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# **Consultation for Organizational Change Revisited**

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*edited by*

**David W. Jamieson**

*University of St. Thomas*

**Robert C. Barnett**

*MDA Leadership Consulting*

**Anthony F. Buono**

*Bentley University*



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## CONSULTING IN-THE-MOMENT FOR CHANGE

Robert J. Marshak

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For more than two decades I have been interested in discursive processes as they influence consulting and change in organizations. One manifestation of this interest is recorded in my scholarly reflections and observations about the linguistic turn in the organizational sciences, particularly concerning concepts and theories of organizational change (e.g., Marshak, 1993; 1996; 1998; 2002; 2010; Marshak, Keenoy, Oswick, & Grant, 2000; Marshak & Grant, 2008; Grant & Marshak, 2011; Oswick & Marshak, 2012). The other manifestation has been in my coaching and consulting practices, especially in terms of language-based interventions (e.g., Heracleous & Marshak, 2004; Marshak, 2004). The purpose of this chapter is to wear both hats—one scholarly, one practice-based—and share a way of consulting for change that has evolved over the years and is now a core part of both my thinking and practice. It is also part of what my colleague Gervase Bushe and I have recently named Dialogic Organization Development (Bushe & Marshak, 2015). The discussion will briefly comment on the emerging discursive approach to consulting and change, and then what is meant by “in-the-moment” consulting. Following two examples, the specific ways in which I work

as a practitioner at a micro-level are discussed, particularly in terms of how metaphors and storylines help frame reality and response in social systems.

### **DISCURSIVE APPROACHES TO CONSULTING AND CHANGE**

The discursive approach to consulting and change is based on social construction premises (Gergen, 2009) and the primary assumption that language—such as narratives, metaphors, and storylines—frames and socially constructs reality and response in individuals and social systems (Marshak & Grant, 2008). In other words, language constructs our world(s) rather than reports the objective facts about that world. Therefore, changing when, where, what, how, and which people talk about things—changing the conversation—will lead to organizational change (e.g., Ford, 1999; Ford & Ford, 1995). As noted by Barrett, Thomas, and Hocevar (1995):

- “... (E)ffective change requires that organization members alter their cognitive schemas for understanding and responding to organizational events” (p. 356).
- “As new language begins to generate new actions, which in turn trigger different action possibilities, basic assumptions and beliefs are altered” (p. 365).
- “In other words, change occurs when one way of talking replaces another way of talking” (p. 370).

Recently, Grant and Marshak (2011) summarized much of the literature about this way of thinking about language and change. Table 11.1 lists the seven main interrelated premises about discourse and organizational change that they found in the research literature.

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**TABLE 11.1 Premises About Discourse and Change**

1. Discourse plays a central role in the construction of social reality
  2. There are multiple levels of linked discourse that impact a change situation
  3. The prevailing narratives and storylines about change are constructed and conveyed through conversations
  4. Power and political processes shape the prevailing discourses concerning change
  5. There are always alternative discourses of change
  6. Discourse and change continuously interact
  7. Change agents need to reflect on their own discourses
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*Source:* Grant & Marshak (2011)

The remainder of this discussion explains and elaborates on a way of consulting for change that is grounded in a discursive orientation to micro-level interventions, hopefully demonstrating how and why this adds value to the consulting process.

### IN-THE-MOMENT CONSULTING

The term “in-the-moment” consulting is used here to connote small discursive interventions (a few words or a phrase or two) on the part of the consultant that are not preplanned or choreographed, but instead emerge during situational interactions with a client or client system members. They are generative in intent, aimed at creating new ways of thinking without a specific outcome in mind. In many regards they are a type of dialogic process consultation intervention with an individual or team (Bushe & Marshak, 2015; Schein, 1969), but are aimed at the implicit cognitive processes that may be framing actions more than the resulting, observable behavioral or procedural processes themselves. In-the-moment interventions also have similarities to what Yeganeh and Good (2011) call “micro actions” wherein very small, time-limited interactions influence workplace behaviors, but again differ in their intentional focus on dialogic processes of meaning making.

Drawing on cognitive and discursive theories (e.g., Lakoff, 2004; Lakoff & Johnson, 1999), in-the-moment interventions are primarily based on the assumption that what is being said reveals unspoken beliefs and socially constructs operative meanings for the individual or group in question. This contrasts with assumptions that what is being said is primarily a way of exchanging viewpoints and information to arrive at conclusions and decisions.

