

## The Role of Conversations in Producing Intentional Change in Organizations



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## THE ROLE OF CONVERSATIONS IN PRODUCING INTENTIONAL CHANGE IN ORGANIZATIONS

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**Most perspectives on change propose that communication occurs in the context of change. This article inverts that perspective by proposing both that communication is the context in which change occurs and that the change process unfolds in a dynamic of four distinct types of conversations. The fundamental nature of speech as performative suggests that change is linguistically based and driven and that producing intentional change is facilitated by intentional communication. The relationships among the conversations are discussed, and implications for theory, research, and practice are given.**

What does it take to produce an intentional change in an organization? Some theorists propose that it requires a shift in the balance of forces for and against the change (e.g., de Rivera, 1976; Lewin, 1951). Others suggest that producing a change depends on the level of top management commitment, the type of intervention used, people's readiness for change, the level of resistance, or the organization's culture (e.g., Goodman, 1982; Quinn & Cameron, 1989). Each of these perspectives makes a valuable contribution to the understanding of and the ability to effectively produce intentional change in organizations by focusing attention on the conditions and circumstances that influence individuals to produce new behaviors (Porras & Silvers, 1991). This article extends the understanding of producing intentional change by developing a framework for considering change as a communication-based and communication-driven phenomenon. More specifically, it focuses on the types of conversations that managers use to create, sustain, focus, and complete a change. We assert that this framework provides a new perspective for understanding change and the change process, new opportunities for change research, and an increased likelihood of producing successful intentional changes in the workplace.

That communication plays an important role in the production of change is not a new idea. Numerous writers have stressed the role of

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communication in the change process (e.g., Beckhard & Pritchard, 1992; Kotter, 1990), even to the point of suggesting that change may be seen as a communication problem that can be resolved by having people understand the change and the role they play in its implementation (Kotter, 1990). In this context, communication is seen as a tool for announcing and explaining change, preparing people for the positive and negative effects of change (e.g., Jick, 1993), increasing others' understanding of and commitment to the change (e.g., Beckhard & Pritchard, 1992; Morgan, 1988), and reducing confusion about and resistance to change (e.g., Kotter & Schlesinger, 1979). Communication is also seen as a tool for diffusing dissatisfaction with the status quo in order to inspire people to change (Beer, 1980; Spector, 1989), as a mechanism for sustaining the change (Kirkpatrick, 1985), and as a way to receive feedback on what a change means to people and how they believe it will affect them (Kanter, Stein, & Jick, 1992). Communication is considered a critical element in enabling people to change their attitudes and behaviors (Beckhard & Pritchard, 1992; Beer, Eisenstat, & Spector, 1990), and in their gaining ownership of the change.

Regarding these perspectives (e.g., Beckhard & Pritchard, 1992; Kanter et al., 1992), the key roles communication plays are providing and obtaining information, creating understanding, and building ownership. These perspectives treat communication as a tool that is used within a change process. We maintain the opposite: Change is a phenomenon that occurs within communication.

Change as an organizational phenomenon necessarily occurs in a context of human social interactions, which constitute and are constituted by communication (Giddens, 1984; Poole & DeSanctis, 1990). These interactions produce and reproduce the social structures and actions people know as reality (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). From this perspective, change is a recursive process of social construction in which new realities are created (Ford & Backoff, 1988), sustained, and modified in the process of communication. Producing intentional change, then, is a matter of deliberately bringing into existence, through communication, a new reality or set of social structures.

If this is the case, then the change process actually occurs within and is driven by communication rather than the reverse. Producing change is not a process that uses communication as a tool, but rather it is a process that is created, produced, and maintained by and within communication (Donnellon, 1986).

In this article, we seek to firmly establish communication as the very medium within which change occurs. Our intent is to explicate a framework for understanding the production of change as a phenomenon in communication and to make explicit the underlying process that drives change. More specifically, we propose that four different types of conversations are pivotal in producing intentional changes and that each type of conversation plays a distinctly different role in advancing the change

process. We also propose that each type of conversation is composed of a distinct combination of speech acts (e.g., Searle, 1969), which ensures that the conversation can perform its unique role in the change process. It is our assertion that intentional change is produced through the development of these conversations and that a change agent's effectiveness in producing an intentional change can be increased through the effective application of these conversations.

This article is speculative, not definitive, and it is intended to provoke ideas and thinking regarding the production of intentional change as a phenomenon in communication. The article is a selective exploration of one segment of a vast communication literature (e.g., Krone, Jablin, & Putnam, 1987) and the ways in which that segment might strengthen both the understanding and the ability to produce intentional change. The article is not intended to be a comprehensive review of the application of communication theory to the change process and will, of necessity, exclude many other perspectives on communication that are of value.

### INTENTIONAL CHANGE

Whether a change is intentional or unintentional, it can be defined as the difference(s) between two (or more) successive conditions, states, or moments of time. The differences between successive moments are established by determining a basis for saying that something is not something else, that is, finding what *is* in the new condition that is *not* in the original condition (Smith, 1982). There is no change, movement, or difference when one looks at only a single state as in a snapshot (Weisbord, 1988). Only when two or more states are juxtaposed and compared over some time interval, as in moviemaking (Weisbord, 1988), can a difference between states be noticed. This difference demonstrates a change. When the difference is intentionally produced, there is an intentional change, and when the difference is unintentionally produced, as in an accident, there is an unintentional change (Levy & Merry, 1986).

Intentional change occurs when a change agent deliberately and consciously sets out to establish conditions and circumstances that are different from what they are now and then accomplishes that through some set or series of actions and interventions either singularly or in collaboration with other people. The change is produced with intent, and the change agent is at cause in the matter of making the change. Unintentional change, in contrast, is not deliberately or consciously produced but is manifested as side effects, accidents, secondary effects, or unanticipated consequences of action. Indeed, one of the benefits of evaluation research is to identify some of these unintended effects (Rossi, 1979).

To produce an intentional change, therefore, requires that some intended result, state, or condition that does not already exist must be brought into existence (i.e., an intended difference must be produced). Planned organizational change involves taking intentional action with a

commitment to producing an a priori specified outcome (Porrás & Silvers, 1991) by directing attention to the specifics of the intended condition or state that will be different from the prior condition or state (Goodman & Kurke, 1982). The accomplishment of the intended change will be demonstrated by some objective evidence or measure of the final outcomes, showing in what way they are different from what was present before the change process.

### SPEECH ACTS: THE FOUNDATIONS OF CONVERSATION

According to Searle (1969), all verbal speaking is performative, in that it is made up of "speech acts," which are actions in language. These actions are not idle; They bring into existence a social reality that did not exist before their utterance. Austin (1962) proposed that each performative speech act, such as a promise, a threat, or the naming of something, constitutes a deed, occurrence, or event—a thing done—which establishes a new state or reality different from what existed prior to the speech act. Austin used the term *performative* to underscore that the speech act produces a changed reality and does not simply report on or represent something that was already there. Thus, speech acts produce change, although on a miniature scale.

