Are Transformation and Power Shifts All or Nothing Events?

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Abstract: This paper represents a qualitative case study conducted in one organization. It examines the role of power and shifts of power in an organization during an organizational transformation, a very specific form of change in which the center core or the worldview of the organization is altered.

Purpose of the Study
Theoretical Framework
Research Design

I chose a qualitative case study as my research design since the case study methodology can incorporate a variety of evidence—documents, interviews, focus groups, and so on (Patton & Applebaum, 2003; Yin, 1994). The end result was a family of answers versus a single view of a complex reality (Schnelker, 2005; Sobh & Perry, 2005). Case studies also tend to focus on the answers to "how" and "why" questions, facilitate understanding of complex phenomena, pursue in-depth analysis of multiple patterns, seek to investigate a phenomenon in its context, and use an inductive approach to arrive at meaning (Cepeda & Martin, 2005; Llewellyn, 2007; Patton & Applebaum, 2003; Rowley, 2004). Both critical reflection and deconstruction during the analysis are reinforced. In addition, the postmodern view of temporary, fluid and context dependant outcomes is integral to the analysis process. Thus, it is a misconception to expect that the total view is the sum of the individual parts (Gummesson, 1991).

My research questions were:
How is the transformation process intertwined with shifts in power?
    a. What does this look like?
    b. How is power used to meet organizational and personal goals?
When an organizational transformation is occurring, what happens with regards to power?
    a. What is the role of formal power and structures?
    b. How do less formal sources of power or agency impact the organization?

Periodically, throughout the research process, I reviewed artifacts, documents and records for any signal or evidence of power shifts resulting from the implementation of policies and procedures by the senior management group during the transformation. I initially used organizational documents to set the stage and understand the history of the company. This was then followed by a series of individual interviews with the senior management group and the founder of the organization. Based on my initial understanding from the documents and interviews I formed questions for the subsequent data collection phase. I held a focus group interview comprised of workers, looking for confirming or disconfirming evidence of the findings from the interviews of senior management and the initial content analysis. Finally, I conducted individual interviews with participants from the focus group looking for further understanding and examples of the power shift process, strategies, outcomes, etc.

The data analysis was built upon a model created by Cepeda and Martin, 2005 and involved spirals of analysis illustrated below.

Each spiral started with a plan and had a section which dealt with data collection and analysis. What differentiates this model from others is what occurs in the circle once these steps have been accomplished. The model encourages the researcher to look beyond the obvious assumptions and question the possible multiple meanings from the data. In implementing this model into my research, I essentially combined the data collection and analysis phases. I believe this was a way to "live" the framework of the study—critical organization theory with a postmodern lens.

Dividing the study and analysis into spirals of analysis accomplished two things: 1) it preserved the chronological perspective that I had as the study unfolded and 2) it also allowed for emerging viewpoints or temporary conclusions to be identified and yet left the study open-ended through the series of questions that are still unanswered at the end of each spiral. Each spiral not only included my initial reactions about the topics and findings emerging from the study thus far, but also developed a series of questions still remaining or being revealed as a result of this spiral's examination.

The focus of my research was a qualitative study which sought to understand the role of power, and shifts in power that occur during an organizational transformation from the perspective of both the senior management and the worker staff. It sought to find evidence of, and understand the notion of power re-distribution as it is transferred from the senior levels of management to the staff or workers during an organizational transformation, a very specific form of organizational change (Argyris & Schon, 1978; Levy, 1986). The findings in part substantiate the literature as well as offer something new for consideration.

The theoretical framework of this study is critical organization theory using a postmodern lens. The combination of critical organizational theory (Carr, 2005; Ogbor, 2001; Grimes, 1992; Grubs, 2000; Sementelli, 2005; Wheatley, 1992) and postmodern organizational theory (Abel, 2005; Casey, 2000; Feldman, 1997; Fleetwood, 2005; Goodall, 1993; Hatch, 1997; Kauffman, 2000) creates a theory which shares an interest in power and at the same time replaces rational reason and a singular understanding with multiple truths. Since the context of this study is within an organization experiencing transformation, a theoretical framework which incorporates change of the center core and worldview is necessary especially when it comes to values, beliefs, and attitudes (Argyris & Schon, 1978; Chapman, 2002; Fletcher, 1990; Levy, 1986; Marshak, 1990; Mink, 1992; Newhouse & Chapman, 1996). Adding critical and postmodern organizational theory to this framework achieves this goal.

For the most part the both of these theoretical derivatives echo the adult education literature and definitions. Most notable, however, is the difference that regardless of the

variations to the theory, the interpretation in the business or management literature rest *inside* of an organization as opposed to the general population (Alvesson & Wilmott, 1992). Also, because the theory is applied to organizations that operate in a capitalistic environment, all references to criticism of capitalism are omitted from this theory. Similarly, a phrase coined by Alvesson and Wilmott (1992) micro-emancipation may exist in organizations where the goal is to spread decision making power to more staff members within the company, but the goal of emancipation falls short of social reform.

This critical form of organizational theory includes the process of critical reflection, questioning hegemony, democracy of power, organizational change as opposed to status quo, and inclusion in decision making in the organization. The postmodern lens adds multiple views, perspectives, fragmentation, non-rational and tentative understanding of a problem to the theoretical framework. It also introduces deconstruction as a process to examine concepts and company policies (Goodall, 1992). This combined theory allows for exploration of power shifting during organizational transformation in two important ways. First, multiple perspectives can be explored since consensus of view or understanding is <u>not</u> a goal, many different interpretations simultaneously are encouraged. Second, these interpretations are based on context and are thus tentative and fluid. In this way, power can be viewed coming from multiple sources at the same time and provisional based on context.

