Conversational Profiles

A Tool for Altering the Conversational Patterns of Change Managers

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This article provides a practical tool that managers and change agents can use to see their own conversational patterns in the management of a change, determine whether those patterns may be contributing to the progress of change, and if so, provide insights into what modifications might enhance progress. Based on the conversational model developed by Ford and Ford, this article explains a methodology for creating and analyzing a conversational profile, provides three illustrative cases, and explores implications for research and practice.

Keywords: *change; conversations; resistance; change agents; communication; change management*

Change is produced in and through conversations and discourse (Barrett, Thomas, & Hocevar, 1995; Czarniawska & Sevon, 1996; Fairclough, 1992; J. D. Ford, 1999;

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Green, 2004; Heracleous & Barrett, 2001). Of all the communication associated with change, the most powerful may be that which occurs at the level of everyday conversation (Barrett et al., 1995), because these interactions are the primary mechanism available to managers for effecting change (Charan, 2001). Indeed, what comprises both the communication of change (e.g., Kotter, 1995) as well as the change itself (e.g., J. D. Ford, 1999) is the myriad of conversations that change managers and recipients have with each other for and about the change. It is in these conversations that vision, possibility, and opportunity are created; people are engaged and mobilized; and problems or breakdowns are resolved.

In light of the significance of conversations, it is interesting that no attempt has been made to provide change managers with a means for "seeing what they say" so they can alter their conversations as needed to accelerate, slow, or alter the course of change. Despite a significant increase in the application of language- and discourse-based perspectives to improving our understanding of organizational dynamics in general (e.g., Boje, Oswick, & Ford, 2004), and organizational change in particular (e.g., Keenoy, Marshak, Oswick, & Grant, 2000; Marshak, 2002; Marshak & Heracleous, 2005), the focus of research has been primarily on demonstrating the applicability of those perspectives to understanding and explaining organizational phenomena. As a result, although researchers have a much greater appreciation for the theoretical and explanatory power of language-based perspectives, a practical means for putting that theoretical power into the hands of individual change managers is missing.

This article is an initial attempt at addressing this missing research. More specifically, our purpose is to demonstrate a tool—the conversational profile—that is grounded in theory and that can be used by change managers for determining their conversational pattern during change and the relationship of that pattern to the results they are obtaining. Based on the conceptual work of J. D. Ford and Ford (1995), a conversational profile provides a way for change managers to (a) identify their current conversational pattern(s), (b) relate their pattern to the progress of a change they are managing, and (c) make informed alterations to their pattern to positively impact their change. In this way, conversational profiles give change managers a tool by which they can conduct a conversational intervention on themselves.

The primary intent of this article, therefore, is to provide change managers, as well as those engaged in the study of change, with a practical way to begin applying the expanding theory of change as a language-based phenomenon. By drawing on the extant theoretical literature as the basis for creating the conversational profile, and by providing three illustrations of how it could be used in practice, we seek to show the practical extension of language-based theory into practice. More specifically, we seek to show that conversational profiles can serve as an intervention that enables change managers to become aware of and alter their conversations during change. Having this ability may be particularly advantageous, given that ineffective communication by change managers contributes to recipient resistance to change (Larson & Tompkins, 2005). By being able to intervene in their own conversational patterns, change managers may be able to reduce, if not avoid, resistance.

Furthermore, we believe conversational profiles, either in the form proposed here or in some modified form, provide change researchers with an alternative to such techniques as discourse analysis for accessing and evaluating the effectiveness of leadership and management communications in the conduct of change. Conversational profiles may provide a tool by which researchers can investigate the day-to-day microprocesses (e.g., conversations) of change and relate them to the broader issue of effective communication during change (e.g., Kotter, 1996).

CONVERSATIONS AND CHANGE

That communication plays an important role in change is not a new idea. Numerous writers have stressed the importance of communication (Beckhard & Pritchard, 1992; Kotter, 1996), even to the point of suggesting that change may be seen as a communication problem that can be resolved by having people understand the change and the role they play in its implementation (Kotter, 1996). In this context, communication is understood as a tool for announcing, explaining, and making a case for change as part of preparing people for its positive and negative effects (Jick, 1993). Communication is also used to diffuse dissatisfaction with the status quo (Beer, 1980; Spector, 1989), increase understanding of and commitment to the change (Beckhard & Pritchard, 1992; Morris & Raben, 1995), and reduce resistance (Kotter & Schlesinger, 1979).

What is new, however, is the idea that successful change requires change managers to alter their conversational patterns. As J. D. Ford and Ford (1995) have argued, and others have shown (e.g., Barrett et al., 1995), successful change is a product of using different types of conversations at different times. Managers may not realize they have a conversational pattern or that altering it can have significant implications for change. Tannen (1995), for example, has found managers are unaware of the extent to which they use ordinary conversational elements, such as apologies, questions, feedback, boasting, compliments, and arguments. Consequently, although managers notice such conversational outcomes as who gets heard, who gets credit, and what gets done in an organization, they do not attribute those outcomes to differences in conversational patterns. Similarly, displays of competence or confidence are attributed to factors such as authority, position, or gender rather than to the ways people talk.

Building on the performative nature of language, J. D. Ford and Ford (1995) propose that successful change depends on the ability of managers to differentiate four distinct types of conversations: initiative, understanding, performance, and closure. *Initiative conversations* introduce new ideas, directions, or possible courses of action. Taking the form of proposals, suggestions, or recommendations, their purpose is to start, launch, or open a new arena or avenue for consideration and investigation, thereby creating a new possibility or offering an alternative to what is currently being considered or pursued.

Conversations for understanding are opportunities for participants to comprehend, appreciate, or understand something (e.g., an event, action, proposal, result, etc.) by providing information, removing ambiguity and uncertainty, and creating meaning, thereby enabling participants to make sense of things. Conversations for understanding allow participants to offer support; question or challenge reasons, assumptions, or logic; and otherwise clarify what they do not understand, accept, or agree with. Although conversations for understanding provide a rationale for action, they are not intended to produce action themselves (J. D. Ford & Ford, 1995). Just because people understand that teams are required for some tasks does not mean they know how to create them or that they will create them even if they do know (Beer, Eisenstat, & Spector, 1990).

