"The re-authoring lens helps organizations to re-engage with neglected aspects of their history and narratives in ways that do not seek to blame, problematize, or judge, but rather open up possibilities and enable organizations to move forward."

# Re-Authoring Leadership Narratives With and Within Organizations[1]

By Chené Swart

**Once Upon a Time....**

> *there was an organization that was doing very important work at a very important time in our world. Some may say that this work was done in some of the harshest conditions imaginable. Over the years of their short existence as an organization, a narrative started to emerge and was told and re-told that was later called Failure and Invisibility. This narrative constantly chanted that the work leaders were doing does not make a difference, is not even done well, and nobody knows about this work, so does it really have an impact?*[2]

This article will provide a lens and practices that can guide leaders, OD practitioners, and organizations in re-authoring and co-authoring their organizational narratives with work-communities. We will explore the role of narratives in understanding organizational culture as well as the role of leadership in the authoring and co-authoring of organizational narratives. We will also unpack how the societal context with its taken-for-granted beliefs and ideas dictate what is possible in organizations and further explore how these beliefs and ideas can be disrupted. This article will provide an invitation for the subordinate storylines of leadership to come out of the shadows and inform alternative ways of co-constructing and co-authoring organizations. Lastly, we will unpack what it means when organizations are seen as ongoing conversations (Bushe & Marshak, 2015) and leaders are invited to be entrepreneurs of meaning (Hamel, 2009, p. 93) and conversation weavers (Goppelt, Ray, & Shaw, 2015, p. 376).

But first we will unpack the context in which the re-authoring lens and practices find their voice.

**What is Water?**

> There are these two young fish swimming along and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says "Morning, boys. How's the water?" And the two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes "What the hell is water?" (Wallace, 2008)

What is the water that organizations and leaders are finding themselves in? How can we see the water or know it? Why does it matter? What the hell is water?

The way we speak, think, and act do not fall from the sky. Leaders and organizations are shaped by the "communities and histories they come from, and the cities,

*1. This article has been adapted from a chapter in a forthcoming book (June): Velsdman, T. H., & Johnson, A. (Eds.). (2016).* Leadership at the coal face: An organizational interventionist perspective. *Randburg, ZA: KR Publishing.*

*2. This is a narrative of one of my clients that I recently had the privilege to journey with. They have given me permission to use parts of their narrative for the purpose of this article. This organizational and leadership narrative will be our guide in explaining the re-authoring lens and practices throughout the article.*

nations, and economic systems that have formed them, as well as the ideas of the global world that they form part of through access to technology" (Swart, 2015, p. 349). We grow up in these communities and societies, and we take for granted that our way of being and doing is the way things are. The way things are becomes normal to the point that we do not even realize that we are swimming in water because these taken-for-granted ideas and beliefs are carried by language and embodied in all of us.

"We become part of, join in with, are 'thrown' into a way of talking and being that precedes us. One is already embedded in a tradition of being. We inherit a vocabulary that is a way of being, so that our language speaks us rather than us speaking our language. Contrary to the conduit theory of language, ideas do not exist in the mind prior to being formed into speech. The language we inherit is the context that allows concepts to become taken-for-granted" (Barrett, 2015, p. 65).

Why don't we know that we are swimming in water? Over the years our ways of thinking and doing become divorced from the history, culture, and worlds they have grown from as they attain some form of truth status presenting itself as "the way things are" or as "normal." These taken-for-granted beliefs and ideas hide their history and also hide how they are informed by people in our societies who are perceived to have knowledge and stand in positions of authority.

How can we see the water we are swimming in so that it is no longer hidden? The following questions can be asked to start unpacking the taken-for-granted beliefs and ideas: Where do these ideas come from? Who do these ideas privilege, and what do they have in mind for the organization and its leaders? How are these ideas influencing the organization and its leaders?

When we start to see the beliefs and ideas for what they are, we can unpack and deconstruct the truths, practices, and the vocabularies of the context so that they can be "more explicitly known" (White, 2004, p. 105).

