Abstract

The role of language, metaphors and stories in an organizational context is discussed from a social constructionist standpoint. Organizations develop "languages" that mirror patterns of unique vocabulary that design practice. A well-placed metaphor has the power to redirect and focus the energy of the people within an organization. Stories often underlie the implicit assumptions within the workplace community. With translation, language, metaphors, and stories are used as catalysts for making sense of the world experienced. Particularly, business organizations and academia are eager to refer to the use of these tools in learning and cultural instrumentation. Leaders of organizations seek to directly influence and effect the development of their organization based on the language they use and the pictures of hope or inspiration they create through the conscious use of these tools. The conscious use of these socially constructed components serve a vital function in setting the stage for change processes to be more effective and long lasting.

Introduction

How do we define the history of immigration to the United States today? Twenty years ago, we were taught to think of this country as a "melting pot" for immigrants, where each culture’s unique characteristics somehow blended together to create a homogenous ethnic stew. More recently, students encounter the image of the "salad bowl," a metaphor that welcomes and retains the unique qualities and characteristics of every cultural "new-comer," yet still manages to image the U.S. as a unified entity. A deceptively simple shift, and yet what an effect it has upon the way we perceive ourselves as a nation and society.
for inspiring positive change in organizations. Fundamentally, social construction maintains that organizations are dynamic, living human constructions whose fate is a reflection and extension of the relationships of the people within a system (the community) and the language that they intentionally create within the context of that system. According to Kenneth Gergen (1999), a founding thought leader in the field of social construction, “languages of description and explanation are generated within human relationships—with each other and the world” (p. 60). An example of developments in strength-based, constructionist thought and methodology, Appreciative Inquiry (AI), co-designed by David Cooperrider and associates at Case Western Reserve University, is a powerful change process that consciously uses language, image, and storytelling to transform organizational structure and relationships. Also steeped in the belief that organizations are dynamic in nature, Appreciative Inquiry seeks to locate and illuminate the most powerful collective stories of “organizational excellence” in order to dream and design a new affirmative future. The process of the inquiry itself (which basically involves whole system dialogue, imaging, and storytelling) generates an energy that encourages people to change rapidly and positively in relation to each other. As a result, entire organizations and communities are radically transformed.

At a fundamental level, social construction and its practical applications demonstrate the power of image and language to influence and affect change in organizations. This article explores the use of words and language, metaphors, and stories—all areas for co-constructing new organizational forms and understandings. Within each area, three learning dimensions influence the direction and intensity of the learning and change that takes place: the choice of the content, the context in which the relational image is created, and the community that influences its ultimate proliferation or extinction.

Words and Language--Building Blocks for Imaging a New Future

Words are a rich and complex set of interrelated symbols “surrounded” by emotional meanings and understandings. Over time, a group’s particular vocabulary is collectively and collaboratively constructed, taking on meaning and significance to those utilizing the words. From an ethnolinguistic perspective, these vocabularies ultimately have evolved into the multitude of languages we experience throughout the world. Since language cannot be separated from the culture that creates and operates it, any translation can only hope to achieve a close approximation, never the exact same meaning.

Organizations also develop “languages” that mirror this pattern—that is to say, each organization’s culture constructs a unique vocabulary that defies exact translation as we move into other organizations or areas of practice. To make this point, Gergen (2001) uses an example from the world of sports: “To illustrate, the terms strike, inning, and home run gain their meaning from within the practices that constitute the game of baseball. One can be quite accurate in assessing whether a home run has occurred within the practice of the game, but outside the ballpark, the term functions only metaphorically—if at all. More broadly put, this is to say that language is world constituting; it assists in generating and/or sustaining certain forms of cultural practice” (p. 806).

The use of language, metaphor, and stories are all aids for co-constructing new
organizational forms and understandings in the workplace. As noted above, the conscious development of an organization's language and methods for conveying that language influence the direction and fate of the organization's growth and sustainability. The language used is an attempt to provide collective images of a positive and hopeful future in a context that expands perception and engagement in the proposed new form and understanding. Examples include the storytelling techniques of CEOs as an organization's chief spokesperson, a branding campaign for interfacing with external customers and stakeholders, or an effort to enroll organizational members in the design of a process.