Conversations for performance are the only conversations that have, as their purpose and design, the generation of action and results. Conversations for performance are specific requests and promises that serve as "calls for" action, eliciting commitments to take specific actions and/or to produce specific results by a specified due date (Winograd & Flores, 1987). A complete request or promise always specifies the "who-what-when-where" for the action(s) to be taken or the result(s) produced.

Conversations for closure are conversations intended to complete or close the loop on any requests or promises still open, actions taken (or not), or results produced (or not). Whenever a promise is made (either independently or in response to a request), it creates a commitment to make something happen by a certain time. Closure conversations close out those commitments by creating "endings" (Bridges, 1980) that acknowledge what has and has not been done and summarize the status of things. Repairing broken trust depends on closure conversations (Tomlinson, Dineen, & Lewicki, 2004) to clean up issues left by failed expectations or broken promises. Vehicles for closure conversations include reports, recognitions, acknowledgements, and apologies, along with other forms of post mortems or debriefs, such as after-action reviews (Darling, Parry, & Moore, 2005).

Although the four conversations proposed by J. D. Ford and Ford (1995) are presented as a possible sequence for producing intentional change, they emphasize that change does not necessarily move linearly through the four conversations. Rather, the uniqueness of every change suggests that sequencing and dynamics among the four conversations will vary. As a result, "the production of intentional change requires a person to move among conversations for initiative, understanding, performance, and closure as conditions and circumstances warrant" (J. D. Ford & Ford, 1995, p. 560).

There is no ideal pattern or mix of the four conversations that change managers should or must follow. Nor is there a particular frequency with which they should use each type of conversation. Rather, the successful implementation of change is a function of conversations that reflect the evolving context and progress of the change, including the results produced and breakdowns to be resolved. Identifying an appropriate conversational pattern, therefore, is a pragmatic issue of determining which type of conversation is most likely to work in the current situation, trying it, seeing what happens, and making adjustments in and to subsequent conversations. What this means is that change managers may find a conversational mix that is effective in one change but ineffective in another.

If we accept that successful change is a function of effective communication, then providing managers with a way for determining and shifting the extent to which they use different types of conversations should facilitate their management of change. This would be particularly true where managers are able to identify potential weaknesses in their conversational pattern that may be contributing to existing problems or breakdowns and make appropriate modifications. In this respect, a manager's conversational pattern can itself become a tool to effect change. However, to effectively use this tool, change managers need to identify their current conversational pattern, that is, to "see what they say," relate that pattern to the progress of changes they are managing, and determine how they might alter or shift their pattern to obtain different and presumably better results. Conversational profiles provide change mangers one way for doing this.

CREATING CONVERSATIONAL PROFILES

A *conversational profile* is a graph with supporting data that shows the relative frequency of a manager's personal engagement in each of the four conversations identified by J. D. Ford and Ford (1995), that is, their conversational pattern. The profile allows managers a way to see the relative frequency with which they use each type of conversation (the graph), and the supporting data, a conversational log, reveal the content of what was said. In the following sections, we discuss the method by which three managers engaged in producing change created their own conversational profiles. Their profiles were created as part of a larger program on leading and managing change in which each manager voluntarily chose to participate.

What we are reporting, therefore, are not the results of a systematic study designed to empirically test theoretical propositions or specific hypotheses. Rather, we are reporting on the practical results of our attempts to develop a tool by which managers can extend a particular language-based theory into practice by investigating the impact of their conversations on change. This means that the methods of data collection and analysis, although acceptable from the standpoint of practicing managers in the context of a development program, are problematic from a research standpoint. We do not, for example, collect conversational profiles as data and analyze them beyond what is reported here.

Because of these limitations, this report is more akin to an exploratory case study than a rigorous field study or instrument development and validation study. These limitations notwithstanding, the fact that practicing managers are able to successfully create and use conversational profiles not only demonstrates their ability to extend theory into practice but lends credence to the theory on which the profiles are based. It is for this reason that we consider this report to be of both practical and theoretical interest.

Data Collection

The creation of a conversational profile depends on the actual conversations, that is "real talk," in which managers engage. However, because it is impractical to collect every conversation managers have, they chronicle their conversations in a "conversation log," gathering a minimum of 50 interactions during a consecutive 2-week period. Although managers are invited to collect conversations from more interactions (some have collected as many as 100), they are instructed not to collect fewer.

To add balance to the sample, managers are instructed to collect conversations from each day of the week and to avoid "log loading" by collecting all conversations in just 1 or 2 days. To encourage this balance, managers are asked to date each conversation and told their logs will be reviewed to see that conversations are distributed throughout the 2-week period. These instructions seem to work, as we have never had anyone log load except in those instances where managers missed work for vacation or illness.

In chronicling their conversations, managers were instructed to record (write out) as much of what is actually said during their interactions with others as possible. This means that rather than jot down simple reminders or paraphrasing (e.g., "Bill—late report"), they were to write out what all parties actually said (e.g., "Manager: Bill, I didn't get a copy of the ABC report. I looked for it this morning since you said you would have it completed yesterday. Where did you put it?" and "Bill: I didn't think it mattered as long as you had it by the end of the week"). In preparation for collecting conversations, managers were given examples of "acceptable" and "unacceptable" levels of detail to record (such as those in Table 1) and were told that because they will be doing additional work with these conversations, their record of each one should be rich and detailed enough so that they can fully recreate the conversation. Table 1 shows excerpts from a conversational log.

Conversations in a conversational log are self-selected by each manager. Although this is highly practical from the manager's standpoint, it introduces two potential risks into the data collection process from a research standpoint. The first is the potential for selection bias in that managers may systematically underreport some types of conversations (e.g., gossip or complaints) or the people with whom they have them (e.g., peers) and overreport others (e.g., ones they think make them look good or conversations with direct reports). As a result, there is a risk the profile will misrepresent the distribution of conversations managers actually had, leading them to draw erroneous conclusions and make inappropriate alterations to their conversations. The second risk is that managers will not record the conversation in their log immediately or completely, resulting in a loss of accuracy and specificity in what was said.