This "water" is not innocent because it has huge implications for what is called for in a particular time when it comes to leadership and organizational work. Therefore, the meaning we make about our own identities, work, leadership, and organizations are informed by ideas and beliefs of the water we swim in. Let's start unpacking some of the important taken-for-granted beliefs and ideas that impact organizations and leaders.

Scarcity (Saunders, 2013) is one of the dominant taken-for-granted beliefs and ideas that daily hums that there is not enough for everyone in our business and organizational world. There are not enough resources, time, profit, product, compliance, talent, market share, growth, alignment, skills, and innovation, which sometimes lead to an inhumane pace, anxiety, competitiveness, and fatigue in some organizations (Swart, 2013, p. 103–104).

Secondly, the taken-for-granted beliefs and ideas that dominate in organizations are still largely influenced by the thinking, practices, and structures of a world that is seen as static, certain, and predictable, and therefore needs command and control leadership. Within such a world, organizations and leaders are often called upon and interested in discovering best practices, benchmarking against world-class organizations, collecting the "right data," and continual searches for the singular expertise. Because this orientation tends to search for the "right answer," "best solution," and so on, there is also an implicit tendency to seek out experts who can supply tested solutions (Bushe & Marshak, 2015a, p. 13). These beliefs come at a price because by the time evidence is collected to create best practices, the conditions have changed enough to make them likely obsolete. Within this understanding leaders are headhunted to apply the best practice and turnaround strategy that was successful in their previous organization sometimes "as is" in the next context.

Another taken-for-granted belief and idea that influences the organizational world is the notion of the individual self (especially in leadership) that requires leaders to trade themselves as a commodity or property to be owned, and whose personal resources and strengths can and should be used and developed to full capacity (White, 2004, p. 128–137; Swart, 2013, p. 119–120). Therefore, we have numerous leadership styles and all forms of assessments to categorize and place leaders on a range of continuums, tables, and scales in which they are "induced to work to close the gap" (White, 2004, p. 169) between these locations and the understandings of what is currently considered normal and the human nature of a good leader (Swart, 2013, p. 121). When we can measure leaders according to "tables of performance" (White, 2004, p. 88), we can also design the appropriate development path for them. When leaders do not shape according to the standard norm of a particular organization, "problematization" (Madigan, 2014) sets in and the individual leader sometimes becomes the sole focus and object of blame for problems in the organization. These messages of deficiency draw a static line in the sand for the leader and remove the responsibility for thinking and deeper conversation about the "water" that is influencing and impacting in this situation (Sandison, 2015).

These are just some of the taken-for-granted beliefs and ideas that impact organizations and leaders in what we have started unpacking as the "water." Some of the other dominant beliefs and ideas that also have an impact on organizations and leaders are patriarchy, the belief in never ending growth, the fascination of the success of businesses in first world countries, to name a few. What are the beliefs and ideas in your organization that constitutes the water?

*The power of the narrative of Failure and Invisibility is that it is hidden. Until we unpacked the context (water) in which this organization was serving, leaders in the organization saw themselves as the problem, they were invisible failures making no real impact. Understanding the context enabled the organization to name the context, which they called the Mess and Chaos. The narrative of Failure and Invisibility was birthed from and supported by the context of the Mess and Chaos. For the first time organizational leaders could see how they have internalized the stories that the context*

*was telling them and could again choose what kind of relationship they would like to have with Failure and Invisibility in the Mess and Chaos.*

What is the re-authoring lens and how can it bring practices to understand, challenge, and make sense of the taken-for-granted beliefs and ideas of the water we swim in?

### The Re-Authoring Lens

*As the leaders were unpacking the context of the Mess and Chaos and its influence on their lives and work, they also saw narratives that were different to these dominant taken-for-granted beliefs and ideas. These different narratives have been dampened by the Mess and Chaos, so much so, that their worth seemed insignificant. As the organizational members were standing in a new relationship to the context of the Mess and the Chaos, they could see that they were not totally taken over by the context, but their daily practices told a different story of work, relationships, hope, and action towards an alternative future of Peace. As meaning-makers and story-makers they were writing a different narrative, even in the face of the Mess and Chaos. The re-authoring lens gave back the pen in the writing and co-writing of the preferred organizational narrative called Real People doing Real Work towards Ending the Conflict, a narrative for which there was a storehouse of evidence, practices, and skills of living and serving.*

The re-authoring lens is a way to see and situate human beings and organizations as authors and co-authors with accompanying practices that creates a way of being and doing. In this section we will unpack what the lens sees and how it sees.

