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Barrett, Frank J.



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The Central Role of Discourse in Large-Scale Change: A Social Construction Perspective

FRANK J. BARRETT
GAIL FANN THOMAS
SUSAN P. HOCEVAR
Naval Postgraduate School

This article reconceptualizes the change process from a rational planning perspective to an interpretive perspective emphasizing the social construction of meaning. Discourse is viewed as the core of the change process through which our basic assumptions about organizing are created, sustained, and transformed. To illustrate the dynamics of meaning systems, examples are provided of organizations shifting from mechanistic assumptions to become more adaptive, responsive, quality-oriented organizations. Implications for researchers and managers are included.

The dominant models for understanding large-scale change have relied on prescriptions that follow a sequence of steps or stages that emphasize rational planning and analysis. These models of planned change include identifying the need and goals for change, targeting change strategies, implementing change, monitoring and evaluating

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Frank J. Barrett is an assistant professor in the Department of Systems Management, Naval Postgraduate School.

Gail Fann Thomas is an associate professor in the Department of Systems Management, Naval Postgraduate School.

Susan P. Hocevar is an assistant professor in the Department of Systems Management, Naval Postgraduate School.

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change, and finally institutionalizing or reinforcing the change outcomes (e.g., Beckhard & Harris, 1977; Porras & Silvers, 1991; Tichy, 1983). The dominant assumption in these models is that managers have the capability and control to achieve rational adaptation to environmental demands for change.

The purpose of this article is to reconsider those assumptions and reconceptualize the change process. To this end, we will look at the change process from an interpretive perspective emphasizing the social construction of meaning (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Gergen, 1991; Rabinow & Sullivan, 1979). The interpretive perspective that focuses on how organizations are created, sustained, and transformed through discourse offers particular insights as to the pervasiveness and complexity of change.

Researchers have studied organizations as meaning systems (Louis, 1983; Pettigrew, 1979; Schall, 1983; Smircich, 1983). In studying organizations as culture, researchers emphasize the importance of coincident or shared meaning in constructing and maintaining organized action. This theory views organizing as a product of consensus among organizational participants. Although "culture" has served as a valuable metaphor in describing organizations, it is also limiting to the extent it portrays organizations as static patterns of meaning (see Martin, 1992).

This article describes a more dynamic view of meaning systems. In this view, the process of organizing involves the construction, maintenance, and destruction of meaning among organizational members. It argues for a more dynamic, dialectical portrayal of organizations as meaning systems, a view shared by Gray, Bougon, and Donnellon (1985).

In addition to providing a dynamic view of the construction of organizational meaning, we offer a different perspective on the locus of meaning. Current organizational literature has focused on cognitive orientations of meaning (Bartunek & Moch, 1987; Gray, Bougon, & Donnellon, 1985). Gray et al. (1985) hold that meaning is coded in the form of concepts and that social action and communication are the primary vehicles through which coincident interpretations are transmitted. Their view treats communication as a conduit through which meanings are transmitted (Axley, 1984). This article suggests that we decenter the individual and instead begin to view "relating" as the place where meaning is made. In other words, instead of seeing meaning centered in the individual's head, we should view meaning as occurring in our relatedness with one another (see Gergen, 1991).

THE ROLE OF DISCOURSE IN CHANGE

We contend here that discourse is the core of the change process. For it is through patterns of discourse that we form relational bonds with one another; that we create, transform, and maintain structure; and that we reinforce or challenge our beliefs. The very act of communicating is the process through which we constitute experience. Habituating this meaning over time provides the background of common experience that gives organizational members a context for their organizing behavior. Communi-

cation, then, is not just a conduit for transferring information from one person to another, rather it is the very process by which organizing comes to acquire consensual meaning. Organizing, therefore, is continuously created and recreated in acts of communication among an organization's members (Mumby, 1988).

Consider, for example, the dynamics of one organization that was attempting to make a shift from its more mechanistic assumptions and behavior to become a more adaptive, responsive, quality-oriented organization. This shift could be seen as essentially a rhetorical revolution, a change in the meaning of familiar words that is altering the way people relate to one another and constitute their experience. What does it mean, for instance, to shift the application of the word *customer* to include both coworkers and other internal departments? This move—to take the network of meanings and patterns of activity usually associated with an external entity and to shift them to internal coworkers—is a metaphorical achievement.

The change in meaning of this one word, *customer*, creates a repertoire of potential that previously was unimaginable: Words like cross-functional teams, empowerment, service to the customer, satisfying the internal customer, commitment to shared vision, and continuous improvement take on new meanings as they support a new range of activities. A vast array of new actions becomes feasible: When the sales department and the purchasing department create their strategic plans, they now consult one another; when the engineering design manager conducts a performance appraisal of members in his or her department, one of the important factors he or she rates them on is the extent to which they satisfied the requests of the manufacturing department; when the customer calls the company with a complaint about a malfunctioning product, the phone rings on the shop floor and the customer talks directly to those who manufactured the item rather than talking to the customer service department; a leading manufacturer issues policy statements that read, "The job is not finished until the customer is delighted, and that includes internal customers too." Such activities, which might have been unheard of 10 years ago, are made possible by the intervention of new language into a mechanistic culture. And the new actions make possible a projection of new meanings.

