Narrative thought and management

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Managing is complicated but the essence is simple: understanding the expectations and the resulting behavior of stakeholders and promoting necessary changes. My purpose here is to expand upon this characterization by examining the origins of expectations and behavior, called cognitive narratives, and how to promote changes that enable the organization to survive and prosper.

NARRATIVE THOUGHT

To start at the beginning: For the past 15 years, my colleagues and I have sought to understand why memories, sensations, perceptions, emotions, and all the rest do not simply merge into one big muddle. That is, why does conscious experience make sense? And, secondarily, what is the relationship between conscious experience and behavior? These may appear removed from the challenges of management, but bear with me.

The answer to the first question, about the muddle, turns out to be that that your brain imposes a very specific and useful structure on the contents of consciousness. It is called *narrative structure* because it resembles the kinds of stories with which we are all familiar on TV, in movies, and in books. But the reason there is a resemblance is *not* because the structure your brain imposes is like a story, it is that stories are like the structure your brain imposes. That is, you and I and all humans have an affinity for stories because that is the way we naturally think. If evolution had resulted in a markedly different structure for conscious experience, we would have an affinity for whatever was congruent with it. Indeed, it can be convincingly argued that, given the structure of the environment in which we evolved, narrative structure was the necessarily the result; but that is a discussion for another day. Suffice it that human conscious experience has a narrative structure and, as a consequence, the way we think about ourselves and the world around us has a similar structure.

To say that conscious experience has a narrative structure is to say something very specific. The elements in the structure are the contents of consciousness—specifically, memories and current perceptions. Structuring consists of temporally arranging these elements by causality, purpose, and their emotional tags according to rules that are not yet wholly understood. But, just as arranging words into a grammatical sentence creates an emergent meaning that the unarranged words do not have, arranging the contents of consciousness into a narrative structure creates emergent meaning that makes sense of experience.

The answer to the second question, the one about behavior, is that imposing narrative structure on the past (memory) and present (perception) constrains what can be expected to happen in the future. The constraints ensure that the expected future is consistent with the past and present, that it flows from what already has happened up to now. This constrained future is, so to speak, the narrative's (i.e., your) best guess, about what can be expected to happen.

Because our narratives are all we have to make sense of what is going on, we tend to believe them, especially when they are coherent and plausible. Therefore, we tend to believe that the expected future actually is what is going to happen, rather than just a best guess. If that future is undesirable (if it conflicts with our beliefs, values, or preferences), we try to stop it from happening or take steps to improve it. This requires a plan of action, its execution, and monitoring of its effects. Such a plan is similar the plans used in organizations but considerably simpler due to constraints on how much detail can be kept in mind as the plan is executed.

Each of us has many narratives. Most are filed away in episodic memory, with only one as the focus of attention at a particular time. For example, your current narrative is about what is happening right now as you read these words, but your episodic memory retains narratives about your family, your friends, your job and the organization in which your work, about national politics, religion, your health, your hobbies, and on and on. In short, you have a narrative for every segment of your life, and they are all interconnected through common meanings and shared emotions to provide you with a broad understanding of what is going on around you and where you fit into it. You retrieve these narratives from memory when conditions require a shift in your attention. Once retrieved, the narrative becomes the current narrative and takes up where it left off when your attention last shifted and relegated it to memory. This narrative remains current until your attention shifts again and some other narrative takes its place, whereupon it returns to memory until it is needed.[1]

Communication

Narration is about more than just structuring conscious experience and acting to shape the future, it is the foundation for social interaction. As part of this interaction, we strive to explain our experience and actions to other people

and we strive to understand theirs. But the narratives that structure our experience are more complicated than the rather simple, paired-down stories we tell others. They are not made merely—or even primarily—of words, like a novel or newspaper article. Nor are they simply a combination of words and mental pictures or words and gestures. Instead they are a rich mixture of memories and of visual, auditory, and other cognitive images, infused with emotions, to capture meaning. But, when put into words, much of this richness is lost, almost always falling short of the original. Indeed, the story one tells is largely limited to the narrative's core meaning and a few ancillary details. This almost always leaves out, or inadequately expresses, the emotions that give the narrative its depth and thrust. Emotions are notoriously difficult to put into words; even gestures fail to communicate them adequately.

