Propositions about Transforming Organizations Through Dialogic OD

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The Revisioning OD project is a long term study that puts together researchers and change consultants to study what change agents who are successful at transforming organizations do and how they think. The project, which has received support from the OD Network, NTL and the Academy of Management, is in its early years (and still looking for participants – if interested please contact me) and my ultimate goal is to create a theory of practice for OD more attuned to the realities of 21st Century organizations.

In this article I tentatively put forward eight propositions about the nature of planned, transformational change. By transformation I refer to what's been called second order, discontinuous, or radical change as opposed to first order, continuous, or incremental change. First order change, when effective, helps the organization be better at what it already is and does. Transformational change, changes the very nature of the system to be better at what it aspires to be and do.

The Revisioning OD project is based on the assertion that what successful transformational change agents and leaders are doing today is not consistent with the diagnosis based, action research approach found in contemporary OD textbooks, and that these practices need to be documented and understood (Bushe, 2010a). The propositions I discuss here are initial, testable ideas toward a theory of "Dialogic OD" (Bushe & Marshak, 2009). (see sidebar)

Proposition 1: To be transformational, a change process has to be counter cultural in the system in which it is used

There is a lot of evidence that supports this proposition. Years ago when studying parallel structures in large organizational change I discovered they only worked when the parallel structure created a different set of norms from the normal organization – and were transformational when that new set of norms mirrored the new culture the organization wanted to move toward (Bushe & Shani, 1991). More recently evidence is emerging that Appreciative Inquiry stops being a transformational change process in organizations that have embraced strengths based management. One implication of this is that effective transformational change processes depend on the situation – there is no one size fits all.
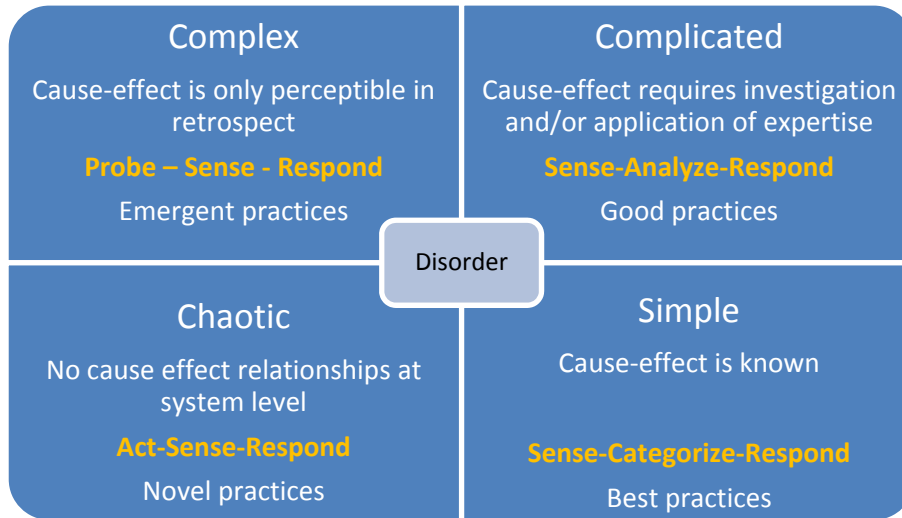
However, I also think that there is enough similarity in western style management, at any given time, that we can usefully talk about general principles for transformational change in a given era. I suggest that conventional participatory action research was counter cultural when it was introduced to organizations in the 50's and 60's, and may still be in some places. In many modern organizations, however, it is too much like business as usual to be transformational anymore. So transformational change processes will need to be based on different logics and processes. For lack of a better term, I am calling these dialogic.

Proposition 2: Leaders of successful transformational change understand the limitations of complexity and embrace emergence.

One of the commonalities I am seeing in contemporary transformational change processes is that they understand and work with the qualities of emergence in change (Holman, 2010). This is countercultural because western managers and organizations are still predominantly trying to control and predict – whether it's quarterly revenues or talent development. I've found the Cynefin framework developed at IBM's Knowledge Management group useful in helping consultants and managers

understand the limitations that complexity creates for that style of leadership, particularly when it comes to leading change (Snowden & Boone, 2007)

Figure 1 The Cynefin Model

Complex	Complicated
Cause-effect is only perceptible in retrospect	Cause-effect requires investigation and/or application of expertise
Probe – Sense - Respond	**Sense-Analyze-Respond**
Emergent practices	Good practices
Disorder	
Chaotic	Simple
No cause effect relationships at system level	Cause-effect is known
Act-Sense-Respond	**Sense-Categorize-Respond**
Novel practices	Best practices

In complicated situations, where the cause and effect relations between leadership actions and outcomes can be understood with enough investigation and analysis, then trying to figure out the right alternatives and implementing them (sense-analyze-respond) works. But in a complex situation, where there are so many variables simultaneously influencing each other that it's impossible to know what the impact of decisions and actions will be until after the fact, the gather data-analyze-problem-solve-implement change approach doesn't work very well. Some argue that it actually gets in the way of effective change practice (e.g., Harrison, 2008) by supporting an illusion that all that's needed to make the right decision is the right data and smart people. The Cynefin model advises that in complex situations it's better to first send out "probes", pay attention and respond to what happens.

