

The use of personal narratives to improve organisational life

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Can personal narratives enhance organisational life? Andy Armitage and Alan Thornton carried out a piece of research where they used their own experience of university life as data, and created an on-going narrative between themselves as a source of personal and organisational reflection. Such deepening connections could do much to enhance organisational life.

IT seems a common and necessary aspect of organisational life for people to engage in conversations with colleagues in which concerns they have about their organisation can be aired. These conversations often have a therapeutic value where individuals can 'get it off their chest'. However, does this go deep enough? This can be valuable in itself, but in addition, what if such exchanges were analysed and interpreted in order to dig deeper into our real concerns. Could such methods, either as research or as an active part of organisational practice, help in finding humane ways of alleviating such concerns and improving organisational life? We carried out an experiment between us to discover what would happen.

What are personal narratives?

Personal narratives are the stories of individuals. They can be spoken or text based statements or conversations that allow people to express their ideas, feelings, perceptions and experiences of life in a free, open and expressive manner. Usually we share and exchange stories of this kind with people we trust and this can happen in our working lives as well as in our private lives. These stories are often intimate and personal and sometimes must remain private. However they are sources of rich, fertile data. When they refer directly or indirectly to professional life they can reveal the genuine concerns of individuals. Revealing information of this kind requires trust and respect between the people concerned. Such exchanges must take place in an environment where individuals allow each other to be open, honest and candid.

With the appropriate consent, such stories can have real utility in organisational and practice-based research. Narrative exchanges provide insights concerning what ‘really matters’ to people and can expose perspectives of organisational life that are not always revealed by other traditional research methods such as interviews, focus groups, observations and questionnaires, or which in organisations are not reached at through traditional types of meetings which are so often goal-focussed.

The personal narrative in practice

As colleagues working in the same organisation we were inspired to embark upon a journey to investigate our working lives that differed from the usual forms of interaction and discourse and decided to conduct our own narrative exchanges through conversations and letters related to organisational life. We did this because we both had a concern to unearth hidden truths of how we work that are not normally spoken about in everyday encounters. This required us to create an environment of trust between us so that we were not afraid to discuss personal and intimate things of how we saw our own realities of the world. This we did explicitly before we embarked upon our journey by stating to each other what we both expected from each other and what we wanted to get out of the process. By a process of agreement, we arrive at a position where we both felt comfortable to express our innermost feelings to each other within the confines of a safe environment. This was liberating for us in at least two ways. First, it allowed us free expression and second it allowed our exchanges to transcend the ‘normal boundaries’ of discourse. This freedom, similar to ‘brain storming’ techniques, opened up possibilities of approaches to organisational problems and personal creativity. This was because we were not bound by pre-defined rules of engagement and allowed our exchanges to be expressed more by imagination and our inner feelings without regard to what the other might think of the other in an expected pre-defined manner.

Initially we expressed our thoughts concerning the appraisal system. This was of common concern to both of us and we both had different perspectives of its function. However, it became clear within the space of only a single exchange that the appraisal system was symptomatic of a deeper problem of organisational domination and the diminution of the powerless individual who felt helpless

in the face of the rules, regulations and procedures. We found that organisations do not respect individual liberty and freedom to create beyond the bounds of its pre-defined boundaries. It ignores or shuns those who dare to violate its pre-determined norms.

When traditional qualitative data collection approaches are used in research, there is always the possibility that researchers will introduce their own assumptions and pre-suppositions into the data collection process. Added to this researchers may assume a position of power with respect to their respondents. Also a

respondent may not trust researchers and refrain from talking about sensitive issues. Personal exchanges escape these objections because they are conducted between two ‘equals’ who have a relationship of trust, transparency and honesty between them.

This requires that researcher-researched intercourse, that entails object and subject exchanges, is moved onto the more neutral ground of subject-subject exchanges. Whilst this has resonance with participatory research approaches and those that reside with Action Research, the difference in our

exchanges was the privacy and intimacy of discussions that took place. Whilst traditional research approaches might appear to be emancipatory, there is still a power relation between the researched and the researcher. Our exchanges removed this vital barrier – we were simultaneously both researcher and the researched that meant our personal attitude to ourselves and to each other were not mutually exclusive, but mutually inclusive. We found that narrative exchanges of this type were the true essence of dialogical processes whereby they gave insights to both our inner lives, not only as colleagues but also as individuals. In many senses this became not only a way to elicit hidden data from the life of the organisation, but it provided a therapeutic outlet whereby we could as colleagues and individuals come to terms with the situation we found ourselves in the organisation and allowed us to make sense of ‘how it worked’.

Of course, there are a limited number of contexts in which this can be applied in terms of research, but in fact there are many opportunities for introducing it in organisations, where peers can

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talk to peers. Action Research has a long history in such contexts, but this can also be subject to issues of power. The particular one-to-one method that we chose had some great advantages in building up depth and trust, and rendering our experience in the workplace more meaningful – if not necessarily less challenging. One of the most enjoyable and important aspect of this short exchange is the insights it gave us both into our inner lives, and to what extent this was mirrored or met in our university.

A means of introducing ethics into organisational life

We consider ethics as the right of individuals to pursue their own lives to full potential and fulfilment without harming others. Values that individuals hold at the core of their being are immutable and usually include: independent and intellectual freedom; the upholding of people's contribution to society and organisational life; and self worth. Such values represent the integrity of individuals and should not be open to compromise. This challenges us to question how social justice is administered within the work place and how individuals can reach their full potential as human beings. Enabling and empowering people necessitates a code of ethics by which an individual's life is the ultimate standard of value. We believe that narrative exchanges offer the possibility for an individual to feel liberated without fear of retribution, whose voice is audible and who is valued as a member of the organisation.

Quite how this is managed in organisations is yet to be fully articulated and practised. Some organisations undoubtedly offer better conditions and more openness for this to take place. Other organisations, with more short-term aims may see the profit motive as the only aim and fail to recognise the benefits of real communication. However, in these times of crisis, where change is happening faster than anyone can predict, can we afford not to have methods where our communication can deepen, and slow down enough to create a truly shared trajectory? At the very least, they offer the possibility of engaging at depth, and finding a place to articulate a values base.

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To conclude

We are now living in a changing economic environment and we radically need to define new ways of working with each other. We need to unfreeze the potential of individuals that lies dormant within our organisations. This is what is called a ‘critical’ turn whereby personal narrative is valued, allowing for self-discovery and the recognition of the individual within the organisation. Personal narratives can actually question the hierarchical and bureaucratic structure of organisations and engage with the motivations and concerns of individuals.

AN IDEAL ORGANISATIONAL LIFE

From our conversations we would like to offer a definition of an ideal for organisational life:

We would wish an organisation to engage in practices that uphold ethical and moral values in the pursuit of individual liberty and freedom. The organisation supports and creates working environments where individuals can critically judge business and management practices without fear of retribution. It upholds and respects the dignity of an individual by giving them a voice and meaning to their social and work environments in their pursuit of intellectual freedom, fulfilment and expression of thought.