CHANGE CONVERSATION STYLE: CHANGE THE ORGANIZATION

Aura CODREANU, Junior Lecturer

"Carol I" National Defense University,
The Regional Department of Defense Resources Management Studies, Brasov, Romania

Abstract: Using conversation as a method to incur organizational change is no longer a novelty in the field. However, the suggestion made by this paper is that change can only occur when the prevailing conversational style employed by organizations aiming at undertaking transformation efforts is changed first.

Moreover, the approach taken focuses on the dynamic nature of the organizational environment described by the verbal interactions and conversation patterns of work groups and individuals. Thus, as opposed to the mechanistic views often taken when trying to change organizations, this paper proposes that change has to occur at the level of employees and, more specifically at the level of naming and talking about organizational issues. The proposition underlying this is that while changing the attitude or behavior of people may be difficult if not impossible, focusing on their conversational style and linguistic patterns and molding these is more likely to trigger expected results. In this respect, it is worth reminding that any sentence formulated by an employee can be viewed as an organization's "health" indicator given the specific organizational context underlying it, as well as the organizational roles and identities it mirrors (Heritage2010:42).

Key words: conversation style, organization change, dialogue, Conversation Analysis, change program

1. Introduction

Using conversation as a method to incur organizational change is no longer a novelty in the field. However, the suggestion made by this paper is that change can only occur when the prevailing conversational style employed by organizations aiming at undertaking transformation efforts is changed first.

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With a view to all of the above, this paper is structured in three parts. First, it focuses on terminological delineations such as conversation, dialogue and conversational style. Second, it highlights the steps taken by two of the most known methods that employ conversation as a trigger of organizational change. In the end, it presents a three-stage

program based on which organizational change can occur through the transformation of conversational style.

2. Terminological delineations

In order to mold organizational conversation style based on the elements characteristic of individual conversation style, it is necessary to clearly delineate the underlying principles of conversation in general, rather than its normative guidelines (Moeschler, Reboul, 1999:57). Therefore, a clear understanding of the conceptual dimensions describing the terms of "conversation" and "dialogue" is required.

2.1. A conceptual approach to conversation:

Conversation, as a basic concept of the discipline known as Conversation Analysis, is defined as *talk-in-interaction* (Hutchby, Wooffitt, 2008:12). In this respect, conversation is seen as the core of interactions (Schegloff 1979:23-78), as a prototype means of language use, of dialogic oral communication during which participants deliberately assume the role of message transmitter (Levinson 1983:284-285). Schegloff (1995:187, 1987:222) insists that the day-to-day conversations are actually the means through which the talk-in-interaction occurs and, hence, social institutions are established, while Ionescu-Ruxăndoiu (1999:37) characterizes conversation as the most frequent speech form.

According to linguistic anthropology, conversation plays an important role in maintaining the cultural habits of individuals and communities in terms of establishing and preserving (Duranti, 2006: 169) identity, subjectivity, ideas, categories, attitudes, values, etc.

The salient feature of conversation is its unpredictability, spontaneity. Thus, in terms of the occurrence of verbal interactions and their sequencing, very few of these follow a predetermined pattern (Sacks, Schegloff, Jefferson 1974). Moreover, as Ionescu-Ruxăndoiu (1999:39-42) points out, there are a few more defining characteristics of conversation such as: continuity, interactional purpose described by the different and sometimes contradictory objectives of the interlocutors, context framing, the creation and recreation of a certain context, the structured interventions of the speakers.

2.2. Day-to-day conversation – organizational conversation

The common characteristic that both day-to-day conversation and organizational conversation share is the sequencing of speech acts. The differences emerge when details come into play. Thus, the day-to-day conversation is rational, teleological and yet defined by the sum of language games that come into play (Nofsinger, 1991:6). Moreover, it is based on unplanned interactions among actors who follow a given set of rules/patterns (Nofsinger, 4). From this point of view, Schegloff (1987: 222) highlights the core difference between current conversations and organizational conversation: while the former is based on interactional patterns generated at individual level, the latter is the result of the patterns/norms characteristic of the formal social structures in place.

