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USING ORGANIZATIONAL STORIES FOR THE DIAGNOSTIC PHASE OF PLANNED CHANGE: SOME POSSIBILITIES AND PRECAUTIONS[1]

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Summary.—Storytelling has often been presented as one way of assessing the subjective, hard-to-measure variables that affect organizational success such as corporate culture and group norms. The content of organizational stories, however, can provide valuable information concerning both the informal *and* formal organization. As such, stories can be used much more broadly—and practically—than has been reported previously. In particular, during the diagnostic phase of planned change, stories can be gathered via individual interviews, group interviews, structured questionnaires, observation, unobtrusive methods, and story creation. Moreover, stories gathered by these methods—especially when coupled with other forms of diagnostic information—may result in a deeper understanding of the organization's problems and opportunities that subsequently can be addressed by a program of planned change. This article discusses the strengths and weaknesses of different methods for collecting story data, considers how stories can be interpreted and presented to the organization, and offers several precautions for using story data during an organizational diagnosis.

Stories have been discussed in organizational literature primarily as a means to assist researchers in learning more about an organization's culture or the "informal" organization (McConkie & Boss, 1986). While this cultural perspective is helpful in understanding the potential impact of stories on organizational behavior, it falls short of addressing the practical benefits of using stories to inform and guide the process of organizational change. In particular, our purpose is to show how stories can be used in the diagnostic phase of planned change. In essence, stories can provide valuable information about *other* aspects of the functioning of the organization besides corporate culture and group dynamics. In particular, the content of organizational stories can be extremely helpful in learning more about all the key barriers to organizational success. In some cases, in fact, stories may identify the organization's problems and opportunities with greater understanding, insight, and validity than other forms of diagnostic information.

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Before proceeding with our discussion, we first define what we mean by "stories" and explain why they are an important source of information. Next we discuss several methods for collecting stories, including their strengths and weaknesses. Then, we review several approaches for interpreting stories (once they are collected) and presenting the "results" to the organization. Lastly, we consider some general precautions and implications of using organizational stories in the diagnostic phase of planned change.

Organizational Stories and Their Uses

Organizational stories are a valuable source of information because all members at one time or another have been involved with telling or listening to stories. Martin, Feldman, Hatch, and Sitkin (1983) defined an organizational story as a narrative that focuses on a single, unified sequence of events—although *complex* stories often include multiple themes and sometimes contain contradictory messages. Bower (1976) described what distinguishes a story from other forms of narratives: stories have settings, central characters, plots, and often a moral. Employees seem to have little difficulty telling stories and can easily relate stories that represent, from their perspective, either dysfunctional or functional organizational behavior. In fact, most change agents would probably agree that diagnostic interviews are, in essence, formalized storytelling occasions. However, for the story to be of the *organization* (as opposed to an isolated experience of one or two persons), it must be shared among several (if not many) members of the organization.

Organizational stories, then, provide a unique opportunity for the change agent to gain a better understanding of both informal and formal organizational variables. In fact, Mitroff and Kilmann (1975) have suggested that stories are so central to organizations that organizations *could not function* without them. McConkie and Boss (1986) suggested that stories provide several important clues for organizational change. According to these authors, stories (1) can serve as an effective means of social control, (2) have significant potential as tools for organizational diagnosis, (3) can serve as an effective means of behavior reinforcement, (4) can help identify organizational proprieties, (5) can help create a new and different sense of self-image and identity, (6) can help facilitate improved interpersonal interactions, (7) create the interpretive context from which we distill the meaning of words and linguistic nuances common in the organizational settings, and (8) can help to facilitate change by influencing—moving—the informal organization. Therefore, the failure to consider seriously such a rich source of information in the diagnostic phase of planned change would seem to leave a critical gap in assessing dysfunctional behavior in order to develop more adaptive organizational behavior.

Collecting and Creating Stories

Several options exist for collecting—and creating—organizational stories to assist in the diagnostic phase. These include individual interviews, group interviews, structured questionnaires, observations, unobtrusive measures, and story creation.

