Reconsidering the Role of Conversations in Change Communication: A Contribution based on Bakhtin

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Abstract
Our purpose is to inspire a more Bakhtinian perspective of conversations in change communication. We differentiate between a view of language, which focuses on conversations that enhances collective thinking, and Bakhtin's ontological view which sees all conversations among people as dialogic. We argue that current views of the role of conversations in change management continue to have a *grammatical* view of the communication process—a view that is static, rather than dynamic. Such a static view is achieved in practice through the on-going search for consensus and the presentation of unity. We distinguish between consensus-as-monologue and consensus-as-dialogue. Under the former, the notion of a single speaker is emphasized (expectations of response are low). But under the latter, consensus becomes saturated with the self as the other (polemic, but born between people). Bakhtin's dialogic theory focuses on the surplus of meaning obtained from diverse points of view inhabiting a variety of speech genres.

Purpose —Our purpose is to inspire a more Bakhtinian perspective of conversations in change communication. We argue that current views of the role of conversations in change management continue to have a *grammatical* view of the communication process—a view that is static, rather than dynamic. Such a static view is achieved in practice through the on-going search for consensus and the presentation of unity.
Design/methodology/approach—We distinguish between consensus-as-monologue and consensus-as-dialogue. Under the former, the notion of a single speaker is emphasized (expectations of response are low). But under the latter, consensus becomes saturated with the self as the other (polemic, but born between people).
Findings—We argue that change agents need to consider their anthropology and ask themselves whether the people in their organizations are the *objects of* communication or subjects *in* communication.
Originality/value—Seeing conversation among people as a never-ending process. We offer a different perspective on participation—a perspective whereby one person's message joins with that of another and one person's meaning joins with that of another.
Keywords—Bakhtin, consensus, conversation, dialogue, social construction
Research type—Research paper

Preamble

Recently those who study management communication have recognized the role that conversations play in organizing (Taylor and Robichaud, 2004). Putnam and Cooren (2004) replaced the notion of organization as an entity for organization as text, or the product of language mediation. Taylor and Van Every (2000) have noted that there is neither an organization nor an ideology other than that which emerges from the way people collectively participate in situated conversation. With specific reference to change, we argue, however, that current views of communicating change continue to have a *grammatical* view of the communication process—a view that is static, rather than dynamic. Such a static view is guided by the pursuit of order (constituting both people and events) and achieved in practice through the on-going search for consensus and the presentation of unity (common ground) among group members.

Whatever the change agents might espouse, including changing conversational styles for the achievement of consensus, such a shift in focus converts generating consensus into a monologic (one logic) practice, for example, *agree with our proposed change, please*. Ford (1999) emphasized that organizational change occurs and is driven by communication rather than the reverse. Their emphasis refers to the role conversations play in constructing change—that is, communication acts as the instrument of change. Change emerges through the change agent's intentional shifting of conversations at work (Ford and Ford, 1995), thus affecting how people think about change initiation, understanding, performance, and closure conversations. In practice, much of change effort work around increasing participation, remains quite monologic; even when a diversity of points of view interact, the stress is placed upon achieving consensus, or in utilizing rhetorics of persuasion (changing intervention and/conversational styles) to arrive at common ground for all (to keep contentious points of view on the margin).

There are historical reasons for the current 'static' view of change communication. Aristotle saw persuasion as a legitimate instrument for influencing people. He did assume, however, that people could respond and agree without persuasion being coercive. But in the sixteenth century, it was Peter Ramus, a 16th-century logician, who earned his master's degree in Paris by defending the viewpoint that all Aristotle's teachings are false (Ong, 1958). Ramus's proposition separated out the study of how we reason and discover ideas from the study of how we present ideas — thus reducing communication to the presentation of predetermined truths, or messages.

According to Ong (1958: 4), Ramus's thesis can be seen "as the outgrowth of a kind of simplified logic which imposed itself by implication on the external world in order to make this simple, too." This simplification has had the effect of depersonalizing the word and reducing conversations to irrelevant status (Taylor, 2001). Ramus's model fits well with how change agents have viewed communication's role in the change process, namely the presentation of reified plans for creating readiness and for change recipients to agree to.

