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'Just Through Talking': A Collaborative Learning Approach for Human Resource Change Agents

Dorothy Wilson Roberts

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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by Dorothy Wilson Roberts entitled "'Just Through Talking': A Collaborative Learning Approach for Human Resource Change Agents." I have examined the final electronic copy of this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education, with a major in Educational Psychology and Guidance.

Katherine H. Greenberg, Major Professor

We have read this dissertation and recommend its acceptance:

Howard Pollio, Ralph Brockett, Ken Newton

Accepted for the Council:

Carolyn R. Hodges

Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

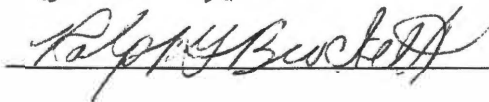
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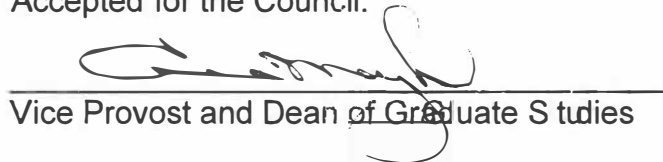


Katherine H. Greenberg, Major Professor

We have read this dissertation
and recommend its acceptance:



Accepted for the Council:



Vice Provost and Dean of Graduate Studies

Thesis
2004b
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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my husband, Jay. Without his love, support, and belief in me this goal would have been unreachable.

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ABSTRACT

My purpose in conducting this research project was to engage in collaborative action research with a group of human resource professionals in order to investigate the role of a human resource professional as an organizational change agent, and how participating in a collaborative learning group focused on change might inform our practice. We used dialogue during our collaborative learning group meetings to share professional experiences, better understand our own assumptions and the assumptions of others in our group, and for sensemaking about our profession. The data analysis focused in two areas: 1) describing what the experience as an organizational change agent was like for the participants, and 2) describing how the experience of participating in a collaborative learning group informed our practice. Additionally, a model presenting a collaborative learning approach for human resource change agents is provided.

We concluded that changes in our practice did occur as a result of personal insights and growth experienced in action research and collaborative learning. Five themes related to our experience as organizational change agents reflect the ways in which we were able to better understand our practice. The themes were: change is personal – “one conversation at a time”; struggles and frustrations – “puts you in the weeds”; approach – “soft or back-door”; trust – “open and honest conversation”; and results – “where the rubber meets the road.” Through participation in the collaborative learning group, we not only had a better understanding of ourselves and others in the group, but were also able to

identify and reflect on our theories-in-action, making explicit what was implicit.

These five themes: "there is a process"; "suspending judgment"; "getting hold of our own change"; "just through talking"; and "safe and understanding environment" were related to the group members' attempt to "make sense" or better understand ourselves, others, and our work environment.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

1.1 Background

Yogi Berra once said, “the future isn’t what it used to be”. No organization today – large or small, local or global – is immune to change. To cope with new technological, competitive, and demographic forces, leaders in every sector have sought to fundamentally alter the way their organizations do business. These changes have paraded under many banners – total quality management, reengineering, restructuring, mergers and acquisitions, turnarounds. Yet, according to most assessments, few of these efforts accomplish their goals. Fewer than fifteen of the one hundred or more companies studied by Kotter (1998) have successfully transformed themselves.

Ulrich (1997) states that one of the key roles of a human resource (HR) professional in an organization is to “manage transformation and change.” He describes the overall transformation as entailing fundamental and cultural change within the firm and that human resource professionals managing transformation become both cultural guardians and cultural catalysts. Ulrich defines the purpose of change in a business as “the ability of an organization to improve the design and implementation of initiatives and to reduce cycle time in all organizational activities” (p. 30). Similarly, Davis (1998) provides a definition of change from an organizational development perspective. He defines it as “the process of aligning an organization’s people and culture with changes in

business strategy, structure, and systems” (p.1). Human resource professionals help to identify and implement processes for change. Ulrich (1997) defines the metaphor for work in this role as “change agent”.

As change agents, HR professionals face the paradox inherent in any organizational change. Often, change must be grounded in the past. For the HR professional serving as change agent, honoring the past means appreciating and respecting the tradition and history of a business while acting for the future. HR professionals may need to force or facilitate a dialogue about values as they identify new behaviors that will help to keep a firm competitive over time. Being change agents is clearly part of the value-added role of HR professionals as business partners. (p. 30)

The actions of change agents include identifying and framing problems, building relationships of trust, solving problems, and creating – and fulfilling – action plans. Ulrich’s research into the competencies related to managing change identified the role of change agent as the most important role for success as an HR professional. “HR professionals who are change agents help make change happen; they understand critical processes for change, build commitment to those processes, and ensure that change occurs as intended” (p. 31).

The need for human resource professionals to lead organizational change is a current focus, which will remain at the forefront of the profession for many years. Based on their book, Capitalizing on the Global Workforce: A Strategic Guide for Management, Schell and Solomon (1997) propose what they believe to be the primary challenges facing human resources in the upcoming decade. The ability to facilitate change management, and helping people prepare and

adapt to change and complexity was at the top of their list. The annual survey by the Human Resource Institute also lists managing change as one of the top two concerns for the year 2005 (Laabs, 1996).

Since change is such an integral part of business success, and that human resource professionals are directly or indirectly appointed as organizational change agents, it is important to consider how this critical responsibility can be enhanced. Change management literature frequently points to the need for improved communication and strengthening of relationships and understanding as fundamental frameworks for successful implementation of change strategies. However, the literature most frequently does not take it to the next step. How is it that this communication and improved understanding of a shared purpose is to be accomplished? Specifically related to human resource professionals as change agents, the literature designates them this role, but says little as to how they can more effectively carry out those responsibilities.

Transforming an organization is the ultimate test of leadership, and understanding the change process is essential to many aspects of a leader's job. Senge, et al. (1999), describe two skills in particular – building coalitions and creating a vision – as being especially relevant to our times. They state that one of the keys to successfully creating a coalition is working as a team, not just a collection of individuals. The pressures of transformation make a strong team essential. They further describe the way to reach these objectives - building a

coalition, creating a shared vision, and developing a quest for learning – is through a collaborative approach.

In a business environment, one way to increase the potential for success is to establish a collaborative process where the manager, associates, human resource specialists, district managers, and others can share knowledge and skills to build a plan of action and to better understand themselves and the organization that is involved in the change. The ideal as described by Senge, et al. (1999) is to create a shared vision that “fosters genuine commitment and enrollment rather than compliance” (p. 9). This is an approach that can be non-traditional for profit-driven business environments. Often the approach is more hierarchical, directive, and singularly focused on achieving operational objectives. The human resource manager’s ability to understand his or her own assumptions, limitations, goals, values, and beliefs, as well as his or her ability to help others involved do the same, is an important part of this process.

Research, such as the four-year study conducted in a business environment by Roth and Kleiner (1996) at MIT’s Center for Organizational Learning, support this theory. They found that having a great team is not enough, it requires “new types of interrelationships and attitudes that can’t just be decreed”, and that one of the greatest single factors of an organization’s success was ensuring that specific attention was paid to “building better conversations” and “recognizing that no one on the team has all the answers,

and importantly, that answers emerge from the give-and-take between members of the team” (p. 28).

One method of building an environment that helps human resource professionals build the understanding and skills to facilitate organizational change is a focus on collaborative learning. Brufee (1993) describes collaborative learning as being constructed among the members of a community of knowledgeable peers – something people construct by talking together and reaching agreement. The purpose of forming the collaborative learning group is to create a foundation for using dialogue to collaboratively learn.

Peters and Armstrong (1998) define collaborative learning as constructing knowledge collectively as people work, inquire, and learn together based on a shared purpose. Through collaborative learning, the participants can develop a shared purpose and improved understanding that can enhance the implementation of change.

An integral tool of collaborative learning is the use of dialogue. Bohm (1996) in his book describes dialogue as coming:

from the Greek word *dialogos*. Logos means “the word” or in our case we would think of the “meaning of the word”. And dia means “through”. A dialogue can be among any number of people, not just two. Even one person can have a sense of dialogue within himself, if the spirit of the dialogue is present. The picture image that this derivation suggests is of a stream of meaning flowing among and through us and between us. This will make possible a flow of meaning in the whole group, out of which will emerge some new understanding. (p. 6)

Issacs (1993) defines it as a "sustained collective inquiry into the processes, assumptions, and certainties that compose everyday experience" (p. 25). He also describes the dialoguing experience as "a setting in which people can allow a free flow of meaning and vigorous exploration of the collective background of their thought, their personal predispositions, the nature of their shared attention, and the rigid features of their individual and collective assumptions" (p. 25).

Collaborative learning has the potential to open the door to facilitating organizational and individual change. Studying how the "tools" of collaborative learning – such as dialogue - can be used to effect organizational and individual change has important implications for the workplace as well as for learning more about collaborative learning itself. Determining appropriate steps to resolve an immediate conflict and the actions for success can best be determined collaboratively – and may result in an increased understanding of the why behind the what, as well as increased buy-in and commitment to the process. Covey (1999) summarizes his thoughts about this need for focus on both process and task in this way:

Leadership lies more in character than in technical competence, but these two are inter-woven. As people grow in competence they become aware of a new dimension to their character. For instance, when we teach the skill of empathic listening, people see that they tend to look at things from their own frames of reference, and they start exploring the richness of other people's perspectives. People say, "now I know why to listen, not just how. (p. 3)

As the literature presents, collaborative learning can potentially impact organizational effectiveness and individual development. As described in the

following section, our collaborative learning group's objectives stemmed from the joining of collaborative learning and professional practice.

1.2 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was three-fold. As a human resource manager I wanted to study my practice as it relates to exploring more about the experience of human resource professionals as change agents. Second, I wanted to study how aspects of collaborative learning, such as dialogue and a collaborative learning group, might be used to inform the practice of a group of human resource professionals. As a part of understanding the influence a collaborative learning group might have on the human resource professional in his or her role as a change agent, it was important to better understand the role of a change agent itself. And third, the group wanted to explore the potential a collaborative learning group might present as a model for human resource change agents. The model focuses on the practice of the human resource professional as a change agent and how collaborative learning might be used to inform and improve their ability to facilitate their own and organizational change.

1.3 Collaborative Learning Group

A collaborative learning group, comprised of six human resource managers, including myself, was formed. The members, who were identified through the researcher's professional relationship with other human resource professionals, voluntarily participated in the group. The members are managers from two local companies, both of which are undergoing significant

organizational change. The collaborative group held twelve group meetings over a four-month period, studying our role as organizational change agents and, through participating in collaborative learning, investigated the impact the group had on our facilitation of organizational change. The collaborative group focused on creating an environment that encouraged dialogue to establish trust and actively used the tools of collaborative learning – dialogue, active listening, asking back, suspending assumptions, and reflection. Using action research, we together practiced collaborative learning and investigated how it informed our professional practice as organizational change agents. Based on our experiences in the group, we also present a model that describes a collaborative learning approach for human resource change agents.

1.4 Method

A summary of the research methods is included in this chapter. Chapter 2 contains a more detailed description of research methods, including action research and phenomenological inquiry, as well as the methodology used for data analysis. This study was carried out using action research and phenomenological inquiry as foundations. This study is action research as defined by Cunningham (1993). He defines action research as “a spectrum of activities that focus on research, planning, theorizing, learning, and development” (p. 4). He also describes a continuous process of research and learning through the researcher’s long-term relationship with a problem. The action researcher is described:

as a person with a scientific attitude, an understanding of qualitative research principles, an understanding of the dynamics of change, and a commitment to studying problems that are relevant in real settings. The researcher is “engaged” within an organization or group undergoing a change. Engagement in a research process is an opportunity to pool the resources and ideas of both clients and researchers. What makes action research different are the practices of encouraging an understanding of real life problems, involving people in a collaborative relationship, and using grounded concepts. (Cunningham, p. 4)

This research project used a model Zuber-Skerritt (1996) and others describe as a spiral of action research cycles. Each cycle is composed of planning, acting (implementing plans), observing (systematically), reflecting, and then re-planning, further implementation, observing and reflecting.

1.5 Data Collection

According to Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) many different types of evidence count as data in action research. The data for this research project consisted of notes I took during the collaborative group meetings and reflections following each meeting, the transcription of audiotapes made during meetings, and one-on-one phenomenological interviews conducted with each participant at the conclusion of the research project. As a part of the action research process group members had ongoing input to the direction of the group. At each meeting we reviewed the data from past meetings and utilized this data to make plans for future collaborative meetings. At the first meeting of the group, members were provided selected handouts that focused on collaborative learning, dialogue, and change. These were also used as a foundation for collaborative dialogue

and to provide some common understanding of concepts and vocabulary. A copy of the handouts are provided in Appendix A. Following the first two meetings, participants responded in writing to short open-ended questions about their role as a change agent and the collaborative group meeting. Because group members found completing the written response burdensome, this procedure was changed at the request of the group following the second meeting. Beginning with the third meeting, each meeting of the collaborative group was taped and transcribed. The last fifteen minutes of each session included a dialogue about the collaborative process – a sort of “stopping the music” to step back from the group and look at the group “from the outside.” Near the close of the four-month period each group member participated in a one-on-one phenomenological interview. The interview questions were two-fold; asking what stood out for the participant about the collaborative learning process, and what stood out about his or her role as an organizational change agent.

1.6 Analysis

The data are presented as the basis of themes that emerged in the analysis process. This document is a story of sorts about what the experience of being an organizational change agent in the human resource profession is like, and our journey in using collaborative learning as a process to help us become more effective at our jobs.

The transcribed tapes of each session and the one-on-one interviews were analyzed. The themes then emerged from the data as repetitive phrases and words. Themes were compared across the data to create a code consisting of thematic categories and were presented in the words of the participants. The specific analysis process is described in more detail in Chapter 2.

As a student in the Collaborative Learning program in the College of Education, Health, and Human Sciences at The University of Tennessee, I was a member of a research group, which provided support during this data analysis stage of the research. During the spring of 2003, this research group consisted of Dr. Katherine Greenberg, Linda Randolph, Jane Henry, and myself. The data and themes were reviewed and evaluated by this group through critical analysis. Additionally, the themes were shared with the group of human resource change agents. The following themes emerged from analysis of the data:

Themes related to the role of a change agent:

1. Change is personal – one conversation at a time
2. Struggles and frustrations – puts you in the weeds
3. Approach – soft or back-door
4. Trust – open and honest conversation
5. Results – the rubber meets the road

Themes related to collaborative learning:

1. There is a process
2. Suspending judgment

3. Getting hold of my own change
4. Just through talking
5. Safe and understanding environment

1.7 Organization of the Dissertation

This document is organized into five chapters. Chapter 1 provides background on human resource professionals and their role as organizational change agents. The problem of the study is also defined in Chapter 1. Chapter 2 contains a detailed presentation about action research and phenomenological inquiry. Chapter 3 includes the literature review, results of this study, and data analysis related to change agents, and addresses the experience of human resource professionals in their role as organizational change agents. Chapter 4 includes a literature review and presents the themes and results of the study related to the impact of the collaborative learning group on the member's own professional practice. Chapter 5, the final chapter includes facilitator reflections and implications for practitioners, which includes a collaborative model for facilitating change.

To maintain anonymity of participant response and company information, fictitious designations are used for group participants and company names. My comments are included along with other participants. For the purpose of this study, I participated equally in collaborative learning group meetings, and my comments were transcribed and analyzed along with other group participants.

CHAPTER 2

Method in Detail

2.1 Action Research

As described in the summary, this study was carried out using action research. Both data collection and analysis used a phenomenological approach. This chapter provides a more in-depth discussion of the rationale and suitability of the research methods selected for the study. It includes discussion about qualitative research, action research, phenomenology, bracketing, and the data gathering and analysis process. Cunningham (1993) describes action research as:

a process of systematically collecting research data about an ongoing system. Its purpose, as defined here, is to develop or discover aspects of the system's operation, which can lead to improvement and change. The process involves understanding the system, defining solutions or discoveries, applying and modifying these solutions, and assessing the results of the actions. (p. 9)

This closely describes what our group of human resource professionals wanted to do – study our role as an organizational change agent with the purpose of improving our practice. The process the group selected to facilitate its action research was a collaborative learning group. It was also important for the group to consider how the collaborative group meetings informed our practice.

Therefore, the research includes a focus on both the role of change agents and the collaborative learning group.

The collaborative learning group meetings allowed participants to study the role of change agent and to view more broadly that part of our profession. We were able to share current issues and practices, study our personal and collective theory that underpins our work, and investigate in a more systematic way the why behind our actions. Using dialogue, reflection, and collaborative

learning we were able to explore our practices in a way that is not common in the workplace. Cunningham (1993) describes a continuous process of research and learning in the researcher's long-term relationship with a problem, and that action research encourages the researcher to experience the problem as it evolves.

Cunningham (1993) further states:

this is the act of "engaging" in real-life problem-solving, and getting legitimization from real organizations. The researcher must be able to access real-life data in "real" time. It is an act of being engaged in the universe where the problem is occurring. Traditional science encourages the testing of ideas in controlled settings, while controlling extraneous variables to gain a better understanding of the effects of the experimental variables. Each type of research has its place. It may become appropriate to carry out conventional research to verify conclusions and interpretations, but it is also necessary to apply these results in unique situations. The action researcher is not looking for something to experiment upon, but responds to the provocations in the field. (p. 5)

By participating in the collaborative learning group, we were able to investigate aspects of our practice with an immediacy and depth that traditional forms of research might not allow. The collaborative approach provided an opportunity to share ourselves and our work life experiences with the objective of informing and improving our professional practice. This method, action research, supported our interactive, collaborative, "real work setting" focused study.

