

Facilitating Conversations That Matter Using Coordinated Management of Meaning Theory

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### Abstract

This article presents the coordinated management of meaning (CMM) theory as a tool for dialogic organizational development (OD) practitioners seeking to introduce reflexivity and self-awareness into conversations. CMM focuses on the patterns of communications which affect how organizational members perceive their working environment, through the inquiry into the stories they tell in relation to self, relationship and culture. The authors draw on CMM to generate questions that dialogic OD practitioners can use to help their clients explore these stories and develop an awareness of the interplay between these stories. CMM is a useful tool for achieving the aim of the recently-emerged dialogic OD approach.

*Keywords:* coordinated management of meaning (CMM), dialogic OD, facilitation

## Facilitating Conversations That Matter

### Using Coordinated Management of Meaning Theory

The recently emerged sub-field of dialogic organizational development (OD) highlights the importance of dialogue and conversations in organizational change. The aim of the dialogic approach is to “unleash, catalyze and support the multitude of motivations and ideas amongst participants” (Bushe & Marshak, 2014, p. 6). With this focus on dialogue among organizational members, changes in their thinking can alter their perceptions of what is possible in the organization and may lead to grander changes in behavior. Although the dialogic OD literature claims that conversations are central in organizational change, there is little written about the essence of these conversations. Some conversations might facilitate change while others can lead to undesired outcomes.

Promoting effective conversations is one of the key questions in the future developments of dialogic OD (Bushe and Marshak, 2009). This is where taking a communication perspective on organizational development can be useful, as communication scholars often are interested in questions of communication patterns and effectiveness of communication. The capacity for organizational change lies in the ability of initiating and sustaining desired patterns of communication. If the goal is to change the conversation and the quality of conversation, it is therefore important to pay more attention to the patterns of communication.

Recently, Oliver and Fitzgerald (2013) introduced to the OD literature a communication theory that focuses on the patterns of communication called the Coordinated Management of Meaning (CMM) theory. They used CMM to demonstrate how facilitators might adopt a dialogic approach to exploring meaning making patterns through the interplay of stories of relationship, identity and culture within an organization. By exploring the stories at various levels in the

organization, Oliver and Fitzgerald hope to help individuals make the connection between these stories and the way they think and act as an organizational member. Building off of Oliver's (2005) idea of reflexivity, the authors use the term reflexive patterns to describe this self-awareness and the ability of mindful action of individuals. Towards achieving the aims put forth in the dialogic OD literature, Oliver & Fitzgerald (2013) highlight the need to "[Invite] reflexive patterns through the ways in which small and large group exercises are designed, so that individuals and groups grow in responsibility for developing self awareness and self authoring as a function of organizational membership" (p. 34). Therefore: the purpose of this article is two-fold: (1) to more fully present CMM to the dialogic OD literature so as to demonstrate its usefulness as a tool for inquiring into reflexive patterns within an organization, and (2) to offer questions that can be used to explore organizational stories at various levels and in turn, develop individual and group responsibility for managing organizational change.

### **The emergence of dialogic OD**

In recent years the scholars and practitioners of OD have applied more discursive and relational approaches to change, that is, interventions focusing on changing the conversation (Marshak & Grant, 2011). This change in OD draws back to the linguistic turn in social sciences, which highlights the discursive and relational nature of human systems (Ospina & Uhl-Bien, 2012). Bushe and Marshak (2009) describe this turn as a bifurcation point that distinguishes between the diagnostic and dialogic OD approaches.

Whereas diagnostic OD had focused on objective data and problem-solving as a base for organizational change, dialogic OD emphasizes the importance of everyday dialogue at work. According to Bushe and Marshak (2008), organizations change by changing the everyday

conversations and organizational discourse. The development interventions therefore focus on creating spaces where organizational members come together to share their understanding of the multiple social realities and to create alignment for decisions and actions. Bushe and Marshak (2009) refer to this space as a “container” (p. 356). Although both diagnostic and dialogic OD are interested in changing communication behavior of organizational members, dialogic OD focuses on changing the collective meaning making that guides behavioral changes (Bushe & Marshak, 2009). The goal of dialogic OD is to develop stories that help the organizational members to coordinate meanings and action for the good of the organization (Oliver & Fitzgerald, 2013).