The purpose of an in-the-moment intervention is typically to address an implicit framing of a situation that seems to be blocking or preventing the person or group from progress towards their stated objectives. Thus, an in-the-moment intervention as discussed here is intended to invite generative, double-loop learning. Put another way, in-the-moment interventions attempt to address what is framing a discussion rather than the content of the discussion *per se*.

In brief then, in-the-moment consulting is opportunistic and situational rather than a preplanned, structured intervention or sequence of actions. The intention of the intervention is to provide an opportunity for the client or client system members to rethink reality and thereby generate new possibilities without prescribing a specific course of action or intended outcome. It is conversational and uses the power of language to frame and create experience. Thus, it is a discursive approach aimed at altering mindsets rather than feedback to encourage specific behaviors or outcomes. Furthermore, the consulting action is literally in-the-moment and not an

extended conversation—more akin to a mental “jolt” than a protracted series of interactions.

In the moment discursive interventions add value to the consulting process primarily in three ways. First, they are not a separate structured event or choreographed process, but instead encourage the client to notice in real time how a semi-conscious mindset or cognitive framing may be shaping and perhaps limiting how they are responding to a situation. Second, even though they intentionally invite the client to rethink the assumptions underlying their thinking and actions, they may be experienced as less confrontational and therefore more acceptable for consideration because they occur in the flow of a conversation. Finally, the data for the intervention is not separately collected, analyzed or reported; nor is there an extended wait to begin considering what all may be influencing or limiting a change effort. The reality is that impetus and action occur in-the-moment.

## TWO CONSULTING EXAMPLES

Two brief examples of consulting in-the-moment might help illustrate the ideas presented thus far. The in-the-moment discursive interventions are noted in *italics*.

### Example One: Corporate Re-Design

The leadership of a mid-sized corporation had decided that a “complete transformation” of the enterprise was needed following a merger and facing increased global competition. A team was appointed to work on what would be needed, and charged with looking at the corporate culture, leadership, strategy, structure, reward systems, and so on. Anything and everything was on-the-table. The team of 12 consisted of several of the most important Senior Vice-Presidents and a blend of others from various functions and levels of the organization—plus me in a periodic consulting role. During the second half-day meeting of the team the following interactions took place:

**SVP Delta:** We need to start thinking about what aspects of the organization need to be changed now and in what ways.

**Others:** Yes, we agree.

**SVP Beta:** Well, I don’t think we have to look at manufacturing. That’s been running smoothly for ten year now. We wouldn’t want to mess with something unless there is a clear problem.

**Mid-Manager Zeta:** Yeah, we are in the midst of some tough competition. We can't afford to have a lot of down time. We need to address what's not working and get things up and running as soon as possible.

**SVP Theta:** Yeah, let's not fix things just because we are on this change team.

**Others:** Murmurs of agreement.

**RJM Consultant:** *Hmm. As I listen to the discussion it sounds to me like you are talking about fixing or repairing a broken machine. I thought the assignment given to this team was more like being asked to re-invent the organization . . .*

**SVP Delta:** Well, when you put it that way maybe we are here to re-invent or re-design parts of the organization.

**RJM Consultant:** *Well, what if your task was to re-design or re-invent the entire organization. You know, put everything on the table . . .*

**SVP Beta:** That would be a completely different story. We'd have to re-think and look at everything.

**Others:** Comments and head nods of agreement.

**SVP Delta:** You know, we probably should break everything down and look at the whole operation from scratch. Where should we begin?

**Others:** Nods and expressions of agreement

### *Comment*

More will be discussed about the metaphorical aspects of this intervention later in the chapter. For now, the main point is that the consultant seized an in-the-moment opportunity to ask the team to re-think and re-direct its assignment and energies before there was too much agreement on a potentially misleading conceptualization of their assigned task to transform the enterprise. It was not part of a more formal or facilitated discussion of the team's mission or vision. Although conversational and in the flow of the task focused discussion, it was targeted to the implicit and unspoken mindset(s) (e.g., *we're here to fix the machine*) that seemed to be framing how people were starting to approach their work.