It was the use of this reflection and constantly challenging my own understanding that I believe led to a greater understanding of the complexity of this study. This process fits with the theoretical framework of the study: constant questions and deconstruction of concepts such as "What does decision making look like in this organization?" "Who is making what types of decisions?" and "What is power and how is it intertwined in the transformation process?" The model encourages changes in perception as each spiral of analysis is completed; does not seek consensus, calls for critical reflection, and incorporates deconstruction of concepts. I t also pushes the researcher to find multiple ways of looking at the data and search for multiple understandings of it. In some cases, using this process caused me to confirm my initial analysis and in other cases it caused me to change my mind or at least pursue contradictory evidence. In this way, a "spiral towards understanding is never complete" (Cepeda & Martin, 2005, p. 861), each cycle of analysis may result in a richer and deeper understanding allowing for further insights. However, it is likely that the cross-case analysis coupled with time allowed for reflection has yielded unique views and understanding of the data. This process is also responsible in part for the difficulty experienced in finding an appropriate stopping place in this research study. As the saying goes in the production of other types of projects—a production is never done, it is abandoned. I admit having this reaction to this study.

In my study, the only group which showed evidence of total transformation was the worker staff. There was a change in their core beliefs, values, and assumptions created by the freedom to critically reflect upon their prior experiences and the encouragement to deconstruct the job responsibilities of their positions. Throughout the process of transformation, they were able to increase their decision making ability—in a way that far surpassed the concept of traditional empowerment or agency of workers. They also bonded with the CEO/Executive Director in a way that was not discussed in the literature. The workers shared founding principles of the organization as well as other espoused cultural aspects of the organization's operation.

While there existed a separation in the roles and duties of the management staff and the workers there also was a relationship that existed between them. This interrelationship was dynamic and ebbed and flowed as the power was shifted between and among these groups.

According to Foucault (1990), power from a postmodern perspective is not neutral and does not come from a single source; instead it is all around us. It can be good, bad, or neither, but undeniably an entity of the transformation. Surprisingly, in this study while the workers bonded to the CEO/Executive Director in terms of beliefs, values, and assumptions and even at times made decisions which were in conflict with their immediate supervisors, the result was not one of win and loss. The hierarchy and the power distribution remained in place. So, in many ways the management exercised 'power' over the workers. However, the workers also exercised their own form of power in expertise and information when it came to their jobs. This issue could have led to power struggles and given birth to negative working relationships. Instead, the result was that in this organization both hierarchal power and legitimate power coexisted with the power or agency of the workers.

My findings shed some light on the illusive nature of organizational power during a transformation. Some key assumptions about organizational power are raised for discussion. Maybe power does not follow organizational lines. Power distribution might look different depending on whom or at what level the transformation is introduced. As Foucault (1990) and others have discussed in the literature (Casey, 2000; Goodall, 1992; Hatch, 1997; Kauffman, 2000; Kilgore, 2001) power shifting does not have to be about one side loosing to the other side can win. Power can come in all shapes and from many sources simultaneously (Erchul, Raven & Wilson, 2004; French & Bell, 1973; Fiol, O'Connor & Aquinis, 2001).

In the literature, transformation, like change is often referred to as an event or occurrence. Perhaps, transformation is not an all or nothing event. Considering the job assignments of different positions might be a way to consider and gauge transformation instead of treating organizational transformation as an all or nothing event. Perhaps it can occur in part—or at least in a portion of the organization. Perhaps it is a process. Furthermore, perhaps this process is ongoing.

Findings and Conclusions

At the end of this study it was evident that parts of the organization had experienced transformation and other parts had not. In addition, the management staff relied on the hierarchy as their major source of power. They remained focused on operational duties or transactional tasks to make the organization run smoother. This focus on operational activities had the impact on the workers of added control and increased traditional forms of power use—power coming from organizational structure; reward, coercive, position and legitimate power sources (Erchul, Raven & Wilson, 2004; French & Bell, 1973; French & Raven, 1959). Though the management staff did not see a transformation in their values, assumptions and beliefs in the same way that the worker staff did, they nonetheless supported the transformation process through their attention to transactional activities. Some of these actions were changes in policy, procedure, mission statement, etc. These actions are important because the completion of these activities often allowed for transformation to occur in other parts of the organization.

Implications for Practice

Much has been learned about both the nature of transformation and the shifts of power required within this transformation process of this particular organization. One natural question that arises for practice is "Does the notion hold true that some aspects of control and power continue to exist in similar form both post and pre the organizational transformation such as operational control?" Perhaps transformation and power shifting are processes that occur

incrementally and perhaps they are not all or nothing events but instead dependant on many complex factors. Using a critical organization theory with a postmodern lens, assists the researcher in opening their own eyes to the potential of finding power located in many places within the organization. It also assists the researcher in finding freedom to question their own understanding of what they are seeing, hearing and concluding as they witness change. It encourages the researcher to be comfortable with tentative, fluid solutions. By better understanding the transformation process, leaders can better guide its direction—even if temporarily.

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