

“How do people start claiming that something else is the case instead of that what earlier counted as self-evident in the local language-community? Rorty’s answer to that question is that new insights do not come because people discover new facts about the world. Instead, new insights emerge when new ways of talking are created.”

Re-description

A Source of Generativity in Dialogic Organization Development

By Jacob Storch and
Morten Ziethen

At the time of the general economic downturn in 2008/9, Storch (one of the authors of this article) was asked (due to his position as director and founder) to give his account of the market outlook at a staff meeting in our company, a Scandinavian consulting firm whose OD Practice is based on the systemic tradition (Bateson, Maturana, and Varela, the Milano School, etc.) and social constructionism (Gergen, Cooperrider, etc.). Storch’s immediate concern at the time was with how media and politicians were continuously talking about a recession and with it all the numbers and statistics that supported that label. He was concerned about how the cacophony of worried voices could result in a foggy, anxiety-provoking experience of the situation and the impact that would have on his employees and the firm.

In this article we will describe an approach to leadership and organization development that turned that situation from one of depressed anxiety to one of energized optimism. We will describe a source of generativity in OD (Bushe, 2007; 2013), called *re-description*, which is performed through the combined use of irony and metaphors, based on the philosophy of Richard Rorty (1979, 1989, 1991, 1999). Despite the fact that Rorty has had a heavy impact on the so-called “postmodern turn” within humanities and social sciences, it is uncommon to use him in OD (with a few exceptions such as Tsoukas & Chia, 2002). For that reason this article is divided into four parts: Part one introduces Rorty and his considerations concerning transformational change; part two works out the inner

relation between irony and metaphor; part three reports on a case where Rorty was used for OD; while part four discusses both possibilities and challenges when carrying out this Rortyrian approach in the field of OD.

Rorty for a Beginning

Over the past few years it has become common to think of organizational development (OD) as something which takes place within the ongoing stream of dialogues in the organization. It is generally claimed that every observation is an interpretation (e.g., Bushe, 2009), and as such also an event, in the flux of the organization. Dialogic OD takes that as point of departure when trying to understand and facilitate the processes going on in OD.

Now the dialogic approach to OD includes a plurality of theories, most prominently the social constructionism that is the foundation of Cooperrider’s (1987, 1999) Appreciative Inquiry, and complexity theory advanced by the Hertfordshire tradition (Ralph Stacey, 1992, 2001; Chris Mowles, 2011; Patricia Shaw, 2002). Common to every dialogic approach to OD, is the importance of how we are talking when trying to help organizations develop. In this article we argue that one can get inspired to talk in a new way by reading Richard Rorty in a certain way.

Rorty is one of the most influential American philosophers of the late twentieth century. His position can best be described as a postmodern pragmatism, though he prefers the term

anti-representationalism (Rorty, 1999). Like all postmodernists he rejects the mainstream assumption that language mirrors the outer world (Rorty, 1979). Instead, Rorty argues that meaning is a result of our social pragmatics: understanding something does not mean understanding the thing (in itself) but the way my language-community has agreed to talk about the thing:

nothing counts as justification unless by reference to what we already accept, and that there is no way to get outside our beliefs and our language [...]. The True and the Right are matters of social practice... (Rorty, 1979, p.178)

Crucial to our purpose, Rorty is not only a postmodern pragmatist; he also has a very refreshing view on individual and cultural change that easily can be translated into considerations concerning OD. Let us start out with some of his basic assumptions. As already quoted, there is nothing in the world which is true according to Rorty. The world and the things simply *are*, only sentences are judged true or not true (Rorty, 1989, p. 5). In ordinary life people do not notice this; our day to day conversations take place with others who more or less agree on the suggested way of talking about the world and things in it— and that is why we do not notice how truth gets established. When people from different company/cultures communicate, they sometimes discover that they are talking almost completely differently about the so-called world and the facts in the world. When that happens, it is easier to see that it is not the world, but the totality of my language (Rorty calls it one's *final vocabulary*—and we will call it one's *local world-language*), which produces the truth value of any sentence in my everyday conversation. For that reason, says Rorty, you can discuss the truth of a sentence with another person who uses the same local world-language, but never with a person who uses another local world-language. Hence a discussion about whether a German or a Chinese vocabulary is the most true way of talking about the world and the

facts, is nonsensical because it is the local world-languages themselves which determine what the world and the truth is.

