The benefits of not managing change by not communicating: Some reflections on the problem of self-reflexivity in human affairs

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So much of change management is merely talk about it. Talking up change and talking about change. So the point of this paper is to understand the relationship between change in organisations and communication about change in organisations.   This relationship can be analysed as a particular case of general debate in social theory about the extent to which "reality" is socially constructed. That is to what extent is the social world a linguistic artifact and to what extent is it a material artifact.   We will argue that in fact organisations are constructed both linguistically and   materially.   However this interaction between materiality and language has not been well theorised.   We offer some thoughts on this underlying problem drawing on autopoesis (Maturana and Varela). The dialectic we engage can be summed up as how can language affect the materiality of organisational processes – and - how can the materiality of organisational process affect language. Then based on this we suggest some pragmatic philosophy   to   guide   managers   in   their   communication   about   change.

Introduction

Much has been made in recent years of the need for flexibility; for self reliant individuals; for the ability and desire to quickly respond to change; and for the need to do away with artificial protection from exposure to the vagaries of the global market place. In this worldview, radical "restructuring" and accelerated change are needed for a prosperous future. We live in turbulent times it is said. Organisations must be supremely adaptive. But is this rhetoric or "reality"? More intriguing still, and this is the point of this paper, how is the rhetoric related to the "reality".

The original theorising regarding turbulent change occurred was by Emery and Trist in 1956 but despite the rhetoric surrounding the notion of turbulence and the need for change, empirical studies of rates of change are relatively rare. Moreover, when it is undertaken it is often superficially analysed. For example, futurists such as Molitor (1997), site growth rates in knowledge and technological change as an indicator of an incessant barrage of change. But this kind of analysis masks a more complex milieu that is in fact comprised of both change and non-change. A complete analysis requires us to consider precisely what aspects of social and organisational life are changing and which are not. For example, while it is true that information technology becomes essentially obsolete within two years this does not mean that all aspects of a persons engagement with that technology is similarly obsolete. Updating skills required for learning new word processing packages requires updating syntactical information and awareness every two years but the meta-competencies of operating word processing systems have remained unchanged since their inception. Therefore, change at the meta-competence level is something in the order of decades rather than years.

Similarly, we can question the extent to which technology is a primary driver of change, for example, in an Australian study information technology change was ranked thirteenth as a source of change and accounted for only 6.4% of significant organisational changes in Australia (Waldersee and Blackstock, 1993). Downsizing and organisational restructuring were involved in 67% of changes. Although technological change may have been an indirect factor in these organisational rationalisations it is equally plausible that restructuring was driven as much by the winds of organisational politics and market demands. How many of these restructurings were actually necessary and how many of them assisted their organisations to improve their capacity to survive is uncertain.

Thus, the turbulent environment which has become folklore in the organisational change literature has rarely been subjected to empirical validation. Whilst some aspects of society and culture have been subject to change at increasing rates, other aspects of society and culture are more resistant and stable. For example, class structures and their supporting hierarchies within organisations appear to have remained unchanged throughout the decades of the most eloquent pleas for organisational democracy. The changes in participation in most work places have been changes at the syntactical level rather than at the level of underlying process. We see turbulence as being a surface turbulence with deeper structures remaining largely immovable. Similarly, language and culture move at a much slower pace. Although the syntactics of popular music change from generation to generation the underlying rhythmic structures remain essentially the same enabling crossover and communication between generations. Similarly, although changes in family and sexual behaviour were predicted during the 60s, the tendency towards monogamous sexual partnerships continues largely unchanged. We would argue that the social and cultural work practices of work organisations also reflect much stability with core issues of sociability and equity remaining a constant at the deep structural level.

