
Re-Authoring Leadership Narratives With and Within Organizations

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Once Upon a Time ...

- ▶ there was an organisation that was doing very important work at a very important time in our world. Some may say that this work was being done in some of the harshest conditions imaginable. Over the years of their short existence as an organisation, a narrative started to emerge and was told and re-told, which was later called Failure and Invisibility. This narrative constantly chanted that the work leaders were doing did not make a difference, was not even done well, and nobody knew about this work, so did it really have an impact?¹

This chapter will provide a lens and practices that can guide leaders, organisation development consultant (OD) practitioners, and organisations in re-authoring and co-authoring organisational narratives with work-communities. We will explore the role of narratives in understanding organisational culture, as well as the role of leadership in the authoring and co-authoring of organisational narratives. We will also unpack how the societal context with its taken-for-granted beliefs and ideas dictate what is possible in organisations and

¹ Throughout the chapter this organisational narrative will be our teacher in explaining the re-authoring lens and practices. This is a narrative of one of my clients, with whom I recently had the privilege to journey. They have given me permission to use parts of their narrative for the purpose of this chapter. This organisational and leadership narrative will be our guide in explaining the re-authoring lens and practices throughout the chapter.

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further explore how these beliefs and ideas can be disrupted. This chapter will provide an invitation for the subordinate storylines of leadership to come out of the shadows and inform the reader of alternative ways of co-constructing and co-authoring organisations. Lastly, we will unpack what it means when organisations are seen as ongoing conversations (Bushe and Marshak 2015a) and leaders are invited to be entrepreneurs of meaning (Hamel 2009, p. 93) and conversation weavers (Goppelt et al. 2015, p. 376).

But first we will unpack the context in which the re-authoring lens and practices find their voice.

What is Water?

There are these two young fish swimming along and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says “Morning, boys. How’s the water?” And the two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes “What the hell is water?” (Wallace 2008).

What is the water that organisations and leaders are finding themselves in? How can we see the water or know it? Why does it matter? What the hell is water?

The way we speak, think, and act do not fall from the sky. Leaders and organisations are shaped by the “communities and histories they come from, and the cities, nations, and economic systems that have formed them, as well as the ideas of the global world that they form part of through access to technology” (Swart 2015, p. 349). We grow up in these communities and societies, and we take for granted that our way of being and doing is the way things are. The way things are, becomes normal to the point that we do not even realize that we are swimming in water, because these taken-for-granted ideas and beliefs are carried by language and embodied in all of us.

“We become part of, join in with, are ‘thrown’ into a way of talking and being that precedes us. One is already embedded in a tradition of being. We inherit a vocabulary that is a way of being, so that our language speaks us rather than us speaking our language. Contrary to the conduit theory of language, ideas do not exist in the mind prior to being formed into speech. The language we inherit is the context that allows concepts to become taken for granted” (Barrett 2015, p. 65).

Why don’t we know that we are swimming in water? Over the years our ways of thinking and doing have become divorced from the history, culture, and worlds they have grown from as they attain some form of truth status presenting itself as “the way things are” or as “normal.” These taken-for-granted beliefs and ideas hide their history and also hide how they are informed by people in our societies who are perceived to have knowledge and stand in positions of authority.

How can we see the water we are swimming in so that it is no longer hidden? The following questions can be asked to start unpacking the taken-for-granted beliefs and ideas: Where do these ideas come from? Whose voices are privileged by these ideas, and what

do these beliefs have in mind for the organisation and its leaders? How are these ideas influencing the organisation and its leaders?

When we start to see the taken-for-granted beliefs and ideas for what they are, we can unpack and deconstruct the truths, practices, and the vocabularies of the context so that they can be “more explicitly known” (White 2004, p. 105).

This “water” is not innocent because it has huge implications for what is called for in a particular time when it comes to leadership and organisational work. Therefore, the meaning we make about our own identities, work, leadership, and organisations, are informed by these ideas and beliefs of the water we swim in. Let’s start unpacking some of the important taken-for-granted beliefs and ideas that impact organisations and leaders.