Moreover, current conversation is the predominant type of human interaction in society and the main instrument employed for socialization purposes. Therefore it is the forerunner of any institutional (i.e. organizational or family) conversation. In addition, the day-to-day conversation is not a conventional one, nor does it become subject to swift historical changes that trigger linguistic patterns centered on equity and efficiency oriented arguments. By comparison, institutionalized conversation is defined by tasks and roles inherent in the script of any organization. Consequently,

by contrast with the behavioral flexibility incurred by day-to-day conversation, organizational conversation places bounds and constraints on behavioral manifestations of individuals (Atkinson, 1982:86-117).

From a theoretical standpoint, it is difficult to find a clear-cut delineation between day-to-day conversation and organizational conversation (Schegloff 1999, Heritage 2005). However, at practical level, the interlocutors are able to do this and hence, act in accordance (Drew, Sorjonen 1997:92-118). Research in the field of institutional conversation analysis has highlighted the existence of unique conversational prints at organizational level that are defined by the ideology, identity, beliefs related to the profession of the individuals, as well as to organizational, methodologies, rules and regulations.

Concerning the differences between the two types of conversation, Ionescu- Ruxăndoiu (1999:39) says:

> *"Conversation is defined by contrast with discussion, the latter requiring an institutional framework (e.g. school, court, etc.) and at least the partial pre-assignment of the transmitter role. As with conversation, the participants act as individuals to whom status and role constraints may impose some restrictions but without necessarily impacting the interaction. On the other hand, a discussion unfolds from the perspective of the social roles assumed/assigned by the participants. The differences between conversation and discussion lie in the topics approached: a conversation does not impose any limits on this, whereas the discussion topic is strictly dependent on the institutional framework where is occurs."*

2.3. Conversation – dialogue

The word "dialogue" comes from the Greek words: *dia,* meaning "through, by the means of" and "logos" whose meaning depends on the context of usage. Thus, "logos" is derived from "lego" with the primary meaning of "speaking, talking" (which for the Greeks actually meant expressing a set of ideas). Later on it acquired the meanings of "thinking", "word", "reason".

According to Plato, dialogue is a manner of dialectically exploring human nature and experience. From this perspective, the concept does not solely refer to the encounter between a "me" and "you" through talk, but to a more profound mutual understanding, acknowledgment of the other and respect (Prosser, 1978:227).

Nowadays, communication sciences (Dixon, 1996:24) define dialogue as the talk between two people occurring with the purpose of establishing a bilateral relationship built on reciprocity and merger. Thus, without excluding the likelihood of misunderstandings, confrontations the dialogic communication unfolds as long as the legitimacy of the perspectives expressed by all the interlocutors is acknowledged. Consequently, the concept of dialogue is defined as the interpersonal dynamics built on dialogic speech acts like: asking direct questions, presenting personal ideas/opinions, arguing, debating, etc. the ultimate goal of dialogue is to bring to the surface what is known and yet not disclosed, to acknowledge the existential paradigm by which interlocutors define themselves. Hence, dialogue is about coherence and any statement must be viewed as part of a personal history that needs to be told. In addition, dialogues is defined as reciprocity, as taking responsibility for the other without expecting him/her to do the same (Levinas, 1999:97), as the merger of differences, as courage to maintain one's viewpoint when arguments are in favor of changing it (Buber, 1965:111), as continuous interrogation among participants (Isaacs, 1999:10).

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According to Bohm (Nichol, 2006), dialogue can be defined as coherence while society's coherence is defined by a set of jointly shared significance. As a result, dialogue involves surfacing tacit aspects like individual values, the nature and intensity of emotions, thinking patterns, inherited myths. Moreover, dialogue is a means of generating and maintaining collective thinking. On the other hand, the source of incoherence lies in the inherited defense mechanisms, in the anchoring in a fixed, unchangeable meaning that renders significance to the surrounding reality and that allows for the present to be interpreted, accepted or rejected. In conclusion, dialogue as coherence must not be viewed as a pre-established goal that must be achieved. On the contrary, dialogue is about living coherently and not living for the sake of cohesion.