Proposition 3: Successful transformational change processes create multiple, parallel streams of action, not all of which will succeed.

Probes are experiments. They are small bets made while keeping your full stake in reserve. I believe successful transformational change processes in contemporary organizations produce many simultaneous actions championed by different groups in the organization. This is what happens in dialogic change processes like Open Space, Appreciative Inquiry Summits, and the "hosted" conferences. Dialogic change processes appear to work through events, often with large numbers of people, where the change challenges are discussed and ideas for change are surfaced. Leaders understand that the point of these "events" is not to identify, agree upon, and then implement THE change. It's to unearth, catalyze and support the multitude of motivations and ideas that already exist in the organization, in the service of the change goal.

There are many ways in which this is significantly different from conventional OD interventions. One worth highlighting is that it requires a much bigger commitment from senior management earlier in the process. I think one of the reasons diagnostic change processes are so popular is that they are used when consultants enter the organization from the middle, to gather evidence to convince senior leaders that something needs to change. That doesn't work with dialogic change processes. Sponsorship from organizational leaders is required from the start or the dialogic events will never take place.

Additionally, it requires as much or more preparation for what will happen after the "event" as for the event itself. In successful dialogic change processes, events take place that surface a host of proposals for change and champions for those proposals. Now they need resourcing. Mundane but essential issues like slack budget and time are necessary to support the energy unleashed by the dialogic process, but these can be challenging to the normal budgeting process, and another reason the support from senior managers is needed from the start.

Proposition 4: The level of generativity differentiates transformational change success

I think dialogic change processes work when they catalyze the emergence of new ideas inside the target group that have two qualities. 1) They provide new ways of seeing and thinking about issues the change effort is about. As a result of these new images, metaphors, and ideas, new options for decisions and actions, that hadn't occurred to people before, now occur to them. 2) These new ideas, images and metaphors are compelling to people – they are attracted to them and want to act on them. Building on Kenneth Gergen's work I call ideas with these two qualities generative. The dialogic change process works not by trying to get people change what they do, but by changing how they think so they can make different personal choices about what they do.

My research on Appreciative Inquiry found the level of generativity of the intervention explains the level of transformation in the organization (Bushe, 2010b; Bushe & Kassam, 2005). Note that this is very different from conventional consulting where new ideas come into the target system from outside. Instead, dialogic change processes work by surfacing new ideas inside the target system. This doesn't mean that they

I now believe this is a key outcome of any dialogic change process and something we need to improve our understanding of: what increases the generativity of the conversations we create during a dialogic change process?

Proposition 5: Successful transformational change is possibility centric – future focused

There is some evidence that possibility centric change processes lead groups to more be generative, and maybe one explanation for why processes like appreciative inquiry, future search, work out, and the art of hosting are successful when they are.

I'm not sure how much of a role leadership plays in identifying the preferred future, versus orchestrating a process for identifying a preferred future, but in either case, I'm pretty sure that transformational change doesn't happen without a widely held image of a preferred future. There are lots of reasons why a possibility centric change process is more likely to engage people and be generative than a diagnostic, problem-centric change process (Boyd & Bright, 2007). When an analysis of problems, dysfunction, or ineffectiveness is part of the change process people in the change process feel negatively judged. It's not surprising that they feel suspicious and distrustful, don't engage, and "resist change". Possibility centric change processes, which invite people to focus on the future they want to create together, don't have these problems. But that doesn't mean the change effort doesn't work on "problems" or issues of concern. My research has found that if a dialogic change process doesn't address widely held concerns it doesn't lead to transformation (Bushe, 2010b). However, dialogic change processes don't address those concerns through diagnosis and problem-solving. They address them through generativity.

Proposition 6: Successful transformational change is related to the quality of container(s) created for evoking generative conversations

In dialogic change practice, a container is a time and space where normal, "business as usual" ways of interacting are suspended so that different, generative conversations can take place. I think what most differentiates dialogic OD practices are their prescriptions for how to create and "facilitate" those containers. The image of "facilitation" in conventional OD, grounded in social psychology and small group dynamics, does not fit with the image of facilitation emerging in dialogic change practice as "convening" or "hosting". Often, the work is done in groups too large to "facilitate". The design of the event needs to set the conditions for self-generated and self-regulated conversations to take place;

conversations that will be productive and useful. The consultant is more of a planner and designer than a facilitator and the process is less controlled and more emergent.