Scarcity (Saunders 2013) is one of the dominant taken-for-granted beliefs and ideas that daily hums that there is not enough for everyone in our business and organisational world. There are not enough resources, time, profit, product, compliance, talent, market share, growth, alignment, skills, and innovation, which sometimes leads to an inhumane pace, anxiety, competitiveness, and fatigue in some organisations (Swart 2013, p. 103–104).

Secondly, the taken-for-granted beliefs and ideas that dominate in organisations are still largely influenced by the thinking, practices, and structures of a world that is seen as static, certain, and predictable, and therefore needs command and control leadership. Within such a world, organisations and leaders are often called upon and interested in discovering best practices, benchmarking against world-class organisations, collecting the “right data”, and continual searches for the singular cause and expertise (Bushe and Marshak 2015b, p. 13). Because this orientation tends to search for the “right answer”, “best solution”, and so on, there is also an implicit tendency to seek out experts who can supply tested solutions (Bushe and Marshak 2015b, p. 13). These taken-for-granted beliefs come at a price, because by the time evidence is collected to create best practices, the conditions have changed enough to make them likely to be obsolete. Within this understanding leaders are headhunted in order to apply the best practice and turnaround strategy that was successful in their previous organisation, sometimes “as is” in the next context.

Another taken-for-granted belief and idea that influences the organisational world is the notion of the individual self (especially in leadership) that requires leaders to trade themselves as a commodity or property to be owned, and whose personal resources and strengths can and should be used and developed to full capacity (White 2004, p. 128–137; Swart 2013, p. 119–120). We, therefore, have numerous leadership styles and all forms of assessments to categorize and place leaders on a range of continuums, tables, and scales in which they are “induced to work to close the gap” (White 2004, p. 169) between these locations and the understandings of what is currently considered normal and the human nature of a good leader (Swart 2013, p. 121). When we can measure leaders according to “tables of performance” (White 2004, p. 88), we can also design the appropriate development path for them. When leaders do not shape or fall in line with the standard norm of a particular organisation, “problematization” (Madigan 2014) sets in, and the individual leader sometimes becomes the sole focus and object of blame for

problems in the organisation. These messages of deficiency draw a static line in the sand for the leader and remove the responsibility for thinking and deeper conversation about the “water” that is influencing and impacting in this situation.²

These are just some of the taken-for-granted beliefs and ideas that impact organisations and leaders in what we have started unpacking as the “water.” Some of the other dominant beliefs and ideas that also have an impact on organisations and leaders are patriarchy, the belief in never ending growth, the fascination of the success of businesses in first world countries, to name a few. What are the beliefs and ideas in your organisation that constitute the water?

- ▶ The power of the narrative of **failure** and **invisibility** is that it is hidden. Until we unpacked the context (water) in which this organisation was serving, leaders in the organisation saw themselves as the problem; they were invisible **failures** making no real impact. Understanding the context enabled the organisation to name the context, which they called the mess and chaos. The narrative of **invisibility** and **failure** was birthed from and supported by the context of the mess and chaos. For the first time, organisational leaders could see how they had internalized the stories that the context was telling them and could again choose what kind of relationship they would like to have with **failure, invisibility** in the mess and chaos.

What is the re-authoring lens and how can it bring practices to understand, challenge, and make sense of the taken-for-granted beliefs and ideas of the water we swim in?

The Re-authoring Lens

- ▶ As the leaders were unpacking the context of the mess and chaos and its influence on their lives and work, they also saw narratives that were different to these dominant taken-for-granted beliefs and ideas. These different narratives had been dampened by the mess and chaos, so much so, that their worth seemed insignificant. As the organisational members were standing in a new relationship to the context of the mess and the chaos, they could see that they were not totally taken over by the context, but their daily practices told a different story of work, relationships, hope, and action towards an alternative future of peace. As meaning-makers and story-makers they were writing a different narrative, even in the face of the mess and chaos. The re-authoring lens gave back the pen in the writing and co-writing of the preferred organisational narrative called Real People doing Real Work towards Ending the Conflict, a narrative for which there was a storehouse of evidence, practices, and skills of living and serving.