Other views of language and communication reinstated meaning creation to the communication process, thus shifting the focus away from a predetermined answer—or message—and thus raising our awareness of the role of language as a transparent medium for the communication of social knowledge (Alvesson and Karreman, 2000). The legitimate issue of granting change recipients a voice and the importance of critical discourse in attending to the margins and to suppressed voices has been emphasized (Hardy and Phillips, 1999). The goal of language has become that of constructing shared meanings (Shotter, 1998). Taking into account diversity among groups and the embodiment of rationality in particular social and emotional contexts, the onus shifted from conversations as accomplishments to the potential of conversations to inspire change communication for people wanting to understand, people wanting to be understood, and people wanting to feel hopeful — but without doubting their roles, and without feeling vulnerable to criticism and attack.

Change agents thus appear to have more than working model regarding communication. One working model tends to rely on communication as being the instrument of change—whereby they strive to deliver effective messages about a predetermined change. Another working model tends to conceive of communication as a means of giving more people a voice in the change process. Communication in the second sense then creates a shared meaning that facilitates a particular change.

We contend that the variety presented by such working models is too limiting. That is, neither view can grapple with realities of communicating change. The first working model appears to privilege the message at the expense of involvement of any person other than the change agents; the second working model appears to privilege relationships and participation at the expense of the message. Both take for granted that conversation is sufficient to generate changes in texts through a widespread circulation of messages. But the reality of change is that people need to be able to recursively communicate and connect with people. In particular, we

hope to suggest the need to return the discovery of what is largely inter-discursive to the communication process and preserve in balance the idea of a message (although not a static, reified message).

To develop a dynamic view of the communication process for organizational change, we turn to the Russian philosopher and literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975). Valuable insights have been gained from Bakhtin's conception of language (Baxter and Montgomery, 1996; Boje, 2001; Matthews, 1998), the role of dialogue in the process of creating meaning (Gergen and Thatchenkery, 1996; Jabri, 2005a; Kellett, 1999) and organizational learning (Oswick *et al.*, 2000), and the role of Bakhtin's notion of polyphony in understanding organizations as being comprised of multiple discourses (Boje, 2007; Hazen, 1994; Jabri, 2004).

Bakhtin offers us a distinctive way of understanding change communication because he offers us a different way of seeing the role of conversations in constructing change. To understand the implications of this in change communication it is necessary to understand Bakhtin's words in the context of his perspective on life, work, and change—or as Bakhtin put it, in the context of his "discourse" (1984: 189). Bakhtin's words are not that different from some of the classic writings by Berne (1964) on transactional approaches to change management. For example, Berne fully endorsed the role of interpreting the view of the other. Berne never spoke of dialectic (purely oppositional) forces leading to a new state of equilibrium. Rather, he spoke of on-going relations for building engagement and of co-dependency for initiating sensitivity analysis as an intervention. Similarly, Tannenbaum's (1995) classic writings in the 1950s saw co-dependency—linkages between one's own awareness of change and the awareness of others—as being crucial for any intervention effort.

Bakhtin saw a level of participation in the construction of meaning beyond what we normally see — even when we speak of 'collective meaning'. There must be other interpretations if one's own interpretation is to exist. This has an important implication for change communication. When Bakhtin (1986: 87) speaks of creating "meaning", he is not talking about arriving at a static agreement. Rather, he sees meaning as a continual process. All conversation is a never-ending process (unfinalizable) and that all conversational episodes among people are dialogic. Participation involves (but is not limited to) having 'voice'. A person does not necessarily arrive at *the* "meaning", but continues to discover meaning as long as he or she interacts with others. That meaning comes from the "contact between the word and the concrete reality", as that reality is shaped and re-shaped through utterances other people make (Bakhtin, 1986: 87). Meanings are dynamic, not

static because a person has no choice but to 'bring forth' the other. To arrive at 'meaning', a person requires other selves.

What sounds like "single-voiced discourse" (Bakhtin 1984: 189) can be multi-voiced dialogic, expression, even out of the mouth of one participant. People double-narrate, and speak with double-voices. For example, a manager can speak in an organizational role, as well, as express a point of view that is independent of formal position. Finally, Bakhtin sees people as *subjects* immersed in conversational episodes rather than *objects* in the communication process. His anthropology is that of free people. Bakhtin's view of communication thus eschews the 'grammatical approach' to understanding meaning by emphasizing the difference between sentence (grammatical entity: 'I' own my statement) and utterance (unit of speech: 'we' own meaning). He insists that grammatical approaches to communication are legitimate, but do not allow people to experience the life that exists in and through dialogue.

