MANAGING II
(Second Edition)

DAVID M. BOJE
DANIEL J. BRASS
LOUIS R. PONDY

Organizational Behavior Group
Department of Business Administration
University of Illinois

Cover design by L.R. Krauss

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DEDICATION: We would like to dedicate this book to our managers: Margaret, Karen, and Dorothy.
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Metaphors, Dancing Partners and Case
Episodes as Training Exercises in
the Art of Organizational Theorizing*

David M. Boje
Daniel J. Brass
Louis R. Pondy

The art, or science, of theory construction has heretofore been considered the exclusive domain of the academician. While the results of such theorizing have been assumed to be of relevance to the practitioner, particularly in the field of management and organizational behavior, the scientific rigor and logic required to build theories has usually been attributed to the university professor. It is within the academic community that hypotheses are defined as tentative conclusions; principles are well defined hypotheses which have withstood empirical tests; theories are scientifically verified sets of interrelated principles. It is here that the distinctions are made between inductive and deductive reasoning, and arguments arise as to the appropriateness of either approach.

Perhaps we have been conditioned by our scientific training to associate discovery of "truth" with the precision of definitions, the rigor of methodology. If, however, we ignore our definitions for a moment, we might discover that theorizing is a common everyday process undertaken by almost everyone. People constantly attempt to sort out and make sense of the things which happen around them. They form cognitive, tentative explanation of "what causes what". They notice events which recur in systematic patterns, and relate these recurrences in systematic ways. What we are suggesting is that people constantly form informal theories about everything that happens. These theories act as a sort of filter between events in the world around them and their experience of those events.

For example, infants engage in the crudest form of theorizing when they first begin to form hypotheses about the environment around them. They discover the principle of gravity by repeatedly verifying that a released toy falls to the ground. Automobile mechanics skillfully employ theorizing to hypothesize the location of a problem by generalizing from a set of observations. They will listen to the sound of the motor, disconnect various elements, and test out a chain of hypotheses, eliminating one after another, until they isolate the defective component.

In a similar sense, managers engage in informal theorizing in performing their jobs. While the scientist employs a formal logic system and a well developed body of knowledge, the manager must rely upon a set of remembered experiences and a less formalized logic to make decisions. Both are able to quickly analyze very incomplete situational information, and through deductive reasoning, apply the precedents of past experience and logic to make sense of new situations. In the case of inductive reasoning, both the scientist and the manager formulate general principles from observations of apparent recurring phenomena. While the scientist
may make his observation through carefully controlled experiment, the manager forms his hypotheses on the basis of participant observation.

The assumption here is that much of the manager's task involves observation, reasoning skills, hypothesis formation and verification, just as does the scientist's. If this is the case, then managers can become more effective by improving their theoretical skills. A manager who can form accurate theories, who can "make sense" of the happenings around him, will be a more effective manager.

However, many of the requirements for scientific theorizing, specifications which have normally precluded thinking of managers as theorists, may have also restricted our ability to generate new theories. These scientific prescriptions may have limited our methods of inquiry, and, consequently, confined our insights and understandings of the world around us.

Numerous books and articles have been written on the methods of scientific inquiry. While the prescriptions contained in each vary somewhat from the others, most concern themselves with the pursuit of "truth", that is, a closer and closer fit of our theories to the one objective reality. Most assume that this can be accomplished through greater rigor and precision, disintegrative analysis of a phenomenon into finer and finer parts, and the rejection of a value-laden inquiry in favor of objectivity.

We would like to suggest a basically different prescription for the generation of theory, one which is sometimes referred to as phenomenology. The approach questions the blind acceptance of the presumption that there is a fundamental logic or systematic uniformity to events - a uniformity which transcends man's need to impose order on a chaotic world. Reality is not a set of external objects bound together in time and space, but, rather, anything the individual constructs in his or her consciousness. Man is seen not as a response object which passively reacts to external stimuli. Rather, an active mind is seen as not only intruding on the connection between stimulus and response, but as generating its own stimuli.

In addition to deductive and inductive reasoning, we would like to suggest that the manager engages in "phenomenological" reasoning. This reasoning is based on the manager's attempts to make sense of his own, as well as his interpretation of others' conscious experience of organizational phenomenon. These are often competing interpretations. Talk to someone from marketing and you get one view, someone from production will tell you the opposite, some one from accounting will see the situation from yet another vantage point. The manager attempts to understand each view and consciously generates his/her own hypotheses about each situation. From a phenomenological perspective, competing views do not imply that one view is right and the rest are wrong. Phenomenological reasoning allows the manager to focus on each actor having his/her own interpretation of each situation. Each person develops his own reality depending upon his personal experiences, the logic he employs, the norms and values of the role he occupies, and his own personal purposes
and expectations.  

