



# From the Machine to the Conversation: Organizational Vitality in the Contemporary World

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For many decades now, the metaphor of the machine has dominated the way we think about the organization and how it functions. We believed organizations could, like machines, be smooth-running, efficient, and effective vehicles for achieving the various ends to which we aspired. Organizational science – through systematic evidence and rational analysis – would supply the plans for building these machines, and organizational development specialists would fix the machines when they malfunctioned and guide them efficiently through the process of change. The machine metaphor was not without utility. If the conditions remained stable, the ends clearly specified, and the participants willing to join in, the vehicle could achieve a certain degree of efficacy, and both repair and transformation could be systematically achieved. However, the world that cradled the machine metaphor is rapidly vanishing. With world-spanning technologies now providing information more rapidly than anyone can absorb, ranges of expert opinion offered without agreement, new ideas sprouting from every corner of the web, skeptical eyes everywhere peeled on organizational activities, and new opportunities and trap-doors emerging with each new day, the idea of the organization as a rationally controlled machine ceases to be viable.

It is in this context that we can appreciate the emergence of a social constructionist view of knowledge. The main message of social construction is simple enough: as we communicate together we come to describe the world in particular ways. We also determine what counts as rational, and what ends are good and bad, valuable or threatening. Thus, for any given situation there are multiple descriptions possible, and each may be supported by many good reasons and values. In ruling between competing accounts, we have nowhere to turn. Scientists also negotiate about how to describe and explain what they choose to observe, just as laypersons do. Consider, for example, the dozens of competing theories of economics, each backed by reasoning and data. There is no final word on rationality. This

view of reality as social construction is very useful in understanding why the machine metaphor is no longer viable, and in confronting the context of flux in which the contemporary organization struggles. We can see that as technologies bring people into communication from all over the world, multiple views and values are likely to emerge. For every “wise decision” in an organization, there may be dozens of outside groups for whom the decision is unwise. And various groups will generate a range of facts that will support their views, and these too can circulate rapidly around the world. Even within the organization there may be competing rationalities and visions of the “good organization” and the “wise decision.” Under such conditions, attempts to fix “the organization” - to perfect the machine - are misguided.



So, one may ask, while social constructionist theory does a good job in helping us to understand the current and coming condition, what does it offer in the way of positive advice? How are organizations to remain viable? What is to become of leadership? What can OD professionals offer to them? These are complex questions, and we can barely scratch the surface in what follows. (The interested reader is invited to explore Ken Gergen's *Relational Being, Beyond Self and Community* (Oxford University Press, 2009), in which the implications of constructionist thought are applied to organizational life.)

Yet, even that analysis is limited, and the conversation must surely continue. But consider this: if realities, rationalities, and values are constructed in conversation, then much depends on the kinds of conversations taking place within the organization, and between its participants and those outside. To begin with, there are the internal processes. On the one hand, it is obviously essential that all participants are roughly "on the same page." Without agreement on what is important to accomplish, and how it is to be achieved, coordination among participants is jeopardized. However, from a constructionist standpoint this view harbors many significant implications. There are, for example, severe limits to top-down, command-and-control organizing. Whatever is pronounced from on high may mean quite different things as it is interpreted in the "lower rung" conversations that ensue. In a conversation, no one has ultimate control of the meaning of what is said. Meaning is always on the move, and there are no leaders without a body of people who are willing to interpret the leader's actions in ways that he or she would find congenial. Invited, then, is a more conversation-centered form of organizing. Ideally, decisions should carry the results of conversations from across the organization. Any decision that comes as a complete surprise to organizational members, is bargaining for trouble.

Let us share an example from our own work. Leo, the CEO of a large subsidiary of an international corporation, recently recounted an impressive illustration of relational decision making. Leo was ordered by his parent organization to reduce the costs of the subsidiary by 15%. He was staggered by the order, and deeply frustrated when he found the demand was non-negotiable. He considered hiring a large consulting firm to advise him about how to make such reductions. Laying off employees was the most obvious solution, but which ones, and when? Yet, by deliberating with his colleagues, it also became clear that, if he announced a down-sizing decision to the organization, he himself would duplicate the kind of treatment he had received from the parent organization. Such an announcement would foster an atmosphere of fear, anger and dejection.

With his staff, another route to decision making was devised. Essentially the organizational members would be enlisted into the decision making process. They would provide inputs into how the organization could be made more cost effective. Thus, fourteen discussion groups were created, each composed of

members from all sectors and levels of the company. The groups gathered information, conducted interviews, and periodically met with other relevant teams. External consultants were hired only to orchestrate the complex process of communication and scheduling. Ultimately the discussion groups generated a seven-volume summary containing their research and recommendations. The executive board ultimately accepted more than 75% of the teams' recommendations. Down-sizing was minimal; ingenious re-organization was everywhere in evidence; the economic goal was achieved, and enthusiasm was maximal. Virtually all sectors of the company were represented, and when the final policies were announced, broad acceptance and affirmation prevailed.

