

Narrative Inquiry: Creating Leading Edges in OD

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This new science stuff is seeping in everywhere - even into OD. In the past, most of us worked primarily from structural or systems metaphors, in which we would work to determine the existence of one authoritative reality. In doing data collection, different players might contribute different pieces and perspectives, but all of these were combined to discern one big picture of Truth and Reality. Now though, with the prompting of postmodernism and related applications such as Appreciative Inquiry and Narrative Therapy, there is a growing movement in OD that recognizes the power of narrative metaphor: the stories people tell, and the way they tell them, help *shape* reality. From this perspective, there is no one authoritative truth. Rather, truth is socially constructed. Everybody's responsible.

This prospect that reality is socially constructed has several significant implications for OD practitioners. Applications of this work are emerging as powerful tools of inquiry and intervention for conflict, leadership and team development, coaching, and diversity. In each of these arenas, the answers to two powerful questions help shape the intervention:

- Who controls the language and discourse processes? (Who's got the greatest influence on others' perception of reality?)
- What relationship do we and our clients have to the problem we are hired to help resolve?

In reference to the first question, how many of us (or our clients) have ever "gotten storied" (placed in a box) by someone else's dominant narrative? Once we understand how different stories are shaping perceived reality, we gain deeper understanding of the power and politics of language. Then we can help clients transform their experiences and their future expectations. This focus on viable possibilities creates positive momentum that clients can use to carry themselves much closer to their desired results.

The second question can be framed this way: is the problem gaining more influence over the client, or is the client gaining more influence over the problem? The more we focus on the problem, the more it can be "socially constructed" and thus unnecessarily reinforced. Our job as OD practitioners is to help the client shift their primary focus from the problem itself, to the resources, skills, and abilities the client brings to the problem. This doesn't mean ignoring the problem, it just means understanding the terrain of the problem in the context of the strengths we bring against the problem, in order to initiate vital momentum towards the preferred future. With this momentum in place, one can then periodically revisit the problem to help erode the strength of the problem story as positive change begins to unfold.

At the risk of oversimplifying, here's a summary of approaches involved in the above processes:

- o explore the problem as a way to situate it within the influence of a larger context;
- o destabilize the dominating story from the existing cultural context by helping to reveal that the dominant story is *a* story, not *the* story;
- o strengthen the focus on preferred outcomes which do exist but don't get much air time because they're hidden by the dominant story;
- o thicken the new story and build an audience in order to strengthen preferred future stories.

By doing this, we help clients re-author their stories from problem-laden stories about the past, to sto-

ries that focus on preferred futures. In this context, data collection is as much about generating a new experience for the client as about gathering information. The result is increased reflectivity, transformed meaning, and greater choice about one's future, as well as energizing progress towards end results.

Exploring how to apply these processes consistently and well in OD is a larger question that a number of my colleagues and I are working on together. There are many other elements of deconstructive questioning and restorying than I can cover here. I hope this gives you a few highlights of the emerging practice of Narrative Inquiry.