So much of change management is therefore merely talk about it. Talking up change and talking about change. So the point of this paper is to understand the relationship between change in organisations and communication about change in organisations. This relationship can be analysed as a particular case of general debate in social theory about the extent to which "reality" is socially constructed. That is to what extent is the social world a linguistic artifact and to what extent is it a material artifact. I will argue that in fact organisations are constructed both linguistically and materially. However this interaction between materiality and language has not been well theorised. We offer some thoughts on this underlying problem drawing on autopoesis (Maturana and Varela). The dialectic we angage can be summed up as how can language affefct the materiality of organisational processes - how can the materiality of organisational process affect language. Then based on this we suggest some pragmatic philosophy to guide managers in their communication about change.

Language and reality

Constructivist (and constructionist) views are now in the ascendancy in social theory. Although there are many variants and traditions[1], pre and poststructuralist, they share an emphasis on language as a determining factor in the constitution (and therefore) change of society. We accept and celebrate that this strand of theorising is an important corrective to purely objectivist views of social theory. In attacking the taken-for-grantedness of social "realities" especially those held unreflexively, social constructivists open the way for critique and remaking of social life. They rightly make it more possible that the many socially constructed "realities" which are in effect legitimations of inequality,

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[1] An important distinction is between constructivist and constructionist traditions… which reflect micro, sense making perspectives and social institutional determinist perspectives respectively. Both are at issue here.

that serve various sets of interests, can be challenged. They remind us that the natural order of things is not natural at all.[2]

However this theoretical stance has a parallell imperative in praxis which find disturbing as it is sometimes enacted, namely, if the world is made through language all we need do is remake the language and our use of it and we will remake the world.

Words make our world. If we can't say it, we can't think it or be it or do it.   Whenever it is suggested to us that we should use new words or words in different combinations we are not just being invited to speak differently but to think and live and act differently.   .... Some of us… do not know the dialect necessary for getting someone to pay us a big salary……. New words invent new ways of living and being and thinking and doing. (Eric McWilliam: Surviving Best Practice…. 1999: 68-71)

We acknowledge that words do have a lot to do with making the social world. But it is an equally dangerous idea to think that words are all there is to making the world. A fallacy which history demonstrates has often been accompanied by a deluded will to power. In order to debunk this praxis, (which in effect simply transposes one power elite with their words, with another with their words)_ we must excavate the underlying social theory that informs it.

From a theoretical perspective, the tendency for influential sociologies to 'follow each "paradigm shift" (be it real or imaginary) in physics or biology' (Sokal & Bricmont, 1998, p. 177) engenders conceptual confusion for communication researchers, a result of the various relativisms that confound sociology in the late twentieth century (cf. Norris, 1997; Saul, 1997, chapt. 2; Sokal & Bricmont, 1998, chapt. 4). The effects of unbridled relativism on communication research are exemplified in the words of Feyerabend (1975) who claims that, because all methodologies have their limitations, 'the only rule that survives is "anything goes"' (p. 296). While acknowledging that scientific rationality may be, and often is, misused as an instrument of technocratic social domination and exploitation, 'what perhaps started out as a justified protest against arrogant technocratic reason has now become, in many quarters, a pretext for the crudest, most wholesale forms of cultural-relativist dogma' (Norris, 1997, pp. 1-2). The effect of such dogmas is to devalue language, the very phenomenon that marks human communication as unique (Maturana & Varela, 1980, p. 121).

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[2] (Though in our view, some protagonists are at times naive in their understanding of the evolution of these practices and self-serving in their attributions about the motivations of actors involved in producing, reproducing and being reproduced in the process. They are also sometimes amnesic, in our view, in their treatment of the atrocities that have been perpetrated by those who have adopted a completely socially constructed view of reality).

In contrast to the linguistically determined view of society we assert that there are three classes of events which are not constructed *exnihilo* by language which are nevertheless important constituents of society. These are

1. Biology of the human species.
2. The arrangement of materiality in space and time.
3. Systemic effects arising from 1 and 2 (including as a special case:- material histories)

As such human society shares much with other systems which are not mediated by language (rain forests, animal species and even the contents of the third drawer of the drawing board into which uncategorisable materialities are thrown and find a way to exist with dignity). In not talking about these precursors, social constructivists of all stripes distract us from the most important task of understanding how systems of words and material systems interact. (As much as objectivists, in their denial of language also offer false hope for systemic change). Understanding the conjunction of materiality and language is the current theoretical imperative and the hope for liberating social change.