This phenomenological approach lifts many of the restrictions associated with scientific inquiry. It allows for a greater tolerance for imprecision and "non-rigor", such as the use of metaphors in generating theories. It acknowledges that alternatives to analysis may exist, such as the composition involved in "dancing partners". Further, it focuses on the subjective meaning of reality, rather than restricting our inquiry to ostensibly value-free investigations. The phenomenological approach allows us to view the manager as a theorist.

As students of management and organization we believe you can become better managers by improving your ability to reason and theorize. This will enable you to take chaotic organizational experiences and make greater sense of them for you and your subordinates. Studies of managers repeatedly confirm that an effective manager is able to act upon too little and often conflicting information. The three training exercises presented here, metaphors, dancing partners, and case episodes, are potentially useful tools for improving your theorizing skills.

METAPHORS

Poets employ metaphors, such as, "this organization is a family" to convey a distinctive set of attributes that readers associate with a family that can be applied to an organization. As an example, the family metaphor might convey the following distinctive set:

- My supervisor orders me about like a little child.

- My future is secure in this company because whatever else happens they take good care of me.

- Although my fellow workers and I are always bickering about trivial matters, we always support one another if an outsider comes too near.

- We worry more about good relations with each other than getting the job done.

- People care about each other around here, etc.

Note how the use of other metaphors like "This organization is an ... Armed Camp" or "...an Aristocracy" or "...a Crystal Palace" convey in a very concise manner different sets of attributes about the phenomenon of organization. Each metaphor allows the expression of a slightly different understanding. (In positing the distinctive set of attributes which bridge the metaphor to the focal phenomenon, you will be, in fact, developing your hypothesis skills. Each element of the dis-

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tinctive set is itself a hypothesis.

One exercise that can be used to improve your theorizing skills is to use metaphors as a way of expressing a phenomenon. Often the metaphor will allow you to convey aspects of the phenomenon that are not easily translatable within the current limits of the English language. Consider the metaphor: "The manager and the theorist swim in different ponds but move through the water using similar strokes". You have an intuitive sense about its meaning, but do not have a ready set of specifically defined words to convey the meaning non-metaphorically.

Reasoning by metaphoric analogy can be either deductive, inductive and/or phenomenological. A deductive analogy that is widely used in organizational theory is "the computer." This metaphor posits that we look for programs; that is, sets of activities organized to achieve a purpose. Organizations typically have sets of procedures (program steps) to accomplish. Such activities as processing a set of inputs, hiring a new employee, or handling a complaint. March and Simon (1958) used the computer metaphor in a deductive way to suggest a whole set of hypotheses about the nature of organizations. For example: "...we would hypothesize that program content will be a function of the need for activity coordination...and the need for output coordination...The more minutely other members of the organization need to synchronize or coordinate their activities with the activities of a particular member, the more completely will the program specify the activity pattern and/or the pacing of those activities." (p. 145)

An inductive metaphor is used by reasoning that the phenomenon described in the actual metaphor contains a set of characteristics, such that, the same set of characteristics is appropriate to the phenomenon being described by the metaphor. If the analogy between the metaphor and the focal phenomenon is assumed to be strong, then any gaps in our understanding of the object phenomenon can be arrived at by focusing upon the more explicit relationships within the metaphor itself. For example, if a family contains authority problems between parents and children, if a classroom contains authority problems between teachers and students, then by metaphoric analogy "organizations as families and classes" focuses our attention on authority problems in the relation between managers and subordinates. This may lead us to a more general hypothesis that authority problems will be present in any situation where one actor has more status than the actors with which he/she is in contact.

Finally, a phenomenological metaphor helps us to focus on the fine shades of meaning that different actors bring to bear on phenomenon. We might for example, ask people at different levels in the organization to write metaphors which describe their relation to the organization they work in. In one study, managers described their organization as "one big happy family", while workers described it as a "pre-Civil War

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southern plantation".

As an exercise in building your skills as a theorizer, the metaphor can aid you to express the phenomenon in question, relate it to other phenomena, and serve as a fruitful source for new research hypotheses. While the use of metaphors does not meet the rigorous requirements of scientific inquiry, it can be a useful tool in generating new perspectives and theories.