In an attempt to mitigate these biases, managers are given four instructions. First they are told what self-selection bias is and how it can reduce the value of their findings and reminded they will get the most useful results if they do not censor themselves and collect as representative a sample of conversations as they can. Second, they are told the log is for their use and, although the authors will review it, its contents will be kept completely confidential, thereby reducing the public risk of what they collect. Third, they are told that because the method for analyzing their conversational data will be revealed only after all their conversations are collected, that rather than try to "psych out" what will be done and collect only what they consider to be the "best" or "right" conversations, they should do their best to collect all types of conversations to get a good, complete, and representative sample. This third point is reinforced by pointing out that they will be taking specific actions based on the information they collect and that the effectiveness of those actions will be a function of the conversations they collect, so it is in their self-interest to do a good job. Fourth,

TABLE 1
Excerpts From a Conversational Log

With Whom?	*Conversation*
Doug, Kenny	[D]: Kenny, she tells me you won't be able to start here until the end of July. That's going to be a problem because you need more time to train with her. [K]: My current AL needs me in this role until then because my replacement will be unavailable up until that date. [Me]: Doug, our program manager requires only that we rotate roles some time in July. [D]: Well Kenny, could we have you up here half days a couple days a week earlier in July to start training? [K]: I will get with my AL, it may be OK. [D]: Great, send me an email with dates you could do.
Jay	[J]: I have the quote you requested for the fixture rack netting. [Me]: Great, let me forward it on to our EHS department and I will get back with you. This is an important project because it's a big safety concern. I expect to move ahead with it; at this point I am just waiting on funding approval.
Jeff	[J]: I heard plant 1 is getting 3 brand new benders, is it true? Our bender here has been down more than its been up, why aren't we getting a new bender? [Me]: I hadn't heard about Plant 1 getting a new bender, I'll have to look into it. Yes I know our benders are old and you guys have to put up with a lot to make it work. Funding is tight as you know, you guys know how much I appreciate your efforts.
Matt	[M]: I just looked at Equals and it shows my weld certs expired. I know they aren't out of date. [Me]: OK, I know you weren't due to be recertified yet. It must be a technical error with the new system change over. I will email Brian. [M]: Alright, I'll just trim tubes today. [Me]: No, we need you welding. You will be compliant, we have other documentation that shows you are up to date on your certifications.
Kyle	[Me]: Have you been working on this maintenance issue for over an hour? [K]: Yes, I am trying to clear the duct so we can use the cut-off saw. [Me]: I would have rather you called maintenance to work on that. That is there [*sic*] job, and I need you welding. The company is down 30 welders now, we need all the effort we can get from you welders. [K]: I was just trying to help, and I thought I could fix it quickly. [Me]: Thank you, but I need you back on your weld job now.

they are encouraged to record their conversations promptly after they occur rather than wait until the end of the day or later in the week.

Of course, these instructions do not completely eliminate the two biases. In fact, they could be eliminated only if a third party shadowed them and was responsible for compiling the log. However, in the vast majority of profiles we have reviewed, including the three illustrative cases presented below, managers have recorded gossip and complaint conversations as well as nonwork-related conversations in their logs. Because these types of conversations do not always reflect positively on their participants, even though they are typical in organizations, their inclusion in the logs suggests managers do not self-select only positive, self-enhancing conversations. This increases our confidence that the four instructions reduce the extent to which managers engage entirely in a self-serving selection bias.

Still, these instructions do not address the accuracy of what managers report in their logs, that is, whether what they report is actually what was said. The issue of accuracy is a potential concern, particularly given that managers' recollections are not compared to those of other participants or to independent observers, that is, there is no interjudge reliability for what is recorded. Research has shown, for example, that leaders' self-perceptions of their behavior differs from subordinates' perceptions of their behavior (Becker, Ayman, & Korabik, 2002). Such research findings suggest that managers' recollections of their conversations are likely to differ somewhat from those of others who participated in those same conversations.

Clearly there are situations in which such differences may be critically important, for example, witness testimony in criminal cases. However, such is not the case here. Rather, the intent is to provide managers with a way to understand the role their conversations play in the change results they obtain. As long as managers provide a relatively faithful reproduction of their conversations, their conversational profile will not be affected, because the profile is based on the type of conversation, not its literal contents. Although participants may disagree over some issues of accuracy, for example, "I didn't say it was illegal; I said it was unfair," such differences do not alter the type of conversation, for example, performance versus understanding. That managers provide relatively detailed records of their conversations (as seen in Table 1) suggests their recollections would be generally recognizable to other parties in the conversation and that their subsequent classification would remain unchanged. However, because no such verifications are performed, we do not know the extent to which recollections of recorded conversations vary among the participants to a given interaction.

A third potential bias is that the conversational log is limited to a 2-week period. As a result, the conversations collected may be atypical in some way or insufficiently inclusive because of the time delay between conversation and result. For example, managers who regularly make requests and accept promises with due dates greater than 2 weeks out will find their logs do not include the requests or promises that are now due and for which closure conversations will be needed. Because these earlier requests and promises are a source of current progress (or lack thereof), by limiting the log to a 2-week period, the earlier conversations are excluded.

Although this issue of inclusion cannot be completely addressed without creating a conversational profile that covers the entire period of a change, managers are made aware of it by having them notice the due dates in the requests and promises in their profile. They are told during the analysis of their profiles that if they observe that due dates associated with performance conversations are consistently longer than 2 weeks, then they should assume their current results are a function of similar requests and promises made in weeks prior. Furthermore, they are told to assume that the requests and promises they made earlier are similar in form and content to the ones in their log. This assumption is based on the observation that people have habitual ways of talking (Tannen, 1995) and that unless they are engaged in intentionally changing those habits, they will persist (Bourdieu, 1990; Dunlap, 1932). Although this does not handle the issue of inclusion, it does provide a way for change managers to make sense of progress in their change in relation to their current conversational profile.

