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EDLE 896 Theories of Change in International Contexts

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Assignment #2: My Theory of Change

“Organizing is a journey, not a destination.”

– Anonymous

Exploring my Theory of Change

Tsoukas and Chia (2002) write, “Change is the reweaving of actors’ webs of beliefs and habits of action as a result of new experiences obtained through interactions” (p. 570). Implicit in this definition of change is the role of conversations, and more specifically, how interactive conversations create that web “of beliefs and habits.” Conversations, or dialogue, create a narrative, which is what constitutes our reality, that is, the environment in which beliefs, habits, and action are taken. The conversations are both external and internal, the latter of which Humberto Maturana, briefly mentioned in Tsoukas and Chia’s article, emphasized the concepts of autopoesis and recursive reflections.

About a decade ago, I had the opportunity to study under Maturana in Santiago, Chile, which reinforced and advanced my approach to organizational learning and development. Maturana bases his theory on human biology, and in particular, the central nervous system. Each cell, he argues, is a self-contained organism that adapts, reflexes, and lives within itself and in coordination with other cells. Applying this concept to humans, his theory suggests we each are continuously engaged in self-reflective, internal narratives. These reflective narratives are self-organizing collections; there is no “lead” internal voice, so to speak, just as there are no “lead” cells in the human body. Said another way, each individual is a self-contained organization and interacts with other human organizations, which result in collective narratives ultimately articulated in and through particular cultures.

The implication of this understanding is that the nature of our humanness is a self-organizing series of reflections defined and articulated through language. When that language engages with an internal or external dialogue, the result is a conversation. As conversations are agile and ever-evolving, the very nature of our humanness is effectively “organizational becoming,” similar to the concept presented by Tsoukas and Chia (2002). My approach to organizational change, therefore, is rooted in the concept that change is affected through changing the narrative of the conversation. As social systems are most identified by shared “assumptions, values, norms, and attitudes,” all of which is based on the language-ing used by the humans therein, I associate strongly with the normative-re-educative theory of change (Janicijevic, 2014).

A potential limit of this orientation is the environment in which such narratives are generated. Not all environments support reflexive discourse, which is well articulated in the power-coercive or rational-empirical models described by Janicijevic (2014). Such top-down organizational structures expect obedience based on either viewing employees as rational humans looking out for self-interest, or as adherent followers to a strict power structure. However, as Janicijevic (2014) suggests, such structures tend not to produce sustained change or embodied commitment among employees. I contend such sustainability is not achieved, because these structures ignore the fundamental point of our humanness, which is that unless we seek to alter the narrative held by the individual, change will not be embodied and therefore will not continue once the personalities of the hierarchical structure leave, and/or will lead to decreased morale, lack of “buy-in,” lower productivity, and decreased incentive to excel.

In my view, the role of the leader is to facilitate the space in order for these conversations to occur. In a power-coercive or rational-empirical structure, therefore, the leader of shifting these conversations will likely not be the one with authority. Leaders are often found in middle management, who, while lacking decision-making power, can (and do) have the power to create space for the collective narrative of a group to shift. This power is given by his/her staff, not by senior decision-makers. This distinction of understanding the potential influence of leaders within the organization – not just those overseeing or commanding the organization – is often overlooked by both senior management and potential leaders. (While this paper does not ask for an analysis of what makes a leader, I will summarily state that managers keep trains on existing tracks; leaders work to lay new tracks. While the role of the Middle Manager may be to maintain the train’s tracks, his/her leadership is available in helping staff see the tracks anew, and creating the space for (i.e. leading) his/her staff to generate narratives that foster inspired, productive, and effective narratives around their work.)