² K. Sandison, personal communication: notes on draft chapter, in an email received on 7 November 2015.

The re-authoring lens is a way to see and situate human beings and organisations as authors and co-authors with accompanying practices, which creates a way of being and doing. In this section, we will unpack what this lens sees and how it sees.

The re-authoring lens sees human beings as active participants in the construction of their lives and their worlds, although they might be unaware that they are participating in the shaping of their lives (White 2007). While our lives are informed by the “water” of the taken-for-granted beliefs and ideas, life is not seen as a direct reproduction of the knowledges and practices of culture because it “renders invisible the specific achievement of meaning-making” (White 2004, p. 104) and story-making (White 2007). Because human beings are meaning-makers and story-makers, organisations and leaders live and act in ways that do not only reproduce these taken-for-granted beliefs and ideas but resist and challenge the water by making meaning through language, behaviours, and embodied emotions (Zimmerman 2015a).

This meaning that is made does not happen in isolation but rather in the interaction between individuals, communities, and organisations, because human beings are relationally connected and socially constructed (Burr 1995; Gergen 1991, 1994; Gergen and Gergen 2003) through history, culture, and taken-for-granted beliefs and ideas. Therefore, “meaning does not pre-exist the interpretation of experience, and all meanings are linguistic and social achievements” (White 2004, p. 75).

As we make meaning through language, words create worlds (White 1991). If we think of how people in organisations are named, we have grown accustomed to words such as employees, workforce, assets, human capital, and human resources. What are the meaning, practices, and worlds that are created through these kinds of words? What would happen if we were to use the words, community of workers, or work-community (Blanc-Sahnoun 2013)? What is the meaning that is possible when the word “community” is introduced? Is it possible that it can invite “notions of care, collective wisdom and knowledges, gifts and neighbourliness to enter a world that is so often rooted in assumptions of competition, success, hoarding knowledge, and doing it my way as the only way” (Swart 2013, p. 141)?

Leaders and organisations convey meaning not only in language but also through their bodies in “both doing and nondoing” (Bushe and Marshak 2015c, p. 37), which then shape and maintain their actions and have consequences for their lives, relationships, and what we would call reality.

Human beings are, therefore, seen as “multi-storied” and “narratively resourced” (White 2004, p. 90) as they construct meaning from their rich histories and memories by trafficking in narratives and by bringing experiences of life into “narrative frames” (White 2004, p. 75). In this approach, narratives are seen as the basic unit of experience. Leaders and organisations weave moments and events together in a coherent storyline across history and time, and as they make meaning of these narratives in a particular context, they draw conclusions about who they are, what they can become, how they should relate, and what reality is all about.

The re-authoring lens provides the practices to unpack the narratives that get human beings stuck and does not take them forward (for example failure and invisibility) and thicken alternative preferred narratives (for example, real people doing real work) that speak of ways of living and being that take leaders and organisations forward. Leaders and organisations are invited to take back the pen in the authoring of individual narratives and the co-authoring of collective narratives, which that provides a counter-narrative, an alternative response and way of being to the dominant ideas of scarcity, individualism, and the so-called certainty and predictability of this world.³

In the same way, organisations are also seen as meaning-makers and story-makers as explained through the Dialogic OD Mindset (Bushe and Marshak 2015a) that sees organisations as:

- An ongoing conversation that is built on emergence, generativity, and narrative.
- A “means to ends that are constantly in a flow of creation and re-creation” and are not viewed as a thing (Storch 2015, p. 197).
- Meaning-making systems in which “reality/truth is continuously created and re-created through social interactions and agreements [and] open to many possible interpretations” (Bushe and Marshak 2015b, p. 17).
- “Self-organizing, socially constructed realities that are continuously created, sustained, and changed through narratives, stories, images, symbols, and conversations” (Bushe and Marshak 2015b, p. 25).

When an organisation is seen as an ongoing conversation of meaning-making and story-making, the nature of the relationships with one another and the conversation that flows from these relationships have the potential to shift the narratives of work-communities and the organisation.