Because narrative is key to thought and action, understanding its implications is key to understanding ourselves and others and why we do what we do. Moreover, it is the key to changing what we and others expect and do. What follows will illustrate this by examining the centrality of narrative to two areas of management, managing organizational change and managing employees.

MANAGING ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE

Consider the following widely accepted principles for managing organizational change.

1. *Assess* the organization's external and internal environments and specify needed changes
2. Understand the organization's *culture* and if it impedes progress, work to change it.
3. Create a *vision* for the organization's future
4. Lay out a *plan* of action for moving the organization toward the envisioned future.
5. *Implement* the plan and monitor progress
6. *Institutionalize* achieved changes

Now consider these principles from the narrative viewpoint; that change management must focus on understanding and changing one's own and others' narratives about what is happening (the present), what is going to happen (expectations), and what to do about it (behavior) if what is going to happen is undesirable.

Assessment

Assessment requires creation of a narrative about what is happening in the world around the organization and within the organization itself. The narrative describes what happened in the past that led to how things are now and what can be expected to happen if nothing is changed.

Consider an example. Suppose the Human Resources (HR) department of your organization reports increasing difficulty finding skilled job applicants. Further, in the course of assessing the organization's external environment, you come to believe (your narrative) that the state legislature's repeated cuts to education budgets (past) are leading to cutbacks in advanced math and science courses (present), and that more cuts and even fewer courses are in the offing

(future). This prompts you to make an internal assessment to see if HR's criteria are right for the jobs or are more demanding than necessary. Depending on what the internal assessment yields, hiring criteria could be changed, jobs could be redesigned to fit applicants' skills, remedial training programs could be set up, and/or you could work with other organizations in similar straits to lobby the legislature to increase school funding.

As with all narratives, an assessment narrative is structured by time, causality, purpose, and emotions. (Although it can be argued that emotions have no place here, there is no way to exclude them, so it is best to be up front about them.) It is a good narrative to the degree that it is plausible and coherent. And, good narratives are believable narratives, even if they are flawed. In our example, suppose that the consistent failure of job applicants to possess required skills led to a narrative that assigned blame to the legislature. The danger is that once this cause is identified and woven into a good narrative, it becomes a fact—it is assumed to be the right cause, even if it is not. Maybe the real cause is simpler. Perhaps the advanced courses were eliminated because students did not sign up for them. Perhaps this was because nobody advised them to do so. If this were the case, lobbying the legislature is less appropriate than working with educators to correct deficits in advising and finding ways to reinstate the courses. In short, misidentification of causes may lead to futile solutions even though the narrative is plausible and coherent and therefore believable and makes sense.

However, for the sake of argument, let us assume we are dealing with an assessment narrative that accurately identifies present and future problems, what caused them, and what will happen if they are not addressed.

Culture

When the external assessment suggests problems exist or are looming, the first step is to see if the organization has the resources to deal with them. Some of this internal assessment is obvious: Are there obstacles imposed by limited resources—personnel, skills, tools, etc.? But equally important are there obstacles imposed by the organization's culture.

Culture is a narrative that is shared by the organization's members. It describes how the organization got started, what it has become, and what it is striving to become. It sets expectations about what is legitimate, and what is not. That is, it sets expectations about how resources are legitimately to be used, what members of the organization can legitimately expect of each other, what constitutes legitimate power for management and how that power is to be legitimately exercised. It also sets expectations about what employee behaviors are legitimate, and therefore acceptable, and how acceptable behaviors will be rewarded and unacceptable behaviors will be punished.

Because the culture is shared, everyone understands what is expected even if it never is written down. Indeed, cultural expectations may be at variance with official statements, but they almost always prevail. And, the more plausible and coherent the culture narrative, the more impervious it is to efforts to change it. This is beneficial in that it provides consistency over time but it is detrimental when change is needed.