This people-centered approach to change theory has been developed after decades of observation and personal experience in both personal and professional domains. For example, in the pre-Silicon Valley environment, I worked for two hi-tech companies; the first in 1992, and the second in 2000. The first company was Seagate Technology, which has and continues to make hard disk drives for the computer industry. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the company maintained a top-down, hierarchical model of organization, leadership, and decision-making with minimum opportunity for employees, outside of software engineers, to innovate or experiment. The result was an environment that struggled with low morale, feelings of being “stifled,” and a task-ordered structure. Change was accomplished through modification of processes, tasks, and positions under a directive style of management (Janicijevic, 2014). This model became problematic as the 1990s unfolded; successful companies were recognizing that embracing new narratives and allowing the staff – its self-reflecting organisms, so to speak – to dialogue and create new realities of possibilities for the company would stimulate the necessary innovation and creativity to succeed in the hyper-fast, hypercompetitive computing industry. Seagate leadership decided to evolve its cultural structure to allow for all levels of the organization to take risks, offer ideas, and work across company sectors, thereby cross-populating ideas and generating new thinking. This decision is a significant reason why Seagate continues as a robust Silicon Valley success story.

In contrast, in 2000, just before the internet boom began, I joined Palm, Inc, which made handheld computer devices most famously known as the Palm Pilot. With competition from Blackberry and other providers, and a growing “Valley energy” (referring to the Silicon Valley) of computing possibility, the company held a tight hierarchical structure at the top but enabled experimentation and innovation at the working level. As a result, non-engineering teams were producing patents; marketing teams were offering ideas to the software divisions; and business development staff were identifying new technologies to integrate into the company’s operating system. A key reason why Palm ultimately dissolved was because senior leadership stopped accepting innovative design and thinking; the result was swift: employee morale plummeted, incentives to innovate deteriorated, and silos and back-biting took over. In other words, the organization’s original experience of flexibly encouraging and generating new narratives, which inspired innovation and agility, was no longer accepted; as a result, in addition to other factors, the company split apart in 2002, and was finally dissolved.

From these experiences, I gained the distinction of “change” and “transformation.” The word “change” suggests a switch from one thing to another; it is a mechanistic term easily associated with “change the lightbulb” or “change the battery” or “change clothes.” If we drive for organizational “change,” the expectation is that staff will absorb and embody that change as if they are parts of a machine being “changed out.” In fact, leadership frustrations during an organizational change often stem from staff “not getting it,” or “resisting change” or “not being rational.” Likewise, staff feel unheard, dismissed, or ignored – or more summarily, not treated as human beings but rather as components.

On the other hand, the word “transform” recognizes the “organization becoming,” the “emergent” nature of organizations that are only seen when “placing ourselves at the center of an unfolding phenomenon” (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002). Humans are not static organisms. Our biology, our narratives, our intuitions, our relations, our cognition are not “changed” from A to B. Rather, we transform from one position or consideration or reflection to another. An example is reflecting on the saying “I changed my mind.” A listener may ask, “what made you change your mind,” or “how did that change occur.” This listener is referring to the process—an evolution or emergence – that occurred, which transformed one thinking, or narrative, to another thinking. (In contrast, it would not occur to someone to ask “what made you change the lightbulb”; this rhetorical question would be seen as pedantic.) Using the word “transform” allows us to recognize the role of the conversational narrative transitioning from Point A and B, and therefore gives us a place to enter into the process. To *transform* organizations conveys the process of movement, which is processed through language and the resulting narratives generated.

I see the challenge of organizational change, or organizational transformation, in my government work almost daily. Given I operate in a power-coercive environment, which simultaneously desires to be a more normative-re-educative structure at the working level – a complicated, often counter-productive tension that affects morale and productivity, I observe political leadership seeking to “change” my Agency without consideration for the process of transforming the conversations occurring both internally and externally among staff. As a result, words such as “we’ll survive this,” or “what do you want me to say/do now” permeate responses and conversations, which superficially may reflect the “change” demanded but does not address the internal transformation process necessary for sustained, meaningful shifts.

