Practitioner's Corner
In Search of Organizational Transformation

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A favorite line from *The King and I* is when the King of Siam, faced with something he did not understand, would tell the English woman, Anna, that it was *a puzzlement.* As the story unfolds, Anna, who the King had retained to educate his many children, contributed to the King's education, and the King contributed to hers. The differences in their perspectives are striking as they struggled to understand and be understood. Efforts toward organizational transformation easily fit this same dilemma. Some things are puzzlements, and the struggle to understand and be understood was a key insight in a recent research project on transformation (Norbutus, 2007).

The transformation under investigation was a reorganization in which I participated. It was identified by one participant as the "most transformational activity" he had seen while in that organization—a sentiment echoed by others. A comment from a research advisor was that each participant in the reorganization seemed to have completely different experience of the event. In addition to the diverse perspectives of the nine participants interviewed was the added complexity that the event was viewed for the research from two different perspectives to see if either paradigm had more explanatory power for the practitioner. Thus, what follows is a brief description of the reorganization, the two perspectives that were used, the results of the research, and implications for practitioners.

The reorganization came about in a participative way through the efforts of the senior executive and many organizational members involving a series of meetings and conversations. The basic reorganization added two major subunits to address organizational capability development as well as assessment of the newly developed capabilities. The senior executive announced the reorganization to all members in a series of "all-hands" meetings to acknowledge the change, assure everyone they and the mission would not be harmed by the reorganization, and to give an overview of the change. The change was implemented over months with meetings scheduled with the senior executive to monitor the progress. The senior executive left the organization about 1 year after beginning the reorganization process at the end of his normal 2-year tour of duty.

The first perspective that was used to examine the transformation was *episodic organizational change*—a systems-based macroperspective of organizational change where a change agent plans a specific change that is normally dramatic and infrequent. The metaphor for episodic organizational change is spatial–consistent of inertial organizations that typically go through infrequent, intentional, and discontinuous organizational change. An episodic change is seen as resolving a misalignment between growing environmental demands and an inertial deep structure. The typical change process is reflected in the three-stage change model of the unfreeze–move–refreeze sequence of activity. The need for leaders to unfreeze the organization was identified early in the change literature because stable human behavior was based on a generally stable situation with significant forces driving and restraining change. For change to occur, the force fields had to be altered in such a way that a counterforce did not emerge to drive the system back to preexisting equilibrium. From an episodic organizational change perspective, organizational transformation is viewed at a macrolevel with key concepts being "inertia, deep structure of interrelated parts, triggering, replacement and substitution, discontinuity, revolution" (Weick & Quinn, 1999, p. 366). It is a macrolevel view with the organization as the unit to be changed. By understanding the system, it is assumed the change agent/leader will be able to manipulate the system for the outcomes desired. For example, change agents are advised to sell the fancy corporate headquarters, change the reward system for top managers, and/or force honest discussion at meetings. Underlying this view is a Newtonian-based quest for predictability.

The second perspective that was used in the research was *continuous organizational change*—a process-based microperspective where organizational change is constant and can accumulate into significant transformational change over time. The basic metaphor of continuous change is temporal and acknowledges emergent and self-organizing aspects of organizing. From this view, change is happening all the time. It is constant, cumulative, and evolving. Organizational variation is not an abrupt or discrete event, nor is it discontinuous; instead, it is a series of ongoing and situated accommodations and adjustments to contextual factors. Over time, they may be sufficient for fundamental changes to be achieved. This is not deliberate planned change but variations in practice that create conditions for breakdowns, unanticipated outcomes, and innovations which are met with more variations. In this conceptualization, there is no guiding, in-control leader/change agent, no predictive process of change, nor a system that is to be changed (Stacey, 2007). Instead of an assumption of misalignment, there are changing individual, group, organizational, and societal patterns of interaction that produce the identities of the participants as they participate together (Stacey, 2003). Continuous organizational change views organizational transformation from a microlevel view. Local processes and emerging patterns are the focus in this process–relational perspective. Key concepts are "recurrent interactions, shifting task authority, response repertoires, emergent patterns, improvisation, translation, [and] learning" (Weick & Quinn, 1999, p. 366). Change is seen as part of the ongoing process of organizing, and equilibrium is not assumed. The influence process is of considerable interest for when one makes a gesture such as a suggestion, demand, or simply a furrowed brow. The meaning of that gesture is not known until the response is provided by another. An example is the growl of a dog. The meaning of the growl is only known when the response of the other dog occurs—does the second dog growl or cower? The entire act of gesture and response is the influence process which iterates. This social process has the potential for either maintaining the status quo or transformation (Stacey, 2003). Transformation or the potential for transformation is constantly emerging as unexpected conditions and actors interact

with organizational members who "innovate, improvise, and adjust their work routines over time" (Orlikowski, 1996, p. 63).