Building on and extending the work of Austin, Searle (1969, 1979) classified all speech acts into five categories: assertives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declarations (Searle, 1979; Winograd & Flores, 1986). These categories constitute the five different ways a change agent can take action in communication. They are performative, in that each type of speech act establishes a new reality (or continues the current reality) with which the listeners must now interact.

*Assertives*, also called *claims* (Reike & Sillars, 1984), are the kind of statements in a conversation that are supportable by evidence. Such statements are assessable and assailable on a dimension of true and false, based on other evidence or the acceptability of the evidence provided (Reigel, 1979). According to Scherr (1989), assertions are the fundamental unit of exchange in most management structures; that is, judgments, evaluations, assessments, and opinions are common in the workplace. Accounts (Austin, 1961; Scott & Lyman, 1968), in which people offer excuses and justifications to explain unanticipated or untoward behavior, are another form of assertives. The speaker may, at any time, be called upon to provide the evidence for the truth of the assertion or account.

*Directives*, also called *requests*, are the elements of a conversation that attempt to make the listener do something. Directives include invitations, instructions, orders, and commands. In this case, the speaker communicates in a way that requires the listener to respond either by action or by refusal to act. Requests are an important vehicle for getting the work done in an organization.

*Commissives*, also called *promises*, are the natural responses to a request in that they commit the speaker to some future action(s). *Commissives* are the speech acts that people use to establish agreements in a conversation. The speaking of a promise may be implicit, as when someone accepts a position with a specified job description, or it may be explicit, as when someone schedules a project or promises to produce a result at a certain time.

*Expressives* are also common in the workplace: These speech acts express an affective state, as with apologizing for being late, worrying about delays in a project, or wishing personnel problems would clear up. Because the truth of the expression is presupposed, there is no evidential issue about whether the speaker's apology is true or not. The expression of an apology is the apology, the expression of the worry is the worry, and the expression of the wish is the wish.

*Declarations*, associated with beginnings and endings, will create a new set of operating conditions and may be the least used speech act in the workplace. Declarations create a state change solely by virtue of their having been said. The adhering qualities of declarations are a function of the speaker's position and are not based on evidence. Just as a judge declares a verdict of guilty, and so it is, or an umpire declares a pitch to be a strike, and so it is, an executive can declare that a new project is under way, an office is renamed, or a person is promoted, and so it is.

These speech acts comprise the five communication tools used by change agents to bring about an intentional change: making claims, requests, and promises; expressing feelings or emotions; and announcing a new operational reality. These are the deeds of change; they create a difference by their very occurrence. These speech acts, combined in four different ways, will constitute the conversations that produce an intentional change.

## THE CONVERSATIONS OF CHANGE

The broad view of conversations as "a complex, information-rich mix of auditory, visual, olfactory, and tactile events" (e.g., Cappella & Street, 1985: 2), has conversations include not only what is said, but also what is done in correlation with what is said (i.e., a *gestalt*). Thus, conversations may include symbols, artifacts, theatrics, and so forth, that are used in conjunction with what is spoken. This view is not inconsistent with the understanding of conversations as clusters of interrelated speech acts. Because this article is an introduction to the conversations of producing intentional change, the focus here is only with the spoken aspects of conversations. The role other aspects of conversations play in producing intentional change remains for subsequent examinations.

In this inquiry, conversations are the verbal interactions between two or more people in which the interaction can range from a single speech act (e.g., "Do it.") to an extensive network of speech acts that constitute

arguments (Reike & Sillars, 1984) and narratives (Fisher, 1987). These conversations may be monologues or dialogues (Reigel, 1979). A conversation may occur in the few seconds it takes to complete an utterance, or it may unfold over hours, days, or months. A single conversation also may include different people over time, for example, when a board member's tenure expires during the process of changing corporate policy.

We propose that, although participants will engage in many conversations, there are four different combinations of speech acts that correspond to four different types of interactions in the intentional change process. The specific content, sequence, tone, and so on, of these interactions will vary, but the emphasis a change agent puts on certain speech acts will define the stage of development of the change. The four conversations are initiative, understanding, performance, and closure.

A brief example of how the production of an intentional change might look using these conversations is shown in Table 1. This example, which is based on a real change, has been abbreviated. In the actual change, there was a great deal of discussion among participants. However, this example illustrates each of the four types of conversations that are described in the sections that follow.

### **Initiative Conversations: Starting a Change**

An initiative conversation relies on assertions, directives, commissives, and declarations to focus listeners' attention on what could or should be done. This is the "call" or "proposal" that constitutes the first phase of a change process. It may be a reaction to manifested or anticipated environmental shifts or organizational performance downturns (Ford & Baucus, 1987), or it may be proactive, intended to move the organization toward some vision or possibility (Kouzes & Posner, 1987). In either case, someone takes the initiative and communicates with an assertion (e.g., "We need to do something about the deteriorating situation in the East."), a request (e.g., "Will you approve our undertaking a new program to restructure the department?"), a promise (e.g., "We will reduce the budget deficit by 25% this year."), or a declaration (e.g., "We will substantially increase the availability of health care.").

Several of these speech acts may be used, or only one may be necessary; the public promise of President Kennedy to put a man on the moon by the end of the 1960s was sufficient to initiate a massive change effort in NASA. The example in Table 1 is also a single request, in the form of a directive. Expressives may be added for emphasis, but they are not the operative element in initiating a change. A claim regarding some danger or opportunity, coupled with a request or promise (or both) and a declaration of a new future will get a change project under way. The working components of initiative conversations are phrases like "I propose . . .", "Tell me what should we do about . . .", "We should stop . . . and start . . .", "It is time we undertake . . .", and "What do you think about . . . ?".

**TABLE 1**  
**The Quality Program: An Illustrative Change**

Conversation	Statements
Initiative	CEO: I want us to implement a quality-improvement program.
Understanding	<p>Director of Administration: What's this all about?</p> <p>CEO: Several things. First, we are getting far too many complaints from our patients. Second, the current climate for reform makes quality essential, and, third, I am convinced we can deliver better care.</p> <p>Director of Nursing: I'm not sure we need to improve quality. We have a well-trained staff and they do a good job. The average performance ratings of the nurses are up, and any changes would just give them more work to do.</p> <p>CEO: The staff may be doing a better job as individual workers but not as a team. There must be some reason for the complaints.</p> <p>CEO: Okay, so we are all agreed that we should undertake a quality-improvement program. Now, how will we know if the program works?</p> <p>Director of Administration: What if we used the number of formal complaints received to tell? We received over 100 complaints last month, both written and verbal. That translates into about 3 complaints per thousand patients.</p>
(Condition of satisfaction)	Director of Nursing: OK, so if the number of complaints is less than 1 per thousand per month by the end of this calendar year, we will say the program worked.
Performance	<p>CEO to Director of Administration: Will you contact each of the department heads and ask them to generate a list of things they think could contribute to us getting fewer complaints and then to bring that list with them to a meeting on the 6th of this month at 1 PM?</p> <p>Director of Administration: Yes. Do you want us to make a list also?</p> <p>CEO: No.</p> <p>Director of Nursing: I will meet with my supervisors and ask them to generate a similar list and ask them to bring the list to a meeting on the 8th of this month starting at 3 PM.</p> <p>CEO: Great. Then, at the meetings, we will identify things that can be done and assign them to some project teams.</p>
Closure	CEO: I want to thank each of you for the work you did here today. Your willingness to press in on the issue made it possible for us to see what is needed to get our quality program well defined. Does anyone have anything to say about the meeting or what happened here?

