

# TRANSFORMING CONFLICT NARRATIVES

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This paper reviews ways in which the recent evolution of conflict resolution theory intersects with emerging approaches in the field of organization development. This new crossroads is opening pathways to new practices for transforming workplace conflict.

## **Conflict Resolution Theory Development**

Conflict resolution theory has broadened from interest-based negotiation as the dominant framework to include several additional approaches. Roger Fisher's book *Getting to Yes* (1981) is the classic text on which most mediator training programs are still based. His framework focuses on shifting parties from position-based negotiation to interest-based negotiation. Interest-based approaches help parties find underlying interests that were not identified before.

More recently, Bush & Folger (1994) have articulated what they identify as transformative mediation. This approach goes beyond the goal of resolving conflict by identifying the additional goals of empowerment and recognition for those parties engaged in conflict resolution. For them, "recognition" includes the ability to listen and the capacity for compassion toward the other parties experience. These skills are congruent with the aim of most organizational development interventions, that of helping the parties become better equipped to resolve their own issues in the future. The United States Postal Service has extensively utilized and documented their own successful use of transformative mediation.

While I was studying transformative meditation, I felt a sense of déjà vu. The same values of empowerment and compassion are at the heart of Outward Bound, where I spend almost ten years as an instructor in the U.S. and Southern Africa. I believe these values are also at the heart of organization development (OD).

## **Post-Modern Influences on Social Science**

As with the practice of conflict resolution, I believe the field of OD is also evolving. I once heard one of my mentors, Charlie Seashore, describe OD as the fusion of the values of democracy and science. It is the science part of this OD equation that is evolving. This evolution results from early reliance on a positivist orientation to more recent exploration of postmodern approaches such as constructivism and social constructionism. (Marshak, 2005, Burr, 1995, Gergen, 1994, Berger & Luckmann, 1966) Rather than searching for one objective truth using valid data, there is an increasing acknowledgement of multiple realities based on our subjective experiences. The fusion of democratic values with this new postmodern science has spawned new approaches in OD. Appreciative Inquiry is one notable example. (Barrett & Cooperrider, 2001)

## **A Narrative Framework Applied to Conflict**

Meanwhile, the conflict resolution field has recently spawned a new approach called narrative mediation which is also based on postmodern science. This approach uses a narrative metaphor and is derived in part from narrative psychology and the recent development itself of narrative therapy by Michael White. (Epston & White, 1990) This approach rests on the combination of narrative metaphor and social constructionism, which serves as a postmodern view of reality with four ideas:

1. Realities are socially constructed.
2. Realities are constituted through language.
3. Realities are organized and maintained through narrative.
4. There are no essential truths. (Combs & Freedman, 1996, p22)

Social constructionism can perhaps be summed up in part by Alfred Korzybski who once said, “The map is not the territory.” The advantage that Michael White saw in the narrative metaphor was that a story is a map that extends through time. He was influenced by how important *time* was for Gregory Bateson:

In arguing that all information is necessarily “news of difference,” and that it is the perception of differences that triggers all new responses in living systems, he [Bateson] demonstrated how the mapping of events through *time* is essential for the perception of difference, for the detection of change. (White & Epston, 1990, p.2)

Monk and Winslade (2000) have applied narrative therapy toward mediation and entitled it narrative mediation. Sara Cobb (2004, 1994, 1993) has also illuminated how assumptions of negative intentionality are embedded in conflict and serve to limit people into a cycle of reinforcing the coherence and integrity of their own stories. Here Bateson’s concept of “news of difference” is important, in that it is an essential element to creating any opening for a new story to emerge.

## **Conflict as Competing Stories**

My colleague Linda Houden and I had the opportunity to study with Sara Cobb (1996) and we have come to see that conflict can be defined as competing stories. We take in information about other people and interpret that information in a way that builds a “story” we hold about them. We develop stories about other people and other people develop stories about us. Our natural tendency is to make our stories as coherent and stable as possible. Given this dynamic, conflict can be seen as a system where information is being reduced. Information that would counter these story lines is restricted. We see best what will reinforce our stories. To break the polarization, more information about differences is needed. This paradox is counter to the commonly held assumption that conflict is reduced by decreasing or deemphasizing differences.

## **Narrative Intervention**

Thus, a narrative intervention might seek to generate information (“news of difference”) which decreases the coherence of each conflict story, thereby opening up space for new meaning. One way to do this is to ask questions which increase the complexity of the conflict stories. Cobb noticed that conflict stories are usually very simple in that they are often built on assumptions of negative intent or character.

Appreciative stories are much more complex. The primary intervention might be any mode of inquiry which generates new information and opens space for new interpretation. Usually there are significant aspects of interactions that have never been “storied” because they don’t fit the dominating conflict narrative. These “unstoried” experiences can often support a preferred future. Asking questions, in a narrative intervention, is for the purpose of generating experience rather than simply gathering information.