The re-authoring lens sees human beings as active participants in the construction of their lives and their worlds, although they might be unaware that they are participating in the shaping of their lives (White, 2007). While our lives are informed by the "water" of the taken-for-granted beliefs and ideas, life is not seen as a direct reproduction of the knowledges and practices of culture because it "renders invisible the specific achievement of meaning-making" (White, 2004, p. 104) and story-making (White, 2007). Because human beings are meaning-makers and story-makers, organizations and leaders live and act in ways that do not only reproduce these taken-for-granted beliefs and ideas but resist and challenge the water by making meaning through language, behaviors, and embodied emotions (Zimmerman, 2015a).

This meaning that is made does not happen in isolation but in the interaction between individuals, communities, and organizations because human beings are relationally connected and socially constructed (Burr, 1995; Gergen, 1991, 1994, 2003) through history, culture, and taken-for-granted beliefs and ideas. Therefore, "meaning does not pre-exist the interpretation of experience, and all meanings are linguistic and social achievements" (White, 2004, p. 75).

As we make meaning through language, words create worlds (White, 1991). If we think of how people in organizations are named, we have grown accustomed to words such as employees, workforce, assets, human capital, and human resources. What is the meaning, practices, and worlds that are created through these kind of words? What would happen if we use the words, community of workers, or work-community (Blanc-Sahnoun, 2013)? What is the meaning that is possible when the word "community" is introduced? Is it possible that it can invite "notions of care, collective wisdom and knowledges, gifts and neighbourliness to enter a world that is so often rooted in assumptions of competition, success, hoarding knowledge, and doing it my way as the only way" (Swart 2013, p. 141)?

Leaders and organizations convey meaning not only in language but also through their bodies in "both doing and nondoing" (Bushe & Marshak, 2015b, p. 37), which then shape and maintain their actions and have consequences for their lives, relationships, and what we would call reality.

Human beings are therefore seen as "multi-storied" and "narratively resourced" (White, 2004, p. 90) as they construct meaning from their rich histories and memories by trafficking in narratives and by taking experiences of life into "narrative frames" (White, 2004, p. 75). In this approach, narratives are seen as the basic unit of experience. Leaders and organizations weave moments and events together in a coherent storyline across history and time and as they make meaning of these narratives in a particular context, they draw conclusions about who they are, what they can become, how they should relate, and what reality is all about.

The re-authoring lens provides the practices to unpack the narratives that get human beings stuck and do not take them forward (for example Failure and Invisibility) and thicken alternative preferred narratives (for example Real People doing Real work) that speaks of ways of living and being that take leaders and organizations forward. Leaders and organizations are invited to take back the pen in the authoring of individual narratives and the co-authoring of collective narratives that provides a counter-narrative, an alternative response and way of being to the dominant ideas of scarcity, individualism, and the so-called certainty and predictability of this world (Tonninger, 2015).

In the same way, organizations are also seen as meaning-makers and story-makers as explained through the Dialogic OD Mindset (Bushe & Marshak, 2015) because this framework sees organizations as:

- An ongoing conversation that is built on emergence, generativity, and narrative.
- A "means to ends that are constantly in a flow of creation and re-creation" and are not viewed as a thing (Storch, 2015, p. 197).
- "Meaning-making systems in which reality/truth is continuously created and re-created through social interactions and agreements [and] open to many possible interpretations" (Bushe & Marshak, 2015a, p. 17).
- "Self-organizing, socially constructed realities that are continuously created, sustained, and changed through narratives, stories, images, symbols,

and conversations" (Bushe & Marshak, 2015a, p. 25)

When an organization is seen as an ongoing conversation of meaning-making and story-making, the nature of the relationships with one another and the conversation that flows from these relationships have the potential to shift the narratives of work-communities and the organization.