The results of the research included several comparisons between the two perspectives to help explain the experience of the participants, the usefulness of the analytic framework, and the intervention theory used. Contrary to the episodic perspective, participants talked about earlier reorganizations that always modified what had been before so were not discontinuous; they emerged from what was there. Organizations were not characterized or experienced as systems. People went to meetings, had conversations, made decisions about the reorganization in the midst of everything else they were doing to carry on the mission. In some respects, the change was intentional in that it was recognized that something needed to change. However, how the change was experienced by the participants fit the nonprescriptive continuous change metaphor more consistently. No one indicated they knew ahead of time what the change would look like. Instead, it was experienced as emergent. For example, a senior executive stated explicitly that he did not know he was asking for reorganization until, after a series of meetings, he realized that was what would give him a way to address some of the shortfalls identified by his colleagues. An example of the self-organizing aspect was when one participant/researcher chose to involve himself in conversations about reorganization, then chose to develop his own option, then chose to challenge a facilitator to get with the program, then chose to collaborate with other participants. This is self-organizing behavior because this participant/researcher made all this effort without direction from an authority figure (which I might add, he has done many times before and since). Another participant made a statement about the organization changing almost instantly after the reorganization was set in motion. He had earlier said that organizations were very hard to change. But, right in the interview, he identified an example for himself and, upon reflection, realized that the next change was almost instantaneous.

A second research result was that though the analytic framework for episodic change indicates change would be dramatic, the experience of the reorganization was not noted as dramatic by participants. One participant related that an organizational transformation was so unremarkable that it had gone unnoticed until pointed out to the senior executive and that, in sum, the result of that particular effort was transformational. The senior executive had to think about it before he realized the statement was true; it was not a dramatic transformation but a transformation none the less.

Third, the organizational change did have aspects of intention from several agents who intended a change. The reorganization had elements of progress but also elements that did not progress because they were not implemented. The change was not a predefined goal as would be expected with episodic change. The episodic model identifies change to be linear and progressive, following predictable steps. However, the experience of change was very different. Instead, according to many interviewees, the change process was a back-and-forth, give-and-take experience that had to balance the interests of all the stakeholders. Special mention was made of the accommodations made to get the agreement of an important group. Not all the organizational changes experienced were progressive as one in particular was identified as a step backward. Although there were factors influencing the change from funding groups and other stakeholders, they did not intervene. This change was developed by the membership and shared with leadership and other stakeholders. This experience fits well the continuous change model. In this perspective, the change agent would be looking for cyclical patterns instead of linear ones. In this change experience, continuous iterations of reorganizations were found. The change was a

redirection of what was already under way. An earlier change had not been successful, and there is no end in sight for further reorganizations.

An additional interesting result evolved from the coding done on the interviews. Coding from the continuous organizational change perspective, though conducted on exactly the same text, was much different from the episodic change perspective. During the coding of episodic organizational change, it was difficult to find codes that corresponded with the text. With continuous change, there were very often multiple and interrelated implications to code. This is reflected in the total codes found for each perspective. There were 372 coded passages for episodic organizational change and, using exactly the same text, 1,638 coded passages for continuous organizational change (over four times more coding was done using the continuous change perspective). This suggests that although the popular press has flooded the market with predictive, episodic change models, the experience of those participating in a transformative organizational change actually experience continuous change. They were much more aware of the day to day processes that were occurring as the transformation progressed as opposed to identifying the macrolevel steps of the overall process. And, it was not just that the interviewees ignored the big steps. One participant, trained to recognize the big steps, railed against the fact that the process used for the reorganization did not follow anything he had expected from his training. Episodic change is conceptualized at the macrolevel, and continuous change is conceptualized at the microlevel, so a significant difference in the coding numbers would be expected. Yet, with only nine participants, no statistically significant evaluation of the data is possible.

Overall, exploring the process of organizational transformation interviewees in this study found their experience better fits the continuous organizational change perspective. This perspective describes how change comes about and how the status quo is sustained. It explains the self-help behaviors seen in some executives. It explains the unfolding of the organizational transformation and why some see it as a transformation and others do not. The episodic model does not explain or include the essential interactive nature of how organizational change occurs and, because of its systems basis, does not have a way to account for transformational/unexpected outcomes. The continuous change model explains how organizational change happens from a microperspective, continuously through interactions which can be applied synergistically in specific situations with insights from the episodic change model when there is a need for the structure and direction inherent to the episodic model of intentional, planned change.