Initiative conversations may arise in different places or from different situations: in informal meetings in which people who are discussing (complaining about?) existing conditions and circumstances, out of the visions that individuals have for what could be (Kouzes & Posner, 1987; Richards & Engel, 1986), or as a result of other change processes within the organization.

There is no singular beginning point to an intentional change, and bracketing events into a meaningful form (Weick, 1979) is a function of who is doing the bracketing. However, an intentional change arises from conversations in the organization at some point following a claim, a declaration, and associated requests and promises. These initiative conversations are like the identification stage of organization decision making, in which opportunities, problems, and crises are recognized and evoke action (Mintzberg, Raisinghani, & Théorêt, 1976) or as the beginning point in issue selling (Dutton & Ashford, 1993), in which managers attempt to get other managers to pay attention to what they are saying.

### **Conversations for Understanding: Generating Understanding**

*Conversations for understanding* are generally characterized by assertions (Scherr, 1989) and expressives; that is, claims are made, evidence and testimony given, hypotheses examined, beliefs and feelings explored, and contentions maintained. Through these conversations, people seek to comprehend the situation and determine cause-effect relationships (Mintzberg et al., 1976); work to make sense of the issue, problem, or opportunity; and move the matter forward (Dutton & Ashford, 1993). This dialogue (Isaacs, 1993; Schein, 1993; Senge, 1990) provides an opportunity to (a) examine the assumptions which underlie thinking and to reflect on the implications of that thinking, (b) develop a common language among participants, and (c) create a shared context in which people learn how to talk to each other (Ashkenas & Jick, 1992). It typifies the problem-solving process: Problems are formulated, alternatives are generated and evaluated, and choices are made in both a linear and nonlinear fashion (Argyris & Schön, 1982; March & Olson, 1982). Such conversations may include requests and promises, but these would be subservient to the process of increasing understanding.

Conversations for understanding produce three important by-products for the change process. The first and most substantive by-product is the specification of the *conditions of satisfaction* for the change. These conditions are the a priori specifications that define the intended end point of the change. Although there will almost certainly be miscellaneous, unintentional, or unexpected outcomes, it is necessary to specify both the conditions that will exist when the intentional change has been completed and the time frame within which these outcomes will be produced (Winograd & Flores, 1986).

Conditions of satisfaction give the measurable and observable conditions, requirements, or measures (Kanter et al., 1992) that must be met in order for the intentional change to be successful. Generalities and ambiguity (Eisenberg, 1984), such as "establish a new allocation process to improve performance," are insufficient if one expects to determine whether the change actions were effective (Rossi, 1979). Without conditions of satisfaction, it is not possible to evaluate progress during the subsequent phase of change: conversations for performance. Specific

conditions of satisfaction are developed in a dialogue for understanding the factors associated with the initiative call for change, as shown in Table 1.

A second by-product of conversations for understanding is some degree of *involvement, participation, and support* on the part of those engaged in the change. This involvement is vitally important in dealing with resistance (e.g., Kotter & Schlesinger, 1979) because it entails dialogue about the rationale, context, and meaning for the change and an opportunity for people to express their concerns, ideas, and suggestions (e.g., Kanter et al., 1992; Kotter, 1990; Lippitt, Langseth, & Mossop, 1985). If this part of the change process is incomplete, people may not understand what is happening or know their role in the undertaking, and they may resist change efforts (Beer, 1980).

A third by-product is *decision makers' interpretations*. Because these conversations will serve to translate events, instill meaning in these events, and develop shared understandings and schema about these events (e.g., Gioia, 1986), they allow decision makers not only to make sense of what has been learned, but also to determine what changes can or should be produced next or in the future (Daft & Weick, 1984; Isenberg, 1986). These interpretations also affirm or alter the impressions decision makers have of each other and, thus, the credibility they grant to each other (Leary & Kowalski, 1990).

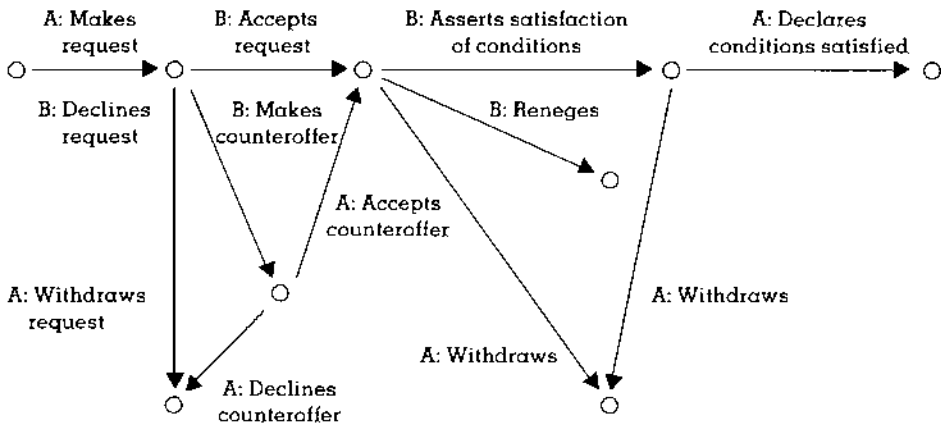
### **Conversations for Performance: Getting into Action**

*Conversations for performance* include what Winograd and Flores (1986) called *conversations for action*, which are networks of speech acts with an interplay of directives (requests) and commissives (promises) spoken to produce a specific result. Such conversations are dependent upon clearly stated conditions of satisfaction in order to produce the intentional change. Even though these conversations may include assertions or expressives, they are considered "noise" here, because they do not produce results relevant to the intended change.

Conversations for performance focus on producing the intended results, not on the transmission of a request, and not on the request's meaning. The requests and promises shown in Table 1 are related to implementing the first step of the program called for in the initiative conversation. Although such conversations cannot be expected to have a direct impact on the condition of satisfaction at this time, they will make it possible to do so in the future. Observed progress toward the results will provide feedback to decision makers about the effectiveness of their communication for performance (Watzlawick, Bavelas, & Jackson, 1967).

The possible patterns of options in conversations for performance are diagrammed in Figure 1, where each circle represents a potential state of the conversation and the lines represent specific speech acts. This is not a model of message transmissions, internal mental states of decision makers, interpreted meanings, or systemic patterns (e.g., Krone et al.,

**FIGURE 1**  
**Communication for Action<sup>a</sup>**



<sup>a</sup> From *Understanding Computers and Cognition: A New Foundation for Design*: 65, by T. Winograd and F. Flores, 1986, Norwood, NJ: Ablex. Copyright 1986 by Ablex. Adapted with permission.