This shift can occur by changing "who is in the conversation with whom, how these conversations take place, increasing conversational skills, what is being talked about, and by asking what is being created from the content and process of current conversations. Talk is action" (Bushe & Marshak, 2015a, p. 18). When talk is action the "words, writings, and symbolic forms of expressions do more than or convey meaning; they create meaning" (Bushe & Marshak, 2015a, p. 17) and shape how we think, what we perceive, and "what makes sense to us and others" (Bushe & Marshak, 2015a, p. 22).

As a result, narratives, and the hosting of different kinds of conversations are the most important discursive phenomena for understanding how people in organizations make meaning (Bushe & Marshak, 2015a, p. 22). These kinds of conversations invite emergence, narrative, and "generative metaphors" (Marshak, Grant, & Floris, 2015) that enrich the future narratives of the organization with "evidence and actions from the past and present. [T]he future is not without evidence of the possibility and potential of the preferred story an organization is living into" (Barge, 2015, p. 189). When this alternative meaning is named through meaning-making together, transformation can happen when our "language changes" in what is named and as we "rediscribe" our organization (Bushe & Storch, 2015, p. 113).

To create the environment for work-communities to participate in collectively co-constructing narratives we have to invite the multiplicity of narratives of an organization to be spoken "as is" through deep human connection built on invitation, welcome, and gifts (Block, 2008). In this deep human connection work-communities are invited to learn with one another and not for one another as informants and co-constructors of the communal narrative.

### Re-Authoring Leadership With and Within Organizations

*In the Mess and Chaos, one of the leader's narratives was being trapped and stuck. It was a narrative of the Shadow of doubt and of victimhood that came to visit when the voice of Mess and Chaos became too overwhelming. The Shadow was also a leadership narrative that did not have all the say, or the last say. There were counter-narratives of freedom and love as well as narratives of hopes and dreams for real peace to reign. Coming alongside these alternative beliefs and ideas, there were also relationships in which the leader stood that spoke of different ways of being and doing as the narrative of Light started to become more visible. The leader's relationship with her gracious and loving father, even as he faced severe violence was only one relationship that offered different conclusions and counter evidence to the narrative of the Shadow. As the leader understood the impact of the Mess and Chaos on her leadership narrative, actions, and options in the art of living and leading became available beyond what is the right and good way to lead according to dominant understandings. There was a crack in the Shadow where the Light could begin to shine through.*

This section will unpack the meaning of the word and world of leadership as it grows from the previous section's philosophical understandings and the context within which organizations are seen. We will explore questions like: What does this viewpoint on re-authoring mean for leadership? What are the important leadership skills and practices to navigate in the context of the "water"? What is the impact on leadership in organizations when the organization is seen as an ongoing conversation?

Leadership and the ideas around leadership were crafted and made meaningful over many centuries in various cultures and contexts. What was and is local and specific cultural understandings of leadership have in some cases become privileged understandings that are communicated across the globe through technology. All these claims of knowing the right and good way to be a leader in this time sponsor "identity conclusions" (White, 2004 pp. 119–147) that grow from cutting edge ideas and thought leadership on offer from leadership schools, literature, and cultural consumer stores of our global world. These dominant taken-for-granted beliefs and ideas about leadership are then sold as universal practices, true for all times and in all contexts, in what we have come to know and call "best practices."

These so-called universal practices lead to the marginalization of local and specific understandings of leadership; and marginalized cultural understandings are sometimes taken and sold on the market divorced from the contexts that can sustain them. Therefore, we are left with the following questions: Who is allowed to speak about leadership, and in what way? Who do we consider to be experts in this field? Whose voices are not included and why?

The re-authoring lens offers a "counter-narrative that reconstructs the current notions of leadership. It is not a new model, with new, distinct characteristics and qualities. It proposes a lens, a way of being, seeing, engaging, and participating in this world, that invites a different relationship for the leader" (Swart, 2013, p. 122) to their organizations, themselves, and the context in which the organization works.

