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Rivers and puddles: metaphors for explaining the need for continuous change and development in modern organisations

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Abstract

Metaphors are popular with academics and researchers to explain organisational phenomena including change, but these metaphors may not be as useful when explaining the need for continuous change to employees. This paper proposes the use of rivers and puddles as metaphors for leaders, managers and organisations to use to explain the shift required in accepting day to day change as the norm rather than a process. These relatable metaphors provide an approach to differentiating between process and adaptive change and how to explain this in terms that having meaning to individual employees and organisations.

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ABSTRACT *Metaphors are popular with academics and researchers to explain organisational phenomena including change, but these metaphors may not be as useful when explaining the need for continuous change to employees. This paper proposes the use of rivers and puddles as metaphors for leaders, managers and organisations to use to explain the shift required in accepting day to day change as the norm rather than a process. These relatable metaphors provide an approach to differentiating between process and adaptive change and how to explain this in terms that having meaning to individual employees and organisations.*

The 21st century world sees the state of change as 'a constant feature of organizational life' (Burnes, 2004:309). The impacts of globalisation, the integration of international financial markets and increases in technological capabilities mean that rigid structures and plans seem no longer practical or feasible and fixed strategies untenable. Modern organisations need to establish and maintain a state of fluidity in order to adapt to operational environments that rarely stay the same on a day to day basis (Sydow & Schreyogg 2010). This is turn requires employees to understand how fluctuating dynamics influence their tasks and workplaces so they can play their part in establishing a flexible and responsive organisation. Weick and Quinn (1999:379) and Buchanan et al. (2005:190) describe this as the 'ideal organisation', one that is capable of ongoing adaptation, being both proactive and reactive according to circumstances and situation.

In order to achieve ideal modern organisations, a fundamental shift is required to move away from communicating day to day incremental change as a process – something to be identified, planned, enacted, managed and evaluated. A state of organisational fluidity, established within flexible boundaries, where adaptability and evolution to altered situations and circumstances should become the new norm. This would see formalised process driven change reserved for hard events related to

financial and strategic issues such as mergers, acquisitions (Cartwright and Cooper, 1995), or cost-cutting, relocations and downsizing (Lindorff, Worrall and Cooper, 2011).

The challenge presented by the differentiating between processes and adaptation is how to explain this in terms that relate to both to individual employees and the organisation. An additional challenge exists in how to place the appropriate emphasis on why distinguishing the different approaches is required. This paper proposes the metaphors of rivers and puddles to communicate the need to establish an organisational culture that is adaptable to continuous evolutionary change.

Metaphors for Explaining Change

The use of metaphors to explain organizational phenomena, including organizational change is not new. Morgan (1980:611) states that metaphors 'generate an image for studying a subject', while Palmer and Dunford (1996:691) describe a continuing shift by management researchers towards using metaphors to understand challenges and difficulties faced by organizations. Pablo and Hardy (2009:821) describe metaphors as 'an integral part of language'. Ostwick, Kennoy and Grant (2002) discuss how metaphors draw on our existing understanding to focus on achieving a better understanding of situations, theories and perspectives, whereas Etzold and Buswick (2008:279) note the usefulness of appropriate metaphors to enable discussion on important issues.

The use of water as a metaphor to explain organizational change is probably best identified with Kurt Lewin's (1947) planned approach to change represented by water and ice. The descriptive metaphor of unfreezing and freezing has been criticised by authors such as Peters and Waterman, (1982) who questioned its continuing relevance in a dynamic environment. Since that time others such as Styhre (2002) have criticised its rigidity as it fails to accommodate the need for organisations to continually grow and develop beyond any change process, particularly the return to a solid state to indicate a finalisation of a change process. Others such as Buchanan et al. (2005) base their criticism on the fact that Lewin's work was based on small group research that does not necessarily translate to how change may impact an entire organisation, and how those in the organisation understand the change process.

