that can stimulate a wealth of insight for the speaker. For example, by *not* asking for *an honest conversation with my boss* I actually help there be a *lack of information* – for me and others in the company.

And my thinking will support this not-doing. *I think* – because I've heard it said so many times before – *that bosses are supposed to hold onto information, because knowledge is power, after all!*

Therefore *lack of information is the way it has to be – and what can I do about it?* Except that reflecting on this question is beginning to demonstrate that I'm very much complicit in this information-less world I worry about.

And so on through the Conversations for Change methodology. Sometimes the *Ahah* moment can happen on questions 2 and 3 (and even question 1 when people realise that the problem they really have is not the one they've been complaining about). In these cases, the whole 11-question process is not required. But the other eight questions provide a platform for insight, discovery, accountability and commitment when the issue is a particularly entrenched one. And there are many entrenched issues in organisations: we are so used to believing that others are the problem and that our bosses can or ought to do something about it, that we have forgotten the reality of our personal freedom and power.

Above all, Conversations for Change demonstrate that 'conversations don't happen in the culture, they are the culture'⁴. And we're all making it, everyday.

WIDER IMPLICATIONS

A social-constructionist approach to organisations might ultimately

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reduce expectations of 'leadership' placed upon it by 'the staff' (although those of us who care about these things don't help ourselves by continually asking for— and so encouraging the making up of - stories about apparently heroic, messiah like leaders such as Jack Welch).

One of the most common default conversations in organisations is that *the bosses have the power to do something to change things and they ought to do so* (with its sister default conversation *until the top management buy-in, we can't move*). That's why so many change initiatives focus upwards on leadership development or executive coaching. That's why surveys have so many questions about trusting leaders. This attention is all very nice for the leadership, but the assumption that if you develop the bosses you develop the organisation is not wholly correct. How many people in a 1000+ organisation are in leadership positions? 100, 200, 400? And then what of the everyday reality being constructed by the other 600? Power may corrupt (and a fish may rot from its head!) but the reality is that power is distributed through the organisation in a way that the hierarchy and org chart doesn't begin to capture. How each of us chooses to show up in the morning, and what each of us chooses to construct in our talking, is as powerful an act as any leader's announcement or boardroom dictat.

In my experience, the vast majority of problems that employees complain about in organisations, whether it be their well-being, potential, morale, motivation, communication, collaboration and 'corporate culture', are entirely within their influence to do something about, simply because, no matter where they are in the hierarchy, no matter what skills or knowledge or experience they have, they are involved in the creation of these things. I'm *involved* in the low morale, I'm *involved* in bad communication; I'm not a distant observer of them. Importantly, this also means these very same issues are *outside the influence of management*. People keep asking for things - such as Trust and Good Communication - that their bosses simply can't supply on their own, no matter how much they promise to do better in the future.

This truth goes beyond the old adage that, for example, Trust is a Two Way Street. It's more than that. I don't trust you because you do trustworthy things. I trust you because I *say* - to myself and others - that you are trustworthy. And when I construct you as trustworthy for myself and others, both I and they are more likely to notice you doing trustworthy things into the future. The stories we tell change how we see the world. (And capturing the collective story - as politics and media show us - is a true sign of power).

The default request for a change from above is a giving away of personal accountability. It seduces people into believing an old work story that workers are simply the passive recipients (victims) of management activity (*cf* the recent dispute at BA and Gate Gourmet), *at effect* in their lives rather than *at cause*. Asking people to take responsibility for their part in what they have created is the first step in creating a truly healthy and resilient organisation.

Clearly then there are wider issues here. Too many default conversations happen in organisations, even in 2005, which are the unacknowledged results of various historical, political and cultural influences on our conception of work which generate stories of dominance and exploitation. They need challenging. Perhaps we need a more constructive and generative story about the role of work in

people's lives...work as good for the soul as well as necessary for the mortgage.

CONCLUSION

I started with a suggestion that our focus over the last fifteen years on Leadership, Management & Organisational Development – the very things that we thought would make things better and easier for us – may have contributed to a continuance of our problems by downplaying the role of the individual in a social context.

I'll end this article with a further hint: that our obsession with Leadership as what we need - (I have a client who has invested tens of millions in leadership development over the last four years; who has found in the latest staff survey that people still don't trust or believe their bosses; and who have announced that the solution is 'more and better leadership') – is always going to leave us lacking.

However much we soften and democratise our conception of leader, nevertheless we keep thinking of leadership as being exhibited, developed and modelled in the individual (compared with the concept of leadership as something that emerges out of a group to meet a need, as a social constructionist approach would suggest). And not only are we limited by our conception of leader as individual, but also by the implication that if there are some who are leaders, then there must be others who are not leaders, and that their contribution must somehow be less significant than that of all those transformational, visionary, authentic, principle-led, self-determined leaders we've been developing over the years.

I hope that the Conversations for Change approach demonstrates that we all contribute to the organisation exactly as it is. We have all created it, however it is, by thought, by word and by deed (and by what we have all not thought, said and done) – and it is all of us who can change it. Engagement is not something a leader creates – it is something that we are already practicing, and always have been, every day. We need a chance to reflect together on the quality and nature of that engagement, and Conversations for Change allow that. Because in the end, the organisation is only ever what we – and our customers, of course - agree to say it is.

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ⁱ NOTE: *With thanks to Bob Hallewell,
Team IT Training, for this phrase.*

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