Individual Interviews

Interviews are frequently used for organizational diagnosis. During the interview process, storytelling seems to be a natural and accepted way of describing life in the organization—which may explain why interviews have been utilized extensively in storytelling research (see, for example, McConkie & Boss, 1986; Wilkins, 1983). The use of individual interviews as a means of collecting stories has several advantages. First, the change agent can ask specific questions related to organizational subsystems (Harvey & Brown, 1992). For example, one can ask for specific stories which highlight aspects of the organization's culture, skill development, team effectiveness, strategy and organizational structures, and the reward system (Kilmann, 1989). Second, the individual interview also allows the change agent to explore stories in more detail and ask questions for clarification. In a recent effort toward planned change, for example, the consultant asked the interviewee, "You just mentioned 'bait and switch.' I don't believe I understand how it operates in your company. Can you give me an example of this practice?" The person responded as follows:

> I've been working for this company for almost twenty years and during this time I've been a victim of the bait and switch. It starts when a manager decides who to promote to a supervisory position. Next, the Human Resources Department posts the job and goes through the official job-interview process, even though the person has already been chosen. A few years ago, I applied for such a job and, are you ready for this, the same day of the interview, when I got home from work, there in my mail was the rejection notice. It was postmarked the day before! They could have waited a few days after the interview took place before they informed me that I didn't get the job. I know of at least four or five other cases where the same exact thing happened. It has become common practice here for managers to encourage people to go after jobs and other opportunities that are already a done deal. And then they (managers) wonder why so few employees trust them.

Interviews also enable the change agent to understand organizational practices that are difficult for the interviewee to define. For example, Wilkins (1984) found that managers could not define the "company way," but they could define it using stories that were well known in the company. Or, if any interviewee is having a difficult time knowing what to say or what is relevant to discuss, the change agent can say, "Why don't you just tell me what life is like here. Just give me some actual examples of what led up to someone (1) getting angry or upset, (2) voluntarily leaving the company, (3) getting fired, (4) being lied to or given false information, (5) becoming em-

barrassed or being humiliated, (6) trying hard, but not getting the job done, (7) not satisfying a customer, or (8) feeling like celebrating or throwing a party because something great happened. Try to recall the people involved and the series of events that led to such experiences in this organization."

The change agent can also stimulate storytelling by posing the following to the interviewee: "If I were your favorite sister or brother and told you that I plan to get a job here, what would you tell me about what goes on, so I am not surprised or disappointed later? And remember, if you mislead me in any way, you're going to hear about it for the rest of your life! Give me some concrete examples of: Whom can I trust? (Why? What happened?) What department (or people) should I stay away from? (Why? What happened?) What issues should I not discuss with others, especially my boss? How should I approach my job? What can I expect during performance reviews and when I apply for a promotion? Remember: I'm counting on you to tell me the truth about what really goes on here."

A weakness of the individual interview is that it puts the employee in an unnatural storytelling setting. Because the person may feel "forced" into telling stories, the person may not feel comfortable in relating them to the change agent. In several of our planned change programs, for example, we have had interviewees who sat rigidly and said: "Everything is fine!" Even when we try to make each person feel at ease, there are always a few who remain extremely anxiety-ridden. In these cases, the interview is shortened to minimize the individual's exposure to an uncomfortable situation. But, in all fairness, it is not clear that some other method could have relaxed the person and provided us with useful diagnostic information. Sometimes, it seems that mistrust (stemming from prior misunderstanding, deception, or manipulation) motivates the interviewee to play it safe no matter what. Worse yet, however, under pressure the interviewee may make up stories that are not representative (or accurate) of life in the organization, which could bias the change agent's diagnostic reports.

Group Interviews

Another approach that may be a more realistic and appropriate means of collecting story data takes place in a group setting. Boje (1991) noted that a story can be conceptualized as a joint performance of tellers and hearers in which often overlooked, very subtle utterances play an important role in the negotiation of meaning and coproduction in a storytelling episode. The group interview provides an opportunity to observe interaction between individuals and document the way in which particular stories are told. Within a group setting, individuals may be more likely to tell stories that show support or lack of support for a particular story moral. One helpful exercise may be to ask interviewees to begin with an actual story and then recount specific supporting or nonsupporting information they have received since that time.