Most of the recent literature in dialogic OD is built on the assumption that when organizational members develop awareness of their own contribution to the diversity of multiple stories that constitute the organization, this will facilitate organizational change. More recently, scholars are looking for ways to promote more effective conversations (Bushe & Marshak, 2009). Oliver and Fitzgerald (2013) write that the main purpose of dialogic OD is “to increase the capacity of a system for reflexive dialogues” (p. 33). That is, facilitating patterns of communication that enable organizational members to become responsible for developing self-awareness and accountability for their contribution to organizational reality. Dialogic OD should not only focus on creating a container within the system, it should focus on developing the capacity for this container to thrive.

### **CMM theory and patterns of communication**

If the task is to develop the system’s capacity of having effective dialogues, then there are several considerations to be mindful of. First, what do those facilitated conversations that can

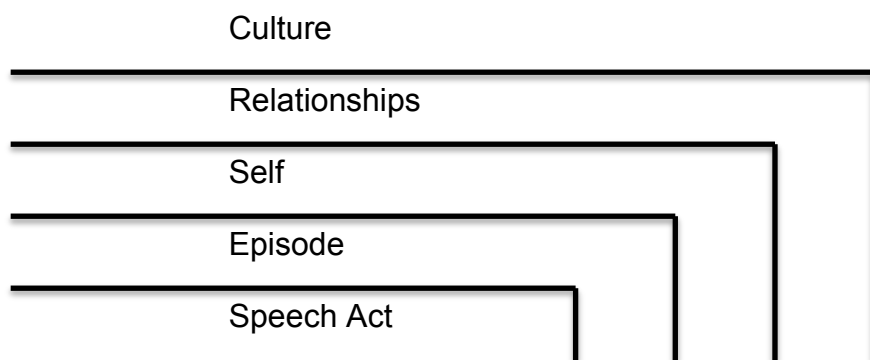
enable the growth of that capacity look like? Second, what conversation design will invite reflexive patterns of communication? To answer these questions it is relevant to understand how people initiate, sustain, and transform patterns of communication (Barge, 2014). Sustained capacity transforms communication patterns in order to build the desired future of the organization.

Instead of seeing communication as only transmitting information, CMM takes a standpoint of seeing communication as central in making social worlds (Pearce, 2007). CMM theory is built on similar premises as dialogic OD, however what CMM adds to the dialogic OD perspective is the understanding of reflexive patterns of communication and how those patterns occur. CMM pays attention to the patterns of coordinating actions and managing/making meaning (Parrish-Sprowl, 2014). CMM is particularly useful in the development of dialogue and the quality of conversation, because it focuses on the ongoing creation and reconstruction of meaning and action in human systems (Chen, 2014). Questions such as “what are we making together”, “how did that get made”, and “how can we make better social worlds”, are central in CMM theory and practice (Pearce, 2007, p. 53).

According to Pearce (2007) everyday lives are full of bifurcation points, or critical moments. Those moments can change the direction of conversation, and the future of the people in conversation. Jovanovic (2003) says that “our decisions about how to communicate and our choices about what to communicate really matter in the mundane moments of everyday life” (p. 71). To make wise choices for action there needs to be awareness of the connections between personal actions and cultural stories told within an organization. Exploring the stories that are told will help to capture the personal accounts how people construct their experiences and make meaning. CMM builds reflexive connections between meaning and action, which can develop

capacity of making choices regarding what patterns are useful to invite and sustain, and what patterns need to be changed (Barge, 2014). Pearce (1999, p. 46) says that the “language is fateful”, meaning that the stories we tell constitute our social lives, and to change the course of our lives we need to change the stories we tell. Developing reflexivity enables people to re-write their stories leading to changed action and behavior.

CMM is drawn upon Bateson’s (1956) ideas of meta-communication and contexts, which were further clarified by Watzlawick, Beavin and Jackson (1967). They stated that communication has always two contexts: content and relationship, where the relationship contextualizes the content. According to Pearce (2014), in order to understand a human system one has to understand the logics of the system and the context in which it exists. CMM has further extrapolated on the idea of context by introducing a hierarchy of meanings that include speech act, episode, relationship, self/identity and culture, summarized in figure 1. The L-shaped lines in the figure represent “in the context of” (Spencer-Brown, 1972; cited in Pearce, 1999).



