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Slawek Magala's view on management of meaning and organisational change: An essay in honour of Slawek Magala

Gerhard Fink Daniel Dauber

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Slawek Magala's view on management of meaning and organisational change

An essay in honour of Slawek Magala

Slawek
Magala's view
on management
of meaning

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Gerhard Fink

Wirtschafts Universität Wien, Wien, Österreich, and

Daniel Dauber

Centre for Applied Linguistics, University of Warwick, Coventry, UK

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to show that Slawek Magala's theory of management of meaning in organisations can be considered as a step towards a generic theory of organisational change.

Design/methodology/approach – The authors are integrating Slawek Magala's views on the processes, which play a role in changing organisations (i.e. framing, reflecting, negotiating, and seeking new windows of opportunities) with the related types of narratives as developed by David Boje (2001, 2008) and with further extensions by Fink and Yolles (2012), which are based on a model of paradigm change.

Findings – The authors develop a theoretical framework, which might serve as a basis for analysis of change processes emerging from different contexts within or outside a firm and offer some reflections about comparing research into issues of organisational change.

Research limitations/implications – This is a theoretical viewpoint paper.

Practical implications – The extension of Magala's model offers a practical guide for research into organisational change processes.

Social implications – Magala's model offers a deeper understanding of actual change processes.

Originality/value – To the authors' knowledge, this is the first time where a concept about emergent causality deriving from interaction between two conflicting agents (i.e. involved parties as, e.g. managers and subordinates) is applied to emerging stages in change processes.

Keywords Hierarchy, Equality, Imminent change, Management of meaning, Paradigm change, Robust theory

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Organisational change can arise from opportunities and threats, from new entrepreneurial visions, from changes in the political and social environment, but also from insolvency threats. Thus, if a generic theory of organisational change should be feasible, it has to be viable independently of the ultimate causes and types of change. Steps towards such a theory were offered by Larry Greiner (1972, 1998) who initially assumed that dependent on firm size only certain business models are viable, but owners or managers alike tend to cling too long to outdated business models. Thus, Greiner observed alternate periods of growth and crisis as firms grow. However, trying to sustain an outdated business model for too long is not the only reason for firm crises. As can be seen from insolvency statistics, sources of firm failure can be found within organisations, but also in the business environment of organisations.

Beyond that, Slawek Magala with his book on management of meaning in organisations (Magala, 2009) had provided an even broader view indicating that shifts in the socio-political environment have consequences for management of meaning in



organisations: “The contemporary theoretical landscape of organizational and managerial sciences has [...] also been constructed and maintained by current institutional environments. Dominant institutions have shaped the processes of organizing and institutionalizing knowledge production and dissemination [...] also in other institutional settings, including politics and mass-mediated communications” (Magala, 2009, p. 81). Three clusters emerged and dominate management of meaning these days:

- (1) The astonishing persistence and perseverance of the hierarchic cluster in all walks of life and areas of organisation (Magala, 2009, p. 81).
- (2) A domination of the market exchange cluster, which extends far beyond the economic sphere. The real global domination of market exchange has become the privileged and increasingly spectacular (which means “made theatrical”, “dramatized” and media communicated) form of social interaction (Magala, 2009, p. 83).
- (3) An emerging alternative and countercultural cluster of social movements and telemediated mobilisations (Magala, 2009, p. 84).

These three clusters manifest themselves in three corresponding processes:

- (1) The “eternal” return of professional bureaucracies in an age of networking organisations and individualised, mobile communications, which expresses itself, e.g. in the gradual shrinking of the role of employee councils in corporations or in the return of the principle of hierarchy in professional bureaucracies of universities.
- (2) The victorious commercialisation of rationalised interactions and the theoretical justifications of value creation ... reflected in the language of academic professionals legitimising their rationality ...
- (3) The successful growth of mediascapes and their professional clusters of “symbolic analysts” turning multimedia into the “fourth estate” exercising its influence by tacit monopolies (e.g. by providing navigational tools for individuals ...) (Magala, 2009, p. 87).

Crisis emerging in organisations

Larry Greiner (1998), in his article on “Evolution and Revolution as Organizations Grow”, reasserted major findings of his 1972 article, namely, that organisations as they grow also pass through a series of developmental phases. “Each phase begins with a period of evolution, with steady growth and stability, and ends with a revolutionary period of substantial organizational turmoil and change”. As firms age and grow over a long period, they may pass through certain stages of evolution, each of which will end in revolution, as “a major solution in one period becomes a major problem in a later period”. He originally, in 1972, distinguished five pairs of evolution-revolution, and added a sixth feature in 1998:

- (1) Creative activities are essential for a company to get off the ground. But as the company grows, those very activities become the problem. At this point, a crisis of leadership occurs, which is the onset of the first revolution.
- (2) The crisis of leadership is resolved by directive leadership. The problem emerging after a while is that lower level employees find themselves restricted by a cumbersome and centralised hierarchy and cannot make independent urgent decisions, what is leading to a crisis of autonomy.

