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POWER - THE INVISIBLE ARCHITECT OF ORGANISATIONAL CHANGE

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Power arises from the creation of knowledge, and from the socialisation of that knowledge through dialogue. This is because knowledge creation involves us in selecting the aspects of life which we give primacy to in our experience, and those which we marginalise. For example, some see an oak tree as an eco-system, some see it as timber waiting to be felled, and our differing views of the world legitimise different meanings and behaviours. It’s unlikely that we would cheer the felling of an oak tree if we see it as an eco-system, but viewing it as a profitable commodity might change that. Yet we don’t develop these meanings in isolation, rather we do so in a social context, discussing our ideas and meanings with others. Our meaning-making (and the behaviour that flows from it) therefore takes place within a social framework, which largely defines what meaning we can make. We are unlikely to view the oak tree as a potential space vehicle, because we know from our social experience that you can’t make a rocket from wood. We’ve never tried, we just know from others’ communication of their experience. It is the ability to influence this dialogue framework which produces power. Where we can influence the dialogue, we can influence meaning-making, and the behaviour which flows from it.

The issue of power is a crucial (though largely ignored) aspect of organisational change, because at its deepest level, change involves the creation of new meanings - seeing the oak tree differently requires us to emphasise different aspects of its existence. In spite of the great volume of literature on change, very little of it deals with how to address the network of power relationships which maintain the organisational status quo, and can make change very difficult in practice. Research also suggests that many change initiatives, perhaps even the majority, fail to produce the desired outcome. Rather than continue to call for “better ways to do change”, it seems likely that a better understanding of the networks of power relations which enable or constrain change in practice might yield improved results.

Both power relations and change are complex phenomena, which take place continually throughout our organisations. They are created and expressed at multiple levels, through dialogue processes. Understanding which dialogue practices produce engagement, inclusion, and promote the generation of new meanings provides us with ways in which we can work with existing networks of power and meaning-making, in our efforts to make change more effective in practice. These can range from coaching approaches, to Open Space or Future Search. At the macro-level, Action Research approaches can provide not only the inclusion of dialogue and power networks in our change efforts, but can also promote cycles of change. This cyclic approach can make our organisations more agile and flexible, as well as more effective at addressing the power dynamics of organisational change. Perhaps most importantly, they offer the hope of making change more effective for our organisations in practice.
Introduction

Like so much organisational experience, power can be slippery stuff to define. Difficult to pin down though it may be, we are acutely aware of its existence – who has it, how it shifts, and the risks of challenging it – our social systems are highly sensitive to power relations (Buss 2015). It is perhaps partly because of the difficulty in describing power that it has tended to occupy the margins of the literature on change.

That same literature suggests failure rates between 28% and 93% for change initiatives, depending who you ask and how you define success (Beer & Nohria 2000; Cameron & Quinn 2011; Decker et al 2012; Higgs & Rowland 2005). Even the low end of such estimates suggests more than a quarter of change projects failing, in spite of the vast amount of writing on how to “do” change. Perhaps then, a shift in emphasis is useful - from “how to do change better”, to a deeper understanding of the networks of power relations that make change possible (or otherwise) in practice.

This paper explores the influence of power on organisational change. After describing what power and change are, the paper goes on to investigate the co-creation of power relations through dialogue, before examining the practical implications for organisational change.
What do I mean by “power”?

For Michel Foucault, one of the leading writers on power, power arises from meaning-making – from the creation of knowledge. This is because in creating knowledge we codify our world, arriving at descriptions of what it is and what it is not (Fabion 1994). In so doing we create a kind of map of reality, emphasising some features and marginalising others. Think of a tree for example. Some may know it as an oak, understanding the quality of its timber, what can be built from it, and calculating its value after felling. Others however may see it as an eco-system, calculating its bio-diversity value, understanding its life cycle, and that of the microorganisms that it hosts. The point is, there are different views of the tree, depending on what we choose to emphasise or ignore – and that is also the case for our lives and our organisations.

At the point of knowledge creation then, we decide which features of the world we will include in describing our experience, and how we will go about doing so - though this often happens largely unconsciously. This creates our world view, and legitimises some behaviours while de-legitimising others. Returning to our tree example, a timber merchant growing oak trees would see felling the tree as a natural and logical conclusion of the tree’s production, while an ecologist who sees the tree as an eco-system might view its felling as a disaster.