For dialogue to occur, tensions among individuals and groups need to emerge. It is only thus that dialogue participants can observe and understand the arguments supporting group/individual actions. The prerequisite for dialogue to appear and solve these tensions is the frequency of encounters. In this respect, it is worth noting that defensive attitudes do not just bend from the very beginning dialogue is initiated. On the contrary, dialogue is a repetitive, cyclical process that entails boredom, frustration before generating dynamic behavior.

Bohm (Senge, 2004: IX) underlines that the real test for dialogue is to allow divergent opinions to coexist. For dialogue to occur and unfold, the following conditions must be met: attention (needed to identify defensive patterns, preconceptions that are instilled at individual or/and group level); curiosity (an intrinsic characteristic of attention that must come together with a relaxed non-judgmental attitude directed towards a clearer and yet not necessarily more correct understanding of the interlocutor's message); listening (that should go beyond mere empathy and focus on discovering new meanings even at the risk of misinterpretation); avoiding to correct the interlocutors' statements.

2.4. Conversation style

In practice, conversation is based on a set of unwritten laws. Therefore, it displays a set of common characteristics that can be viewed as constant conversation patterns. The term suggested by Erving Goffman (1955, 1981) to describe the outcome of the interactions that could be labeled as conversation is "interaction order". This is built on a complex set of rights and obligations that act both at individual and institution level. Moreover, this order is built on a "syntax", namely on the relationships established by the people who are present at a given moment in a given place. The syntax is the one that ensures the sequencing of speech acts and that contributes to expressing, ratifying or undermining concepts like self-perception and personal identity.

According to Gumperz (1982), many of the elements that are part of the interaction order (such as the means of showing interest, feelings, the way of telling a joke and the identification of the right moment to do that, the moment when one can start talking without overlapping with the other, voice pitch and volume) may seem implicit but they vary from an interlocutor to another.

Consequently, the way of saying something in order to create and interaction order defines conversation style (Tannen, 2005:4). Its features are rendered by the verbal behavior manifest at all language levels: phonological, lexical, syntactic, prosodic, and rhythmic (Tannen, 9). Ideally, the analysis of verbal behavior should not be separated from the analysis of proxemics, kinesics and haptics.

The basic trait of conversation style that recommends it as the best means to use in organizational change is *involvement* (Lakoff, 1979, Tannen, 1990). In this respect,

specialists (Svennevig, 1999:49) talk about involvement strategies as features of conversation style and as means of shaping the form of conversation (compared, for example, with Grice's politeness strategies employed in developing the contents of a conversation). If Grice's strategies contribute to developing social relations through the linguistic means that show familiarity, solidarity, affection, as well as through the linguistic techniques that solely cover affections (Tannen, 1982:12) both as the reflection of a psychological status, and as interaction and self-presentation means. In this respect, involvement is viewed (Katriel, Dascăl, 1989:276) as both commitments to the beliefs/psychological status expressed through a speech act (that may belong either to the transmitter or to the receiver) and as involvement in the conversation topic and in the relationship established among conversation participants.

The involvement strategies identified by Tannen (1984:30-31) fall into the following categories: managing sentences sequence (e.g. tolerance for talking over the interlocutors/oneself; active listening); managing the topic of conversation (e.g. preference for narrative techniques or for topics of relevance at personal level); paralinguistic strategies (e.g. intonation, pronunciation, voice quality, speech rhythm); speech metrics (e.g. rhythm, repetition of phonemes, morphemes, words or phrases; figures of speech); participation in constructing meanings (e.g. indirect style, ellipsis, tropes); dramatization (e.g. dialogue; details)

2.4.1. Laws of conversation style

The laws governing conversation style and that can be identified with the help of the above definitions and delineations are:

➢ The law of coherence defined by interaction strategies (e.g. I see what you mean…), continuity strategies (e.g. in this way…) and contextualization strategies (I believe what you've just said can prove useful to me in the following way…). Another label for these laws could be that of laws of alternatives. Its correct understanding and employment undermines defense mechanisms, or anchoring in one-sided interpretations of situations.

