**HAT: Change Research and Application Report**

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**Introduction**

The aptly named article “The Central Role of Discourse in Large-Scale Change: A Social Construction Perspective” from the Journal of Applied Behavior Science, is a Social Construction’s (SC) view on the role that discourse plays in organizational change. The SC theory suggests that a person’s knowledge, experience, and reality are shaped by the interactions with society and culture. The goal of this research and application report is to review the article, interpret implications of the article’s view on change efforts, offer recommendations as to the implementation of this change effort, and apply the principles to an actual case or situation.

**Review**

The article in question is an SC’s view on the importance of discourse in an organization. As stated above, the social constructionist’s theory, when speaking about an organization, is that the identity and culture of the organization is shaped by the interactions, experience, knowledge of its employees, managers and customers. It should be noted that discourse is not inherently positive or negative but focuses on the open exchange of words and ideas. The article acknowledges that “discourse is the core of the change process” (Barrett, 1995, p.353), and that it is through discourse that we create, transform, and maintain structure.

According to the article, the role of discourse in an organization is to drive evolution and innovation in the organization, and that the clear and honest communication between all levels of the organization is equally important. Furthermore, that individuals can sense insincere attempts at communication, and change based on how those around them react to the change. This also plays a vital role in how change is viewed by the individual, if the group does not support the change efforts, the individual will not either; both entities reinforcing each other. This will also be supported in the opposite direction, if the individual does begin to support the change effort, the group will begin to support. Both directions have the ability to “snowball”, with a constant loop of acceptance or rejection.

The article uses an example of the implementation of the Total Quality Leadership (TQL) that the U.S. Navy in the early 90’s, to illustrate the need for discourse within a change effort. This change effort was originally met with disdain and distrust as it was a drastic contrast to the rules and regulations that many members of the Navy had known for years. Those members tasked with implementing the new TQL ideology figured it to be the next another program that would run its course, wouldn’t work, and then would be left behind like many programs before it. However, the one unit the researchers followed found that the more the members embraced the program, the more power the program began to have. Members were able to submit ideas and new processes through a “Productivity Improvement Form” without going through the “chain of command” and as these ideas were met with credibility and acceptance, their support of the program began to grow. The article found that through the TQL program, that the culture, language, and support of change was altered.

The article also draws a stark contrast between this theory of change management and Lewin’s Three-Stage Model, stating that “unfreezing, changing, and refreezing” is too simplistic. According to the SC’s view of change management, there needs to be an ever-evolving culture of communication and change; meaning that the “refreezing” stage is detrimental to organizational change.

**Implications & Recommendations**

Approaching organizational change using the Social Constructionists application has both its advantages and disadvantages and disadvantages. The article by Barrett did not place any emphasis on the negative effects of discourse in the change process. While it can be positive for an organization to be flexible in its responses to employee concerns, failures, and successes, this can also create a disorganized culture within an organization. For an organization to function effectively, there needs to be some rules, regulations, or practices that are “set in stone” to offer some stability to the employees, managers, and shareholders.

**Application**

Over the last ten years, Luxco, an adult beverage manufacturer and supplier, has drastically changed their portfolio of offerings from a commodity (inexpensive, value) company to a “premium-plus” (expensive, high quality) portfolio of brands. When asked in an interview what the most difficult change he has ever had to lead was; the current head of sales stated that “changing the mentality of the company from commodities to premium plus”. As a relatively new (eighteen months) employee of that company; I would have to disagree that there has been such an organizational change. I joined the company when they acquired a brand that I was the Vice President of Sales for, that fell into the “premium-plus” category, have several more years of experience selling higher priced products; and would consider myself a SME on the sales and distribution of a higher priced product. I would consider many of the more tenured sales personnel to be “stuck in their ways” when it comes to their approach to managing a family of brands like the company has now.

The “approach” the company took to transforming their employee’s mindset from commodities to premium plus mostly consisted of educating their staff on the products themselves, focusing more on the added value of production standards, and a more in-depth understanding of the product itself. There was little to no focus on managing the volume, presentation, logistics, and expectations that came with managing a higher price point product. Finally, there was no change in the approach to marketing or attempting to understand the mentality of the target consumers; treating high-end connoisseurs as if they were the same consumers that the lower-tired products attracted.

Using the example from the article of the implementation of TQL, the prescription to truly alter the “mindset” of the management and employees of Luxco will follow closely to that of the Navy. It will also need to be understood that this process, similar to TQL, will be a timely project that will need to be flexible to evolve as the process continues.

The first step in this process is for the company to clearly define the changes that they will be looking to implement, this step in the process is simple at its core; “change the way that the individuals approach, manage, and understand the portfolio they are responsible for”. The process, however, will be very difficult, often battled, and ever-changing. Alternatively, those whose mindsets are to be changed will have to embrace this directive, open themselves up to changing the way have they have approached the business, some of them for decades.

Similar to the “PIF” system from the article, a solid next step in the change process for Luxco, will be to create a new way to submit suggestions and ideas to those above them without fear of being labeled as someone who causes trouble or complains. As those in power begin to listen and enact some of the suggestions of those below them, the employees will gain confidence in the new process; this will in turn encourage them to make more suggestions and trust that the company is also willing to change.

Additionally, both management and employees need to embrace continuing education in how to properly manage the business they are now responsible for. As each member becomes more educated, their verbiage, actions, and expectations will be re-enforced by the commonality of the group. Creating cross-division groups within the organization will allow employees and managers to work with others outside of their specific sales teams, learn from each other, and ideally teach one another. These groups can share successes and failures with each other; allowing the others to learn from each other’s mistakes and opportunities; drastically reducing the mistakes.

Truly changing the mindset of the individuals will allow the company and employees to be more fluid, reminding them that if or when the companies goals or priorities were to change again, they already have steps in place to transition their mindsets again.

**References**

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