A second important implication is related to the way in which most organizations are structured. Typically, different groups are assigned different tasks or duties. Various, departments are devoted to sales, research and development, finance, human resources, and so on. While there are advantages to this arrangement, there are also liabilities. Each unit will create its own realities and values, and these may be at odds with their neighbors. The problem is intensified if there are subsidiary organizations in far-flung lands. Each will represent a new reality-making force. And, as these smaller groups begin to coalesce, so can there be a growing insulation from the flux of opinion, reason, and values outside. If the world inside the unit is convincing, so will those outside seem misinformed and misdirected. Again drawing from our own experience, we once served as consultants for a large pharmaceutical firm. Their problem was a growing fragmentation between the central, home office and their fifty satellites spread around the world. As the home office executives described it, many of the satellite groups seemed resistant to their directives; they did not seem to realize the importance of uniform practices, nor understand the economic logic necessary for success. Our visits to the satellites confirmed the picture of fragmentation. Often we found within the satellites a high degree of morale, and the sense that the home office did not understand their situation or the culture of their organization. They took pride in their superior knowledge, and made fun of what seemed the "second rate intelligence" of managers in the home office. There was a negative vitality that resulted in a closing-off from the home office. There was excellent organization and generally high morale within each satellite, but the result was an erosion of the whole. Again, the message for management and OD is to open the boundaries of conversation: remove impediments to the flows of meaning across the organization, and indeed, generate forms of organizational process that ensure open communication. For example, increasing shifts toward multi-functional work teams, information circulation across functional areas, and vertical participation in decision-making teams, represent promising moves.

We turn now to the relationship between the organization and the world outside. At the outset, a constructionist view invites a reconceptualization of the relationship itself. The traditional view from economics defines organizations



in both Hobbesian and Darwinian terms: in terms of organizational viability it is “all against all” and only the fittest will survive. Such a view has proved destructive - to the economy, the environment, and to world peace. It invites the organization to eliminate the flow of reason and value across the borders of the organization, to shield the internal views from outside surveillance, and to be suspect and defend against alien views. At the same time, those outside come to view the organization with suspicion, and to treat its expansion as threatening. One may view the rise and fall of Nazi Germany in just these terms, and, indeed, the recent expansion and deflation of the Western economy. In contrast, from a constructionist standpoint we come to see organizational vitality as inherently dependent on its participation within the broader flows of meaning. To remain in synchrony with the world at large means absorbing its conversations, whilst sharing the internal logics and values with the world at large.

The practical implications of this view are many. We share here only one example from our experience. A large manufacturing company in Vienna was constantly and critically scrutinized by the press. They were attacked for profiteering, making questionable claims for their products, and for exploiting their workers. Whenever the company attempted to defend its policies, the press located reasons for mistrust. Antagonism prevailed. Reaching an impasse, the company decided to adopt a different policy. Rather than fearing and loathing the press, they decided to invite members of the press into meetings where company decisions were made. In this way the press might come to understand the logics and values of the organization from the inside. And too, as decisions were made in the presence of the press, managers might be more acutely aware of public implications. The result was a transformation in both the organizational logics and the attitude of the press toward the organization. The antagonistic relationship dissolved and organizational practices were transformed.

In many respects we see a constructionist sensibility emerging from many corners of the management world. Scholars, managers, and consultants increasingly find the machine metaphor of the organization no longer viable; the rational plan is giving way to dialogic participation as the key to a sustainable future. There are few OD specialists, for example, who are not familiar with the striking success of Appreciative Inquiry practices for organizational change. Such practices - placing collaborative inquiry at the center of the change process - were direct descendents of constructionist theory. Also, illustrating this increasing sensibility to collaboration is a new wave of books on such topics as relational leadership, collaborative process in organizations, multi-party dialogues, and innovation through design-oriented groups. For the organizational development practitioner, the implications are far-reaching: Attempts to diagnose, repair or improve the needy organization from an expert stand-point, are dangerous. They will reflect only a small range of realities and values, and their instillation may be viewed as an invasion. Rather, the challenge of the

OD specialist will increasingly become that of inciting, enriching, and extending generative practices of dialogue. To perfect THE organization is not the goal; but rather, to contribute to the perpetual process of organizing, out of which the benefits may find global extension.

#### BIOGRAPHIES

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