Complexity theorists argue that Lewin's work is still relevant in the modern world. Weick and Quinn (1999:363) describe Lewin's approach as a 'generic recipe for organisational development' whereas Baulcomb (2003) refers to the practical guidance provided by Lewin's framework in moving from what is happening now to achieving a new or optimal state. Burnes (2004:313) rephrased refreezing to a state of 'quasi-stationary equilibrium' to allow for some notion of flexibility after a change process has been enacted to have greater relevance to the situations faced of modern organisations. These authors utilise Lewin's description to explain the process of change, but unfreezing and freezing does not explain the necessity or reason for change in a way that is meaningful to employees in modern organisations.

Burns (2000) reports on the successful use of the river metaphor to teach the historical development of leadership theory. Other researchers have used water based metaphors to describe other management phenomena such as 'strategy rivers' to highlight the concept of path dependency, timing, and evolutionary aspects of strategic decision making (Lamberg and Parvinen, 2003) whereas de Geus (1997 cited in Hagiefremidis 2004:37) describes a 'living company' as being more 'like a river', due to its permanence as a landscape feature, and the rules it has for continuity, longevity, power and motion. de Geus also describes a 'puddle company' as a machine like economic company whose field of influence only broadens when it rains.

While metaphors can be used to establish a 'cognitive bridge between two domains' (Putnam & Boys 2006:542) careful selection of metaphors appropriate to each situation is required. This avoids choosing a metaphor which may have outlived its usefulness, such as Heracleous and Jacobs (2008) comment about Morgan's description of the organization as a machine as an example of a dead metaphor. Another complication arises where the metaphor used may be perceived as simplifying an idea to the extent that a deeper level of understanding cannot be developed (Oswick & Grant 1996) defeating one of the purposes for using a metaphor in the first place.

Although conjecture and argument is useful for exploring change related to organizations and the use of metaphors (Cornelissen 2005, Heracleous and Jacobs 2008), this does not assist those who are usually the most affected by any change – incremental or otherwise. Employees need to understand

why continuous change is necessary not only to ensure the organisations survival, but to provide for the best opportunity for their continued employment. If the metaphor of frozen water may not effectively explain the necessity for continual incremental change to employees rivers and puddles maybe more suited to this purpose.

Why use rivers and puddles as metaphors to explain 21st century organisational change?

The situational context faced by modern organisations requires a more flexible and adaptable approach to change beyond the notion of frozen, melted and reshaped water. This places a greater burden on managers to communicate change effectively to employees (Longenecker Neubert & Fink, 2007). Rousseau and Tijoriwala (1999:514) state that social, individual and relational factors influence how employees interpret change, while Dutton, Ashford, O'Neill and Lawrence (2001) propose that in order to shape change it should be 'sold' as an issue, but the effectiveness of the 'sell' is reliant on the expertise and skill of a leader or manager as a communicator. Palmer and Dunford (1996:708) highlight that there needs to be serious consideration of what metaphors can be 'consciously and actively' used to describe change within an organisation as there is sometimes a different and conflicting use of metaphors between leaders, managers and academics, whereas March (1996) suggests one means of knowledge acquisition is to exploit the use of existing knowledge to develop further understanding.

In an attempt to emphasise the importance of change as a continuous course of action both for individuals and organisations from a leader/employee perspective alternate metaphors to test March's point were proposed to a group of MBA Organisational Behaviour students, who were asked the question – 'Which water would you rather drink? Drink from a river, or drink from a puddle?' The overwhelming (and correct) response followed the healthy approach to 'drink from moving water'. When seeking a natural source of water we are taught to drink from water that moves – because it remains fresh. The idea of keeping organisations 'fresh' through continuous incremental development and refinement moves the idea of change away from a process to an organisational cultural practice.