Those considerations lead Rorty to some important suggestions concerning how “the new” (i.e., development) takes place. Consider this question: How do people start claiming that something else is the case instead of that what earlier counted as self-evident in the local language-community? Rorty's answer to that question is that new insights do not come because people discover new facts about the world. Instead, new insights emerge when new ways of talking are created. To explain how a new way of talking emerges, Rorty introduces a distinction between two types of language: familiar and unfamiliar ways of speaking, which he calls literal and metaphorical language (Rorty, 1989, p. 17). By literal language Rorty means the way people are used to talking that counts as true in our language. Thereby speaking literally is a way of talking in which I am using the already existing conceptual schemes in my local world-language. By metaphorical language Rorty on the other hand describes a way of talking, where one does not lie, but does not say anything true according to the already existing rules of the local world-language—hence it is a new way of talking. As such metaphors do not say anything true; they produce effects (Rorty, 1989, p. 18). One possible effect is that others hear it as nonsense. Another, more helpful effect produced by a metaphor is the re-configuration (i.e., development) of the local world-language and the things of the world (when this process is completed the metaphor is not a metaphor anymore but an accepted truth). According to Rorty, re-description of the local world-language is the only possible way to transformational change, both of ourselves and culturally, hence change always requires a change in language.

It can sound as if Rorty means that re-description is just another way of talking about the same facts of the world. But that misses the whole point, because to Rorty there are not any facts out there we can talk about in new ways. All we know and understand is embedded in our local world-language, and a re-description of the local

world-language is therefore an essential transformation of how we understand the world and the so-called facts. So a re-description is not just a new label on old wine—on the contrary, re-description is a creative process that (metaphorically speaking) can transform water into wine—and vice versa. Let us take a brief look at how one can help a customer to re-bottle her organizational world.

How one can take those insights into the essence of change as point of departure in organizational consulting is illustrated by a major consulting project involving absenteeism in a Danish municipality of 5,500 employees. During a two year process, our consulting team facilitated conversations enabling the whole organization to re-describe an alternative to a culture of absenteeism. This required developing both a language and a culture of well being and thriving. We engaged people in questions such as: “What is the practice of people feeling well at work?” “What kind of leadership creates, sustains, and develops healthy habits?” “How are welfare services delivered by engaging and thriving employees?” “How do we talk with our employees when they get sick so that they find it easy to get back into work again?” Sustaining and further developing these dialogues created a step by step development towards a reinvigorated organization that managed to drop absenteeism by more than 30% to a level well below the national average and redistributed millions of Danish kroner to welfare services. At no point during the process did we or they figure out what was right or the causes of high absenteeism. Rather we continuously took advantage of openings for learning to take place (i.e., openings for the creation of new metaphors), distributing these toward desired ends. While we facilitated the process and training, they applied their own solutions in local contexts and we offered necessary support.

When signing the contract with the municipality we did not say anything about Rorty, re-description, and OD as the emergence of new metaphors (but maybe we will do that in a year or two). What we were aiming at, and what we think happened through the process, was exactly a

continuous re-description of the language in the municipality. According to the employees many became able to relate to themselves, to colleagues, and to the organization in new and helpful ways that the previous local world-language did not make possible. The horizon and thereby the field of possibilities was somehow transformed.