Winter (1996) describes action research in a similar manner, focusing on the link between practice and research and the relation to the larger profession being studied. Action Research involves:

ways of investigating professional experience which link practice and the analysis of practice into a single productive and continuously developing sequence, and which link researchers and

research participants into a single community of interested colleagues. It is about the nature of the learning process, about the link between practice and reflection, about the process of attempting to have new thoughts about familiar experiences, and about the relationship between particular experiences and general ideas. Practitioner action research is thus part of the general idea of professionalism, an extension of professional work, not an addition to it. Action research provides the necessary link between self-evaluation and professional development. (Zuber-Skerritt ed., p. 14)

The six members of the collaborative learning group were co-researchers in this study. I was an “equal” participant in the group, considering myself one of the co-researchers, participating along with other group members in our collaborative learning meetings. Through dialogue and reflection during group meetings, and in one-on-one interviews, we explored our role as organizational change agents and how the collaborative learning group influenced our practice. At the first meeting, there was a brief introduction to dialogue and collaborative learning. A short handout was used to provide a basic level of common understanding and vocabulary. The dialogue was initiated by having each individual share a critical incident related to change. At subsequent group meetings we dialogued about current issues in our own practice. Many of these issues concerned projects in progress where the individual was able to “try out” insights gained from group meetings, and return to subsequent meetings to discuss results. The last fifteen minutes of each meeting were spent dialoguing about the collaborative learning group – a sort of “stepping back” or “stopping the music” to study the process of the group. Additionally, at the conclusion of the

series of group meetings, each group member participated in a one-on-one phenomenological interview.

One of the primary examples of the group participating in making decisions about group direction was in the decision about data collection methods. The initial plan was for group members to complete written responses at the end of each meeting regarding their reflections on change and the collaborative learning group. After two meetings, however, the group decided that completing the written responses was burdensome, difficult to complete when coupled with the travel and intense nature of their day-to-day job, and turned what was a very positive experience – the group meeting – into a stressful, pressured task. As a result, a tape recorder was used to record each group meeting, including reflections on the group that were held at the end of each meeting. The tapes were transcribed verbatim to be used in data analysis. This proved to be effective and also helped participants realize their input was an integral part of the group and the research.

2.2 Qualitative Research

The study is qualitative in nature, which implies that the data are in the form of words as opposed to numbers. Whereas quantitative data are generally evaluated using descriptive and inferential statistics, qualitative data are usually transformed into themes and/or categories. There is more emphasis on description and discovery and less emphasis on hypothesis testing and verification. According to Polkinghorne (1991), qualitative methods are

especially useful in the “generation of categories for understanding human phenomena and the investigation of the interpretation and meaning that people give to events they experience” (p. 112). Searight (1990) states that “Piaget’s theory of cognitive development, for instance, was developed using qualitative methods. Whereas the quantitative researcher is apt to record a small set of previously identified variables, the qualitative researcher seeks a psychologically rich, in-depth understanding of the individual, and would argue that experimental and quasi-experiential methods cannot do justice to describing phenomena such as the therapeutic relationship or the experience of the homeless” (p. 31). In the case of this research study, the phenomena being studied – the experience of organizational change agents, and a collaborative learning experience - are well-suited to being described through the experience of the individuals directly experiencing the phenomena.

Patton’s (1990) description of the fundamental assumptions of qualitative methodology includes several “themes of qualitative inquiry”. Among them are:

- 1) Naturalistic inquiry – studying real-world situations as they unfold naturally; non-manipulative, unobtrusive, and non-controlling; openness to whatever emerges – lack of predetermined constraints on outcomes.
- 2) Inductive analysis – immersion in the details and specifics of the data to discover important categories, dimensions, and interrelationships; begin by exploring genuinely open questions rather than testing theoretically derived (deductive) hypotheses.
- 3) Holistic perspective – the whole phenomenon under study is understood as a complex system that is more than the sum of its parts; focus on complex interdependencies not meaningfully reduced to a few discrete variables and linear, cause-effect relationship.

- 4) Qualitative data – detailed, thick description; inquiry in depth; direct quotations capturing people's personal perspectives and experiences.
- 5) Personal contact and insight – the researcher has direct contact with and gets close to the people, situation, and phenomenon under study; researcher's personal experiences and insights are an important part of the inquiry and critical to understanding the phenomenon. (p. 40)

Two objectives of this research were to better understand the experience of an organizational change agent and to study the potential impact a collaborative learning group focused on change might have on group member's professional practice. Since one of our objectives was to describe the experience of a change agent participating in a collaborative learning group, phenomenology was a natural choice. When phenomenology is applied to research the objective is to produce as clear and accurate of a description of the human experience as possible (Polkinghorne, 1989). "Thus phenomenological inquiry attempts to describe and elucidate the meanings of human experience. More than other forms of inquiry, phenomenology attempts to get beneath how people describe their experience to the structures that underlie consciousness" (Rudestram and Newton, 1992, p. 33).

Merleau-Ponty (1945/1962) defines phenomenology as trying "to give a direct description of our experience as it is, without taking account of its psychological origin and the causal explanations which the scientist, the historian, or the sociologist may be able to provide" (p. viii). For phenomenologists, each person is unique. Phenomenologists see people as irreplaceable; no one can live people's lives for them or experience exactly what

they experience. It is possible to empathize with someone and, in a sense, feel his or her pain or joy, but we can never experience all the nuances and meanings that the person experiences. Thus we must listen to people rather than assume that we know immediately what they are telling us.

This interdependence of an individual and his or her experience, so basic to the framework of phenomenology, is similarly present in the field of collaborative learning. The experience of learning cannot be separated from the other “grounds” and “figures” in the learner’s life. Also, neither can the learner be separated from his or her experience. “As people grow and develop they accumulate an increasing reservoir of experience that becomes an increasingly rich resource for learning – for themselves and for others. Furthermore, people attach more meaning to learning they gain from experience than those they acquire passively” (Knowles, 1980, p. 44). “Regardless of how one defines an adult, two social characteristics stand out as significant in the context of teaching and learning: experience and diversity. Adults come from a variety of backgrounds, occupations, and locations and have a variety of experiences (Hiemstra and Sisco, 1990, p. 31). Placing the appropriate emphasis on the individual and his or her unique experience is a common thread for adult learning, collaborative learning and phenomenology.

2.3 Phenomenological Interviews

Phenomenological interviews provide a unique perspective on collaborative learning, that is, a firsthand description of the experience of

collaborative learning from the members of the group. The use of phenomenological interviews is a natural one to explore collaborative learning and change, particularly within an action research project where there is a continual loop of reflection and action. In describing his phenomenologically based philosophy, Merleau-Ponty stated, "all knowledge, including self-knowledge is constructed in social discourse" (1945/1962). This is the condition for the "collaboration" of phenomenology and collaborative learning, both of which are grounded in social discourse. "The phenomenological interview is a human event that yields interpretable data if approached properly" (Pollio, Henley, and Thompson, 1997, p. 129). To fully appreciate the research data resulting from interviewing collaborative group members, it is important to have an understanding of the underpinnings of phenomenology as a valuable research method.

Valle and Halling (1989) related "there are two quite different aspects to learn about people: a) the outward, observable side of others; that is what they do and what they say, commonly referred to as their physical or verbal behavior; and b) the inward, unobservable side of others; that is, their private world of experience" (p. 14). In collaborative learning, experience plays a critical role. Peters and Armstrong (1998) state that "in a collaborative learning experience, individuals bring their knowledge and actions to the table, and as members of a group, individuals contribute their collective knowledge and actions to the experience. Thus, in a collaborative learning experience, individuals learn and

the group learns” (p. 2). Adults bring a wealth of experience to the learning situation and it is important to recognize and build upon that experience.

Phenomenological interviews are a means to do just that. The phenomenological interview involves an interpersonal engagement in which an interviewee is encouraged to share with the interviewer details of his or her experience. It also seeks description of experience itself without the interviewee’s interpretation or theoretical explanation.

In this research project, at the end of the series of collaborative group meetings, each participant was interviewed using a phenomenological approach. As is the practice in phenomenological interviewing, a broad question is used to open the interview and subsequent questions derive from the interviewee’s response. Kvale (1983) describes the qualitative research interview as “theme-oriented and not person oriented. Two people are talking together about a theme, which is interesting to and important to both persons.” He further states that “it seeks to describe and understand the meaning of central themes in the life-world of the interviewee” (p. 175). The interview was initiated by a question similar to “In thinking about your role as an organizational change agent, can you describe a time when that part of your job stands out for you? Once the area had been thoroughly explored – using follow-up questions to clarify, elicit examples, and fully understand the interviewee’s response, a question was asked about participation in the group. That dialogue started something like, “Over the past few months you’ve participated in a collaborative learning group, what stands out

for you about that experience"? The exact question was similar, but depending on the specific interview it was asked in a slightly different manner. As Pollio, et al. (1997) describes:

a phenomenological interview cannot (and should not) be conceived as a rule-driven mechanical activity. There is no methodological guarantee that any rule applied in a specific interview encounter will have the same meaning or effect for the interviewer and person being interviewed. For the interview to be a path or way for understanding the life-world of a co-participant, it must be allowed to emerge freely rather than to be constrained by predetermined injunctions. (p. 33)

2.4 Bracketing

A factor to be considered when using this research method is the impact of what, in other contexts, is termed interviewer bias. An essential component of the phenomenological method is the bracketing interview. Husserl (1913/1931) introduced the term bracketing to describe, "suspending the taken-for-granted natural attitude" of daily life. Thomas and Pollio (2002) define it as follows:

Bracketing, as we use the term today in phenomenological research, is an intellectual activity in which one tries to put aside theories, knowledge, and assumptions about a phenomenon... Thus the goal of the bracketing interview is to highlight to the researcher his/her individual pre-understandings about the topic of investigation. Once noted, the researcher's task is to make every effort to maintain an open, nonjudgmental attitude when conducting and interpreting interviews. (p. 32-33)

Ihde (1986) describes this first step in phenomenological analysis as *Epoche* (p. 32). Patton describes it as "an attitudinal shift known as the phenomenological attitude. This attitude consists of a different way of looking at the investigated experience... and is a process that the researcher engages in to

remove, or at least become aware of prejudices, viewpoints or assumptions regarding the phenomenon under investigation. Epoche helps enable the researcher to investigate the phenomenon from a fresh and open viewpoint without prejudgment or imposing meaning too soon” (p. 407).

Although there is an attempt to approach the analysis of the data in a presuppositionless manner, this is not entirely possible. As Kvale (1983) states, “the interpreter cannot ‘jump outside’ the tradition of understanding he lives in. The interpreter of a text may, however, attempt to make his presuppositions explicit...What matters here is to be as aware as possible about one’s own presuppositions and modes of influence and to attempt to take them into account in the interpretation” (p. 17). Ashworth (1996) describes the process as “not a turning away from the world and a concentration on detached consciousness, but to the resolve to set aside theories, research presuppositions, ready-made interpretations, etc., in order to reveal the engaged, lived experience” (p. 1).

A bracketing interview was conducted with the researcher by a separate research group comprised of doctoral students in the University of Tennessee’s Collaborative Learning Program. This is a separate and different group from the collaborative learning group of human resource professionals formed for this study. During the phenomenological interview the researcher was interviewed about her experiences related to organizational change. Following the interview, which was transcribed, the interview was analyzed by the research group. Through discussion among group members, initial steps were taken to identify or

"bracket" prejudices or assumptions to allow greater openness to the research experience.

In addition to bracketing, other steps are taken to ensure the interviewee's description of his or her experience is fully understood by the interviewer. As described by Pollio et al. (1997) "interpretations [should] be rendered in terms used by participants rather than in the more abstract language common to some set of disciplines..." (p. 49). The themes and results from this research are enriched by the words of the participants, and care was taken to describe themes in terms consistent with the participant's description of their experience. During the interview care was also taken to clarify and seek understanding to insure there was common meaning regarding the interviewee's experience. During data analysis, the use of a group to assist in this process is an additional check and balance. After the data were analyzed and themes identified, all themes were discussed with collaborative learning group participants to insure there was agreement and understanding of the themes resulting from the data. The following section describes the data analysis process in more detail.

2.5 Data Analysis

After all the group meetings and one-on-one interviews were transcribed, data analysis, or interpretation, began. Pollio, et. al (1997) describes the interpretation process as follows:

The group functions in a critical, rather than consensual, capacity. The purpose of each group member is to question the adequacy of any proposed description of interview data. Group members are in a position to notice a theoretical supposition not recognized by the

primary interpreter(s): that is, group members are able to make figural what might otherwise remain a background assumption. Second, the group provides a source of alternative perspectives: Having the group discuss the relative adequacies of alternative perspectives reduces the likelihood of describing the text in a stereotyped fashion.

Finally, the group process provides a public test of whether an interpretation is directly supported by the text. In fact, members of the group regularly request the person proposing an interpretation to "show, where in the text, you got that interpretation. (p. 49)

This is the process used by the university research group for analysis of the meeting transcripts and interviews. As Pollio described, we reviewed the data with a critical eye and themes were derived on the basis of critical analysis rather than consensus.

Hermeneutics has been described as the interpretation of texts or transcribed meanings (Polkinghorne, 1983). One engages in a hermeneutic approach to text in order to derive a better understanding of the context that gives it meaning. Understanding is the fusion of the perspective of the phenomenon and the perspective of the interpreter. All of us bring life experiences and expectations to the task of interpretation, but because even our understanding of ourselves is limited, and only partially expressible, interaction with the meaning of the text can help produce a deeper understanding of both the observer and the observed.

Patterns, referred to as themes or meanings conveyed by the texts, emerge through this type of systematic interpretative process. Although the themes are identified across interviews, support for each theme must be found in

individual transcripts. The results of hermeneutic analysis (the task of understanding texts) of interview protocols is based on interpretation and not inference. Interpretation is a continuous back and forth process of relating parts to the whole, and earlier sections of an interview transcript must always be re-evaluated in light of what follows later in the interview. The goal is to describe experience in lived rather than abstract terms. As Thompson, Henley, and Meguiar (1989) state "the text of the interview is treated as an autonomous body of data comprised of respondent reflections on lived experiences. There is no attempt to corroborate a respondent's descriptions with external verification, and the interpretation should not incorporate hypotheses, inferences, and conjectures that exceed the evidence provided by the transcript" (101).

Rubin and Rubin (1995) describe the data analysis process as:

exciting because you discover themes and concepts embedded throughout the interviews. As you continue with the data analysis, you weave these themes and concepts into a broader explanation of theoretical or practical listening to hear the meaning of what is said. To begin the final data analysis, put into one category all the material from all your interviews that speaks to one theme or concept. Compare material within the categories to look for variations and nuances in meanings. Compare across categories to discover connections between themes. The goal is to integrate the themes and concepts into a theory that offers an accurate, detailed, yet subtle interpretation of your research arena. (p. 226)

The data gathered during this research project were analyzed using the methods described above. Each interview was interpreted by the university research group, and then interviews were interpreted in the context of all other interviews resulting in overarching themes that describe, as closely as possible,

the experience as lived by the participants. The data from the transcribed group meetings and the one-on-one phenomenological interviews with each of the group participants were read by the university research group and the initially emerging themes were further organized in ways that helped formulate themes, refine concepts, and link them together to create a clear description of the experience of the participants.

CHAPTER 3

Change Agents in the Human Resource Profession

Thematic Structure: The Story

If all participants spoke with the same voice, they might say...

I know companies must change to remain competitive. I realize that change is an inevitable, constant part of organizational life.

I am aware that as a human resource professional, one of my responsibilities is that of facilitating organizational change, whether or not I am formally viewed as an organizational change agent. Through my day-to-day interactions with managers and other employees across the organization I have an opportunity to build bridges and facilitate understanding of company change and direction. I often play the role of a sounding board, and need to interact with individuals in a way that respects them as unique individuals while also considering the goals and boundaries of the organization. I achieve great satisfaction when a collaborative effort, like finding a solution to a tough problem, works. I am often a coach, and my success can be measured through the success of others.

I find that my role sometimes presents conflict. There are times when I am asked to facilitate changes that I don't understand or necessarily support. It is important for me to find a way to manage both my own change, as well as assisting others to facilitate change for themselves. It is important for me to understand as much as I can about a change so I can quickly assimilate, integrate, or at least accept it. My own work team plays a significant role in my ability to accept change – providing information and also providing a process for working through a change.

3.1 Introduction

Chapter 3 focuses on four areas: 1) an overview/background of change agents in the human resource profession; 2) an introduction to the role of a change agent in the human resource profession; 3) background on managing organizational change; and 4) a literature review and discussion of each of the 5 themes related to the participant's role as change agent that were derived through data analysis.

3.2 Overview/Background

Although a critical part of this project focused on the collaborative learning group and how that process informed the role of human resource professionals as change agents, it was also important to the researcher and our collaborative learning group to learn more about our role as organizational change agents.

Therefore, it is important to begin to define the essence of the experience from the perspective of those carrying out the job on a day-to-day basis.

During group meetings, participants, including myself, dialogued about our experiences as change agents and understanding and managing our own reactions to organizational change. At our first and continuing into the second group meeting, dialogue was initiated through the sharing of critical incidents. Each participant shared his or her critical incident related to organizational change. In later meetings, participants also brought current issues, problems, or successes, to the group's dialogue. Meetings were supplemented by articles on the topics of change or collaborative learning that the group selected based on interests or current issues. Through analysis of the data provided by our group meetings and one-on-one interviews with group participants, the following five themes related to change agent were identified and titled using the words of the participants:

1. Change is personal – "one conversation at a time"
2. Struggles and frustrations – "puts you in the weeds"
3. Approach – "soft or back-door"
4. Trust – "open and honest conversation"
5. Results – "where the rubber meets the road"

While there are five themes that stand out for the participants about their experience at being a change agent, these themes are not discrete or independent of one another. Just as collaborative learning factors such as the

environment, relationships among participants, and participant assumptions and beliefs are inter-related, so too are each of the themes. Themes also can co-occur in specific experiences. As Pollio, et al. (1997) describes, “the various themes are in a figure-ground relation to one another; they are mutually interdependent and interrelated. When one theme is figural in description, the remaining themes are best described as a ground, but not absent” (p. 246).

3.3 Introduction – Change Agents in the Human Resource Profession

The ability to change is critical to the success of today’s business. Current business authors such as Collins (2001) describe an iterative process of continuous examination by organizations to ensure the right steps are taken to direct change. Collins states that “an enduring great company requires a commitment to change”, (p. 6) and that you “must maintain unwavering faith that you can and will prevail in the end, regardless of the difficulties, AND at the same time have the discipline to confront the most brutal facts of your current reality whatever they might be” (p.13). Past Chief Executive Officers, such as Steve Kerr of General Electric, capture the challenge of change in making the point that:

both winners and losers will face increasing amounts of change that cannot be fully predicted, anticipated, or controlled. A primary difference between winners and losers will not be the pace of change, but the ability to respond to the pace of change. Winners will not be surprised at the unanticipated changes they face; they will have developed the ability to adapt, learn, and respond. Losers will spend time trying to control and master change rather than responding to it quickly. (Collins, p. 151)

Others such as Champy (1995) describe a difficult path.