In our discussion, we draw specifically on Bakhtin's ideas of utterances. We fully concur with the contention that change occurs in the context of communication, but differ in taking a dynamic view of the communication process—a dynamism that Bakhtin helps us to see through his articulation of utterances. Weisbord (1992) as well as Hammond and Sanders (2002), worked on the role of conversations in "constructing" change, but their conception of the role of conversation (speech act analysis) in constructing change remains basically monologic—"conversations are treated as simply a methodology" (Fairhurst and Putnam 2004: 6). Hammond and Sanders (2002: 17) focus upon communication as a means of uncertainty (or equivocality) reduction. Dialogue becomes a means of attaining a "workable level of certainty" (Hammond and Sanders, 2002: 17) or to Bohm (1996) and Senge (1990) who like to use dialogue to move a group toward 'shared meaning', a prelude to Weisbord's (1992) 'collective action.' Note this is a shared meaning, coherence, and collective action that overcomes and diffuses "resistance" as "part of the self-organizing process" that Hammond and Sanders (2002: 18) advocate. The confusion of sentence and utterance, is something we think is symptomatic of organizational change and development studies. A conversation that has multiple voices is not necessarily polyphonic; a dialogue of many voices with a focus on shared meaning, coherence, and consensus can be quite monologic.

The paper is organized into two parts. In part I, we begin with a discussion of some of Bakhtin's key concepts implicating change communication. In part II, we discuss how dialogue is theorized and applied in organizational change. In particular, we hope to suggest the necessity and importance of further discussion of

the opportunities and prospects that exist in viewing change management as providing occasions for change agents to experience the life that exists in and through a Bakhtinian view of change communication.

I. APPLYING BAKHTINIAN IDEAS TO COMMUNICATING CHANGE

Bakhtin's ideas about communication and meaning are at odds with much that we currently, if perhaps implicitly, embrace. The modern idea of communication ― especially the modern idea of message ― relies on a linguistic, grammatical base. At the turn of the 20th Century, Ferdinand de Saussure (1983), one of the founders of modern linguistic analysis, suggested that the study of language (langue) and speech (parole) should be separated (with signifier and signified being viewed as two separate but stable systems) and that emphasis should be placed on language as a social institution of the word. The result of Saussure's work was that langue became invested with powers such that meaning was held in place around some ideal (universally understood) statement. Communication became centered on what the speaker says (Shannon and Weaver, 1949). Meaning was static and language was simply a code for transmitting information.

Bakhtin took issue with Saussure's approach to language. Bakhtin distinguished utterances from sentences—sentences being a linguistic, grammatical approach to language. Sentences are static, fixed in time and easily analyzed and dissected. Utterances, in contrast, were characterized as taking on meaning only when they are embodied and exchanged with other people in the form of discourse. Discourse was understood by Bakhtin (1984: 183) in terms of "*dialogic interaction [which] is indeed the authentic sphere where language lives*" [italics in original]. According to Bakhtin (1984: 183), discourse is:

> … language in its concrete living totality, and not language as the specific object of linguistics, something arrived at through a completely legitimate and necessary abstraction from various aspects of the concrete life of the word. But precisely those aspects in the life of the word that linguistics makes abstract are, for our purposes, of primary importance.

Bakhtin objected to Saussure's approach in structuring language as an independent system of signs dissociated from speech (parole) — a system in which each sign reflects a ready-made code and signifies a definite concept, thus giving speech a fixed and stable meaning. Bakhtin (1986: 147) noted that: "A code is only a technical means of transmitting information; it does not have cognitive, creative

significance". Many change agents today take for granted that communication is constituted by information transmission through use of more than one conversational style (Shannon and Weaver, 1949). They do not see the need for a model that accommodates the cognition and creativity of which Bakhtin spoke. Using codes appears efficient and effective only if the change agents are the ones constructing and sending the codes.