### **Example Two: Team Integration**

At the urging of the SVP for Human Resources and several members of the 15-person executive team, Pat, the CEO of a major not-for-profit organization, reluctantly asked for consulting help in building a more integrated top team. Her main concerns included functional silos, difficulties in

decision-making, anxieties about who was in and who was out, and the need to work smarter rather than longer. Pat agreed to an initial team meeting to kick-things off for a process that was anticipated to last six to nine months. She assumed this would be part of the regularly scheduled monthly team meeting that normally lasted two hours. Both the consultant and SVP of HR pushed back and said much more time would be needed since the purpose of the meeting would be to cover such items as values, mission, culture, top team dynamics, priority areas to address, personal statements, and so forth. In other words, an opening session that would give an overview of what was to come and gain buy-in and support for the work ahead. Pat agreed to hold a four hour session that included a working lunch, but could not understand how that much time could possibly be needed.

Following this agreement there were further discussions between Pat and the consultant leading up to the event. Pat continued to question or wonder how or why so much time was needed. Pat was also coached to prepare a statement of what she, as CEO, expected of the team and be ready with comments about the organization's direction, values, mission, and vision. Pat again pushed back on why four hours were needed and why it wouldn't be a waste of time with a lot of filler. That conversation ended with the following exchange:

**Pat:** OK, I'll work on preparing something, but I still don't see how we can use up all that time.

**RJM Consultant:** There are a lot of things to cover and everyone has said there is not enough time to have substantive discussions on the team.

**Pat:** Well this should certainly be plenty of time, that's for sure.

**RJM Consultant:** There are 15 people and if each only spoke for two minutes on any topic that would take 30 minutes. In my conversations with members of your team they all seem to have a lot to say.

**Pat:** OK, we'll keep the schedule, but I'll be surprised if it goes the full four hours.

About three weeks later, the first session focused on improving top team integration was held. Pat gave very brief opening remarks, and told people they already knew Pat's thinking on values and vision so there was no need to cover that. The consultant then asked people if they had anything they wanted to say on those topics. All certainly did on those and other topics. The session went the full time, including a working lunch, and the role of the facilitator was mainly to keep the topics and conversations flowing and insure people could get in and out with what they wanted to contribute.

Several people commented on the way out that it had been the best session of the top team they had had. It was exactly what they needed: time to talk with each other all in the same room so they knew where everyone was coming from. Pat left immediately to get to another appointment with no comments to anyone. Three days later Pat, the SVP for HR and the consultant met to do a quick debrief of the session and to begin discussions about what should happen next. A critical part of that meeting included the following interaction:

**Pat:** I guess, I was wrong . . . They certainly used all the time and really liked the session.

**RJM Consultant:** Why did you think they wouldn't need or want that kind of time?

**Pat:** Oh, I'm sure they can talk a lot, but will they say a lot?

**RJM Consultant:** And . . .?

**Pat:** I didn't hear anything I hadn't heard before from any of them.

**RJM Consultant:** That included what they said and what they had questions about?

**Pat:** For much of it yes. I've answered their questions before. That's why I couldn't understand why so much time was needed. If they all just want to talk couldn't they do that without me in the room? It feels like a waste of time for me to be there just listening. We need more action and less talk around here.

**RJM Consultant:** *Whose time are you worried about wasting? Do you think the purpose of the session and other top team meetings is for you to quickly inform them and be informed in return? What if the purpose instead was so they could interact with each other, get a sense of each other, and start the process of being more of an integrated team than a collection of executives?*

**Pat:** I'm not sure I understand the difference.

**RJM Consultant:** *Well, if the purpose of our work is to achieve greater team integration and alignment then to me that means with each other as well as with you, and you will need to put some of your time into that. And, some of that time might best be used listening and endorsing others and their views.*

**Pat:** (Pause). I hadn't thought about things that way before. I have been more focused on the best use of my time. . . .



*Comment*

In this vignette there was an in-the-moment confrontation about unspoken assumptions about what the change work involved. These included assumptions and a storyline framing the critical concepts of productive uses of time, the role of a CEO, and to some degree the meaning of an integrated team (e.g., the role of a CEO is to talk not listen, a CEO's time should not be wasted, just listening is a waste of a CEO's time and should be avoided). Pat thought there was too much time allotted for team discussion, and apparently did not think team discussion was a good use of a CEO's time. Those assertions could be argued or discussed in various ways. By addressing Pat's unspoken and possibly out-of-awareness beliefs and implicit storylines about talk and what CEO's should or should not do offered an opportunity to open pathways to new meanings and new possibilities.