In one program of planned change, a group of 10 employees talked about the following story:

A task force was put together to plan for the introduction of a new product. A highly respected employee was assigned to be the team leader. This person was known to be domineering and arrogant but always got the job done. One member of the task force, a newly hired employee, had just completed the company orientation program that encourages everyone to share ideas openly and come up with new and better ways of doing things. But he made the big mistake of taking the company seriously. In the first meeting of the task force, the new employee briefly outlined a plan to design a consumer panel for testing the features of the proposed new product (rather than rolling out the same kind of product campaign that has become the company's standard practice). After the employee finished expressing his ideas, the team leader, in no uncertain terms, proceeded to straighten him out: "How many products have you introduced here lately? In case you didn't know it, I'm head of this team and I'll tell you when and how we will proceed. You got it?" Although this public put-down was bad enough, what was more shocking to the newly hired employee was that everyone else in the group looked the other way and simply ignored the team leader's harsh tone. Even after the meeting, the other members said: "The team leader is a good guy, but a little rough around the edges. That new guy has got a lot to learn."

As the story was being told, the group of interviewees smiled, nodded their heads, and sighed. Apparently, this one story was not unique but described a typical experience in the organization. The nonverbal behaviors of the interviewees also suggested that, even though members have accepted such rude treatment, nobody liked it (or wanted to be on the receiving end). With a little prodding, they recounted other incidents that confirmed these lessons: "Don't share your ideas if they challenge the way things are done here. Wait for the boss to present his plan. It's o.k. to be rude to new people. Someone has got to teach them to ignore the company's publicity programs." Then someone said: "Now that we all know what it's like, does anyone care to do anything about it?" There was a long period of silence, and then the discussion switched to another topic.

A weakness of the group interview is the artificiality of the setting. This problem is somewhat minimized because the individuals are surrounded by other members who can offer support. Another disadvantage of the group interview is that members may not recount stories if one individual is perceived as a close ally of management (Cummings & Huse, 1989). In this case, interviewees in a group may be apprehensive about discussing stories that depict management negatively. Nevertheless, if one member begins talking about a sensitive topic and receives support from others, the fear of management being informed is reduced and a lot of useful information (confirmed by others) can be provided.

Structured Questionnaires

Change agents also have the option of collecting data through structured questionnaires. Wilkins (1979), for example, asked individuals to reconstruct

stories by rating story content on various response scales. The use of structured questionnaires seems to be more appropriate as a follow-up to interviews and as a way of aggregating and checking the reliability of the story data as well as the change agent's interpretation of the data. Questionnaires help to test the homogeneity of various interpretations of the story, i.e., its internal consistency, and the relative significance of the story across the organization, i.e., its external validity.

Consider the case in which the change agent hears a story told by just one interviewee. Is this a story of just one person's experience or is this an *organizational* story? To be an organizational story, either the themes or the exact incidents must be shared among the members of the whole organization, division, department, or work group. Certainly, the change agent must be cautious in not making too much of one individual story—an isolated experience that is not representative of life in the organization. Besides using group interviews to discern if certain stories are shared and interpreted in the same manner, structured questionnaires can be used to list numerous story themes (from individual interviews) and then quantify the extent to which these themes (or the stories themselves) have been experienced among members of one or more work units. Moreover, proposed interpretations (or morals) of the story can be listed on the questionnaire and responded to by the membership as well. Therefore, tabulating and analyzing members' responses to stories, themes, morals, and interpretations are exceedingly helpful not only in distinguishing individual from organizational stories but also in validating the significance and meaning that are ascribed to these stories.