1987). Figure 1 is a diagram of the speech acts exchanged between participants in a conversation directed at the production of specific measurable results.

To begin, Speaker A may open a conversation for action with a complete request to Listener B (e.g., "I request that you be accountable, starting now, for all the monthly reports that go out of this department."). The request identifies the conditions of satisfaction in terms of results and time. Speaker A can either withdraw the request before receiving a response or can modify the request. Then Listener B can (a) accept the request, (b) decline the request, or (c) make a counteroffer for different results or times. A counteroffer might be, "I accept the request but cannot start this new accountability until November." Acceptance of the request constitutes a promise or an agreement by Listener B to produce the results on time. In the normal course of events, Listener B at some point asserts to Speaker A that the conditions of satisfaction have been met; Listener B is now accountable for all monthly reports going out of the department. Speaker A can accept the assertion and declare a successful completion or refute the assertion by saying, for example, "You have forgotten about the budget summaries that we send to the accountant." This refutation allows either party to modify the specified conditions or to back out, thus moving the interaction to a point of incompleteness where one or the other can be held "liable" (Winograd & Flores, 1986).

Perhaps because of a reluctance to confront this element of liability, performance conversations are seldom conducted this rigorously in the workplace. People regularly make requests and promises, set deadlines, show evidence of completion, and change their minds about what they

want, but they seldom set clear conditions of satisfaction, insist on accountability for fulfilling these conditions, or communicate straightforwardly to renegotiate the performance agreement. The pattern of options in a rigorous conversation for performance has, however, been applied to management communications with substantial success (Scherr, 1989).

### **Conversations for Closure: Completing the Change**

*Conversations for closure* (Albert, 1983, 1984; Bridges, 1980) are characterized by assertions, expressives, and declarations to bring about an end to the change process. Claims may be made that the change is complete and the work is finished, and congratulations or regrets may be expressed that the project is over, but the project is nonetheless declared complete. Table 1 shows that a closure conversation is even important for a single meeting to allow everyone an opportunity to leave the event behind them. Requests and promises may occur in this conversation, but they are subservient to the process of closure.

Closure is essential to change. It implies "a sense of harmonious completion," wherein tension with past events is reduced or removed and balance and equilibrium are restored (Albert, 1983). As Jick (1993: 197) stated, "disengaging from the past is critical to awakening to a new reality." Closure, therefore, involves both a letting go of what no longer works and a continuation of what does. Albert (1983, 1984), for example, proposed that closure conversations include summaries, justifications for termination, expressions of positive sentiments, and discussions of continuity in which things are related to a larger context that is not ending. Bridges (1980) proposed that closure conversations focus on, relate to, and support disengagement, disidentification, disenchantment, and disorientation. Despite their apparent differences in focus, what appears to be common to each conversation for closure is some form of *acknowledgment* conveyed in assertions, expressives, and declarations.

Acknowledgment also can involve celebration of the actions and results that foster accomplishment of the change (Richards & Engel, 1986). Celebration is more than rewards: It connotes ceremony, acclaim, and festivity that honors individuals, groups, events, and achievements (DeForest, 1986). Things to celebrate are the stages of change, successes, losses and failures, people, and events (DeForest, 1986). Conversations for closure acknowledge accomplishments, allowing people to complete their past with respect to the issue of the change and to move on (Albert, 1983; Bridges, 1980).

One final aspect of closure conversations is important in order to ensure that people are released from their change effort to go forward: the acknowledgment that there are now new possibilities and new futures that did not exist prior to the efforts of those engaged in the change. In Table 1, the speaker introduces the possibility of a well-defined quality program, a future that did not exist in the change's initiative stage. Whether the change was completely, partly, or not at all successful, the

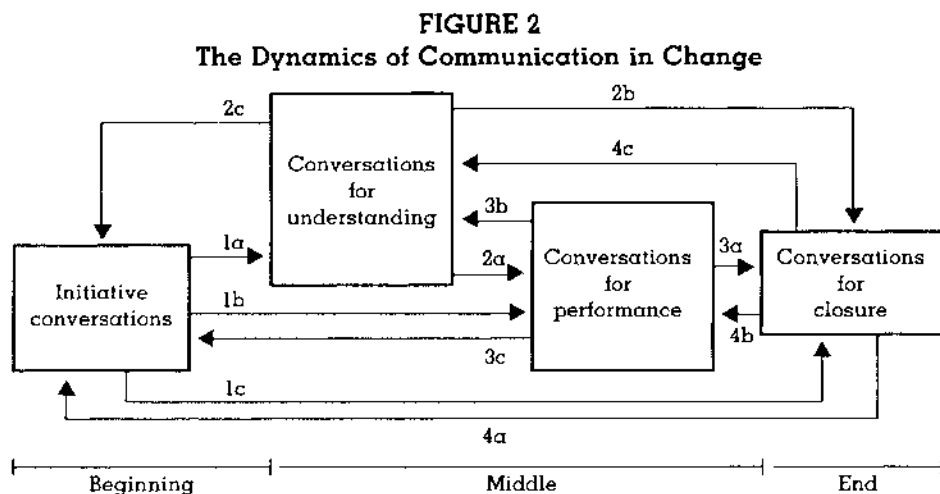
future contains possibilities, opportunities, and problems that are different from those that existed before the change. The future will, presumably, encourage new initiative conversations.

### CONVERSATIONS AND THE DYNAMICS OF CHANGE

Figure 2 shows how the conversations for initiative, understanding, performance, and closure can be related to each other in the production of an intentional change. If one examines these relationships, it is possible to identify the dynamics among conversations that characterize an intentional change process. When we regard intentional change as a temporal phenomenon moving from beginning to end (Beckhard & Harris, 1987), or from unfreezing to refreezing (Lewin, 1951), the general sequence of conversations will move from left to right in Figure 2. Any one of the four types of conversations can shift to any of the other three types, as shown whenever someone or something changes the conversation from one intention or purpose to another.

#### Transitions From Initiative Conversations

Initiative conversations are considered the starting point of each intentional change. They are essentially proposals, and whether they are honored is a function of the relation among the speaker and listener (e.g., Leary & Kowalski, 1990; Stiff, Kim, & Ramesh, 1992), the issue being raised, the context in which it occurs (Dutton & Ashford, 1993), and the adherence qualities of the conversation itself (Reike & Sillars, 1984). If an initiative conversation is successful, the change process may shift into conversations for understanding (Figure 2, line 1a) or go directly into conversations for performance (line 1b). If it is unsuccessful in initiating a change process, then the initiative conversation is ignored or dismissed, and the change process will stop with a conversation for closure (line 1c),



or end like a motion that fails to be seconded. Each avenue is described next.

When the change process moves from initiative conversations to conversations for understanding (line 1a), this does not mean that any agreement for undertaking a change has been made; it means only that the initiative issues raised have been accepted for subsequent discussion (Dutton & Ashford, 1993). Upon further investigation, decision makers may decide that no action is warranted and the intentional change process will stop at the discussion phase. In contrast, decision makers may determine that change is called for, establish its conditions of satisfaction, and move on to conversations for performance (line 2a).