Nothing is simple anymore. Nothing is stable. The business environment is changing before our eyes, rapidly, radically, perplexingly. Now, whatever we do is not enough. Incremental change is what we're used to: the kind we could manage gradually, with careful planning, broad consensus-building, and controlled execution. Now we must not only manage change, we must create change – big change – and fast. If we stop for a leisurely consideration of the issues, the situation will alter in front of our eyes and our careful judgments will not apply. Everything is in question. The old ways of managing no longer work. The organization charts, the compensation schemes, the hierarchies, the vertical organization, the whole tool kit of command and control management techniques no longer work. Everyone must change. The change will go deeper than technique. It touches not merely what managers do, but who they are. Not just their sense of task, but their sense of themselves. Not just what they know, but how they think. Not just their way of seeing the world, but their way of living in the world. (p. 9-10)

Mauer (1996), a current leading expert in the area of organizational change, conducts annual research about organizational transformation efforts and reports the following startling results. "Only 20 – 30% of all reengineering projects succeed; only 23% of all mergers and acquisitions make back their costs; just 43% of quality improvement efforts make satisfactory progress; and 9% of all major software development applications are worth the costs" (p. 18). Other research such as that conducted by Mourier and Smith (2001) described similar poor results of organizational change efforts. Mourier and Smith conducted five separate studies on the success of change management – the "highest success rate reported was 50%, and for changes that impacted culture it was reported to be even lower at 32%. In the restructuring efforts of over 165 companies, approximately 50% reported that they failed to achieve significant increases in value" (p.1-3). There is a significant positive impact that can be

gained by companies that more effectively manage and anticipate change, and there is a wide gap between company objectives and results.

Ulrich (1997) states that a key role through which HR professionals can add value is through the “management of transformation and change.” He further states that “human resource professionals can help identify and implement processes for change by serving as business partners and by helping employees let go of old and adapt to a new culture” (p. 30). As change agents, human resource professionals help organizations identify a process for managing change. The actions of change agents include identifying and framing problems, building relationships of trust, solving problems, and creating and fulfilling action plans. In Ulrich’s (1997) research on the domain of competencies required for successful human resource professionals,

managing change was identified as the competency most important for success. HR professionals who are change agents make change happen; they understand the critical processes for change; build commitment to those processes, and ensure that change occurs as intended. The role is changing, the four images that characterize the HR professional of the future include strategic partner, administrative expert, employee champion, and change agent. (p. 47)

For some in our collaborative learning group the responsibility of change agent was specifically assigned – a part of their written job description. For others, the responsibility was more implicit. Although the responsibilities were not formally addressed, the human resource department is looked upon as a group to support and carry out company change programs and to act as a

sounding board and provide training and development for company leadership directly responsible for carrying out changes.

The Human Resource Department is often in a unique position to bridge the gap between an organization's leadership and line employees. Lewison (2001) describes human resources unique place in an organization as:

the only place within an organization where people, collaboration, reward systems, and technology come together. While it may provide the technology to capture information, human resources is the department responsible for developing the human resources to access, leverage, and expand on that information. Only when people make tacit knowledge explicit and translate it into actions, does the organization benefit. (p.5)

3.4 Background – Change Management

To understand change management as we know it today, you need to consider two converging and predominant fields of thought: an engineer's approach to improving business performance and a psychologist's approach to managing the human side of change. Change management is the application of many different ideas from engineering, business, and psychology. As changes in organizations become more frequent and a necessity for survival, the body of knowledge known as "change management" has also grown to encompass skills and knowledge from each of these fields of study.

Students of business improvement have been learning and practicing how to make changes to the operations of a business as a mechanical system since Frederick Taylor's work in the late nineteenth century. This type of system focuses on observable, measurable business elements that can be changed or

improved, including business strategy, processes, systems, organizational structures, and job roles. Historically companies embracing a mechanical approach to business improvement typically did not embrace change management concepts until their projects encountered resistance or faced serious problems during implementation. The tendency from an engineer's perspective is to isolate the people problem and then eliminate it or design a quick fix for this perceived obstacle to the improvement initiative. The other side of the story begins with psychologists.

Concerned with how humans react to their environment, the field of psychology has often focused on how an individual thinks and behaves in a particular situation. Humans are often exposed to change, hence psychologists study how humans react to change. William Bridges (1980) was a predominant thinker in the field of human adaptation to change. His early text is frequently cited in Organization Development books on change management. Only once or twice in his book, however, does Bridges relate this theory to workplace change. The net result of this evolution is that two schools of thought have emerged. Observers of business changes in real life have realized that the extreme application of either of these approaches, in isolation, will be unsuccessful. An exclusively engineering approach to business issues or opportunities results in effective solutions that are seldom able to be adequately implemented. An exclusively psychological approach results in a business receptive to new ideas

without an appreciation or understanding of what changes must occur for the business to succeed. Not all practitioners travel down these two extremes.

A few leaders in the change management field advocated a structured change management process early on. Jeanenne LaMarsh (1995) was actively using an organizational change model in the 1980's. Other recent change management authors include Conner and Lake (1994), who emphasize the understanding of the psychology of change and a structured change process. More recently, Kotter (1996) describes an 8-step model for implementing change initiatives and describes change management as "the process, tools and techniques to manage the people-side of business change to achieve the required business outcome, and to realize that business changes effectively within the social infrastructure of the workplace." He also states that the new values of business today require a different approach to the way businesses change. The response of the employee has shifted from a "yes, sir" to "why are we doing that." The change leader must adapt. Change management is a required competency in business today. The shift in the core values of employees to empowerment, ownership, and accountability has created a workforce that will embrace change as long as they are a part of the process.

Many change specialists like, Gerard and Ellinor (1999) describe change as a process not an event; organizations don't change - the people in them do. They present a change management process based on dialogue. Others like Emery and Devane (1999) prescribe a participative design workshop. Soderquist

(1999) introduces a strategic forum. Much of the literature on how companies manage change describes a change management cycle. The stages may vary according to the author, but they are consistent in asserting that there is a cycle and the impact on individuals going through the changes can be profound. For profit-focused organizations, one of the by-products of change can be a dip in performance as employees attempt to manage themselves through the change cycle. One of the responsibilities of human resources has become understanding that you can't avoid the performance dip, but implementing a “good” change plan can accelerate people through it.

Both of the companies represented by participants in the collaborative learning group conduct formal change management training for their employees. The training includes a model of change management. Both companies use a very similar model that is derived primarily from the work of Kotter (1996), but provided to the companies through consulting firms. The change model is included in Appendix B and is described in more detail below. Table 1 describes the 6 stages of the change model as outlined in the materials from Interchange International (2001):

Our collaborative learning group referred to the model during group meetings and used the terminology as a part of our discussions. This provided a certain common vocabulary and language for our dialogues. For example, Mary referred to a manager having difficulty making a change as being “stuck in Stage 2” or “helping team members move through the change cycle”.

Table 1: Change Cycle Stages and Description of Feelings and Behavior of Each

	Stage Title	Description of Feelings/Behavior
Level 1	Loss	feelings of fear, thoughts are cautious, behavior is paralyzed
Level 2	Doubt	feelings of resentment, thoughts are skeptical, behavior is resistant
Level 3	Discomfort	feelings of anxiety, thoughts are confused, behavior is unproductive
Level 4	Discovery	feelings of anticipation, thoughts are creative, behavior is energized
Level 5	Understanding	feelings of confidence, thoughts are pragmatic, behavior is productive
Level 6	Integration	feelings of satisfaction, thoughts are focused behavior is generous.

Although these models and the training provide a starting place for discussion about change management, the continued gap in implementation of organizational change prompted the group to explore the issue of: what else is missing? Although the model provides a framework, "in real life" the acceptance of change is much more complex and often more difficult. Fullan (1999) states that "the old way of managing change, appropriate in more stable times, does not work anymore" (p. 3). He describes two theories in particular that help us think differently about where we are at the end of the twentieth century, and how we must approach the new millennium, - complexity theory and evolutionary theory.

Complexity, or chaos theory:

claims that the link between cause and effect is difficult to trace, that change (planned and otherwise) unfolds in non-linear ways, that paradoxes and contradictions abound and that creative

solutions arise out of interaction under conditions of uncertainty, diversity and instability. (p. 4)

Fullan (1999) further defines complexity theory and the evolutionary theory of relationships as:

about learning and adapting under unstable and uncertain conditions, evolutionary theory of relationships raises the questions of how humans evolve over time, especially in relation to interaction and cooperative behavior. (p. 6)

3.5 Themes – Change Agents in the Human Resource Profession

Through analysis of the meeting transcripts and one-on-one interviews, a rich description of the experience of being a change agent in the human resource profession emerged. Detailed descriptions of each of the five themes follow.

3.5a Theme 1: Change is personal – one conversation at a time

“Change starts with you and then your own team. Because change happens one conversation at a time. It might take multiple conversations about the same thing before new ideas start being embraced.”
Susan, Group Participant

Within this theme of “Change is personal – one conversation at a time”, there were three sub-themes – 1) personal change 2) facilitating change in others and 3) control of change (change agent vs. influencer). Participants expressed acceptance or rejection of change as being personal, and their primary method of facilitating change was through relationships and day-to-day conversation.

Many authors describe the difficulty of change and the resistance to changing. In the human resource change agent role, there is a particularly interesting twist. There are two hats – on the one hand you are charged with

facilitating organizational change, while on the other, you personally have a reaction to the change, which you must also manage. As a part of the facilitating organizational change – in the end it comes down to helping individuals manage the change for themselves.

Schein (2000) states that:

the degree to which you can change people is very much limited by their own experience. The role of change agent is really to facilitate and help the change process, rather than to force it. All of this has to be put into a time and learning context. You can't change things overnight. You create a new behavior, but whether attitudes and assumptions will catch up with the new behavior is very much a function of how successful the new behavior is at solving whatever problems there are to be solved. (p. 1)

This conflict between the expectation that a change agent can somehow "make change happen" and the reality that in the end change happens with individuals, was emphasized by group participant comments such as "*we can only influence change*", "*helping change their way of thinking*", "*helping people refocus*", "*facilitating the thinking out loud process*", "*helping people get beyond it themselves*", "*creating and raising dialogue*." One participant referred to the belief that change agents can magically make change happen as "*putting on our T-shirts with the big "S" on it and fly over there – sort of Super Change Agent*."

Some authors take it a step further to say that change management is so personal that it can not be managed. For example, Jim Clemer (2002) refers to Change Management as an "oxymoron". He further says,

change can't be managed. Change can be ignored, resisted, responded to, capitalized upon, and created. But it can't be managed and made to march to some orderly step-by-step process. Problems that a management team or organization may be having with change aren't

going to be suddenly improved by some change management program. To effectively deal with change we can't focus on change as some manageable force. We deal with change by improving us. And then our time must come. Resistance to today's change comes from failing to make yesterday's preparations and improvements. When our teams, our organizations, fail to learn, grow, and develop at the speed of change (or faster), then change is a very real threat. (p. 1)

Others such as Kanter (1995) discuss the need for a broad approach. He writes, “change management steps do not work – piecemeal programs are not good enough. Only total transformation will help companies – and people – master change” (p. 83).

The participants' comments indicate that they clearly understand that every person accepts change individually and differently. Change management is multi-layered – enabling the organization to change, enabling others, and enabling change for yourself. Barb described the need for her to monitor her own reaction to changes being instituted while sharing a story about her personal reaction to a current change her company was rolling out.

“I realize how important it is for me to get a hold of my own reaction to the change so I can help others. I think it is particularly helpful to understand that you first have to figure out where your own head is and then help your team members move through the change cycle. And that is different for every team member. Even though you might think everyone should understand it, get onboard and move on – that's not how it is going to be for everybody.”

Similarly, Jane describes her reflection on a previous meeting and discussions about individual reactions to a change initiative that several of the group members had participated in together.

“While Mary spoke at our last meeting about the change in supervision in our group, it caused me to reflect on just how different each of us are and how much differently we may accept or

struggle with change. I think that accepting change is related to our personalities, and also to our different life experiences".

Similarly, Mary said about the same event,

"it hit me today about how we all perceive events differently. In talking about the same event, we clearly have at least three different perceptions of the same event. A big part of managing change is realizing that we all have the same experiences but we react completely differently to it based on our assumptions and experience."

In describing a situation where a manager was having difficulty making a change, Barb described her reaction.

"In the end the person has to change themselves. I think you can facilitate them getting there – acknowledging the evidence that leads you to believe there are still issues, and together identify the solution. In the end, she's going to have to see a need for change. It kind of fits into the assumptions we're talking about today- one of the assumptions I've built is if the person does not want to change and buy in, the change is difficult, if not impossible."

During one of the group meetings Jane shared an example of how her uncovering assumptions led to a deeper understanding.

"We're obviously products of our past experience. When P was reassigned as B's supervisor, he acted out very deeply in a meeting. In talking with him and trying to understand what happened, he shared that he had gone through a terrible experience at his past job and things he was seeing happen here reminded him of that company. The company had closed and he had to start over. It was fear that was controlling him. It helped me see to keep in mind that you don't know what is causing a person's behavior. Sometimes we assume it is for a certain reason, but we don't know. Having a dialogue to challenge your own assumptions can help."

Much of the dialogue centered on specific issues related to change and dialogue about what the participants were doing to facilitate the change. Mary described her role as a facilitator of change.

“I do a lot of listening. I don’t know whether it necessarily makes a lot of difference, but when the District Managers have issues with a change, I do a lot of listening and trying to bring them back to magnetic north where they realize that the change is going to happen and how can we make sure this is as painless as possible. It’s sort of a get it off of your chest and refocus.”

Another example was related during a dialogue about a manager having difficulty accepting a change and problems it was causing with employees that she managed. *“She’s stuck. In HR I think a big part of our role is to recognize and understand when someone else has reached a point where they can’t get beyond it themselves. I’m not sure what you do other than start the conversation.”*

Another frequently discussed aspect related to the theme of “Change is personal” was that of imposition of the change. Whether the change was externally imposed change or self-initiated contributed to the acceptance of the change. Susan described it as *“so much of this has to do with the control you have.”* She went on to provide an example that she was going through,

“for example, when you buy a new house, you have an enormous change – your lifestyle, how you get home from work, but you decided to do it. It’s a big deal. You control the steps. It is the ‘done to’ part that is important to remember. Sometimes, even if it is a positive change, my first reaction is to react negatively – anything pushed at me.”

Mary similarly stated,

“in my personal life I like change more – I think based on who might be rolling out the change I have assumptions about whether I’m going to be onboard or not. However, there are changes in my personal life that I view with vigor. Based on where the change is coming from I have assumptions in play.”

Hodgetts (1990) defines change as "any modification or alteration of the status quo". He further states that:

when change takes place three things happen: there is a movement from one set of conditions to another; some force causes the change to come about; and a consequence results from the change. The consequence is an alteration in the way things are now done" (p. 457). "Participation is an important part of the change process. People are more supportive of changes that they helped bring about than of changes that were either assigned to them or forced upon them. Research also reveals that although many managers believe they involve their people in the change process, workers do not think so. Based on research by Likert about whether or not superiors use their subordinates' ideas and opinions in solving job problems, 70% of the managers said they always or almost always consult their subordinates, but only 52% of the foremen agreed. Likewise, 73% of the foreman said they practice a participative approach, only 16% of the workers agreed. (p. 470)

Participants frequently dialogued about the acceptance or rejection of the change being significantly impacted by the credibility and trust of the person instituting the change and the history of change. Joan shared, that *"yes, one change builds on another. Whether it has a positive or negative end result makes a big difference for the next time."* John reflected on a change that was currently being implemented and the past issues with the department implementing the change.

"Yes, that's something I am starting to realize - that how opposed or accepting you are is often more about generally how you feel about things, how things are going than the actual change itself. The trust and credibility of who is presenting the change plays a big part."

Chevalier (2000) discusses personal power related to change. He defines personal power as "the extent to which we gain the confidence and trust of others

based on their perception of our personality, competence, and integrity. It is the basis for participative change" (p. 23). Group participants stated that they work toward building personal power through building strong relationships with their business partner. Mary describes "*doing a lot of listening*", John as "*being a strong partner*", Joan as "*being there, being there to talk and listen during the complaints and compliments.*" Additionally, the group dialogued about the importance of credibility- both personal and for the HR Department as being a foundation for personal power to influence change in a participative manner. Table 2, *Participative versus Directive Change Characteristics*, on the following page, describes Chevalier's (2000, p. 24) difference in participative and directive change.

Chevalier (2000) also looked at human performance technology (HPT) as traditional roles expand and become true change agents and how most organizational change can be more effectively impacted in the long term using participative methods.

Position power can be used to implement a directive change more quickly by communicating expectations and shaping behavior with new systems and work processes. The problem is that individuals may resist a directive change. While management can impact group and individual behavior quickly with position power, the change may have little impact on attitudes. In other words, mandated change may lead to short-term compliance but not long-term commitment. More effective change strategies involve the use of both position and personal power. The directive part of the strategy overcomes inertia and creates some movement toward the desired change, while the participative part of the strategy involves adding new knowledge to affect attitudes. (p. 24)

Table 2 describes the participative approaches taken by group members

Table 2: Participative versus Directive Change Characteristics

Participative Change	Directive Change
Personal power	Position power
Commitment	Compliance
Involve/Empower	Inform/Control
Gradual	Immediate
Evolutionary	Revolutionary
Bottom up	Top down
Sell/Guide	Tell/Structure

to help individuals understand and facilitate their own change. Using personal power through building relationships and participative gradual approaches were described. The "soft approach" experienced by the group is described in more detail in Theme 3. The conflicts and frustrations described in more detail in Theme 2, often occur because of the conflict between an organization's more directive and immediate results approach to change, and the human resource professional's more participative, long-term approach.