What I’m trying to show here is that the world-view that we hold influences both the meaning we make of events in our lives and the way we behave. Whoever is able to influence our meaning-making, and the world view within which it takes place, has power.

Yet meaning-making does not take place in a vacuum – humans are social creatures and we communicate about our meanings, and about what they legitimise and exclude. This communication establishes a framework for future meaning-making. New events and experiences are interpreted within the bounds of this framework that describes what we understand our world, and our organisation, to be. This approach is hard-wired into us - our brains make sense of the world according to what they already know (DaMasio 2012). (This is how optical illusions work, they fool our brains by playing with the known basis of common experience and throwing in something that doesn’t fit the pattern.) Our communication of meaning in this way means that power is not linear, rather it is a network of mutual influence which is co-created in social groups.

As Foucault put it:

“whatever phenomenon of fixity exist result from stabilised disciplinary powers and the discursive practices that constitute them”

McKinlay & Starkey 1998 p.38

To recap, power arises from the creation of knowledge and from socialising that knowledge with others, developing agreed forms of interpretation of the world. These interpretations in turn legitimise certain behaviours and de-legitimise others, turning our ideology into our reality. In so doing we operationalise power structures into our physical world, demonstrating hierarchical power with grand offices, or the organisation’s right to judge others through appraisal systems. It is by manifesting power relations in the physical world this way, and by defining organisational processes, that power is able to reach far beyond local groups (Butters et al 1996) and control our global organisations. Without it, the modern organisation would be impossible. Yet all structures both enable and constrain. While the ways in which we operationalise power may enable control, they can also constrain change as an accidental consequence of the entrenched ways of thinking they require to operate effectively.

For me then, power is:

The ability to influence the framework within which discourse and meaning-making takes place.

For the remainder of this paper, it is this dialogic interpretation of power upon which I shall focus, both because it is the closest in my experience to the way that power is exercised in modern organisations, and because it offers us hope for change. Even when we can do nothing else to influence a situation, we can express our disagreement – in a dialogic conception we all have some power to influence our lives. My final reason for a dialogic construction of power is this; those who have a lot of power must exercise it by delegation, since their influence is too great for them to be in touch with everything directly. Yet the process of delegation proceeds by using rules, and rules are open to interpretation – which requires dialogue (McKinlay & Starkey 1998). Thus for even the most powerful individuals, power is not fixed and cannot be exercised without interpretive dialog.
What do I mean by “change”? 

Much of the literature on change characterises it as something we “do” to organisations, moving them from a stable state, through change, to a new stable state (e.g. Kotter 1995, Lewin 1947). Others however suggest that change isn’t something we “do” to organisations at all, rather organisation arises from a process of constant change (e.g. Stacey 2001). Based on the idea of power as the ability to influence the framework of dialogue, I would argue that in fact the way we relate to permanence and change is itself a consequence of power.

Since change can threaten the influence of those who are currently powerful, our cultural framework, at least historically, tended to entrench permanence and view change as dangerous. The emergence of new meanings which challenge the status quo was prohibited, preserving interpretations that supported those in power (Lønning 2015). For example, ideas such as those of Copernicus or Galileo were rejected for the challenge they presented to established ways of thinking. Yet before the development of this approach, others took a different view.

2,500 years ago, the philosopher Heraclitus viewed the world itself as change. His maxim that “you can’t step in the same river twice” (paraphrased from Heraclitus, 2003, p. 27) captures the essence of this idea – that we live immersed in a constant flow of life, in a reality that is always shifting. Confucian thinking is another example – with its emphasis on cycles of change rather than stable, linear progression (Marshak 1993). These can be deeply uncomfortable ideas for those of us raised with the concept of stability as the norm. Yet they can also be emancipatory when we consider the challenges that face our organisations and our world, for they imply that every moment is a new start – that our lives, our organisations, and our world can get better.

The mere fact that our organisations can change however, doesn’t mean they will. For as the preceding paragraphs describe, our ability to change depends on the way that power is used to define our outlook. The core of Heraclitus’ thinking was always within the culturally promoted maxim of stability, just as the cultural roots of our desire for stability remain at the heart of our efforts to change organisations. The point is – we have a choice in how we construct our reality – seeing change or stability as our dominant frame of reference. Yet because that choice impinges upon the influence of those who are already powerful in our organisations, it is not often freely made. In fact, it is not usually even acknowledged at all.