Sometimes initiative conversations skip over the stage of conversations for understanding and shift directly into performance conversations. The change process can move directly into conversations for performance (line 1b) in the case of disasters or emergencies, where the conditions of satisfaction are evident or need little clarification and where an explicit or implicit agreement to take action exists. In fact, under such conditions, conversations for understanding may be seen as unnecessary delays. There may be other times when it is beneficial to omit conversations for understanding; Sometimes such conversations devolve into attempts to change people's attitudes, which is not a pathway to successful change (Beer et al., 1990).

The third exit from initiative conversations is to shift into conversations for closure (line 1c) when the call for change is abandoned or terminated without further research or action. In some cases, an initiative conversation may not move forward into understanding or performance conversations because the people who are in a position to move it forward are stuck in the past (Bridges, 1980; Smith & Berg, 1987). This stalling happens when managers are responding to historical events or prior interactions with the initiator rather than being attentive to the issue that is being presented. When people "save" up transgressions and then dump them all at once (Watzlawick et al., 1967), they may hold the initiative hostage to the past, and they do not move it forward until the change agents deliberately shift the conversation into another phase.

### **Transitions From Conversations for Understanding**

In the stage of conversations for understanding, decision makers have accepted the call to initiate change, and they conduct discussions to set forth the conditions of satisfaction for the change. They also may include others in the organization to inform them of the need for change, to elicit support and participation, and to obtain feedback. When a conversation for understanding is successful, it will shift to a conversation for performance (line 2a). When it is unsuccessful, the change process either ends or it can shift into conversations for closure (line 2b). When it is successful, it may generate new initiative conversations (line 2c). Each avenue is described next.

In a successful conversation for understanding, the participants determine what the change should produce and what actions are appropriate to make this change happen. The conversation focuses on understanding the reasons for a change or the options for action, and it progresses until the conditions of satisfaction are outlined. The conversation then moves into conversations for performance (line 2a).

Sometimes during conversations for understanding, the dialogue cannot progress to conversations for performance, and it may be useful to move such dialogue into a conversation for closure (line 2b). The participants may find that they are "hung up" or "stuck" (Smith & Berg, 1987) in ineffective ways of thinking (Argyris & Schön, 1982) and cannot move beyond their interpretations of history. They may say, "We did this before and it didn't work." Bridges (1980) pointed out that people must complete prior changes before they can effectively start a new change; if conversations for closure have not taken place for prior changes, these conversations may have to occur before the new change can be successful. If the change agent cannot facilitate the conversation for understanding such that it produces a statement of the conditions of satisfaction for the change, then the progress of the intentional change dialogue ends.

In the process of a conversation for understanding, participants may observe other opportunities or threats that need to be addressed, and they may opt to initiate new change conversations to address such opportunities or threats. The generation of new initiative conversations (line 2c) restarts the cycle of change conversations. Substantive changes in organizations may be expected to trigger other changes in other areas, and they can involve an entirely new set of decision makers who will shepherd the new change process through its stages of conversational development. If new changes are initiated, however, the change agent must ensure that the original effort proceeds into subsequent stages of development.

### **Transitions From Conversations for Performance**

When the process of change reaches the stage of conversations for performance, it produces requests and promises that generate the actions and results that will, over time, fulfill (or fail to fulfill) the conditions of satisfaction for the intended change. In their study of General Electric's work-out program, Ashkenas and Jick (1992) pointed out that to make the transition from understanding into action requires conversations for performance, in which people engage in action-planning sessions to create specific plans, timelines, and accountabilities. Without these conversations, people naively assume that an agreement to some course of action will, automatically, make things happen. Understanding, however, does not produce results.

The stage of conversations for performance will be complete when the intended conditions of satisfaction have been met, when the time allotted for the change process has ended, or when the change has been

terminated for any other reason. At each of these points, the change agent's role is to complete the change process for people through conversations for closure (line 3a). These conversations acknowledge what has been accomplished and the contributions people made to the change process.

Conversations for performance also may be suspended at any time to allow the dialogue to return to conversations for understanding (line 3b). For example, during conversations for performance, people may request explanations, justifications, or clarifications for what they are being asked to do. The resulting conversations for understanding can provide a background or context of legitimacy, in which the conversations for performance will be heard, and thus may support or inhibit the acceptance of requests (Hirokawa, Mickey, & Miura, 1991) and the making of promises. A shift from conversations for performance back to conversations for understanding also happens when people give accounts (Bies, Shapiro, & Cummings, 1988; Scott & Lyman, 1968) or make self-serving attributions (Kelley, 1973), in which they blame their failure to fulfill a request or keep a promise on someone or something else. The intent in making these accounts is to transfer responsibility so that the person giving the account is not held accountable, thereby creating or maintaining a favorable impression (Leary & Kowalski, 1990). The result of the explanations, however, is to take a conversation for performance and turn it back into a conversation for understanding.

Conversations for performance also may generate new initiatives (line 3c). New understandings and opportunities open up during a change process, and these can start new change initiatives that unfold alongside the existing initiative. Such parallel change efforts require rigorous attention to the management of conversations for change in order to avoid loss of momentum of any of the change efforts. When conversations for performance spawn new initiatives, the change agent must ensure that those initiatives are managed through the stages of conversational development and that the current change process is returned to the performance conversation stage or advanced into conversations for closure.

### **Transitions From Conversations for Closure**

Finally, conversations for closure can put into perspective all that has happened and allow participants to complete their relationship with the change effort (Bridges, 1980). The end of conversations for closure signals the end of the change process for the intentional change undertaken in the initiative stage. This completion may lead naturally to new initiatives (line 4a), because a new future now exists and new opportunities are available in that future.

Conversations for closure may be interrupted by brief returns to prior stages of the development of the intentional change process, but the change agent must facilitate the conversation to produce an authentic closure. For example, during conversations for closure there may be a

return to conversations for performance (line 4b) as people discover incomplete items or identify actions that could be taken to enhance the change effort. There also may be a return to the even earlier phase of conversations for understanding (line 4c): When people raise complaints, concerns, or questions about the change process in the midst of the closure conversation, they return the change process to the level of explanations, clarifications, and justifications. The change agent must, in either case, manage the conversation to produce closure for the change.

The dynamics of communication in a change process entail transitions among four distinct types of conversation. An example of a change process that progresses along the full set of change conversations on lines 1a, 2a, 3a, and 4a is shown in Table 1. But not all changes are so direct. Rather, change efforts jump around as when people shift conversations back toward an earlier conversational stage in the process of change. A change that has advanced to the level of performance conversations, for example, can be slowed by someone who shifts from making requests and promises into giving explanations and justifications (a conversation for understanding). A change agent, therefore, must be aware of the different types of conversations and how these contribute to the change process.

### BREAKDOWNS IN CHANGE

The production of intentional change begins with the recognition that speech is performative. If a manager believes that talk is cheap, then the power of designing intentional conversations to move a change project through its constitutive communications should be abandoned. We propose that the problems of change may be addressed if one considers that conversation produces change and that specific conversations produce specific aspects of change.