Data Analysis

After they have completed their logs, managers learn about the four types of conversations. This training is provided after the conversational log is completed to reduce the likelihood managers will collect conversations to intentionally manipulate their profile in some way. During this training, which takes at least 4 hr, managers learn the characteristics and purposes of the four conversations, review several examples of each, and receive answers to any questions they have about each type of conversation.

After this training, and on their own time, managers review their conversational logs and assign each conversation to one of six categories: initiative conversation, understanding conversation, performance conversation, closure conversation, gossip, and complaint.[1] Where a particular interaction involves more than one type of conversation, such as when a manager starts out explaining something (conversation for understanding) and then transitions into a request (conversation for performance), the manager is instructed to assign each part of the interaction to the appropriate conversational type. The result is that managers may end up with more classifications than the number of interactions in their logs.

Managers do their own analysis. This is done for three reasons. First, it has them grapple with the issues of moving from theory to practice, from abstraction to data. By doing the analysis themselves, they have to discover how to classify each interaction, thereby developing their ability to differentiate the four conversational types. Second, conducting their own analysis has them confront what they actually say in their interactions. Managers tell us this is one of the most eye-opening parts of the process because they cannot easily dismiss their own data. Finally, because it is they who are making the assignments, doing the analysis gives them the opportunity to author and own their conversational patterns.

One risk in this self-analysis is that managers will "misclassify" their interactions, resulting in a distorted conversational profile. Misclassification could lead them to erroneous conclusions about how they talk and how to improve their conversational effectiveness. However, because such misclassifications could have real consequences for them, we expect a relatively high motivation to appropriately classify their conversations. Nevertheless, as a check on the possible extent of misclassification, when we review participant logs for log loading, we typically select several logs "at random" and classify all the conversations in them ourselves.[2] The results of this comparison are fed back to the group along with our observations about the differences in classifications. On average, our classifications have matched those of the managers 83% of the time.

In reviewing the differences in our classifications and those of the managers whose logs we examined, we have found no disagreement in classifying conversations for performance. Rather, differences occur in classifying initiative, understanding, and closure conversations. It is likely these discrepancies are caused by the difference between our reading the log and the managers' actually having been in the conversation. Someone who is only reading the record of what was said lacks any awareness of the intent or context of the conversation. As Shotter (1993) points out, people "in" a conversation have a kind of knowledge that comes from within the conversation (what he calls "knowing-from-within") that those not participating in the conversation do not have. Managers know-from-within a conversation's intent, context, and meaning, which informs their classification. None of this is available to an outside reader of the log who is attempting to classify the same conversation based solely on what is written. For this reason, differences in classifications are to be expected, and we do not conclude managers have necessarily misclassified a conversation. Rather, if we have questions about a particular classification, we make a note on their log that asks, “Did you mean to make this classification?” This note prompts them to reconsider their assignment in light of the feedback and, in some cases, change their classifications. In all cases, however, the manager is the final arbitrator of a conversation’s classification.

The issue of misclassification raises questions concerning whether other participants in the conversation would classify it the same way as the manager. Tannen (1995), for example, points out that some managers are indirect in their requests and, as a result, do not get what they want because the other person does not realize a request has been made. This suggests that a manager can believe he or she had one type of conversation (e.g., performance) whereas the other person thinks he or she had a different type of conversation (e.g., understanding). Shotter (1993) points out that because “what we are talking about” is not always successfully constructed and negotiated in conversations, people can leave the same conversation with very different conclusions and understandings.

Differences in perceptions among participants in a conversation could provide valuable feedback to managers interested in improving their conversational performance. If managers think they are having closure conversations, for example, only to find out recipients classify them as understanding conversations, it provides managers an opportunity to learn what is missing in their conversations that they are not being heard as intended. Unfortunately, the extent to which such differences occur and their impact must remain an issue for subsequent research in which both change managers and change recipients are trained in conversational patterns. In the work reported here, change recipients are untrained in conversational types, so managers have no opportunity to compare classifications with them.

After managers have classified all the conversations in their log, they create their conversational profile graph by computing the relative frequency with which they use each type of conversation. They total the number of times each conversation type is used and divide by the total number of distinct conversation types recorded. Examples of four different profiles collected from managers are shown in Figure 1. In these examples, the columns represent, respectively from left to right, the four conversations: initiative (IC), understanding (UC), performance (PC), and closure (CC) conversations. The height of each column represents the frequency each type of conversation is used.[3]

As can be seen in Figure 1, different managers can have very different conversational profiles. Manager A, for example, relies extensively on conversations for understanding, whereas Manager B uses predominantly conversations for performance and closure. Manager C tends to use mostly conversations for understanding and closure, whereas Manager D uses more initiative and understanding conversations and no closure conversations.