This shift can occur by changing “who is in the conversation with whom, how these conversations take place, increasing conversational skills, what is being talked about, and by asking what is being created from the content and process of current conversations. Talk is action” (Bushe and Marshak 2015b, p. 18). When talk is action the “words, writings and symbolic forms of expressions do more than or convey meaning; they create meaning” (Bushe and Marshak 2015b, p. 17) and shape how we think, what we perceive, and “what makes sense to us and others” (Bushe and Marshak 2015b, p. 22).

As a result, narratives, and the hosting of different kinds of conversations are the most important discursive phenomena for understanding how people in organisations make meaning (Bushe and Marshak 2015b, p. 22). These kinds of conversations invite emergence, narrative, and “generative metaphors” (Marshak et al. 2015) that enrich the future narratives of the organisation with “evidence and actions from the past and present. [T]he future is not without evidence of the possibility and potential of the preferred story an organization is living into” (Barge 2015, p. 189). When this alternative meaning is named

³ W. Tonninger, personal communication: notes on draft chapter, in an email received on 9 November 2015.

through meaning-making together, our language and our metaphors/images changes. That again transforms how we engage with and participate in the organisation (Bushe and Storch 2015, p. 113).

To create the environment for work-communities to participate in collectively co-constructing narratives we have to invite the multiplicity of narratives of an organisation to be spoken “as is” through deep human connection built on invitation, welcome, and gifts (Block 2008). In this deep human connection work-communities are invited to learn with one another and not for one another as informants and co-constructors of the communal narrative.

Re-authoring Leadership With and Within Organisations

- ▶ In the mess and chaos, one of the leader’s narratives felt trapped and stuck. It was a narrative of the shadow of doubt and of victimhood that came to visit when the voice of the mess and chaos became too overwhelming. The shadow was also a leadership narrative that did not have all the say, or the last say. There were counter-narratives of freedom and love, as well as narratives of hopes and dreams for real peace to reign. Not only were there alternative beliefs and ideas as counterevidence to the narrative of the shadow, there were also relationships in which the leader stood that spoke of different ways of being and doing as the narrative of light started to become more visible. The leader’s relationship with her gracious and loving father, even as he faced severe violence was only one relationship that offered different conclusions and counterevidence to the narrative of the shadow. As the leader understood the impact of the mess and chaos on her leadership narrative, actions, and options in the art of living and leading became available beyond what is the right and good way to lead according to dominant understandings. There was a crack in the shadow where the light could begin to shine through.

This section will unpack the meaning of the word and world of leadership as it grows from the previous section’s philosophical understandings and the context within which organisations are seen. We will explore questions like: What does this viewpoint on re-authoring mean for leadership? What are the important leadership skills and practices to navigate in the context of the “water”? What is the impact on leadership in organisations when the organisation is seen as an ongoing conversation?

Leadership and the ideas around leadership were crafted and made meaning of over many centuries in various cultures and contexts. What were and are local and specific cultural understandings of leadership have, in some cases, become privileged understandings that are communicated across the globe through technology. All these claims of knowing the right and good way to be a leader in this time sponsor “identity conclusions” (White 2004, p. 119–147) that grow from cutting edge ideas and thought leadership on offer from leadership schools, literature, and cultural consumer stores of our global world. These

dominant taken-for-granted beliefs and ideas about leadership are then sold as universal practices, true for all times and in all contexts, in what we have come to know and call “best practices.”

These so-called universal practices lead to the marginalization of local and specific understandings of leadership; and marginalized cultural understandings are sometimes taken and sold on the market divorced from the contexts that can sustain them. Therefore, we are left with the following questions: Who is allowed to speak about leadership, and in what way? Who do we consider to be experts in this field? Whose voices are not included and why?

The re-authoring lens offers a “counter-narrative that reconstructs the current notions of leadership. It is not a new model, with new, distinct characteristics and qualities. It proposes a lens, a way of being, seeing, engaging and participating in this world, that invites a different relationship for the leader” (Swart 2013, p. 122) to their organisations, themselves, and the context in which the organisation works.

