

Talk and Action – Team Mates Not Rivals!

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Currently, in Western management circles, action is almost universally seen as being superior to talk. "Action orientation" is the stuff of leadership; whilst talk is more likely to be equated with indecision and the antithesis of doing. It might be more useful, though, to adopt a perspective that sees talk and action as interdependent - team mates, not rivals, in the quest for improved organisational performance:

- Talk sets the context within which action takes place. Failure to understand the critical link between context and action is, perhaps, one of the main causes of poor 'follow through' and failed initiatives.
- Talk articulates the visions and themes that inspire and energise action.
- Talk helps to mobilise and sustain the commitment to action.
- Talk is essential to the effective implementation of action: aligning effort, solving unforeseen problems and charting progress.
- Talk validates action, by defining what constitutes "success" and determining which results deserve recognition and comment.
- Talk builds the relationships and creates the mutual understandings that pave the way for future actions.
- Talk extracts the learning from action - enriching the organisation's knowledge and increasing the ability of its members to decide and act more effectively in the future.
- Talk can avoid the damaging - and potentially fatal - actions (such as the premature launch of the Challenger space shuttle), which occur when the political or cultural pressure for action suppresses vital information.
- Talk helps to build the coalitions and new mindsets that are the key to effective organisational change: "If you . . . want to change the way people think, you do it by changing the way they talk. . . [giving them] new stories and myths to tell and retell to each other." (Paul Bate, *Strategies for Cultural Change*, Butterworth-Heinemann, 1995).
- Talk about purpose, values and overarching goals enables people to anticipate and respond to actual events, rather than those that might have occurred if the 'real world' had been kind enough to comply with the assumptions made in formal plans and budgets.

Talk is not simply a ritual precursor to action, even where action-taking is its intended outcome. People who fail to follow through on workshop-generated action lists do not lapse into some form of suspended animation. They continue to act - and to talk! But they do so in ways which sustain the status quo, rather than carrying out the supposedly 'agreed' actions.

Organisations unavoidably comprise networks of ongoing, self-organising conversations, through which managers' actions are interpreted, inferences drawn and cultures embedded. What is required, therefore, is more talk not less. But it needs to be talk that emerges from the shadows and into the open; talk that exposes and explores the "undiscussable" issues that block action; and talk which shares the new stories and myths that encapsulate the desired future.