As can be expected, there are several weaknesses of structured questionnaires that can limit their usefulness. Naturally, the value of this method depends on the validity and range of the questionnaire items (and the clarity and focus of the instructions): the answer can only be as good as the question—even if some useful comments are gathered in an open-ended format. The process of responding to the method is more impersonal than the interview (which is a negative for some people but could be a positive for others—especially if responses are anonymous). Moreover, all structured questionnaires can be affected by various response biases (see Cummings & Huse, 1989; Harrison, 1987). Perhaps most alarming is the finding in one study that 29 percent of respondents falsely answered questions (Dean, 1958). While the careful construction, pretesting, and administration of questionnaires can minimize many of these weaknesses, it is clear that something is lost when a structured form is substituted for a face-to-face conversation.

Observations

Because all of the foregoing methods place the individual and group in an artificial setting, Boje (1991) has argued that observing people in natural storytelling settings may be the most appropriate means of gathering story

data. This method gives the change agent the opportunity to observe behavioral interactions taking place between storyteller and listener. As a result, the change agent can obtain information as to unconscious behavioral practices within the organization (Harvey & Brown, 1992; Levinson, 1972). As a practical consideration, however, observation is costly and time-consuming (Cummings & Huse, 1989); therefore, it is rarely used. In addition, it is obtrusive. Unless the change agent hides his identity (which raises various ethical issues), members may not be as free to tell stories to the (outside) observer as they would to a fellow employee.

Unobtrusive Measures

Measures not requiring direct contact with members, such as case histories and archival data, may be most appropriate in the search for stories regarding the origin of the organization and other significant events (McWhinney & Batista, 1988). Case histories, however, often rely on second- and third-hand accounts. Further, since such data are focused almost exclusively on the past, information drawn from archival sources may not be meaningful to the change agent for today's and tomorrow's challenges. For example, even if employees' newsletters or company bulletins provide descriptions of various organizational events and incidents, it is difficult to figure out their *meaning* without a focused conversation. Did these reported incidents become organizational stories? Are the interpretations given to these incidents shared among members today? Do employees even read the company bulletin? Thus, whatever is found in archival sources must be corroborated with at least one of the other methods for gathering organizational stories.

Story Creation

An unusual method for collecting organizational stories has been suggested by Mitroff and Kilmann (1975). Instead of documenting *existing* stories, members can be asked to *create* stories. Specifically, members can be asked to make up a story that depicts their "ideal organization" either individually or in a group setting: "If you could design an organization from scratch, what would it be like? How would it function? What would the people be like? How would decisions be made? What would it be like to work there?" Employees can first be asked to write individual stories. Next, they can be formed into a group to identify common themes and thereby create a *group story*.

Story creation bears a strong resemblance to projective testing—whether it is done in an individual or in a group setting. Much like telling stories to a number of pictures containing interpersonal and social cues (e.g., the Thematic Apperception Test; Atkinson, 1958), members project their concerns (conscious and unconscious) onto imagined images (ideal or otherwise) of the

organization. As a result, story creation may identify problems that often are not voiced during individual and group interviews because the material is either provocative or simply out of conscious awareness.

In one recent program of planned change, for example, several members from different departments created a group story about their ideal organization. One key aspect of this make-believe organization was that everyone could interact freely and openly across departmental boundaries to raise issues, coordinate work, and solve problems. The characters in the story also exhibited deep respect for the different contributions each department made to the organization: "We are all part of the same family and need each other to succeed." These themes, which were presented by almost every individual separately and then highlighted in the group, indicated that movement across the boundaries was a major obstacle for the organization. After listening to the group and individual stories, the change agent concluded that the departments were managed as fiefdoms and, to succeed, members had to demonstrate blind loyalty to their functional area. Moreover, this cultural dynamic was further reinforced by a fragmented structure of departments and a reward system that focused exclusively on individuals achieving their own departmental objectives—often at the expense of organizational objectives. Further investigation confirmed that a lack of cooperation across outdated departments was one of the primary bases of the organization's difficulties in adapting to its increasingly competitive environment.