It would be hard to imagine any of these activities occurring in the GM Lordstown plant in the 1960s. If a foreman on the assembly line were chastised for not satisfying the internal customer, he would most likely be puzzled. There was no network of commonly accepted words, no behavioral repertoires that would allow the foreman to glean any sense from such an utterance. It does not mean that such a conversation would have been false, or further away from the real nature of things. It simply means that organizational members did not talk that way, and there were no familiar patterns of activity that would render such an utterance intelligible. The introduction and acceptance of novel discourse transforms the way these workers relate to one another. Further, as their new behaviors are reinforced over time, new structures will evolve, and attitudes and beliefs about the nature of work will be transformed. In turn, new behaviors and routines will spawn new terms and categories. It is this recursive nature of social change that an interpretive perspective allows us to appreciate.

THE IMPORTANCE OF DIALOGUE IN CHANGE

Jack Welch of General Electric (GE) has a reputation as a world-class change master. Tichy and Sherman's (1993) account of Welch's change strategies provides countless examples of the critical importance of understanding organizational discourse. GE's "Work-Out" program, begun in 1988, was Welch's attempt to share GE values throughout the organization. He realized that videotapes and speech reprints were not creating a shared sense of meaning among all of GE's employees. In short, he discovered that meaning is not something that can be "delivered" but is cocreated through praxis. In other words, meanings are not found in the words themselves but are created through practice. In an interview with Tichy, Welch said:

I learned pretty early on that videotapes and speech reprints alone are of little value. Because people don't use them. They're not alive or dynamic. The idea is to convene a group, use the videotape [of a Welch speech] as a catalyst, and then have a discussion. Well, what managers would do is just show the tape. There would be no communication with the people. Nobody talked to them.

Worse than that, with their body language some would communicate their own reaction to the tape—that it was bullshit. (p. 198)

Dialogue about Welch's vision was the critical element that was missing—dialogue that would allow both the middle managers and employees to create a new shared sense of what the company was about—dialogue that would allow everyone to speak his or her mind, uncover assumptions, and hammer out differences. Even though the content of Welch's messages reflected a desire to alter the assumptions that underlie authoritarian culture, the actions of many managers seemed to reinforce the old way of doing things—simply giving lip service to the CEO by showing the video, not participating themselves in the change, and certainly not encouraging the employees' participation.

Later, Welch wrote a memo expressing the importance of creating shared meaning among the employees about the corporate mission. GE's middle managers and all their direct reports were encouraged to participate in dialogical exchanges to actively discuss issues and concerns.

[If people can't] buy into the corporate message . . . come and talk to any of us [Welch or the vice chairmen] about what bothers you and what you would like to change/modify. . . . Ask your direct reports what they can buy into—and what they can't. Dialogue to achieve consensus on Corporate message. Use examples and illustrations pertinent to your business. . . . Have each of them meet with their direct reports—and you participate. Then bring it to the next level until every manager in the Company has met with his/her leader—and if they are troubled, see you. . . . Devote some time—at each staff meeting, at each level—to discussing progress in support of the Corporate message. One-time announcement/discussion will not achieve intended results. . . . The objective is to have every person in this company be exposed to and have a dialogue on the corporate operating objective and its support messages by July 1, 1988. (Tichy, 1993)

Using Welch's ideas, Work-Out was implemented in September 1988 and has been one of the keys to GE's creating shared meaning about a new way of relating and

organizing. An interpretive view of social-organizational change processes helps us understand why GE's change effort was successful.

Clearly, GE's transformation to a more organic organization represents a major shift in the very foundation of knowledge for members of a traditionally mechanistic organization. Such a change could imply a pervasive change in what members recognize as fact and what they regard as legitimate forms of actions. For a corporation to achieve this shift, the interpretive perspective would suggest questions such as the following: How can organizations get to the point where members are operating under new assumptions and using these new words? How can we transform the interpretive foundations upon which knowledge rests within organizations so that a new discourse community shapes members' relational bonds? Can this perspective help us see paradoxes and complexities involved in change?

THE CONSTRUCTIONIST PERSPECTIVE

The shift to a social constructionist approach is not new. In fact, what constitutes science and knowing has been in evolution for centuries. Social scientists such as Marx, Husserl, Dilthey, Weber, and Habermas who have questioned the applicability of the physical science "knowing" have recently become popularized in the management literature. These new models are more actor based, experientially oriented, praxis oriented, and self-reflective than the traditional positivistic, objectivist model.

Growing acceptance of the constructionist model in the management literature is evidenced in the increasing number of articles dealing with the subject in major journals such as *Academy of Management Review* and *Administrative Science Quarterly*. In the field of organizational development, cognitive theorists have begun to introduce some variations of social constructionism. Bartunek and Moch (1987) and Gioia and his colleagues (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Poole, Gioia, & Gray, 1989) argue that effective change requires that organization members alter their cognitive schemas for understanding and responding to organizational events. Although the interpretive schema literature has provided an opening to considering the influence of interpretive process in shaping the world we discover as fact, we need to capture the dynamic and recursive nature of interpretive processes. We call attention here to the social basis of interpretation and the dynamic quality of knowledge creation within social groups. By focusing on the evolution of meaning, the interpretive perspective also responds to the criticism of Pettigrew (1985), who argues that the majority of research on change has been ahistorical, aprocessual, and acontextual in character.

INTERPRETIVE VIEW OF KNOWLEDGE

The predominant view of knowledge since the Enlightenment depicts a separation between cognizing mind and external world. The assumption is that there is a real world that exists "out there," independent of any attempt to perceive it or converse about it. In this view, language is seen as a system of symbols that compose patterns

and stand for something in the world. Following Rorty (1979), a "picture theory of words" has predominated the modernist world: Language reflects information about objects in the world and conveys meaning between subjective minds. In the same vein, Reddy (1979) called this the "conduit" metaphor of language, the belief that words actually contain information and are the conduits by which people transfer information to one another.