We'll return to these two examples in the context of some specific ideas about consulting in-the-moment in the next section.

### IN-THE-MOMENT CONSULTING GUIDELINES

Although in-the-moment consulting might appear to an onlooker to be some kind of off-hand remark in the normal flow of a conversation, in practice it is most effective when comments are intentional and follow some basic guidelines.

First, the choice to pursue an in-the-moment intervention is based on an assessment that the individual or group is somehow stuck or limited in how they are implicitly conceptualizing their intended work and might be "headed down the wrong path"—for example, suggesting the frame of re-inventing the organization rather than the unspoken, but (probably) implicit frame of fixing the machine. Thus in-the-moment interventions are for the purpose of generating new ways of thinking about and approaching a situation similar to double-loop learning (Argyris & Schön, 1978) without stating exactly what should be done. In some cases such moments may offer another conceptual option, while in others they may intentionally confront the presumed unstated, but limiting belief(s) directly.

Second, the impetus for an in-the-moment intervention may be triggered by some mix of analysis, empathy, and intuition. Often it is based on tracking recurring themes or patterns in what an individual or group says and does that in turn suggest the possible existence of an underlying, but unspoken, set of assumptions, beliefs or concepts framing the situation. For example, in the re-design example there was tracking of the way things were being talked about before the re-inventing remark. In the team re-alignment case, tracking of the emerging storyline (from Pat) was also balanced with empathy for a busy CEO. Deciding what to say, how and when is

an art form, not a recipe. It is also more than a “gut reaction” or “what came to mind in that moment.”

Third, as with all consulting interventions, in-the-moment interventions need to be offered in the service of the client’s stated concerns, needs and objectives. Here, clarity during the on-going consulting processes about what you think is happening, why, and how best to help the client system is critical. In that regard the stated purposes of the re-design and team integration projects provided clarity about what might be blocking progress and also suggested ways to open up new possibilities for the client or client system. The need to stay clear and focused during the ongoing dynamics is often the difference between an intentional or a reactive cognitive process intervention.

Fourth, to help insure alignment with the client’s needs and objectives, it’s always important to stay focused on the stated purposes of the work and your contract. This will get re-negotiated over the life of a project and sometimes as a result of an in-the-moment intervention, but however it may evolve it is always one of the principle touchstones, along with professional ethics, for assessing what one should or should not do as a consultant.

Another point is to be sure to continue to track the dynamics and issues in the situation to the point of making an in-the-moment comment. Because the form of in-the-moment interventions discussed here is primarily based on discursive methods, one set of dynamics to be tracked focuses on the ways in which conversations unfold. Not just who says what and when, but also what are the dominant, but perhaps implicit metaphors, that seem to be shaping the discussions (e.g., *fix the machine*) or what are the implicit storylines (e.g., *the role of a CEO is to talk not listen; a CEO’s time should not be wasted; therefore, listening is a waste of a CEO’s time*) that seem to be framing what is said and done (Gabriel, 2004).

Based on your tracking of the dynamics and discourse of the situation at a moment in time, develop one or more hypotheses about what you think might be the metaphors, storylines, or other framings that are implicitly blocking consideration of a broader range of options and possibilities. This helps avoid jumping to conclusions too quickly and encourages trying to discern how the client might be implicitly interpreting the situation.

Finally, consider what might be a different metaphor, storyline, or framing that would likely *not* be rejected by the client or client system and which also could generate new thinking—in-the-moment. Try it out. If it doesn’t have the intended effect, use the response as further data to recalibrate your thinking.

Given its central importance in discursive consulting work, it is important to take a closer look at how to approach what I call “deep listening” and then ways to address metaphors and storylines in-the-moment.

## Deep Listening

In contrast to “active listening,” where the listener seeks to draw out the speaker while also acknowledging and responding to the emotions behind the words, in *deep listening* attention is placed on discerning and responding to the possible mindsets and cognitive frameworks behind the words and the emotions. There are four main aspects to deep listening.