Firstly, the viewpoint of re-authoring invites leaders to draw on their own unique local and specific narratives of leadership that are often "domesticated" (White, 2004) and called nothing special or important in the face of these dominant understandings of good leadership. Therefore, leaders are seen as primary authors that hold the "storytelling rights" (Madigan, 2011, p. 16) to their own narratives, not as biographies but as autobiographies. As leaders draw from this treasure chest of hidden understandings and knowledges through culture, memory, embodiment, and narrative it opens up possibilities for the "kind of leadership story that leaders prefer, and enables

them to define the task of leadership for themselves" (Swart 2013, p. 123).

Secondly, the re-authoring lens invites leaders to understand that they are relationally connected to their communities, cultures, and contexts from where their identities are formed. These leadership identities are socially constructed through history, societal and business beliefs and ideas, organizational structures, their own stories of work, and are co-constructed by the organizations that leaders are part of. Within this understanding there is a multiplicity of narratives, relationships, moments, meanings, and events that inform leadership, and "leadership becomes a reflective and dialogical project, co-created in interaction" (Stelter, 2014, p. 113) with the organization. As a result, leaders are constructed by the organization and the organization is co-constructing what leadership means in this particular context at this particular time.

Thirdly, re-authoring practices enable leaders to co-create conversations and narratives that shape, constitute, and maintain relationships, identities, and organizational realities in preferred ways. From the viewpoint of the re-authoring lens, leaders are seen as the convenors of conversations where all are invited to work from their preferred narratives and where conversations, meetings, and initiatives are guided by an awareness of the co-authoring capacity of all in the organization to shift and celebrate the narratives and metaphors that move the organization forward, in what Snowden (2015) would call, "more stories like these."

When an organization is seen as an ongoing conversation, leaders have the privilege to convene gatherings and meetings (both formal and informal) wherein the ongoing conversation by its mere existence and practices creates and co-creates an alternative preferred narrative together. In these gatherings attention is given to how we speak, what we speak about, generating metaphors, vocabulary of the conversation, and to images that resonate with the ongoing unfolding of the narrative and its accompanying practices and skills. Since words creates worlds (White, 1991), "new vocabularies are invitations to new possibilities" that suggests that leaders "pay attention to new voices, new action possibilities at the margins that can suggest new worlds of meaning" (Barrett, 2015, p. 71).

The re-authoring understanding also enables leaders to identify, unpack, question, and challenge societal beliefs and ideas (water) that influence organizational culture by harnessing and inviting the unique knowledges or "insider know-how" (White, 2004, p. 99) and skills of the work-communities beyond "the way things are" or "this is normal." In the Dialogic OD Mindset this challenging practice is referred to as the creation of the "disruption in the status quo" (Bushe & Marshak, 2015a, p. 29).

Therefore, leaders can be seen as "entrepreneurs of meaning" (Hamel, 2009, p. 93) because they listen to, unpack, and challenge societal beliefs and ideas and stuck narratives. They also create conditions where meaning is constructed and co-constructed so that narratives can be re-meaned, re-authored, and co-authored. As entrepreneurs of meaning, leaders are attentive to the "appearing of what appears" (Goppelt, Ray, & Shaw, 2015, p. 397) as they are in constant conversation with the emergence of all the layers of narratives and meaning in the organization, with its "variety of different narratives about the same thing, sometimes even competing narratives about the same things" (Swart, 2015, p. 364).

The leaders' role in the organization as an ongoing conversation is to understand their own narratives and how they influence their practices, to convene conversations where meaning could be collectively named, to challenge and unpack the taken-for-granted beliefs and ideas, and to invite the co-authoring of the emergence of the alternative preferred narrative.

The next section will provide a map, a scaffold, and practices for the journey. These maps will focus on how we create the conditions to see and act differently.

## The Re-Authoring Maps and Practices for the Journey

*As the leader understood the Mess and Chaos and the competing individual leadership narratives of the Shadow and the Light, the ability to see the organizational narrative and the participation in it, became more visible. The leader was now able to host conversations where the problem was the problem and not the person, where the unique leadership quality of each individual narrative of leaders were valued and seen to contribute to the diverse gifts that show the way forward. Leadership now became the hosting of the re-authoring journey of the collective organizational narrative as environments of deep human connection were created that invited and welcomed the alternative preferred narratives to be named and lived into. As an entrepreneur of meaning and the weaver of conversations, the leader became an active participant co-leading and co-authoring the forever emergent cultural narrative and preferred future of the organization.*

Re-authoring work is emerging work, work that is co-constructed in the moment with the above possible maps and practices always serving in the background much like a scaffold and definitely not a strict process to follow slavishly.