Thus, for example, I can use the word *customer* to convey information about a particular person or role, and I can be confident that others will apprehend the meaning of the word. From this perspective, the object (customer) and the perceiver are separate and distinct. The subject internally registers knowledge of the object and linguistically conveys it to another, who grasps the meaning of "customer." Thus, following this traditional (modernist) view of knowledge, we would assume that if an executive desired to initiate a change in organizational design, he or she would define his or her task as adequately articulating the characteristics of the redesign in appropriate words and conveying this to others in the organization.

Whereas the traditional view holds that knowledge is the result of pure observation, the interpretive perspective holds that it is not possible to perceive an object or event without some mental predicate, some preunderstanding (what Heidegger called "anticipating foreconceptions") that guides what is noticed and talked about. In other words, the mind is not a tabula rasa that reflects the world. Rather there is no perception without the prior existence of meaningful words that guide what we notice and how we are to make sense of something. We always perceive an object or event as one kind of thing as opposed to another and the interpretive angle is embedded in social convention.

According to Hans Gadamer, Heidegger's student, it is impossible to perceive something without interpretation, and interpretation is made possible by prejudice and preunderstanding that are built into the language that one inherits and uses (Gadamer, 1979). Within a given cultural context, we learn to read gestures and utterances in ways that have become familiar and facilitate our interactions. People live within interpretive communities, or discourse communities (Fish, 1989) that provide a horizon of understanding and guide what members notice as fact. So, for example, the word "subordinate" makes sense within some discourse communities because it exists within a network of familiar words that guide members' interpretive activities: Concepts like chain of command, superordinate, bureaucracy, and division of labor serve to delimit what members can perceive and what actions are appropriate within a particular setting. There is no sense in which the term "subordinate" more accurately reflects the reality of the world. Within a commune or an egalitarian organization, the word "subordinate" would not be useful. The object in the world and the descriptions of it cannot be separated: The vocabulary for talking about the world actually make objects and experiences available to us in one form as opposed to another.

What this suggests is that rhetorical strategies and linguistic conventions are not just decorative devices or conduits containing information, they play a formative role in guiding how people interpret situations, read texts, and construct versions of experiences. In this spirit, there has been an emerging interest in the constitutive power of metaphor in guiding interpretive frames. Morgan (1986) demonstrated how root

metaphors for organizing guide whole bodies of theories and research, as well as forms of activities within organizations themselves. Thus the familiar metaphor of organizations as machines shapes the contours of imaginable activities within organizations. We continue to talk about organizations in terms of efficiency, coordination of the bottom by the top, rational models of control and decision making, the functional breakdown of departments, measurement of outcomes, and evaluation and appraisals as corrective measures to improve efficiency. These linguistic patterns reinforce and are reinforced by what we have come to know as bureaucratic activities.

Following Wittgenstein (1968) and ordinary language philosophy, meaning making is a shared and public activity, not something that occurs in the private recesses of the mind. A word achieves meaning because of its usage within a systematic pattern of activities, because of its place within a language game members engage in. In this sense, it is no longer useful to think of words as pictures but as tools, as navigation devices that allow members of a culture to coordinate ongoing relations with one another. The signifier *customer* has no necessary relation to the concept *external buyer*, but to utter the word may be helpful if I want to get someone to buy something or want to discuss satisfying someone's requirements. Words emerge in order to facilitate and support patterns of interactions.

One central theme of interpretive theory is the indeterminacy of meaning. The established meaning of a word is never fixed and does not determine how it will be applied in the future. Words develop meaning in relation to other words. Meaning is never final but always deferred in relation to other terms that themselves are evolving (Derrida, 1978). Also, words develop meaning through novel applications that alter the fabric of interpretive assumptions. Words are continuously extended beyond the boundaries of their existing applications. Wittgenstein likened the situation to the growth of an expanding town: Like the creation of new roads and building of new houses, language is constructed as we go along. In this sense, the discourse patterns are never fixed: Discourse creates, sustains, and transforms organizational structures by altering or augmenting the set of interlocking assumptions that in turn shape the linguistic patterns and conventions. Knowledge processes in organizations are recursive and dynamic: Through time, members' linguistic forms shape actions and these actions in turn stimulate new linguistic forms. In this sense, every utterance is an intervention into the interpretive horizon of a discourse community. The challenge in understanding the change process rests in grasping the embeddedness of language in historical patterns of gestures and assumptions. Language offers the opportunity for change by enabling new action alternatives, while reflecting the constraints of previous patterns, actions, and assumptions.

The interpretive view holds that knowledge is fundamentally social, linguistic, and historically constituted. Through discourse, individuals cocreate and shape their social reality. In this sense, discourse supports particular social patterns by creating and sustaining forms of argumentation, categories for understanding, labels and metaphors, and accounts of legitimate action. From this perspective, utterances are practical forces in shaping the very negotiation of meaning within organizations. Crucial to understanding this process are the patterns of discourse through time as organizations achieve stability through patterns of interaction cycles and the evolution of rules for

interpreting gestures and utterances. This suggests that discourse creates, maintains, and transforms the background of agreements and set of interlocking assumptions that reinforce one another and delimit what is knowable within organizational communities.

To demonstrate the application of this alternative view of knowledge, we will present a social construction analysis of a large-scale organizational change. We chose the U.S. Navy's move to Total Quality as the illustration because it represents a paradigm shift in an organization with a 200-year tradition. We will look at the early stages of an attempted change to see how the dynamics of the change process involve a tension between discourses—how change involves conflict between a well-entrenched discourse and the proposal of an alternative discourse.