The problems or breakdowns that occur in the process of intentional change efforts may be viewed as breakdowns in and among the four conversations of change. This idea of breakdowns is useful for change agents regarding any of the four stages of development of an intentional change process. The manager who is worrying over (or cursing) a recurring problem in the organization can wonder why the change isn't showing signs of progress, but, in fact, if there has been no performative conversation, then there has been no call to action, no creation of understanding or clear conditions of satisfaction, and no requests and promises designed to fulfill those goal conditions. In this section we discuss, in the framework of performative conversations, five different types of breakdowns or problems associated with the production of an intentional change.

The first type of breakdown occurs when someone who wants to initiate a change makes an assertion, request, promise, and/or declaration

in order to rally others to produce a change, and nothing happens: The initiative conversation fails to evolve into a subsequent conversation (for understanding). This breakdown can occur when the initiative conversations are not delivered to the people who are—or who see themselves as being—in a position to move the issue forward. For example, an employee who works in manufacturing may observe that a single change in the manufacturing process would save the company money and improve quality, but rather than communicate the idea to a manager, he or she might mention the idea to someone in sales, who cannot bring about the change. One reason people may not communicate initiative conversations is because their past initiatives have been either ignored or dismissed (Dutton & Ashford, 1993), or the initiators have been punished or reprimanded in some way, or because the initiators are concerned about the impression they will make or others have of them (Leary & Kowalski, 1990).

A second type of breakdown can occur when there is a failure to create enough shared understanding among participants to produce a clear statement of the conditions of satisfaction for the change. Because conversations for understanding are directed toward generating understanding and agreement among decision makers regarding what must be done, why, when, how, and by whom, this breakdown will stop the change process from moving forward with the deliberate, cooperative behavior implied in an intentional change (Donnellon, 1986). Ashkenas and Jick (1992) found in their study of the GE work-out program that when conditions of satisfaction were vague and general, rather than focused and specific, or were not set at all, people were not clear about what actions to take and conversations did not move forward. The manager who is geared for action but is surrounded by people who are expressing, discussing, and arguing about the change and its ramifications may want to conduct a conversation explicitly for understanding that focuses on assertions and expressives to produce a clear statement of the conditions of satisfaction for the change. A full and complete conversation for understanding among the people involved in the change can pave the way for action by clarifying assumptions, intentions, and expectations (Isaacs, 1993; Schein, 1993; Senge, 1990).

Ironically, the creation of shared understandings among participants may result in a third type of breakdown: the failure to realize that agreement and understanding are not, by themselves, sufficient to produce action (Beer et al., 1990). Many people believe that if agreement has been obtained, there is no need to move on to conversations for performance. Ashkenas and Jick (1992) pointed out in the GE work-out program that it was not until people had conversations for performance, in which specific actions were identified, requests were made, and people were held accountable, that actions were taken. The failure to move on from conversations for understanding to conversations for performance can

terminate, significantly slow, or frustrate a well-intentioned change effort, because conversations for understanding do not reliably produce what is wanted (Beer et al., 1990).

Therefore, delays are not necessarily the result of people being resistant or trying to subvert the change but the result of people not being clear on the specific actions that must be taken, by whom, and by when. Beer and colleagues (1990) pointed out that just because a manager announces a change to "teamwork" does not mean that people know what teams to form or how to function within them. It does not matter that managers believe that people *should* know these things: Agreement and understanding must be accompanied by requests and promises in order to produce the coordinated action implied in an intentional change. The change agent can move things forward through explicit performance conversations (Ashkenas & Jick, 1992) composed of requests and promises.

It is our experience that this third type of breakdown is the reason that many change efforts are unsuccessful; that is, people rely almost exclusively on conversations for understanding (e.g., Beckhard & Pritchard, 1992; Kotter, 1990). Consider, for example, an employee who persists in criticizing the ideas of others, making negative comments during departmental meetings. The manager can explain to the individual how such comments are disruptive, slow down the meeting, and suppress others' contributions. The employee can give reasons why he or she was not more positive. This conversation for understanding may end with both parties either hopeful or frustrated. The likely outcome is that there will be no substantial change in the employee's attitude or behavior. The interaction included no conditions of satisfaction and, therefore, no conversation for performance. In this example, the manager first obtained coaching in making requests and met again with the employee. He asked if the employee would agree to make one positive comment for every negative one, with the assurance that the manager would keep score. The employee agreed to the arrangement and was surprised to discover that comments he believed to be helpful were considered negative by others. During the next several meetings, the employee's behavior changed. In his book on overcoming resistance, Jellison (1993) proposed that managers must make specific requests for change, and until they do so, they are not likely to get the change they seek.

A fourth kind of breakdown can be the result of the lack of rigor people apply to conversations for performance: They may fail to ask, demand, or invite others to take action because they believe people already know, or should know, what to do, or that these people already are at work on such a project. Managers and staff may not understand that actually, specifically, and directly asking someone to do something has a substantially greater likelihood of producing an action compared to not asking at all. Also, when managers do make requests, they may fail to specify the intended result or the deadline for this result. These omissions prevent effective action, and thus, the performer simply "does his or her

best" or gets the job done "as soon as possible." Conversations for performance generate action and make changes happen through requests and promises. If a person asks others to do things and tells them what he or she will also do, both parties are called to produce (Winograd & Flores, 1986). In fact, unreasonable requests can contribute to the production of breakthrough results (Scherr, 1989).

A fifth kind of breakdown occurs after the change agent omits a specific and comprehensive conversation for closure to the project. At some point in the course of a change project, the aggregate of conversations for understanding and performance will either have produced the intended result or made it evident that the result will not be produced by the deadline, if at all. In either case, without acknowledgment of what has been accomplished, what has been contributed by the participants, or what has happened in the organization or the environment since the effort began, people may feel their contributions were unappreciated, of no value, or made no difference to the organization. All too often, there are no conversations for closure after a change effort has ended (Albert, 1984; Bridges, 1980). The absence of conversations for closure can foster resignation, cynicism, and other forms of resistance that will make future change efforts more difficult (Bridges, 1980). The absence of closure is a breakdown that may be invisible until the next time a change effort is proposed. A manager who is ready to move on to a new project but is not getting the "buy-in" of the employees may need to sponsor a conversation for closure, through which assertions, declarations, and expressives ensure that past change efforts are complete.

Aside from these five types of breakdowns in the process of producing a change, there is a larger social and cultural background against which the change occurs that is related to problems or failures in change. Researchers into the phenomena of organizational change and human discourse know that both change and conversation seldom progress the way they talk about them, because neither phenomenon is linear or predictable. The development of a series of conversations is not quite as logical or as rational in real life compared to a summary of observations or conclusions. People do not always deliver initiative conversations, and others do not always respond to the conversations as they are delivered (Dutton & Ashford, 1993). People can and do purposely falsify or distort initiative conversations for their own ends (Leary & Kowalski, 1990). Decision makers may discuss changes for a long time and not come to a shared understanding, and people may accept requests and not fulfill their promises to deliver results. People leave projects unfinished, or they finish a project and move on to the next one without explaining this completion to the task's participants.