3.5b Theme 2: Struggles and frustrations – puts you in the weeds

"It really puts you in the weeds, over and over again; every time there is a change because of past experiences you don't trust the outcomes to be positive. As a result there is resistance and skepticism. At the end of the day, if the change doesn't reflect a positive outcome, then it is no wonder we struggle."
Jane, Group Participant

One of the results of poorly managed change is employee frustration. Barb's comments provide a look at the depth of the frustration that can result from change.

"I think the change cycles seem to imply that eventually you get around the cycle to acceptance or integration. In so much of what I see that never happens. That's kind of an "A-ha" moment for me – thinking about how people get frustrated and burned out – it is kind of a build up of all these changes that are never fully integrated. You never move through the change cycle. Well, they just lay there in your stomach or head, one on top of the other, and they are never integrated into day-to-day life."

Many authors describe blocks or hurdles to the implementation of change in different ways. Mauer (1996) describes it as "resistance" and identifies 3 levels:

Level 1, the idea itself – resistance to the change itself; Level 2, deeper issues – indication that there are deeper issues involved; and Level 3, deeply embedded – entrenched resistance (p. 88 – 95). Others, such as Kotter (1996), describe it as complacency and how it stands in the way of establishing a sense of urgency. Chang (1994) takes an approach that comes from the anonymous quote “you can change the world if you can change minds”, and describes change and an individual’s reaction to the change as “a function of the individual’s attitude composed of personal history, social experiences, and work environment” (p. 89). The end result for an organization is the same - a successful change transition is dependent on change within individual employees.

The group talked about the struggles and frustrations related to organizational changes. The frustrations expressed were both from a personal view and also that of the role of change agent – helping others to facilitate change. Jane’s comments vividly describe her initial personal reaction to a change that was recently rolled out by her company and the steps she took to understand and accept the change and to facilitate others to accept the change.

“When the change was first rolled out, my reaction was to look at them like – do you have three heads? Are you nuts? There’s no way it can work, it won’t happen, who thought up this harebrained idea? But I know just through bitching about it, talking about it, reflecting on it, I come to accept it is going to happen and my next thoughts are of ways so it can happen. What can I do to facilitate the process?”

Barb shared a similar situation she was dealing with related to manager reaction to some store closings.

“There will be change ripples for a long time. I don’t know how to quite make it better— except just listening and trying to help them manage their own change and figure out how to best help each employee manage his or her own change.”

Mauer (1996) writes, “change is unsettling. It disrupts our world. Some fear they will lose status, control, even their jobs. The larger the change, the stronger the resistance” (p. 19). Change agents must have a vision, persistence, courage, an ability to thrive on ambiguity, and a willingness to engage those who have a stake in the outcome. They recognize that resistance, both their own and that of others, is natural, but need also to have an optimism that inside the resistance lies hope and opportunity to build excitement for their ideas. During the dialogue at one of the group meetings, Joan shared her view of the responsibilities of a change agent to overcome frustration.

“As a change agent many times we have to dig inside to find a way to be supportive of a certain change that the organization rolls out. I often have to dig deep to look at the issue from many perspectives to understand the reason for the change to make sure I’m communicating about it and supporting it once the decision has been made.”

The descriptions of the frustrations and struggles related to implementing organizational change are often vivid and paint an interesting picture. Jeannette Swist (1996), speaking at a National Society for Human Resource Management conference on Addressing the Challenges of Executing Change, described a survey in which she had asked respondents to present a drawing that represented the internal impetus for change. In one example, the drawing depicted a very old elephant with the team riding on the elephant’s back. The

drawing included comments like "we're all on this ride together; "mindset preconceived by years of doing it the same way"; "olfactory senses masked by employee reluctance"; "feet are difficult to move in a swamp of uncertainty" and "a prodding device e.g., training, education, process documentation, and improvement" (p. 3).

Our collaborative learning group shared several similarly visual stories of how their organization's change model often felt to them. Jane shared that:

"You know how the diagram would look if we sketched a model - it's a lot like a Volkswagen beetle with 4 flat tires driven by two blind nuns. It takes a long time - we can only use influence, but we're getting there."

During the same dialogue session, Susan described it as, *"I think of us as shooting at a large target, but our bows and arrows are tiny - the little bitty arrows have a difficult time reaching the target and having an impact"*.

Barb continued the dialogue with the following description:

"I see a damsel in distress - tied to the railroad tracks. Our HR team is standing there with the tools - we know the train is coming, our axe is sharp, we hear the cries, but we're tied to the same tracks and a train is coming in the other direction also straight at us!"

Group members vividly described their experiences with change as at times being a frustration and a struggle. Often at the bottom of the frustration and conflict are differences between a directive and participative approach noted in Table 2. Human resource professional's soft-door, participative, and one-on-one approach often is in conflict with the company's more direct, immediate result focused objectives.

3.5c Theme 3: Approach - soft or back-door

"Plant the seed, talk to your various partners using a soft approach, keep going back after it and after it."
Joan, Group Participant

The use of a "soft or backdoor approach" emerged from the participant data in several ways. One of the most prominent was using a soft or backdoor approach as an informal or self-devised change management model. It was described as *"planting a seed"* and by others as *"letting it simmer"*, *"a bottom up approach"*, *"keeping the dialogue going"*, *"helping people think aloud"*, *"keeping open and constant communication"*, *"work change through relationships"*, and *"a bottoms-up approach."* Through dialogue during the meetings, group members came to recognize that they did, in fact, have models or theories in practice that they frequently used for facilitating change.

Cunningham (1993) described a major concern of management related to the process of change, which is the conscious use of information for modifying practice. He asserts that "it is based on the assumption that no universal strategies exist for introducing, processing, and having change accepted. Rather, strategies are usually developed, either formally or intuitively, to respond to particular needs" (p.211). Kofman and Senge (1995) discuss theory and organizational change:

Contradictory as it may sound, there is nothing more practical than a good theory. The problem with "seven step methods to success", keys to successful organizations, and similar how to's is that, ultimately, they aren't very practical. Life is too complex and effective action is contextual. Real learning – the development of new capabilities – occurs over time, in a continuous cycle of

theoretical action and practical conceptualization. The impatient quest for improvements all too often results in superficial changes that leave deeper problems untouched. Herein lies a core leadership paradox: Action is critical, but the action we need can spring only from a reflective territory that includes not only cognition but body, emotions, and spirit as well. (p. 17)

Susan explained it in this way:

"We just have to keep influencing change by creating and raising dialogue, by keeping coming back to the dialogue and not sweeping it under the rug. This is a model of creating organizational change when you don't have the power, only as an influencer."

Jane added,

"sometimes we struggle between influence versus the power to change. Our role is to influence, and it is often expected that somehow we have the power to make it happen."

Their comments relate not only to facilitating change with others, but also to the complexity of change and the individual nature that results in change beyond the superficial.

Fullan (1999) also discusses change theory, or the lack thereof.

There will never be a definitive theory of change. It is a theoretical and empirical impossibility to generate a theory that applies to all situations. Definitive theories of change are unknowable because they do not and cannot exist. Theories of change can guide thinking and action, but the reality of complexity tells us that each situation will have degrees of uniqueness in its history and makeup, which will cause unpredictable differences to emerge. It is the tasks of change theorists and practitioners to accumulate their wisdom and experience about how the change process works. Sometimes this will be model-specific insights of change, i.e. the best approaches to implement aspects of a given model. (p. 21)

Susan and others provide examples of the struggle to define a single or simplistic approach to implementing change. She describes the

strategy her team has been using in attempting to facilitate a change in the store structure.

“We call it planting a seed. Because few of us love change we usually get a negative response the first time we present a new idea. So the model is to never to ask for a decision the first time you present a new idea. Always let the idea simmer and come back to it later. Sometimes we’re not empowered to execute ideas that could bring change in the most efficient and positive manner. In the end we can only influence change.”

At a later meeting she described the progress of their actions.

“I’ve had a couple of changes on our big project that we’re working on – trying to get key carriers out of the store. I talked to R about it and I can tell positive effects from bubbling things up. It wasn’t his first exposure to the concept, which is always really good when you get decision makers informed. He wasn’t opposed to the idea. That’s a start in the right direction.”

Ulrich (1997) describes the need for human resource professionals to become more aware of the theory behind their actions.

To make HR practices more than isolated acts, managers and HR professionals must master the theory behind HR work; they need to be able to explain conceptually how and why HR practices lead to their outcomes. HR is based on recognizable bodies of knowledge. Familiarity with theory of learning should be a prerequisite for those in training, development, and education. The theories of motivation should be the foundation for work by those in compensation. The theory of organizational change should be the foundation for HR professionals working toward organizational effectiveness. Reliance on theories creates thoughtful practitioners with solid grounding in the basics of HR practices. Theory also leads to contingent thinking. Contingent thinking is based on a series of if..then equations. It helps HR professionals to avoid playing HR jeopardy, in which they begin with the answer, an HR practice, and forget to ask the question. (p. 238)

The theme “approach – soft or back-door” focused not only on trying out and refining a model for the facilitation of change, but also as an approach that

was used in facilitating change through one-on-one relationships. Again, because of the nature of human resource professionals being in an influencing position and not in a position of direct authority, many of the change approaches focused on helping individuals manage their own change using a "back-door" or soft approach. During one of the group meetings, Mary described a situation where she was helping a manager make necessary changes to her management style.

"There are a lot of problem solvers. Many people hired in retail are problem solvers and tend to solve problems on the run. They have a quick conversation and before the conversation is finished, already have a solution. One of the ways I work with them to facilitate change is through conversations that facilitate the thinking process aloud. Trying to help them think through the issues, the implications – to take the time to reflect and consider. It's usually a low-key conversation, trying to help them solve it for themselves."

Other conversations centered on an important by-product of a soft approach – the time element. In describing their relationship with their day-to-day business partners, John referred to the time element. *"That's important for HR, since many of the non-HR areas – like operations, aren't under HR's direct line. It takes a long time – we can only use influence, but we're getting there."* Susan provided a specific example in discussing the phone calls she receives from managers.

"We just have to keep influencing change by creating and raising dialogue, by keeping coming back to the dialogue and not sweeping it under the rug. This is a model for creating organizational change when you don't have the power, only an influencer. I think most of our job is about helping others to change their ways of thinking and the way they approach things. We spend 60% of our time each day on the phone, working the change model."

Okay, you want to fire her because she doesn't come to work, here's what you've done in the past, let's talk about how you need to change the way you approach it.Ě

3.5d Theme 4: Trust – open and honest conversation

“I was reflecting about this from our last meeting. The change when Susan came as our supervisor and how much time it took for us to be comfortable with the change. I was thinking, one of the keys to that having a positive end result was having many honest, open, conversations.Ě
Mary, Group Participant

The theme “Trust – open and honest conversation” focused primarily in two areas – relationships of participants within their immediate work team and more broadly, the culture and relationships within the company. Maurer (1996) includes “cooperation and trust” along with values and vision, history of change, culture, resilience, rewards, respect and face, and status quo as the eight major issues that must be assessed to determine the degree of support for a change.

Mauer states that:

trust building is like preventive medicine. It creates a corporate immune system that can handle the stress of change. When the corporate body is healthy, it can handle disruption with far greater ease. Trust suggest that you share some sense of common purpose, some mutual interests, values, and dreams; with regard to your shared goals, you trust that the other individual or group will act in your best interests as well as their own. The answers to “What’s in it for me?” and “What’s in it for them?” may not be the same, but they do complement each other. As trust increases common ground develops. On this firm soil you can create strong foundations. The dilemma is that trust is difficult to build and easy to destroy. Yet it is essential if you ever hope to build long-lasting support and commitment for your ideas. Leaders of organizations often fail to pay attention to building trust and then are surprised when people grow suspicious of their motives. (p. 128)

During collaborative group meetings and in one-on-one interviews, several participants shared their perception of the same incident related to open, honest conversation among members of their work team. Within the past year, a new supervisor had been assigned to their work team. The transition was difficult, despite having a positive relationship with the supervisor prior to her assuming responsibilities for that department. Mary described the situation and why she thought the problems were successfully resolved and the change successful.

"Yes, she fought with me, she fought with Jane, she fought with John, then back to me. We finally found a middle ground. Honest communication. We allow each other to voice how we feel. We've developed a relationship built on trust, and when you trust you aren't having negative assumptions about the whys of their behavior, you're open to question and discuss openly."

Susan shared the following thoughts about the same situation.

"I need to learn to use dialogue better. I can be a much better listener. When comments are made or opinions given that, from my view, don't make sense or I don't understand, I need to step back, work to suspend my judgment and ask questions and try to really understand. I know from experience that when I do that many times there isn't a disagreement there, just not fully understanding what the other person is really saying. I think we can enhance our everyday performance of our team through being more conscious of the messages we send and receive – not just the surface messages."

One of the most difficult aspects of building trust (or dealing with resistance) is accepting the fact that other sane and right-minded people may see the world differently. Many recommend approaches to build the level of trust and understanding. For example, Mauer (1996) describes structured dialogue, story telling, what-if scenarios; Senge (1990), team learning to build a shared

vision and an environment where self-interest is not paramount; Schon (1983), reflection in action; Bohm (1996), a dialogue group. What these, and many other approaches, have in common is better understanding of your own assumptions and the assumptions of others.

Fullan (1999) describes a positive result that may come from tension within the system. “Vitality springs from experiencing conflict and tension in systems which also incorporate anxiety-containing supportive relationships. Collaborative cultures are innovative not just because they provide support, but also because they recognize the value of dissonance inside and outside the organization” (p. 27).

The company culture also plays a part in change. Jane described the situation where a projected change has been communicated and even though there have been concerns expressed privately, there are no issues raised or opposition verbalized to the change.

“There are some tough spots, but I think in our company, especially sometimes on the operations side, there can be an elephant in the room and everybody just sits there. No one acknowledges it. They’re just sitting there – the elephant might be about to knock you out of the room, but nobody talks about it. I think it is not just communication, but the open and honest part of it”.

One of the ongoing changes that were dialogued about during the group’s meetings was a change in procedure that was implemented. Here is Jane’s description of the “roll out” or implementation planning meeting with the District Managers (DMs).

"It was very interesting listening to the signage [the style, placement, management of store signs, such as price, advertisements] change being presented. M presented it to the DMs. There were relevant questions like, has it been tested? How will we have time to print the signs with less payroll and fewer people, plus the other tasks? How is it going to work? M was like, well, no, and didn't want to elaborate on it. So the questions were just dropped. Before the meeting C told the DMs in our area this, there is a new signage program, and it is what it is. Don't be negative. He programmed them to come in and accept it – or at least act accepting. So there was no opportunity to discuss. There was not one opportunity for open and honest give and take. I think that is one of the problems with change in our organization. It is very directive, with very little feedback from the people who are expected to execute it. It's a big opportunity. From an HR perspective, that's very frustrating. We're attempting to help implement the company's directives or changes, but we sometimes have little opportunity to give input or ask questions to understand the why behind the decision."

Mary added her reaction to the same meeting.

"Sometimes you want to stand up and say, let's get the negative out, let's talk about it. As an HR professional, that's what I need sometimes. That's where I need to be – to be able to talk with peers in a safe and understanding environment – state here are my concerns, and get it all out so you can feel better supporting it, or just listening to other people and their concerns."

From a professional view, it is difficult to bridge the gap when the opportunity for open and honest dialogue is not consistent with company values or philosophy. As related to the situation described previously, Jane described the possible conflict between the desire for open and honest communication and giving input that might influence the change.

"Sometimes the company chooses not to do what the managers want. If there really isn't any opportunity or desire for input, how do you let people voice their concerns when you know all they are doing is venting – they aren't providing input to the process."

Mary responded:

“Don’t you think venting helps the process? I really think it does for me. If I can express my opinion, even if I know that I don’t have a dog in the race, it still makes me feel better about the change and what I need to do.”

Susan shared:

“if at least you preface that up front with – we really want to hear what you think about that, but I want to be upfront, but in the end, we don’t want you to feel your input wasn’t valued, but the result might not reflect any of the conversation today. If you at least make the intent clear, you don’t get in the situation we discussed earlier, you spill your guts and once again no one is listening, they don’t care.” Others such as Barb talked about a possible role for HR. *“I think in HR we can do both – understand that the decision has been made, but at least talk about the concerns and what can we do to implement it – overcome the barriers. Just acknowledging people’s discomfort with it”*

Workers need to feel that there’s a “payback” for change. Obviously, if the company is doing better, then those within the company will do better. They’ll experience an increase in programs, perks, benefits, and pay. They’ll also enjoy a certain amount of job security with the attained goals. It is everyone’s responsibility from the janitor to the president to work toward company goals and fulfilling the company mission to serve its customers.

3.5e Theme 5: Results – the rubber meets the road

In the end, the objective is to improve organizational effectiveness – make our team, our company more profitable, a better place to work, more efficient – whatever the goal. Whether the change is made easily or it is difficult this is where the rubber meets the road. What is the impact of the change is important and can’t be ignored.

Barb, Group Participant

Change is here to stay, and to survive we must all understand it, embrace it, and learn to use it to our advantage. Human resource and change management strategies can have a significant impact on the organization's bottom line and human resource departments must ensure that the workplace is flexible and responsive in order to meet changes in market and business demands. Below are some specific examples provided by Critchley (1998) of how human resource directly impacts the company's bottom line results.

- "If employees are motivated 4% more, this leads to customers being 2% more satisfied, leading to a 0.5% increase in profits.
- 10% of your best customers most likely produce 20% of your revenue, resulting in 70% of your profit. Consider the impact this continual change is having on the people-side of your business.
- With all the mergers taking place, organizations are concerned – or should be – about losing key talent as workforces are realigned. Approximately 25% (one in four) top performers leave within 90 days of the announcement of a major change event.
- Research indicates that 70% of organizations view human resource related initiatives as critical during times of organizational change. The reality, however, is less than 10% of organizations actually give human resource issues top priority during a change event" (p. 1).

Within the overarching theme of "results", there was a sub theme related to the pace of change, particularly the conflict between an organizational need for change to be implemented quickly and an individual's need for time to process and accept the change. John, in discussing a change that HR was trying to implement, talked about the slow pace of change. *"Change is slow to be accepted. And that's not going to be changed tomorrow – especially in this*

company where the wheels turn slowly. But, he went on to describe other changes:

"Now that I've said the wheels turn slowly – let me paint another picture in a different situation...when some changes are initiated by the company- like the signage [the style, placement, management of store signs, such as price, advertisements]- it's expected that it will be accepted and made overnight – and we in HR understand it, support it, and can just make it happen overnight."