### *Co-Constructing an Environment that Invites Narratives*

Leaders play a very important role in co-creating the environment that can invite and trigger the meaning-making and story-making skills of people. In this environment leaders:

- invite everyone in the room to have a voice,
- ask unsettling and generative questions,
- respect participants as the authors and agents of their own narratives and co-authors of the organizational narrative, and
- acknowledge both the words and the emotions generating these words, the meaning and the experience of the meaning as they focus on what is being said and what is experienced (Zimmerman, 2015b).

Co-creating this inspiring environment with a community of workers invites deep

connection to open up multiple subordinate storylines that enable rich narratives to be told, new meaning to be made, and preferred futures to be named.

> The work-community speaks about and to the idea that not only do people come to work, produce, serve and ensure profit, but they are also a community of human beings, working together to earn a living and co-create a working environment that is in line with their values, hopes, and dreams for the future. On all levels the community of workers is seen as key informants and contributors to what is known and can be known in the future (i.e., the vision) of the organization. (Swart, 2013, p. 135)

Leading then becomes something leaders do with groups/teams/communities and not a responsibility that is taken up on behalf of, for, and over others (Swart, 2013, p. 123). Leadership becomes a way of being (or an ethics) that guides how we engage with others in community, rather than an identity or a position that we take up (Carlson, 2015).

But how do we create the initial welcome, how do we greet?

### *Saying Hello from the African Ground*

> [A]s Westerners [we] want to brush over things, so dominated by what we have constructed as "time." It is as if we want to fast-track to intimacy and connectedness, without giving anything meaningful from our lives as a gift to the other – not even our time. (Swart, 2013, p147)

Re-authoring work creates the environment that enables us to pause and live into the rhythm of the telling of narratives that cannot be rushed. It is a rhythm that challenges ideas around speed and so-called effectiveness, "as it joins hands with African culture in redeeming time as a gift to see, be touched by, and connect with one another as human beings" (Swart, 2013, p. 147). This human connectedness means that we pause long enough to "see the news in the eyes of the other" (Mpahlele, 2015) and care enough to ask generative questions that touch on issues that are personally meaningful and that people care about deeply (Bushe & Storch, 2015, p. 118).

Therefore, as we create the environment for human connectedness we also create the possibility for affect and meaning that can flow over into our social behavior as communities within organizations.

We have used the following questions to construct the greeting and the welcome to invite our human connectedness to enter as the ground from where new ways of acting and doing can grow:

- On whose shoulders are you standing as you enter this room today?
- If you had to design a t-shirt that would help us understand who you are, what would it say or what would it look like? (Blanc-Sahnoun, 2013)
- What fires your curiosity as you come to this meeting?

In the next section we will unpack the practices that create the environment for these kinds of conversations and experiences.

### *Practices That Open Up the Conversation*

Once we have created the environment for connectedness and community, we now look towards the practices that would hold the conversation so that emergence, narrative, and meaning would be invited and honored.

Table 1. *Humanizing Practices for Re-Authoring Conversations*

| ***Avoid*** | ***You are invited to*** |
|---|---|
| Judging and evaluating | Be carefully curious |
| Assuming | Ask questions that you do not know the answer to by using the vocabulary of the narrator(s) |
| Fixing, solving problems, and intervening | Elevate the narrator to primary authorship |
| Giving advice and reframing | Generous listening (Stelter, 2014) and being open to be surprised |
| Giving applause and affirmations | Share gifts and reflections |
| Practices that come from a place of knowing about people things they do not know about themselves | Practices that come from a place of not-knowing about others as we have a deep appreciation for their uniqueness (Carlson, 2015) |

Leaders are "vehicles of power" who are always in the "position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising this power" (Foucault, 1980, p. 98); therefore, they have the platform to deconstruct their power so that the multiplicity and diversity of all the narratives can come together and be spoken. In the way they welcome, invite, listen, and ask questions leaders can deconstruct their power through careful curiosity and generative questions.

