

# CONVERSATIONAL STRUCTURE MODEL: A VIEW OF ORGANIZATIONAL SYSTEMS

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## KEYWORDS

Language, coordination of actions, organizational change, top management role.

## ABSTRACT

This paper addresses conversations as a basis for organizational change. This paper delineates the major elements of a model labeled conversation structure model. In this approach, change moves from problem solving and efficiency planning toward a method focused primarily on conversations viewed not as a communication nor a symbolic or narrative device, but as a reality construction and action generator to reach the organization desired future. The model proposed is developed based on Maturana's theory of observer, Echeverría's ontology of language, and Cossette's symbolic interactionist stance.

## INTRODUCTION

We should bear in mind that organizational systems are immersed in an increasingly global economic environment and in a turbulent international marketplace where there is an intense international competition. For the survival of the organizational systems we need to question our current models; in this paper, we present a paradigm called Conversational Structure Model which seek to explain the organizational system behavior. We also propose a new role for management derived from the same model. In a previous paper, the author (Loyola, 2000) has analyzed some major organizational improvement strategies and also presented and analyzed the concepts of three major theories of language. The conclusions presented there are:

- People in organizations are observers and behave as linguistic beings; they converse.
- Work in organizations is done through conversations; managers' conversations are basic. Consequently, top management involvement is essential.
- Conversations in organizations have a determined and specific structure.
- This conversational structure defines the results obtained by the organization; different conversational structures produce different results.
- The conversational structure can be observed, diagnosed, and changed in an intended direction to obtain specific results (as defined by a vision or a desired future state).

In this paper, the Conversational Structure Model is presented in some detail. This model assumes that organizational systems are networks of constituents (called observers or

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communities of observers in the Maturana's sense). These observers interact in such a way that relationships emerge; Our proposal is that these interactions are done through conversations which generate conversational patterns; these patterns generate conversational structures which finally, determines what is possible to achieve in terms of coordination of actions.

The organizational system improvement is approached through a change in the observers' relations in order to generate a different way of conversing, different conversational patterns, and a different conversational structure in order to obtain different results in terms of coordination of actions.

A central issue in this approach is the role of top management who defines the desired future state and a previous diagnosis, both of which will be the input to develop an intervention strategy based in the assumptions of the model proposed.

## CONVERSATIONAL STRUCTURE MODEL

In this section, this model will be briefly described and before going further, it is necessary to introduce some definitions.

The concepts and principles of observer, organization, structure, system, culture, environment, languaging, emotioning and related terms are excerpts from Maturana (1988, 1997a, 1997b) and Whitaker (1995, 1998)

*Languaging* is an ongoing process of recursive consensual coordination of consensual coordination of actions or distinctions in any domain.

*Emotioning* is a flow of one emotion (dynamic body dispositions for action) to another that specifies at every moment the domain of actions that a living system can perform or operate.

Emotioning defines in what interaction observers can or can not enter. And It determines what a living system can or can not do.

*Conversation* is the flow of languaging and the flow of emotioning. Conversations can be considered the basic unit of languaging, which are present in human interaction. They have an organization and a structure.

*Organization* is the configuration of relations between constituents that specifies its class identity as a composite unity that can be distinguished as a simple unity of a particular kind. What make an organizational system be this organizational system is its organization, that is, the components and their relations among them. The organization is necessarily invariant because if you change it, you create something else.

The *organization* of a conversation is constituted by a set of observers that converse in a specific context, producing specific results. These *results*, in a conversation, are in terms of coordination of coordination of distinctions, actions, and behaviors .

In another place (Loyola, 2001b), we defined the *structure* of the conversation as having the following elements:

- *Basic clause*: A question that is important to address for some reason.
- *Purpose*: Intended results that explain why a new specific conversation is needed. It expresses the realization of the *organization* identity in a given structure.
- *Theme*: Specific issue that has to be approached to reach the purpose established. It takes the form of a recurring and unifying subject or topic.
- *Function*: Set of related actions or conversations contributing to reach the purpose sought. The first action of a conversation is the conversation design (opening).

- The final action of a conversation is the conversation evaluation (closing).
- *Nature*: Essential character or constitution of the conversation (essentially, reciprocal manipulation or a reciprocal understanding among people). (Kenny, 1999)
  - *Attributes*: Qualities or characteristics that may be predicated of this conversation. These may vary according to the specific point of view from which the conversations are observed.
  - *Links to other conversations*: Relations established when the *organization* of the current conversation is determined and when its structure operates. Through these links the results of a conversation are inoculated or incorporated to other conversations.

*Conversational pattern*: Recurrent network of conversations within a specifically compatible structure. Individuals or groups can structurally operate in a congruent and consistent set of conversations.

*Conversational structure*: Structure of an organizational system as a net of conversations and conversational patterns. The actual structure that makes an organizational system be what it is and develop to reach its purposes. The conversational structure is itself a conversation.

*Relations*: Continuous emerging phenomena within a conversational structure, particularly in terms of interactions between observers. Relations give origin to new conversations.

We label *conversational structure* the approach We are proposing as a different managerial paradigm to make an organizational system reach its desired future. As any organization change and improves, one can explain conversational structure stance as having three dimensions: elements, connections and method of implementation. Now, the Conversational Structure Model is going to be described.