Firstly, the viewpoint of re-authoring invites leaders to draw on their own unique local and specific narratives of leadership that are often “domesticated” (White 2004) and called nothing special or important in the face of these dominant understandings of good leadership. Therefore, leaders are seen as primary authors that hold the “storytelling rights” (Madigan 2011, p. 16) to their own narratives, not as biographies but as autobiographies. As leaders draw from this treasure chest of hidden understandings and knowledges through culture, memory, embodiment, and narrative it opens up possibilities for the “kind of leadership story that leaders prefer, and enables them to define the task of leadership for themselves” (Swart 2013, p. 123).

Secondly, the re-authoring lens invites leaders to understand that they are relationally connected to their communities, cultures, and contexts from where their identities are formed. These leadership identities are socially constructed through history, societal, and business beliefs and ideas, organisational structures, their own stories of work, and is co-constructed by the organisations that leaders are part of. Within this understanding there is a multiplicity of narratives, relationships, moments, meanings, and events that inform leadership, and “leadership becomes a reflective and dialogical project, co-created in interaction” (Stelter 2014, p. 113) with the organisation. As a result, leaders are constructed by the organisation, and the organisation co-constructs what leadership means in this particular context at this particular time.

Thirdly, re-authoring practices enable leaders to co-create conversations and narratives that shape, constitute, and maintain relationships, identities, and organisational realities in preferred ways. From the viewpoint of the re-authoring lens, leaders are seen as the convenors of conversations where all are invited to work from their preferred narratives, and where conversations, meetings, and initiatives are guided by an awareness of the co-authoring capacity of all in the organisation to shift and celebrate the narratives and metaphors that move the organisation forward, in what Snowden (2015) would call, “more stories like these.”

When an organisation is seen as an ongoing conversation, leaders have the privilege to convene gatherings and meetings (both formal and informal) wherein the ongoing conversation by its mere existence and practices create and co-create an alternative preferred narrative together. In these gatherings attention is given to how we speak, what we speak about, generating metaphors, vocabulary of the conversation, and to images that resonate with the ongoing unfolding of the narrative and its accompanying practices and skills. Since words create worlds (White 1991), “new vocabularies are invitations to new possibilities”, which suggests that leaders “pay attention to new voices, new action possibilities at the margins that can suggest new worlds of meaning” (Barrett 2015, p. 71).

The re-authoring lens also enables leaders to identify, unpack, question, and challenge societal beliefs and ideas (water) that influence organisational culture by harnessing and inviting the unique knowledges or “insider know-how” (White 2004, p. 99) and skills of the work-communities beyond “the way things are” or “this is normal.” In the Dialogic OD Mindset this challenging practice is referred to as the creation of the “disruption in the status quo” (Bushe and Marshak 2015b, p. 29).

Leaders can therefore be seen as “entrepreneurs of meaning” (Hamel 2009, p. 93) because they listen to, unpack, and challenge societal beliefs and ideas and stuck narratives. They also create conditions where meaning is constructed and co-constructed so that narratives can be re-meant, re-authored, and co-authored. As entrepreneurs of meaning, leaders are attentive to the “appearing of what appears” (Goppelt et al. 2015, p. 397) as they are in constant conversation with the emergence of all the layers of narratives and meaning in the organisation, with its “variety of different narratives about the same thing, sometimes even competing narratives about the same things” (Swart 2015, p. 364).

The leaders’ role in the organisation as an ongoing conversation is to understand their own narratives and how they influence their practices, to convene conversations where meaning could be collectively named, to challenge and unpack the taken-for-granted beliefs and ideas, and to invite the co-authoring of the emergence of the alternative preferred narrative.

The next section will provide maps, scaffolds, and practices for the journey that will focus on how we create the conditions to see and act differently.

The Re-authoring Maps and Practices for the Journey

- ▶ As the leader understood the mess and chaos and the competing individual leadership narratives of the shadow and the light, the ability to see the organisational narrative and the participation in it, became more visible. The leader was now able to host conversations where the problem was the problem and not the person, where the unique leadership qualities of each individual narrative were valued and seen to contribute to the diverse gifts that show the way forward. Leadership now became the hosting of the re-authoring journey of the collective organisational narrative as environments of deep human connection

were created that invited and welcomed the alternative preferred narratives to be named and lived into. As an entrepreneur of meaning and the weaver of conversations, the leader became an active participant in co-leading and co-authoring the forever emergent cultural narrative and preferred future of the organisation.