For the purposes of this paper, I am taking a Heraclitian view, because its contrast with our common cultural narrative allows me illustrate the influence of power clearly. Yet it is also the view to which my lived experience mostly closely aligns, and one which helps answer the question “what is change?” I can find no permanent permanence in history – empires and organisations rise and fall. The Heraclitian view is experientially and empirically true – civilisations, organisations and individuals come into being and decline – to argue otherwise seems contrary to experience. A glance at organisational history supports this idea, as anyone who remembers Woolworths, Marconi or Enron can attest. Yet decline doesn’t have to mean disappearance – it can lead to re-birth, with examples that include Nokia (originally a pulp & paper company), and Shell oil - which grew from a London antique shop. Both change and the temporary stability that arises from it take place continually - at any one time an organisation is complete as it is, yet is ever changing – like a rose.

Gallwey (1986) brings to our attention the parable of the rose, to illustrate that we are always complete but always a work in progress. When we plant a rose seed, we notice that it is small, but we do not criticise its lack of roots and stems – rather, we regard it as a complete seed and we give it what it needs to grow. As it grows, we don’t condemn its slow growth or unopened flowers for being incomplete, we simply continue to care for it. From the time it is a seed to the time it dies, the rose is fully complete, always containing its whole potential, yet always in a state of change.

Organisational change then is with us every day. Within the apparent stability of daily activity lies the constant development of new ideas and interpretations. At its deepest level, change itself is the negotiation of these new meanings (Ford & Ford 1995; Weick et al 2005). Yet the way that power is used to amplify or discourage the negotiation of new meanings can enable or impede our ability to change, however much we might want to. It can also affect the physical infrastructure of change – the processes, skills, or machinery required, because the need for such things is negotiated among members of the organisation. This negotiation takes place within an existing framework of meaning-making and power relations. If that framework is left unchallenged, it can impede change by anchoring our perspectives in the status quo. Bounded by the existing framework of power relations, our attempts to change then meet invisible barriers. Thus both power (control of the framework within which meaning-making takes place) and change (the negotiation of new meanings) are inextricably linked.
So power and change in organisations both manifest themselves through conversations, and everyone has some voice in those – even the most powerless can still speak. Yet it doesn’t always feel like that. Humans are acutely aware of social status, a phenomenon which accords more power to some than others, and which can render even the simple expression of disagreement an act of great courage. Thus we must turn next to an exploration of inequality in power-relations, before we go on to consider the practical impacts of power on organisational change.

“Status” is a subjective judgement of social rank, based on a hierarchy of values and it is through status that social order is formed (Piazza & Castellucci 2014). Humans have evolved to be acutely sensitive to status, and whilst its anthropological basis was probably valuable tribal knowledge, (Buss 2015) in the modern world it can come from a range of other sources such as notoriety or wealth.

As Sorensen (2014) points out, status is influential precisely because it is unequally distributed. In modern society it often arises as a consequence of a particular position, or a particular training or expertise. Such people are afforded privileges in society to make judgments about phenomena, which result in categorisations of the normal and the abnormal. For example the status of a doctor allows them to define who is sick, a teacher who is clever, or a judge who is guilty. As Foucault observed, such acts involve great power, and categorise the abnormal as requiring correction (Foucault 1991). People perceive those with high status as more valuable to society (Blau & Duncan 1967) and give greater credence to their opinions (Merton 1968; Simcoe & Waguespack 2011). In other words, higher organisational status gives rise to a greater ability to influence the framework of meaning-making. For example, the CEO has a greater ability to define what sense people make of a phrase like “client focussed” than does the admin assistant.