When asked to create stories, members do not seem to experience the same type of anxiety as in individual or group interviews because the focus (pressure) is not on revealing sensitive things about the current situation. For some people, writing stories is less threatening and provides an interesting alternative to more traditional methods of data collection (Mitroff & Kilmann, 1975). But writing stories is not for everyone: some people feel awkward about sharing their "creations" with others. This drawback, however, can be minimized in a group setting when only common themes are reported—not individual stories.

Combining Different Methods

As implied at several points above, it will usually be advantageous to combine several of the methods for collecting—and creating—stories, which serves to double- (or triple-) check diagnostic findings (and thereby to minimize the weaknesses of any one approach). In particular, conducting individual *and* group interviews will provide not only corroborating information but also will convey firsthand the effects of group dynamics on individual behavior in the organization. (These interviews, of course, can ask members to *create* stories as well as to share existing ones.) Next, listing the themes (and interpretations) of what is found during all the interviews and having a representative sample of members respond to a structured questionnaire (properly

pretested, etc.) will provide valuable information on the validity and significance of the story data. Examining archival data (e.g., employees' newsletters and company bulletins) will enable a further test of the validity, significance, and chronology of what the combined diagnostic methods are indicating. Lastly, direct observation of members in action (during group meetings, on the shop floor, with customers, etc.) will provide an additional perspective on generating the story data.

Interpreting Stories and Presenting Results

A major challenge is correctly interpreting and integrating the story data into problems to be resolved by a program of planned change. Typically, the sheer number of stories that depict similar themes pinpoints specific widespread barriers that must be removed so that the organization can survive and improve. Wilkins (1979), for example, found a positive correlation between the number and types of stories told in the interviews and levels of employees' commitment: a larger number of stories and more stories favorable to the organization were told by employees of the highly committed organization. Of related interest, Wilkins (1979) also reported several characteristics of stories that are most likely to have a powerful influence on organizational culture: (1) they are concrete (told about real people and specific actions have a strong sense of time and place, (2) they are common knowledge, (3) they are believed by some groups, and (4) they describe a social contract—how things are or are not to be done. Perhaps the best measure of the "*importance*" of stories is the degree to which they serve to confirm or disconfirm other diagnostic data.

While counting the frequency of stories and themes (with or without the use of structured questionnaires) suggests the extent to which certain problems are experienced throughout the organization, it is also possible that some less frequently cited themes are even more significant and shared—but not voiced. Even though creating stories can indicate some unconscious wishes or fears about the present organization, most stories tend to describe the more conscious, observable aspects of organizational life. Consequently, to get the most meaning (conscious and unconscious) out of organizational stories requires the change agent to have certain clinical skills: to be able to read between the lines, look behind the scenes, and see below the surface. Acquiring such clinical skill, however, is not a simple matter. It takes certain personality characteristics (whether they are genetic or learned), a knowledge of social events and meanings in different cultures, and a good deal of empathy, experience, and training. It should be evident that different change agents can hear the same story and yet gain different amounts and kinds of diagnostic information. Of course, the same can be said for any diagnostic process in virtually every field of specialization (social, physical, or biological).

When it comes time to present the diagnostic results, there are several ways to organize the story data, each of which highlights a different aspect. First, the story data can be presented according to a timeframe, showing a progression of stories from the past to the present to the future. This approach conveys the evolution of issues and problems that coincide, in most cases, with a sequence of key internal and external events that deeply affected the organization. Second, the data can be organized by level of analysis—individual, group, intergroup, and organization. This approach illustrates differences in story types (and interpretations) among individuals and work units across both the formal and informal organization (Martin, *et al.*, 1983). For example, if departments in the organization tell very different stories about where the organization is (or should be) headed and what priorities are (or should be) used for allocating resources, there may be a vital need to formulate a clear strategic vision and to translate this vision into clear goals and objectives for every department and person in the organization.