Bakhtin argued that an utterance is a real unit of speech because it reflects a real speech situation (1986: 67). An utterance reflects actual personal experience. To say that utterances are subjective (uni-vocal) would be too limiting and would misstate Bakhtin's anthropology. There are other subjectivities (interpretations) if one's own is to exist. Every utterance has its own 'social atmosphere' — a sort of theme that surrounds the utterance, hence giving it its own speech genre. Bakhtin observes (1986: 87):

> Genres correspond to typical situations of speech communication, typical themes, and consequently, also to particular contacts between meanings of words and actual concrete reality under certain typical circumstances.

Bakhtin fully implicates change communication in the sense that it firmly reinstates the creation of meaning in the communication process through the active participation of all communicants in utterances. He observes (1981: 272)

> Every concrete utterance of a speaking subject serves as a point where the centrifugal as well as centripetal forces are brought to bear. The process of centralization and decentralization, of unification and disunification, intersect in the utterance.

Bakhtin discarded the dualism of transmissions between an active speaker and a passive listener in favour of utterances that are made in anticipation of the other's active response. Rather than seeing meaning-making as being based on ready-made subject-centered codes, Bakhtin's approach sees meaning-making as irreducibly dependent on a complex unity of differences in utterances, or heteroglossia, whereby meaning comes to be constituted.

Implicit in Bakhtin's conception of heteroglossia is its implication in terms of managing change communication by the privileging of speech under centripetal forces (forces of meaning that unify change plans, tending towards the center) and centrifugal forces (forces of meaning that disturb change plans, tending to flee the

center). It is from within his conception of heteroglossia that we are able to see change communication as being completely 'unfinalizable' — there is no such thing as 'strictly speaking'.

The process of centralization (unification) stresses the uniformity and singularity of meaning. It emphasizes the intended meaning of the communicator—preserving the message as created by the self. Couldry (2000) reminds us that speech tends to concentrate, rather than disperse, self-representations and social representations of people. But Bakhtin draws our attention to the contestatory nature of everyday speech with the notion of centrifugal forces of language. In contrast decentralization (disunification) is committed to 'being with' the other. Centrifugality (decentralization) is met with abrupt counter-languages aimed at getting people to agree with what has been planned. Bakhtin (1981: 272-273), writes of "the unifying, centralizing, centripetal forces of verbal - ideological life," to which are opposed "the centrifugal, stratifying forces," of everyday life.

Within such a framing context, change communication would need to be approached as based on a conversation that is made in anticipation of the other's active response. Each side becomes itself through taking on elements (aspects) of the other side. By "outsideness", or "transgredience" as it is sometimes known, Bakhtin meant that elements of the self (or one's own culture in general) cross over to other selves (or other cultures) and take on elements from each other as they complete themselves. One thus illuminates the other (Bakhtin, 1981: 324). Commenting on Bakhtin's notion of outsideness, Morson and Emerson (1990: 185) noted that, as each side takes on aspects of the other, an "illumination" is achieved, which allows each side "to complete and finalize an image of each other". Each takes an element of the other, and each comes to illuminate the other. Outsideness is a phenomenon of being 'outside' the other and yet being able to 'tele-transfer' elements of one's own social language (culture) to social others.

Through this idea of "illumination", or 'surplus in meaning' as it is sometimes called (Jabri, 2005a), identity can be seen as co-constituted from 'outsideness'. The fact that a teacher is 'outside' his or her students means that the teacher can narrate things about them that they cannot see, and the fact that they are 'outside' the teacher means that they can narrate things about the teacher that he or she cannot see. Outsideness has important implications for change management because it emphasizes not the speaker (the individual as the unit of analysis in communication) but the dialogue that takes place.

According to this understanding, change has meaning only as they relate to the utterances of others. According to Bakhtin (1984: 183): "Language lives only in the dialogic interaction of those who make use of it". He saw conversation language as a living thing that is dependent on an infinite and recursive chain of utterances. That is when both change agents and change participants become indistinguishable.

Implications for consensus

In addition to seeing communication as dynamic rather than static, Bakhtin helps us see that messages cannot be constructed in isolation. Meaning can be generated only through interaction with others. Consensus that has multiple voices is not necessarily polyphonic; a consensus of many voices with a focus on shared meaning, coherence, and consensus can be quite monologic.

