Chapter 42
Framing and Tropes in Organizational Change Practice

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ABSTRACT

There are two main parts to this reflective case history of evidence-based OCD practice. The first involves the use of framing in enhancing meaning and provoking action from the client, an automotive manufacturer in Malaysia. The second part, largely drawn from organizational change experience in Australia, is a reflection on the use of tropes in change project teams and with clients to facilitate communications and invoke new ways of thinking. Both "evidence" and experience play an important role in the two stories. Through reflection, insights and lessons learned are presented that may help organizational change and development practitioners.

INTRODUCTION

My reflective case history narrative is premised upon one change-related project that I had been involved in and the other is a broad reflection of my time as a management consultant involved in organizational change over 10 years. In both instances, I explore the use of language in framing situations and the use of tropes.

Language is a ubiquitous and powerful tool in reframing the way we understand our world, and in instigating multiple perspective-taking (Cornelissen, Holt, & Zundel, 2011). Indeed, language is useful in allowing us to be efficient as we use metaphors and analogies as a 'shorthand', yet maintain some degree of accuracy in description. Words are powerful as they not only convey meaning but the right words can be a catalyst for action (Oswick, Keenoy, & Grant, 2002).

I explore the use of framing and tropes from two perspectives; in communicating change with the client, and its use in the 'operations' of change management project teams. The first explores my work in the evaluation of an automotive manufacturer's information technology (IT) environment, and how the team reframed the client's dire IT environment from a 'health' perspective using medical metaphors to instigate action from senior management to remedy the situation. The second case explores the use of tropes in my past consulting engagements to navigate and communicate within the complexities of the clients' environment.

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Both ‘evidence’ and experience play an important role in my stories. During my time as a management consultant I held postgraduate degrees. Through my education, it was evident that major change programmes are always a challenge, especially in securing active top management support. In addition, through learning from real case studies and the application of various change management models (e.g. Kotter, 1995), the criticalness of effective communications and persuasion strategies to achieve organizational change was evident. As a matter of fact, many of the consulting firms that I worked for used methodologies that prioritised communications as a means to enact change effectively.

However, through experience and practice, I have learned different aspects of communication such as the role of framing and tropes. The effective use of framing and tropes were not from ‘evidence’ but rather from my practice. However, by reflecting from experience, I am able to present my insights and lessons learned that I hope will be helpful to organizational change and development practitioners.

FRAMING IN THE MANAGEMENT OF CHANGE IN AN IT ENVIRONMENT

The Organization

Automobile manufacturer (AM) of Malaysia has been the cornerstone of this South-East Asian country’s ambitions in the automotive sector since its establishment in 1983. From its inception AM had grown steadily, and by the early 2000s it led local car sales. To help manage this growth, AM began to create a portfolio of subsidiaries to enhance the effectiveness of its operations. This included, commencing in the early 2000s, a new marketing and distribution subsidiary to improve the sales of its cars locally and internationally in the UK and Australia. Through its manufacturing arm, AM extended their reach to other firms to externally gain competencies in automobile engineering. AM’s biggest acquisition was of Lotus Cars in the UK. By 2001, the firm had a revenue of roughly equivalent to £1.2 billion, a share capital of £97 million and notably, even stronger aspirations for further growth. Inspired by its robust market growth and performance, AM further expanded as an organization, mostly through mergers and acquisitions. However, non-organic growth can cause problems and issues began to surface internally as its process and systems, particularly its information technology (IT) infrastructure, did not keep up with the pace of the firm’s market growth.

To address this problem, AM hired the consulting firm that employed me to diagnose the issues with the firm’s overall IT environment, namely, Applications, Networking, Operating Systems and Organization (e.g. process and methods). The team was also tasked to provide recommendations that would ensure adequate utilisation of its IT infrastructure and tools, and that there was effective management of the firm’s IT Division. The objectives of the project team were to, i) advise on the rationalisation AM’s current IT hardware and software infrastructure, ii) propose enhancements of the connectivity of systems and the network infrastructure, increase compliance to known standards (e.g. network standards), iii) undertake a gap analysis against trends and best practices, and iv) identify key priorities and solutions.

Help From Key Stakeholder

The team was supported by a project sponsor from the client, Robert (all names anonymised), who proved to be very helpful. The project sponsor was a senior manager in the Chief Executive Officer’s (CEO) office and had been with the organization for quite some time (more than 10 years if I recall correctly).

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