The implications of this study suggest that continuous change provides a more informed story of how change is experienced. When organizational change/transformation is not known in advance, this perspective can help inform the creation of change through a continuous collaborative process. For example, using the continuous change perspective allowed me to identify conversations that maintained the status quo such as the request by a senior executive to share resources and the response of inaction that maintained the status quo. There is no need to invoke a made up construct of deep structure. Conversations also allowed for the emergence of transformation through perpetuation of new patterns. For example, in one conversation, a participant was challenged to take the initiative to make changes (a gesture); this challenge motivated him to take on the reorganization effort which was a critical choice in the emergence of this organizational transformation.

In addition, an organization is not a monolithic thing that changes. For example, viewing the reorganization as a transformation was in the eye of the beholder with everyone having a

different perspective. Some interviewees said it was a transformation, some said it still had transformational potential, and some did not think it was transformational at all. Thus, although an organizational change occurred, did the entire organization as a monolithic thing change? Although transformation is not knowable in advance, leaders can identify patterns and, by doing so, influence pattern momentum. For example, from the macroview, transformation is historical. From a microview of continuous change, everyone has a different perspective. Because one is working at the microlevel, it is possible to identify transformational patterns along the way instead of waiting for historical validation.

Conversations are the heart of transformation. This opens the door to many relevant questions such as: what kind of gestures would get desired responses? Does it make sense to assume someone can control an organization? Does it make sense to assume someone can control another? Is it even appropriate to try? What are appropriate means of influence? Should an organization in the messy business of transformation focus on efficiency or effectiveness? How does one set conditions that would make transformation more likely? What are the consequences of the transformation having negative consequences? What is the implication for risk management? Are policies, processes, and rewards encouraging transformation? What are the characteristics of being stuck in a status quo conversation? Many of these questions can only be answered by those connected in their specific social web of organization.

Although the activities of leaders and managers are frequently viewed as separate, in continuous change perspective, the various activities are not separated. Regardless of what one is doing in relating to another, there is a possibility that something new will emerge from the conversation which explains the emergence of creativity, novelty, and innovation.

Thus, it is important in times of change for leaders to place primary emphasis on communication; it is through communication that the transformation moves forward. Specifically, those aspiring to lead can do so more effectively by becoming more conscious of their gestures and the responses they get to their gestures. Realizing that whatever the response, it is a gesture back to them (including no response), underscores the importance of focusing on this human dynamic. It is only through the response that the meaning of the gesture can be determined. Since everyone can make gestures relevant to a transformation, everyone is potentially a leader. A senior executive with position power, due to this power differential, will likely have more receptive people listening and responding than an entry level worker. But, even those commonly ignored can still make gestures that can get reinforced and eventually change patterns with more and more people involved in the conversation. For example, this was seen clearly in the research narratives. One participant/researcher with no positional authority was a key leader in the reorganization.

In sum, from a continuous change perspective, the leadership role moves from person to person as the conversation flows, resulting in patterns that maintain or transform their organization. Transformation is thus a collective process, cannot be determined in advance, and may have positive and/or negative components depending on the situation and shared leadership. Leadership is shown by participating in conversation (through gestures and responses) with implicit or explicit acknowledgement of power differentials by the people involved. Paying attention to the conversations, the patterns that are emerging from the conversations, and pointing out these patterns to then iteratively inform the conversation is the leadership imperative from this perspective.

In conclusion, continuous change has greater explanatory power to help the understanding of the experience of the reorganization. The experience was not about someone

being in control and changing the organization. Quite the contrary, this organizational transformation was experienced as people engaging in conversation. A senior executive with the greatest power differential described this organizational change as highly collaborative. When enough people agreed, he agreed; in many instances, that became the new way things were done. There were also times when he asked that something be done, and it was not. This is also explained by the continuous change perspective as informed by complex responsive processes of relating (Stacey, Griffin, & Shaw, 2000). This reorganization was a messy business with patterns of social agreement emerging on an ongoing basis. As one participant noted, once the reorganization was disseminated, it immediately changed. The conversations continued as they are still doing today. This research could become part of the conversation. It is a gesture to which others can determine their response as was the case between the King and Anna.

About the Author

Dr. Diane K. Norbutus earned her Ph.D. in organizational leadership from Regent University and is currently working for the U.S. government as a transformationalist. Her interests are in leadership, transformation, and application of complex responsive processes of relating. She has also recently written a paper for the Mastering Wicked Problems conference (please contact her for a copy of this paper).
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