

“... language constructs our world(s) rather than reports the objective facts about the world. Therefore changing when, where, what, how, and which people talk about things—changing the conversation—will lead to organizational change.”

Leveraging Language for Change

By Robert J. Marshak

For more than two decades I have been interested in discursive and dialogic processes as they influence change in organizations. One manifestation of this interest is recorded in my reflections and observations about the linguistic turn in the organizational sciences, particularly concerning concepts and theories of organizational change (e.g., Marshak, 1993, 2010). The other manifestation has been in my coaching and consulting practice, especially in terms of language-based interventions (e.g., Heracleous & Marshak, 2004; Marshak, 2004).

The purpose of this article is to share my thinking and a way of working that has evolved over the years and is now a core part of my practice. The discussion will briefly explain the dialogic and discursive approaches to organization development and then what is meant by “in-the-moment” consulting. The specific ways in which I work at a micro-level are then discussed, particularly in terms of how metaphors and storylines help frame reality and response in social systems.

Discursive and Dialogic Approaches in Organization Development

In recent years there has been an increasing recognition and use of approaches based on premises that differ in varying degrees from those found in foundational OD practices. These include premises and practices influenced by post-modern philosophies, social construction, organizational discourse studies, and the complexity sciences to name a few. In combination

these influences have led to a variety of OD approaches that focus mostly on “changing the conversation” as the primary method for changing social systems, for example by inviting all the stakeholders into the room, asking different questions, focusing on the positive, altering the topics or methods of discussion, and so forth (Marshak & Grant, 2008). In many of these approaches, data collection and diagnosis as separate, discrete steps in an action research process are eschewed in favor of real-time interactions and the social agreements and collective intentions that emerge from them. This contrasts with more traditional approaches wherein data collection and diagnosis are used to help identify a desired end state, and then are further used as one of the primary methods to motivate change in “frozen” systems (e.g., Nadler, 1977). To help talk about these two approaches to OD and change, my colleague Gervase Bushe and I have labeled the one approach Diagnostic OD and the other Dialogic OD (Bushe & Marshak, 2009; Marshak & Bushe, 2013).

In my own consulting work I have been particularly influenced by discursive approaches based on the primary assumption that language, such as metaphors and storylines, frames and socially constructs reality and response in individuals and social systems (e.g., Marshak, 2004). In other words, language constructs our world(s) rather than reports the objective facts about the world. Therefore changing when, where, what, how, and which people talk about things—changing the conversation—will lead to organizational change.

For example, as noted by Barrett, Thomas, and Hocevar (1995):

- » Effective change requires that organization members alter their cognitive schemas for understanding and responding to organizational events. (p. 356)
- » As new language begins to generate new actions, which in turn trigger different action possibilities, basic assumptions and beliefs are altered. (p. 365)
- » In other words, change occurs when one way of talking replaces another way of talking. (p. 370)

Elsewhere my colleague David Grant and I have summarized much of the literature about this way of thinking about language and change (Grant & Marshak, 2011). *Table 1* lists the seven main interrelated premises we found in the research literature and that influence how I think about discursive dynamics in my practice.

In-the-Moment Consulting

I use the term “in-the-moment” consulting to label small discursive interventions (a few words or a phrase or two) on the part of the consultant that are not preplanned or choreographed, but instead emerge during situational interactions with a client or client system members. They are generative in intent; that is, aimed at creating new ways of thinking, without a specific outcome in mind. In many regards they are a type of process consultation intervention with an individual or team (Schein, 1969), but are aimed at the implicit cognitive processes that may be framing actions more so than the resulting, observable behavioral or procedural processes themselves. Drawing on cognitive and discursive theories, they are primarily based on the assumption that what is being said reveals unspoken beliefs and socially constructs operative meanings for the individual or group in question. This contrasts with assumptions that what is being said is primarily a way of exchanging viewpoints and information to arrive at conclusions and decisions.

The purpose of an in-the-moment intervention is typically to address an implicit framing of a situation that seems

Table 1: Premises about Discourse and Change

1. Discourse plays a central role in the construction of social reality.
2. There are multiple levels of linked discourse that impact a change situation.
3. The prevailing narratives and storylines about change are constructed and conveyed through conversations.
4. Power and political processes shape the prevailing discourses concerning change.
5. There are always alternative discourses of change.
6. Discourse and change continuously interact.
7. Change agents need to reflect on their own discourses.

to be blocking or preventing the person or group from progress towards their stated objectives. Thus an in-the-moment intervention as discussed here is intended to invite generative, double-loop learning. Put another way, in-the-moment interventions attempt to address what’s framing a discussion rather than the content of the discussion per se.