This is a similar concept to Jane's earlier quote about "having a shirt with a big S – for Super HR" that you can just put on at a moment's notice and rush over and make the change happen now. Another important aspect of the barriers to effective change implementation is that of taking time to assess and understand the current environment in which the change will be implemented. Susan shared this comment about a proposed change.

"We think it is a positive change for the customers, but ignore the other reality – what it will take to actually implement the change. If they'd just take the time to say- we want to do this, but how can we best do it in the current operation environment."

Susan went on to discuss what she called the "fundamental flaw" and described a recent incident where the implementation of a change had not gone smoothly.

"In our meeting yesterday on the task force we were talking about something that happened last month. Someone decided that the stores should sell roses on Valentine's Day to draw people into the store. Cool, let's do it. There were two fundamental flaws- one is we decided not to charge tax on the roses, and two we made a mistake on the skuing [programming items into the register] and info could not be entered into the registers. We had a big discussion about not wanting to stop innovation, but how do we quickly amass expertise so changes can be implemented quickly, but in a reasoned way. I would say that that's unfortunately too frequent a model of change – there are fundamental flaws because

we haven't taken the time and gotten the experts together we just say do it." And Joan added, "I think it is fine to respond quickly, but we need a say to get the right people at the table to determine that we haven't left out an important piece – involve the people that need to be involved."

A part of this theme was a frequent mentioning of business results. Along with human resource's recognition as a business partner and a change agent, comes the responsibility for operating in a manner that is congruent with organizational results. It requires balance for the human resource professional to continually weigh the company's desired business results with providing a positive employee environment. Hopefully, these two objectives are compatible, but there must often be conscious attention expended to ensure both are achieved. The focus on business results was found in comments like *"it is what's in it for the business"*, *"what will be the results"*, *"it's about improving sales or improving the business"*, *"change needs to be sold operationally"*, *"the drivers of change"*, *"the company's needs and objectives"*,

Schein (2000) describes the need for organizational change to be put into a time and learning context.

You can't change things overnight. You create new behavior, but whether attitudes and assumptions will catch up with the new behavior is very much a function of how successful the new behavior is at solving whatever problems there are to be solved.
(p. 3)

Schein was one of the pioneers of the concept of corporate culture. He defines it as "the shared assumptions that people hold, for example, about their mission, how to work, how to measure things" (p. 3). He recommends

that companies take each business process and interdisciplinary teams embark on a dialogue, engaging in in-depth assessments of one another's assumptions, to see what the current reality actually is before attempting to make any changes.

The need to respond to change quickly to produce business results is not likely to decrease. There are many changes in the business environment. Everything is speeding up and there is more uncertainty. Kotter (2000) describes his view of the primary changes impacting businesses as follows:

One is that there is more change to deal with, the second is that you have less time to implement change. There are people we talked to in 1995 who would have said: This is what we did and it worked terrifically well, but today you wonder if it is going to work well because it was a slow process. Increasingly, you can't spend a couple of years trying to induce people to do something, because of the urgency of the matter. There was a time in certain situations when you had the luxury to do that. In most cases that is just not the case today. There was a time in a big company when you could probably have waited, say, some 18 months before you got your first, visible short-term win. Today you might have half that time or there will be trouble. They are just going to play themselves out, forcing more and more companies that have had relatively safe harbors to leap further and faster and to be able to compete, to win, to serve. That is the most fundamental trend. Companies have to leap further, faster, and in the right direction. If they can't, they are in trouble. (p. 121)

CHAPTER 4

How Collaborative Learning Informs Professional Practice

Thematic Structure: The Story

If all participants spoke with the same voice, they might say...

I know each member of my work team is a unique individual with his or her own set of experiences and assumptions. I learn more about them through my daily interactions with them, and through more focused interactions like the collaborative learning group. Through my daily interactions with managers I can have an impact on their professional growth and development, and their overall work experience. The relationships I establish with the managers I work with are important to me and I learn from them, and they from me.

I realize that it is important to continue to learn and to have opportunities at work that facilitate my own growth and development. Organizational change is constant and the need for the company to remain competitive is real. The job is sometimes difficult and stressful, and having a supportive, open, honest, working environment is important. There can be serious consequences to my decisions and actions – to both individuals and the company. It is important to ensure our team has a shared vision, and that we understand our own strengths and limitations.

I understand there are significant demands on my time – organizational priorities and a heavy workload is a reality - but I also understand that it is necessary to take time to connect with peers for support and understanding and to enhance my job competency and consistency.

4.1 Introduction

Chapter 4, “How Collaborative Learning Informs Professional Practice”

focuses on 3 areas: 1) An introduction to collaborative learning in the workplace, 2) discussions about dialogue and sensemaking since these were key foundations for the collaborative learning group, and 3) presentation and discussion about the five themes that emerged from the data analysis. This chapter presents the experience of participating in a collaborative learning group and how participation in the collaborative learning group informed our professional practice.

4.2 Overview/Background

One of the purposes of this research was to study how participating in a collaborative learning group influenced the professional practice of its members.

As previously described, the group of human resource professionals met bi-weekly over a period of several months. The focus of the collaborative learning group meetings was our role as organizational change agents. This chapter looks at the collaborative learning group itself, and the themes that emerged from interviews concerned with this issue. The chapter begins with an introduction to collaborative learning and dialogue, which is followed by a discussion of each of the five themes that emerged through the analysis of data resulting from collaborative group meetings and from one-on-one interviews following the series of meetings. The following themes emerged related to the collaborative learning group's experience in the collaborative learning process and the group's impact on the participant's role as a change agent:

1. There is a process
2. Suspending judgment
3. Getting hold of my own change
4. Just through talking
5. Safe and understanding environment

While there are five themes that stood out for the participants regarding their collaborative learning experience and its resulting impact on their practice, these themes are not discrete. Just as collaborative learning factors such as the environment, relationships among participants, and participant assumptions and beliefs, are multi-dimensional and inter-related, so too are each of the themes.

Themes suggest that what participants report as standing out for them is a patterned event. Themes also can co-occur in specific experiences. As Pollio, et al., (1997) wrote, “the various themes are in a figure-ground relation to each other; they are mutually interdependent and interrelated. When one theme is figural in description, the remaining themes are best described as a ground, but not absent” (p. 246).

4.3 Dialogue and Collaborative Learning in the Workplace

Although there is much written about organizational change, the need for change, and models for effecting change, taking change to the next step - how change agents actually can facilitate change in individuals - is not as prevalent in the literature. Particularly in the human resource-related professional literature, the admonitions that HR professionals must act as change agents within their organizations, fail to provide professionals with guidance about how to facilitate their own change and with the issues and challenges of facilitating others to change.

While more is written about the broader topic of organizational change, in the end, organizations are composed of individuals and their reaction to change is pivotal to successful transition. As a human resource professional, the first step is usually self-understanding and understanding about the change. This was a consistent issue for our collaborative group. Many of the examples the group shared related to change that they had not yet accepted or assimilated.

Nielson (2003), in responding to a question about influencing change that you yourself have doubts about, writes that:

you can't influence another's mind-set if you haven't dealt with your own first. If I'm attempting to influence another person to accept change, yet I'm really uncomfortable with it, or I'm trying to create an environment for innovation yet I want everyone to think like me, I don't think it's going to work. Confronting your doubts and resolving them is a prerequisite to doing business today, especially for HR executives who are dealing with matters of change, ownership, and the ethics – the 'mind-set' kinds of things. (p. 77)

One of the solutions presented by Nielson for becoming more comfortable with the change process is "peer encounters with those who've been through it" (p. 78). A collaborative learning group presents one plausible action-focused solution for facilitating "peer encounters." This can strengthen a human resource professional's ability to manage his or her personal reaction to change and thus be better positioned to assist others to facilitate their reaction to the change being presented. Schon (1983) also speaks about the need for professionals to have a venue for paying attention to the values, which shape their practice. Schon states that:

at any given time in the life of a professional, certain ways of framing problems and roles come into good currency. Their frames determine their strategies of attention and thereby set the directions in which they will try to set the situation, the values, which shape their practice. When practitioners are unaware of their frames for roles or problems, they do not experience the need to choose among them. They do not attend to the ways in which they construct the reality in which they function; for them, it simply is the given reality. When a practitioner becomes aware of his frames, he also becomes aware of the possibility of alternative ways of framing the reality of his practice. He takes note of the values and norms to which he has given priority, and those he has given less

importance, or left out of account altogether. Frame awareness tends to entrain awareness of dilemmas. (p. 310)

Greenberg (1997) in describing change in the educational system found that she "began to notice that the change process occurred more successfully for those teachers who had more frequent and better opportunities to reflect together on their experiences in the classroom. We slowly realized that this collaborative learning was more important than the opportunities we provided for review of program concepts" (p. 1). In a similar manner, this opportunity to reflect on professional experience can have an impact on the change process in a business setting. A dialogue or collaborative learning group can also provide a professional with the means to evaluate and test his or her own assumptions and values.

One of the primary ways this self-assessment and exploration comes about in the collaborative learning group is through the use of dialogue. Hale (1995) in discussing dialogue in organizational settings concludes that:

dialogue and its outcomes can help teams, and organizations help themselves on multiple levels. By following the various paths that can lead to dialogue, teams are likely to enhance the quality of their communication, thinking, and interpersonal relationships through the process itself. These outcomes can facilitate improved performance and cooperation whether the goal of the organization is to become a learning organization, a high performance team, or simply to be more effective tomorrow than they are today. Yet, the journey toward dialogue can be a difficult one, filled with the need for risk taking, new learnings, and the letting go of old, familiar ways of doing things. Because of these issues, a high level of patience and commitment to the process is necessary to reap the full rewards possible. For those individuals, teams, and organizations willing to make that commitment, new possibilities for creativity and transformation emerge. (p. 7)

Bohm (1996) defines the outcomes of dialogue as "the understanding of consciousness *per se*, as well as exploring the problematic nature of day-to-day relationships and communication. This definition provides a foundation, a reference point if you will, for the key components of dialogue: shared meaning; the nature of collective thought; the pervasiveness of fragmentation; the function of awareness; the micro cultural context; undirected inquiry; impersonal fellowship; and the paradox of the observer and the observed" (p. xi). This connection between dialogue and the workplace can be a mutually beneficial relationship. Bohm, Factor, and Garrett (1991) propose that dialogue is:

a way of observing, collectively, how hidden values and intentions can control our behavior, and how unnoticed cultural differences can clash without our realizing what is occurring. (p. 3)

Isaacs (1999) states that:

dialogue is a conversation in which people think together in relationship. Thinking together implies that you no longer take your own position as final. You relax your grip on certainty and listen to the possibilities that result simply from being in a relationship with others – possibilities that might not otherwise have occurred. (p. 18)

Mintzberg, Dougherty, Jorgensen, and Westley (1996) suggest that "first, people do not always realize, at least overtly, what they learn from each other, sometimes not even that they learn from each other. But learn often they do. If successful collaboration for innovation is not terribly conscious, then explicating it through formal structure may, in fact, stifle creativity.... People create new knowledge for product design as they work together on real problems. That

knowledge, in other words, has to be connected to, indeed be a part of, actual practice. This suggests that successful collaboration is neither a cerebral activity that can take place in the abstract, nor an interpersonal process that can focus on affect per se. It needs to occur in the context – the customer's setting, the plant, the laboratory" (p.63). Peters and Armstrong (1998) in a broader sense, define collaborative as "people labor together in order to construct something that did not exist before the collaboration, something that does not and can not fully exist in the lives of the individual collaborators" (p. 2). Through dialogue and reflective practice our group was able through "laboring together" to gain personal and group insight on the basis of interplay between the group and the members' practice.

The collaborative learning group used organizational change as a focal point for dialogue. Group members shared stories of what was happening in their own professional responsibilities. Members shared stories such as their own personal reactions to a newly implemented change, the reactions of others to a proposed change, general work dilemmas that they solicited feedback on handling, and frustrations.

There are, however, limitations to dialogue in organizational settings. The day-to-day tasks of most organizations focus primarily on producing concrete results. Certainly for members of our collaborative group, all of whom are in corporate management of retail establishments, the emphasis is on producing results. While dialogue or a collaborative group can produce positive results, a

direct link between the group and “business results” may be difficult to define. Isaacs (1993) states that “dialogue seeks to have people learn how to think together – not just in the sense of analyzing a shared problem, but in the sense of surfacing fundamental assumptions and gaining insight into why they arise. Dialogue can thus produce an environment where people are consciously participating in the creation of shared meaning” (p. 26). Imel (1992) describes another potential hurdle related to a collaborative group in the workplace.

Reflective practice has both advantages and disadvantages. It can positively affect professional growth and development by leading to greater self-awareness, to the development of new knowledge about professional practice, and to a broader understanding of the problems that confront practitioners (Osterman, 1990). However, it is a time-consuming process and it may involve personal risk because the questioning of practice requires that practitioners be open to an examination of beliefs, values, and feelings about which there may be great sensitivity (Peters 1991; Rose 1992). (p. 1)

The difficulty of finding time was a real one for our group. Because of the nature of each participant’s job responsibilities, which includes travel, extended work hours and employee-focused problem solving which takes priority, most meetings had at least one member absent. The other related issue that was identified by our group was that of transition – transitioning both on entering the meeting and following the meeting. The sometimes incongruent nature of the workplace and the requirements of dialogue and a collaborative approach required a conscious effort from the group. As Joan said at the beginning of one of our meetings, *“I feel like I need to take a few deep breaths and cleanse my mind of the million tasks that are waiting on me, and focus on the opportunity the*

group offers to step back and look at my self and my job in a different way".

Similarly, John shared, *"when I left the meeting last week, I felt excited. Excited about trying a more collaborative approach with some of the District Managers I work with. It seems like as soon as I leave here the real world overtakes my good intentions and I'm back to doing things just the same way."*

4.4 Themes – How Collaborative Learning Informed Our Practice

The themes that emerged from the data related to the impact of collaborative learning on member's practice had an important commonality – a focus on sensemaking. Each of the five themes – there is a process; suspending judgment; getting hold of our own change; just through talking; and safe and understanding environment were related to the group members' attempts to "make sense" or better understand themselves, others, and their work environment. Sensemaking describes helping people make sense of their own organization for action.

For Weick (1995) sensemaking includes "such things as placement of items into frameworks, comprehending, redressing surprise, constructing meaning, interacting in pursuit of mutual understanding, and patterning" (p. 6). Weick further states that sensemaking can be viewed as a recurring cycle comprised of a sequence of events happening over time. The cycle begins as individuals form unconscious and conscious anticipations and assumptions, which serve as predictions about future events. It is the process of sensemaking which assigns meaning. Other authors such as Shotter (1993) and Schon (1983)

also describe sensemaking as a process that constructs knowledge or sense from a situation or problem that initially makes no sense.

Weick (1995) emphasizes that sensemaking involves an activity or a process. He summarizes the seven properties of sensemaking as follows:

The recipe 'how can I know what I think until I see what I say?' can be parsed to show how each of the seven properties of sensemaking are built into it.

1. Identity: The recipe is a question about who I am as indicated by discovery of how and what I think.
2. Retrospect: To learn what I think, I look back over what I said earlier.
3. Enactment: I create the object to be seen and inspected when I say or do something.
4. Social: What I say and single out and conclude are determined by who socialized me and how I was socialized, as well as by the audience I anticipate will audit the conclusions I reach.
5. Ongoing: My talking is spread across time, competes for attention with other ongoing projects, and is reflected on after it is finished, which means my interests may already have changed.
6. Extracted cues: The 'what' that I single out and embellish as the content of the thought is only a small portion of the utterance that becomes salient because of context and personal dispositions.
7. Plausibility: I need to know enough about what I think to get on with my projects, but no more, which means sufficiency and plausibility take precedence over accuracy. (p. 62)

Others researchers like Glynn (1993) posit sensemaking as "an approach for dealing with ambiguity" (p. 1). The collaborative learning experience was a method for focusing on situations, which are complex and ambiguous, and identified a methodology that permits and explores the movement from confusion to clarity. The experience provided participants an opportunity to "make sense" of their professional environment. It placed them in the role of participants,

whose own perspectives impact on what is happening, rather than as observers detached from the issues and problems of the organization.

One highlight was that people and groups have different ways of making sense, and that they do not necessarily see eye to eye, have the same priorities, or view work in the same way. Since organizational change is about bringing people together in order to accomplish something, much of what managing is about is recognizing and appreciating different ways of making sense. From the perspective of sensemaking we can say that the heart of managing is working with people’s ways of seeing thinking: dealing with the consequences of different perspectives, encouraging the emergence of shared models or metaphors (as a common ground of understanding), and recognizing the richness and inevitability of different ways of being and understanding.

As indicated by the five themes that emerged from the data, the group used the collaborative experience as an opportunity for sensemaking. The group’s sensemaking focused on the informal models of practice, understanding of others and themselves better through suspension of judgment, understanding and managing personal change, the impacts on personal understanding through dialogue, and the environment that is required. Apps (1996) describes a similar process for managing significant change. He describes it as “the rope being untied” and suggests although our inclination is to tie things together as quickly as possible, that this period of “not knowing” is an “opportunity for profound

learning, for the opportunity to develop new ties”, and that the “being at loose ends” is essential before “reconnecting” the knot” (p. 46).

As described in the themes that follow, the action of sensemaking was important to each group member. As members shared their work experiences, dialogued about them, and “went back” to the workplace to try out new learnings, and then returned to reflect and dialogue about the results – we were able to learn about ourselves, others in our group, others that we work with, and our own practice. We were able to make better sense of ourselves, others, and our practice.

4.4a Theme 1: *There is a process*

“Well, until now, I hadn’t thought much about how we go about doing our job – whether it was handling problems or helping to manage change. I see now there is a process or way of trial and error that we go through – building, reflecting, and learning from our successes and mistakes. I hadn’t really looked at it as a formal process that happened.”
Susan, Group Participant

One of the themes that emerged through analysis of the data focused on process – the process of how professionals understand, build, and refine the models they use to carry out their day-to-day tasks. In a fast-paced and immediacy-focused business like retail, discussions about process are infrequent. There is much more emphasis on results, the “doing of the task” versus the “process of the doing.” Having an opportunity to overtly reflect is not common. One of the group participants, Joan, expressed it in this way.