- (3) The crisis of autonomy is resolved by delegation with successful application of a decentralised organisational structure with freedom of decision making within specialised departments. As freedom eventually breeds a parochial attitude, the organisation falls into a crisis of control.
- (4) The crisis of control is resolved by coordination, i.e. the use of formal systems for achieving greater coordination and by top-level executives taking responsibility for the initiation and administration of these new coordination systems. Due to emerging bureaucratisation, lack of confidence gradually builds between line and staff, and between headquarters and the field. A "red-tape crisis" is emerging as procedures take precedence over problem solving, and innovation dims.
- (5) The "red-tape crisis" is resolved by collaboration where spontaneity in management action through teams and the skilful confrontation of interpersonal differences is required, and social control and self-discipline replace formal control. Greiner then posits that crisis will centre around the psychological saturation of employees who grow emotionally and physically exhausted from the intensity of teamwork and the heavy pressure for innovative solutions.
- (6) Finally, with his reflections Greiner (1998) added a sixth source of firm growth, namely seeking extra-organisational solutions, which might lead to crises of cultural conformity (as Greiner mentions in the context of service firms).

Comparing these six sources of economic firm growth and the subsequent crises with observed causes of insolvency, then we find some overlap, but also additional sources of firm crisis beyond control by firm owner or manager (as shown in list below).

Crises leading to insolvency of firms (KSV1870 2013; Rotter 2014; Sicking 2011):

- (1) Three major external sources of insolvency crisis beyond control by firm owner or manager:
 - poor payment morale of clients (poor counterparty risk management);
 - market change, decline in demand, new foreign or domestic competitors; and
 - credit constraints.
- (2) Major internal sources of insolvency crisis:
 - values and attitudes:
 - authoritarian rigid leadership style of owners/mangers (crisis of autonomy);
 - lack of transparency and deficient communication (lack of confidence); and
 - lack of essential personality characteristics such as: reliable, honest, fair, creative, loyal and open (lack of cultural conformity).
 - Ill-defined strategy (crises of leadership):
 - lack of vision and foresight, wrong images of the future;
 - incapability to make appropriate market assessment; and
 - unfounded investment decisions and excessive investment.

- Poor implementation:
 - lack of financial resources;
 - lack of market observation, ignorance of market feedback;
 - lack of operative knowledge about accounting system and business practices; and
 - lack of controlling or inefficient corporate controlling (crisis of control).

Looking at these two lists of crises we may feel uncomfortable about the various forms of crises, but we find plausible Magala's proposition of the overwhelming role of hierarchical clusters, which manifest themselves in professional bureaucracies and are dramatising the importance of the rule of market exchange. Given the dominance of hierarchies and bureaucracies in all spheres of society and business, we might easily also follow his model of change analysis.

Magala's (2009) three step approach to the analysis of organisational change consists of: framing (defining), interpreting (mirror-like reflecting) and negotiating meanings (opening new windows of opportunity), which may be considered as steps towards a generic theory of organisational change:

- (1) framing (of the issue to be discussed and negotiated, for instance peaceful coexistence of hostile methodological research programmes);
- (2) mirror-like reflecting (of individual and group situational preferences and underlying values, often abbreviated into "identities"); and
- (3) opening windows of opportunity (for future actions, often articulated as "visions") (Magala, 2009, p. 31).

Those who have the power of "defining" can exert control over meanings. In that sense, as long as the wealthy have defining power, they may very well understand the unnecessary sufferings of the poor, but can easily decide to ignore it. The dominant "power of defining" is challenged by "interpreting" and much more so by "negotiating" of meaning. While defining serves the sender of messages who want to lock out others, interpreting opens up and serves the recipients, but negotiating strengthens the mediators.

In a way, "communicating [...] is sometimes considered part and parcel of organizing, managing, doing. Some [...] suggest that organizations exist mainly through their continuous communication" (Magala, 2009, p. 143). Communication multimedia became capable of inflating themselves all around us and tucking us in. By that they "influence the processes of socialization, of bringing up children in multimedia saturated communicational environments" (Magala, 2009, p. 147). "The political task, then, is one of inventing a name around which a political subject can be aggregated from the various social struggles, through which we are living. This act of the aggregation of the political subject is the moment of hegemony" (Critchley, 2007, p. 104).

Creating a robust theory based on Magala's model of management of meaning

According to Steven Wallis (2014) a robust theory implies that all each element (construct) of a theory is explained through a causal link to at least two other elements. All elements of a theory are concatenated.

To constitute a theory some concepts are required to be concatenated, i.e. that a concept (e.g. C) has two more causes (A and B).