A New Turn in OD— Irony as the Vehicle of Transformation

Thinking of OD this way is quit uncommon. Compare prominent theorists who seem to be very different, like Kotter and Buckingham. Kotter (1997) has formulated the idea that the most effective way to provide OD is to articulate a deficit, a “burning platform,” that is characterizing the current situation of the organization, or what things might lead to if nothing is done. Buckingham (2007) on the other hand, puts forward the argument that change is more likely to succeed if organizations build on the successes and the strengths of people. Despite their apparent disagreements about strategies for change, they unite in a common satisfaction with the current discourses, their literal horizon, their vocabulary, and from there on pursue what they have come to believe as the better way (focusing on deficits or strengths in the situation).

In contrast, Rorty’s point is that whatever we want, can understand, dream of, be concerned about and so forth, is determined by the literal horizon, the local world-language that is available to us. Any desire for change that gets formulated within an already existing local world-language can and will only lead to variations on the themes that the vocabulary-horizon makes possible for us. And for that reason, transformational change is not something that can be thought up through a reasoned examination of the literal horizon (whether examined according to problems or successes). Instead, transformational change is only possible through a poetic and un-reasonable creation of a new metaphor, letting one’s self and one’s world be re-viewed within a new conceptual frame. This is also why, according to Rorty, it is impossible to say

exactly what we want with, and think of, the new language before it has emerged. It is the new language itself that, for the first time, lets us understand, talk, think, and do in a new way. The new language comes with its own intelligibility—it is not logical until the metaphor comes with the new logos—which is why transformational change only takes place if one lets go, for a while at least, the security of the literal and already well-know logic of one’s local world-language.

Rorty indirectly formulates a critique of what we think is a dominant tendency within the dialogical approach to OD, namely that dialogue is always something good (i.e., developmental), that every dialogical event is seen as a contribution to the ever ongoing flux in the organization. Instead Rorty is arguing that transformational development only takes place through re-descriptive dialogue, hence dialogues without metaphors only preserve the already spoken local world-language. Obviously there is a need for both kinds of dialogues in the organizational flux, because nobody and no culture can constantly live on the edge of the world, and (almost) nobody and no culture is not forced to re-connect to their surroundings from time to time. But nevertheless it seems an important Rortyan point to us, that dialogue is not enough when it comes to the question of transformational OD. Only dialogues driven by the metaphorical language will have this transformative capacity.

This begs the question how a metaphor emerges, how re-description is at all possible? Rorty does not give a clear answer to that question but he seems to insist on the intrinsic relation between the metaphor and a certain approach he calls “irony.” Rorty himself explains irony as follows:

The ironist spends her time worrying about the possibility that she has been initiated into the wrong tribe, taught to play the wrong language game. She worries that the process of socialization which turned her into a human being by giving her a language may have given her the wrong language, and so turned her into the wrong kind

of human being—but she cannot give a criterion of wrongness. (Rorty, 1989, p. 75)

Rorty does not mean irony as it is commonly used, by which it means saying the opposite of what one really means. Instead he means Socratic irony, what Socrates did when trying to make the young people of Athens start thinking. What he did with them was to show the incompleteness of the positions they were holding on a certain issue (for example justice, love, friendship, etc.). Socrates was not criticizing a claimed position—rather he was criticizing a certain way of holding a position, i.e., holding something as truth. When the youngsters asked Socrates, what he thought was true on the topic at stake, he always claimed that the only thing he knew was that he did not know anything. That claim is Socratic irony in a nutshell. What the Socratic irony does is not to say the opposite of what the speaker really means, but to establish a reflexive distance to every given and culturally mediated way of taking something to be the case.

The ironic stance that we think is required for re-description is a certain kind of reflexive self-awareness, which turns oneself into a question, which makes oneself (i.e., one’s language) un-obvious. The ironic stance lets you constantly ask yourself whether you can commit yourself to the language that, due to socialization, is the taken for granted way of communicating. The ironic stance provides a distance from the local world-language, and this distance makes it possible for new conceptual formations—the metaphors—to emerge. In the following example we look at how we used irony and metaphors in combination as an OD intervention in a concrete organizational situation.