First, one listens for the information the client(s) seems to be overtly and explicitly trying to convey. What is the situation? What is desired? What is or is not happening? This alone would simply be good listening. It becomes deep listening when another three aspects are added to it.

Second, one listens for explicit metaphors, analogies, word images, storylines, and so forth in what the client is saying. For example, if the client describes their situation as “like a pressure cooker,” and later that they are “under a lot of pressure” or that something got them “hot and boiling mad,” then a compelling theme emerges that potentially reveals how they are experiencing their situation. This theme may be suggestive of their mindset about this and possibly similar situations even if they have not explicitly stated: “I am under intense pressure and am constrained in what I can do or where I can go. If the pressure continues, I may explode or boil over.”

Third, one listens for implicit metaphors and images, in addition to listening for explicit expressions. In cognitive linguistics these are referred to as conceptual metaphors and connote the cognitively unconscious ways in which we organize and experience the world (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, 1999). For example, if someone talks about their life in terms of “starting out in humble origins, getting over a number of obstacles, sometimes getting detoured, but now on the right path,” then it is possible that the unconscious conceptual metaphor “Life is a Journey” is implicitly organizing their experience and, therefore, the choice of words for how to describe that experience—*starting, getting over obstacles, detoured, right path*. One could also listen from a more psychoanalytic perspective and assume the metaphors and word images are the symbolic way the repressed unconscious expresses itself (e.g., Jung, 1964; Siegelman, 1990). Regardless of the orientation, however, one listens for the implicit symbolic framing(s) as a potentially legitimate clue or indicator of the way the client is interpreting and experiencing the world.

Finally, one listens not only for what is said or emphasized, but also for what is not said or deemphasized. If a client leaves out seemingly relevant information or topics, this may suggest a blind spot or possibly something hidden for presently unknown reasons. Similarly, if the client emphasizes “X” it may indicate that “Y” is being intentionally or inappropriately ignored or repressed. For example, a conflict adverse client after describing their unit’s organization structure was surprised to discover that a key office

had been omitted from the discussion. It also turned out that the head of that office and the client had a history of interpersonal/interdepartmental conflict that had never been addressed.

Deep listening asks the consultant to listen simultaneously for what the client is explicitly and literally stating while also listening for what may be being expressed implicitly and symbolically, and for what is being omitted or emphasized (Marshak, 2006). This is a tall order, but deep listening can be learned and developed much like group facilitators must learn to simultaneously follow task and process; what is happening as well as how it is happening in a group. The consultant must also listen from the frame of reference of the client in order to intuit the unspoken mindset or framework that is leading to the particular word choices and expressions. A critical error of some beginning deep listeners is to unintentionally impose their own metaphors, storylines, or framings on the situation, as if they were guessing what the client was thinking or experiencing by assuming it must be what they would think or experience in the same situation. This might be a way to empathize with the client, but it is not deep listening for the unspoken ways the client may be framing and experiencing the situation.

## Metaphors In-the-Moment

First of all, metaphors matter because they are a form of mental model that implicitly or explicitly frames for someone(s) the experience of one thing in terms of another (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Depending on the operative metaphor different thoughts and actions will result. “We need to *fix* what’s wrong in customer operations” may lead to different thoughts and actions than, “We need to *head in a new direction* in customer operations.” Consequently, metaphors can both be a target for, or method of, intervention. As a potential impediment, a metaphor that is framing a situation in limiting ways may be confronted by questioning or challenging its applicability to the circumstances. *Are we really here to fix or repair a machine?* Alternatively, offering a different metaphor is a way to both question an existing framing while also inviting new or novel ways of interpreting things.

### *Types of Metaphors*

In consulting discursively there are two types of metaphors to listen for and track in an engagement. First are metaphors that are consciously created comparisons or analogies. For example, “This organization is a runaway train” or “Talking to the boss is like talking to a . . .” These are used by people to express their experience with what is or to imagine what could be.

Second are metaphors that are unconscious cognitive patterns that implicitly structure/interpret experience. As previously noted some cognitive

linguists refer to these as conceptual metaphors which function in the cognitive (versus the psychoanalytic) unconscious (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999). Conceptual metaphors are discerned by listening for the implicit framework that seems to be organizing how something is discussed as in the Life is a Journey example mentioned above or the fix the machine example in the corporate re-design case. Subconscious conceptual metaphors are ubiquitous, but require deep listening to discern the implicit framing and meanings that may be organizing the overt expressions (see Marshak, 2004; Vignone, 2012).