Narrative therapy and narrative mediation, are both based on social constructionism, and share the same foundation as appreciative inquiry. All three approaches seek to get to a preferred future, though they differ in how they seek to transgress the current dominant narrative. Narrative therapy and mediation both emphasize initial inquiry on exploring and deconstructing problem-saturated narratives in order to open up space for new interpretations. Appreciative inquiry prefers to skip any exploration of deficit-oriented viewpoints and emphasizes building stories of a preferred future. Based on my experience, both approaches are effective in catalyzing change. They differ in their assumptions about how to create change and correspondingly where to direct their inquiry.

## **Narrative Practices**

Additional concepts and practices which narrative therapy and narrative mediation have to offer OD include:

- Sample questions for deconstructive questioning.
- The concept of *externalizing the problem*, or *the people aren’t the problem the problem is the problem*. The opportunity here is to get to know the problem separate from the people involved while simultaneously exploring the terrain of a people’s natural abilities outside of the problem context.
- The concept of transgressing the plot toward the antiplot as a change strategy.
- Techniques to thicken a preferred plot, such as extending the story into the future, drawing in other points of view through questions, developing a history of the new story, and writing letters to strengthen new stories.
- The idea of reflection teams as a component of the narrative intervention.

To illustrate some of the concepts above, I will share a brief excerpt from a longer narrative letter I once wrote for a client following the examples of Barry (1997). The key issues in this client system were staying in functional silos, and slow decision-making. This is an example of the narrative technique of *letter writing* used to thicken a preferred plot. This letter mentions three *externalized problems* which the client choose to name as decision stuckness, competition, and limited ownership:

“...I mentioned another character, who may soon be on the endangered list, *Decision Stuckness*. *Word has it that Competition, Limited Ownership and Decision Stuckness* all try to work together to block policy clarity and reinforce the stereotypes of old folklore. ...*Decision Stuckness* doesn’t like extended communication because of it’s ability to transform problems and differences into

opportunities. The VP s I talked with gave clear evidence that you have used this strategy to successfully outsmart *Decision Stuckness* . Beyond the mud pond of *Decision Stuckness* is a lake of clear water which brings renewal and clarity. You have found that clarity in your vision, strategy, and priorities. *Decision Stuckness* wins by getting people to slow down and stop trying. *Decision Stuckness* is also threatened by your departmental integration and may be living in a world focused on the past. I wonder what all your department members have learned about outsmarting *Decision Stuckness*? This may be valuable intellectual capital for the rest of the organization.”

The breakthrough opportunity in externalizing problems is that it offers clients a new way to relate to *the problem* often with newly discovered strength. More illustrations of the above concepts are available in White & Epston (1990), Freedman & Combs (1996), and Winslade & Monk (2000). Reading about these narrative practices has enhanced my understanding of appreciative inquiry, because the shared foundation of social constructionism has been applied with different methods. I now have more ways to both conceptualize and practice OD from a stance of social constructionism.

Others are utilizing and developing narrative intervention frameworks as well, including Mobius Inc. (Demarest, et. al., 2004), and the Public Conversations Project ([www.publicconversationsproject.org](http://www.publicconversationsproject.org)) and the Taos Institute ([www.taosinstitute.net](http://www.taosinstitute.net)). Another classic book, *Difficult Conversations*, (Stone, et. al., 1999) illustrates the often neglected role of emotions, identity, and presumed negative intent on conflict and suggests ways to address each. See also Cloke & Goldsmith. (2000) These applications offer us new tools to address the nonlinear complex elements of organizational conflict, rather than previous models which focused only on the rational elements of conflict resolution.

## **Narrative and Democratic Values**

Returning to the OD value of democracy within an organization, a core concern from a narrative perspective is the question of whose stories are more *privileged*. Who has the power to define what is *real*? How is this a reflection of stories existing at a larger cultural or societal level? An organization striving to live democratic values needs its members to co-author stories of preferred futures. For full democracy, sometimes these stories must run counter to prevailing society. These stories, often the antiplot or counterplot to prevailing society stories, happen best when people form full partnerships capable of both supporting and challenging each other. People in partnership assert the freedom and responsibility necessary to notice and respond to imbalances in whose stories are privileged. Courage and risk-taking are fundamental components needed for responding to the bumps of conflict in ways that build and solidify the fabric of democracy. (Cloke, 2001, Welp, et. al., 2005, Proudman, et. al., 2005, Morris, et. al, 2005) Any crisis or turbulence in the organization is an opportunity, in fact a calling, to demonstrate the values we live by.

The emerging practices and concepts of narrative intervention offers new approaches to addressing workplace conflict in the field of organization development.

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## **Biography**

Michael Welp, Ph.D. leads EqualVoice® ([www.equalvoice.com](http://www.equalvoice.com)), an organization development consulting firm recognized for its transformative approaches to conflict. Known for his authentic, trust-building style, Michael works to develop leadership in everyone.

Michael is also a founding principal of White Men as Full Diversity Partners®, a consulting firm that pioneers work on engaging white men as full diversity partners inside organizations. ([www.wmfdp.com](http://www.wmfdp.com)). Michael is co-author of two books on white men and diversity and another book on leadership. He is a recipient of the Minnesota Organization Development Practitioner of the Year Award and is a professional member of NTL Institute. Michael lives in Sandpoint, Idaho and can be reached at 208-263-6775 or [michael@equalvoice.com](mailto:michael@equalvoice.com).