*Figure 1.* CMM Hierarchy of Meanings Model (Pearce, 1999, p. 36)

The key idea of the hierarchy of meanings is that in a certain situation there are always multiple stories. The concept of hierarchy of meanings can be used to help people to interpret and take action about what is going on in their organization (Pearce, Sostrin & Pearce, 2011). Each of the contexts in the hierarchy model can be understood by looking at the other contexts, and each context is always contextualizing other contexts. For example, specific speech acts can be interpreted within the contexts of episode, self, relationship and culture. This order of the hierarchy is dynamic and dependent on the situation. If you change something in one context, you change the meaning of the things contextualized (Pearce, 2014).

In other words, one can understand each organizational conversation better if one also seeks to understand how the conversation is contextualized and what kind of context it creates for further action and meaning making. For example, a conversation between a CEO and a manager can be an episode whose meaning is derived from its embedded-ness in the context of their existing relationship. The meaning of the episode is taken in context of the relationship. Alternatively, what happens in the episode can change the future course of their relationship. For example, an argument between the CEO and manager has the potential to change how they make sense of their relationship moving forward. The meaning of the relationship is taken in context of the episode.

Understanding the interplay between different context levels and meanings one can better understand and change the patterns of communication within an organization. The experiences of organizational members that result from these patterns become part of the stories they tell about the organization. Thus, CMM is interested in exploring these stories and simultaneously developing the reflexive awareness of organizational members (Pearce, 2014). With this awareness, members have the capacity to change the patterns of communication within the



organization, thus producing meaningful organizational change. The various context levels within the hierarchy of meanings will now be presented.

*Speech Act.* The CMM theory points to the two faces of communication: coordinating actions and managing/making meanings, which come together in speech acts; what is said and done in communication with others. Speech acts include compliments, threats, insults, promises, etc. (Pearce, 2007) Being able to make wise choices of which speech acts to perform is an important factor in improving communication, and during organizational changes it is crucial to mindfully engage in facilitating desired speech acts that will enable meaningful conversations and lasting organizational changes. For example in an organizational change situation the CEO informs the staff members about the reasons behind the change. The speech act refers to the specific language he/she uses to inform the staff members.

*Episode.* This level of stories can be described as “sequences of speech acts, punctuated with a beginning and an end, and united with a story” (Pearce, 2007, p.131). This level helps one to pay attention to how episodes are made and to clarify what is happening and what kinds of patterns are taking place. According to Pearce (2007) patterns of communication are clusters of episodes, and once established, attract certain episodes and resist others. To change patterns of communication one needs to initiate speech acts that will enable different episodes. Paying closer attention to the multiple stories that are being told of a situation can help one understand and change the patterns of communication. To follow the given example, the CEO’s speech acts are interpreted within the given situation, in this case the staff debriefing. Afterwards, each staff member will tell a different story based on his or her experience of how the debriefing episode went.

*Self.* Identities and the idea of self are constructed in communicative processes. Pearce (2007) believes that there is a reciprocal relationship between the patterns of communication and self. Individuals become who they are because of the patterns of communication they engage in. They are responsible for producing the patterns of communication partly by the selves that they have become. In the example case, the staff members interpret the CEO's message through their identity, including all their personal and professional history.

*Relationships.* Stories at this level emerge from patterns of communication and like selves; relationships serve one context for the meanings being made and actions being taken in an individual's social lives. In other words, relationships are the context for the way we communicate (Pearce, 2007). Different speech acts and episodes are interpreted and enacted differently in different relationships. For example, the CEO's message is heard and interpreted differently depending on what kind of a relationship the staff members have with the CEO.

*Culture.* Cultural context includes the narratives reflecting the meanings attached to the different cultures individuals live in, such as national or organizational cultures. Cultural rituals and values are embedded in the meanings one makes in a certain episode and relational context. In an organizational change it is valuable to make the connections between the organizational culture and identities and personal experiences about the change. To follow the case example, the CEO's message is also put in the context of the organizational culture, and the stories of what is typically valued or disapproved within the organization. For example, stories of hierarchy and power can affect how the staff members interpret the message and how it affects their future actions.

### **Exploring organizational stories and patterns of communication**

In the following section, the context of speech acts is presented by drawing on the first author's experiences consulting for an organizational client experiencing workplace issues. The CMM hierarchy of meaning model is used to formulate sample questions that could be used to explore the stories from the speech act within this organization in the context of episodes, self, relationship and culture. Reflexive questioning inspired by Tomm's (1987) work is employed to tap into power generated by facilitators who build self-awareness through reflection in their clients.