The practices in *Table 1* can help leaders generate the keys for unlocking their individual, team, communal, or organizational narratives in new and exciting ways by creating the conditions for the meaning-making skills to be accessed and the words and worlds to be re-meaned.

These humanizing practices invite alternative ways of having conversations that create different experiences that can also change meaning (Zimmerman, 2015b).

By participating in these practices of creating the welcome and conversations differently, leaders can "make and remake the world by introducing new ways of talking" (Barrett, 2015, p. 75). As a result, the "shift in one conversation by the way we are talking and being will have a ripple effect into all of the others because the interconnectedness of the web of narratives moves the organizational socially constructed narrative" (Swart 2015, p. 367).

### *Leaders as Conversation Weavers*

As a result, leaders become a "conversation weaver" as he/she takes "strands developed in one conversation into the other" (Goppelt, Ray, & Shaw, 2015, p. 376) As conversational weavers, leaders have an amazing opportunity to host conversations and meetings where the multiplicity of narratives are honored and challenged, and the ones that moves us forward can be thickened and committed to.

Leaders as conversation weavers talk and act differently in what we can call a "type of praxis: a way of acting into the everyday forms of relating that create our social world" (Goppelt, Ray, & Shaw, 2015, p. 372). This praxis implies that leaders strive to stop speaking "to" people and start speaking "with" people and invite "respect for the knowledges of the lived experiences of people" (Freire, 1993, p. 30; 1994, p. 26).

As leaders start to speak with people, their role as entrepreneurs of meaning is to become "a sense maker who notices emergent dynamics and redirects the flow of interactions and conversations" (Barrett, 2015, p. 73).

Leaders as conversation weavers and entrepreneurs of meaning convene conversations that honor the multiplicity of narratives, ask generative questions, invite meaning-making and sense making to take place, and challenge taken-for-granted beliefs and ideas as they know talk is action and their praxis matters in the invitation to shift our relationship to narratives in the organization.

## Enabling Re-Authoring Journeys

In this re-authoring work, the invitation into human beings' capacity to story and make meaning is a very important step in entering this work. Without sufficient experience of the power of narrative as well as the broader understanding of the context, people in organizations get stuck in blame and never see how they are participating authors in the organizational narrative. They are left with thin (Geertz, 1973) stories and conclusions about all that goes wrong, who is to blame, or reach for quick fixes that take the organization back to familiar responses leaving nothing for the imagination.

It is also important that the diversity of understandings must be invited, acknowledged, and engaged with so that the movement to coherence grows out of the multiplicity of gifts and practices as it invites the organization to collectively move forward. As we host conversations that honor the multiplicity of narratives inside the organization, we also create the experiences that help people deal more effectively with the complexity of the uncertain and unpredictable world outside the organization (Sandison, 2015).

Leaders and organizations engaging in re-authoring practices need to understand that these practices will disturb the way things are and there will be questions and curiosities about organizational life as everybody knew it. In the Dialogic OD Mindset "transformational change always involves disruption to the ongoing patterns of self-organizing" (Bushe & Marshak, 2015a, p. 21) in which leadership can play a very important role.

Transformation in an organization is invited through the acknowledgement that culture is the sum total of the diverse narratives we tell and the meaning employees on all levels have made of the significant events, enactments, practices, leadership, and moments over time. Organizational culture is further informed by the taken-for-granted ideas of the context in which an organization functions and these beliefs and ideas add another layer of meaning and complexity that influences the organizational narrative.

In true emergent fashion, the organizational narrative is never finished, as each conversation becomes a springboard for future ones. Because of the continuous movement, an organization and its leaders are always on the way of making sense as they participate in re-authoring organizational narratives. This is contrary to the taken-for-granted beliefs and ideas around change as a process that can be engineered, summoned, and designed with outcomes we are told are predictable and certain.

When leaders practice this approach and lens they are facilitating movements in organizational conversations away from and towards re-authoring conversations (see *Table 2,* next page).

## The Re-Authoring Gifts for Leadership and Organizations

The re-authoring lens can bring various gifts to both leadership and organizations, and because of the emergent nature of this work, these gifts will be beyond that which can be named and imagined at this moment.