AN ILLUSTRATION

The following example is meant to illustrate common problems associated with introducing a large-scale organizational change. It is not intended to represent an in-depth case analysis; rather the example provides a means for demonstrating the conceptual notions in this article. We will focus on the early stages of a change where the paradigm disconnects and early transitions are particularly visible.

In the fall of 1989, the chief of Navy operations released a memorandum that cited the importance of moving to a Total Quality organization and encouraged all Navy commands to move toward implementing Total Quality within their units. The shift in organizing is monumental for the United States Navy, considering its size and entrenched bureaucratic/mechanistic traditions. In view of that fact, commands from shore establishments to the fleet are in various phases of accepting and implementing this paradigm shift.

The organization illustrated in this paper is a Navy computer and telecommunication command located in the continental United States. The commanding officer (CO) of the organization had previously been assigned to a unit that had begun instituting Total Quality Leadership (TQL). Because of his experience with TQL and his belief that eventually it would become a mandatory program throughout the Navy, the CO decided to begin implementation of TQL in his unit during the summer of 1991.

The data for this study were collected during a 3-month period in the winter of 1991-1992. The purpose of the study was to look at the initial stages of the change effort (Youngblood, 1992). The two data collection techniques used were document analysis and 21 in-depth interviews with a cross section of officers and enlisted men and women from the two departments that comprise this command. The data were collected to provide us with an understanding of how various organizational members were making sense of this change effort.

Introducing New Organizing Assumptions

Our example begins when a memo was received from an upper manager by the CO of this organization outlining the goals and objectives of TQL. The memo emphasized some of the characteristics mentioned earlier, such as creation of a quality culture,

timely delivery of high-quality, cost-effective services, and employee involvement in continuous improvement.

A section of the memo follows:

Commanding Officers, Assistant Chiefs of Staff, and special staffs will:

- Ensure continuous, obvious, top level commitment to the TQL process strategy . . .
- Implement TQL training that ensures adequate training for all employees. Enclosure (1) contains minimum TQL training requirements . . .
- Implement an Ideas Handling Program that places emphasis on employee participation. Ensure that ideas are tracked monthly as to the number received and number implemented. The results of the Ideas Handling Program should be displayed within the activity . . .
- Ensure quality is included in all supervisors' performance evaluations . . .
- Ensure uniformity in evaluation and interpretation of TQL statistics for purposes of reporting or determining resource requirements . . .
- Consolidate activity TQL progress submissions and report quarterly to the Office of the Under Secretary of the Navy for TQM/Productivity on [command] progress . . .

We *will* accomplish the mission. (NAVCOMTELCOM Instruction 5200.2, 1991)

This section of the instruction is presented to illustrate how the language in this memo is embedded within a mechanistic discourse community. Familiar mechanistic assumptions, language, and behaviors are cited to introduce the new paradigm. Whereas the Navy's TQL philosophy purports to be built on a participative ideology, customer orientation, systems thinking, continuous improvement, and team-oriented problem solving involving all levels of the organization, the memo announcing this "paradigm shift" contains language that reflects the traditional mechanistic view of organizing.

Language contained in the memo, such as "ensure commitment to TQL" and "implement TQL training that ensures adequate training for all employees," is imbued with mechanistic assumptions regarding rank, power, authority, decision making, and obedience. Commanding officers are informed to "ensure commitment," "ensure quality," and "ensure uniformity" as if commitment, quality, and uniformity are to be delivered by pure force of a memo. Specification of "minimum requirements," references to "evaluation and inspection," and the quantitative measurement of an "ideas handling program" are all rhetorical expressions that have Tayloristic overtones quite inconsistent with the quality revolution.

Herein, however, rests the paradox: How can a radically new way of operating be understood by those in the organization if the change is not communicated in familiar terms? Social constructionists would say that this paradox is inevitable; people have no *tabula rasa* powers to view language and behavior suddenly with "fresh eyes." Each interaction is interpreted by organizational members within preunderstandings of language that delimit what they notice and how to make sense of it. They use familiar ways of thinking to interpret new gestures.

The Navy's proposed change to become a Total Quality organization would involve a change in the fundamental values and assumptions regarding organizing. Members need to make meaning of the proposal expressed in this memo and other communications that mandate large-scale change. From a constructionist perspective, the meaning

does not exist in the words themselves. Clearly, issuing a memo and mandating that this military command redesign its structure will not guarantee that members will accurately grasp the memo's essence and that a shift in meaning will occur. The commanding officer's words and actions do not come with directions or recipes dictating how they are to be interpreted. In other words, meaning is not something that is delivered from speaker to listener; it is cocreated. To locate the meaning-making process, we look at the interpretive readiness of the discourse community in question, and we ask what interpretation this particular utterance might trigger for the readers from within their social context—the interlocking sets of background assumptions that guide members' beliefs. In other words, how do members place this utterance in relation to other utterances and conversations that have defined this interpretive community?

**Tension Between Discourse Systems:
Creating Versions of Inconsistencies
and Questioning Authenticity**

The admiral, the commander, and others throughout the Navy's leadership declare that a major restructuring is underway and that they (the Navy leaders) are fully committed to it. However, many of the most deeply cherished military values and norms are challenged by the Total Quality discourse that generates phrases about altering authoritarian relations, empowering all members of the hierarchy to solve organizational problems at their source, and disregarding functional barriers imposed by functional departments. Members begin to question the authenticity of the proposed change and interpret this proposal as another bureaucratic gesture, an order to be obeyed like all other orders from superiors. Members quickly call attention to inconsistencies between the assumptions that Total Quality discourse espouses and the historical patterns of authority relations that they have experienced. The interpretation of this gesture is embedded within previous patterns of behaviors and gestures: In particular, this proposal is compared with previous attempts to alter organizational problems, attempts that have been interpreted as bureaucratically driven and largely unsuccessful. Total Quality is seen as a temporary interruption of the organizational routines. Many of the officers echoed the tone of this officer who reported that this change effort will not interrupt bureaucracy-as-usual: "There's a boatload of skepticism about the program. . . . People figure this is what's happening now and we'll be back to business soon."¹ Many people initially interpreted the TQL effort as driven by the need to follow orders within the command.