In sum, in-the-moment consulting is opportunistic and situational rather than a preplanned, structured intervention or sequence of actions. The intention of the intervention is to provide an opportunity for the client or client system members to rethink reality and thereby generate new possibilities without prescribing a course of action or intended outcome. It is conversational and uses the power of language to frame and create experience. Thus it is a discursive approach aimed at altering mindsets rather than feedback to encourage specific behaviors or outcomes. Furthermore, the consulting action is literally in-the-moment and not an extended conversation; more akin to a mental “jolt” than a protracted series of interactions.

In-the-Moment Consulting Guidelines

Although in-the-moment consulting might appear to an onlooker to be some kind of off-hand remark, in practice it is most effective when comments are intentional and follow some basic guidelines. The following are seven to consider.

1. The choice to pursue an in-the-moment intervention is based on an assessment that the individual or group is somehow stuck or limited in how they are implicitly conceptualizing their intended work and might be “headed down the wrong

path.” Thus in-the-moment interventions are for the purpose of generating new ways of thinking about and approaching a situation without stating exactly what should be done. In some cases they may offer another conceptual option, while in others they may intentionally confront the presumed unstated, but limiting belief(s) directly.

2. The impetus for an in-the-moment intervention may be triggered by some mix of analysis, empathy, and intuition. Often it is based on tracking recurring themes or patterns in what an individual or group says and does that in turn suggests the possible existence of an underlying, but unspoken, set of assumptions, beliefs or concepts framing the situation. Deciding what to say, how and when is an art form, not a prescription. It is also more than a “gut reaction” or “what came to mind in that moment.”
3. As with all OD interventions, in-the-moment interventions need to be offered in the service of the client’s stated concerns, needs, and objectives. Here clarity during the on-going consulting processes about what you think is happening, why, and how best to help the client system is critical. The need to stay clear and focused during the ongoing dynamics is often the difference between an intentional or a reactive discursive process intervention.
4. To help insure alignment with the client’s needs and objectives, it’s always important to stay focused on the stated purposes of the work and your contract. This will get re-negotiated over the life of a project and sometimes as a result of an in-the-moment intervention, but

however it may evolve it is always one of the principle touchstones, along with professional ethics, for assessing what one should or should not do as a consultant.

5. Be sure to continue to track the dynamics and issues in the situation to the point of making an in-the-moment comment. Because the form of in-the-moment interventions discussed here is primarily based on discursive methods, one set of dynamics to be tracked are the ways in which conversations unfold. Not just who says what and when, but

addressing metaphors and storylines in-the-moment.

Metaphors In-the-Moment

First of all, metaphors matter because they are a form of mental model that implicitly or explicitly frames for someone(s) the experience of one thing in terms of another. Depending on the operative metaphor different thoughts and actions will result. “We need to *fix* what’s wrong in customer operations” may lead to different thoughts and actions than, “We need to

in the cognitive (versus the psychoanalytic) unconscious (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999). Conceptual metaphors are discerned by listening for the implicit framework(s) that seems to be organizing how something is discussed. For example, the choice of words in the following statement, “I had to *get over* a few rough spots and get back *on track* before I was able to *move forward* in my life,” makes sense if we assume the conceptual metaphor that *Life is a Journey* may be subconsciously framing things. Subconscious conceptual metaphors are ubiquitous, but require “deep listening” to discern the implicit structure and meanings that may be organizing the overt expressions (see Marshak, 2004; Vignone, 2012).

Empathy and connection to the person or system you are working with is important in order to hear what they are expressing and not what you would say in a similar situation. Assuming what the meaning must be from your frame of reference or set of experiences is the most common error in working metaphorically.

also what are the dominant, but perhaps implicit metaphors that seem to be shaping the discussions, or what are the implicit storyline(s) that seem to be framing what is said and done.

6. Based on your tracking of the dynamics and discourse of the situation at a moment in time, develop one or more hypotheses about what you think might be the metaphors, storylines, or other framings that are implicitly blocking consideration of a broader range of options and possibilities. This helps avoid jumping to conclusions too quickly and encourages trying to discern how the client might be implicitly interpreting the situation.
7. Finally, consider what might be a different metaphor, storyline, or framing that would likely not be rejected by the client or client system and which also could generate new thinking... in-the-moment. Try it out. If it does not have the intended effect, use the response as further data to recalibrate your thinking.