From Recession to Re-Session

We return to the case we opened this article with. At the time of the general economic downturn in 2008/9, Jacob was asked to give his account of the market outlook at a staff meeting in our company. He wanted to transform the situation from something scary and hopeless, to something

engaging and energizing that they could do something about. For that reason, the messy situation was, from Jacob's position, begging for inquiry. The messy situation in this case was the global-crisis-manifested-in-our-organization-as-loss-of-orientation, and the OD work to be done was to transform the situation into something so determinate that people could see where to go next as an organization and thereby what every single employee in relation to this direction, or end-in-view, could do.

Now the problem of the cacophonies and anxious vocabulary rising from the global crisis was that there was little room left for other voices, and Jacob was therefore missing a voice saying something about what it takes to move beyond the mood of recession and show a new organizational direction. As such one could say that Jacob was ironically aware of the need to deconstruct the claustrophobic logic of the global crisis—he was just missing the helpful metaphor to create an alternative logic.

One day that autumn the metaphor came to him, that one could try to start talking of the recession as a “re-session.” Jacob decided to design a company day by making use of Rorty's thoughts on re-description. It took place like this: On the day of the staff meeting Jacob in an introductory speech simply suggested that instead of talking about recession (a word and underlying logic on heavy rotation at that time), we should talk about what Jacob re-described as re-session, arguing that we needed to session ourselves to new market conditions. Hence the kind of session we needed to engage ourselves in was not one that could be located through rational thinking, since it was a request to engage in the not yet actualized. The point was furthermore stressed by saying that the challenge was not so much figuring out what was right to do according to our old market agendas, but instead to become increasingly responsive to the voices that invited us into new and different stories about making consultants relevant, so that we could orient and prepare ourselves to markets not yet realized. So the skills Jacob asked for were those of orientation, meaning creating a

broadening set of responsive skills towards times of uncertainty.

After his brief introduction Jacob invited people to engage in conversations relating to two questions:

1. What voices does the idea of re-sessioning our selves call forth in us?
2. What kind of conversations, and with whom, do we need to invite ourselves into, in order to increase our responsiveness to our being in the market?

What is methodologically important here is, that the word *session*, used in this way, does not make sense in the local world-language of this or any OD or business group we know of. That is the point. The unintelligibility of the word allows for a suspension of the taken for granted knowledge in the local world-language. But the fact that it riffed off the word *recession* made it at the same time somehow seem worth exploring. Or to put it in another way: The image of re-session was familiar enough and strange enough at the same time, and it seems obvious to us that there has to be some connection between the generative image being offered and the issues that are top of mind for the client group—it is unlikely that any nonsense word will have the same impact.

After the conversations that took place in small groups, we did a round where each group highlighted the most important messages from their work. The event produced spontaneous responses from all sides in the organization offering their support to making new moves possible. A consultant later reflected on the event (the following quote is a transcription of an interview taken from Jacob's doctoral thesis):

A central episode in the process was to see a budget and results presented by a director who seemed undaunted by the dark clouds of the market outlook. He presented (dull and ordinary) financial figures with words such as “relationships,” “to do what you are best at doing,” “to build on our competencies,” and to deconstruct the word “recession” and instead inquire into “re-session” through brief encounters that opened up chances

for talking about our best practices. It was an episode that was ground breaking. Never have I experienced anything like it. I was hit by a strong gratitude that it was even possible.

As such the potential impact of the re-description as a way to OD should be pretty obvious, and importantly the organization managed to act in ways that led to growth rather than decline, an almost unique performance in a difficult Scandinavian consulting market.

Are all Re-descriptions Helpful?