Successful solution of the problems in the assessment narrative almost always requires a change in one or more aspects of the organization's culture narrative. This is because solving the problem almost always requires changes in resource allocations, procedures, and power structures. All of this is disruptive and provokes resistance; people tend to stick with the old narrative, especially if it is plausible and coherent. The leader's job is to induce cultural change, to change the narrative, in order to minimize or remove obstacles to the solution of assessed problems so the organization can survive and prosper.

Vision

Culture change is best begun by offering a narrative about a desirable future, called the vision, and a plan for attaining it. This vision narrative uses the assessment narrative to identify what is wrong and what will happen if nothing is done, as well as what could be attained if the proper steps are taken in time. It must emphasize the salvageable aspects of the existing culture; "We won't betray our principles, but if we work hard, etc., this is what we can become." That is, the vision narrative always is an extension of some of the bedrock values in the culture narrative because that is what makes working to achieve the vision worthwhile. But, it also makes clear what aspects of the culture narrative have to change and why. That is, it makes clear what expectations and behaviors must change and why.

Plans

Once the assessment narrative identifies the problems and the vision narrative identifies the desirable future that will be attained when those problems are eliminated, it is necessary to lay out a plan to make it happen. It is surprising how often managers think that all that is required is to identify the problem and state what its solution will produce and somehow employees will work it out from there. But, of course, you need another narrative, a plausible, coherent story about how the organization will go from where it is to where it should be; from the problems it faces to the envisioned future. Failure to articulate the plan as a plausible, coherent narrative leaves everyone in limbo. They know what is wrong and they know what a good future looks like, but they don't know what to do. They need a step-by-step story about how we'll do this first and then this and then either this or that depending on what happened and so on. Of course, this narrative will have to change as conditions change, as the effects of prior behaviors either work or fail, but the core remains the same—getting from here to where we want to be.

Implementation

As the plan narrative turns into action, feedback about its success is key to keeping it on track. This requires that both progress and success must be clearly defined and the means of measuring both of them must be specified. Doing this requires a refinement of the narrative that tells everyone how to differentiate progress from regress or stagnation (benchmarks or mileposts or some similar label) and how

we will deal with setbacks (plans, B, C, and D). And, equally important, it tells everyone what constitutes success, preparing them to understand that it seldom is total and often looks rather different from it was originally envisioned.

Institutionalization

The leader's job isn't done after some approximation to success is achieved. The stronger the old culture narrative, the greater the tendency to drift back to how things were before the change. This means that the old problems may creep back in and little if anything will have been accomplished. This must be combated by creating a follow-through narrative about the change itself. This narrative is a mini-history about how the organization confronted its problems, how it strove to overcome them, how it succeeded, and how that success sets it up to deal with problems in the future. The latter is important because the organizations internal and external environments are in constant flux and new problems are inevitable. Strengthening the new culture narrative with this follow-through narrative institutionalizes the entire sequence of narrative development: assessment, vision, planning, and implementation with an eye to change as a constant rather than merely the reaction to threats.

The theme of the foregoing is narrative at every level. Assessments have to be plausible, coherent narratives if they are to be taken seriously. Culture is an existing narrative that can aid or hinder attempts to instigate change. Vision is a narrative about a desirable future, but it won't accepted unless it is reasonably clear that you can get there from here or if "there" is too amorphous. A plan is a narrative about the explicit steps for getting from here to there and is usually appended to the vision narrative to reinforce its plausibility. The implementation narrative often is unique to the different jobs that contribute to the overall effort—to the cogs in the machine. But, at all levels, implementation narratives too must be plausible (reasonable steps toward the vision) and coherent (lacking in ambiguous choice points for the individual implementer). Finally, the follow-through narrative has to be incorporable into the culture narrative as the story of how we prevented catastrophe and how this victory tells us to remain vigilant and flexible so we can prevail over new potential catastrophes.

MANAGING EMPLOYEES

The narratives discussed above are rather abstract, or at least on some higher plane than the ones to be discussed next. Those were about guiding the organization as it confronts and overcomes internal and external problems. These are about individual employees and groups of employees acting as a sub-unit of the larger organization. Those were about being an executive, these are about being a boss.