Given their central importance in discursive coaching and consulting work, let’s now take a closer look at how to approach

head in a new direction in customer operations.” Consequently, metaphors can both be a target for, or method of, intervention. As a potential impediment, a metaphor that is framing a situation in limiting ways may be confronted by questioning or challenging its applicability to the circumstances. *Are we really here to fix or repair a machine?* Alternatively, offering a different metaphor is a way to both question an existing framing while also inviting new or novel ways of interpreting things.

Types of Metaphors

In working discursively there are two types of metaphors to listen for and track in an engagement:

- » First are metaphors that are consciously created comparisons or analogies. For example: “This organization is a pressure cooker” or “Talking to the boss is like talking to a ...” These are used by people to express their experience with what is or to imagine what could be.
- » Second are metaphors that are unconscious cognitive patterns that implicitly structure/interpret experience. These are *conceptual metaphors* that function

Tips for Working with Metaphors

How to listen for and work with metaphors in-the-moment is an acquired skill that can be developed or enhanced with attention and practice. Some tips that have always guided me include:

- » Listen for word images, both those that are explicit as well as those that may represent subconscious, organizing themes. Track recurring and related images and themes.
- » Listen for the meaning made by the person/system using the metaphor or image, not the meaning you would attribute to that word image. Empathy and connection to the person or system you are working with is important in order to hear what they are expressing and not what you would say in a similar situation. Assuming what the meaning must be from your frame of reference or set of experiences is the most common error in working metaphorically.
- » Try getting “in sync” with their meaning. Deep listen and then draw out their imagery by using all or aspects of the suspected metaphor or image in the language you use to interact with them. If they are talking explicitly or implicitly about fixing the machine/organization, try continuing the conversation from that framing and see how they respond. “So, what’s broken?” “What will it take

to fix it” “What tools do you need?” If they look confused or quizzical at what you are saying try using their response as further information about what is going on for them. Adjust what you say accordingly.

- » Inquire about unspoken or neglected aspects of their metaphor or image based on your understanding of the situation and the metaphor or image they seem to be invoking. If they talk about “being confined” in what they do, inquire about what is confining them. If they tell you what it is, ask about how they got into that predicament, or, how could they get “out?” If it is a conceptual metaphor underlying their thinking about a situation, then much of how they are interpreting and experiencing things in the broadest sense may be linked to that same metaphor.
- » Suggest ways to rethink the metaphor or image by challenging, re-framing, and/or replacing it. In other words, offer some reasons why the implicit or explicit metaphor in use is inappropriate to the situation (will *fixing* the organization address all the challenges you are facing?); or re-frame how the dominant metaphor/image is being applied, for example *re-inventing* the machine rather than *fixing* the machine; or try another relevant, but different metaphor and see how the system responds. “What if you were *transitioning to another stage in the life* of the organization? What would you do in that case?” Again, you are not suggesting your own favorite images or metaphors, but instead ones that may have resonance for the person or people in the system based on your experiences with them and the context of their situation. If what you try does not work, use the responses to re-hypothesize what may be going on and try something else.

Remember, the most powerful aspects of a metaphor or word image are likely to be subconscious or out-of-awareness. Consequently, do not be surprised if there is denial or defensiveness at what you say or suggest. It’s important to stay

Table 2: Everyday Talk about Talk and Action

Everyday Expressions	Underling Storylines
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » <i>Talk is cheap</i> » <i>It’s just empty words</i> » <i>Idle talk, idle chatter</i> » <i>Talk is a waste of time</i> 	Talk is Worthless
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » <i>It’s deeds that count, not words</i> » <i>Watch what we do, not what we say</i> » <i>Walk the talk</i> » <i>Avoid: Too much talk and not enough action and being all talk and no action</i> 	Action Counts; Action is Valued
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » <i>Stop talking and start doing something</i> » <i>It’s time to stop all the talk and get down to business</i> » <i>If everyone would just stop talking, maybe we could get something done</i> 	Talk Must Stop for Action to Start
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » <i>Action lists</i> » <i>Actionable issues</i> » <i>To do lists</i> » <i>Action research, action learning, action science</i> 	A Bias for Action

conversational and open to whatever comes back to you. Don’t force your insights. Do invite curiosity and speculation not only by what you say, but how you say it. And, always stay in-the-moment.

