

The Parliament of Formal and Informal Coalitions

A guest article for **The Change Journey**,
describing one of the 'locations' on the Change Journey Map¹

by Chris Rodgers

The Parliament recognizes that life in organizations is inherently political - a complex social process of people constructing the future together through their everyday conversations.

Par-li-a-ment: From *Parler (Fr)* "to speak". At their core, organizations are nothing more than people interacting for a purpose – or, more accurately, for a range of purposes. Some of these interactions take place in the formal arenas of the organization and follow formally designed processes, systems and procedures. Many more take place informally. The latter might include, for example, pre-meeting get-togethers to agree positions on issues; whispered asides or 'nods and winks' during formal meetings; water-cooler gossip; corridor conversations; private discussions; social interactions; and so on. Through this ongoing process of 'local' (i.e. one-to-one and small-group) interaction, people make sense of the world and decide how they are going to act. And it's through the widespread interplay of these local conversations and interactions that formal designs, plans and programmes become established; coalitions of support for change are built; cultural assumptions become embedded; and overall outcomes emerge.

Formal Designs - 'Coalitions of Co-operative Effort'

The formally designed structures, systems and processes are intended to bring people together to deliver outcomes in line with management's intentions and the official ideology. This includes people both within the formal 'boundaries' of the organization and those beyond (such as partners, suppliers and other 'external' stakeholders). The belief is that a coalition of co-operative effort will form around the stated intent, as people behave rationally in pursuit of the organization's goals. People might be inspired to act in organizationally beneficial ways because they are attracted to the goals themselves. Or they might be incentivized by other means to follow the intended course. Either way, with the formal structures, systems and processes in place, conventional management wisdom assumes that 'doing these things better and getting them right' is the way to ensure success.

Underlying Dynamics

However, a number of factors intervene to affect the ways in which these sought-after changes happen *in practice*.

- To begin with, all organizational designs incorporate two fundamental *and opposing* requirements that make political activity inevitable and outcomes uncertain. That is, they divide up responsibility for carrying out the specified tasks and, *at the same time*, require these separate groups to act together to achieve the organization's overall objectives. This simultaneous need to differentiate contributions and integrate outputs accounts *both* for the functional value of organization *and* for its underlying political dynamics. In effect, you can't have one without the other.
- Secondly, every individual is unique. They have different histories, are involved in different networks of personal and professional relationships, and face differing 'real time' demands. As a result of this, people inevitably see things differently, value things differently, and act differently 'in the moment'.
- Thirdly, regardless of how precisely the formal designs might be specified, these will always be subject to local interpretation by *specific* people, at *specific* times and in *specific* circumstances. How people make sense of what's going on – and the meaning that they take from formal initiatives - is therefore crucial to what actually happens 'on the ground'. *And this is not within the gift of managers to control*. Even in a so-called "command-and-control" regime, these sense-making conversations are self-organizing. In the moment of their everyday interactions, people decide why, when and how they are going to talk about things; what they are going to say; and to whom they are going to say it. Outcomes emerge from this dynamic web of interactions, according to the sense that people make of what's going on and the actions that follow from this.

¹ The Change Journey: <http://www.changejourney.org/>. The Change Journey Map is © Vesa Purokuru and Holger Nauheimer, 2010.

- Fourthly, the more that people make sense of things in particular ways, the more likely they are to continue making sense in similar ways going forward. That is, patterns of assumptions emerge and become taken-for-granted ways of seeing, thinking and acting. This patterning process tends to channel ongoing sense making, imperceptibly, down established 'pathways'. On the one hand, this enables people to go on together, by creating high expectancy that things will proceed in culturally familiar ways. At the same time, this same self-organizing, patterning process tends to inhibit cultural change.
- Finally, change inevitably involves shifts in power, ideology and identity, as people navigate their way through this diverse mix of formal and informal interactions. Because of the in-built structural tensions and diverse perspectives, different interest groups exist in relation to organizational issues. Some of these reflect the agendas of formal functional groupings. Others are issue-specific or based on informal relationships. Also, all significant decisions require choices to be made about how best to use limited resources. Taken together, these differing interests coupled with resource constraints make tension and conflict central to the ways in which organizations operate in practice. Dealing with these constructively is what the political dimension of organizational dynamics is all about. As such, it needs to be at the heart of managers' change-leadership practice.