In short, everything that we have proposed here can and does break down in the real and complex network of human conversations and activities applied to produce an intentional change. Nevertheless, it is useful to understand intentional change as a direct product of performative

conversations through which managers gain proficiency and an increased capacity for producing intentional changes and dealing with breakdowns via the management of conversations (Ford & Backoff, 1988). Even such proficiency, however, is still not a guarantee that a particular change will be produced.

When looked at from the standpoint of initiative, understanding, performance, and closure conversations, producing an intentional change is a dynamic, fluid phenomenon. Although the flow of an intentional change may begin with initiative conversations and may end with closure conversations, the uniqueness of each change implies that the exact sequencing and dynamics of the conversations will vary. For this reason, the idea that change processes move in a linear fashion from start to finish, from unfreezing to refreezing, or from formulation to implementation is an oversimplification. The framework proposed here suggests that, although there may be a general direction for the successful evolution of a change effort, the production of an intentional change requires a person to move among conversations for initiative, understanding, performance, and closure as conditions and circumstances warrant.

### IMPLICATIONS

Traditional perspectives on change treat communication as something that occurs within the change process alongside other phenomena associated with change (e.g., resistance). This view implies that the intentional change process is something other than communication (e.g., Van de Ven & Poole, *In press*). Our perspective reverses this view, and we consider that intentional change is based in and driven by particular types of communication. In this context everything, including prevailing conditions and circumstances, is seen as created, sustained, and produced by and in communication. Therefore, in the absence of communication there is no intentional change and no intentional change process.

We propose that communication is the generative mechanism of change that gives people the reality in which they live (Giddens, 1984) rather than serving as simply a tool for representing and transmitting people's understanding or knowledge. Talk is not cheap: What is said matters, and rigor and consciousness in the communication of change are what differentiates a successful change from one that is derailed by resistance and uncertainty. Such an awareness of and appreciation for the power of communication demands a change in the understanding of change itself. Rather than observing change as something that occurs "out there" as a result of some underlying dynamic (e.g., a life cycle) (Van de Ven & Poole, *In press*), we believe that change is created, sustained, and managed in and by communications. Further, the macrocomplexity of organizations is generated, and changes emerge through the diversity and interconnectedness of many microconversations, each of which follows relatively simple rules (Waldrop, 1992).

Rorty (1989) proposed that social change is produced through new speech, or speech that has not been spoken before. Producing intentional change in organizations now becomes a matter of creating and shifting conversations rather than bringing about an alteration in objectlike attributes, traits, conditions, or circumstances. The difficulty with either sort of change is that social realities and organizations will immediately become objectified (Berger & Luckmann, 1966), and they will be treated as objects or objective realities rather than as constructions that are maintained in communication.

### **Implications for Theory**

In most models of change, communication is one step in a multistep process. These models fail to specify the medium through which the other steps are accomplished. Donnellon (1986), for example, said that after a decision, the implementation of change is all communication. However, what about the decision process and all that precedes it? Clearly these entail communication. Through the perspective presented, we argue for expanding the understanding of change by placing all of it within a context of communication. There is a need to examine more closely the means by which management occurs, including closer scrutiny of what is said, how it is said, when it is said, and the impact of what was said on the progressive development of an intentional change.

Traditional perspectives on organization change consider situational factors (e.g., organization structure) to be key determinants of the change process (Porras & Silvers, 1991). The framework developed here calls into question the role of situational factors as determinants of change because here they are relevant only insofar as they are invoked, appealed to, and validated (agreed to) in conversations, particularly conversations for understanding, and they do not occur independent of the conversations that contain them. If situational factors occur only in conversation, then they occur as attributions and accounts (Scott & Lyman, 1968), and one should shift attention to how and why situational factors are invoked and the various conversations people use for creating and sustaining these factors. That situational factors are invoked and adhered to differentially in conversations for change could account for inconsistent research findings (Porras & Silvers, 1991).

Current perspectives on change put a heavy emphasis on education to obtain acceptance of change. The assumption is that people resist change because they do not understand it. The model proposed here indicates that understanding is only one component of the change process and that it may not be the most important component. Further, understanding by itself is not sufficient to produce a change. Performance conversations are necessary for coordinated action (Ashkenas & Jick, 1992), and closure conversations have been proposed as being more important than understanding (Bridges, 1980). Others (e.g., Beer et al., 1990) have suggested that all that may be required in some cases is clear

conditions of satisfaction, without extensive understanding and knowledge. If researchers have placed too much emphasis on education for understanding in order to produce change, they must now consider other methods for moving change forward. Practical training in action communication (Winograd & Flores, 1986) and closure processes (Albert, 1983, 1984) may be more effective.

Placing change in a context of communication also has implications for how researchers conceptualize other aspects of the change process. Resistance to change has been treated as an attribute or characteristic that must be overcome, but it may, instead, be a conversation that can be altered in dialogue (Isaacs, 1993). Resistance may be a conversation that arises when there is disagreement, when things do not go as planned, when people do not do what is wanted or expected, or when people do not know what to do. If resistance is a conversation that occurs when there is a breakdown in the progression of conversations for change (e.g., a failure in understanding, a refusal to accept a request, or a cynical response to a proposed course of action), then one should examine the specifics about the conversations for resistance. One can explore the actual content of such conversations, where they occur in the change process, and what they provide regarding the possibilities for facilitating the change.

Finally, this perspective has theoretical implications beyond the area of change. If, as we and others suggest, management occurs in conversation (e.g., Shaw & Weber, 1991), then *all* other areas of management can be considered or observed as occurring in communication. Researchers can examine how their theories look in a context of language and communication. What, for example, would leadership or strategic planning look like as phenomena in communication? It may be possible to translate existing theories into language-based perspectives that give one a more direct access to their power in producing intentional change.

### **Implications for Research**

The conversations of change occur within a context of communication, and if one wants to understand change, then one needs to understand that context. Ford and Ford (1994) proposed that there are three fundamental logics or points of view within which change is conducted and that each logic has its own distinct language. Formal logic uses a language of replacement, dialectics uses a language of conflict, and trialectics uses a language of attraction. The existence of distinctly different languages of change suggests that the metaphors and metonymies that managers use when producing change may depend on a manager's perspective. Managers who have a dialectic perspective, for example, may use power metaphors, whereas those who have a trialectic perspective may use relatedness metaphors (Ford & Ford, 1994). Differences in people's experience of and reactions to change are likely to be a function of how managers talk about change (Marshak, 1993). These differences suggest that researchers may be able to identify different vocabularies of

change and to differentiate among changes on the basis of those vocabularies. In fact, it may be that the only way one can know a change is by its vocabulary (Rorty, 1989).