TQL was mandated by the chief of naval operations, I understand. Headquarters said, "You're gonna implement this." Here we are trying to sell this to employees who've been through some of these programs. There used to be a human resources bunch too, with computerized surveys. That's what we're up against.

One of the very officers mandated with implementing the change even speculated that the commander's motives were guided by professional interest consistent within a hierarchical, mechanistic system of norms: his desire to climb up the hierarchy. The

officer said, “[It was implemented] because the commanding officer was told to. I take that back. Because the chief of naval operations was pushing it and the commander wants to get ahead.”

Patterns of discourse reinforce the interlocking sets of assumptions that guide what members of this interpretive community select as fact and taken-for-granted common sense. Discourse patterns uphold assumptions regarding efficiency, coordination of the bottom by the top, and decision making by upper level managers. In particular, the organization values authority lines and chain of command as the proper mode for handling problems.

Initiation of Novel Actions Within New Discourse Patterns

One of the espoused principles of TQ discourse is the formation of groups (such as Process Action Teams and Quality Management Boards) and task forces to solve problems and foster a learning environment. According to these precepts, the basis for group membership is not authority but expertise, so that those closest to the source of the problems share knowledge and initiate solutions. In this organization, as part of the TQ change effort, cross-functional groups were formed to solve organizational problems. They began to talk about issues that under previous norms were assigned to those holding managerial authority. Within this command, however, the proposal to form Process Action Teams (PATs) does not fit within familiar categories of meaning that value individual responsibility, timeliness, and lines of authority. Many echoed the complaint of this officer: “Management expects this particular PAT to be a long drawn out process. They told us to take as long as we need and that’s what’s happening. I don’t want to sit on this PAT for the remainder of my time here.” Many of the members expressed frustration with the length of time (in their words, “waste of time”) devoted to PATs and other group activities:

I think we’re studying this process to death. We discussed doing simple things but decided to do something meaningful and we either started too late or picked something hard. Now it looks like another management slow roll. We’ll meet for two years until it’s [TQL] canceled.

Based on familiar categories of meaning, members are unable to glean any sense of progress from these activities. Based on norms of efficiency and control, the PAT meetings are a waste of time. They use military metaphors of surrender to describe the inevitable defeat of the change attempt: “The process is being beat to death. They’re going to beat it into submission til it waves a white flag.”

At this point there are no linguistic categories consistent with an interpretive horizon that would support a Total Quality ideology to help the members of the command make sense of these new activities. There are no terms to grasp stages of group development, organizational learning, or continuous improvement activities. Group activity is seen simply as an interruption of routine: Problems are to be solved, not discussed.

Faced with what looks like meaningless activities, members tend to frame these actions in terms consistent with accepted meanings. In the implementation of TQL,

several interviewees reported that although Productivity Improvement Forms (PIFs) were supposed to go directly from the originator to the TQL coordinator, department heads would sometimes keep them within their departments, taking action as they saw fit but never formally entering them into the PIF processing system (Youngblood, 1992). Managers often reverted back to using old behaviors such as directives, rules, and procedures to force the change. Then, TQL, with all its formal structure and rules, was perceived as becoming a bureaucracy of its own:

TQL here is becoming a program. Bad way because it's becoming a check in the block. Management of it is becoming a political, elaborate structure that supports it. It's becoming bureaucratized, making it an office with office furniture and people.

Managers began to require quarterly reports on the status of TQL implementation, an action that reinforced familiar political activity. One officer complained, "I hope it doesn't turn into a contest—who has the most PIFs. It is becoming that at this command. The reports to Telcom [higher command] worsens the political nature of it." In one case, a commanding officer began to track the number of PIFs by department. One department head ordered his department to write and submit PIFs: "Up until last week we were the only department with no PIFs. I've been after my division officers to get at least one in to me to make it look like we're playing the game."

The Emergence of a New Language to Construe Novel Actions

Nevertheless, as the organization continues the contest between alternative discourse patterns, a different pattern of words emerges to constitute legitimate activity and delimit what is knowable and normal. Under familiar discourse patterns, it was not within the horizon of possible actions to imagine workers generating and acting on ideas to improve work processes. However, members begin to form different expressions and attributions to talk about these novel activities. For an employee to fix a broken computer terminal is now framed as "serving the customer." Conversations about managers "paying attention to ideas" were unlikely under previous discourse patterns, but now members begin to utter nascent scripts that propose a new form of activity. One junior officer said, "The most stimulating thing about TQL is the fact that you can have suggestions about changes and know that they won't get stopped in the chain of command."

Another junior officer said, "I believe it's a real good program. I think upper management is, if you want to call it, stubborn about taking lower management's ideas and ignoring them. But this is improving the way upper management looks at ideas." Within everyday conversations, the phrases "suggestions that don't get stopped in the chain of command" and "improving the way upper management looks at ideas" begin to open new possible relational scenarios. Perhaps it is now within the horizon of possible actions to propose ideas and initiate actions that actually improve work systems. The background set of assumptions that guides expectations for future behavior is subtly being altered. Acting on lower managers' ideas may now seem

within the horizon of possible actions. Or perhaps “old” actions will receive new attributions, so that when a chief petty officer initiates a new procedure, it may now be framed as “employee empowered to do continuous improvement” rather than simply doing his job or following orders.