Containers need to focus attention and interaction in predictable enough ways that leaders can feel secure enough to let go. One aspect of good containers that's been widely discussed is the quality of questions used to focus attention and interaction (Vogt, Brown & Issacs, 2003). The right question, worded the right way, can make all the difference in the success or failure of a dialogic change process. Another widely discussed attribute is the mix of people engaged in those conversations. Whether it's the need for multiple organizational levels, multiple stakeholders, or people inside and outside of the target system, the emerging consensus is that the more diversity in the group the more generative the outcomes are likely to be. Yet, while the concept of "containers" is commonly used by dialogic change consultants, there are almost no descriptions of what they are, how one creates one, what the difference between a good container and a bad one is, or the contingencies to take into account when designing them. This is fertile ground for OD theory.

Proposition 7: Containers are co-constructed through the <u>being</u> of the leader in relation to the group

The metaphor of container evokes, at least in me, concrete issues of place, time, how a room is set up, how removed people are from their normal routines, that sort of thing. And I still think that can make a difference to what happens in a group of people. But I am now convinced that the really important qualities of "containers" arise from the qualities and character of the leader in relation to the group being contained.

By "leader" I am referring to the person or group that is convening and leading the dialogic change event. This could be a consultant, internal facilitator or the actual leader of the group – it's the person who is "holding the space" or "hosting" the event. We could probably list skills of people who are good

at creating effective containers – things like knowing when to hold on to an agenda or topic and when to let go, knowing how to read and move with the energy of a group, being a non-anxious presence. This is a topic I've gone into elsewhere in more depth than I can here (Bushe, 2010c).

But I think there is a deeper issue for the OD profession to grapple with: is it just about skills? I don't think so. Whether we call it character, ego development, spiritual enlightenment, I think there is something about people who are able to utilize dialogic OD methods in consistent, successful ways, that can't simply be attributed to technique. In the OD profession we've turned away from studying, discussing and training the *being* of OD professionals, preferring instead to identify a body of knowledge and skills we expect OD professionals to master. There are a lot of good reasons for that, one of which is the egalitarian value that anyone, with time and effort, can learn to do it. But is that true? In a study I did many years ago I found that ego development not only predicted conventional consulting competence in a group of 62 quality engineers (Bushe & Gibbs, 1990), but that consulting styles were highly related to their stage of ego development (Bushe & Gibbs, 1989). We may find that dialogic OD processes rest even more on the social, emotional, and appreciative intelligence of the change agent than diagnostic ones.

Proposition 8: An improvisational approach to the action phase results in more change, more quickly, than an implementation approach

Consultants and managers can use dialogic approaches to generate ideas and solutions and then converge on a solution and work to implement it. I don't, however, think that leads to much transformational change. I think, by definition, transformational change is a complex situation where there are so many variables influencing each other simultaneously we just can't figure it out ahead of time. The alternative change process seems to work like this. We engage as many members of the target system as possible in generative conversations about the issues they are concerned about. We

create events where people can find each other and create groups that are motivated to pursue a line of action to deal with those concerns. And then the leaders say "Go and do it. Don't wait for us. There aren't going to be any committees to vet proposals and pronouncements coming from on high. You know what you need to do differently starting now so just do it. Let us know what resources and other support you need".

This process works by leaders putting into place mechanisms so they can track what actually happens and amplify the efforts that are leading in the desired direction (probe-sense-respond). Studying cases of successful transformation using Appreciative Inquiry, Open Space Technology, Art of Hosting, Future Search, I think this pattern is what we find. To breed a culture that can continuously change, leadership needs to acknowledge and celebrate the experiments that failed as well as those that succeed.

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Sidebar: The following can be Dialogic OD techniques, depending on how they are used...

- Art of Hosting (artofhosting.org)
- Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperrider)
- Complex Adaptive Response (Stacey)
- Conference Model (Axelrod)
- Coordinated Management of Meaning (Pearce & Cronen)
- Cycle of Resolution (Levine)
- Dynamic Facilitation (Rough)
- Organizational Learning Conversations (Bushe)
- Narrative Mediation (Winslade & Monk)
- Open Space Technology (Owen)
- Reflexive Inquiry (Oliver)
- Real Time Strategic Change (Jacobs)
- Search Conference (Emery)
- Solution Focused Dialogue (Jackson & McKergow)
- Syntegration (Beer)
- Systemic Consulting (Storch)
- Technology of Participation (Spencer)
- Work Out (Ashkenas)
- World Café (Brown)