The story data can also be organized by themes. For example, Boje, Fedor, and Rowland (1983) suggested that it might be helpful to focus on (1) recurring metaphors that appear across different stories (for example, monsters, storms, feuding families, wars, kingdoms, class distinctions, biblical characters) and (2) categorizing dimensions employed in the stories (for example, us versus them, short-term versus long-term, the good old days versus the present). Alternatively, the stories might be used primarily as illustrations of already identified problems. In this sense, stories are not used to identify problems *per se*, but to make the problems understandable—real—to participants. Consider a presentation of diagnostic findings organized according to the key barriers to organizational success, namely, culture, skills, teams, strategy-structures, and reward systems. As each barrier is presented by the change agent, one or more organizational stories (maintaining confidentiality of the source and the people involved) are used to illustrate exactly how employees are thwarted by the barrier on a daily basis.

General Precautions and Implications

One major concern in data collection and interpretation is that of frame of reference of both the storyteller and the change agent. As Martin (1982) noted, the content of the story's moral may vary depending on who is listening to the story, why the particular story is being told, and who is telling it. There is much evidence to suggest that individuals are strongly influenced by their respective roles in the change process (see, for example, Covin & Kilmann, 1988, 1990).

Given their background and training, change agents are a potential source of bias. For example, a change agent might be more likely to believe or place more importance on the stories of individuals who the agent iden-

tifies with more closely, e.g., top management, internal consultants, the underdog. A broader source of bias may also interfere with story collection and interpretation. As Boje, *et al.* (1983) noted, change agents often substitute their own myths for those of the client organization. In other words, the change agent may have a personal story in mind concerning how the change effort should proceed and what the proper ending of the story should be. Implicit theories about which organizational variables are most important, values concerning how people should be treated, and beliefs about why people resist change are just a few issues that may affect the change agent's view of how the "change story" should be played out.

Alternatively, biases may lie within the storytelling process or the storyteller. Because storytellers may view the change agent as an expert, for example, they may assume that the change agent understands what is being said without further explanation. Or perhaps, because the change agent is viewed as an outsider, individuals only feel comfortable in telling part of the story. Clearly, it would be a mistake for change agents or storytellers to assume that all individuals will interpret the same story in the same way. As Howard (1991) suggested, "even if all members of a society told themselves exactly the same stories, the meaning and implications of these stories for different members of the society would not be the same" (p. 194).

A final precaution concerns the dysfunctions that stem from the inherent vagueness of stories. In short, complex stories (with contradictory messages and conflicting morals) or ambiguous interpretations can be expected to promote miscommunication, can be put to abusive and manipulative ends, can lead to very different recommendations for action, and can be a mechanism that causes people to cling to delusions in preference to realities (McConkie & Boss, 1986). Martin (1982), for example, observed that employees give managers "credibility ratings" from their handling of past events (as depicted in stories), which shape how employees will respond to management in the future. Thus, if the change agent is unclear or biased in the interpretation of organizational stories (e.g., if the change agent's interpretation appears to favor management's views), a great deal of credibility for the program in planned change may be lost: employees may be left feeling that they have been deceived or simply that the change agent did not understand them.

Conclusion

This article has sought to illustrate the wealth of information that change agents can acquire by using stories in the diagnostic phase of planned change. As with any research approach, the change agent who uses stories as a basis for an organizational diagnosis must take into consideration the strengths and weaknesses of each method, be skilled in collecting the information, and be aware of potential biases and dilemmas in interpreting and using these data. While the use of organizational stories offers great promise for understanding a wide range of organizational variables, we advise change agents to proceed with caution by (1) using a *combination*

of methods for collecting—and creating—stories and (2) using *other* kinds of diagnostic information in conjunction with organizational stories.

Besides collecting diagnostic data just *before* a program of planned change proceeds, we urge change agents (and organizations) to collect diagnostic data *after* the program has been implemented as an evaluation of how well the identified barriers to organizational success have been removed. Collecting before-and-after stories would provide a rich source of longitudinal data for testing many hypotheses about the creation (and realization) of new stories, the relative proportion of positive and negative stories as improvement proceeds, the changes in story themes during the ups and downs of organization-wide change, the ease of storytelling in individual and group settings as a function of cultural change, and so on. Clearly, such a research base would promote more dynamic theory about organizational stories in general.

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