

## **Organisational change and personal meanings**

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### **Personal meaning and occupational choice**

Personal construct psychology (PCP) invites us to see each individual as perceiving the world through their own unique personal construct system — the highly individual lenses through which we experience and find meaning in the world.

In his two-volume work, *The Psychology of Personal Constructs [1]*, George Kelly outlined his ideas about the way in which our choice of occupation links with our developing personal construct system. Kelly described an occupation as both a system of ready-made constructs, and a set of validators for our own personal constructs. Viewed either way, he suggested that our occupation has far-reaching implications for our approach to life, way beyond our particular duties or the size of our pay cheque. He proposed that our occupation or profession is one of the principal means by which our life is given clarity and meaning, and that many occupations help us to define our role in day-to-day situations, carrying with them a particular range of interpretations of other people's motives, and obligations both within and outside one's occupational group.

Many of us do experience our occupation as a key aspect of personal identity, and hence the significance of career changes, unemployment, redundancy, job loss and retirement, still too often discussed as practical issues revolving around income. The meanings carried even by our job title can cause difficulties for those of us whose occupations are not a good "fit" with who we believe ourselves to be, and we may try create some distance between ourselves and that set of 'ready-made' constructs that come with a job title, to avoid feeling misunderstood.

Kelly suggested that our occupations are likely to be areas where we have many constructs which are permeable enough to allow a considerable amount of "successive evolving" to take place, that is, somewhere we feel able to grow and take on changes without too much threat, and where new situations can be absorbed into our existing construct systems. We will choose to work in areas where our key constructs and personal meanings are affirmed rather than challenged, and so are capable of elaboration.

Kelly described an ideal occupation as an area which "does not overtax one's tolerance of ambiguity". We will seek a vocation, he suggests, which is a happy compromise between what is new and challenging to us, and what is known and safe. Throughout our working lives, as we consider moves from one job to another, we are weighing two powerful needs in the balance and finding compromises between adventure and security: "something which is excitingly new, but not so strange as to be confusing".

Core constructs are described as those by which we maintain our identity and existence, our sense of the person we are and how we fit in with the rest of the world. Our core constructs form the central, weight-bearing structure deep inside what Dalton and Dunnett have described as the “scaffolding” of our unique personal construct system [2]. As we continually climb around the scaffolding, shifting and adjusting peripheral constructs to achieve a better fit with the world in which we find ourselves, these central core constructs remain relatively unchanged, allowing us to retain our sense of who we are and the meaning of what we do. Kelly has described our core constructs as comprehensive enough to allow us to see a wide variety of events as consistent with our personality, and to understand ourselves as complex, but organized. We react vigorously to any threat of change at this level which might imply a loss of clarity about who we are, and the meaning of our lives.

Core constructs could be seen perhaps as personal myths. Rollo May [3] has described myths as being like the beams in a house: not exposed to outside view, they are the structures which hold the house together so that people can live in it. Those who subscribe to a collective mythology, a religious or philosophical system, find that it does indeed hold their world together, providing an enduring sense of who they are and of the meaning of their lives while on a day-to-day level they are shifted and shaken by movement and change. As collective myths lose their power for many, and the emphasis on individuality is continually heightened, we fall back on our unique, personal mythologies - the stories we tell ourselves to make sense of our lives and choices, the unfolding narratives which, largely unseen, guide our next move.

### **The implications of organisational change**

If our occupational choices are so central to our identity, what then are the implications of organisational change?

Most of our core constructs are fairly robust and comprehensive; after all, they cope with a world which is in constant change and which rarely lives up to our plans and ideals. Much of the time we are able to take changes in our stride, adjusting and reassembling peripheral constructs and absorbing their implications at core level. We find similar meanings through different tasks perhaps, and affirm our identity through new role functions. Our capacity to accommodate change is impressive.