Consciously and unconsciously leaders directly influence and affect the development of their organization based on the language they use and pictures of hope and inspiration they create through the conscious use of words, metaphors, and stories. As an influencing effort, the proposition of new language is only the beginning of the process. For the new language to become a collective language of hope and inspiration, others co-construct through acceptance, re-configuration, elaboration, and efforts to understand. What is offered is not always what the words become. The meanings that arise, according to Peter Manning (1977), have persistence in any organization and have certain “unique” qualities. These unique and practical qualities give the organization the features that people practice as “norms” (p. 196). Meaning making is an exchange with opportunities for participants in the process to adjust, explain, and justify. The power to pass on these meanings is critical to sustaining or causing a shift in the “organizational story.” It is through meaning making that all members co-construct and participate in the design and attunement of the organizing efforts of the organization. Yet, most people don’t believe that they co-construct their organization or that they create their own workplace realities. And, as Peter Senge (1990) states in his book, The Fifth Discipline, in many organizations the belief that “we can’t create our own futures” is so great that it eludes acknowledgement, is in shadow (Johnson, 1991). Under these circumstances people lack the awareness that their “realizing experiences” orchestrate their understandings, creating their current realities (Senge, 1990, p.68). Therefore, they don’t see how they could possibly contribute to changing their reality, no less how they might intentionally create their own future.

Content, Context and Community

How does language construction evolve throughout an organization’s culture? Within an organization’s frame of reference (context), the language in use (content) reflects the current activities, goals, and needs of the people (community). New words, images, and metaphors arise as a result of perceived needs—internal (improved communications or business processes) and external (response to a new competitive threat). The extent to which the language remains in use is based on the language’s ability to satisfy these needs. Any language that is viewed by the community as useless or meaningless will ultimately be extinguished. For example, the use of language to internalize a goal may require the creation or extinction of a specific term, or possibly the invention of a term with a past, recognized meaning that contributes to the activation of new behaviors (Seiling, 2001, 3). More specifically, when calling for change in levels of involvement and

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collaboration, the organization may choose to use the word "member" instead of "employee." As a result of this shift, the term "employee" takes on a new or different meaning—someone who is less committed and/or not participatory at an energetic level, perhaps coming from a sense of distrust, entitlement or comfort with the status quo (Seiling, 1997, 10).

In contrast, by consciously using the term "member" to describe the participating relationship and emphasizing through explanations the appropriateness of the new term, the organization shifts its expectations. Member and membership invite "volunteerism"—contributing because you want to instead of because you must. A member values their membership in their organization and makes choices to be involved at a higher level of participation and collaboration.

As a result of incorporating and understanding the meaning of the term "member" throughout the organizational context, the community, including the leadership group, begins to define and develop new roles and structures that reflect the meaning of the term. Hence, language ultimately constructs the new reality. If the organization does not mirror a structure that allows membership to become a reality throughout the community (i.e., if the organizational leadership merely gives "lip service" to the term), then the term will lose credibility, and despite the best internal marketing efforts, it will be scoffed at as unreal and eventually disappear from the organization's vocabulary.

From the perspective of organization development and leadership, the most fundamental competency in constructing meaning, re-forming old meaning or addressing the concerns relating to the meaning requires attention to (a) the ability to label specifically and meaningfully, (b) the recognition of words as they relate to each other, and (c) the willingness to address the affective traits of the new language and how it is to be used. The introduction of new language can have a positive or negative connotation to those experiencing it for the first time, especially when viewed through the organization's "cultural lens." People often look to past understandings and experiences to identify what is "really meant." It is important that the affective impact of the new language is addressed. Any provocative challenge to its meaning and use must be explained and/or eliminated. The awareness of and willingness to address these issues are important aspects of leading.

Metaphors—Images of Change

The dictionary definition of a metaphor is "a picture or image denoting one object in place of another and suggesting an analogy between the two; an implied comparison." To use an animal image, when speaking metaphorically, one is not just "like a deer," but through the image created by the analogy, one "becomes a deer," taking on all of the qualities and attributes associated with that animal nature. Or with reference to the sports image above, the term "home run," while literal in the world of baseball, takes on a metaphoric meaning when used in the context of a sales organization (What's the quota to make a sales "home run" this quarter?) or a merger (What would represent a "home run" for both of our organizations as we merge into one?).

In organizations, this sense of "becoming the image" demonstrates the power of metaphor when searching for common ground among differing viewpoints or factions. While each individual's sense of what to do in a given situation might vary, all parties can still rally around the fact that they want a "home run" for
the organization. Even more significant, the choice of an organization’s metaphoric image drives the degree and type of organizational change that takes place. For example, do we choose to see our organization as a “machine” or a “complex living ecosystem?” Each image carried forward leads to very different organizational structure and outcome. As Gergen (1999) suggests:

[If the machine is our metaphor for the ideal organization, we are likely to divide the organization into specialty units, in which each person has a specific function (like the parts of an automobile). In contrast, if we view the organization as a living organism we may be centrally concerned with its health and the way the participants function in teams, and coordinate actions in times of stress, (p. 176).