“I think the group itself, probably more than the subject of change, was interesting and useful to me and the other members. In past worklives we’ve had more of a chance to talk about how we work together, how we make decisions, how we form a team – more the process and the interrelationships. We really don’t do that often here. So it is wonderful to have a framework to do that. Together to sit down and talk about your theory, your practice, the why, the how, instead of just what’s the decision, let’s move on. It was good to hear how others think about things, to have time to reflect and talk with others.” In most work situations, there are time constraints and number of tasks do not support reflection, discussion, and sometimes even is a block to collaboration and dialogue. There is little time and effort given to reflecting back, discussing models and or theory of behavior.”

The ability to create and test new theories – new ways of seeing – to conceptualize the challenges and opportunities, and to build new ways of understanding what is happening and what could happen is critical to business success. Understanding organizational and personal aesthetics and values is a strong foundation for a professional and a company. Marsick (1990) describes the importance of theory building and the need to combine other’s thinking with our own as follows:

Managers cannot rely on experts to make decisions. They must learn to trust their gut reactions and then to integrate intuition with both rationality and the advice of others. Managers should have the opportunity to test pieces of theory out in a safe laboratory, to combine others’ thinking with their own, and to develop the habit of continually testing out their assumptions publicly and getting feedback on which they can reflect. Managers cannot be prescriptive in their actions; they must constantly experiment, keep themselves fully open to results, discuss the undiscussable, open their eyes to the deniable, and experiment. Theory building is thus a living, growing activity. A second interpretation is the development of critically self-reflective insight into oneself as both a person and a manager. This component involves self-analysis tied to issues, problems, and concerns that come up through interaction with others in the program. (p. 35-36)

Isaacs (1999) defines theory as operating from:

a set of taken-for-granted rules or ideas of how to be effective. Understanding these tacit rules is what I mean by theory. The word theory comes from the same roots as the word theater, which means simply "to see." A theory is a way of seeing. Without a theory, however, - some way to assess what is happening - we shall be forever doomed to operate blindly, subject to chance. (p. 73)

Jarvis (1999) further describes how practitioners build their own theory.

"Through learning from practical experience, practitioners take the content of what they are taught and what they acquire in practice, and they build their own theory. This theory is pragmatic, necessarily dynamic, and relative to the practice situation" (p. 49).

An example was provided by Jane when she was describing how using dialogue and a collaborative approach influenced her practice. *"We had a specific focus to discuss and change, but how we did that - honest, respectful, open conversation was rewarding and positive. That's a model I will use in other situations"*. She was describing a situation she was facing at work which involved helping a manager she was working with understand input about her performance that would hopefully result in a change in the manager's behavior. From the group, Jane was able to see how the use of the elements of dialogue were helpful for her in understanding herself in relation to change. For this reason she wanted to apply the approach in another situation. Jane did just that, and at the next meeting described:

"Well, instead of just going in and telling her what to do we had a open dialogue about the situation - her thoughts and mine. We

collaboratively came up with a plan". I think it's about having a real, open honest dialogue. I say dialogue instead of discussion – I'm focusing that her opinion coming into it is on equal footing. I'm not there to tell her what to do – but the two of us are there together to solve it. She brings her information, I bring my info, and we collaboratively work out a plan and learn together.ä

When asked what she did differently, she replied:

"Asked more questions and think I probably listened more. I tried to take the approach that we were each bringing something to the discussion. I also tried to stay focused on what she was saying and not trying to impose my solution on it".

Schon (1983) describes the importance of managers not only to reflect-in-action, but also to have a means to reflect on their reflection-in-action.

Managers do reflect-in-action. Sometimes, when reflection is triggered by uncertainty, the manager says, in effect, "This is puzzling; how can I understand it?" Sometimes, when a sense of opportunity provokes reflection, the manager asks, "What can I make of this?" And sometimes, when a manager is surprised by the success of his own intuitive knowing, he asks himself, "What have I really been doing?" Whatever the triggering condition, a manager's reflection-in-action is fundamentally similar to reflection-in-action in other professional fields. It consists in on-the-spot surfacing, criticizing, restructuring, and testing of intuitive understanding of experienced phenomena; often it takes the form of reflective conversation with the situation. But a manager's reflection-in-action also has special features of its own. A manager's professional life is wholly concerned with an organization, which is both the stage for his activity and the object of his inquiry. Hence, the phenomena on which he reflects-in-action are the phenomena of organizational life... When a manager reflects-in-action, he draws on this stock of organizational knowledge, adapting it to some present instance. And he also functions as an agent of organizational learning, extending or restructuring in his present inquiry, the stock of knowledge, which will be available for future inquiry. Finally, managers live in an organizational system, which may promote or inhibit reflection-in-action. Organizational structures are more or less adaptable to new findings, more or less resistant to new tasks. The scope and direction of a manager's reflection-in-action are strongly influenced, and may be severely limited, by the learning

system of the organization in which he practices. Managers do reflection-in-action, but they seldom reflect on their reflection-in-action. Hence this crucially important dimension of their art tends to remain private and inaccessible to others. Moreover, because awareness of one's intuitive thinking usually grows out of practice in articulating it to others, managers often have little access to their own reflection-in-action. The resulting mysteriousness of the art has several harmful consequences. It tends to perpetuate the split in the field of management, creating a misleading impression that practitioners must choose between practice based on management science and an essentially mysterious artistry. And it prevents the manager from helping others in his organization to learn to do what he can do. Since he cannot describe his reflection-in-action, he cannot teach others to do it. Yet one of a manager's most important functions is the education of his subordinates. (p. 241-2)

Susan's comments describe how having a means to reflect, and to dialogue, can positively impact the interactions with other employees.

"Generally, our work is issue-based, not process-based. There's a specific issue, a very unhappy person, a complaint. Often we need to broaden our conversation – is this the best practice we've adopted, is the issue alerting us to a broader problem that we haven't uncovered, am I fully understanding the person and the issue – it is so difficult to get past the specific issue and the need for an immediate answer. The collaborative learning group has broadened our conversation from the specific issue at hand. In the group we brought out day-to-day issues, but used them as a framework or starting point for discussing them in broader terms, and also about ourselves."

It is important for human resource professionals to have the opportunity to verbalize and better understand their actions. Many times human resource professionals come from other professions. As an example, within our dialogue group, none of the members had formal degrees in human resources. The experience has been on-the-job, building from related fields like training, sales, or management. Jarvis (1999) notes that:

few practitioners are actually doing precisely the job for which they were trained; more knowledge is being legitimated pragmatically rather than either logically or empirically; the high status of theory is being questioned; academic qualifications are becoming symbolic of ability, and gaining them is becoming a necessity for career advancement; and scientific management requires more data on which to base decisions. (p. 3)

Greenberg (1997) summarizes the importance of integrating theory, practice, and the role of reflection as follows:

Peter Jarvis (1992), a Professor of Adult Education in England, helped me gain an explicit understanding of what I have been learning through experience: People do not learn or create change by putting theory into practice – they learn by deriving theory from practice. But effective learning and change do not occur in just any kind of practice. They occur when practice is reflective or “influenced by sustained inquiry into the relationship between thought and action,” the definition of Reflective Practice of my colleague, John Peters (1991). To be sure the sustained inquiry can and should be influenced by decontextualized, formal theories. However, ...I found reflective practice improved the COGNET Model immensely – and turned it into an open system, designed to be modified for use according to the needs within each and every setting. (p. 8)

In our group, the use of dialogue and reflection had several effects. (1) It first encouraged the consideration of viewing the implicit theories behind our practice, (2) it helped clarify and make those theories explicit, and (3) it provided an opportunity to dialogue with peers and test theories-in-action.

4.4b Theme 2: Suspending judgment

The value of collaborative learning is the process of articulating your thoughts and having others help you uncover your assumptions. And in taking the time to really listen to others. I'm more aware of the need to be willing to suspend judgment and really listen to what others are saying or trying to say. Today's meeting made me think of how I can change my own opinion and open up to what others are saying. It also caused me to consider that I can probably do a better job in explaining my ideas to others – that is understanding and speaking from their viewpoint.
Susan, Group Participant

One of the themes that emerged was that of suspending judgment or assumptions. Susan spoke about how dialogue was a key to the suspension of assumptions. *"I need to learn to use dialogue better. I can be a much better listener for my team members. If I don't initially understand, I need to suspend judgment and ask questions to help me understand."* Bohm (1996) describes dialogue as:

a way of observing how hidden values and intentions can control our behavior, and how unnoticed differences in culture or gender can clash without our realizing what is occurring. It can therefore be seen as an arena in which collective learning takes place, and out of which a sense of increased harmony, fellowship, and creativity can arise" (p. 5). "Suspension of thoughts, impulses, judgments, etc., lies the very heart of Dialogue. It is one of its most important new aspects. It is not easily grasped because the activity is both unfamiliar and subtle. Suspension involves attention, listening and looking and is essential to exploration. Speaking is necessary, of course, for without it there would be little in the Dialogue to explore. But the actual process of exploration takes place during listening – not only to others but to oneself. Suspension involves exposing your reactions, impulses, feelings and opinions in such a way that they can be seen and felt within your own psyche and also be reflected back by others in the group. It does not mean repressing or suppressing or, even, postponing

them. It means, simply, giving them your serious attention so that their structures can be noticed while they are actually taking place. (p.14)

Isaacs (1999) discussed the positive results that can come from a group having the opportunity to “collectively suspend assumptions”. Isaacs states that:

most groups will have a number of critical issues that limit their effectiveness – issues that they are unable, for whatever reasons, to see clearly. Much of the time the ecology of a group is such that it is impossible for much reflection in action to take place. Things happen too fast. The pressure to produce results is too great. The fear that arises in people at the thought of slowing down the process is too overwhelming. Interrupting these habitual patterns can be quite powerful. Collective suspension is the practice of shifting the ecology of a group so that it can begin to see it has alternatives, to understand that it no longer needs to be limited to a single point of view. (p.156)

Susan shared that *“our discussions in this group caused me to look at their reactions in a different way. I tried to step back and try to better understand their position before rushing to judgment.* Similarly Mary shared that the group allowed her to *“also look at how I perceive situations and my role and how others might perceive the same situation.”* Joan described how a process, like the collaborative group, opened the door to personal and professional improvement. *“I miss the opportunity to talk with other professionals about how to do my job better and my department’s job better. We don’t spend enough time looking at how we personally can improve. My job is taking a fresh look at my assumptions and questioning why I make the decisions I make”.*

4.4c Theme 3: Getting hold of my own change

*I'm working on managing my own reaction to the change. It's not always positive. I realize how important it is for me to get a hold of my own change so I can better help others change.
It's not always easy.*

Barb, Group Participant

One of the primary themes related to collaborative learning was that of personal change, or, as one of the participants, Barb described it, “getting hold of my own change.” As organizational change agents we are affected by changes coming from two directions – the expectation that we will facilitate change for the company and secondly, our own reaction to that change. Many times, the need to “take hold” or facilitate your own change must precede being able to facilitate change with others.

Human resource professionals are not always in the organizational structure line to receive all the information needed to fully understand a change. Additionally, changes often are presented in a manner or on a timeline that contradicts “good” human resource strategy. It is critical that human resource professionals develop a method that allows them to quickly assimilate or quickly “move through” the change cycle. Due to the nature of the job, there is not always the luxury to move through the stages of loss, doubt, and discomfort at a leisurely pace. There is a need to quickly come to a place of understanding – if not integration – where you are able to at least understand the change, and then moving to a behavior around the change that is productive and not resistant or unproductive. Jane described the change cycle as follows:

“So if you consider all of us go through a cycle to become okay with a particular change, that it takes effort and understanding on all parties part, that it takes time, and that it is often painful we need to look for ways to help in this area. Our group meetings allow us to talk through some of the issues, and for me, that brings me closer to understanding and moving toward integrating the change.”

Susan, described how dialogue fits into personal change as follows:

“I would love to continue to learn more about dialogue. I think the whole process of uncovering our own assumptions and understanding others is one of the most fundamental ways for personal improvement. We each have our own brick walls and until we are able to understand them, why we operate from a particular point of view, I don’t think we can ever change as human beings.”

Another aspect of personal change that was addressed in the group was the individual nature of the acceptance of change and the impact an individual’s own experiences and values have on the change process. As John related in one of the meetings *“I have thought more about how different each of us are and how much differently we may accept or struggle with change. I think that accepting change directly related to our own personalities but also seems to relate to our different life experiences.”* This comment led to a broader discussion about how each of us has different reactions to change and often in an organizational environment there is an expectation that there will be a “cookie cutter” response to the change and the approach to facilitate that change.

Jarvis (1999) raises the issue about predisposition of personality and learning style upon reflectivity. Using research of Kagan (1971), he makes the point that reflective thinkers are not necessarily cautious; they simply prefer to consider more alternatives before they reach a solution. Likewise, some

practitioners are more likely than others to consider a greater number of alternative strategies. This finding gives rise to two forms of practice other than habituation – impulsivity and reflexivity in practice. Impulsive practitioners, having arrived at a solution to their problem, put it into practice and may not reflect on it thereafter. In contrast, reflective thinkers examine the alternatives and act accordingly. In doing this they regard their actions as experiments from which they can continue to learn, so that they both reflect in action and continue to reflect after it. This is what Schon (1983) regards as "reflection in action", a process of thinking about action in such a manner to generate new knowledge, which, in turn, will generate new action and so on. Schon provides the following example:

A consultant goes into a large company and confronts a problem, but one that he or she has faced before in a very similar situation. It is beguilingly easy to fall back on this previous experience and "choose the most comfortable way – suggesting what he or she has done in similar situations with previous clients, or choosing the first solution that will come to mind. There is therefore a psychological component, a predisposition, in our understanding of reflective practice: we all decide for ourselves how to act, but in similar situations, different people act differently, according to their personality types. The extent to which we can create reflective thinkers through simple training courses is therefore an open question, although some professions have introduced such courses into their professional preparation. (p. 63)

Brown (1995) describes how dialogue can enhance the development of both individuals and organizations. Dialogue seeks:

To build deeper understanding, new perceptions, new models, new openings, new paths to effective action, and deeper and more enduring, even sustainable, truths. Dialogue's purpose is to honor development of individuals and ideas and organizations, at a very

deep level. It opens paths to change and clears space for organizational transformation by changing the inner landscape. We change the world by changing the way we perceive the world, the way we think about cause and effect, the way we conceptualize the relationships among things, and the meaning we ascribe to events in that external world. Organizational change means changing our internal landscapes as leaders. Such change is undertaken by us only when we reach a place in our lives where we want to change those landscapes. Such changes are encouraged by the openness and the reflective and collective process of dialogue. Dialogue opens pathways for change – within us and among us. From that opening comes the space for organizational and social change. (p.157)

Senge et al., (1999) describes how collaborative dialogue can result in organizational shared meaning:

Individuals make sense of life based on personal experience. But that's not easy in an organization, where "experience" has been dispersed among all the employees. Some have been collecting information by talking to customers; others have been experimenting; others have been analyzing mistakes and successes; and still others have been interacting with suppliers. All of these many perspectives can be brought to bear on critical organizational issues, but only through deliberate conversation. (p. 440)

Dialogue through a collaborative workplace group can support personal change and organizational change. In the end, organizational change is dependent upon individual change. One of the opportunities provided by our group meetings that affected an individual's ability to facilitate his or her own change was to facilitate reflection. Mezirow (1990) describes learning for adults as being "centrally involved in creating and facilitating dialogic communities to enable learners to engage in rational discourse and action". He goes on to say:

However, reflective discourse and its resulting insights alone do not make for transformative learning. Acting upon these emancipatory insights, a praxis, is also necessary. Here, we enter into the

cognitive dimension of transformative learning. The learner must have the will to act upon his or her new convictions. (p. 354)

Jane summed it up in this way:

"Exploring new ideas and beliefs is beneficial for me personally in how I view change as well as improving my ability to initiate change in my role as an HR professional. I'm excited about taking the time for us to meet with peers to discuss more the process of how we go about being strong change agents and how we can personally accept change. If we aren't open to and able to accept change how can we hope to facilitate change in others?"

4.4d Theme 4: Just through talking

"Well, I hadn't ever done anything like that before (participating in a collaborative learning group). I was a little skeptical going in because I didn't know what to expect. It was good. Good to have time to talk about some of the frustrations about change and to see what my colleagues thought. It was good to see that others had some of the same concerns. I didn't think much would come from the meetings, but just through talking – dialoguing or discussing the example, we came up with ideas and suggestions to try that I don't think we would have come up with on our own – at least we wouldn't have taken the time to be that creative."
Jane, Group Participant

The group discovered that "just through talking" they could more fully understand themselves, others, their practice, and the organization. Brown (1995) describes dialogue as "a process central to the development of learning organizations. In a sense, dialogue is not complicated. It is good conversation over the back fences of our lives. It is continued, thoughtful exchange about the things that most matter. It is time to sit under the apple tree together and talk, as the ideas and thoughts come to us, without agenda, without time pressures"

(p. 153). This definition reflects the informality and approach taken by the group.