Tolerance of ambiguity is a key issue. Our capacity to react to a change which is unwanted but clear can be greater than our ability to handle what is still unknown or uncertain. There are clues here for change planners. If a change can offer us possibilities for elaborating our personal construct system, together with enough familiarity to feel within the limits of our tolerance of ambiguity, then it provides optimum conditions for our growth. Getting a good-enough balance between challenge and comfort for staff is not always a priority for organisational strategists. Little attention may be given to emphasising those things which will actually stay the same providing stability

during change. And the equation of change with 'reform', 'improvement' and 'correction' carries with it an implicit devaluing of what has gone before, often to the point of wiping out its meaning. Some moves in health and social care, from institutions to community-based services for example, have been presented not just as different and hopefully helpful models, but as a correction to the damage done by institutional models. What could this mean for staff who have spent 25 dedicated working years in these settings?

Could we pay attention to the management of what is not changing, to areas of stability, valuing existing models and skills at the same time as promoting the new? Could we affirm those core structures, the weight-bearing beams, which will hold the house together while it is being refurbished?

When major changes and 'reforms' are imposed, we may over time be able to reconstrue these new situations to fit our personal 'myths', with differing degrees of distortion necessary to achieve a fit. Or we may evolve new stories which can help us make sense of, and find meaning in, the situations to which we are required to conform – a process of core reconstruction.

In many imposed organisational changes, the task is intensified by tight timescales, leaving a number of people with a poor fit between their sense of self and the meaning of the work in which they are now involved. Some feel that they have no choice except to leave their profession, unable to assimilate or accommodate the change in the time given, and finding it impossible to live with the contradiction. The meanings may be too central, too significant — the entire edifice would crumble; or that is the fear. In these circumstances we are struggling for personal survival.

## **Change and resistance**

Among the constructs of transition described in PCP, three key ones are *aggressiveness*, *hostility* and *threat*. Kelly had a confusing knack of taking very familiar words and redefining them in precise and unusual ways. In PCP, *aggressiveness* is defined as "the active elaboration of one's perceptual field" – doing things, making things happen. Anything we do to elaborate our own personal construct system, (me writing this paper, you reading it), is aggressive. There are no connotations of antagonism in Kelly's definition. However his confusing way with words has a useful slant in this instance, since at times of change it is the change enthusiasts who are most "aggressive" - making things happen - and aggressive, in colloquial terms, is precisely how they are seen by those who are not so keen.

When we are hostile, we seek to keep things as they are, even when we are aware that this is not working for us. We may realize that we are painting ourselves into a corner, but we continue to try to get the external world to fit our internal model, because we see no viable alternative. Kelly suggested that aggression in one person may elicit hostility in another. The aggressive person is restless and overeager and others find themselves involved in their experimental ventures. In an effort to make the development conform to the

original script, the hostile person may attempt to impose constriction on the aggressive person. Kelly describes it as 'a psychological fact of considerable significance' that people who go around aggressively dilating other people's fields are likely to find themselves the targets of hostility.

'Resistance' to change is often seen as a generalised unwillingness to change, a reactionary negative attitude or persistence with a tired ideological argument. "Resisters" rarely attract much sympathy; rather they are seen as a disruptive and time-consuming nuisance. There is little acknowledgement of the ways in which changes in work role and function (which on the surface may appear to be methodological or structural), impact on deeply held and not always conscious core beliefs about who we are, and about the meaning of our work.

Threat is defined as "the awareness of imminent comprehensive change in one's core structures", and it is clear that organisational change might threaten individuals at core levels. It is important not to make too many assumptions about what is core and what is not. Kelly wrote:

Sometimes it is assumed that a given structure in a person is peripheral. Later it is discovered that the person uses it as a core construct. We need to be alert to the possibility that any construction utilised by another person may turn out to be a core structure.

A fundamental principle of personal construct psychology is the concept of *elaborative choice*, that is that we choose the direction in which we feel lies our best option for elaboration. So if we are standing still with our heels dug in and our head under the blanket there will be good reasons - the alternatives, as we construe them, are worse than this. And no one will begin to help us move without finding out, respectfully, and with an open mind, how we are experiencing the situation. Resistance is therefore important data – something to be explored and understood rather than something to be overcome. The beams of the house are sometimes hidden even to ourselves; we do not always know why we are responding so fiercely to what is demanded of us.