### *For Leaders*

As the authorship of leaders' own narratives and co-authorship of the organizational narrative bring collective ownership beyond blame, leaders see and recognize their own participation in the shaping, creation, and conveying of the organizational reality.

### *For the Community of Workers*

When the community of workers engage in new ways of talking and thinking their agreements to talk and act differently not only bring about authorship of their own narratives but also co-authorship of the organizational narrative. This co-authorship enables the organizational narrative to be re-written as the community of workers are actors and participants in this organizational drama (Swart, 2013, p. 148).

Another gift that the re-authoring lens brings is the possibility of "buy-in of the work-community in terms of commitment and ownership of any organizational strategy, vision, or initiative that flows from their knowledges and expertise" (Swart, 2013, p. 148). When their voices, knowledges, and narratives have been included in moving the organization forward, they are already invited to take ownership and take part in.

Not only new eyes and new perspectives are given through this approach, but also new practices that enable the community of workers to link their stories about the purpose of their work with the collective objectives and direction of the organization.

### *For the Organization*

When leaders and the community of workers are invited to be co-authors of the organizational narrative, it generates knowledges, vocabularies, and narratives that are "home-grown and owned in ways that can take the organization forward" (Swart, 2013, p. 148).

The re-authoring lens helps organizations to re-engage with neglected aspects of their history and narratives in ways that do not seek to blame, problematize, or judge, but rather open up possibilities and enable organizations to move forward. It invites organizations to make new meanings of experiences not previously understood or unpacked as it initiates steps otherwise never considered.

These practices and skills also enrich the language, "offer generative images, and enable people to respond to the societal reality that emerges from having different conversations with participants holding a diversity of ideas and points of view" (Storch, 2015, p. 198).

Because this lens invites new ways of talking and being it enables organizations and leaders to have everyday conversations that help narratives to become unstuck (Storch, 2015, p. 198).

The most important gift to both leaders and organizations is that it enables thinking that goes beyond what leaders and the community of workers routinely think. The experience of a generative change process "produces new images and ideas that provide people with new eyes to see old things, resulting in new options for decisions and actions that they find appealing" (Bushe & Storch, 2015, p. 118).

All of these practices can present the gift of disruption that may lead to the emergence of new possibilities and realities in a significant way.

Re-authoring work invites leaders and organizations to participate with a lens to see and a pen to write as they stand in the "midst of a complex flow, in which a multiplicity of beginnings, middles, and ends are in play simultaneously" (Goppelt, Ray, & Shaw 2015, p. 391). This complex flow is forever on the move as the weaving of various individual stories create and evolve the cultural water of the organization forward and leaders and organizations become authors and co-authors of collective narratives.

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Table 2. *Movements in Re-Authoring Conversations*

| ***Moving away from*** | ***Moving towards*** | |
|---|---|---|
| *Content first*<br>*Are we jumping into an agenda without acknowledging our humanity?* | *Connection first*<br>*Have I created the space where my team experiences connection to one another as human beings?* | (Block, 2008) |
| *Blame*<br>*Are we just looking for who is to blame?* | *Ownership*<br>*Are we asking how are we contributing to and participating in this narrative? Are we co-authors of this narrative in some way?* | (Block, 2008) |
| *The Person is the problem*<br>*Are we making the problem personal?* | *The problem is the problem*<br>*Are we taking ownership as a team and naming the problem and our relationship to it?* | (Morgan, 2000) |
| *Thin stories*<br>*Are we satisfied with easy answers and solutions for complex challenges?* | *Rich descriptions/stories*<br>*Are we allowing all the views to be spoken by creating an environment for all the team members to speak so that the complexity and diversity can be honored?* | (Geertz, 1973; White, 2004) |
| *Isolation*<br>*Are we trying to figure out things alone?* | *Community*<br>*Are we inviting people we trust even if they think differently as well as our team members to think with us and support us?* | (Block, 2008) |
| *Telling*<br>*Are we telling our team what to do?* | *Asking questions*<br>*Are we asking questions that enable team members to come to their own conclusions and decisions or to go and look for answers?* | (Freire, 1993, 1994) |

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