A number of issues could be discussed to illustrate, and invite critique of our argument in relation to organisational functioning. These could include:

Biology

1. Biology, gender roles and leadership in organisations.
2. The biological basis of cognitive capacity and organisational hierarchy.

How did patriarchy evolve were males and females equal and the males got together one day and thought up a system of words to disenfranchise women.. Or were they better at catching and thereafter the words evolved.

Material Systemic effects

1. Economies of scale and in particular.
2. The impact of technology on social process and structure.
3. Unintended systemic consequences of human agency (eg runs on banks and critical mass effects in diffusion of new technology)

Does the division of labour exert its influence via the social relations or economies of scale it establishes or both. Did it emerge because of social relations that existed (esp relations of power) or because of it allowed social systems to produce more in less time or both. Are productivity and distribution of wealth separate or related issues….

We maintain that these issues cannot completely be explained solely by recourse to constructivist thinking. They are phenomena that are evident in systems that do not have language (at least the human variant). However, they are phenomena which are also languaged and this languaging has reciprocal effects. We assert that rather than pitting constructivist views against materialist views a more fruitful task is to understand the possible relation between the two, (as in for example the relationship between ecological and cultural systems, or gender and biology, or ideology and productive capacity).

There are a few possible ways to start thinking about the relation ship….

1. Language is epiphenominal. Human society is a nothing more than a rain forest or a machine with an overlay of chattering. The systemic effects of the material substrate of society (biology, space and time, systemic effects) far outweigh the effects of language mediated processes, in terms of the current shape of society.
2. Language is more constitutuve of society than the material substrate. The current shape of society is largely the result of choices in languaging. The limits to change are in language not materiality.
3. Language and materiality are both constitutive of society in complex and mutually influential ways. Language is not constitutive of the material substrate. Rather it is the template of the eruption of materiality into culture. It mediates its expression and manifestation of materiality in culture. It can therefore retard or enhance the social manifestation of material determinisms of culture, but is not solely determinative of this.

A well articulated elaboration of this third view can be found in the work of Maturana and Varela… For example, from an autopoietic (Maturana and Varela) perspective, cognition is a *process* of effective action in the context of constant, continual interaction with an environment that is both specified by, and at the same time specifies, the cognitive domain of the individual. Merleau-Ponty summarises the phenomenology of human cognition from a reciprocally causal perspective:

> The world is not an object I have in my possession … it is the natural setting of, and field for, all my thoughts and all my explicit perceptions … The world is inseparable from the subject … and the subject is inseparable from the world, but from a world which the subject itself specifies (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, in Varela, Thompson, & Rosch, 1993, pp. 3-4).

Put simply, reciprocal causality assumes that social phenomena **are processual, materially embedded processes entailing cognitive exchanges that are co-determined by the relationship between a system and its social and physical environments.**

Moreover,

> (A) living system capable of being an observer can interact with those [observations] of its own descriptive states which are linguistic descriptions of itself. By doing so it generates the domain of self-linguistic descriptions within which it [the system] is an observer of *itself* as an observer, a process which can be necessarily repeated in an endless manner. We call this the domain of self-observation and we consider that self-conscious behaviour is self-observing behaviour, that is, behaviour in the domain of self-observation. The observer as an observer necessarily always remains in a *descriptive domain*, that is, in a relative cognitive domain (Maturana & Varela, 1980, p. 121, my emphasis).

Human social systems are constituted and maintained in the descriptive, consensual domain of language (Maturana & Varela, 1987, p. 231).