This awareness, and even emphasis, on the use of metaphors in the workplace is an outcome of recent phenomena in organizations urging considerations to go beyond rational planning and programmed expectations, and to actively seek different personal and organizational possibilities. Metaphors make this possible, allowing us to frame existing realities into new opportunities, to reflect and design different, previously not thought of viewpoints, and schemas, while removing past contradictions and assumptions. This new perspective calls us to be conscious of new opportunities to extend learning through the use of metaphors and to consciously listen to the metaphors currently being used in our organizations.

**Content, Context and Community**

One trend in the conscious use of metaphors throughout organizations is the incorporation of “real-time” experiences (also known as Experiential Learning or Action Learning). These experiences extend the use of metaphor from the cognitive realm into the kinesthetic. (Ricketts and Willis, 2001, 2). These concrete experiences create a structure for delivering learning content while the learner is immersed within an applicable context and community.

Russell Ackoff (2002) states that active or experiential learning experiences are “absolutely steps in the right direction, but not nearly enough of it is happening” (p. 59). Experiential learning involves an immersion into a series of structured experiences or “micro-worlds,” combined with a meaningful reflective process during and after the experiences. The structured experiences can range from computerized business simulations to outdoor, adventure-based initiatives. They can involve groups as small as intact work teams, to support groups, to broader populations like functional and geographical divisions, matrix units, and even entire organizational memberships. A key learning component is the integrated reflective process that helps learners explore what happened during the experience, identify and analyze the patterns and dynamics that emerged, and make metaphoric connections from the experience back to the organizational context.

Ernst & Young LLP, in working with the primary author, integrated adventure-based experiential learning into a new hire partner orientation program. Using the metaphor of “embarking on an adventure journey together” as a way to orient to the firm, teams of newly hired partners met in the Arizona desert for a literal one-day wilderness journey that tested
their ability to use new tools and technology (e.g., orienteering using map and compass, walkie-talkies etc.). During this time, the participants were making strategic decisions and conducting real client engagements (i.e., high-level partners and current clients challenging the teams to perform real-time consulting from the other end of a walkie-talkie). Throughout the experience, the teams used learning journals to discover recognizable patterns and dynamics and to monitor and improve team leadership, communication, and decision-making skills.

The net effect of the desert adventure was to create a common kinesthetic experience through which the partners learned the business content necessary for a successful orientation, while contextually living the metaphor of "navigating the firm" among a community of peers. In a post-program survey of 250 participants conducted three years after the program deliveries, the metaphorical adventure experience continued to be rated the most memorable, effective learning component of the 6-day orientation (Ricketts and Willis, pending publication).

In the end, the experience was a win for many of the participants as well as the firm itself. The long-term business relationships that evolved from the common outdoor experience, as well as the metaphorical learning connection to the experience itself, both served to accelerate alignment with the firm's culture and its relationship networks, thereby reducing the time needed to effectively on-board new executives.

As organizational members, our interpretation, integration, and practice of "what is said" (the organizational language) create opportunities for acceptance and legitimacy. What is appreciated and not appreciated is symbolized by language, its use, and the actions taken. Ultimately, when the memory of an effective learning component (e.g., the common experience) is later recalled and valued, the metaphor-in-use and the language-in-use can be consciously or unconsciously called up to re-experience the sense of "becoming the image." Sir Geoffrey Vickers' (1995) lifetime of writings came to emphasize that what is appreciated as acceptable and significant results in beneficial choices and decisions. Because of the nature and conceptualization that is involved in the intentional use of metaphors and imagination, there is a heightened opportunity and power to shift the awareness (and appreciation) that drives an organization's direction and development.

The Power of Stories in Organizations

At any given moment in time, the use of a particular word, image, or metaphor within the organizational context has the power to redirect and focus the energy of the people within that organization. Common images bring opposing viewpoints together under one banner, guide the nature and direction of dialogue, and even drive the type and degree of organizational change within the community. Over time, the artful combination of linguistic building blocks, like words, images, and metaphors, in conjunction with the community's reinforcement of their use, encourages the development and co-construction of linguistic patterns. One could argue that these patterns create the rhythm and pulse from which an organization's stories and legends emerge.