In emphasizing the impact dialogue could have on business. Isaacs (1993)

states that:

conversation is the means by which people share and often create what they know. Therefore, the most important work in the new economy is creating conversations. Dialogue, the discipline of collective learning and inquiry, is a process for transforming the quality of conversation and the thinking that lies beneath. It can serve as a corner stone for organizational learning by providing an environment in which people can reflect together and transform the group out of which their thinking and acting emerges. Dialogue does not require agreement, instead it encourages people to participate in a pool of shared meaning, which lead to aligned action. (p.28)

Mary described the thinking and action steps in the following way: *“At every session we came away with an understanding of each other’s positions – mine, theirs, and them, mine. We identified different approaches, and also reinforced our own thinking. Some ideas were identified that we could go back and try it and come back to the next meeting and share the progress.”* Barb’s comments focus more on the resulting alignment of action. *“We were relieved to have an opportunity to share experiences and test ideas. I think a lot of HR has not one right answer so it is a relief and valuable to dialogue or discuss options and ideas with others. It is important for us to be consistent.”*

Another aspect of the “just though talking” was the avenue it offered for participants to manage their own frustrations and concerns about change. Participation in dialogue, simply the process of having a venue to candidly express concerns, was of value in reducing or managing frustration. Brown

(1995) talks specifically about dialogue's impact on change and how a less mechanistic approach reduces resistance to change. "Most of the traditional thinking about change is more mechanistic, and shows change as structured and planned, change as engineered and driven into organizations. We believe that resistance is a necessary component of managing change. We say that managing change means managing resistance. Perhaps we should note instead that resistance is a natural part of managing change the way we have managed it so far. It is "natural" no doubt, when change is managed in instrumental, mechanistic ways. But dialogue builds capacities that dissolve resistance" (p. 157). Mary expressed it as follows: *"Don't you think venting helps the process of implementing change? I know it really does for me. If I can express my opinion, even if I know that I don't have a dog in the race, it still makes me feel better about the change and what I need to do. Maybe that's not right for all changes or everything, but it sure seems to help."*

Jane shared her thoughts about the group.

"It was interesting. When we first talked about the group, my first thought was there will probably be some deadly pauses in there. How much can you talk about being a change agent? But I was wrong. It was rewarding; even therapeutic. It was a way to share frustrations and successes."

Scott (2002) said "together, we created a force field by asking the questions, by saying the words out loud. Things happen as a result of those conversations" (p. 9). Susan summarized another impact on professional practice – the idea of collaborative learning as follows:

“For me, the whole project is about communication – honest, respectful conversation. We had a specific focus to discuss change, but how we did that – honest, respectful, open was rewarding and positive. That’s a model I use in other situations. I think it’s about having a real, open, honest dialogue. I say dialogue instead of discussion – focusing that her opinion coming into it is on equal footing. I’m not there to tell her what to do – but the two of us are there together to solve it. She brings her info, I bring my info, and we collaboratively work out a plan”.

Bohm (1996) describes a possible result of dialogue – creating something new together.

For example, consider a dialogue. In such a dialogue, when one person says something, the other person does not in general respond with exactly the same meaning as that seen by the first person. Rather, the meanings are only *similar* and not identical. Thus, when the second person replies the first person sees a *difference* between what he meant to say and what the other person understood. On considering this difference, he may then be able to see something new, which is relevant both to his own views and to those of the other person. And so it can go back and forth, with the continual emergence of a new content that is common to both participants. Thus, in a dialogue, each person does not attempt to *make common* certain ideas or items of information that are already known to him. Rather, it may be said that the two people are making something *in common*, i.e., creating something new together. (p. 2)

Joan describes her perception of the collaborative learning experience as follows. *“Sometimes the end result of our discussions was such a combination of all of us. I think without the group we individually knew that, but may not have taken the time to consider it in that way. The result was something different, something we probably wouldn’t have come up with without the group”.* Bruffee (1993) describes this aspect of collaborative learning as follows:

Collaborative learning assumes that knowledge is a consensus among the members of a community of knowledgeable peers –

something people construct by talking together and reaching agreement. Collaborative learning is a reacculturative process that helps (students) become members of knowledge communities whose common property is different from the common property of the knowledge communities they already belong to. (p. 3)

4.4e Theme 5: Safe and understanding environment

For me, the whole project is about communication – honest, respectful conversation. We had a specific focus to discuss change, but how we did that – honest, respectful, open was rewarding and positive. Together we created a safe and understanding environment where we could learn about ourselves and others in the group. It is a model that I can use in other situations.

John, Group Participant

The theme “Safe and Understanding Environment” came from a group member’s expression of the interactions among group members and how that created an environment for understanding change – both from a personal and change agent point of view. The importance of this type of environment also extended from interactions in the collaborative learning group to others that group member’s interacted with daily. Frequently the group’s dialogue focused on their relationships with others and the kind of environment they tried to create to facilitate relationship building, which they viewed as a building block to being an effective change agent.

John described it as:

“the relationships we have with the District Managers is a real key to our success. If you don’t have a good working relationship – if they don’t respect your credibility and trust you to be open and honest- you won’t be very effective at helping them understand change, or any other thing else you’re trying to discuss.”

Joan, described a successful dialogue she had participated in with a group of managers as "*bottom line, there was a lot of open, honest conversation by all of us. I don't think we would have had any where near as positive of a result without it.*"

Marsick (1990) describes the conditions needed to discuss difficult and complex issues. "Resistance to delve into difficult issues unless the right conditions are created. Ideally, these conditions include a climate of trust, strict confidentiality, respect, active listening, equality of participation, and an ability to help people examine their behavior as separate from who they are and to understand their capability to change" (p. 38). Marsick further states that a "climate must be fostered that allows participants to examine beliefs, practices, and norms" (p. 45). Mary in describing how the environment allowed her to express and deal with her own concerns said "*we have the ability to get beyond our own fears quickly because of how supportive we are of each other.*"

The perception each individual has of his or her role in the group – the feeling of power or powerless and how that impacts a participant's feelings of being a fully accepted, equal member - plays an important part. Participant experiences highlight the importance for each person to feel accepted, on his or her own terms, as well as the need for "equality" among group members. Mary described the issue of power related to her ability to influence change in the following example. *Sometimes in meetings with some of the decision makers there is such hesitancy for people to give their input freely. There is a real block.*

I'm not sure why, but at times there is a room full of yes people when there are issues that need to be raised. Some of it is history – the way we've always done it, and some of it is the way the group operates. There isn't any opportunity. There's no dialogue like we have here." Imel (1996) asserts that "clearly, an important issue is how to deal with conflict and attend to power relations in groups" (p. 19).

The literature primarily focuses in two related areas: humanistic psychology, which deals primarily with maintenance of the group, and education, which traditionally focuses on how a group deals with a certain task. The role and authority in collaborative learning situations is a blending of a need to focus both on relationships and group maintenance, as well as on individual group learning.

Peters and Armstrong (1998) state, "...the unequal distribution of power and authority in a group can profoundly influence the direction of decision making and knowledge construction" (p. 6). Bohm, et al. discussed a different dimension of the power issue, the various roles that people adopt: "Some people adopt the dominant role, some adopt the role of the weak powerless person who can be dominated. They sort of work together, with each other. Those "roles", which are really based on assumptions and opinions, will also interfere with the operation of dialogue" (1991, p. 6). Senge (1990) further describes the roles individuals take that block collaborative learning and the reaching of shared meaning as "defensive routines" (p. 253).

Several participants in our group referred to the impact of process on power. An important focus of collaborative learning is the experience described as “above looking down at the process”. Yalom (1995) describes a potential benefit to this attention to process, stating that “a social structure’s open investigation of its own structure and process leads to power equalization – that is, a flattening of the hierarchical pyramid” (p. 138). Bruffee’s (1993) description of collaborative learning as bringing “to the surface the relationship between the authority of knowledge and the authority of teachers. By challenging the traditional, foundational understanding of the authority of knowledge, collaborative learning helps college and university teachers begin thinking in quite a different way about what it means to teach” (p. 7). This is also applicable to organizations.

Friedman (1992) describes the equality of group members in this way. “The questioner is just as important as the answerer...a wise person is not a fount of knowledge. On the contrary, he or she is helpless until someone asks a question great enough to evoke a profound response. A person does not have wisdom. Wisdom literally happens, comes to be, in the between” (p. 19). Jane expressed it in this way,

“one of the positive things about this collaborative learning adventure is that we all have been equal. We respect each other’s contribution. It seems like each group member, whether you’re the one sharing your problem or issue or the one listening and working to understand is equally important to the process. That’s a good feeling.”

Apps (1996) describes it simply as “everyone is a learner and everyone is a teacher” (p. 15).

Peters (1995) presents the importance of the questioner in a somewhat different light:

When questions are understood as speech acts with representations in the form of beliefs, wants, etc., the role of the questioner and his or her intent is critical in the collaborative learning experience. This focuses our attention not only on the collaborator’s intentional features, but the questioner’s intentional features as well. Moreover, when both are seen as collaborators who are intending to learn from their interactive experience, we have another level of intentionality of interest – the intent of the interaction, or collaboration itself. (p. 271)

Barb described this common intentionality as follows:

“In our group, we have a common ground – a common purpose of getting together to discuss change and our practice. We have a common goal. This helps me to be more open in my responses to questions, and want to ask questions of others in a way that will help me truly know more about them. Sometimes, when I think about the questions I’ve asked or even the ones I think and don’t ask, it also helps me to learn more about myself.”

Another result of the collaborative learning experience for group members was to provide an outlet for sharing, interacting with peers in a safe environment, and an opportunity for sensemaking around ambiguous areas. Mary explained it as:

“Sometimes what you really want to say is let’s get the negative out; let’s talk about it. As an HR professional that’s what I need sometimes. That’s where I need to be – I need to talk with peers – in a safe and understanding environment. Be able to say – here are my concerns and get it all out so you can feel better supporting it, or just listening and understanding other people and their concerns. Sometimes just saying your concerns to others helps you better understand what you’re thinking. The group can help you

clarify your thoughts. That’s why this group is so useful. I think we doubt a lot of things that are put in front of us, but we have a good sounding board.

The opportunity to communicate in this way has been linked by researchers to job satisfaction and performance (Buchholz, 1987). Satisfaction about self, job peers, management, and organizations were evaluated and results indicated that a person could be satisfied with all of these and still not perform well. The breakthrough came when satisfaction was correlated to communication.

Buchholz (1987) reports that “from this research it was concluded that employees who were satisfied and talked about it performed the best. Employees who were dissatisfied and didn’t talk about it performed the worst. Even people who may not be fully satisfied, but have an environment where they can communicate about their dissatisfaction perform better than those who may be satisfied but are in a climate lacking open communication” (p. 71).

Another outcome of a positive, open environment was an openness to be challenged. Jane described it in this way:

“It is also important that we challenged each other in a caring way – to dig a little bit deeper, look what we did and what we were thinking and uncover the assumptions that were in play. It also helped me to think more creatively, the challenging conversations cause me to think more about some of the issues. But that wouldn’t have happened without the trust we have with each other”.

Scott (2002) uses the term “fierce conversations “. She defines fierce as “not meaning menacing or cruel, but fierce as robust, intense, strong, powerful, passionate, eager, unbridled, uncurbed, untamed. A fierce conversation is one in

which we come out from behind ourselves into the conversation and make it real"

(p. 7).

CHAPTER 5

Reflections and Implications for Practitioners

5.1 Overview

What does this research mean for us as participants in and facilitators of collaborative learning? How might participating in a workplace collaborative learning group affect professional practice? What would a model for using collaborative learning to inform our practice look like? Although this is a single piece of research, it provides useful information to organizational change agents, particularly those in the human resource profession.

The themes which emerged from the interviews and meeting transcripts paint a picture of what the experience of organizational change is like for six human resource professionals charged with facilitating that change. They also paint a picture of the experience of participating in a collaborative learning group and its impact on the participant's professional practice. Collaborative learning can serve as a solid bridge to help us better understand each other and learn creatively and actively together, and, as a result, improve our ability to support an organization's goals.

This research provides insight in three areas: 1) the experience of human resource professionals as change agents, 2) the impact of participating in a collaborative learning group on members' professional practice, and 3) a model for using collaborative learning to inform the practice of a human resource change agent.

5.2 *The Experience as a Change Agent*

As described in earlier chapters, change is costly for organizations to implement, both in terms of real dollars and the emotional well being of employees. The number of change efforts that are successfully implemented to reach the desired objective is extremely low. The toll of ineffectively and inefficiently implemented change can be costly to the organization and to its employees resulting in reduced profits and employee dissatisfaction and burnout.

Participants in our group take their role as an organizational change agent seriously. They recognize that as human resource managers they have a unique relationship and opportunity to influence change. They daily interact with all levels of the organization – from upper management to store-level hourly employees. They are in a position to serve as a strong bridge between organizational objectives and facilitating understanding of organizational goals at the frontlines. A key to maximizing this valuable resource is to identify methods through which the human resource professional can understand and manage his or her own reaction to change and thus be better positioned to facilitate change in others.

The experience of a change agent as described by the participants was both similar and dissimilar with the role of change agent as it is described in the literature. As Ulrich (1997) notes, successful human resource change agents can "replace resistance with resolve, planning with results, and fear of change with excitement about its possibilities" (p. 152). A key factor to successful

implementation of change is taking time to ensure that individuals charged with leading change have the tools and opportunity to first understand their own feelings, thinking, and behavior toward the proposed change.

Ulrich (1997) and Kotter (1996) present specific models for implementing change. Both approaches include steps like identifying individuals who will be involved in leading the change, mobilizing their commitment, and creating a shared understanding of the need for change. The importance of understanding one’s own personal reaction to a change being implemented is not fully addressed. There is little description of how to facilitate this critical first step.

While much of the focus of models presented in the literature concerns business results, (which was also identified as one of the five themes deriving from participant protocols, “Results – the rubber meets the road”), the other four themes further describe the process, environment, and relationship needed to facilitate change. This finding seems to indicate that we are missing an opportunity to better understand and improve how human resource change agents go about preparing themselves to facilitate change.

Another important aspect of the role of change agent, which is also one of the five themes mentioned, is that of “Struggles and frustrations – puts you in the weeds.” This theme also appears to capture another area that can be more fully explored; that is, the process change agents use to deal with their own struggles and frustrations. Human resource change agents that are better prepared, and

more satisfied with their own jobs and the company, are in a better position to facilitate change with others.

5.3 The Experience of Collaborative Learning

Although only one member of the group had participated in a collaborative learning group in the past, the group enthusiastically participated in the group meetings. Over time, the group practiced and to an extent became proficient in using dialogue to learn collaboratively. The dialogue topic was work-focused, primarily concerning organizational change. The group's dialogue fell into a pattern of dialoguing about organizational changes that were being implemented, their personal reaction to them, and strategies for managing the change for themselves and how to more effectively assist others to facilitate change for themselves. During the time between meetings, members would "try out" their learning and at the next meeting they would share results through dialoguing. For some of the members it was their first experience explicitly talking about the process of change and also of having a defined process, like dialogue, to guide the meeting. One indication of the group's value to members is that several of the group's members are requesting to re-vitalize the group. They miss the meetings and the opportunities they provided.

5.4 Facilitating Our Change-Focused Group

An informal approach to initiating dialogue was taken. Hamilton (1994) describes a five-stage developmental model for describing the progression of human interactions during the process of developing expertise with collaborative

learning. The stages are: 1) Learning rules, techniques, and strategies; 2) Applying what you have learned; 3) Developing competence; 4) Becoming proficient; and 5) Becoming an expert (p. 97-99). Using these stages as a reference, we likely hovered between stages 2 and 3 – “applying what you have learned” and “developing competence”. During the short period the group met, we did not consistently reach the “proficient” or “expert” stage in learning collaboratively. There was a conscious decision to keep the upfront “teaching” about collaborative learning and dialogue to a minimum and focus on learning through practice.

Brookfield (1990) discussed the need to “avoid guided discussions...to create meaning through a process of collaborative inquiry... and that after good discussions, participants leave with more questions raised than answered” (p. 90). Issacs (1993) states that “dialogue does require a facilitator initially, who can help set up this field of inquiry and who can embody its principles and intention” (p. 32).

Bohm (1996) in his description of dialogue in a corporate setting is most consistent with our group’s process.

The way we start a dialogue group is usually by talking about dialogue – talking it over, discussing why we’re doing it, what it means, and so forth... one thing I suggest is to have the dialogue. And you mustn’t worry too much whether you are or are not having dialogue – that’s one of the blocks. (p. 6)

Bohm continues, specifically addressing dialogue in a corporate setting.