➢ The law of involvement is built on strategies aimed at overriding both the institutional role assumed by an individual/group, as well as the expectations and at acknowledging the interlocutor as a partner and counterpart.

➢ The law of the domino is based on strategies aimed at questioning what seems to be for granted.

The strategies underlying these laws are different, but they depend on one another in defining a person's/group's/organization's conversational style. Given the goal of this paper, these strategies are not presented in this paper.

3. Contemporary methods of organization change through conversation and dialogue

The goal of this chapter is to briefly present two contemporary methods that use conversation and dialogue in order to implement organizational change: the Landmark Business Education/ Vanto Group method and the focused conversation method. The criteria used in their selection for the purposes of this paper were the success of Landmark Business Education/ Vanto Group method in inducing organization change, and the similarities between the focused conversation method and the one suggested by this paper, namely conversation style method.

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3.1. The **Landmark Business Education(LEBD)/ Vanto Group method**

Landmark Business Education/Vanto Group is both a controversial and successful organization that reports accomplishments in implementing organization change through dialogue and conversation.

Unlike conventional methods in organization change focused on developing or improving employee competence level, the LEBD method aims at changing individual behavior, as well as employees' self-perception (Chappel *et.al.*, 2003: 90). Their endeavors are built on the premise that reality is shaped through language. As a result, the adequate usage of the latter markedly contributes to the interpretation of the day-to-day situations and to the identification interpretative alternatives, and hence to future actions.

The philosophical principle underlying LEBD programs is formulated as a double negation: "we do not know that we do not know" (McCarl *et.al.*, 1). This principle is actually the one used as a measurement of the transformation undergone by individuals and organizations. Thus, from Socrates' quote: "I know one thing that I do not know nothing", the LEBD philosophy focuses solely on the second part and develops it in the Socratic tradition with the help of a coach, teacher, mentor, therapist or philosopher (McCarl *et.al.*).

By LEBD definition, an organization is the result of the conversational networks established by its employees. Therefore, aspects like performance, work conditions, success, profit, development are not given facts, but the result of these conversation networks. As a result, the goal of LEBD is to analyze, explain and change the interactions that form these networks. The propositions underlying LEBD's actions can be summarized as follows (Logan, 1998: 7):

➢ Organizational culture is defined by the conversational network;
➢ An individual's participation into the network shapes his/her experience and understanding;
➢ An individual's approach to work influences his/her behavior;
➢ By shaping the conversation network in which the individual participates, his/her relationship with work and, hence, behavior is shaped;
➢ An organization's results are generated by its employees' behavior.

Relying on the power of language/speech as an important component of conversation, the Director of Vanto Group, S. Zaffron (2007:6) identifies three laws governing performance and that should be followed any time individual or organizational change through dialogue/conversation is envisaged:

➢ Individuals' actions are triggered by the way they frame the situations with which they are confronted;
➢ The way a situation is framed can be understood from the language used to describe that situation;
➢ Using a future-oriented language changes situation framing.

The LEBD method consists in following the steps:

➢ The involvement of all decision-makers in the elaboration of organization mission. (The commitment is made in writing and is stated as "We commit to….")
➢ The description of mission elements in a document signed by all decision-makers and that uses linguistic structures like Present Tense sentences, the personal pronoun "we", and, when necessary, the means by which the commitment is fulfilled.
➢ Building teams and work relationships by taking training programs targeted at understanding and becoming involved in organization change through dialogue (alongside with specific actions like business processes improvement, company reorganization, etc.)

3.2. The *focused conversation method*

The focused conversation method was initially developed by Joseph Matthews in the '60s as an experimental method aimed at teaching art. In the '90s, the Institute of Cultural Affairs from

the USA develops it into a four stage program built around a set of questions organized from simple (i.e. addressing superficial aspects) to complex (i.e. addressing in-depth aspects) in order to guide conversation and run by a facilitator. The underlying hypothesis of this method is that free, unguided conversation does not yield any results.