Consider the common situation in organizations. Change agents determine that a certain change is necessary. To facilitate implementation of the change effort, these change agents deem it desirable that everyone in the organization should agree that the change is necessary. Although the idea of creating such a 'consensus' carries connotations of 'participation', this approach to change is best characterized as a 'monologic consensus', a term, we hasten to add might appear to show some contradiction in words. There can be no theoretical excuse for spawning yet another contradiction, but the history of change and its implementation seems to suggest that consensus often shows a state of nominal commitment among people whose real commitment is moderated by real lack of commitment: the reason for this is that people might wish to avoid further arguments.

Consensus, in reality, often covers up large differences between people. There is no 'meeting of mind' and so it remains a proclaimed state of the situation until tested, and that is when things fall apart (change fails to take roots). Because people feel quite threatened by change, they often do not wish to fully engage, hence one way to finish up with a conversation in a meeting would be to show consensus and to leave the meeting happily on good terms with each other. Consensus is moderated by compassion, and so it is here where we should be challenging the common view of change — a view that does not take into account that for change take roots, there must be other interpretations if one's own interpretation is to exist.

Though the idea of creating consensus carries connotations of participation, we would argue this approach to change is best thought of as getting to a monologic

consensus. In a monologic consensus, the invitation to participate extends no further than the call to agreement with a pre-determined outcome. In these circumstances, dissension is not a viable option. The call to consensus is essentially a monologue. The change agents might communicate in apparently consultative/participative ways, including holding forums for discussion but they do not necessarily break out of the monologic frame. What appears to be dialogic communication can actually serve monologic ends. As Bakhtin (1984: 189) notes:

> Discourse that has become an object is, as it were, itself unaware of the fact, like the person who goes about his business unaware that he is being watched; objectifiable discourse *sounds as if it were single-voiced discourse*" [italics added].

Understandings of the nature of communication have historically oscillated between the monologic and the dialogic. Modern theories of communication emphasize monologic messages, i.e., creating messages to persuade an audience to do something the speaker desires. Consensus becomes a monologic outcome rather than a dialogical process, i.e., what I really want is for you to agree with my predetermined action. Postmodern communication theories emphasize the dialogic nature of communication, whereby the speaker and the audience are perceived as co-communicators who participate in constructing meaning. There is little room in the modern view for participation of anyone other than the author of the message, and the postmodern view allows little room for a message. We contend that neither view has gone far in enough in conceptualizing what actually happens in communication. The postmodern view has a commendable emphasis on participation, but it has not presented a convincing perspective on the message.

Bakhtin's dynamic view of messages as part of communicating is indicative of his anthropology. Monologic perspectives on communication tend to see persons in terms of a set of characteristics that need to be understood for persuasive purposes. Bakhtin sees persons as irreducible to a set of characteristics. For Bakhtin, persons can be known only as they relate to other persons. Humans create conversation, and the dialogue reflects our "personness" of the participants because the utterances of one participant have meaning only in relation to the utterances of the other. According to Bakhtin (1981: 324), if people wish to know themselves they must continually engage in an "accommodation of otherness".

We cannot deny intent (our message), nor can we deny the active participation of the "other." If we try to protect their messages from the interpretative powers of others, they kill the life of their messages. 'Living communication' allows for

others to engage and participate in the message making. That does not mean that there is no such thing as doing violence to a message. A participant of a message can consciously distort the intention of the author of the message. However, it should also be recognized that, as others interpret the words of the author of a message, that author also perceives his or her words differently. The interaction gives life to the message.

II. PRIVILEGING PARTICIPATION OVER MESSAGE

Nowadays, change management is increasingly becoming influenced by having a tendency to privilege participation over message—especially the participation of the un-empowered over the message of the powerful. Concerns about empowering and 'giving voice' are legitimate. However, such a perspective can fall into a dualism that denies the character of any utterance. Change agents who privilege 'voice', though, often fall back into thinking of communication as a military battle. They focus on voice assuming the utterances are like arrows that we shoot at each other, and that what we want are *more* people shooting arrows, for example, some haven't gotten to shoot as many arrows so now they should get a chance. Yet the arrow metaphor is not one that enables us to see participation in the making of meaning.