Process Improvement Forms—the proposals of ideas for improvement—were at first depicted as a new form of suggestion box, or a chance for employees to “bitch” and complain about what is not working well. Even after a few ideas are successfully implemented, including a flexible work schedule, the PIFs are depicted as “bypassing the chain of command,” a clear reference to previous discourse assumptions as a way to make sense of this activity. Some see PIFs as a power tool—a legitimate way for workers to get the attention of the chain of command that without this forum would not receive managerial attention:

This TQL is the only way for workers to bypass supervisors that won't listen or that can't get along. TQL allows you to bring things up, jump the chain of command, without getting in trouble—that's not a good word—without looking like jumping over the boss.

Worker participation in solving problems is still framed in the old discourse rules of normality. However, even while this action is still depicted as violating the chain of command, it is beginning to generate new forms of action. This shift points to the recursive nature of a community's interpretive repertoires, a point we will expand on in the conclusion. The interpretive code facilitates certain practices, and the practices augment and extend the meaning and application of the interpretive code. The interpretive repertoires associated with chain of command and Total Quality discourse in regard to authority relationships now make it feasible for employees to suggest changes in the design of work. In turn, such novel actions alter and extend the meaning and possible range of application of the interpretive accounts of Total Quality discourse; perhaps initiating changes in work processes is no longer constituted as jumping the chain of command. Or, in this example, it is feasible to submit PIFs without being labeled a troublemaker or whiner. This is consistent with Derrida's notion that the meaning of words is never fixed but always being extended beyond existing applications. Also, it is reminiscent of Wittgenstein's comparison of language to a town its inhabitants expand to accommodate new living patterns.

After deciding that meeting once a month was too infrequent, the Quality Management Board begins to meet on a weekly basis. Similarly cross-functional groups that consider various PIFs begin to meet on a weekly basis. The same meetings that only 2 months earlier were framed as a waste of time are triggering different attributions. One officer said:

It's giving people an opportunity to state ideas even when they're not on processes. Some ideas are just bitches. If they had put them in the CO's suggestion box they would have been labeled a troublemaker. This seems to avoid that if we act on the ideas in a positive way.

There is a subtle new distinction emerging here. Under former discourse patterns, events that would have been regarded as “employees bitching” can now be transformed

into positive contributions given two new constraints: a) that the ideas be submitted to the group rather than left in a box and b) that the group act on the ideas in a positive way. The meaning of the event is undergoing a subtle transformation. It is becoming imaginable that something can be done with employees' ideas, that some consequence may follow.

Imagining and Initiating Novel Actions

New actions are initiated that would seem unimaginable under previous discourse rules. When first initiated, members reported that the Quality Productivity Improvement Council (QPIC) meetings were regarded as a waste of time, and members reported frustration in regards to coming to an agreement among different department heads who held diverse interests. Three months after meetings first began, they initiate a new form of action: When a proposal is being considered and these diverse members need to debate and seek consensus on an idea, one member agrees to collect data on the proposal from each of the other members and then present the collective picture to the entire group as a way for members to see what the group wants. This allows members to hear each other's views, see where there is agreement and disagreement and whether it is possible to move on a particular proposal. Under previous discourse rules, such a proposal for action would be unimaginable. Or if such an activity had been initiated, it may be framed in different terms, such as "getting the players in line." Other new actions are initiated as well. Soon after the "consensus seeking" innovation, the CO decided that he would withdraw from the QPIC because it was "becoming self-sustaining."

Emergence of New Assumptions and Beliefs

As new language begins to generate new actions, which in turn trigger different action possibilities, basic assumptions and beliefs are altered. Soon after the formation of the new action described above, one of the junior officers said:

I believe in it. I believe it's gonna work. Not like religion, it's been proven. It works. Learn it, do it, and it will work. The proof is there. I believe it could work if everybody gave it an honest effort. To look at PIFs that come in front of them in a realistic way saying it could work instead of just no.

Once again, we can begin to see here the emergence of new accounts and distinctions that delimit forms of activity. Members begin to talk about "giving ideas an honest effort" and avoiding the temptation of "just saying no."

Some officers even begin talking about "convincing the workforce" that TQL works:

It needs help. We need to convince the workforce and all levels of management that it will work and that they won't lose control. There are some people who could really make it work and are gung ho and just need the leverage to do it.

This version is quite different from the one depicted in the memo in which members were instructed to implement TQL. Total Quality is not seen as a set of behaviors that should comply with new standards but as a set of beliefs that one chooses to hold. Nor is it depicted as something temporary that will revert back to old ways of doing business but as an activity that will be successful if "honestly" attempted.

Eventually, members report that new actions are being successfully attempted, even though members refuse to label it in terms of TQL:

People don't want to admit to using TQL, but I see people who are, and they come to me and say, "We're trying to do this PAT. We're getting somewhere," or, "Got another PIF today. Pretty slick." People are getting more sophisticated. Haven't gotten one that will save a million bucks, but you never know.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Throughout this article, we have used the constructionist perspective to demonstrate how the accounts people generate and the words people use are not a matter of accurately reflecting the world but rather are a matter of coordinating social relations. Referring to an earlier example, we mentioned the introduction of the word *customer* in an organization to describe coworkers and internal departments within the organization. This word is not just a new label but marks the transformation of interactions among members within the organization. Put simply, the interpretive perspective holds that knowledge and understanding are not something that reside in the private recesses of the mind. Instead, the locus of knowledge is embedded in social relations. These relations generate certain utterances and linguistic patterns that support a range of activity and dissuade others.