*Speech Act.* The first-author is currently consulting with an organization whose management team is feeling that there is a lack of team spirit within the management team that is needed to improve the business. During individual interviews the management team members express concerns related to their meetings, especially to poor preparation, unclear decision-making, inefficient use of time and lack of participation during the meetings. These concerns resurfaced during a team meeting observed by the first-author. For example, when one team member took more time than what was scheduled for his topic, another team member responded by stating: "this illustrates how bad we are". There was a clear sense that team members were distracted and frustrated.

*Episodes.* As the given speech act happens within the episode of meeting, it is important to understand what typically happens during meetings and how they got to be that way. In this situation the speech act could be interpreted as a disappointment and complaint towards breaking meeting rules or not respecting the meeting procedures, which in turn can contribute to the experiences of inefficiency and negative atmosphere. To inquire to the speech act within the meeting episode, the facilitator could ask questions such as "how does the speech act reflect your typical meetings?" and "how does it contribute to the future opportunities?" Also, the meeting

represents only one episode in the overall communication of the management team, and the facilitator could therefore also explore the differences and similarities between different episodes.

*Self.* To further understand the meaning of the specific speech act and what possibilities for action it might provide, the facilitator could explore these stories by asking “what story does the speech act tell about you as a team?” and “what kind of stories of self does it invite?” These kinds of questions seek to help the team members to build awareness about the fit between the selves and the patterns of communication.

*Relationships.* The given speech act also entails a relational context for why and how the team members communicate to each other the way they are. The facilitator could inquire further by asking more general questions about how the team members would describe their relationships and build a connection of those stories and the specific speech act: “how does the speech act contribute to the team spirit and your relationships?” The facilitator could also help the team members to generate possibilities for the future by asking: “to build better relationships, what kind of speech acts would you like to see in future?”

*Culture.* The questions about the cultural context will help the management team members to understand their communication in a wider context. The facilitator could help the management team members to explore the cultural context by asking questions such as: “what cultural stories does the speech act invite?” and “what kind of organizational culture does it construct?” Exploring the cultural context will build awareness of the connection between the patterns of communication within the organizational culture and within the management team.

*Interconnected stories.* Inquiring into different contexts will enable the management team members to build awareness of what's happening but questions addressing the interplay between different contexts and stories will facilitate reflexive dialogue. Pearce (2007) tells that there are always multiple stories and they are unequal, thus, some contexts are more powerful than others. Therefore it is the facilitator's task to help the management team members to build connections between the different context levels and to reflect on how these contexts play out in their communication: which context is the most powerful one? If it is the episode of the meeting that dominates, then what needs to be changed within that episode? If it is the management team relationships that contextualize the other contexts, then how do they develop their relationships? Further on the facilitator can then help the team members to reflect and pay attention to the speech acts used in the management team, and how those speech acts construct episodes, selves, relationships and cultures. If the case is to build relationships, then what kind of speech acts do the team members invite?

### **Further developing meaningful conversations**

Facilitators must lead individuals through the system of reflexive dialogue as well as develop within this system patterns of communication that will facilitate organizational change. In recognition of this, the authors recommend specific consulting practices for the dialogic OD community. This article has presented CMM and described the hierarchy of meanings that are present in the everyday organizational discourse. To more fully develop the reflexive awareness of organizational individuals and groups, facilitators can use questions that are crafted in consideration of organizational stories relating to specific speech acts, the episodes in which they occur, relationships, identities or cultures. An understanding of how to craft questions that

address the interplay of the stories will help facilitators fulfill the intent of dialogic OD (Oliver & Fitzgerald, 2013).

Understanding how to craft these questions is only the first step towards fulfilling this goal. The authors point to two future research efforts in order to move dialogic OD towards building meaningful conversations. The first step needed is additional research into the choices that facilitators make in the moment when exploring stories with organizational individuals or groups; what questions do they ask when exploring each level of organizational stories and how do they use the CMM hierarchy of meanings present within the organization to build reflexive awareness?

The second step for future research is to investigate the manner in which CMM might be applied in facilitated large-group interventions to develop the capacity of individuals and groups to change the patterns of communication in the organization. The goal of applying CMM to the dialogic OD approach is so that organizations may be able to employ the reflexive awareness developed with the guidance of the facilitator, in future organizational change efforts on their own. The aim of using CMM to inform consultancy practice in dialogic OD is so that it can be further established in organizational practices. The authors believe that developing in organizational members the capacity to change patterns of communication on their own, fulfills dialogic OD's aim of promoting meaningful conversations.

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