The second tier of Varela's double dialectic is 'a *dialectics of knowledge*'. The key point here is that a living system produces its own domain of problems and actions to be "solved"; this cognitive domain does not exist "out there" in an environment that acts as a landing pad for an organism that somehow drops or is parachuted into the world. Instead, living beings and their worlds of meaning stand in relation to each other through mutual specification or co-determination. Thus what we describe as significant environmental regularities are *not external features that have been internalised …* Environmental regularities are the result of a conjoint history, a congruence which unfolds from a long history of co-determination (p. 14, original emphasis).

For Marx (1976), too, at any given point in history, society itself

> is a historically specific form of the social production process in general. This last is both a production process of the material conditions of existence for human life, and a process, proceeding in specific economic and historical relations of production, that produces and reproduces these relations of production themselves, and with them the bearers of this process, the material conditions of existence and their mutual relationships … the relationships in which they produce, is precisely society. (1981, p. 957).

Shared, co-determined, experiential history, then, also plays a significant part in Marx's dialectical method. Thus Marx and Varela outline the epistemological basis for 'a historical materialism not a perennial philosophy or synchronic sociology. The object of historical materialism changes; historical materialism will also change' (Jarvis, 1998, p. 51). A concomitant phenomena of humans' recursive

and reflexive ability to describe their own descriptions is 'practical consciousness' which, at the same time, is both subjective and social (Marx, 1846/1998, p. 4; Varela, 1992):

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Double dialectical epistemology may be briefly described as a *socially, historically, and environmentally mediated, co-determined subjectivism.* This socially, environmentally, and historically mediated subjectivism should in no way be confused with the apparently unmediated subjective-relativisms that afflict many so-called 'postmodern' approaches to sociology (Garnham, 1990, pp. 1-4).

Given this articulation of a position on the relationship between language and materiality in social systems we now turn our attention to the original issue of the relationship of rhetoric to reality in organisational change.

Organisational change and language

Elsewhere (Rooney and Hearn, 1999) we have argued that many conventional approaches to change management are not only ineffective but are in essence ideological in intent. We argued that organisational change is best understood as complex system evolution and as such is to a large extent outside the control of individual agents (such as managers). This is not to deny that managers have important roles to play in the change process but we would assert that it is the understanding of these interventions that matter as much as the interventions themselves. Most importantly we question whether the notion of intervention is useful because it directs the efforts of managers towards see change as an abnormal rather than normal part of system behaviour. A more fruitful approach would be to understand the organisation as constantly involved in evolutionary process (which could include periods and/or levels of stability / non-change) and ask what are the characteristics of the design of organisations that enhances sustainability.

Morover three pragmatic corollaries flow from the different positions taken on the nature of language and materiality in the constitution of social systems.

If language is epiphenomenal then change will happen regardless of what you about it it is a function of the evolution of the material substrate of social systems… focus on resourcing and structural design issues.

If language is constitutive then propagandize the change…. Focus on vision, culture and building consensus.

If language is co-determined with materiality than reflexive communication is more likely. (Because the essence of reflexivity is obervability (awareness) and testability… The objectivist view precludes observability (because there is no language to capture representations of reality)and the constructivist view precludes testability because there is no co-determination between language and materiality). Reflexivity is the sine qua non of the changed system because the system is in fact a new material and social reality. The imperative then is to focus on designing organisations that are reflexively constructed.

Non-reflexive communication does not allow for constant mediation between material and socially constructed aspects of the change. Unanchored messages splinter off to become myth viruses or non-sustainable linguistic bubbles divorced from reality are created. Reflexive communication is embedded in and constituted in historical material realities and is experimental.

Importantly, evolution science teaches us that it is the environment that selects which novel genetic attributes are amplified through time and space. Turned around, we can say that it is not individual elements of the environment that select, but it is the system and the context within which change occurs that selects new behaviours and attributes. It is, therefore, the dense interconnecting relationships between all the facets of the system that are paramount in determining change.