Once again we start with some broadly accepted principles for managing employees.

1. Actively *lead*.
2. Understand one's own and one's employee's work-related *expectations*.
3. Anticipate one's own and one's employees' *emotions*.

4. Translate expectations into clear performance *standards*.
5. Evaluate *problems* that arise from unmet expectations and solve them.

As was the case for managing organizational change, narrative is key to managing employees. But, in this case, the principles listed above identify components of a fairly unitary job-related narrative that every boss and every employee has about their respective jobs and about each other. As with every narrative, job narratives describe what has happened in the past, what is going on now, and what is to be expected to happen. But, bosses' and employees' narratives have different viewpoints. The boss sees things from the viewpoint of how each employee contributes to the unit's performance and the employee sees thing from his own viewpoint and the viewpoint of those with whom he or she works. It is this difference in viewpoints that leads to mismatched expectations and resulting conflicts that are an unfortunate feature of any activity involving human beings, particularly those within the hierarchical structure that characterizes most modern organizations.

So, let us look at these components of the bosses' and employees' job narratives.

Lead

Every boss has a leadership component in his or her job narrative; how he or she goes about doing his or her job. One boss' component might be laissez-faire dealings with employees; perhaps articulating goals and leaving the methods up to the employees. Another's might be to establish friendships with employees and motivating them on a personal level. Still another's might be using the authority and power inherent in being the boss to direct through fiat and motivate through threat. Or, make semi-economic deals with employees—they do their jobs and don't make trouble in exchange for specific rewards. None of these is particularly attractive but they all are common.

Expectations

Just as bosses' job narratives have components about how to be a boss, every employee's job narrative has a corresponding component about how the boss should do his or her job. Research by my colleague, Byron Bissell, showed that the greater the mismatch between how bosses are seen as doing their jobs and employees' expectations about how they should do them, the lower employees' reported satisfaction with the organization. That is, if their boss doesn't behave like they think a boss should behave, it makes the whole organization less attractive, perhaps because it makes everything more difficult and unpleasant. Low satisfaction with the organization can impair motivation and, depending upon the ease of moving to another job, contribute to employee attrition.

Just as employees have narratives about how their bosses should do their jobs, they each have a narrative about their own job and its place in the overall scheme of things. This narrative is about how they came to have the job and how things have developed since then, what the job entails, what

obstacles it faces, what constitutes good job performance, and so on. Their bosses have complementary narratives about each job under his or her purview, although these center more on functions and performance than the nitty-gritty of actually doing the job. Mismatches between these two narratives result in unmet expectations on both sides. Sometimes these unmet expectations can be resolved by mutual willingness to understand the other's narratives, characterized by the common phrase, "I'm trying to understand where you're coming from." But, good will aside, severe violations of the boss' expectations may be fatal for the employee because the boss has the power.

In fact, power and how it is legitimately exercised is a major component of job narratives for both bosses and employees because it is part of the organization's culture narrative and because it is part of everyday interactions. For employees, the component is about power relative to the boss—what either can legitimately ask of the other—and about how the boss should exercise his or her power. It also is about power relative to other employees. If this power component matches the boss' power component and the power components of the job narratives of co-workers, everybody's expectations are met and things go smoothly. But mismatches are a major source of workplace conflict. Perceived excessive or illegitimate use of power by a boss or co-worker is interpreted as bullying. Perceived underuse of power is interpreted as weakness. Bullying breeds resentment and retaliation. Weakness invites exploitation and usurpation.

Finally, everyone's, including the boss', job narrative has a component about his or her job relative to other aspects of his or her life. On the one hand, this component is important because it determines the degree of commitment, energy, and time the person will willingly devote to the job. On the other hand, it is important because it determines the balance the person will strive to achieve in his or her life and, therefore, is part of his or her larger autobiographical narrative and self-concept.

