How does exploring metaphorical representations of organisational change at its best affect levels of well-being in an ambiguous and rapidly changing public sector work environment?

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Abstract

This study investigates the effects on well-being of using symbolic modelling and clean language to explore employee experiences of organisational change at its best in a UK Special Health Authority that faces an ambiguous environment and rapid change.

Martin et al (2005) cite multiple references noting that organisational change is a significant source of stress, and is associated with a wide range of negative behavioural, psychological, and physiological outcomes. They note that poor adjustment to change is characterized by feelings of threat, uncertainty, frustration, alienation, and anxiety.

Change management practices are widely used to mitigate such effects. Bordia et al (2004) found that management communication, participation and control mediate the deleterious effects of uncertainty, while Callan (1993) noted that empowering employees enables them to cope more effectively.

This study adds to the existing knowledge base by investigating the effects on well-being of exploring employee metaphors for organisational change at its best.

Lakoff and Johnson (1981) define metaphor as “understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another.”

Lakoff (1993) demonstrates that the locus of metaphor is thought and not language, indicating that metaphor is part of our ordinary way of conceptualising the world rather than simply a linguistic mechanism used to share meaning.

Symbolic modelling, and the clean language questions it employs are methods for assisting individuals and/or groups in exploring their metaphorical experience. NLP modellers Lawley and Tompkins (2000) modelled clean language from the therapeutic work of David Grove, recognising the efficacy of his work.
Clean language has been used in a variety of settings to support improved outcomes, including with challenging young people in schools in Hackney (Doyle 2010), and with the long-term unemployed to support returns to work (Training Attention 2006). However, Jacobs and Heracleous (2004) note that there is relatively little research on how organisation development practitioners might elicit metaphors to assist with targeted issues at work. This study seeks to fill this gap by investigating the use of clean language in workshops, and symbolic modelling in 1:1s.

This study follows Lawley et al’s (2010) study of work-life balance in applying clean language as a research methodology, exploring whether:

- there is a connection between metaphorical exploration of organisational change at its best and well-being
- the impact of group and 1:1 interventions on well-being differ
- patterns can be detected across individuals to provide insight about resourcing individuals through change.

This quasi-experimental study involves forty-one participants in control, 1:1 and workshop groups. The study is an interrupted time-series comprising initial, post intervention, and twelve-week post intervention well-being measures using the Ryff scales. The study includes phenomenological study of lived experiences of organisational change, and of experiences of the study interventions through semi-structured interviews. The study adds to the body of evidence of the efficacy of NLP interventions in a business change setting, providing guidance to practitioners for the use of metaphor and clean language.

The study concludes in February 2012 with completion of statistical and phenomenological analyses. At the conference results, conclusions and suggestions for further research will be presented.

**Bibliography**


Training Attention Ltd (2006) Breathing in Blue by Clapton Duck Pond, Counselling Children and Young People Journal, Winter