Re-authoring work is emerging work, work that is co-constructed in the moment with these possible maps and practices always serving in the background much like a scaffold and definitely not a strict process to follow slavishly.

Co-constructing an Environment that Invites Narratives

Leaders play a very important role in co-creating the environment that can invite the meaning-making and story-making skills of people. In this environment leaders:

- Invite everyone in the room to have a voice.
- Ask unsettling and generative questions.
- Respect participants as the authors and agents of their own narratives and co-authors of the organisational narrative.
- Acknowledge both the words and the emotions generating these words, the meaning and the experience of the meaning as they focus on what is being said and what is experienced (Zimmerman 2015b).

Co-creating this inspiring environment with a community of workers invites deep connections to open up multiple subordinate storylines that enable rich narratives to be told, new meaning to be made, and preferred futures to be named.

The work-community speaks about and to the idea that not only do people come to work, produce, serve and ensure profit, but they are also a community of human beings, working together to earn a living and co-create a working environment that is in line with their values, hopes, and dreams for the future. On all levels the community of workers is seen as key informants and contributors to what is known and can be known in the future (i. e., the vision) of the organisation (Swart 2013, p. 135).

“Leading then becomes something leaders do with groups/teams/communities and not a responsibility that is taken up on behalf of, *for*, and *over* others” (Swart 2013, p. 123). Leadership becomes a way of being (or an ethics) that guides how we engage with others in community, rather than an identity or a position that we take up.⁴

But how do we create the initial welcome, how do we greet?

⁴ T. Carlson, personal communication: notes on draft chapter, in an email received on 11 November 2015.

Saying “Hello” from the African Ground

[A]s Westerners [we] want to brush over things, so dominated by what we have constructed as “time.” It is as if we want to fast-track to intimacy and connectedness, without giving anything meaningful from our lives as a gift to the other – not even our time (Swart 2013, p. 147).

Re-authoring work creates the environment that enables us to pause and live into the rhythm of the telling of narratives that cannot be rushed. It is a rhythm that challenges ideas around speed and so-called effectiveness, “as it joins hands with African culture in redeeming time as a gift to see, be touched by and connect with one another as human beings” (Swart 2013, p. 147). This human connectedness means that we pause long enough to “see the news in the eyes of the other” (Mpahlele 2015) and care enough to ask generative questions that touch on issues that are personally meaningful and that people care about deeply (Bushe and Storch 2015, p. 118).

Therefore, as we create the environment for human connectedness we also create the possibility for affect and meaning that can flow over into our social behaviour as communities within organisations.

The following questions have been used to construct the greeting and the welcome to invite our human connectedness to enter as the ground from where new ways of acting and doing can grow:

- On whose shoulders are you standing as you enter this room today?
- If you had to design a t-shirt that would help us understand who you are, what would it say or what would it look like? (Blanc-Sahnoun 2013).
- What fires your curiosity as you come to this meeting?

In the next section we will unpack the practices that create the environment for these kinds of conversations and experiences.

Practices That Open up the Conversation

Once we have created the environment for connectedness and community, we now look towards the practices that would hold the conversation so that emergence, narrative, and meaning would be invited and honoured.

Leaders are “vehicles of power” who are always in the “position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising this power” (Foucault 1980, p. 98); therefore, they have the platform to deconstruct their power so that the multiplicity and diversity of all the narratives can come together and be spoken. In the way they welcome, invite, listen, and ask questions leaders can deconstruct their power through careful curiosity and generative questions.