In the case above the re-description was helpful, but not every metaphor is helpful, so it seems important to ask how one evaluates the helpfulness of a re-description. It is our experience that one has to take the following two dimensions into account:

- 1) The relation between the metaphor and the function of the organization the metaphor is to re-describe; and 2) The relation between the metaphor and the web of meaning in the local world-language.
1. First of all one has to examine whether a new metaphor sustains the overall function of the organization. Example: A primary school is (at least in Denmark) supposed to be inclusive to all children in the neighborhood (except if the child has a clinical diagnosis). Now if the director of the school, on a staff meeting, introduces a metaphor by saying that he wants his teachers and thereby school to be “on the top,” i.e., be the best school in the area at the yearly benchmarking, one can consider whether this “on the top” metaphor is sustaining the essence of being a school. One problematic effect of the metaphor could be (as we have experienced), that the identification between being a good teacher and winning a competition is transferred into the teachers' relations with children in such a way, that the teachers turn more exclusive; so much that they try to get rid of some of the problematic children by searching for a diagnosis for them. As such the metaphor supported a good benchmark, but not necessarily

the overall function of the school: inclusion, teaching, and socialization. For that reason one always has to take into account whether the metaphor is aligned with the basic function and values of the organization, i.e., client system.

2. The introduction of a new metaphor is the same as saying the world could be understood and described differently than it is now. It is our experience that there are basically two reactions to that claim from the speakers of the local world-language, and only one of them supports the new metaphor: Restorativeness and Playfulness. Restorativeness is when the metaphor makes people so insecure and anxious, that they now fight even harder than ever to defend their local world-language. One can find this attitude in every culture and almost every organization, and it is often provoked when people, in one way or another, are feeling intimidated by the insecurity, the metaphor generates. On the other hand playfulness, where the speakers of the local world-language take the initial meaninglessness as a being set free, which allows the metaphor to act as a new lens for seeing the world anew. For that reason, one has to forecast as carefully as possible how the speakers of the local world-language might respond to the metaphor, and what might be the best process to introduce the metaphor.

If one takes those two dimensions into account, a) metaphor and functionality and b) metaphor and compatibility, then it is our experience, that one will have a high rate of success when introducing a new metaphor in the local world-language, i.e., in an organization.

Provisional Conclusion

The aim of this article was to: 1) introduce Rorty and his conception of re-description, hence it has inspired us to think of transformational OD in a new way; 2) work out the inner relation between irony and re-description; 3) describe a case in which we

used re-description for OD; and 4) consider more generally what one has to be aware of when using re-description as a method for OD. In summary, we'd like to emphasize two key points.

First that Rorty, with his distinction between literal and metaphorical language, is insisting that dialogues are not just dialogues and talk is not just talk. There is a crucial difference between dialogues in which the participants accept the already existing local world-language (what one could call literal dialogues), and dialogues driven by metaphors, which transform the local world-language (what we called re-descriptive dialogues). That distinction seems very important to us if one wants to approach OD dialogically.

Second it is our provisional conclusion that re-description is a powerful but also somewhat risky method of organization development. It is powerful because the right metaphor at the right time and the right place, said by the right person, is able to transform the whole world of an organization, that is, transform the local world-language of the organization and thereby give it new direction. On the other hand it can be risky business because successful re-description only occurs if all factors (metaphor, time, place, and person) are in place, while the refused metaphor marks the speaker with the label of Babel and messenger of non-sense. Somehow it is like poker, the bigger the opportunity, the bigger the risk. What can be won by the metaphor is a new world, and what can be lost is one's acknowledgement as a rational human being in contact with reality. That is what is at stake when trying to use re-description as a way to OD.

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Jacob Storch, PhD, is the founder and director of a leading Scandinavian consultancy, Attractor. In 2007 the organization merged with Rambøll Management Consulting and is now operating in six countries. He is a leading OD practitioner with extensive international experience. He holds a doctorate in systemic practice, and is external lecturer at Aarhus University. He is author and co-author of several books and articles. He can be reached at JCOS@r-m.com.

Morten Ziethen is research manager in Rambøll-Attractor. He holds a Master in Philosophy, a Master in Educational Theory, and a PhD in Philosophy (Heidegger and German Idealism). He is an experienced OD practitioner, is external lecturer within applied philosophy at the University of Aalborg, and author of several articles and chapters in books on both academic philosophy and OD. He can be reached at MOZ@r-m.com.

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