An analysis of the language of change also can reveal something about managers' theories-in-use (Argyris & Schön, 1992) and the assumptions they have about change. In a textual analysis of a change effort in one organization researchers found that managers who were engaged in a change effort that was intended to be inclusive, participatory, and empowering were actually speaking from an adversarial perspective (reported in O'Connor, Hatch, White, & Zald, 1995). Such differences between what is being said at one level of communication and what is being said at another level can create paradoxes (Ford & Backoff, 1988), which slow or stall the change process. In this respect, the literature on logical types (e.g., Bateson, 1975) and paradox (e.g., Watzlawick et al., 1967) can provide some necessary guidance on the impact of communicating at different levels on the process of producing change.

Managers' assumptions about how ideas are related can be discovered through a study of their conversations about change, particularly during conversations for understanding. By mapping the causal links among assertions, it is possible to observe the system dynamic as managers understand it and to propose alternative relationships and actions that may have an impact on the effectiveness of the change (e.g., Eden, Jones, & Sims, 1983; Senge, 1990). Additional research on identifying these system dynamics would give a better understanding of both how managers observe the dynamics of change and how to support them in its production.

There is an evolving body of research examining language in organizations (e.g., O'Connor, 1994). This literature clearly suggests that conversations, both written and verbal, and the artifacts and practices associated with those conversations, create the organization's culture. The production of change, then, involves not only an alteration in what people say, but also the myths, rituals, symbols, and signs associated with those changes. In fact, one reason a change does not stick may be that not all the conversations associated with the change are aligned to support the intended outcome. Research that draws on the culture literature and considers how associated conversations support or hinder a change effort would make a valuable contribution to the understanding of change as a phenomenon in communication.

The framework presented here implies that some conversation sequences will be more effective than others, but it is not clear for which sequences this is true. Beer and colleagues (1990) implied that conversations for performance should come before conversations for understanding, which, in turn, should be used to clarify and support conversations for performance. But other authors (e.g., Beckhard & Pritchard, 1992) have suggested that people will not engage in a change until they understand it, suggesting that conversations for understanding must come before

conversations for performance. Bridges (1980) implied that conversations for closure must come before either conversations for understanding or conversations for performance, and Ashkenas and Jick (1992) implied that a sequence which includes conversations for performance will be more effective than a sequence which excludes them. Research is clearly needed to identify and propose different sequences of conversations and then test their effectiveness. Such tests would give not only information about sequence effectiveness, but also information about the validity of different sequencing models.

The literature on impression management also offers an opportunity for research into the conversational model of change. Because people are interested in how they are perceived and evaluated by others (Leary & Kowalski, 1990), they sometimes behave and communicate in ways that create or control the impression others have of them. Impression management involves the motivation to both construct and manage an impression. This motivation implies that the way in which people engage in each of the four conversations of change articulated here may be influenced by attempts at impression management. For example, people may only have initiative conversations that further their public identity, enhance their self-esteem, or ingratiate themselves with those of higher authority or status. During conversations for understanding, people may engage in distortion, partial disclosure, and even lying in order to look good and maintain their public personae. In conversations for performance, managers may shy away from making strong requests or demanding accounts for nonperformance in order to be viewed favorably by subordinates. Managers also may choose to have conversations for closure only so they are seen as concerned and committed rather than to bring about completion for a project. Impression management is a rich area for study as it relates to the conversations of change because it suggests that the impressions people are interested in conveying will have an impact on their conversations.

Change is sometimes seen as a mechanism for the acquisition and use of power intended to bring about an alteration in the status of participants (Frost, 1987; Kanter, 1983). Under these conditions, communication is not considered neutral; it is something that can be manipulated by actors in the pursuit of their own self-interests. Similar to impression management, one would expect attempts at political influence to inform each of the four conversations for change and how people react to them. For example, one might expect that the acceptance of initiative conversations would be a function of trust and how well-developed the relationship is between initiator and recipient (e.g., Stiff et al., 1992). Similarly, conversations for understanding may involve withholding, overloading, circumventing, and deception (Frost, 1987), and conversations for performance may be resisted, undermined, or even sabotaged. Additional research in this area will help researchers to better understand the impact of politics on the four conversations identified here.

There are many ways to conduct research on communication in organizations that can inform the understanding of change as a phenomenon in communication (e.g., Jablin, Putnam, Roberts, & Porter, 1987; O'Connor, 1994). However, conducting research on change as communication requires that researchers give more attention to the analysis of transcribed "live" conversations and the texts of change efforts. In this respect, theorists should be willing to borrow from the research methods of literary theory (e.g., Ket de Vries & Miller, 1987).

### **Implications for Practice**

To suggest that change occurs in communication requires that managers consider the impact that their communications have on the change process. Managers who recognize that they can have a substantial impact on a change by what they say may have a considerable advantage over those who do not. A manager who can consider change in terms of four different types of conversations also may begin to practice relating the use and management of these conversations to the failure and success of change efforts (Scherr, 1989).

Managerial effectiveness in producing change may be improved by training managers to distinguish the four conversations for change and to practice their use. A new and practice-based training must be provided, because in our experience of educating, training, and being consultants to managers in business, government, and service organizations, we have observed managers who can recognize the differences among the four types of conversation in a classroom but remain unable to bring these tools into the workplace.

Special training also is needed in performance conversations because many managers still believe that understanding alone makes people act (Beer et al., 1990). Many managers do not understand that speech is performative and, thus, do not make clearly defined requests for action or results, do not negotiate specific conditions of satisfaction with their staff, do not invest the time to examine their goals and objectives, and do not identify the requests and promises that might help those goals to be accomplished. In fact, managers may not believe that their performance problems are related to this inability to distinguish conversations for performance, remaining convinced that their problems are the result of their staff's motivation, morale, or personality conflicts. Because people can be trained in conversations for performance (Watzlawick et al., 1967), it may be possible to improve their effectiveness in producing change by enhancing their command of requests and promises.

Training in the conversations for change also must focus on conversations for closure because managers often do not understand closure as a critical part of the change process. Also, if they do understand the significance of closure, they often cannot effectively conduct such conversations that would leave people restored and ready to go forward regarding new projects or changes. Because managers can be trained in

the use of conversations for closure (Albert, 1984; Bridges, 1980) and dialogue (Isaacs, 1993), the challenge is to find ways to bring these conversations into practice.

One of the complaints that practitioners have about the change literature is that "no one tells us how to do it," and the prescriptions given are not really actionable. Such directives as "communicate openly," "be flexible," and "lead from your vision" do not tell managers what they are to do. The ability to differentiate among the types of conversations used to produce an intentional change gives a more fine-grained view of a change process and allows change agents to be more specific in their communications. It also may be possible to offer more specific prescriptions (e.g., "Say what you see is possible and ask your listeners to tell you about what you said," "Ask others what they see they can contribute and then ask them to do that," and "Practice making five new requests and promises today.>").

All this talk does not mean that the mastery of communication is a guarantee of success. Producing change requires the participation of others, and there are many reasons why people do not participate, even if they say they will. The production of change is work, and there is no simple formula or methodology for it. However, if change is seen as occurring in communication, then the management of change can be understood to be the management of conversations. Thus, this is a ripe area for research and for working with leading change agents to find out what communications and communications patterns are required for people to be increasingly effective in producing intentional changes in organizations.

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