Application of this Theory of Change

In early summer 2020, I joined the Bureau for Africa at USAID to lead the Education and Youth Division as its Chief and “YALI” Coordinator (two separate positions). One of my teams is the Young African Leaders Initiative (YALI) team. This team is made up of five staff in DC, plus interns, and four staff located in four different countries in sub-Saharan Africa. In addition, YALI is implemented at USAID through four separate Regional Leadership Centers (RLC) located in Senegal, Ghana, Kenya, and South Africa. Each RLC is led by a Chief of Party (COP), who oversees a local staff providing operational support and leadership training to roughly 1000 young African leaders at each RLC annually. Further, each RLC resides in an African host institution, which is either a university or other training center; these host institutions are partners to YALI as they support the RLCs in implementation and engagement with the national and regional communities. Additionally, YALI is an interagency initiative with the Department of State, which operates the Mandela Washington Fellowship program, an exchange program under YALI, and the YALI Network, made up of 650,000 self-selecting young Africans who desire information, network, training, and other opportunities facilitated through the Network.

As a former Presidential Initiative under the Obama Administration, YALI also responds to political leadership priorities, which is currently of significant focus, and maintains great attention from Congress, particularly Representative Karen Bass, who chairs the Black Caucus and overseas the House relationship with Africa. Beyond U.S. government stakeholders, the YALI alumni make up a powerful key stakeholder; YALI has catalyzed a transformative youth movement on the continent, and alumni and their endeavors are leading this charge. As a result, multiple civic organizations, local and national governments, and private sector organizations on the sub-Saharan continent are involved with YALI. Another key stakeholder of YALI are private sector partners (called the public-private partnership program). Multiple American private sector companies and foundations provide funding, specialized training courses and in-kind resources to support YALI, and therefore are closely involved in the initiative’s outcomes and results.

When the RLCs opened in 2015, this complex, cosmopolitan organization was founded on the assumption that private sector partners would assume financial sustainability of YALI, which was written into the cooperative agreements that funded the RLCs. (Note: cooperative agreements are a type of award mechanism utilized by USAID.) In 2019, recognizing the private sector was not responding as expected, the RLCs formed YALI Africa, an umbrella organization intended to serve as a coordinating vehicle and fundraiser for the RLCs. Aside from creating a shell organization called “YALI Africa,” the operationalization and execution of it objectives have either been insufficient or not occurring.

Since taking the helm of my Division, I have been implementing my Theory of Change (which I would argue would be better termed “Theory of Transformation”). As Heyden, Fourne, Koene, Werkman, and Ansari (2017) suggest, a “spark” often initiates a call for change (p. 962); in my case, that spark was generated by a confluence of my entrepreneurial experience intersecting with tightening budgets, staff frustration, and attrition at the RLCs. The spark was an urgent recognition that the objectives, capacity, and competency of the cooperative agreements, the ambitions of YALI Africa, and its partnership system was not working. It quickly became clear that a significantly different understanding of and approach to YALI was necessary for its future viability, sustainability, and growth.

In response, I employed the normative-re-educative approach with my human-centered, self-reflective approach, meaning I looked at the social structures and narratives that had created and formed YALI, and how those conversations had evolved. This effort meant engaging in multiple conversations with staff individually, in small groups, and in large groups. These conversations led to a document, which I distributed to all staff for comment, feedback, and modification. Next, I engaged with a broader group of stakeholders, including the RLCs, Department of State, private sector partners, and others to listen and socialize the idea that “the emperor had no clothes,” and a transformation of thinking was necessary. This process has been challenging and time consuming as is the case when seeking to shift a narrative through conversations. Some staff have been committed to a particular approach and narrative around YALI, and efforts to move the conversation to include other factors has not always been well-received, and at least in one case, directly challenged. In addition, some stakeholders carry certain concerns, such as budgetary obligations, program implementation approach, conservation of RLC autonomy, deferral to private sector organizations, and political prioritization. My approach has been to include these concerns while maintaining the vision and core narrative that a bold transformation for YALI – a new narrative – is necessary should it continue.