Table 1 Humanizing practices for re-authoring conversations

Avoid	You are invited to
Judging and evaluating	Be carefully curious
Assuming	Ask questions that you do not know the answer to by using the vocabulary of the narrator(s)
Fixing, solving problems, and intervening	Elevate the narrator to primary authorship
Giving advice and reframing	Generously listen (Stelter 2014) and be open to being surprised
Giving applause and affirmations	Share gifts and reflections
Practices that come from a place of knowing things about people they do not know about themselves	Practices that come from a place of not-knowing about others as we have a deep appreciation for their uniqueness ^a

^a T. Carlson, personal communication: notes on draft chapter, in an email received on 11 November 2015

The humanizing practices in Table 1 can help leaders generate the keys for unlocking their individual, team, communal, or organisational narratives in new and exciting ways by creating the conditions for the meaning-making skills to be accessed and the words and worlds to be given a new or different meaning.

These practices invite alternative ways of having conversations that create different experiences that can also change meaning (Zimmerman 2015b).

By participating in these practices of creating the welcome, leaders can “make and remake the world by introducing new ways of talking” (Barrett 2015, p. 75). The “shift in one conversation by the way we are talking and being will have a ripple effect into all of the others because the interconnectedness of the web of narratives moves the organisational socially constructed narrative” (Swart 2015, p. 367).

Leaders as Conversation Weavers

As a result, leaders become a “conversation weaver” as he/she takes “strands developed in one conversation into the other” (Goppelt et al. 2015, p. 376). As conversational weavers, leaders have an amazing opportunity to host conversations and meetings where the multiplicity of narratives are honoured and challenged, and the ones that move us forward can be thickened and committed to.

Leaders as conversation weavers talk and act differently in what we can call a “type of praxis: a way of acting into the everyday forms of relating that create our social world” (Goppelt et al. 2015, p. 372). This praxis implies that leaders strive to stop speaking “to” people and start speaking “with” people and invite “respect for the knowledges of the lived experiences of people” (Freire 1993, p. 30, 1994, p. 26).

As leaders start to speak with people, their role as entrepreneurs of meaning is to become “a sense maker who notices emergent dynamics and redirects the flow of interactions and conversations” (Barrett 2015, p. 73).

Leaders as conversation weavers and entrepreneurs of meaning convene conversations that honour the multiplicity of narratives, ask generative questions, invite meaning-making and sense-making to take place, and challenge taken-for-granted beliefs and ideas as they know talk is action, and their praxis matters in the invitation to shift our relationship to narratives in the organisation.

Enabling Re-authoring Journeys

In this re-authoring work, the invitation into human beings’ capacity to story and make meaning is a very important step in entering this work. Without sufficient experience of the power of narrative as well as the broader understanding of the context, people in organisations get stuck in blame and never see how they are participating authors in the organisational narrative. They are left with thin (Geertz 1973) stories and conclusions about all that goes wrong, who is to blame, or reach for quick fixes that take the organisation back to familiar responses, leaving nothing for the imagination.

It is also important that the diversity of understandings must be invited, acknowledged, and engaged with, so that the movement to coherence grows out of the multiplicity of gifts and practices as it invites the organisation to collectively move forward. As we host conversations that honour the multiplicity of narratives inside the organisation, we also create the experiences that help people deal more effectively with the complexity of the uncertain and unpredictable world outside the organisation.⁵

Leaders and organisations engaging in re-authoring practices need to understand that these practices will disturb the way things are and there will be questions and curiosities about organisational life as everybody knows it. In the Dialogic OD Mindset “transformational change always involves disruption to the ongoing patterns of self-organising” (Bushe and Marshak 2015b, p. 21) in which leadership can play a very important role.

Transformation in an organisation is invited through the acknowledgement that culture is the sum total of the diverse narratives we tell and the meaning employees on all levels have made of the significant events, enactments, practices, leadership, and moments over time. Organisational culture is further informed by the taken-for-granted ideas of the context in which an organisation functions, and these beliefs and ideas add another layer of meaning and complexity that influences the organisational narrative.

In true emergent fashion, the organisational narrative is never finished, as each conversation becomes a springboard for future ones. Because of the continuous movement, an organisation and its leaders are always on the way to making sense as they participate

⁵ K. Sandison, personal communication: notes on draft chapter, in an email received on 7 November 2015.