As we said, you can also have a dialogue in a more limited way – perhaps with a purpose or goal in mind. It would be best to accept

the principle of letting it be open, because when you limit it, you are accepting assumptions on the basis of which you limit it – assumptions that may actually be getting in the way of free communication. So you are not looking at those assumptions. (p. 43)

He further describes a situation of dialogue in a corporate setting where there is a defined purpose, such as our group's focus on change as follows:

Naturally, that sort of dialogue will be limited – the people involved do have a definite purpose, which is limiting – but even so, it has considerable value. The principle is at least to get people to come to know each other's assumptions so they can listen to their assumptions and know what they are. Very often people get into problems where they don't really know what the other person's assumption is and they react according to what they think it is. That person then gets very puzzled and wonders what is he doing? He reacts, and it all gets very muddled. So it is valuable if they can at least get to realize each other's assumptions. (p. 43)

One of the primary issues relating to a collaborative learning group in the workplace is time – time for the meeting, time away from tasks. This requires a commitment on the part of participants and their managers. Too often, in the rush to "move things forward" or to "meet objectives," ample time is not provided to prepare employees involved for the task at hand. A collaborative learning group can help fill that void and provide a means for change agents to take time to reflect, and better understand themselves and others. Another, often overlooked, aspect of time is the difference in the pace of change and the pace of a relationship-focused approach. Frequently, businesses require that changes be implemented immediately and the schedule is on a "fast-track" for completion. Building and sustaining solid relationships is a pre-requisite for the effective understanding and assimilation of change. The participants in this research

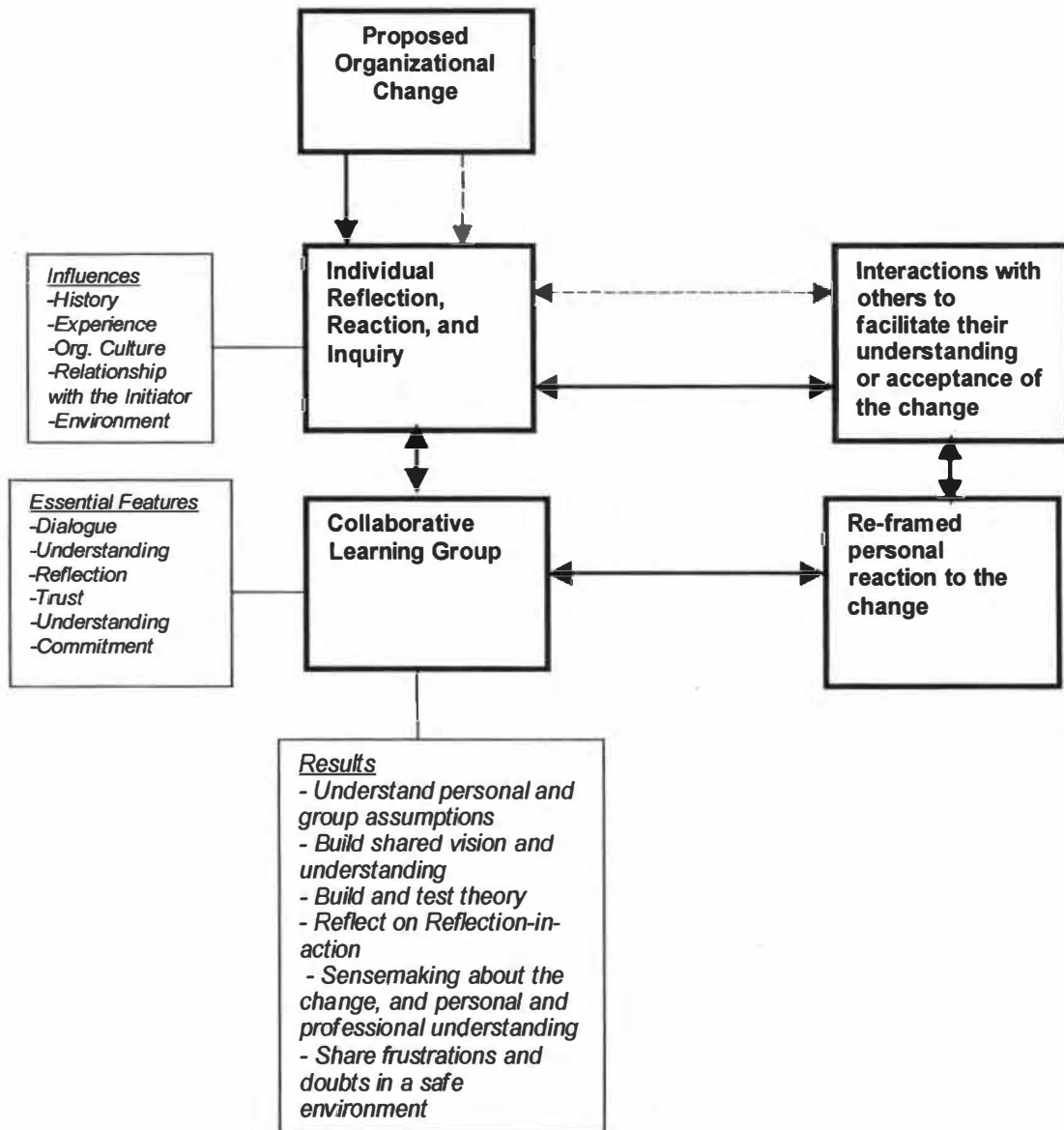
found that the relationship, credibility, and trust of the instigator of the change have an impact on its acceptance. Also, at least for the organizations participating in this study, the “soft-approach” and facilitating others to “get hold of their own change” requires solid relationships, which take time to build and foster.

5.5 A Model for Using Collaborative Learning to Facilitate Organizational Change

Collaborative learning has the potential to inform the practice of organizational change agents. By providing a forum to reflect and inquire in a systematic, open, trusting environment, human resource professionals may be better able to manage their own integration or assimilation of a proposed change. The uncovering of assumptions, shared vision, theory building and testing, sensemaking, and reflection result in a human resource professional who is better prepared to personally change, and assist others to facilitate change for him or herself. This opportunity to re-frame one’s personal reaction to a proposed change strengthens the interaction with others. Figure 1: *A Model for a Collaborative Learning Approach for Human Resource Change Agents*, presented on the following page, describes graphically how collaborative learning might inform and improve the practice of organizational change agents.

In most companies a proposed change is announced and immediately, at least in the case of human resource professionals in their role as organizational change agents, they begin interacting with the employees directly affected by the proposed change. Using this “traditional model” – which is depicted in Figure 1

A Model for a Collaborative Learning Approach for Human Resource Change Agents



Note:

————— A solid line designates the collaborative learning approach.

----- A dotted line designates the traditional two-step approach.

Figure 1: A Model for a Collaborative Learning Approach for Human Resource Change Agents

as a dotted line directly between the proposed change and the interaction with others to facilitate understanding or acceptance of the change - there is little opportunity for the human resource professional to reflect, understand his or her own feelings and assumptions, or to make sense of the change. As indicated in the figure, an individual's personal reaction to the change may be complex, influenced by experience, history, organizational culture, relationship with the initiator of the change, and the openness, trust, and respect in the environment. In both the traditional approach and the collaborative learning approach, an organizational change is announced and the human resource professional has an immediate, initial reaction to the change. The human resource professional reflects, reacts, and may inquire to clarify his or her understanding of the change. This initial reaction is influenced by the individual's prior experience with the organization and with change, the organizational culture and environment, and the individual's relationship with the initiator of the change – the trust and credibility the initiator of the change has previously built, and their life experiences, values, and assumptions. In the traditional approach, many times, human resource professionals immediately step into their role as organizational change agent and interact with others to help facilitate his or her understanding or acceptance of the change. There is often little time to process the change or as described in this study, “to get hold of my own change.”

The proposed collaborative learning approach model is designated in the model by a solid line. It includes a collaborative learning group, which provides

an opportunity for more fully exploring factors that influence reactions to change and to “re-frame” individual reactions prior to attempting to assist others to facilitate change. Through use of dialogue and reflection in a trusting and understanding environment, human resource professionals have the opportunity to understand personal and group assumptions; build a shared vision and understanding about the change; build and test theory; reflect on their reflection-in-action; engage in sensemaking about the change and improve personal and professional understanding; and share frustrations and doubts in a safe environment. The result is a re-framed personal reaction to the change, which influences the individual’s reflection, reaction, and inquiry – and the continuous cycle is repeated. Through engaging in the collaborative process, change agents are then better equipped to assist others to facilitate change if first they better understand their own reaction to it.

5.6 Implications for Practitioners

This section provides our “lessons learned” or what might be implications for practitioners – human resource change agents. As a result of participating in the collaborative learning group, areas were identified where a formal process of dialogue and reflection might inform one’s practice.

1. Dialogue and reflection can help identify one’s own barriers to change and relationships. To be effective in facilitating change in others you must first understand how your personal relationship, involvement, and understanding of a change can influence others, as well as personally assimilate the proposed change.
2. A collaborative learning group provides the team with an opportunity to talk with each other – not only about process – but also about the hows

and whys behind operational decisions. As a result there can be improved, shared understanding.

3. Dialogue and better appreciation of the kind of environment that facilitates collaborative learning can bring insight into how a safe and understanding environment fosters organizational change. The group members provided examples of how they used “tools” of collaborative learning like dialogue, deep listening, and questioning outside of the group to facilitate change in others, and for the interaction to also facilitate change in themselves.
4. The collaborative process of dialogue can help professionals to identify and articulate models and theories they are using to facilitate change and other work practices. It provides an opportunity to verbalize, dialogue about, develop and test theories in practice.
5. Participation in the group can help members in the identification of their own assumptions and allow a more meaningful dialogue to take place with others through better understanding the assumptions of others.
6. A collaborative learning group can be a venue for sharing concerns and opportunity to verbalize frustrations and doubts within a safe environment.
7. A collaborative learning group provides an opportunity for sensemaking about one’s own profession and organization. Through this experience the group developed a better understanding of informal models of practice, making explicit what might have been implicit.
8. Consistent, scheduled meetings help keep priority topics, like organizational change, a focus. Often other activities and competing priorities dilute the focus on organizational change. Setting aside time for experiences, such as a collaborative learning group, provide a process that can maintain the momentum and focus on organizational change.
9. The environment created by a collaborative experience demonstrates the support network of peers, and is particularly valuable for peers who share the same job responsibilities.
10. It is important to recognize the disconnect between the “corporate pace” of change and the “relationship pace” required to effectively facilitate change. It is a continual challenge to balance the organization’s need to move quickly to achieve objectives and the need to establish trusting, dialogic relationships that are required for successful implementation of change.

11. The collaborative learning experience can take place not only in the formal group, but also with those individuals with whom the human resource professional is facilitating change. This attentiveness to interact in a way that is sensitive to the needs of the individual is important. It is more than interacting in a way that suits you. It is taking the interaction to the next level and attempting to communicate in a way that is best suited to the other. Dialogue can assist in identifying the difference between your approach based on assumptions about the individual, and an approach that is truly more aligned with the individual's desires and needs.

5.7 Recommendations for Further Research

Organizational change and the facilitation of individual and organizational change are, and will continue to be, a focus of companies. Human resource professionals will continue to have increasingly focused responsibility to assist organizations in facilitating organizational change. Many times human resource professionals charged with facilitating change do not fully understand or support organizational objectives. It is in the organization's best interest to provide methods to more effectively prepare individuals they view as organizational change agents.

There were limitations to this research. This study was not designed to evaluate the effectiveness of participation in the collaborative learning group. A study could be designed to determine the effectiveness of the change in practice that resulted from participation in the group. Instead, this study provided a description of the experience as told by participants. There was no attempt to sort out any impact of factors other than participation in the collaborative learning group. Additionally, because of the schedules of group members, the group was only able to meet every two weeks. This potentially contributed to a lack of

continuity from meeting to meeting, and spending a significant portion of the following meeting catching up and renewing our practice of dialogue.

Phenomenological research, as described by Polkinghorne (1989),

“seeks understanding for its own sake and addresses the question *what?* Not *why?* Productive phenomenological research supplies a deeper and clearer understanding of what it is like for someone to experience something {in this case, the experience of being a change agent}. The researcher results amplify our understanding of these experiences...”(p. 58).

5.8 Closing Reflection

As Cunningham (1993) states, “a person who joins a group is significantly changed thereby. His (or her) relations with his fellow members alter both (the person and others)” (p. 14). This study helped me better understand my own reaction to change and also to better understand my professional practice. Each member brought their own experiences, values, attitudes, and assumptions to our group. It was meaningful to create the group experience with them. During our meetings, there were times of frustration, excitement, learning, laughter, fun, and somber moments of reflection.

Through participating in the experience I was able to see more clearly the possibilities that collaborative learning has at improving the experience of people in the workplace, as well as the potential it has to positively impact business results. My participation in the group led me to an increased understanding and acceptance of organizational change that I was involved in and allowed me to assist others to understand and integrate proposed changes. By uncovering my own personal assumptions about specific change efforts in my workplace,

through dialoguing with the group, I was better able to understand my fear and resistance toward the change. This better understanding of myself led me to reframe my thinking and approach to facilitating changes with others. There is one particular example of how the group helped me to re-frame my own reaction to an organizational. My company announced that several stores were going to be closed. Although I intellectually understood that these stores were not financially sound and that it was necessary for the company to make difficult fiscal decisions to remain competitive, my initial reaction was negative and focused on the impact the store closing would have not only on the employees of the closed stores, but also on the employees of our other stores, and the morale of managers and store employees. I came to our collaborative group meeting that day quite stressed and dreading to take the first step, which was talking with District Managers about the proposed changes. Through the process of first sharing my frustration, and then dialoguing with the group, I was able to identify that a large part of my apprehension stemmed from my assumption that District Managers would not fully appreciate the bigger picture and might take a narrow view of the impact of the decision on their own district, and that their reaction would be negative and have long term impacts on the general working environment. Talking through my frustrations and more clearly understanding my apprehension helped me to develop a more effective communication plan. I was also more fully aware that if my assumptions had such an impact on my reaction, so would the assumptions of each of the individuals involved. The

communication with each of the District Managers was much more dialogic, allowing time and opportunity for us to talk openly, allowing us to come to a stronger shared understanding of the company direction, and to better understand each other’s assumptions and reactions. As a result of the collaborative experience I was able to “work through” my initial personal reaction and develop a more positive and inclusive approach for communicating with others. It did not lessen the intensity and sadness at closing stores and the impact on lives of the employees involved, but it did help to carry out the process more effectively and interact with the individuals involved in a way that also was potentially more effective for everyone.

I came away from the study with a renewed commitment to the importance of collaborative approaches, and the importance of attending to the person and clearly understanding another person’s experience as fully as possible. My desire is that I continue to learn about learning – whether it is collaborative, continuous, through the lived experience, organizational, or personal, it is an important continual, complex process in the workplace.

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Appendices

Appendix A – Handout for Collaborative Group

Collaborative Learning: When two or more people collaborate, each collaborator contributes something to the effort, and the parties jointly contribute something to the effort. There are individual contributions, and there is a group contribution. In a collaborative learning experience individuals bring their knowledge and their actions to the table, and as members of the group, individuals contribute their collective knowledge and actions to the experience. In a collaborative learning experience, individuals learn and the group learns. The group learning isn't simply the sum of the individual learning experiences, however, it is both more than and other than the individual experiences. The knowledge developed is other than the sum of individual member's knowledge because it is jointly constructed knowledge.

Dialogue: The object of a dialogue is not to analyze things, or to win an argument, or to exchange opinions. Rather, it is to suspend your opinions and to look at the opinions – to listen to everybody's opinions, to suspend them, and to see what all that means. In dialogue a group of people can explore the individual and collective presuppositions, ideas, beliefs and feelings that subtly control their interactions. It can allow us to observe how hidden values and intentions can control our behavior.

Initial Guidelines for Dialogue

- Suspend assumptions and certainties
- Listen to your listening
- Slow down the inquiry
- Be aware of thought
- Objective is not always to agree
- Respect each other

Inquiry and Reflection: A process by which a group digs deeply into matters that concern them, creating breakthroughs in the team's ability to solve problems. One key to this is learning how to ask questions that lead to new levels of understanding and accelerate the group's collective thinking.

Listening: Moving beyond active listening skills to develop the group member's capacity to stay present and open to meaning that is being expressed, either explicitly or implicitly, at both the individual and group level.

Suspension of Judgment: By more clearly understanding a model of human communication and thinking, group member's can become more sensitive to how our normal mental processes affect our ability to stay open to new and alternative perspectives on reality.

Assumption Identification: Using dialogue, group members learn to become aware of their own and other's assumptions as a way to discover common ground, as well as incoherence in the group's collective thinking, which may cause undesirable outcomes or results.

- Relax and quiet your mind
- Listen without criticizing
- Listen with a sense of anticipation and wonder
- Say, “help me to understand”... or “tell me more about that”
- Ask clarifying questions

The very premise that there are multiple valid points of view, including one's own, establishes a foundation for *interdependence*.

Being listened to and understood builds *trust* and willingness to subordinate one's individual interest to that of team accomplishment.

Teams generate identification for its members. Teams that generate identity among its members through *mutual understanding* of and appreciation for differences, rather than enforced agreement, are stronger.

Unpacking *assumptions* and being willing to reveal and explore one's own and each other's mind-models is fundamental to effective teamwork.

	Debate/Discussion	Dialogue
Intent	<p>Prove a point; win-lose</p> <p>Come to some sort of closure – make a decision, identify a problem</p>	<p>Exploration, discovery, and insight.</p> <p>Along that path, the group may in fact sometimes come to a meeting of the minds and reach some agreement – but that isn't the primary purpose in coming together.</p> <p>Shared purpose; shared meaning.</p>
Inquiry vs. Advocacy	<p>Dictating; Testing; Asserting; Explaining; Interrogating</p>	<p>Clarifying; Interviewing; Suspension of assumptions; Balances advocacy and inquiry.</p>
Reflection	<p>Not listening to self and others; hearing what you expect others to say</p>	<p>Becoming more aware of your own thinking and reasoning.</p>

References:

J. Peters (1998); D. Bohm (1996); D. Flick (1998)

Appendix B – Change Management Materials Used by Organizations in Group

Managing Change

*No matter how positive the change
No matter how competent people are
No matter how committed people are
No matter how resilient people are
No matter how proactive people are.....*

*Change affects us mentally, emotionally, behaviorally....
Therefore, we must address it.*

Introduction:

- Leaders & Managers must execute well for change to be effective.
- Goal: Minimize the length & depth of performance dip.
- Recognize the change will result in mental, emotional, and behavioral change.

The Change Cycle

LOSS

Effects

- Interrupts
- Paralyzes
- "What does this mean for me?"

Successful

- "I need time to absorb"
- "I'm scared"
- "I need to know more about how it effects me"

Struggling

- Denial of what is happening

Change Leadership Behaviors

- Communicate what's been said again, and again, and again
- Expect silence
- Provide forums for asking questions
- "Rule of seven"
- Talk about milestones and next steps to the extent you know them.

DOUBT

Effect

- Resist prospect of change because they "don't get it"
- Question the viability of the change
- More rumblings – some may be loud
- Like a jigsaw puzzle without the box cover

Successful

- "Trying to get it"
- "Hard to understand, it's not clear to me"

Change Leadership Behavior

- Should expect skepticism
- Acknowledge how others feel
- Clarify expectations for the here and now
- Stay focused on the things that can be controlled

DISCOMFORT

Effects

- Low morale
- Low productivity
- High confusion
- "Change doesn't seem to be working"

Successful

- "Is this project viable?"
- "I hope I have what it takes"
- "Need a break"

Struggling

- "Whatever"
- "Completely overwhelming"
- "Can't do it"

Change Leadership Behavior

- Tight management (not micromanagement)
- Clearly set priorities
- Help them work on the pieces that are clear

DANGER ZONE

DISCOVERY

- Feelings of Anticipation
- Thoughts are Creative
- Behavior is Energized

UNDERSTANDING

- Feelings of Confidence
- Thoughts are Pragmatic
- Behavior is Productive

INTEGRATION

- Feelings of Satisfaction
- Thoughts are Focused
- Behavior is Generous

The Change Cycle



Interchange International (1991). Change Cycle Series

Vita

Dorothy W. Roberts was born in Bristol, Virginia and graduated from Bristol, Virginia High School. From there, she attended Virginia Intermont College, receiving an A.A. degree in Education. Later she attended The University of Tennessee in Knoxville, receiving a B.S. degree in Education and an M.S. degree in Adult Education. She has been enrolled in the Collaborative Learning Program in the College of Education and will earn a Doctor of Education degree in 2004.

Dorothy has had a twenty-plus year career in human resources and management, and has worked for not-for-profit, government, and private sectors.

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