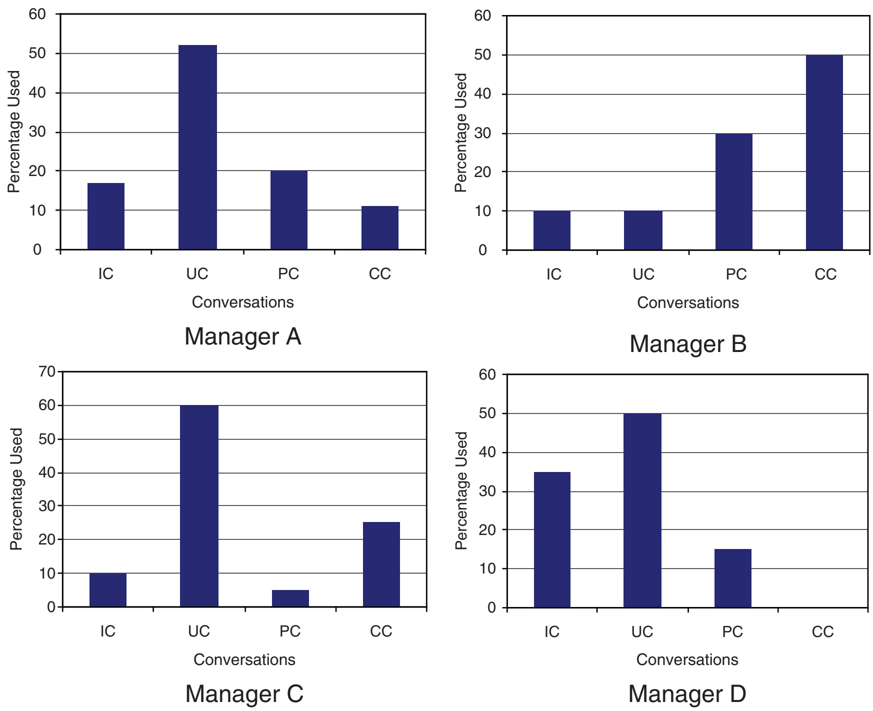

FIGURE 1: Four Illustrative Conversational Profiles

Although the conversational profile graph allows managers to see the relative frequency with which they use particular conversations, it does not tell them anything about the content of those conversations. This can be achieved only through the content analysis of the conversations themselves. By using the profile graph and examining the actual content of what they are saying, managers are able to discern relationships between what they are saying and the results they are getting in their changes. As one manager put it after seeing her profile,

> I really had no idea I was talking about some of these things, or that I was so focused on having people understand the reasons for the change. If you had asked me before I did this to tell you what I talk to my staff about, I would have said I motivated them by acknowledging their successes [conversations for closure]. I am really surprised there are so few conversations for performance. But, now I see why things aren't moving.

After seeing analysis of their conversations and results, managers come to their own conclusions about what might be missing or not working, that is, develop a hypothesis, which they can then test by altering either the type of conversations they use or the content of those conversations.

USING CONVERSATIONAL PROFILES: THREE ILLUSTRATIONS

The progress of a change is a function of the conversations managers use in the conduct of that change (J. D. Ford & Ford, 1995). Although we are not providing a systematic test of this theoretical proposition, the purpose of a conversational profile is to give managers the ability to identify and modify their conversational pattern in a way that will alter the progress of change and thereby demonstrate the practical applicability of the theory in their own management experience. Accordingly, the three illustrations below are taken from managers who have gone through the process of data collection and analysis described above. These illustrations come from three managers who generously share their profiles, the status of the change to which they applied them, and the insights they gained from their analysis. In each example, the manager was engaged in some form of "local" change in their organization that was part of a larger change but that is limited in scope, scale, and time. As Kotter (1996) points out, organizational changes often involve projects within projects. Thus, although none of the examples is about leading and managing a large-scale organization change, for example, restructuring, they can nevertheless provide some insights into the impact of conversations on managing parts of such changes.

Finally, these illustrations should not be taken as representative of the types of profiles change managers have (or should have). Rather, they illustrate how managers can use the conversational profile to bring about an alteration in the progress of their change by altering their conversations.

The Wireless Project

Brad is the media manager for Local Electric, and among his many responsibilities, he was responsible for the implementation of a new wireless system in his organization. According to Brad, the wireless implementation project was not progressing at all (literally, no progress), and he was experiencing considerable stress in anticipation of increased management attention to his failure to meet the objective.

When he analyzed his conversational log, Brad was surprised to see that during a 2-week period, he had logged only two conversations pertaining to the wireless system, both of which were conversations for understanding. Brad had been thinking and worrying about the project and the lack of movement so much that he believed he had been talking about it more than he actually was. When he saw the reality of his conversational profile, Brad resolved that he would have several conversations a day about the project and that he would emphasize the use of conversations for performance and closure. Here is what he said about what he learned:

> I am proud of the way the wireless project turned around for me and our organization. More specifically, once I saw my conversational profile, and compared it to what wasn't being done on my project assignments, I focused more time on my conversations for the wireless project. I thought this project needed more of my time, but what helped the most was using my time more effectively. I started tracking conversations and scheduling follow-up calls, e-mails, and other

conversations. I had multiple projects going simultaneously, and I learned it worked if I scheduled one small block of time each day to do follow-up calls, another for follow-up e-mails, and my remaining time for general responsibilities that related to my other projects. I became much more efficient, not only in the wireless project but in many of the rest of my projects too.

Along with all this, my conversations became clearer. My requests and promises were more organized. I also found myself with the opportunity to accomplish more during a day, and to accept other responsibilities without feeling overwhelmed. Looking back on what has been accomplished with the wireless project since doing my conversational profile, I can see that one of the reasons the project was languishing was because I was unwilling to make extraordinary requests or promises. I am now making bigger requests and promises.

Before doing the conversational profile, I anticipated that this project would be completed in the spring [next year] sometime. After recognizing what was happening and focusing on the conversations for this project, which I knew all along was important to not only me, but also my boss, the project is scheduled to be completed early next week [December, this year].

Brad's experience reflects the value of diagnosing one's conversational profile and looking for a correlation to the effectiveness of implementing a change. In Brad's case, his analysis revealed that not only was he not having many conversations about the wireless project but also the types of conversation he was having (understanding) were not appropriate for putting people into action. On the basis of his analysis, he decided to increase the number of conversations he was having on this project and to shift to having more conversations for performance (requests and promises) and closure (follow-through). Because of these changes, Brad was able to gain velocity on the project and complete it months earlier than expected.

The Training Project

Tracy Goss (1996) asserts that managers can increase the velocity of a project by increasing the frequency of requests and promises made. Brad's experience is clearly consistent with Goss's assertion. However, as we can see from Michelle's case below, simply increasing the number of conversations for performance may not be sufficient.

Michelle is a senior manager in human resources responsible for the implementation of numerous changes in her organization, including the Training Project, a new training program that would eventually affect most of the organization's managers. When first asked about how the project was going, Michelle replied that it was "not progressing well." This lack of progress was despite the fact that she was, in her words, "talking about it all the time." Indeed, her analysis of her conversational log revealed that fully 25% of all her conversations pertained to the implementation of this one change. Moreover, of these conversations, half were conversations for understanding and half were conversations for performance (shown in Figure 2). As she points out, "With this many conversations for performance, I would have expected more results and successes."