The use of a river as a metaphor to communicate this approach highlights the need for continuous adaptability rather than considering change as a process that is started and then stopped. This

supports Weick and Quinn's observation that 'change never starts because it never stops' (1999:381) and embodies Tsoukas and Chia's notion of microscopic change which takes place by such things as adaptation and variation (2002:580). To provide further emphasis on the benefits of constant renewal the inclusion of puddles as a comparative point allows for the consideration of the fate of water than is not renewed and has no ultimate destination.

Through using comparative analysis between rivers and puddles, these concepts may be more easily understood by employees, as the metaphors are relatable and provide a basis for deeper discussion and application. Etzold and Buswick (2008:284) note that using metaphors in this way illuminates issues to expand 'the vision of the business problem', in addition to overcoming some of the negative aspects of uncertainty that often occurs when managers try and communicate about change using explanations that lack clarity (Bordia, Hobman, Jones, Gallois & Callan 2004).

Features of Rivers

Rivers adapt to changing environments, starting out as streams and rivulets they grow, merge focussing on an ultimate destination. They adapt their form and shape according to the current climate and external factors encountered as they move towards their goal. As the landscape and environmental changes, rivers evolve and move along with it – performing the functions relevant to the current situation, an embodiment of learning organisations. A river grows, evolves, and changes shape according to the landscape and environment within defined but malleable boundaries.

The vagaries of weather and influences of outside forces impact on both rivers and puddles, however rivers responds in a different way, continuing to move towards an objective – meeting a larger body of water whether it is a lake, a sea or ocean. They can be redirected, harnessed, channelled, reused, however a river continues to be a moving body of water that is changing, developing and growing – and remains fresh. This is the same approach that modern organisations need to integrate into their culture in order to adapt and survive in a changing world.

Differences in mental pictures can cause difficulties when selecting appropriate metaphors to communicate ideas to employees across cultures (Gibson & Zellmer-Bruhn 2001:375), however rivers

are a metaphor that have a relational aspect that can overcome diversity issues – they are easily identifiable, and recognizable across cultures and nationalities. Names of rivers can have different representations, just as organisations carry different names and labels. Rivers represent different things in different cultures and countries – some are the source of sustenance, others revered, but all have movement and momentum.

The momentum changes with the landscape and environment and the river adjusts accordingly. Jansen outlines how momentum is important particularly at the early stage of a change process, and that a change-based momentum can be established through a mass accumulating support (2004:281). The metaphor of a river provides an effective means of demonstrating how the momentum of moving water can be effective when focussed on achieving a goal, yet destructive, when the rivers' boundaries do not exist such as in the time of a flood.

The concept of rivers can be expanded to develop other related metaphors that can explain other aspects of organisational change. Cornelissen (2005:753) describes this approach as the 'sensory and imaginative qualities of metaphors' that can open up new and alternative ways of understanding and interpreting organisational events. For example, rivers can be channelled into dam or used for transport harnessing the power of the river for additional purposes while still progressing towards an ultimate objective. Despite these additional uses the water is still moving and changing – not staying the same.

Puddles as a point of comparison

Puddles or small bodies of water change in size and composition due to environmental factors – growing in times of rain, or where water is added, or evaporating when the source is not replenished. They may be recreated when the rain comes again. However nothing changes the fact that it is a puddle, limited by boundaries, nor does it move or adapt effectively to ensure its continued existence. Leave it without fresh sources of water and it becomes stagnant, and eventually disappears through evaporation.

The limitations ascribable to puddles can be related to Hannan's notion of structural inertia of organizations the relative inertia thesis claims that organizations are typically unable to match

structural changes to their competitive environments in a timely fashion leading to their eventual downfall (Reuf 1997). The evaporation and recreation of puddles can also be linked to Sull's (2005) investigation where it was noted that when actions of the past are repeated, a cycle of active inertia exists, which can ultimately lead to good companies going bad. West (2002) describes the failure to acknowledge the role of external demands as the 'fate of stagnation' (2002:356) and regardless of the industry in order to survive the aim should be to 'aspire realistically toward being sparkling fountains of ideas and innovative change' (2002:356).