Bakhtin, in contrast, sees *everyone*—whether in power or not—as participating. Clampitt, *et al.*, (2000) compared communication to a dance — one partner leads, but the one who "follows" is hardly passive. Bakhtin sees utterances as having creators and perhaps we should think of communication as art and ourselves as artists. For every artist has to give up her creation at some point—and in some sense we have to give up proprietary interpretive rights to our utterances *if we want them to live*.

Some change agents emphasize 'voice' so that we can construct a completely different view of situations — one based on the totality of voices. The underlying assumption is one that sees truth as emerging from collective experience — that each person's subjective experience is a data point, and that truth emerges in the patterns formed by collective, diverse experiences. This understanding of voice, however, an invitation to blend voices into a whole — rather than interpreting shared utterances.

Bakhtin saw *ongoing interpretation* as being the actual process of making meaning. Creating meaning is not divorced from communicating; rather, each is integral to the other. By embracing this concept we say that a conversational

episode in organizations is best understood as a series of utterances. One can try to impose a monologic communication model on the change process, but the dialogic, conversational utterances live on. Seeing and feeling the potential power of communication hinges on whether one sees communication as monologic or dialogic. Bakhtin's perspective challenges us to leave aside dualism — in this case the dualism of active message senders speaking to passive listeners. But he also challenges the dualism of emphasizing the message over the relationship. One cannot separate the two as they are inextricably intertwined.

The potential for change occurs in what Bakhtin calls "dialogic space". For Bakhtin, a dialogic space was a space in which 'rays of light' pass through layers of varying density. It is the medium in which utterances crisscross one another. Mirrors are not placed facing each other. If they were so placed, they would simply reflect what they had received — effectively 'blinding' each other. Similarly with a creative dialogic space, there is more than a mere reflecting of what has been uttered. Bakhtin's mirror is not an ordinary (conventional) mirror.

In terms of implicating change communication, we contend that Bakhtin's mirror is a prismatic mirror, the light of which is sent off in all directions. Its illumination is prismatic, creative, and expansive. Creating meaning is an infinite and recursive process that is not finalizable. Meaning is not *this* or *that*. It is not dualistic — *your* meaning or *my* meaning. However, Bakhtin steered away from the idea of *shared meaning* (consensus as outcome), in favor of *communication* in which utterances are offered with the full expectation of another's interpretive participation. As Bakhtin (1984: 202) observed:

> When a member of a speaking collective comes upon a word, it is not a neutral word of language, not as a word free from the aspirations and evaluations of others, uninhabited by others' voices. No, he receives the word from another's voice and filled with that other voice.

Seeing conversation among people as a never-ending process, then, offers a different perspective on participation — a perspective whereby one person's message joins with that of another and one person's meaning joins with that of another. According to Bakhtin, meaning is created only when utterances are brought together, where each side takes on aspects of the other (outsideness), hence allowing each side to obtain a more illuminated image of each other. This produces what might be termed a 'surplus of seeing' — a sort of capability that manifests itself through speech, by which things are enriched by insights being

brought to bear from more than one angle. A 'surplus of seeing' develops in a back-and-forth manner within a 'stretch of talk' as utterances are transposed among con-texts and situations. A 'surplus of seeing' along these lines of thinking is instrumental in the development of the notion of learning organization. It can benefit change communication in depicting new ways for producing improvements and innovation in team learning.

The literature on management has, indeed, emphasized the notion that organizations should aim at creating open communications with minimum defensiveness (Argyris and Schön, 1978), and that through this they should learn (Garvin, 2000; Senge, 1990). Yet, by in large it has done little to emphasize the role of utterances in the co-construction of meaning. Senge (1990), for example, identifies five disciplines that learning organizations would need to consistently exhibit — personal mastery, mental models, a shared vision, team learning, and systems thinking. However, Senge's five disciplines, and in particular team learning and a shared vision, say little about co-utterances, outsideness, and the role of language (speech) in their development.

Implicating change communication, organization members, for Bakhtin, would emerge as being always involved in co-utterances: "I am conscious of myself and become myself only while revealing myself for another, through another, and with the help of another" (1984: 287). Team learning and a shared vision are, in effect, fully dependent on utterances (speech), rather than on langue. Team learning is not based on a pool of views, but on a 'surplus of seeing' obtained from "a plurality of consciousness" (Bakhtin, 1984: 110) inhabiting a variety of speech genres. Team learning and shared vision are multi-styled, multi-texted, and multi-voiced. Team learning involves double-voiced dialogue; how one narrator speaks through another, and how the self of an interlocutor is dialogized with multiple voices, which makes utterances and their contexts more than their sum.