To find out what accounted for the lack of movement, Michelle looked more closely at each of the performance conversations that pertained to the Training Project in her log. Here is what she said about what she discovered:

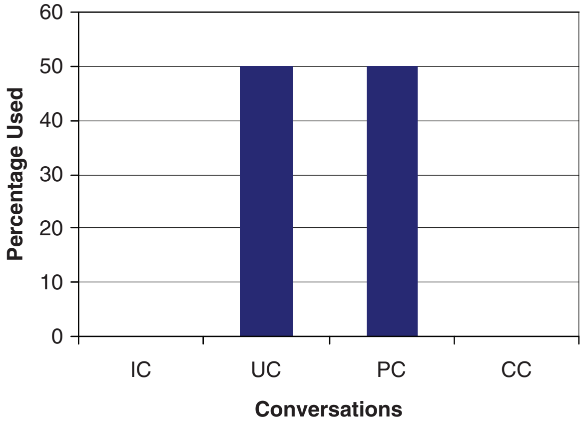

FIGURE 2: Michelle's Conversational Profile for the Training Project

> From my analysis, I am beginning to see why this change is not progressing very well. I make lots of requests, but I make very few promises, and I don't ask other people to make promises either. Also, the requests aren't very strong: I never give or get any deadlines. When I make requests, they usually tend to be ordinary, and aren't designed to nudge people out of their comfort zones to do anything unreasonable or outstanding. There are also no conversations for closure, like follow-ups on the requests I make or acknowledgments of work completed. Plus, since I leave out initiative conversations altogether, there may be people on the team who don't understand where this idea for a training project came from and why it's important to the company.

From her study of the four types of conversations, Michelle knew that conversations for understanding might give someone an idea about what they can or should do but not generate action. She also knew conversations for performance would produce results, but until she studied the performance conversations from her log, she had not seen the need for a better balance between making promises and making requests. Both types of performance conversation are necessary because a request does not cause action unless someone agrees (promises) to take the action and produce the requested result. A promise is the completion of a request: Without the promise, there is no commitment to action. Michelle observed her weakness in promises on both sides of a conversation: She often failed to make promises for her own action, and she rarely obtained promises for action from others. This was, in her estimation, the primary reason for the stalled project.

Michelle's analysis also revealed that her requests lacked deadlines. When she analyzed her performance conversations, she saw that some of her performance conversations did not meet the full set of criteria for "who-what-when-where." As a result, people could accept her requests (and she theirs) without committing to any deadline or due date for when the action or result was to be completed. Without adding deadlines, there was no accountability and no basis for follow-up.

The failure to use deadlines also helped Michelle understand the absence of closure conversations from her profile. Having a deadline supports accountability by supporting follow-up: If a promise includes a deadline, people relate to it as something they will have to account for at that future time. The manager who keeps track of promise due dates has a mechanism that can remind them to have closure conversations. Michelle saw that by not having due dates and closure conversations, she was not following up on the requests and promises made for the Training Project. She said,

> Not only were people not acknowledged for what they were doing and getting done, there was no way to hold anyone accountable for what was not getting done. I was just waiting for things to happen instead of making and following up on promises, closing out broken agreements, and acknowledging successes.

After she saw what was missing, Michelle included deadlines in the requests she made and made it a point to follow up on the results. This shifted her conversations to include requests and promises that were more specific and had deadlines and to include more closure conversations. Three weeks later, she told us she had a "significant acceleration" in progress on the Training Project.

As Michelle learned from her own analysis, making numerous requests and promises is not sufficient if they are weak (e.g., lacking deadlines) and if people believe they will not reliably be called to account for the results in the future (e.g., no closure conversations). In this respect, she confirms Sull and Spinosa's (2007) assertion that failing to obtain strong promises undermines managerial effectiveness. Although managers have frequently been told to "follow through," Michelle's results also give a new understanding to what that means. Follow-through entails having closure conversations with people about the status of requests and promises.

A Tale of Two Projects

Jason is a midlevel manager accountable for several different installation projects in a communications company. During the period of his conversational log, one of his projects was progressing very well and another was not. Because the people involved in both projects were the same, he was at a loss to explain the difference in progress. When he looked at his conversational profile for each of the two projects (Figure 3), he could see what might be happening.

Here is what Jason had to say about his analysis of the two projects:

> The difference in the two profiles is revealing. It's clear that one of the problems is what I talk about. Or rather, what I don't talk about. In Installation Project A, I tend to solicit ideas [initiative conversations], explore them with my team [conversations for understanding], and then we all make agreements as to what we'll do by our next meeting [conversations for performance]. Then, in our weekly project meetings, we always review what has happened since our last meeting and we do our post mortems on things that didn't go as expected [closure conversations].
>
> In Installation Project B I don't do that. One reason is because I have done this type of installation before and I know how it should go. So I don't ask for ideas, I just explain to them what

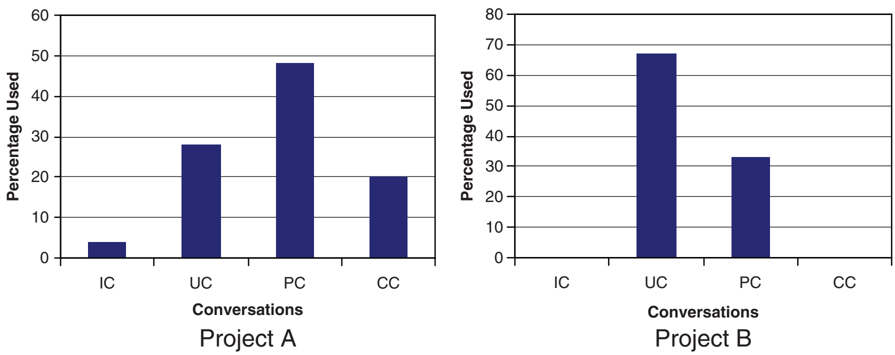

FIGURE 3: Jason's Conversational Profiles

> needs to be done [conversation for understanding], make a few assignments [conversations for performance], and expect them to do it. And, because I know they are capable, I don't follow up with them.