These dense interconnecting relationships are the key elements of self-organisation, a process of communication, and information sharing which might be usefully looked upon as the nervous system and connective tissue of a society, or what Paquet (1998) calls co-ordination and orientation maps. What is important about this observation is that we see a process of conservation of the system (a self referencing system). However, it is a process of conservation, non-change, which may (paradoxically) stimulate the system to change so that it stays coherent but adapts to new environmental conditions. In addition, because self organising systems depend on the communication and reception of information, it can be said that it is the interaction between parts of the system, to organise and reorganise, which produces change.

Self referencing is what makes a system a system; without the conservation of co-ordinating structures the system would collapse. Goodwin (1994, pp. 100-1) conceives of this non-change process as an active one, calling it dynamic stability in robust order. This is a process in which a systems organisational characteristics and the individual variations (like mutating genes) produced in the individual components of the system interact to produce change. Goodwin argues that it is simply too costly to explore the endlessness of possibility space in the hope of stumbling across the ideal new characteristics (genetic mutation) to perfectly suit the changed environmental conditions, and, therefore, a process of mediation between environment and 'genes' to find a change that is "good enough" (not necessarily optimal) is a more realistic evolutionary strategy.

Conclusion

Although there are compelling theoretical reasons to refrain from communicating about and intervening in change, we are not necessarily sanguine about the propects for the strategies we outline here. Truly reflexive communication could be seen as something of a holy grail.. and though claims for social design based on it have been made from time to time, we do not see it in existence in any pristine form. Moreover, we have perhaps now reached the stage where some aspects of the material substrate (especially technology and soon bio-technology) is now evolving faster than the evolutionarily derived capacity for self-reflexive human communication is able to deal with. This means we are resorting to non-reflexive communication (principally hype and propaganda) which can be created quickly but arguably depletes our social systems' reflexive capacity.   As a result we see more technology being used less effectively and less ethically. Another reason for some pessimism is the progressive erosion of the reflexive capability of universities, (out of which most of the promising experiments in reflexive system design have come). In short we believe it is more likely that the future failure of non-reflexive human systems is a more likely test of the arguments contained herein than the attempted establishment of reflexive systems. Perhaps only in the milieu of widespread system collapse will the value of reflexivity may be once again recognised.

Material/logistical	Language/symbolic
Pure presence or absence of information/communication	Vicariosity is possible through symbolic manipulation
Propinquity to sense data from other social agents (eg emotional cues)	Complex social/institutional arrangements can be constructed
Density of networks	"Meanings" mediate between actor and experience
Arrangement in space/time of actors	The link between "meanings" and "emotions" (biochemical)
Time space dissubstantiation	
Unintended consequences	
How many apes can get close to the most dominant ape at one time: (can't read)	
Access to food and natural resources	
The number of breasts a female homosapien has	
Limitations of short term memory	
Is a rainforest a society?	
Physical pain	
Physical material environment??	
The invincibility of ones thoughts and feelings to other social agents	
Experience/language conflict	
Biology	
Biochemistry	
What is a theoretical engine which will allow for both the material/logistical and the logistic symbolic??	
Will influence regardless of how they are socially constructed.	

Virus : self sustaining linguitics systems divorced from its original referents

Consensual domain…… specific system of communicative descriptions used orient people to themes of particualr aspects of the world…….

Reflexive vs non-reflexive communication strategies

Non-reflexive:

Propagnadized
Self-sustaingin system divorced from its original referents.
Inability to solve problem
Change resisting (auotpoetic)

Single loop
 Defencive

Autopoesis may be either
Self-organising … adaptation to new environement via a adaptation
Self-defeating…… resistance to change that ultimately destroys organism

Propaganda ….
Myth
Virus
Unintended symbolic explosion
Self-sealing loop

What happens if we have now reached the stage where some aspects of the material substrate (especially technology) is now evolving faster than the evolutionarily derived capacity for self-reflexive human communication is able to proceed at. Means we resorting to non-reflexive communication which can do a lot faster but it also means our social systems are become more constitued by non-reflexive communication. More technology being used less effectively, less ethically and less cleverly.