DANCING PARTNERS

This method of inquiry was first proposed by Ian Mitroff and Louis Pondy as a way to gain more insight into the phenomenon of leadership by "waltzing" it with other theoretical perspectives.4 "In order to understand leadership, we should let it waltz with problem-solving, and language, and technology, and "mediums"...the more the better... In order to understand the behaviors of oxygen, chemists composed it with carbon, and iron, and hydrogen,... So we propose "composition" as an alternative to analysis as a strategy of inquiry more appropriate to social and organizational behavior." (pp. 4-5)

The phrase "dancing partners" is itself a metaphor for describing a technique which is difficult to otherwise explain. However, by evoking a distinctive set of attributes associated with dancing, one can get a intuitive feeling of what is involved. Dancing partners proceeds by taking one perspective and dancing it with another. These do not necessarily have to be competing perspectives; they can be very loosely connected. In the process of relating the two perspectives, you attempt to interpret the first with the concepts advanced by the second, and vice versa. In so doing the obvious similarities and differences fall out, but more importantly, you will often uncover important new insights into the gaps and inconsistencies in both views.

If we take two theories, such as Maslow's hierarchy of needs, and Alvin Toffler's Future Shock (1970) you might initially react that a very odd dance step would result. Maslow posits that man has a hierarchy of physiological, safety, love, self-esteem, and self-actualization needs, while Toffler speaks of people coping with an increasingly more rapid rate of change in our society.

How can we possibly interpret Maslow in the framework advanced by Toffler and vice versa? We might start by asking what does Toffler's theory say about the need hierarchy theory or what would Maslow say about Toffler's theory if he was alive today? First of all, we might note that if a person has a high need for safety, this may mean that he/she has a very low tolerance for rapidly changing situations. Rapid change for this person would mean moving into a world where life is unpredictable, unordered and unmanageable, perhaps even dangerous. On the other hand someone who is self-actualizing may thrive on rapid change, seeing the

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many opportunities to reach greater self-fulfillment by acting upon the unpredictable, unordered and unmanageable. This person will see ways to grow and develop by meeting the challenge of future shock. He or she may see ways to generate self-esteem by becoming someone who can lead the fearful out of their chaos.

But this dance does not tell us about the relation between future shock and physiological and love needs. We might posit that the rapid changes in our future may mean a greater abundance of food and energy that will allow us to make our higher needs more salient. Or, we might forecast that just the opposite is on its way. If Maslow is correct our energy shortages, and rising food costs are indicators that will mean less of an emphasis on art, music, creativity and invention. We will be too hungry to be actualizing.

There are many other relations you can find between these two theories if you take the time to thoroughly understand them both. Perhaps you have already thought of your own. As you read the articles and books in this field you can increase your understanding by trying to dance not only the many competing perspectives, but the seemingly unrelated perspectives.

CASE EPISODES

A slightly different way to sharpen your theoretical talents is by attempting to apply the many theoretical perspectives to classic case situations and to your own personal experience. Traditionally, the case method has been used to sharpen a student's problem solving skills by having him/her propose strategies that would resolve a case situation. We would like to propose a slightly different twist to this method. We feel that a useful way to build theoretical skills is to have students use cases deductively by applying theories to the case situation, and inductively by using the situation to generate their own theories about the situation. This will help to counter a common criticism of the case approach, i.e., cases have limited generalizability and therefore teach you solutions that may be inappropriate in other situations. Students gain skills in theorizing not just in strategy building.

While applying a set of theories to the analysis of a case or even generating one's own theory about a case situation, appears to be straightforward, the application of phenomenological reasoning to case episodes may at first seem somewhat puzzling. We suggest that phenomenological reasoning can be applied by encouraging students to use their own enacted experience as case situations. Here the student takes a slice of conscious experience and subjects it to one of the three reasoning styles.

Your own classroom can serve as a whole set of potential case episodes to be interpreted. The instructor is the manager of the decision process, the organizer of the course resources and the designer of the performance appraisal system. Students are the members of the classroom organization. The inputs to the organization are a mixture of participants, course materials, authority relations, individual objectives and expectations. Transformation of these inputs into outputs of learning and grades is
done through the application of the methods of instruction and interaction employed in the classroom. The point is that if you are observant, you can see power, conflict, motivation, leadership and other management and organization phenomena in many everyday places.  

Out of the classroom, you may have a part time job, visit a bank, post office or Burger King. These are all organizations where you can use theories to interpret what you observe, thereby increasing your insight into those situations. If you do not see any obvious connections, it may be because you have not tried to focus in on very specific episodes. For example, when you are at the Burger King, how does their process of burger making differ from a MacDonalds? Will this have any impact upon the interaction patterns and motivational levels of their workers?

Each new episode provides the opportunity to exercise and develop your theorizing abilities. If you record your metaphors, dancing partners and case episodes, you will not only gain useful experience, but develop a rich bank of important ideas and potential research hypotheses. In addition, noting the similarity between theorist and practitioner will help to bring the two closer together so that each can build on the strengths of the other. Theorist as well as practitioner can generate non-routine conclusions and hypotheses by engaging in non-routine ways of theorizing.

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