Emotions

Emotions are part of every narrative and the most important emotions are those that arise from violated expectations or the anticipation of violations. Bosses often are stunned by the strength of employees' emotional reactions to what seem to them to be justifiable demands. Similarly, employees often are surprised when their bosses react emotionally to what seem to them to be reasonable actions on their part. Although these supposedly justifiable demands may be legitimate in terms of the boss' narrative, they violate the employee's expectations. Similarly, what is reasonable in light of the employee's narrative violates the boss' expectations. The resulting emotional reactions seem unprompted and incomprehensible to those on the receiving end. Most organizations try to outlaw emotions in the name of "professionalism." But this just keeps the peace in the short run because it doesn't address the underlying problem, of which the emotions are merely symptoms. It doesn't address the mismatch between the bosses' and the employees' job narratives and the resulting violations of expectations.

Standards

The boss' narrative about an employee's job and how it contributes to the larger enterprise dictates his or her expectations about the employee's behaviors and about what constitutes good job performance. Of course, the employee's job narrative does the same thing. Once again the problem is that the two may not agree. When this happens, the boss' violated expectations often generate strong emotions that the employee finds difficult to understand; after all he or she was doing what their narrative indicated should be done. In this case it usually boils down to finding a way to make the employee's narrative more like the boss'; again, the boss holds the power. But, too often this unilateral solution is unsuccessful. If the employee faces obstacles that the boss' narrative doesn't include, no amount of force or persuasion are going to make the two narratives match. The boss must somehow be informed about the obstacles and help in their removal or he or she must change his or her narrative to take them into account. Many, many years ago, when I was head of a psychology department, I fired a receptionist about whom everyone had been complaining. Later, when I tried to compose a job description to advertise for a replacement, it became clear that the job was so badly designed that nobody could have done it well. It became equally clear that my narrative about her job had been badly flawed: I simply didn't know what was involved and my attribution of her apparently poor performance to inherent incompetence was baseless and insulting. Even worse, my sole standard for evaluating her job performance was that there should not be any complaints. In short, I was a rotten boss for that poor woman and, because she was already gone, there was nothing I could do to make things right.

Problems and Solutions

Boss' narratives often have different timelines than do employees'. This becomes apparent in the difference in what is regarded as prompt identification of problems and prompt solution of those problems. Bosses are more likely to detect systemic problems, especially if the dysfunction centers on particular employees or groups of employees, and less likely to detect more specific obstacles to good individual or unit performance. And, when they detect the latter, they often are more measured in their responses because their narrative contains a bigger picture than employees' do, so they see how removing obstacles for one employee may impose new ones for another. Employees' narratives are just the opposite. They quickly detect local obstacles and the repercussions because they see the immediate negative consequences. The result is that bosses feel that employees want solutions too quickly, without regard to the complexities and employees feel that bosses don't understand their problems or simply don't care.

The result of this narrative mismatch in narratives is a mismatch in expectations, with all the attendant emotions and the complications that strong emotions can give rise to. The antidote is to create trust between bosses and employees that the other is well intended and is willing to tolerate

some degree of frustration in order to make things run more smoothly. Part of this is establishing a mutual understanding about what constitutes fairness in regard to solutions to the problems.

Making fairness part of employees' job narratives is difficult. Talk is insufficient; actions are everything. A history of procedurally fair decisions, even if the results weren't always what the employees regard as fair, is the bedrock. This allows employees' narratives to include the good record of past decisions when setting expectations about future decisions. If there isn't sufficient history, or if it is spotty, the narrative will lack plausibility and coherence and expectations will reflect these structural defects in the form of decreased trust and tentative behaviors. At its extreme, decreased trust means that every decision will be doubted, every change resisted, and the boss-employee relationship will become contentious and confrontational. And all that conflict decreases the energy that can be devoted to improving the bosses', employees', and organization's performance.

IN CLOSING

All of what has been said above about change management and being a boss can be said without recourse to anything about narratives. It has been done in countless textbooks and management seminars. But identifying these seemingly different management and supervisory principles as narratives underscores what was said in the opening paragraph: Fundamentally, managing organizations and people is about managing narratives and the expectations and behaviors that derive from them. In short, thinking in terms of narratives provides a more plausible and coherent story about managing than is afforded by thinking in terms of discrete managerial responsibilities.

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