Table 2 Movements in re-authoring conversations

Moving away from	Moving towards	
Content first Are we jumping into an agenda without acknowledging our humanity?	Connection first Have I created the space where my team experiences connection to one another as human beings?	(Block 2008)
Blame Are we just looking for who is to blame?	Ownership Are we asking how are we contributing to and participating in this narrative? Are we co-authors of this narrative in some way?	(Block 2008)
The Person is the problem Are we making the problem personal?	The problem is the problem Are we taking ownership as a team and naming the problem and our relationship to it?	(Morgan 2000)
Thin stories Are we satisfied with easy answers and solutions for complex challenges?	Rich descriptions/stories Are we allowing all the views to be spoken by creating an environment for all the team members to speak so that the complexity and diversity can be honoured?	(Geertz 1973; White 2004)
Isolation Are we trying to figure out things alone?	Community Are we inviting people we trust – even if they think differently – as well as our team members to think with us and support us?	(Block 2008)
Telling Are we telling our team what to do?	Asking questions Are we asking questions that enable team members to come to their own conclusions and decisions or to go and look for answers?	(Freire 1993, 1994)

in re-authoring organisational narratives. This is contrary to the taken-for-granted beliefs and ideas around change as a process that can be engineered, summoned, and designed with outcomes that we are told are predictable and certain.

When leaders practice this approach and lens they are facilitating movements towards re-authoring conversations (see Table 2) in organisations.

The Re-authoring Gifts for Leadership and Organisations

The re-authoring lens can bring various gifts to both leadership and organisations, and because of the emergent nature of this work, these gifts will be beyond that which can be named and imagined at this moment.

For Leaders

As the authorship of leaders' own narratives and co-authorship of the organisational narrative bring collective ownership beyond blame, leaders see and recognize their own participation in the shaping, creation, and conveying of the organisational reality.

For the Community of Workers

When the community of workers engage in new ways of talking and thinking, their agreements to talk and act differently bring about not only authorship of their own narratives but also co-authorship of the organisational narrative. This co-authorship enables the organisational narrative to be re-written, as the community of workers are actors and participants in this organisational drama (Swart 2013, p. 148).

Another gift that the re-authoring lens brings is the possibility of “buy-in of the work-community in terms of commitment and ownership of any organisational strategy, vision, or initiative that flows from their knowledges and expertise” (Swart 2013, p. 148). When their voices, knowledges, and narratives have been included in moving the organisation forward, they have already been invited to take ownership and take part in co-authoring the narratives of the organisation.

Not only new eyes and perspective are given through this approach, but also new practices that enable the community of workers to link their stories about the purpose of their work with the collective objectives and direction of the organisation.

For the Organisation

When leaders and the community of workers are invited to be co-authors of the organisational narrative, “it generates knowledges, vocabularies, and narratives that are home-grown and owned in ways that can take the organisation forward” (Swart 2013, p. 148).

The re-authoring lens helps organisations to re-engage with neglected aspects of their history and narratives in ways that do not seek to blame, problematize, or judge, but rather open up possibilities and enable organisations to move forward. It invites organisations to make new meanings of experiences not previously understood or unpacked as it initiates steps never otherwise considered.

These practices and skills also enrich the language, “offer generative images, and enable people to respond to the societal reality that emerges from having different conversations with participants holding a diversity of ideas and points of view” (Storch 2015, p. 198).

Because this lens invites new ways of talking and being it enables organisations and leaders to have everyday conversations that help narratives to become unstuck (Storch 2015, p. 198).

The most important gift to both leaders and organisations is that it enables thinking that goes beyond what leaders and the community of workers routinely think. The experience of a generative change process “produces new images and ideas that provide people with new eyes to see old things, resulting in new options for decisions and actions that they find appealing” (Bushe and Storch 2015, p. 118).

All of these practices can present the gift of disruption that may lead to the emergence of new possibilities and realities in a significant way.

Re-authoring work invites leaders and organisations to participate with a lens to see and a pen to write as they stand in the “midst of a complex flow, in which a multiplicity of beginnings, middles, and ends are in play simultaneously” (Goppelt et al. 2015, p. 391). This complex flow is forever on the move as the weaving of various individual stories create and evolve the cultural water of the organisation, moving leaders and organisations forward to become authors and co-authors of collective narratives.

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