It is easy to conclude that Jason should use the same conversational profile in both projects. Clearly, he could try this and see what happens. However, because there is no "best" or "ideal" conversational profile that works in all situations (J. D. Ford & Ford, 1995), what works in one change may not work in another, even if the same people are involved in both. Jason chose to add more performance and follow-up (closure) conversations to Project B and reduce the use of conversations for understanding. After these changes, he reported that Installation Project B was back on schedule 5 weeks later and that both he and his team were pleased with the results. Jason had successfully shifted his conversational profile to include what was missing.

Jason's situation shows how a manager's assumptions can influence his or her conversational profiles. Installation Project A was one with which Jason had no experience, so he took a more participatory approach, as evidenced in his conversational profile for Project A. His assumptions about the more familiar type of project, Installation Project B, led him to believe he could cut corners. His people were experienced, but the project bogged down because people did not reliably see what actions to take or have the satisfaction of knowing which tasks were completed and which ones were still open for action.

Jason's profile also demonstrates that one manager can have more than one conversational profile, even with the same group of people. Although it may be possible to talk about a manager's overall conversational style, Jason's results indicate that managers use different profiles under different conditions. Moreover, because he is dealing with the same people in both projects, his results indicate that his conversational pattern was more a factor in the progress of the change than either the characteristics of the project or the people involved in its production. We suspect Jason's findings are not atypical. Unfortunately, this impact is likely to go unrecognized unless managers are willing to investigate the relationship between their conversations and the results they are getting.

DISCUSSION

As a practical matter, change managers are encouraged to communicate frequently and enthusiastically about change (Lewis, Schmisseur, Stephens, & Weir, 2006). The experiences of the three managers reported here, however, suggests that frequent and enthusiastic communication is not enough if the conversations are poorly designed and inappropriately mixed. Michelle, for example, communicated frequently, but her performance conversations (requests and promises) were, by her own admission, inadequate, and the absence of closure conversations meant there was no follow-up, accountability, or acknowledgement. These shortcomings impeded her progress.

We may do change managers a disservice by simply telling them to “communicate, communicate, communicate” (Kotter, 1996). It is one thing to say that managers need to communicate to keep people informed, to enroll them in the change, or to provide direction and quite another to translate such guidelines into specific types of conversations. Keeping people informed, for example, may involve conversations for understanding and/or closure. Enrolling people can involve initiative, understanding, performance, and/or closure conversations. Providing direction can require initiative, understanding, and/or performance conversations. Managers who think they are keeping people informed, enrolled, and directed because they are frequently communicating explanations and information (conversations for understanding) may never consider they are getting unexpected results because they are using inappropriate conversations. Both Michelle and Jason believed they were communicating sufficiently, and it was not until they constructed their conversational profiles that they realized “sufficiently” is not the same as “appropriately.”

We may, therefore, want to condition our advice to managers regarding communication campaigns (Hirschhorn, 2002). Such campaigns, which are typically composed of initiative and understanding conversations, are appropriate at the beginning of a change, where new ideas need to gain a foothold in already existing discourses and practices (Green, 2004). Indeed, it is the intent of such campaigns to establish awareness, keep the change in existence, and build support. This study of conversational patterns suggests it is imperative that change managers complement such campaigns with intentionally designed conversations for performance and closure. Ashkenas and Jick (1992), for example, found in their study of General Electric’s Work-Out program that without conversations for performance, people naively assumed recipient understanding would lead to action. If change managers make the same assumption, they may inappropriately attribute the lack of action following a communication campaign to resistance or other factors rather than to a failure to employ an appropriate mix of conversations.

The three cases illustrated here also suggest that performance and closure conversations are particularly important to the progress of change. In each case, breakthroughs in both the velocity and magnitude of results stemmed from (a) expanding the frequency of performance and closure conversations and/or (b) upgrading the quality or rigor of those conversations, for example, adding deadlines to requests and promises. Increasing the rigor of performance conversations reduces uncertainty and ambiguity regarding actions to be taken and results produced. Adding closure conversations reinforces the idea that requests and promises are "real," that is, valuable, and helps build accountability, credibility, and trust (Sull & Spinosa, 2007), all of which are critical for effective leadership (Kouzes & Posner, 1993). When change managers do not keep their promises and agreements, trust is broken, which, if not repaired through closure conversations, can compromise the progress of change because recipients no longer listen or believe what they are told (Andersson, 1996; Cobb, Wooten, & Folger, 1995; Tomlinson et al., 2004). Research has shown that the absence of closure conversations contributes to high levels of cynicism directed toward change managers (Dean, Brandes, & Dharwadkar, 1998; Reichers, Wanous, & Austin, 1997). We would hypothesize, therefore, that change managers who pay particular attention to having closure conversations that follow through on the agreements created in their performance conversations will have change teams that report higher levels of trust, lower levels of cynicism, and more productive relationships with change recipients.

The results obtained here suggest that change managers need to manage their conversations. Brad (the Wireless Project) realized he would need to manage the frequency, type, and content of his conversations with people on his team and associated with his change. He had to think about which conversations he wanted to have, schedule those conversations, conduct them, and then follow up on requests, promises, and breakdowns. Although he acknowledged it was not difficult, it did require effort and attention in a new area, that of managing conversations. His subsequent success points to the value of his being able to do so. We would hypothesize, therefore, that change managers who manage, that is, track and know the status of, alter, and follow up on, their conversations will be more effective than those who do not.

Change Manager Conversations and Resistance

Each of the three managers here had some difficulty with the progress of change. In the traditional literature on change, such difficulties are frequently attributed to some form of resistance located "over there" in the change recipient (Dent & Goldberg, 1999; J. D. Ford, Ford, & D'Amelio, 2008). When we first met Brad, for example, he was sure that resistance from his staff and team members was the cause of his project's stalled progress. In fact, he hoped the conversational profile would help him learn how to overcome their resistance.