Great storytellers know how to use momentum and pacing to build tension and excitement. They also know how to draw in their audience by creating rhythmic pauses for readers and listeners to insert their own emotions, experiences, hopes, and dreams into the story. The audience becomes engaged in the story because they develop an empathic frame of reference based on inserting personal experience and emotion into the plot. In
essence, storytellers help their audience "co-
construct" the story, and in doing so they bring
multiple interpretations to life within the context
of one tale.

An organization's "story" develops in a
similar way. Through a type of audience
participation over time, the community uses
stories and reconstructions of past happenings
not only to connect, conserve, maintain, or
possibly re-write the past, but also to shape
and influence the future. Generated and
understood within the organization's context,
the "work world" stories define occurrences as
acceptable or unacceptable. They honor and
dishonor people and situations in order to
increase pride or place blame. Language,
metaphors, and stories are shared with
newcomers to pass on the historical basis for
understandings and to reinforce the current
organizational culture to those inside and
outside of the organization.

Stories in the workplace often underlie the
implicit assumptions within the workplace
community. Consider the story about a service
organization where the service providers could
arrive at work on time, assemble their orders
for the day, and then meet for breakfast or coffee
at a local gathering place. Although
management looked down on it, the practice
eventually became an assumed entitlement for
the workers. Addressing the practice through
rules was futile; the workers knew it was
against the rules all along. Addressing it
through calculation of lost time and cost was
also futile. The workers didn't see themselves
as "business partners" (management's
language) so why should they care?

Suddenly external competition loomed on
the horizon. Exemplary customer service
became crucial to business survival. Exploitation
of this external [threat] through stories of [potential]
future loss and [a diminished customer base] spurred the service
providers to change their behavior and
reconstruct the former practice into a story
reflecting the need for workers to "sacrifice" for
the company in order to assure its survival. The
new collective story provided an appropriate
context for the service providers to behave like
business partners. As a result, the former
practice disappeared to the degree that any
continuation of the old behavior generated peer
scolding and intense pressure to change.

In light of the story above, consider the
following statement by Alan Watts (1951), "The
power of memories and expectations is such that
for most human beings the past and the future are not
as real, but more real than
the present. The present
cannot be lived happily
unless the past has been
'cleared up' and the future
is bright with promise" (p.
56). Old ways of doing
things get "cleared up"
when stories from the past
are inappropriate for the
present—possibly requiring the need to be re-
written. In the case above, it was vital to reframe
the old story in order to fit the new workplace
reality. Once reframed, the new story took hold,
reflecting the need for all members to actively
participate in keeping things going—for
individual job and company survival. An
organization's story can be re-written.

Content, Context and Community

The idea of consciously re framing an
organization's story is at the heart of the
previously mentioned Appreciative Inquiry
process. The "poetic principle," one of the
fundamental principles of Appreciative Inquiry
(Cooperrider & Whitney, 1998), suggests that
an organization's "story" is like a poem. As
such, it is subject to multiple interpretations
and can be re-interpreted or reframed, even in
a mythopoetic perspective (Barton, 2000), at
any time, depending on what the organization
seeks to "locate, highlight, and illuminate." The
organization conducting an Appreciative Inquiry
consciously chooses an inspiring affirmative
topic to study (e.g., exemplary leadership,
lightning-fast consensus, liberating
collaboration, etc.) and then, through one-on-
one dialogue and interviewing, seeks out and
collects stories that highlight the best of what
currently exists within the organization
pertaining to that topic. The organization uses
the collected stories and information to create
through dialogue an ideal future scenario
representing the greatest potential vis-à-vis the
inquiry topic, and to identify and commit to the
organizational elements necessary to make the
ideal future become a current reality.

One example of a small-scale initiative that
included Appreciative Inquiry (and Experiential
Learning) components again features Ernst &
Young LLP, a firm that several years ago sought
to instill core leadership values and skills
through an experience with inspirational
community service (Ricketts & Willis, 2001,
22). At a time of rapid growth and change, the
firm wanted new executives to experience a
more positive and uplifting leadership culture
within the context of a leadership initiative that
emphasized community service awareness (one
of the firm’s core values). Over a two-day period,
the executives used interviewing techniques to
to explore the topic of “leadership that inspires
positive community change”—both within the
firm and in the New York City community—
and to set goals and identify action steps for
improving individual leadership skills.