A variety of causal links is only a collection of rudimentary theories, which are not robust (unconstrained complexity).

A single causality as, e.g., "B follows A", is only a rudimentary element of a possible theory. There is high probability of spurious regression.

And, a comparison of two states is an investigation with no theoretical explanatory value: the difference between A and B does not have theoretical implications.

Combining the aforementioned considerations it is possible to combine generic considerations of organisational change with those of Magala's model of management of meaning in order to facilitate sense making of change processes. The following example shall demonstrate this: those who have the power of defining and framing may attempt to unilaterally initiate and control change processes. If recipients are strong enough to challenge the power holders by reinterpreting observable characteristics, then a different logic may apply: in the following we distinguish two interacting agents (perhaps a manager A and a subordinate staff B who set actions A1, A2, etc.; and B1, B2, etc.) and the state of a system S1, S2, etc. (not considering for now how that state might be described and analysed).

In that sense, those who have the power of defining and framing may attempt to unilaterally initiate and control change processes. Consequently, a direct logic of causality may apply: Agent A considers the current state S1 as a reason for initiating change. He sets action A1 and a new state is emerging (S2), i.e. "A1" causes "S2" to emerge. The change is from state 1 to another state "S2". In that case, change is often defined by comparison of two states: $S1 \neq S2$.

If recipients are strong enough to challenge the power holders by reinterpreting observable characteristics, then a different logic may apply.

Impulse for change is leading to a reaction to that impulse (reflection) and the outcome is different from the original intentions of the agent who sets the impulse A1: i.e. "A1" causes a change in behaviour of agent B from "B1" to "B2" ("B2" could be, e.g. a supportive or a subversive form of behaviour by a counterparty). In that case, the action by "A1" and the change of behaviour of the counterparty from "B1" to "B2" together cause "S2", i.e. a new state "S2" to emerge, which does not conform with the original intentions of A1. In this case, change is defined by an initial change attempt by A1, and as a process, by changes in behaviour of agent B as reaction to a change initiated by A1.

If the change impulse is leading to repeated or ongoing negotiation processes, then a change spiral may emerge. An adequate model is that of emergent causality, where there is interaction between two agents: A1 is the current behaviour of the power holder; and B1 is the current behaviour of the counterparty (subordinate). S1 is the initial state.

The power holder sets an impulse for change observable as A2. That impulse is leading to a reaction B2, which in turn is leading to a new state S2.

Based on S2, the power holder sets another action A3, there is another reaction B3, and yet another state is emerging S3. This circular process may go on until a state of S has emerged which does not lead to further action and reaction by A and B. In this case, change is defined by emergent causality between changes in action and changes in reaction processes, thus, leading to a new window of opportunity.

Fink and Yolles (2012) extended Magala's model and could illustrate the emergence of a meaning cycle, which goes through nine stages from a relatively stable situation, through reflections about deviations from expected outcomes, perception of crisis to either death of a firm, or re-established power relations, or materialisation of new options – i.e. a window of opportunity. The course of this development cycle is framed by storytelling in its whole variety of forms of undisputed narratives and storytelling, ante narratives, crisis narratives and counter narratives (Boje, 2001, 2008).

This theory contains various constructs which are concatenated, i.e. reflections on the current state, reaction by agent A and counter-reactions by the other agent B are leading to the next stage of the system in the circular model (Table I).

Thus, impulse for change may come from the outside, as, e.g. poor payment morale of clients, market change, decline in demand, new foreign or domestic competitors or credit constraint, but may also come from the inside as, e.g. changes in management styles (manager or owner imposed value change), strategic deficiency or operative deficiency (see the list above). Power holders will try to frame the issues as recognised by them (with reference to the current state S1) and also in their own interest, i.e. personal strategic intentions, which become expressed as observable communication and behaviour A1, while non-power holders may have their own ideas and pursue counter-framings in the light of their interest (B1). Thus tensions increase and if not resolved may lead to a crisis (S2). The model offers three alternative paths towards the end of a crisis: the organisation may cease to exist because no other alternative is found (S-exodus); power-holders of organisation may be strong enough to re-establish their paradigm and, thus, suppress opponents (re-established S1), or a new organisational paradigm will emerge as a materialisation of a perceived window of opportunity (S3).