Dynamic Utterance and Collective Meaning

Dynamic utterances are not to be confused with 'collective meaning'. The latter is an abstraction that Bakhtin would have rejected. He insisted on bringing all abstractions down to the level of the concrete. Collective meaning, in many ways, implies static agreement occurring in specific moments—reaching a point at which it can be said that understanding has been reached and that the interpretive effort can therefore cease. Such a position upholds the myth of *static meaning*, whereas Bakhtin insisted that utterances have a *dynamic life*.

Much of organizational change work around achieving consensus through participation in dialogue, remains quite monologic (one logic); even when a diversity of points of view interact in dialogue, the stress is placed upon achieving consensus, or in utilizing rhetorics of persuasion to arrive at common ground for all (to keep contentious points of view on the margin). A supposedly polyphonic dialogue can remain monologic (one logic), and not achieve polylogical (multiple logics) aims.

People pursue monologic communication on the assumption that their words are independent of the thoughts of others. Even more significantly, some assume that their words and messages find fulfillment in themselves — independent of interaction with the minds of others. Bakhtin (1984: 292) observed that:

> Monologism, at its extreme, denies the existence outside itself of another consciousness with equal rights and equal responsibilities, another I with equal rights (thou). With a monologic approach (in its extreme or pure form) another person remains wholly or merely an object of consciousness, and not another consciousness.

The approach of a change agent to communication thus reveals his or her anthropology. Monologic communicators see 'others' as *objects of* the communication process, whereas dialogic communicators see 'others' as *subjects in* the communication process. The difference is essentially a difference in understanding of the notion of participation — with the dialogic communicator acknowledging 'interpretive rights', in addition to acknowledging 'voice'. There must be other interpretations if one's own interpretation is to exist. All conversation is a never-ending process (unfinalizable) and that all conversational episodes among people are dialogic.

DISCUSSION

When change agents want to create transformative change, it is easy to immerse themselves in the wisdom of their decisions and promote their will on those who have not had the opportunity to participate in the decision-making process. Brown and Eisenhardt (1997) talk about continuous change models suggesting that change theory stands to benefit from highlighting semi-structures that permit continuous change by blending limited structure with extensive communication. Admittedly, their suggestion is a very important first step in supporting continuous change, but it does not go far enough.

What is missing is the role of conversation being viewed as a never-ending process that is supplemented by the surplus of seeing and whose goal is to provide more agile structures (both organizational and linguistic). Utterances are tied to each other, but they continue to change in the course of speaking with meaning carried over from one round of conversations to another. Every round is a co-communication cycle to be metamorphosed into hybrid forms. In change management we have framed change somewhat like authors developing their plots. The organizations are the "novel" and the employees are the characters.

A monologic view of communication has led us to focus on what the change agent (the narrator) should say, and what we would like the change participants to say in order for the plot to develop along our desired lines. If that is the case—if that is our approach, then we must ask ourselves, how we view our "characters" and how we want them to communicate with us. Bakhtin (1984: 6) commented that:

> Dostoevsky, like Goethe's Prometheus, creates not voiceless slaves (as does Zeus), but free people, capable of standing alongside their creator, capable of not agreeing with him and even of rebelling against him.

Bakhtin argues that because Dostoevsky's characters are free people, one cannot examine his novels in terms of the usual analysis of plot development (1984: 6). We draw inspiration from Bakhtin and argue that change management has, for too long, focused on monologic implementation of predetermined change, i.e., how to develop the 'best plot'. We argue that change agents need to consider their anthropology and ask themselves whether the people in their organizations are the *objects of* communication or subjects *in* communication. Furthermore, we argue that one's anthropology and one's espoused communication theory are intrinsically intertwined: how one communicates depends entirely on whether one views people as participating subjects *in* the process or as objects *of* the process.

