

Success Talk: Narrative Accounts of Organizational Change

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journals.sagepub.com/home/jab**Julie Wolfram Cox** **Abstract**

Based on evidence from narrative accounts of organizational change, the potential of dialogic approaches that privilege joint construction of both change challenges and interventions appears very promising. This evidence also demystifies the notion of “well-planned” change, may further strengthen moves away from n-step programmatic approaches to change intervention, reminds readers of the importance of procedural fairness, and invites further research in terms of collective leadership. Where retrospective stories through which participants distinguished perceived success and failure provide the data for analysis, it is important that findings are understood within a narrative rather than an objective frame of reference.

Keywords

diagnostic OD, dialogic OD, change leadership, organizational development, storytelling

The recent empirical paper by Hastings and Schwarz (2021) is likely to cause quite a stir among communities engaged with organizational change and development research and practice as it addresses the foundational question of “What works?”. In presenting the results of their narrative study, Hastings and Schwarz discuss some thought-provoking findings, including that dialogic orientations to organization development (OD) were associated with perceived success, either when applied throughout a change process or when following initial diagnostic processes. In contrast, perceived success was not associated with diagnostic orientations unless there was also an oscillation to a more dialogic approach (Bushe & Marshak, 2009, 2015). Although the

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authors also argue for the potential of concurrent inquiry that integrates both diagnostic and dialogic orientations, the potential of dialogic approaches that privilege joint construction of both change challenges and interventions seems, from these results, to be very promising indeed.

Particularly interesting among the authors' findings is the statement that they are "agnostic as to whether change is initiated as a dialogic or diagnostic process – this initial choice is less important than subsequent choices as change unfolds" (Hastings & Schwarz, 2021, p. 3). In line with longstanding images of organizational change as a continuing journey (cf. Cassell et al., 2012; Marshak, 1993), and with recognition that past experiences of organizational change are likely to impact the present, this finding demystifies what might otherwise be cast as "well-planned" change. It invites instead a more tentative, experimental notion of starting out, and of doing so in line with acceptable norms and routines in particular settings. The findings on the importance of oscillation (in this case switching and then switching back from diagnostic to dialogic processes, or *vice versa*) add to this in that oscillation implies a capability for flexibility. These findings further strengthen moves away from n-step programmatic approaches to change intervention (see e.g., Levie and Lichtenstein, 2010) and even supplement the iterative nature of action research with a logic that privileges shifts in emphasis without the more diagnostic emphasis of action research that is associated with sequential waves of data collection.

As such, *Leading change processes for success* is a provocative paper that provides a thoughtful contribution at a time when receptivity to new ways of thinking is likely to be high. In addition, the presentation of the study, including the authors' careful documentation of their assumptions, invites scrutiny. As the authors discuss, this is a narrative study in which participants were invited to take part in semistructured interviews as a means to access their representations of knowledge about organizational change. Hence, retrospective stories through which participants distinguished perceived success and failure provide the data for analysis, and it is important that the authors' findings are understood within a narrative rather than an objective frame of reference, even though the participants were also asked for data that confirmed the achievement of success states.

To me there is some slippage within this narrative framing as the article progresses, for although narratives are discussed in the findings, the presentation there relates more to themes among the data sources (e.g., distinctions among shared positive, feedback, and resistance narratives) than to the narrative nature of the study itself. Here it is important to recognize that the distinctions drawn between dialogical and diagnostic inquiry are made from *within* a narrative, constructionist epistemology. This does not diminish the findings in any way, but reinforces that they have emerged from within a particular stance on research and, thus, that they need to be positioned and reflected upon from within that stance, as the authors remind us toward the end of the paper when they distinguish organizational narratives from organizational states. It is not, therefore, that the causal model is supported in an objectivist sense, or that the paper contributes to "testing" of diagnostic versus dialogical inquiry (Hastings & Schwarz, 2021, p. 5).

Finally, the authors' nicely illustrated finding that it is not the nature of between-participant narratives (i.e., positive, feedback, or resistance narratives) *per se* that matters in terms of outcomes, but instead *whether and how* leaders inquired into participants' representations of reality, is an important reminder of the importance of process and procedural fairness in organizational change interventions (e.g., Faupel and Helpap, 2021). It is also notable that Hastings and Schwarz (2021, p. 3) have directed their study to leadership as a position occupied by particular individuals, distinguishing leaders as "those people in formal positions of authority who take responsibility for success" from participants as "others who exert influence during change". As such, considerable opportunity exists to consider the implications of the authors' findings on and promotion of concurrent (diagnostic and dialogical) OD practices in the context of more collective approaches to leadership where leadership work is distributed, shared or rotated among individuals (see e.g., Eva et al., 2021). If responsibility for leadership is shared, then discussion, debate and successful delivery of concurrent inquiry – which could become known as *concurrent OD* - may be more readily achievable than if leadership remains located in particular individuals or positions.


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