### **Supporting staff through change**

Three further ideas from PCP are useful in considering how people might be enabled to support each other through times of change:

*individuality*: that we each operate from a different and unique personal construct system;

*commonality*: that to the extent to which we make similar interpretations and ascribe similar meanings we can be said to share a degree of commonality in our personal constructions; and

*sociality*: that in order to have a meaningful role relationship with another person we must attempt to understand their construing of events in their terms rather than our own.

The balance between individuality, commonality and sociality is important to the success of any organisation. It is as though individuality and commonality are in the balance, with sociality as the balancing mechanism. Too much emphasis on individuality and we have independent individuals with little interest in teamwork. Overvaluing of commonality can lead to group conformity and differences being construed as a threat.

Increasing the potential for sociality - being able to talk, listen, and understand each other, without needing to agree, is often the key to managing the delicate tension between sharing a common vision and valuing individual difference. Our capacity to handle an unwanted or imposed change seems to be closely correlated with our sense that our reactions are understood and respected on our own terms.

Rowe asks:

How can we give up the great satisfaction of regarding those who differ in their views from us as mad or, even better, bad, and instead take the very unsatisfying view that other people are neither mad nor bad when they see things differently from us, but simply behaving as all human beings do: creating their own world of meaning?[4].

One of the things which can make a difference to the capacity of a team to manage a change effectively among themselves is to deepen their understanding of their myths and meanings as *personal*, and so viable for themselves but not necessarily for others; and as *chosen*, and therefore available for change.

### **Helping a team to manage change**

A brief extract from a case study might illustrate the way in which some of these ideas can be used to help manage change in groups. I was approached by the director of a range of public sector services about to embark on a major change in structure and philosophy. His team had widely differing views about the appropriateness and wisdom of this change, and communication and relationships in the group had deteriorated with attitudes polarised around the change as “good” or “bad” for the service. The aggressive enthusiasts were perceived by a hostile resistance as ruthless entrepreneurs, and in return they were seen as difficult characters stuck in a reactionary rut. No one felt heard or understood. There was however a will to improve the situation, largely because neither the changes ahead nor membership of the team were seen to be negotiable. Individually, commitment to their service was high.

We had a fairly open discussion about the forthcoming changes, and I encouraged the group to be specific about what was changing and what was not, and what the changes would mean to them in practice. Some changes were largely conceptual, whereas others would have a significant impact on day to-day practice. This process helpfully clarified what we were dealing with, and also reinforced some structure and stability while the group considered

the uncertainties ahead. Each person then chose one other with whom they would talk about the change, their feelings and reactions, and what they felt was needed in the team. Questioning was restricted to checking understanding only.

The conversations were quiet and thoughtful. The comment was made at the end that it was “not needing to agree that made me really listen; it was liberating because there was nothing to argue for, nothing to defend”.

As a whole group we then considered the types of things that were making a difference to people’s experience of change. These included personal circumstances, working styles, previous experience of change, age, health, level of social support, politics, qualifications, self-confidence and so on. We began to see that these various factors, many of them core issues, form a cocktail that shakes differently for each of us. One member commented very honestly that he began to see that people had “some fair enough reasons” for being cautious and that they were not just “ostriches”.

One or two of the former ostriches then generously told the group something of their own particular mix. This included sharing some personal issues which had not been known in the whole group, including recovering alcoholism for one, and a long history of rejections for promotion for another. This was a turning point in the day as people were able to see one another not simplistically as resisting change, but as individuals managing their own complex lives and circumstances, enmeshed in their own evolving life stories and wondering how to make the best next move.

In the facilitated discussion it also became apparent that there was more commonality in the group than had been imagined. No one was particularly keen on the ideology behind the change, but some had personal myths which guided them to “make the best of things” or “never bother to fight the inevitable” or “refuse to be a victim”, which led them to look for opportunity above all else.

