



Transformative Languages for Change

By Meg Salter

In Robert Kegan's *In Over Our Heads: The Mental Demands of Modern Life* (1994, Harvard University Press, 176-7), two people are faced with the problem of a tardy and disrespectful colleague. In Kegan's scenario, Mary is waiting for her associate Dennis to take over the office at two pm for a few hours. This is a standing arrangement they have made, so that Mary can get to her training course. For the third time now in five weeks, Dennis is late and Mary is fuming. "How could he do this to me? He knows how important this is! It seems that his commitments are more important than mine!"

Another person, Joan, when faced with the same situation reacts differently. Instead of reacting with Mary's instant anger, Joan asks herself, "Wait a minute, who's the jerk here? I know that my associate isn't very reliable and here I am putting myself again in a situation where my welfare is in his hands. There must be other ways of handling this that don't leave me helplessly waiting!"

What is the difference here? In the first scene, Mary constructs her experience in terms of her feelings about her colleague's behaviour. In scene two, Joan is able to consider the experience within a broader framework; not only does she attend to what is being communicated by Dennis's behavior, but also how she herself contributes to the construction of their relationship.

A Theory for Transformative Change

This example is at the heart of Robert Kegan's brilliant elucidation of transformative change. Dr. Robert Kegan is a professor of adult learning and professional development at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. As a developmental psychologist, he is best known for championing the idea that mental development continues throughout adulthood. (There now, doesn't that make you feel better?) Subject-object theory is the basis for understanding how this development occurs. What was the subject of experience at one stage of development becomes the object of experience at the next stage. In the example above, **Mary is embedded in the relationships and experiences its disconnects**. Joan however is able to reflect *on* the relationship and how she contributes to shaping it.

It is Kegan's hypothesis that this represents a transformational shift in our capacity for meaning making. This hypothesis is backed by twenty years of research data, which show gradual and unidirectional progression among the adult population. This is a normative theory, suggesting that later stages of development are indeed more grown or matured than earlier ones. Diversity is critical of course, and within those stages one may have varying stylistic or **voice preferences**. Indeed, it is the increasing capacity to stand apart from our assumptions or styles that allow us to critically examine them, to ponder whether we construct our styles and preferences or they construct us, and to respectfully engage with those different from us.

Languages for Transformative Change

Kegan takes his theory about transformative change into the practical arena with his most recent book, *How The Way We Talk Can Change the Way We Work*, (Robert Kegan and Lisa Lahey, 2001, Jossey-Bass, **Place of Publication**). The model for understanding how change happens is based on organic forces or complex adaptive systems. These exhibit 1) entropy, or gradual falling apart; 2) negentropy, or evolving to a higher levels of complexity, order and energy concentration; and 3) dynamic equilibrium, which keeps systems in a state of overall stability. His approach to change is based on working with the forces of equilibrium and looking at these forces and the unexamined assumptions that underpin them. By surfacing and looking at our assumptions, **or hidden immune system to change**, we have the chance to gain enough distance to make into an object of reflection what was once the subjective force through which we filtered our experience.

What really excites me about this approach is twofold. First, it looks respectfully at understanding why things so often don't change – a frustrating experience for many leaders and OD professionals. Secondly, it is in contrast to most theories of change, either the grief-work/response to loss approach (e.g. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, William Bridges) or the burning platform/heroic leader approach (e.g. Warren Bennis), most of which come from an individual rather than a systemic perspective. While these are valid perspectives, experience to date would suggest that they are partial and often not effective.

The language tools that Kegan and Lahey outline are not difficult to understand or apply. Indeed, this is the reason why I stress the theory base above, or you might be fooled into thinking that this is just another useful trick to add to your OD tool bag! The tools involve:

- Probing underneath complaints to see what commitments they represent.
- Probing underneath these commitments to see what you are doing or not doing to keep these commitments from being fully realized.

- Probing underneath these actions to discern the competing commitments that you also hold. This outlines the dynamic equilibrium that perpetuates the current situation, and in my view is a much more powerful, in-depth tool than a typical force field analysis.
- Probing underneath this competing commitment to discern the “big assumptions” (**Lahey 1994, pg #**) which organize how we make meaning in our world.

These are primarily languages for surfacing our individual, hidden assumptions. Various social, collective languages are also outlined that allow these assumptions to be exposed to ongoing testing. These are: conferring recognition and regard, and creating public agreements and **deconstructive criticism**. What these all have in common is taking usual workplace ways and discussions, and exposing the hidden assumptions on which they operate. For example, constructive criticism assumes that I’m right, and I’m communicating so that you will change your behaviour. **Deconstructive communication** assumes that we both think our perspectives are valid, that they seem to differ, and that this represents a resource for individual and organizational learning.

Many leaders and Organizational Development professionals are quietly frustrated by how little lasting impact their interventions create. I find the work of Kegan and Lahey exciting because it probes how this is so and offers a sound, research-based theory that encouraging truly transformative change. It also provides a sober yet encouraging perspective for us all. Transformative change is truly difficult, *and* it happens naturally, all the time. The best we can do, as professionals or as citizens, is to give it conscious, intelligent support and guidance!

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