The results obtained here, however, suggest that the focus on recipient resistance may reflect a self-serving bias by agents in that it ignores that the difficulties agents report may be the result of their own ineffective communications (J. D. Ford et al., 2008). The literature on self-serving attributions and bias is replete with examples of decision makers at all levels giving accounts that shift blame and make themselves look good (e.g., Bettman & Weitz, 1983; J. D. Ford, 1985; Kelley, 1973; Salancik & Meindl, 1984). Unless we are willing to assume change managers are somehow immune to these same attribution tendencies, we should expect them to give accounts in which they take credit for successful changes and blame other factors, such as resistance, for problems and failures. Consistent with this reasoning, it is worth noting that it was not until after they developed their conversational profiles that the three managers here considered themselves (more specifically, their conversational patterns) as a possible source of the lack of progress in their changes. After Brad saw his conversational log, he realized that "their" resistance was not the issue; his failure to communicate sufficiently and appropriately was.

This observation has potentially important theoretical implications because it suggests the traditional emphasis on resistance as something located "over there" is incomplete in that it does not recognize the role change mangers' conversations play. Because change managers do not know they have conversational patterns or the impact of those patterns (Tannen, 1995), they would be expected to look for, and find, explanations for inconsistent results outside themselves. As a result, it is not surprising that resistance reduction strategies focus entirely on creating some alteration in change recipients rather than altering how change agents communicate (e.g., Kotter & Schlesinger, 1979). The work on cynicism, for example, suggests change agents would experience less of what they call resistance if they had more closure conversations (e.g., Reichers et al., 1997).

The Future

There is clearly a need for research that goes beyond the three case studies reported here. The presumption of conversational profiles is that language is performative and that what happens during the change process is a function of the conversations in which people engage. People do not only use language to make accurate representations of perceived objects but also to accomplish things (Alvesson & Karreman, 2000) and to do things with words (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969). This being the case, we would expect to find differences between effective and ineffective conversational profiles as agents move through the different stages of change suggested by Lewin (1947), because each stage requires different activities and accomplishments (M. W. Ford & Greer, 2006).

Bridges' (1980) work on transitions, for example, suggests that a combination of closure and initiative conversations will be more effective during the launch of a change (i.e., unfreezing) than other combinations, because initiative conversations presence the desired future state whereas closure conversations provide closure to the organization's current state. Because unfreezing involves questioning and challenging an organization's current state, we would also expect effective profiles to use conversations for understanding. During the movement stage, where new work patterns are developed and implemented, more conversations for understanding, performance, and closure might be expected. In this stage, however, we would expect closure conversations to deal with status reports, breakdowns, the completing of promises, and the repair of broken agreements. Finally, refreezing, in which new practices are institutionalized, suggests that a high frequency of closure conversations will be the most effective.

Identifying differences in conversational profiles at each stage could be accomplished by collecting conversational profiles from groups of managers at different stages in the change process, determining which managers are effective and which are not, and then comparing profiles between effective and ineffective groups for each stage in a manner similar to the comparisons made by M. W. Ford and Greer (2006). This approach could allow for the aggregation of conversational profiles and the possibility of determining which profiles are more effective at each stage and the characteristics of those profiles.

There is also the opportunity to extend the idea of a conversational profile beyond individual change managers to groups and teams, particularly during the formulation process. Although we have no explicit data, we have noticed during meetings that groups have a tendency to emphasize some types of conversations (e.g., understanding) and neglect others (e.g., performance). When group members are made aware of this tendency and are briefly trained in using the missing conversations, they seem to become more efficient and productive during the meetings (as indicated by the number of action items generated and completed), and there is greater cooperation outside of the meeting. This suggests, in the spirit of process consultation, that groups could improve their effectiveness during change by altering the group's conversational pattern.

Although our experience with conversational profiles has been favorable, this does not mean that conversational shifts automatically result in enhanced progress during change. Managers may still propose uninspired ideas, give poor explanations, make weak or inappropriate requests, and fail to provide adequate closure. They may also fail to have the appropriate conversation (e.g., closure in the form of an apology) at the appropriate time (e.g., after embarrassing someone) or in a manner recipients consider appropriate (Tannen, 1995). And change managers may lack the affinity, credibility, and trust necessary for recipients to listen to their initiatives, explanations, requests, and apologies. Larson and Tomkins (2005), for example, have shown that change managers undermine the power of their justifications for and legitimacy of a change by being ambivalent in their communications. By using the rhetoric of the new while engaging in the practices of the old, or advocating the value of the new while praising the success of the old, change managers send an inconsistent message to change recipients and undermine change by creating ambiguity and uncertainty and undermining their credibility regarding the change. Unfortunately, ambivalence such as this will not be revealed in the frequency distribution of conversations, though it should be evident in the content of the conversations contained in the log. For this reason, profiles must consider not only the distribution of conversations but also their content.

Change is fundamentally about mobilizing action, and although talk is essential, the three case studies reported here indicate that not all talk leads to effective action. In this regard, the problems and breakdowns managers confront in the course of change may be more a function of their own conversational patterns and their failure to alter them than they realize. As one manager put it,

> What I have learned about the power of conversations will stay with me the rest of my life. By having me "look in the mirror" with the conversation profile, I could see how my talk with others affects outcomes and relationships in my work and life. I have been forcing myself to make more and more specific and extraordinary requests. I can see how much more effective I have become in getting things done and moving others to act toward accomplishing the change.

Implementing more changes that are successful, therefore, may be a matter of being able to identify effective patterns of talk. Conversational profiles offer one tool for doing this.

NOTES

1. Although gossip and complaints are forms of understanding conversations, because they are considered unproductive in terms of forwarding a change, they are separated so that managers can see explicitly the extent to which they engage in each.

2. Our selection is not truly random in the strict sense of the term. Rather, we take a selection of approximately 7 to 10 logs from those collected in a random-like manner so that logs come from different locations in the stack of profiles.

3. The gossip and complaint conversations are not added into the *understanding conversations* tally, but managers are encouraged to take note of the proportion of their conversations for understanding that take these forms.

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