Mode 1: Narratives with characteristic type of stories (sort of relatively stable situation and rather undisputed story telling)	1. Framing
Mode 2: Antennarratives (uncertainty drift leads to discussion about what “the problem is”, what is “really relevant”, and “who has the right to speak about it”)	2. Reflection and drift 3. Tensions and subversive interpretation 4. Tensions increase 5. Structural criticality
Mode 3: Crisis – narratives (competing descriptions and explanations of critical situations, in search of the “true causes”, the “ultimate reasons” and “the guilty persons”)	6. Fluctuations and negotiations
Mode 4 The decision path – actual outcomes	7. Trifurcations 7.1 Type change: organisation death (post-narrative – insolvency crisis) 7.2 Type change – more of the same (re-established previous power relations) 7.3 Type change – new vision and goals (new window of opportunity – organisational change)
Mode 5: Transformation-narratives (implementation of a new or renewed “stable” corporate paradigm)	8. Complexification, is including aspects so far not considered in an existing theory 9. Parsimony, is simplifying a theory through elimination of redundant elements

Source: Fink and Yolles (2012)

Table I.
Management of meaning and modes of organisational change an extension of Magala's (2009) model

Discussion – challenges of defining and researching “organizational change”

While it seemingly is possible to frame Slawek Magala’s perceptions of management of meaning in a way to meet the standards of a theory, if not a robust theory (Wallis, 2014) numerous issues are emerging when one attempts creating comparable and valid information in a research process.

In Table I, the interpretation of Magala’s model is strongly influenced by David Boje’s (2001, 2008) seminal work on storytelling in organisations. However, stories are a reflection of perceived states of a system and intentions, i.e. perhaps strategic goals, of story-tellers. For comparably characterizing a state of a system, larger and consistent sets of data are required. E.g., the questionnaire derived from the configuration model of Dauber *et al.* (2012) distinguishes 16 different constructs, and yet more constructs may be added if one also would consider the three bi-polar value dimensions developed by Sagiv and Schwartz (2007).

It is also not so easy to find clear guidance for undertaking qualitative research that would deliver similar clarity as does descriptive economic statistics: there is a clear distinction to be made between stocks and flows, between absolute and relative change (growth rates) of changes in stocks and flows. The links between flows (inflows minus outflows) and absolute change are well defined. The points of time when stocks are measured and the length of periods over which flows are cumulated are well connected. For comparisons the points of stock measurement and the lengths of periods have to be harmonised, e.g. monthly statistics, annual statistics, five year cumulated statistics, etc.

That means that qualitative analysis should also contribute to understanding change in states as a consequence of processes, which take place between the points of time of identification of states. Change intensity has something in common with growth rates in descriptive statistics: the larger change in the same length of a period is the more intense change. A precondition for that is a clear definition of what constitutes a state of a system, what constitutes a process, how a process does contribute to change, and most notably the time dimension of length of processes and of elapsed time between states.

Admittedly, not every research study requires a full understanding of processes. However, research fields such as mergers and acquisitions, which can be classified as one of the most severe organisational changes, have started to recognise the importance of understanding processes instead of considering the states of two independent organisations before and after an acquisition. Indeed, many studies highlight the importance of social integration processes that affect the outcome of mergers and acquisitions (Cartwright and Cooper, 1993; Chatterjee *et al.*, 1992; Dauber, 2011, 2012; Fink and Holden, 2008). Thus, the “quality” of the change process appears to be highly important to understand mergers and acquisitions and goes beyond the common predictors of merger and acquisition success in the pre-merger and acquisition stage, such as size of companies, financial well-being, value on the stock-market, price of the target company, etc. This would also explain the commonly known mergers and acquisition paradox: while mergers and acquisitions are the most popular expansion strategy of organisations, they are also highly unsuccessful (*The Economist*, 1999; Child *et al.*, 2001). Thus, while managers identify in the pre-merger and acquisition stage “synergies” of such a deal, based on certain states of organisational domains (e.g. access to a new customer base), the change process that follows after signing a merger and acquisition contract can affect the realisation of such synergies. Therefore, the quality/nature of the change process appears almost more important than a given

state of an organisation prior to an acquisition. This quality of change is largely determined by the agents involved in this process. Thus, understanding values, motivations, expectations and modes of operating of agents is crucial and directly links to Magala's approach to management of meaning.

In conclusion, while inferences based on comparisons of states might be helpful and sufficient, they tend to be rather prone to spurious regressions and might not fit research efforts that aim to unpack the nature of change as part of modelling organisational change.

Conclusion

We think that Slawek Magala's views on management of meaning in organisations have laid the foundations for a profound and robust theory, which significantly goes beyond the view that "change" can be identified by comparison of two different situations. In our assessment his theoretical approach could be adapted and converted into a theory of organisational culture change. By that Larry Greiner's stage model of firm growth could be complemented and converted in a more robust theory.

The extended theory of management of meaning meets the requirements of a robust theory with respect to: first, agents: power holder and non-power holders; and second, processes (framing, reflecting, negotiating, paradigmatic death, paradigmatic persistence or implementation of new opportunities), and supports perceptions of cyclical shifts in organisational cultures. However, there are numerous important issues unresolved with respect to the qualitative research methodologies to be applied.

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