Puddles remain where they are, restricted by circumstance without the power or inclination to do anything about it. Their movement is the result of external factor – such as wind, sun and rain without the power from within to move and change. Puddles are directionless – some may continue to exist but the opportunities for permanent change, growth and the option of seeking new horizons are not there.

Mapping the Organisational River

Rivers are mapped and documented for recognition and awareness so others may know of its existence and how to navigate its path. Organisations are no different – structures are defined, reports are written, and technology such as intranets and internets are all utilised to assist stakeholders in identifying and understanding the organisation and how it operates.

Despite mapping there is a requirement to remain aware that external conditions that may influence access, design and performance of the river – this is where rigid structures, plans or directives that do not allow for flexibility or interpretive approaches place limitations on performance, innovation and ultimately success.

Toxic Organisations = Polluted Rivers and Puddles?

Rivers and puddles can become polluted by internal or external forces. Unless drastic actions are undertaken the pollution will lead to toxicity – and destroy freshness and life. Rivers have a greater chance of recovery due to movement and awareness if action is taken, with Applebaum and Roy-

Girard (2007) highlighting that if a healthy organisation has a toxic leader, the organisation will survive if the toxicity is removed , just as a river can be restored if a pollutant is removed.

Hannan and Freeman (1984:160) propose that a change requires a renewed liability of newness while suggesting that it robs an organisation of survival values. In the current day and age liability of newness is a necessity rather than a liability   - albeit the idea was proposed at an earlier time. If we look towards the river scenario the newness generates new opportunities and a capacity to adapt to a change set of circumstances including the environment where the river exists. Virtual organizations do provide hope for puddles. By linking to other puddles or even rivers the puddles can receive the "injection of newness" that is required to keep them fresh. Hannan and Freeman ultimately admit that aligning features to the current environment actually "promote survival" rather than contribute towards demise and that a better alignment with the environment.

If connections or channels can be established to and from puddles, the restricted body of water may begin flowing again – generating a stream of fresh water into the previously stagnant body. This may flush out the resistance and start the puddle organisation moving again. In order to achieve this strategic engineers are needed in the form of strong leaders who are visionary enough to plan a way for the puddle to become a moving body of water, and implementing strategies including effective communication plan to achieve it.

Is Change Readiness Required for Organisational Rivers?

There is evidence to support the view that organisations that create a state of change readiness in order to support the transition of the organisation from one state to another is essential to ensure success (Smith, 2005). However, if the organisation is already a river, flexible, adaptable and responding to the changes to environment and landscape it could be argued that a state of change readiness already exists. Instead of expending energy on creating preparedness, the energy can be more effectively directed to continual development for both the organisation and the individuals who are part of it.

Practical and Teaching Implications

The practical use of rivers and puddles to explain the necessity for change to be considered as a continuous process is heavily reliant on the communication skills of the leader or manager. One aspect to be considered is their ability to create a shared vision to facilitate understanding about change (Gill, 2003) and the establishment of 'shared fields of meaning and engagement' (Carlsen, 2006). From a teaching perspective Burns (2000) reported that the river was an effective way of teaching leadership theory, and this proven approach could be easily adopted to the organisational framework. This is one area of future research that will result from this conceptual paper.

In conclusion

The focus of this paper was to propose the concept of rivers and puddles as metaphors that leaders, managers and organisations can use to explain the alteration in mindset required to accept day to day change as a norm. These metaphors provide a different approach to communicating the need for continuous change that will keep an organisation fresh– changing form and moving continuously towards a goal. The next step is to further investigate the usefulness of the river and puddle metaphors to determine the effectiveness of their relatability and their ability to overcome existing perceptions about continuous change. If organisations can adapt to the prevailing conditions encountered, and the importance of this can be effectively communicated to employees, organisations can remain fresh – just like clear running water. Through the use of rivers and puddles as cognitive metaphors the necessity for this shift may be more easily communicated so employees can understand how to approach organisational challenges of the 21st century business environment.

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