A Bakhtinian approach leads change agents to understand people (change participants) as social beings, to focus change on dialogue, and to embrace the notion that meaning creation (surplus of seeing) is inseparable from communicating *with others*. Change in the Bakhtinian sense is about getting people to appreciate the dialogic nature of conversations and habits of action (Jabri, 2006). This constitutes a very significant shift in change management — *away* from thinking about change as mere interventions aimed at shaping better qualities of relationships through consensus *towards* a conception of change as a genuine

dialogue (from which joint actions co-emerge). (Anderson, 1997; McNamme *et al.*, 1999; Spreitzer and Quinn, 1996).

A conversation that actively invites, expects, and encourages interpretive participation results in a 'surplus of seeing.' Such a surplus develops in a back-and-forth manner as people exchange utterances and as words are transposed among cultures and situations (Jabri, 2005b). It holds in balance both unity and diversity, for in each exchange of utterances one sees both a core of meaning, and one also see the diversity of meanings. The ideas that we utter have basic identities, but their identities are not limited by their nature. They are "born between people" (Bakhtin, 1984: 110). They are not static, but rather have dynamic energy that goes beyond their original creation.

A key conclusion is to switch from the transmission model of Shannon and Weaver (1949), which places emphasis on the transactional nature of the communication process, to a more Bakhtinian model where emphasis is placed on the verbal dialogue embedded in the wider systems that is dialogic. In the transmission model of Shannon and Weaver, which was based on Claude Shannon's mathematical theory of signal transmission that he designed for Bell Telephone in the late 1940's, message travels, in a transactional way, between sender and receiver, accompanied by feedback loop. It is time to abandon this model, in favor of one that is more conversationally systemic. Meaningful change we believe is an intervention at the systemic level, which can be facilitated by a dialogue, but only when it is reconceived as at the whole utterance level of intervention.

It is not easy to switch from a model of communication *as code*, to a model of communication *as a surplus of seeing.* The prismatic reflections afforded by dialogue may not always be welcome to the participants. In the context of previous change initiatives that asked for agreement or at least full cooperation, it is most likely difficult for change participants to feel free to begin verbal dialogue with change agents (though they may engage in it with other change participants).

More difficult, though, is to get people to acknowledge the interpretive rights of others in the utterance process. Our own interpretations are implicit and thus we rarely think about the fact that we are interpreting others' words. It is when their interpretations of our words do not match our intentions that we want to freeze meaning and impose our own—effectively constricting communication to a monologue of meaning. Bakhtin shows us that the surplus of seeing in communication is inevitable; what we need to advocate in communicating change is that it is not only inevitable, but also desirable. A change that is led through

dialogue is more likely to take root because it is born at a point of contact among various consciousnesses (Bakhtin, 1984: 81). The ideas are living ideas; the people are free people interacting and continually learning.

A most significant implication of applying Bakhtin to change is that to understand change we need to stop giving attention to arriving at a static consensus (outcome), and focus on utterances. That would shift change management from thinking of change as a series of change initiatives and feedback loops, to thinking about how people change their ideas and habits of action. Rather than seeing change as a prefabricated product that needs to be communicated, change management would focus on facilitating dialogues about issues. Such a perception would shift the focus from anticipation of responses to the change agent's monologue to a real understanding of how people change their ideas through communicating with each other.

CONCLUSION

Change agents want to change the organization; indeed, they have been trained to change it. Change agents may even know what the organization needs. Many change agents have been trained to think about how to communicate the change in ways that people will accept it. That training reflects a caring for the audience, even as it limits the audience's participation. The audience is mere spectator to the change, rather than witness to it.

Moreover, the current models of communicating change do not help change agents, though, when they meet with disagreement. How are they to understand such disagreement? What are they to do? That is the dilemma. Voice gets presented as a strategic choice, for example, who gets a say and when? That gives the illusion that participation in communication is a choice, and not a reality. Voice is a powerful part of the postmodern movement. But giving voice still holds to some extent to the metaphor of communication as military conquest — adding more arrows to the battle. Bakhtin makes clear that participation goes beyond choice to interpretation of our own and others' utterances. The interpretation and creation of meaning are ongoing and are present even when change agents try to impose a monologic communication model.

People change their ideas and habits through conversations with other people. In order to understand the change process, we need to see the creation of meaning in dynamic rather than conventional (static) terms. Only then will the practice of

communication mirror the social reality of communication in change management. Bakhtin offers us a distinctive way of understanding change because he offers a dynamic way of seeing communication.

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