In PCP, the “laddering” process enables us to consider the meaning of our constructs by exploring why they are important to us and why we prefer them to what we construe as their opposite. We worked together and individually to ladder our personal construction of “change” to see how it worked for us. Most striking was a conversation between two people who had been massively irritated by each other’s reaction to the change, who found that for one of them the opposite of change was “stagnation”, (laddering very quickly to “death”), and for the other it was “comfort and security”, (laddering to “being able to stay on the planet”). Their discovery and new understanding of how differently they perceived life led to a new tolerance, and later to a genuine appreciation of each other’s differences.

Talking together after this experiment, we found a way to reframe the problem facing the team. Instead of “needing to press ahead” versus “holding out against change”, the group formulated the question: “How can we move on, making the most of the possibilities of the change, while building in enough

support to help us all feel OK?” There was agreement that, while this was difficult and a bit idealistic, it ought to be possible, and there was energy for the attempt. It seemed that the recognition and valuing of the objections and concerns held by some members had been enough to enable them to be involved. The rest of the day was spent developing an agenda both of tasks towards organising the new structure, and communication and support ideas to help one another and their staff teams through the uncertainties and anxieties of change.

Nine months later, that part of the change process was over. The director felt that his management team handled the change better than many others: “We ironed out the personal differences at the very beginning, before they became entrenched as who we are”. As a result of the unusual level of openness during the group event, he feels that friendships have been established which are highly valued but which did not preclude the possibility of constructive challenge and honest feedback about performance: “We’re pretty tolerant of each other now, I think”.

It is not that we emerge with a complete and clear understanding of the other person, an impossible aim in the field of human relationships, but more that the glimpses we are given of their lives and stories help us to appreciate that there is more going on than we might have at first imagined. What really happened during our day together was that the group were able to clarify for themselves some aspects of their personal guiding myths and meanings, and to share some of that understanding with respectful colleagues. We were able to recognize that we were dealing with central important aspects of people’s lives, not just petty concerns and bloody-mindedness.

## **Conclusion**

This exploration points to some key issues for change leaders in organisations.

First, can we take the challenge to become more aware of the personal creation of meaning, to recognize that the variety of ways of construing a situation is as great as the number of people involved? We do not have a monopoly on truth – there are multiple realities. The meanings we give to our role at work, and to our work itself, are deeply interwoven with our unique core identity and the personal myth in which we are living. Significant changes in organisations may require us to make corresponding changes to our self-perception and identity.

Second, can we manage change in a way which respects and uses these understandings? This would mean paying attention to areas of stability as well as change in order to avoid dismantling the entire scaffolding all at one time. It would mean taking care to value the past and present as well as the future, and planning in time scales which show greater respect for the work our colleagues may need to do if they are to move with us. And can we reconstrue

“resistance to change” as a normal, healthy reaction to threat, rather than an unwelcome nuisance from difficult individuals?

Third, can we become more skilful in our facilitation of change by providing genuine opportunities to explore what the issues really mean to us, to truly dialogue with each other, listening as well as talking? Can we undertake to meet our colleagues in their own myths in order to better support them, uncovering the areas of commonality which will help us connect and move forward together, respecting, valuing and using the individuality which marks us each as uniquely different?

If our organisations were really the “learning cultures” which are talked about so often, then we would see these questions as posing learning opportunities so fertile that moving towards a more complex and sensitive understanding of reactions to change would be an offer we just could not refuse.

We can all develop a rather static mythology, both as individuals, and collectively in organisations. As the unseen beams in familiar structures, our myths are taken for granted, outside our awareness, and in the face of threat that natural rigidity tends to intensify:

We cannot change our personal myths overnight, nor should we; but accepting the relativity of personal meaning, we can purposefully and self-critically bring these myths into greater awareness. When we begin to see our myths as productive, as the best understanding we can achieve at the moment, we can create opportunities for challenging and further exploring their value and we can experience the excitement of refining, elaborating, deconstructing and re-building them. [5]

## References

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