Power then, relies on inequality. In a perfectly equal system, everyone would have equal influence, but in practice this does not happen. Rather, people have varying levels of knowledge, status, wealth, conversational ability, experience, charisma and many other qualities, and it is this that largely gives rise to differential levels of influence. Regardless of the source however, power manifests itself through communication – including both dialogue and behaviour. It is often through behaviour that those with the least power can exercise their will, behaving in ways that reflect their meanings rather than those imposed on them. While those of higher status may be better able to influence the dialogue, they are often less able to do the actual productive work of the organisation. Although in theory they have the hierarchical legitimacy to control those that do, in practice this is very difficult to achieve. This is because the execution of work requires more than simply following a list of instructions, it requires the initiative and commitment of those who do it – which is why “work to rule” protests can be effective. The simple following of rules is insufficient in producing the outcomes that organisations need, yet as highlighted at the beginning of this paper, there is no other way for the powerful to implement their will across the organisation. It is this phenomenon of behavioural power in lower status employees that in change initiatives is often characterised as “resistance”. Yet following the logic to its conclusion, it is the use of power in ways which deny the voices of lower status members of the organisation that actually creates this situation. The attempt to impose a particular vision without the messy business of taking others’ views into account actually creates resistance to that outcome – simply put, we are most likely to meet resistance on the road we take to avoid it.

Not all change creates resistance however. Different approaches to dialogue allow different responses, and as the conversation develops, the practices used by those involved in the dialogue produce outcomes which vary according to the kind of practice used. For example inviting, proposing, building, clarifying or affirming might be used to explore new meanings, whilst invoking authority, reiterating, or reifying a previously stated position might be used to shut-down such exploration and project a particular interpretation. (Thomas, Sargent & Hardy 2011). Thus although not all participants in the conversation have equal access to different dialogue practices – only those agreed on as having hierarchical authority can invoke it for example – we all have some choice in how, or indeed whether, we take part in dialogue.
The co-creation of power

It’s not just the way that power is projected however which influences outcomes, it’s also the way that power is received. For power to exist, we must consent to its legitimacy. We must admit that whoever is speaking has legitimate authority to influence the dialogue – through expert knowledge, hierarchical authority, or other means. Much power is thus a kind of social illusion which we all play a part in creating, and if we refuse to recognise it, we may limit its effectiveness. Taken that we consent at some level to the power dynamics of a situation we are in however, how we respond depends significantly on how that power is used. Power can influence the dialogue in generative ways which create inclusion (Gergen et al 2004), or degenerative ways which reduce it.

How might we react to that? Mintzberg (1983) takes a largely structural approach to power in organisations, and bases the dialogue practices that he refers to on Hirschman (1970). He suggests that in any human system, participants have three choices – to leave the system (Exit), to stay and influence the system (Voice) or to stay and contribute in line with existing norms and expectations (Loyalty). “Voice” is where power lies in terms of dialogue, but “exit” and “loyalty” are also legitimate reactions to the expression of power.

Yet there are other, more subtle ways in which we react to the exercise of power. Where there is insufficient trust for people to speak-up and use “voice” to influence events, they may not choose “exit” or “loyalty”, instead remaining in the organisation and frustrating its efforts (Moss Kanter 1977). Power mechanisms which deny others a voice can enforce compliance, but can do little to ensure genuine commitment. A workforce that has chosen “frustrate” as its cultural paradigm is unlikely to be responsive to change. Over time, a sort of “organisational sclerosis” develops. Power becomes sustained by a downward monologue. Staff conclude that expressing their view is pointless. A culture develops in which people become adept at appearing to comply, while not engaging with the organisations goals. Such power practices provide high levels of control, at the expense of engagement, and tend to generate considerable resistance to change – as change is perceived as being “done to” people.

In such a culture, we can become so caught-up in the autonomous operation of our organisations that we discipline ourselves to fit the norms required of us. In so doing, we actually become the ones projecting power onto ourselves, based on our internal stories of what might happen if we don’t. This can be a risk even in organisations where there is a reasonable level of trust. For example, our careers provide a ladder of betterment to climb, from which we fear falling if we do not conform. Through this internalised but often unexpressed fear, power can become a self-enforcing aspect of organisational culture, trapping us in the status quo. In that sense, it is not just how leaders or those with high status exercise power that can impede change, those further down the hierarchy can become trapped in their conceptions of power and impede change too. How then might we challenge power anywhere in the organisation, when it works in ways that don’t support change?
Foucault (1991) suggests that a direct challenge to power is often ineffective, as power tends to be distributed too widely to be influenced easily. Power flows not just from the dialogue, but from the operational forms - organisational processes, structures, building layouts and the like - that the dialogue legitimates. Power structures are thus infused throughout the organisation. Although a challenge may not produce change directly, it can influence the rules of the organisational dialogue – though possibly at some risk to the protagonists (Oliver 2010).