It is important to note that we are not contending that this is a second-order ("double loop" or "gamma") change (Bartunek & Moch, 1987). We are simply saying that understanding change is understanding alterations in discourse patterns that may suggest different ways of constituting action. These suggestions in turn are capable of generating new action possibilities. Change, then, occurs when a new way of talking replaces an old way of talking.

Implications for Understanding the Change Process

Operating under traditional knowledge assumptions, the speaker/observer and the object are two discrete entities mediated by language. Following these foundationalist assumptions, identifying and measuring change is feasible. However, from an interpretive perspective, change is difficult to identify because it is impossible to separate the object from accounts of the object. When an employee is heard complaining about work processes, is he or she whining or is he or she engaging in employee involvement in the interests of process improvement? There is no sense in which one account is more accurate or closer to the truth. What is deemed adequate to measure validity of change is always specific to the discourse community under study. The interpretive repertoires that uphold and are upheld by the tacit social agreements determine which

account is acceptable and which is not. Even the most simple descriptions of events are interpretive, so that whenever one describes what is happening in an organization, one is always speaking from some interpretive slant, assuming what events are similar, what outlines the contour of their shape, what qualifies as evidence for an event having occurred. Organizations change when there is an alteration in the way members conceive of themselves, in the stories, accounts, and versions a community tells about itself and thereby enables in its members' practices.

What this suggests is that change is at the heart of every interpretive community. Constraints that make some utterances, activities, and routines acceptable and others unacceptable are not fixed and are always being altered by the actions these utterances make possible. So when Total Quality was first introduced in the Navy command, the introduction of new discourse patterns initiated novel actions that in turn triggered a new language about how work could be accomplished in this command. Interpretive repertoires and accounts are extended, augmented, and altered as they elaborate themselves. This suggests that whereas the interpretive repertoires organize experience, they are not monolithic, explicit sets of directions, but a general project whose implementation involves the continual discovery of its own content, a discovery that accomplishes its own alteration (Fish, 1990).

It is through patterns of discourse that relational bonds are formed; that action and structure are created, transformed, and maintained; and that values and beliefs are reinforced or challenged. The process is recursive: Interpretive repertoires are extended to include various practices. At the same time, these practices augment and alter the interpretive code. So, for example, when an enlisted person at the telecommunications command hears that he or she is encouraged to offer suggestions for process improvements, he or she may interpret this as an opportunity to make suggestions about the work schedule and ask that the organization consider a flex time program. (Or it might trigger nothing at all.) As others discuss or ignore the suggestion as useful or irrelevant, members begin to extend various versions of process improvement: Perhaps it is now legitimate to suggest changes in task design without fear of jumping the chain of command. Or perhaps his suggestion is interpreted and ignored, and he is labeled a whiner or complainer. The recursive cycle could proceed in another direction: The version of process improvement may be reframed into an account of something the command structure is doing to follow orders and enhance careers. Or perhaps contradictory interpretive repertoires are generated triggering a range of directions. An interpretive community is, by definition, always transforming the horizon into ingredients for its own practices, but the practices themselves are being transformed by the very work they do. When members reach out to absorb ideas for their own projects, they are simultaneously extending those projects and altering them.

In this sense, change is not something that comes from the outside and alters the inside of a community. The interpretive repertoires offer sets of interlocking and sometimes contradictory assumptions that organize equivocal, contingent experience in a way that makes its modification inevitable. In the above case, one cannot say that the ideas regarding Total Quality intervened from outside the organization and caused it to change, as if the idea is an entity entirely separate from the organization's current practices and assumptions. For the agent or idea to be persuasive, it must already

present some ideas that members believe and see as legitimate. There must be some appealing principles that uphold current beliefs before it can pose a challenge to other beliefs. Any organizational change is constrained by the tacit agreements that enable the change to occur, and the agreements themselves are changed by what they enable. For example, the "instruction" that orders the command to initiate Total Quality improvements contains many elements consistent with accepted discourse patterns (the command language, the form of the memo, etc.). At the same time, it is invoking elements of Total Quality discourse from private industry that invoke different relational scenarios that one would not usually associate with military organizations—employee involvement, process improvement that overcomes functional and hierarchical barriers, and so forth—that if interpreted one way could amount to the undoing of many of the very practices and assumptions invoked in the memo. In this sense, interpretive repertoires are open to challenge from some of the very same interests that are being invoked.

Up to this point, our discussion of the recursive relationship between discourse and behavior has implied, but not explicitly addressed, an important question, namely, the question of power. We do not want to suggest that discourse patterns within organizations are ideologically neutral. Critics of social constructionism often assume that the interpretive perspective, because it emphasizes the creation of meaning by participants, connotes an egalitarian view of organizing. However, participation in creation of meaning does not imply symmetry. It is rare that anyone, regardless of status, is able to initiate a change in discourse in an organization. It is rare that organizations are able to achieve Habermas's (1975) ideal speech situation in which anyone is free to say anything without fear of reprimand or restraint, let alone achieve a situation where speakers are assured that what they say will have impact or influence on an organization's policies. Discourse, as George Orwell depicted in *1984*, like any resource, is a potential tool to be used by the powerful to control and maintain the status quo. To return to the case of Jack Welch and GE, for example, although he and other top leaders have created forums for dialogue, are all voices and viewpoints welcome? To what extent are opposing viewpoints actually invited, and, if offered, heard? Recent events have suggested that perhaps Welch's emphasis on the bottom line is so pervasive that ethical lapses may have been tolerated. For example, some reports suggest that the organizational pressure to generate profits led to the reporting of false earnings at Kidder, GE's investment bank (Solomon & McGinn, 1994).