This people-centered approach can be summarized as a repeating cyclical approach starting with a spark:

Notably, this Theory of Change is possible even within power-coercive or rational-empirical structure, both of which are evident at USAID. In my Theory of Change, these structures are acknowledged as the forum for decision-making, but not directive in how I relate to my colleagues and lead conversations to generate a new reality based on a new narrative. This distinction is important; even within power-coercive and rational-empirical structures, which are highly directive, I argue we retain the agency and leadership, and further, hold the responsibility, to guide our colleagues’ conversations in order to shift a narrative, particularly when the objective is to transform a team’s way of thinking and taking action. This possibility exists in part because, even within tightly controlled structures, the organization continues self-organizing at some level because it is our nature to do so. Individuals and groups self-organize based on the conversations and resulting reality that is produced by that narrative regardless of who holds the authority to coerce or cajole change. As a leader, therefore, my role is to create space in the emergent, organizational becoming, that is, between Narrative A and Narrative B, so that new narratives can be generated. Further, this theory of change indicates staff are empowered regardless of the structure of the organization.

As I launched this spark for change, my management style has been best reflected in Kotter’s Change Management Model (Kotter, n.d.); at the same time, the response from colleagues has been best captured in the Kubler-Ross grief scale (Kubler-Ross, 1969). In alignment with Kotter’s model, I began by affirming and expanding a nascent-felt sense of urgency by explaining the challenges, building commitment, and gaining support for both the immediate need for change as well as the possibility for change. Building a team and developing a strategic approach has occurred simultaneously, reinforcing the point that this change process has not been linear. Currently, we are preparing for a broader communication strategy of the change we propose, which includes setting SMART goals and obtaining resources, although the circular process of continually re-seeing and re-articulating the challenges (phase I) continues. The response of some of my colleagues has varied, however, and for some, their reactions most closely resemble the Kubler-Ross grief scale. I currently have staff at various stages along the scale with one in particular still caught in the negotiation stage. This stalemate reveals the weakness in my human-centered approach; the time involved in developing a new narrative, particularly within a power-coercive organization. Put simply, in order to advance our objectives with YALI, staff do not have a limitless amount of time to move through the grief process when change is necessary for the survival of the initiative. This constraint is further dictated by political, legal, budgetary, and procurement authorities, which therefore requires the narrative of the conversation to come to a conclusion.

In response, my role as the leader, defined here as creating space for staff to generate new narratives through conversation, evolves by me narrowing that space. In other words, as new narratives are developed, the “funnel” of conversations narrows toward Narrative B. The graphic below illustrates the process whereby the conversations are open, narratives are shaped, and ultimately conclude in a new narrative. As the leader, my role is to help move staff through the process with the eye of maximizing the space to have those conversations as long as possible.

To recap, my theory of change is people-centered based on the conviction our reality is created by the narrative we employ, which is articulated through the conversations we have. The grounding for this belief is rooted in the self-organizing cells of our biology. A theory of change addresses conversations, and the role of the leader is to create space for those conversations to occur while simultaneously providing shape to those narratives so that action can occur. The limits include time, patience, and willingness to let go of full consensus. Not all staff will be able to create new narratives, and this process may lead to a reshuffling of positions or members. As this theory of change contends with our social structures, the normative-re-educative approach captures the tools used and participative nature of this approach.

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**Feedback to Learner 3/4/21 6:39 PM**

**Stephanie,**

**Your opening paragraph is description of coconstructivism, a topic we have talked about in class a few times. This idea seems to be a theme throughout your paper. I had to look up Maturana but from what I did find suggests that you likely had a great experience and I can see he left an impression. I especially like his marriage of biology and philosophy.  It’s clear you have given your change philosophy a lot of thought. Although we didn’t talk about this at length, narratives are likely the most important aspect of change but the thing that most often overlooked. The rest of change it is relatively easy, putting a plan together, figure out process, but all of that really doesn’t matter if the narrative doesn’t change. I often wonder how much of narrative creation is assimilation vs. manipulation. I seem to do both, I sometimes engage in narrative making to assimilate ideas and come up with new solutions and other times consciously or unconsciously engage to shape the narrative. Now that I think about it I probably try to shape the narrative more often than assimilate narratives to control the outcome. I think having a formal process in place to carve out time to engage in open discourse is essential but as I discovered in my own research, ingenuine exercises in soliciting feedback only results in further disenfranchising already skeptical stakeholders. How do we convince others of our sincerity? Too often people draw conclusions about our intentions based on outcomes and we know these things don’t always align. Great food for thought, this will keep me up tonight.**