The levels (Stanfield, 2000: 18- 21) targeted by the questions are as follows:

➢ The objective level focused on questions aimed at describing the subject of the conversation: (e.g. concerning a law: What is this law about?; What does it propose?; What does it omit? OR concerning a meeting: What words/expressions do you remember to have been used during the meeting? What are some of the key ideas presented?)

➢ The reflection level includes questions aimed at generating personal reactions, attitudes, associations related to the topic under discussion (e.g. What was your first reaction to this law?; What do you like/dislike about it?; OR How did you feel during the meeting?, What was one of the positive aspects about the meeting?)

➢ The interpretation level is based on questions aimed at identifying meanings, values, the importance and consequences of the topic under discussion (e.g. What are the real goals of this law?; Will this law serve its purpose? OR What topics were approached during the meeting? What is the relevance of this topics for you personally?).

➢ The decision level is focused on making a decision for the future and the ever present question underlying the surface ones is: So what? (e.g. What is the priority of this law? What are the arguments in support….? What are our arguments? OR What do we have to do after this meeting?).

The rules that govern the establishment and administration of the questions are:

➢ There are no good or satisfactory answers. This discourages defensive attitudes while encouraging unimpeded expression of personal opinion.

➢ The role of the conversation is not to teach, but to guide in the efforts to structure people's reasoning.

➢ Questions must be open-ended and should not include any clues as to likely expectations concerning the answers. Such questions encourage the use of creativity instead of a critical attitude.

➢ *"Yes"," No", "I don't know"* answers are accepted;

➢ Only one answer to a question is not accepted;

➢ Questions should start with *Who, What, How, Which, Why.*

In conclusion, the focused conversation method is built around a set of questions with the role to clarify a topic before making any decisions and acting. However, this method is nothing but a small part of a methodology aimed at conducting organization conversation in such a manner that by changing individual attitudes and behaviors organization change can be achieved. In this respect, the LEBD/Vanto Group method demonstrates that organization change is a tangible goal.

4. Change Organization Conversation style: change the organization (overall method description

The three laws governing conversation style and their inherent strategies can be applied at organization level only by resorting to a research method known by the name of *triangulation* whose stages are as follows:

1. Theoretical triangulation, namely a further analysis of the strategies underpinning the three laws by focusing on the following disciplines: Conversation Analysis, Rhetoric, Linguistics with its branches: Linguistic Anthropology and Sociolinguistics.

2. Temporal triangulations focusing on the linguistic principles that lead to a changes in a the form and structure of a given language both diachronically and synchronically. In

this respect, the disciplines informing on the theoretical concepts to be employed are Dialectology and Stylistics.

3. Triangulation at organization level by focusing on the three layers of organizational linguistic behavior: organizations policies, rules, regulations; group linguistic behavior and individual linguistic behavior.

The steps to be taken in changing an organization by changing its conversation style are as follows:

1. Using the method of observation and case studies at top management level.
2. Presenting the conclusions in the form of an individualized training program in conversation style change.
3. Running the program
4. Using the method of observation at formal group level.
5. Presenting the conclusions in the form of an individualized training program in conversation style change.
6. Running the program

As for the time needed to go through the above steps, it depends on the feature of the organization that is to undergo change. For this, the first step is a prerequisite.

The items based on which the observation method is to be employed in steps 1 and 4 are the following:

1. How are new ideas shared?
2. What kind of justifications (i.e. solidarity/power) do managers/employees use when it comes to presenting pros and cons in a discussion?
3. What are the means used to argue in favor of one's ideas? (e.g. examples, analogies, etc.)
4. How are roles and statuses assigned/built/enforced in the organization?
5. What is the tolerance level of emotional language?
6. Who gets frustrated when his/her ideas are not taken into account?
7. Who is the initiator of the latest idea that has been put into practice at organization level? Who is tasked to put the idea into practice? Whose name is written on the documents related to idea development?
8. What are the jokes viewed as acceptable at the level of informal groups?

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