And yet the discussion of power from a discursive perspective takes us beyond visible intimidation and the control of access to participation in policy decisions. Following Foucault's (1977, 1979) genealogical analysis of the power/knowledge nexus, discursive power does not dominate subjects (to use his term) but rather envelopes them. Power is embedded in gestures of observation and surveillance, through "microtechnologies" in the gathering of data, including "exacting questionnaires" and interviews. Observations, notations, and the gathering of data create a "normalizing gaze" as categories become the basis upon which subjects are appraised and upon which they appraise themselves. This of course raises an important set of questions for any understanding of discourse and organizational change. To return to the example of the Total Quality movement, how does the creation of various

measurements (such as the creation of PERT charts and flow diagrams) and awards (such as awards for process improvement suggestions) contribute to the creation of a normalizing judgment that measures individuals against these standards? Subjects begin to internalize the standards that are created through discursive categories, and the techniques of observation are no longer necessary. An analysis of discourse must acknowledge power dynamics because organizational members may refer to themselves in categories that implicitly maintain a system that does not serve their own interests.

Foucault is often criticized for viewing the individual as helplessly manipulated by larger structures of power. Here, Gramsci's (1971) theory of hegemony is helpful in shedding light on how dynamic and unstable power relations are. Groups and classes are continually in struggles—forming, disbanding, and reconstituting in various forms of consent, opposition, and alliance. Over time, these power structures often become the object of transformation as members engage in activities that resist or sabotage normalizing practices. This again points to the recursive dynamics of discourse in organizational change.

Implications for Research

The interpretive perspective suggests that we decenter the individual in our consideration of organizational change. Traditional views of change often assume that members' social identities affect their organizational actions. A view that appreciates the recursive dynamics of discourse suggests that discourse patterns help to shape social identities. This notion is consistent with Heidegger's (1971) notion of "thrownness," the idea that people are thrown into linguistic conventions that guide their experience. As he put it, people do not speak language, rather language speaks people. It is also consistent with Foucault's (1971) notion of the formation of enunciative modalities, the idea that whereas social subjects shape discourse, they are also shaped by discursive practices. These notions suggest several implications for researchers.

First, organizational researchers should take a historical and longitudinal perspective in studying how linguistic forms are inherited, how these forms constrain and facilitate thought and action, and how they change through time. This perspective also suggests intensive case studies of discourse that go beyond the scope of the short illustrations above. Such cases would appreciate the ongoing contestation of various forms of discourse over time, how various discursive practices influence and/or resist one another, how relational bonds are transformed and reconstituted through patterns of discourse.

Also, if knowledge is linguistically and relationally constructed, it is impossible to ignore the constitutive role of the researcher. The researcher employs data collection techniques—surveys, interviews—that are highly discursive, that maintain, create, and transform various categories, much like the microtechnologies of power that Foucault discusses. Researchers do not have privileged access to objective data, but in fact play a role in constructing what they discover as reality.

On a final note, there is currently a lively debate inspired by the interpretive perspective (see, for example, Golembewski's critique, 1995). Whereas the interpretive perspective seems to have influenced research in the social science, critics abound. This paradigm challenges mainstream quantitative normative methodology that has been a privileged form of knowing in this field for decades. Although the particulars of the debate go beyond the scope of this paper, there has become a plethora of literature defending the viewpoint (see Guba & Lincoln, 1994). In this paradigmatic change, we too are witnessing a powerful form of changing discourse within our own discipline.

Implications for Managers

Perhaps this decentering of the individual has implications for managerial practice. When planned change is attempted and members' familiar discourse patterns are challenged, they have to engage in a discourse that allows them to reject or "try on" the new language. The military illustration demonstrates how members point out inconsistencies and question the authenticity of the change. Perhaps this can be construed not so much as resistance to be overcome but as a form of sense making. People cognize situations with the terms they have available. In this sense, it is not individuals who are resistant but the available discourse systems that create, maintain, and transform people's assumptions and beliefs. In this sense, change occurs when tensions within a community's discourse patterns produce the beginnings of a new discourse. This resonates with Nietzsche's notion that social change is a "mobile army of metaphors." In other words, change occurs when one way of talking replaces another way of talking.

This interpretive view suggests that the change process is more dynamic and recursive than the process depicted by Lewin's three-stage model of unfreezing, changing, and refreezing that envisions a linear and static approach to change (Lewin, 1947). Organizations are perpetually in motion and accomplishing their own alteration. The crucial issue for those interested in planned change is the complex and recursive nature of meaning systems within organizations.

If the interpretive slants of a discourse community define the contours of objects and experiences, define and redefine the limits of the knowable world by the accounts, versions, and stories members tell about their experience, then the most powerful change intervention is one that occurs at the level of everyday conversations. Interpretive codes are altered as people consider, debate, and propose various accounts within ongoing relational scenarios. In this sense, perhaps managers should think of themselves as managers of symbolic action (Mumby, 1988) or choreographers of discourse scenarios. Leaders can shape the contexts within which members dialogue, try out new words, and discard old ones.

In this article, we have presented a broad sketch of a constructionist understanding of organizational change. By appreciating the constitutive nature of discourse, this perspective emphasizes the dynamic nature of organizational life and the pervasiveness of change, and suggests implications for managers and students of organizational change.

NOTE

1. The quotes that follow in this illustration were compiled by Youngblood (1993).

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