Informal Coalitions – Individual Action Mobilizing Collective Action

Even if the formal designs of structures, processes and systems could be stated unambiguously and interpreted as intended, some of the resulting political activity would be directed towards *changing* these formally established ends and/or means, not just accommodating them.

As a result of the *natural* processes outlined above, people tend to coalesce informally around themes that dominate their local conversations and which 'ring true' to them. They then act on the basis of the meanings that these have for them. If the dominant themes are aligned with managers' formally stated intentions, then it is more likely that the latter will be realized in practice. However, if these themes run counter to the official line, then other outcomes will undoubtedly materialize. Crucially, *these dynamics will happen with or without managers' active involvement*. The only meaningful choice that managers have, therefore, is whether or not to engage with them in a deliberate and informed way. Even then, despite acting with intent, neither they nor anyone else can control what actually emerges.

Building *active* coalitions of support for change, by engaging purposefully with this ongoing conversational process and seeking to shift the nature and patterns of interaction, is what change leadership is all about. This means that 'talk' (including what managers 'say' through their *everyday* behaviour) is the most powerful *action* tool in a manager's change-leadership 'toolkit'.

As the conversations change, so does the organization.

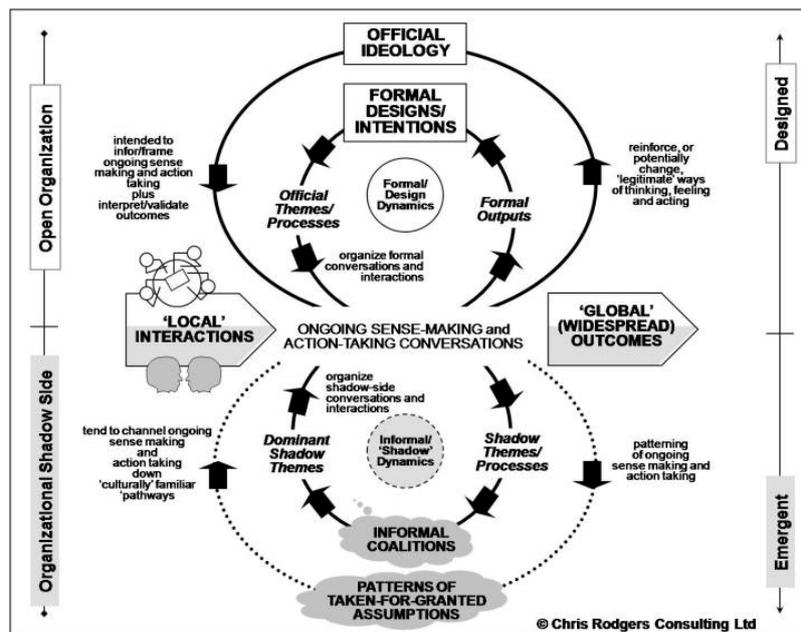


Figure 1 – Outcomes Emerge from Everyday Conversations and Interactions

QUESTIONS FOR DEEPER EXPLORATION

- **Formal organization.** In what ways are the formal structures, processes and practices enabling or constraining achievement of the desired change?
- **Cultural assumptions.** What taken-for-granted assumptions might be inferred from people's observable behaviours? How might these assumptions be helping or hindering the change process?
- **Managers as role models.** What specific things are managers doing - *and not doing* - that are reinforcing these patterns of taken-for-granted assumptions? What might they usefully do differently?
- **Shifting the conversations.** Who are the key players in this ongoing conversational process? Which people always know 'what's going on' and how people think and feel about planned changes? Which individuals are having the most significant influence on local sense-making and action-taking? How might local leaders 'tap into' these conversations and help shift them in organizationally beneficial ways?