### *Tips for Working with Metaphors*

The ability to listen for and work with metaphors in-the-moment is an acquired skill that can be developed or enhanced with attention and practice. Some tips include:

- Listen for word images, both those that are explicit as well as those that may represent subconscious, organizing themes. Track recurring and related images and themes.
- Listen for the meaning made by the person/system using the metaphor or image, not the meaning you would attribute to that word image. Empathy and connection to the person or system you are working with is important in order to hear what they are expressing and not what you would say in a similar situation. Assuming what the meaning must be from your frame of reference or set of experiences is the most common error in working metaphorically.
- Try getting “in sync” with their meaning. Deep listen and then draw out their imagery by using all or aspects of the suspected metaphor or image in the language you use to interact with them. If they are talking explicitly or implicitly about fixing the machine/organization try continuing the conversation from that framing and see how they respond. “So, what’s broken?” “What will it take to fix it” “What tools do you need?” If they look confused or quizzical at what you are saying try using their response as further information about what is going on for them. Adjust what you say accordingly.
- Inquire about unspoken or neglected aspects of their metaphor or image based on your understanding of the situation and the metaphor or image they seem to be invoking. If they talk about “being confined” in what they do, inquire about what is confining them. If they tell you what it is, ask about how they got into that predicament, or, how could they get “out?” If it is a conceptual metaphor underlying their thinking about a situation, then much of how they are interpreting and experiencing things in the broadest sense may be linked to that same metaphor.

- Suggest ways to rethink the metaphor or image by challenging, re-framing, and/or replacing it. In other words, offer some reasons why the implicit or explicit metaphor in use is inappropriate to the situation (will *fixing* the organization address all the challenges you are facing?); or re-frame how the dominant metaphor/image is being applied, for example *re-inventing* the machine rather than *fixing* the machine; or try another relevant, but different metaphor and see how the system responds. “What if you were *transitioning to another stage in the life* of the organization? What would you do in that case?” Again, you are not suggesting your own favorite images or metaphors, but instead ones that may have resonance for the person or people in the system based on your experiences with them and the context of their situation. If what you try does not work, use the responses to re-hypothesize what may be going on and try something else.

The most powerful aspects of a metaphor or word image are likely to be subconscious or out-of-awareness. Consequently, don't be surprised if there is denial or defensiveness at what you say or suggest. It's important to stay conversational and open to whatever comes back to you. Don't force your insights. Do invite curiosity and speculation not only by what you say, but how you say it. And, always stay in-the-moment.

### **Storylines in-the-Moment**

Storylines have similar effects as metaphors and are addressed and worked with in similar ways. Storylines are also frequently subconscious and implicitly frame how someone thinks about and responds to situations. A storyline, for purposes of this discussion, provides the underlying theme, plot, or linkage of ideas and events that provide coherence to what an actor says and does (Czarniawska, 1999; Polkinghorne, 1988). Whereas metaphors suggest a symbolic word image that may be framing a person's experience, storylines link implicit assumptions and beliefs that then provide the interpretive framing of a situation. Storylines might also be thought of in terms of themes, motifs, or scripts, all of which shape reality and response for the actor(s) (Beech, 2000).

Again, as with deep listening and metaphors, the consulting stance is to wonder what the unspoken storyline might be for a person(s) of positive intent to talk and act the way they do. This is similar to an anthropologist wondering what the deep societal assumptions might be that would lead people in a particular culture to talk and act the way they do.

The consulting approach follows the same tips and guidelines as working with subconscious metaphors. The intent is to surface the unspoken storyline

that is providing the rationale and justification for actions which may be limiting the client from achieving their stated objectives. Sometimes simply making clear what has been influencing behavior is sufficient. Sometimes challenging the applicability of the storyline or offering a plausible alternative will be needed. And, sometimes listening for conflicting or out-of-sync storylines may suggest mindset differences that are “behind” operational misalignments.