Our organisational dialogue relies on communication between people – what I say influences the response you give, and vice versa – it's co-created. This means that you can’t tell the outcome of the dialogue from the behaviour of its parts. Mintzberg (1983) uses the example of a torch – it has batteries, bulbs, wires and a casing, yet by looking at these parts individually you would have no idea that when assembled in a particular way, they produce light. Similarly, in human systems we all bear some responsibility for the outcomes achieved, because the dialogue is generated from a constant stream of inter-related behaviours by all participants. A change in the reaction that one participant gives at any point in the dialogue can change its direction entirely, leading to the creation of different meanings and outcomes.

If we want to influence power in our organisations then, our likeliest route is to change how we respond. We’ve discussed how conversational choices such as inviting or clarifying can be used to explore new meanings, while reiterating or reifying can prevent such exploration. Our co-creation of power and meaning means that if we change how we respond, we influence the dialogue differently. We often need courage to implement this simple idea, but the power of a sustained conversational effort over time is not to be under-estimated. Change efforts can get so caught up in an action orientation - what to do to bring about organisational change - that sometimes an equally influential question, “how do I need to be?” is forgotten.

Power is very much part of our social world. We are highly sensitive to it, yet rarely explore it directly, and much of the literature that does (Foucault 1997,1991; Marx 2009; Hobbes 1998) takes a rather pessimistic view – but it doesn’t have to be that way. Power is neutral, it’s the manner in which we choose to use it that makes it either helpful or otherwise. An understanding of power as created by dialogue and meaning-making give us choices, providing us with both a way to study how power operates in practice, and practical ways of influencing it through self-expression.

For organisational practice there are several implications that arise from this exploration of power and change.

The use of dialogic methods during organisational change can provide us with ways to work with networks of power relationships more effectively, helping us benefit from the inclusive presence of more voices. A range of options exist to help with this process. At the individual level, coaching can help decision-makers get to grips with their part in the change process – both how they affect it, and how it affects them. Dialogue processes such as Future Search (Weisbord & Janoff 1995) or Open Space (Owen 1997) allow us to work with large groups, hearing voices from across the organisation. These approaches can be repeated whenever necessary, allowing cycles of learning to move our organisations towards their goals, rather than attempting a one-off “big bang” approach.

More broadly, the inclusion of power relations in our conception of change brings into question the validity of generalizable theories of change. It is very difficult to make valid general statements about how to undertake change effectively – because the specific context in which change plays out is crucial to its outcome – and that context varies from one organisation to another. The high failure rate of change initiatives, in spite of the surfeit of literature, tends to support the idea of a fresh approach - one which takes the organisation’s unique context and culture into account. Working with the perceptions of the men and women who make up our organisations can be challenging, but because those perceptions become embedded in our structures, relationships, and ways of doing things, it is difficult to achieve meaningful change without addressing them (Rapoport et al 2002).

One approach to organisational change which can achieve that is Action Research (Reason & Bradbury 2006). In this approach, organisations become their own experts about what works for them, identifying how their own operating principles enable and constrain them (Fletcher et al 2005). The method is straightforward, is accessible to anyone, and uses cycles of change to learn about what is effective in the particular context of your own organisation. It also uses action to produce that understanding, so rather than endless workshops and plans being developed, action is taken immediately to begin moving the organisation towards its goal. In this way, we learn what is effective as we take action, rather than trying to anticipate what a successful method will look like and then implementing it and hoping. We also learn about what sense people make of what is going on, and in so doing come to better understand the network of power relationships that make change effective or ineffective in practice.
We can’t always control our world. Sometimes we choose to make changes, sometimes we must change in response to events. Yet we can choose how we approach our world. Information technology managers had a maxim in the 1990s – “no one ever got fired for buying IBM”. In other words, the conventional approach can always be justified, even if we doubt it will be the most effective. Those of us involved in organisational change sometimes face the same dilemma. Yet if we ourselves can’t challenge traditional approaches in the service of more effective organisations, how can we expect others to change? It can be tempting to go along with “change theatre” in which we take all of the recognised actions of accepted change approaches, but ignore the network of relationships, emotions, and power which influence the outcome. Should our efforts not meet with success, we can always reassure ourselves that many change efforts are like that. Change after all, is hard, right? Yet we could make a different choice. We could choose to work with what we know will be challenging – our complex networks of relating – and in so doing give ourselves a chance to make change more effective in practice.
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