1998 NYC Leadership Challenge
Learning Journal Interview Questions

Thank you very much for agreeing to participate in this interview.

I am seeking stories that describe how people inspire and lead community change. I understand
the dire situation that exists in our inner city. It seems as though the need for change is so huge,
and the task for improving people’s lives in our city so daunting, that achieving success appears to
be almost impossible.

Yet, people like you continue to have success in improving our community and in inspiring others
to do the same. You and others in our community continue to prove through your own examples
that one can create opportunities for clothing, feeding, housing and educating the people in our
community who are in need.

Please describe a time when you were part of, or observed, an extraordinary display of inspirational
leadership in your community.

• How did leadership inspire people to participate in changing their community?
• What is important to you personally about leadership?
• What do you value most about yourself and the people in your community?

Imagine that the year is 2005:

• What do you hope will be the result of the community leadership efforts that have taken place
  in the last 7 years?
• How have you and others contributed to these outcomes?
• What are you working on today that will achieve your dreams for the next 7 years?

Experience AI: A Practitioner’s Guide to Integrating
Appreciative Inquiry with Experiential Learning, p. 22
During the first morning the participants interviewed each other about personal and organizational experiences around extraordinary leadership. They then participated in a literal community service leadership experience: they went into New York City in teams to feed/clothe 2000 people within 24 hours, all while interviewing the leaders, volunteers, employees, and beneficiaries of the service organizations contacted. They used the interview guide on the previous page for the community service part of the initiative.

Upon returning from the community service leadership challenge (the group far exceeded the goal of feeding and clothing 2000 people in less than a day), the executives came together to reflect on their experiences, many of which included real time leadership moments, and to share the output from the completed interviews. Each person then created a personal plan with 6-month and 12-month goals for developing leadership skills, to be reviewed by their mentor and included in their annual performance review. As a result of this initiative, the executives were able to dialogue about and even experience peak moments of leadership excellence and to identify strategies for improving long-term leadership skills.

While this initiative focused on a small population within a very large organization, the combination of appreciative dialogue and storytelling, along with a challenging learning experience, contributed toward consciousness raising, a deliberate reframing, and co-construction of leadership excellence. For this group, the organization’s leadership story was rewritten.

Conclusion

With translation, language, metaphors, and stories are used as catalysts for making sense of the world around us. Particularly, business organizations and academia are eager to refer to the use of these tools in learning and cultural instrumentation. Leaders of organizations directly influence and effect the development of their organization based on the language they use and pictures of hope and inspiration they create through the conscious use of words, metaphors, and stories. As noted earlier, the shift in language from thinking of this country as a “melting pot” for immigrants to the image of the “salad bowl” is a deceptively simple and subtle shift in our perception of the US as a nation and society. These simple and subtle shifts in image designed by language, whether in an organization or country, suggest the direction and development of a socially constructed, co-constructed culture and future. It is with language, metaphors, and stories designed through the language-in-use, that people, organizations, and countries become who they are. The conscious use of language as a component of development serves a vital function in setting the stage for change processes to be more effective and long lasting.

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Jane Galloway Seiling has a degree in Business Administration, a master’s in Organization Development and is currently a candidate for a Ph.d. Her interest in organization development, social constructionism, and consulting are based on working 20+ years inside organizations and her academic studies and explorations. She has written two books (The Membership Organization and The Meaning and Role of Organizational Advocacy) and a book on constructive accountability (pending). She is an associate of The Taos Institute, Cleveland, OH and co-editor of their Focus Book Series.

Contact Information:
Business Performance Initiative
1501 Riverview Drive
Lima, OH 45805
Phone: 419-227-7979
E-mail: jseiling@wcoil.com

Miriam Ricketts, a specialist in Corporate Experiential Learning since 1983, has trained others in Experiential Learning, Appreciative Inquiry, Accelerated Change, Group Facilitation, Communication & Leadership Skills and Team Building & Team Leadership Development.

Miriam holds a Master’s Degree in Management from Johns Hopkins University and a Bachelor’s degree in History and English from Dartmouth College. She is co-author of the Taos Institute Focus Book, Experience At: A Practitioner’s Guide to Integrating Appreciative Inquiry with Experiential Learning, and is an associate of the Taos Institute.

Contact information:
Executive Edge, Inc.
Managing Partner
46 Chagrin Plaza, #147
Chagrin Falls, OH 44022
Phone: 440-338-8308
E-mail: mricketts@executiveedgeinc.com
www.executiveedgeinc.com