Storylines in-the-Moment

Storylines have similar effects as metaphors and are addressed and worked with in similar ways. Storylines are also frequently subconscious and implicitly frame how someone thinks about and responds to situations. A storyline, for purposes of this discussion, provides the underlying theme, plot, or linkage of ideas and events that provide coherence to what an actor says and does. Whereas metaphors suggest a symbolic word image that may be framing a person’s experience, storylines link implicit assumptions and beliefs that then provide the interpretive framing of a situation. Storylines might also be thought of in terms of themes, motifs, or scripts,

all of which shape reality and response for the actor(s).

Again, as with deep listening and metaphors, the consulting stance is to wonder what the unspoken storyline might be for a person(s) of positive intent to talk and act the way they do. This is similar to an anthropologist wondering what the deep societal assumptions might be that would lead people in a particular culture to talk and act the way they do.

The consulting approach follows the same tips and guidelines as working with subconscious metaphors. The intent is to surface the unspoken storyline that is providing the rationale and justification for actions which may be limiting the client from achieving their stated objectives. Sometimes simply making clear what has been influencing behavior is sufficient. Sometimes challenging the applicability of the storyline or offering a plausible alternative will be needed. And, sometimes listening for conflicting or out-of-sync storylines

Table 3: Storylines that Guide Policies and Actions

Liberal Storyline	Conservative Storyline
» The world can be made a better place.	» The world is a dangerous place.
» The world can be dangerous; people need to be protected from those dangers.	» The world is competitive; there will always be winners and losers.
» People are born good and can become better.	» People can be bad; you have to be disciplined to do what is right.
» People become responsible, self-disciplined and self-reliant through being cared for and respected, and through caring for others.	» Disciplined people who pursue their own self-interest become prosperous and self-reliant; they are the responsible people.
» Show responsibility and empathy towards everyone.	» By pursuing your own interest you help everyone.

may suggest mindset differences that are “behind” operational misalignments.

Consider *Table 2* where some everyday expressions about talk and action are linked to their presumed underlying storylines (Marshak, 1998). No wonder discursive consulting may seem ephemeral to some! And, of course, a client subconsciously operating from these storylines would likely not be interested in spending much time in meetings to talk things over versus getting down to action.

Another example is provided in *Table 3* by what the cognitive linguist George Lakoff suggests are the underlying frames or storylines behind how liberals and conservatives in the American political system think and act (Lakoff, 2004).

Imagine for a moment you were consulting with two executives, one of whom operated from one of these storylines and the other from the other. Which one might talk and act in a way more consistent with *your* storyline? What are the implications of that for your practice and also your ability to deep listen, empathize, and supportively confront as necessary?

Address the Frame not the Content

A discursive orientation to stability and change embraces the notion that there may be objective, empirical events, but it is the interpretation or meaning that is given to those events that creates social reality for individuals and organizations. Discursive in-the-moment consulting involves the

ability to listen for how others are framing their reality as well as the ability to invite or suggest new frames for their consideration. Consequently, in my own practice I rarely address the specific content of an interaction or situation. More often I am listening for and addressing the implicit assumptions and beliefs (conceptual metaphors and storylines) that may be framing how the person or system is experiencing and making meaning about the situation. “Yes, I understand you are discussing how to transform the organization (*content*) and I am wondering why you are talking as if you are fixing a machine (*frame*)? Put simply, the ability to find, form, and frame reality is a core competency for discursive in-the-moment consulting.

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Two Examples

Next are two brief examples to help illustrate the discussion. The in-the-moment interventions are noted in *italics*.

Corporate Re-Design

The leadership of a mid-sized corporation had decided that a “complete transformation” was needed due to increased global competition. A team was appointed to work on what would be needed and charged with looking at the corporate culture, leadership, strategy, structure, reward systems, and so on. Anything and everything was to be on-the-table. I joined the team as a consultant to help keep them focused on their task and as productive as possible. The team of twelve consisted of several of the most important Senior Vice-Presidents and a blend of others from various functions and levels of the organization. During the second half-day meeting of the team the following interactions took place:

SVP DELTA: We need to start thinking about what aspects of the organization need to be changed now and in what ways.

OTHERS: Yes, we agree.

SVP BETA: Well, I don’t think we have to look at manufacturing. That’s been running smoothly for ten year now. We wouldn’t want to mess with something unless there is a clear problem.

MID-MANAGER ZETA: Yeah, we can’t afford to have a lot of down time. We need

to address what's not working and get things up and running as soon as possible.

SVP THETA: Yeah, let's not fix things just because we are on this change team.

OTHERS: Murmurs of agreement.