### *Talk and Action Storylines*

Consider Table 11.2 where some everyday expressions about talk and action are linked to their presumed underlying storylines. No wonder discursive consulting may seem ephemeral to some! And, of course, a client subconsciously operating from these storylines (perhaps Pat in the team integration example) would likely not be interested in spending much time in meetings to talk things over versus getting down to action.

## Two Political Storylines

Another example is provided in Table 11.3 by what the cognitive linguist George Lakoff (2004) suggests are the underlying frames or storylines behind how liberals and conservatives in the American political system think and act. Imagine for a moment you were consulting with two executives,

**TABLE 11.2** Everyday Expressions About Talk and Action

Everyday Expressions	Underling Storylines
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Talk is cheap</i></li> <li>• <i>It's just empty words</i></li> <li>• <i>Idle talk, idle chatter</i></li> <li>• <i>Talk is a waste of time</i></li> </ul>	Talk is Worthless
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>It's deeds that count, not words</i></li> <li>• <i>Watch what we do, not what we say</i></li> <li>• <i>Walk the talk</i></li> <li>• <i>Avoid: Too much talk and not enough action and being All talk and no action</i></li> </ul>	Action Counts; Action is Valued
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Stop talking and start doing something</i></li> <li>• <i>It's time to stop all the talk and get down to business</i></li> <li>• <i>If everyone would just stop talking, maybe we could get something done</i></li> </ul>	Talk Must Stop for Action to Start
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Action lists</i></li> <li>• <i>Actionable issues</i></li> <li>• <i>To do lists</i></li> <li>• <i>Action research, action learning, action science</i></li> </ul>	A Bias for Action

Source: Marshak (1998)

**TABLE 11.3 Storylines that Guide Policies and Actions**

Liberal Storyline	Conservative Storyline
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The world can be made a better place</li> <li>• The world can be dangerous; people need to be protected from those dangers</li> <li>• People are born good and can become better</li> <li>• People become responsible, self-disciplined and self-reliant through being cared for and respected, and through caring for others</li> <li>• Show responsibility and empathy towards everyone</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The world is a dangerous place</li> <li>• The world is competitive; there will always be winners and losers</li> <li>• People can be bad; you have to be disciplined to do what is right</li> <li>• Disciplined people who pursue their own self-interest become prosperous and self-reliant; they are the responsible people</li> <li>• By pursuing your own interest you help everyone</li> </ul>

Source: Lakoff (2004)

one of whom operated from one of these storylines and the other from the other. Which one might talk and act in a way more consistent with *your* storyline? What are the implications of that for your practice and also your ability to deep listen, empathize, and supportively confront as necessary?

### Address the Frame not the Content

A discursive orientation to consulting for change embraces the notion that there may be objective, empirical events, but it is the interpretation or meaning that is given to those events that creates social reality for individuals and organizations. Discursive in-the-moment consulting involves the ability to listen for how others are framing their reality as well as the ability to suggest new frames for their consideration. Consequently, in my own practice I rarely address the specific content of an interaction or situation. More often I am listening for and addressing the implicit assumptions and beliefs (conceptual metaphors and storylines) that may be framing how the person or system is experiencing and making meaning about the situation. “Yes, I understand you are discussing how to transform the organization (*content*) and I am wondering why you are talking as if you are fixing a machine (*frame*)? Put simply, the ability to find, form, and frame reality is a core competency for discursive in-the-moment consulting.

### CLOSING COMMENTS

In doing the kind of consulting described here it is critical to never assume “I’ve got it.” Whatever you think about what’s going on it’s always a hypothesis



to be tested gently in the on-going conversation and pursued, amended, or dropped depending on the response. It's about creating new possibilities and/or insights for the client system and not about being "right."

Finally, it is worth noting that the dominant conceptual metaphors shaping consulting and change have been shifting over time, although all or most all are still in current use (Marshak, 1993, 2010; Oswick & Marshak, 2012). For example, do we have tool kits for helping to fix problems in the organization? (*The organization is a machine*); or, are we restoring or improving the health and competitive fitness of the organization as in a doctor-patient relationship? (*The organization is a growing, living organism*). Perhaps we are helping the client system move from a current to a desired future state (*Change is a journey*)? Whatever one or ones are currently helping to shape your consulting practice, I hope I have now added: "*Change is a shifting conversation that can happen in a moment.*"

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