The first dimension includes the *elements* of the model, that is, a set of concepts and propositions that define, from the conversational structure view, the parts and components of an organizational system. These elements are: Observer, organizational system (firm or enterprise), culture, and conversational structure.

The second dimension comprises the *connections* or dealings between the elements, that is, the concepts in terms of their interactions and processes among them. It should be noted that I do not use the term relation or relationship because this is a concept that has a specific meaning within the proposed approach.

Finally, the third dimension is the *method of implementation* of the conversational structure. This dimension consists of a set of sequential and interrelated steps through which the conversational structure is carried out within an organizational system (company, firm, enterprise). The seven steps are: Previous diagnosis, diagnosis, determination of the desired future state, implementation design, implementation process, after implementation diagnosis and evaluation of the whole process. Every one of these steps is in itself a conversation.

An organizational system is and develops itself in and through conversations. The identity of an organizational system resides in its organization. The actual realization of the same system dwells in its structure. There are components that relate in the organization of the organizational system, but the components that relate to make an organizational system be what it really is are in the structure. These components are,

mainly, observers that operate in languaging and emotioning or, for short, they are human beings that converse, they are conversers. From this perspective, I conclude that the actual structure that makes a organizational system be what it is and develop to reach its purposes is the conversational structure, that is, the structure as conversations.

A conversational structure can be considered as a whole, as a complex of all the conversations and conversational patterns in the social or organizational systems. That is not precisely the way conversations take place. Individuals or groups can structurally operate in a congruent and consistent set of conversations. When this occurs, a conversational pattern emerges. A conversational pattern is a set of conversations where specific individual or groups learn as they solved their problems of adaptation and integration. In this set of conversations, individuals promote their own security and their continuity within the organizational life and in their realization of the organization of the organizational system.

Within a organizational system, there is not a unique conversational pattern, but a set of them; organizational systems can be seen as a set of non-homogeneous cultures that coexist and work to perform a specific and, supposedly, common task. These conversational patterns have worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, are learned by new members as the correct way to act, converse, and interpret the organization as a whole. (c.f. Schein, 1997) It is in the conversational patterns where operationally a conversational structure takes place; it is in them where the organizational system realizes its organization.

Conversational patterns, thus, are the basic units that need to be observed, analyzed and, given the case, intervened to reach the purposes of the system (realize its organization).

The conversational structure approach is an organizational improvement model.

Improvement can be defined as any change carried out into an intended direction. In the conversational structure model, improvement is a positive assessment made by one or more of the constituents regarding the current state of the organization compared with the perceived past. From this point of view, improvement is the same as development, transformation or any other action that involves infusion of energy in the organization. In a more general way, improvement or change refers to moving the organization system from a current state observed to a desired future state defined, both by a constituent.

The basic assumption underlying the conversational structure approach is that conversational patterns and conversations can be developed, that is, designed, implemented and evaluated. The axle on which change and improvement of an organizational system (enterprise, company or firm) can take place is the development of conversational patterns.

Culture can be defined as a network of conversations that determine a way of living, a way of being oriented in existence in the human domain. Culture involves a manner of acting, a manner of emotioning, and a manner of growing in acting and emotioning.

## THE ROLE OF TOP MANAGEMENT IN THE CONVERSATIONAL STRUCTURE MODEL

Management plays a decisive role. There are different approaches, but the present situation demands one model can react immediately to any economic change or drift. High-speed management can be mentioned as a model that typifies this trend. (Cushman, 1995). Dynamic management is innovative, adaptable, effective and quick. This strategy

can transform all of an organization's communication activities, including leadership, into a more responsive customer adaptation system. It is not difficult to realize this is management at its highest level opposed to traditional and conventional models.(Grudsewski, 2000)

In this paper, we consider that the role of top management is essential. Worren, Ruddle and Moore (1999) even think that management change can be a discipline by itself "that can unite the 'different worlds' operating in the field of planned organizational change." They base this asseveration on the increase dissatisfaction with traditional organizational development during the last decade.

Mintzberg (1973, p. 99) conducted an extensive study of the managerial work, and he gives several reasons why organizations need managers. He also suggest ten roles from which he derives six basic purposes for the manager.

From this point of view, we can see management as constituent of organizations; in fact, every serious author acknowledges, even in an implicit way, that management is present in every organization playing an essential role.

We sustain that this essential role is coordination of conversations, in a recursive way. Using the structure of a conversation this coordination of conversations breaks down in coordination of structural elements of conversations (basic clause, purpose, theme, function, nature, attributes, and links to other conversations) that in themselves are conversations. Underlying this coordination is the coordination of distinctions.

## CONCLUSION

According to the model being analyzed, the results of the organizational system is determined by the actual conversational structure; so that, if different results are sought, there is a need to change that structure and this can be done introducing new conversations that change the current structure in order to reach a desired future state. Reiterating, given the complexity of the problem the only entity that has the possibility to do that is top management. Sometimes top management thinks that using its declarative power would be enough to change an organizational system; however, this declarative power it is not infallible because, as was stated, the structure responds in the only way it can response due to its structure and sometime the response is such that extinguishes the just opened conversation. Literature is plenty of failures; for example, in TQM implementations.

This organizational system's reaction is what is commonly called resistance to change; it is the only way the organizational system can react because of its structure. This represents a challenge to the top management that can address changing the conversational structure.

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