

## **Creating the future**

**By Maya Baltazar Herrera**

In February, in this column, we spoke about how organizations that have powerful positive stories develop positive realities. As it is a time for writing the beginning to the new stories of our fresh graduates, I thought it would be an excellent time to talk about how organizations can change with positive self-talk.

### **Language and stories**

In order to understand how powerful stories can be, we must first understand how important language is. Language is not only how we speak with others, it is how we speak to ourselves and also, for the most part, how we explain the world to ourselves.

Language is a virtually unbounded symbol system. All human languages possess what Santrock (2005) calls infinite generativity, the ability to produce an endless number of meaningful sentences.

Human languages are characterized by four main rule systems: Phonology: the language's sound system with phonemes, or basic sounds as building blocks; Morphology, is the set of rules for word formation with morphemes, the smallest unit of language that has a meaning, forming words; Syntax, the set of rules for combining words to form acceptable phrases or sentences; and Semantics, the meaning of words.

Man and boy, for example, share many semantic features but are not semantically identical. Also, the sentence The electric fan convinced the surgeon to operate might be syntactically correct, but it is certainly semantically incorrect.

Language is certainly important in cognition as much of what we know is stored not only as sensory information but also as words. More importantly, language is typically how we store complex information such as concepts. While we do not always think in language, it certainly eases much of our thinking. Santrock (2005) points out that there seems to be increasing evidence that language and thought are not part of a single, automated cognitive system but rather, have evolved as separate, modular, biologically

prepared components of the mind. Also, while language does not determine thinking, language does seem to influence thinking and vice versa.

This means that influencing cognition should almost certainly include language. Language bound up in stories, bring other factors into the mix. Ray Blunt explains that stories are powerful because they put learning points in context.

This little tidbit, of course, is the reason why the case method of teaching is one of the preferred modes of teaching management. But, in fact, even in the world of corporate communications, professionals have always known how powerful stories can be.

Time and again, we have cited the classic experiment of how the compelling story trumps statistics alone and even statistics with a story.

This perhaps explains why many people still have the tendency to make decisions on the basis of anecdotal evidence. It also perhaps explains the media predilection of creating a theory and reporting a conclusion on the basis of a single event.

I believe stories are powerful communication tools precisely because they allow us to deliver the message within the context of the human, making the message immediately accessible. More importantly, appropriately told, a story pulls in the less tractable factors of emotion, attitude and preference.

### **Appreciative inquiry**

Appreciative inquiry is one of the OD approaches that is grounded on the concept of social constructionism, the idea that individuals form their reality by their shared beliefs and values, their shared mythology.

Watkins and Mohr (2005) identify five principles of Appreciative Inquiry. These five principles are expanded into eight by Whitney and Bloom.

1. Constructionist: Words Create Worlds. Both the current reality as well as the destiny of the organization is founded on what its members think about it.
2. Simultaneity: Inquiry creates Change. The process of inquiry itself influences the direction of change. This means the observer is always part of the universe.
3. Poetic: We can choose what we study. The “epic poem” of the organization is constantly being written, influenced by what stories individuals in the organization choose to tell and believe.
4. Anticipatory: Image inspires Action. The collective imagination of individuals in the organization concerning the organization’s future will drive how they behave, and therefore, where the organization goes.

5. Positive: Positive questions lead to Positive Change. Gergen had this to say about the virtue of positive inquiry: “It’s not clear how much is to be gained from a problem orientation. You can find problems everywhere if you start looking. If you take it too far, you create a sense that it’s all insurmountable. ... But if we could construct a world in which something is possible, we can talk about that in such a way that we might be able to achieve it together. Suddenly, you create a tremendous positive energy.”

6. Wholeness: Wholeness brings out the best. Bringing all the stakeholders into the discussion stimulates creativity and builds collective capacity.

7. Enactment: Acting “As If” is self-fulfilling. Gandhi said it best: “We must be the change we want to see in the world.”

8. Free Choice: Free choice liberates power. Effective organization change requires individual commitment, something that only occurs when the individual chooses to change.

Watkins and Mohr identify the five steps of AI:

1. Make the focus of the inquiry positive.
2. Elicit positive stories.
3. Locate themes that appear in stories.
4. Create share images of the future.
5. Find Innovative ways to create the future.

The first three steps are analogous to the scanning portion of a change effort. The main difference is that, in AI, explicit attention is paid to the perceptions of the individuals in the organization. The fourth step is simply the portion of change that is very similar to goal setting or visioning—what AI practitioners call the “Dream” stage. Finally, the last step is analogous to the operating plan for change—the “Design” stage.

What constructionism and AI bring to the process of organization change is the realization that not only do individual perceptions affect their response to change, it is that, in the same way individuals can manage change in their own lives in order to create behave more effectively, organizations can use the power of cognition and self-conception in order to bring the individual members of the organization together to form a share positive mindset about the entire organization.

The stories we tell ourselves about our organization pave the way to the reality of our organization, because they shape our beliefs about our situation and hence shape our behavior.

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