RJM: *Hmm. As I listen to the discussion it sounds like you are talking about fixing or repairing a broken machine. I thought the assignment was more like being asked to re-invent the organization...*

In doing the kind of consulting described here it is important to never assume “I’ve got it.” Whatever you think is going on is always a hypothesis to be tested gently in the on-going conversation and pursued, amended, or dropped depending on the response. It’s about generativity—creating new possibilities and/or insights—for the client system and not about being “right.”

SVP DELTA: Well, when you put it that way maybe we are here to re-invent or re-design parts of the organization.

RJM: *Well, what if your task was to re-design or re-invent the entire organization. You know, put everything on the table...*

SVP BETA: That would be a completely different story. We'd have to re-think and look at everything.

SVP DELTA: You know, we probably should break everything down and look at the whole operation from scratch. Where should we begin?

OTHERS: Nods and expressions of agreement

Comment

In this example the consultant seized an in-the-moment opportunity to wonder if the team should re-think its assignment and energies before there was too much agreement on a potentially limiting conceptualization of their assigned task to transform the organization. Although conversational and in the flow of the task focused discussion, it was targeted to the implicit and unspoken mindset(s) (*we're here to fix the machine*) that seemed to be framing how people were starting to approach their work.

Team Integration

At the urging of the SVP for Human Resources and several members of the 15 person executive team, Pat, the CEO of a nonprofit organization, asked for my consulting help to develop a more integrated top team. Pat agreed to an initial team meeting to kick-things off and thought it should last one to two hours. Both the SVP of HR and I pushed back saying much

more time would be needed. Pat reluctantly agreed to a five hour session that included a working lunch, but could not understand how that much time could possibly be needed. About three weeks later the first session on improving top team integration was held. Pat gave very brief opening remarks, and then told people they already knew Pat's thinking on values, strategy, and vision so there was no need to cover that. When I asked people if they had anything they wanted to say on those topics, everyone certainly did! The session went the full time and my role was mainly facilitation to keep the topics and conversations flowing. Several people commented that it was exactly what they needed: time to talk with each other so they knew where everyone was coming from. Three days later Pat, the SVP for HR, and I met to do a quick debrief of the session. A critical part of that meeting included the following interaction:

PAT: I guess I was wrong and you were right. They certainly used all the time and really liked the session.

RJM: Why did you think they wouldn't need or want that kind of time?

PAT: Oh, I'm sure they can talk a lot, but will they say a lot.

RJM: And....?

PAT: I didn't hear anything I hadn't heard before from any of them.

RJM: That included what they said and what they had questions about?

PAT: I've answered their questions before. That's why I couldn't understand why so much time was needed. If they just want to talk couldn't they do that without me in the room? It feels like a waste of time for me to be there just listening.

RJM: *Whose time are you worried about wasting? Do you think the purpose of top team meetings is for you to quickly inform them and be informed in return? What if the purpose was so they could interact and get a sense of each other, and start the process of being more of an integrated team than a collection of executives?*

PAT: I'm not sure I understand the difference.

RJM: *Well, if the purpose of our work is to achieve greater team integration then team members need to achieve that with each other as well as with you, and you will need to put some of your time into that. And, some of that time might best be used listening and drawing out others and their views.*

PAT: *(Pause)*. I hadn't thought about things that way before. I have been worried about the best use of my time....

Comment

Here there was an in-the-moment confrontation about unspoken assumptions about what the work involved. These included assumptions and a storyline framing the critical concepts of productive uses of time, the role of a CEO, and to some degree the meaning of an integrated team (e.g., The role of a CEO is to talk not listen. A CEO's time should not be wasted. Just listening is a waste of a CEO's time and should be avoided). Pat thought there was too much time allotted for team discussion, and apparently did not think team discussion was a good use of a CEO's time. Those assertions could be argued or discussed in various ways. Addressing instead Pat's unspoken and possibly out-of-awareness beliefs and implicit storylines about what CEO's should or should not do offered an opportunity to open pathways to new meanings and new possibilities.

Closing Comments

In doing the kind of consulting described here it is important to never assume “I’ve got it.” Whatever you think is going on is always a hypothesis to be tested gently in the on-going conversation and pursued, amended, or dropped depending on the response. It’s about generativity—creating new possibilities and/or insights—for the client system and not about being “right.”

In closing, it is worth noting that different conceptual metaphors influencing OD practice have emerged over time. For example, two that come readily to mind are: 1) Are we trying to move an organization from a current to a future state (*change is a journey*), and 2) Are we restoring or improving the health and fitness of the organization (*the organization is a growing, living organism*)? I hope this discussion has helped to add “*change is a shifting conversation that can happen in a moment*” to the list.

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