Narratives of Organizational Change within the Amsterdam Social Service

Martha Horvers & Gepke Joosten

VU University Amsterdam

Dept. of Organizational Sciences

m.m.horvers@vu.nl; gepkejoosten@gmail.com

"I expect that DWI needs to cut back even more because the new government will make it more difficult for our target group and for ourselves…I even expect that maybe I have to consider to quit my job at DWI if the facilities are being cut back so far that we can hardly motivate people to go to work." (job coach, November 2012)

This employee of the Department of Work and Income of the Amsterdam municipality (Dienst Werk en Inkomen DWI) lends a sense of drama to current and anticipated developments in the organization. He believes that the current political and economic climate in the Netherlands will worsen the situation for members and clients of DWI, which grants social benefits to those in need. He also believes that the current changes initiated by the DWI management will hardly help to improve the staff's motivation and commitment to the organization.

In response to changing legislation, recent national and municipal economy measures and the decreasing labor market, DWI aims to develop into a 'learning organization'. In 2011 the DWI management launched a four year organizational change program with projects such as 'Lean Management' and 'Appreciative Inquiry' to become more flexible, effective and efficient. The pros and cons of these change processes are heavily debated within the organization, with members either championing, resisting or accepting the instigated changes. Some claim that it hardly constitutes 'change'. An organizational change advisor for the Lean project for instance, plays down the effects of lean management for change recipients: "Lean management is a method which can rely on a very broad acceptance. Because of its simplicity people don't experience it as an obstacle." Some indeed accept the change. As a member of the Employees Council explains: "I think change is always possible as long as you take employees' ideas into account and involve them in the process. (…) If there is no public support people don't commit to the organization" (December 2012). Some others are less optimistic: "They tell us they want our input for improving and renewing work processes but I'm pretty sure they have already developed them themselves" (client manager, December 2012).

This paper reports on the initial results of an ethnographic study of organizational changes within DWI. The paper examines how organizational members make sense of these changes and tell different stories about its aims and effects. Sensemaking refers to processes of narrativization. Our versions of reality take a narrative form and stories are means of interpreting and infusing events with meaning

(Rhodes and Brown, 2005 p.170). According to Stake (2003) a narrative perspective allows the researcher to study what people find ordinary or extraordinary in happenings, settings and in expressions of value. It is through studying stories or narratives people tell within the organization that we may come to a sophisticated understanding of working lives (Brown, 2006; Rhodes and Brown, 2005 p.177).

In this paper we respond to Sonnenshein's (2010) call for investigating the underlying reasons organizational actors give for promoting or opposing change. He argues that we need to focus not only on members' negative or positive embellishing of an organizational change, but also on the reasons why members offer a positive or negative account. By delving into the underlying stories members tell about change, we might be able to show, for instance, that organizational actors evaluate organizational change similarly and yet have very different reasons for this evaluation. By implication, organizational research needs to provide more in-depth accounts of employees' meaning-making of organizational change. In-depth insights into the variety of stories organizational actors tell might also help practicing managers tailor change implementation tactics to very different constituencies, such as those who think the change goes too far and those who think the change does not go far enough (Sonenshein 2010: 503).

This research is in its initial stages. Preliminary findings show the gap between change agents' and change recipients' narratives of organizational change. Change agents tend to construct positive narratives on change processes whereas the majority of change recipients is skeptical. We aim to analyze the various discursive strategies DWI members employ to instigate, support, oppose, deny, or doubt change. By offering an account of the complexities of change as a discursive struggle, we aim to provide in-depth insights into the underlying reasons organizational members provide in their narratives of organizational change and continuity. Since DWI is under high pressure to change, such in-depth knowledge can also help change agents to adjust communication, content and techniques used to bring about change.

References

Brown, A.D. (2006). A Narrative Approach to Collective Identities. *Journal of Management Studies*, 43 (4), pp.731-753.

Rhodes, C. and Brown, A.D. (2005). Narrative, organizations and research, *International Journal of Management Reviews,* 7(3): 167-188.

Sonenshein, S. (2010). We're changing – or are we? Untangling the role of progressive, regressive, and stability narratives during strategic change implementation, *Academy of Management Journal,* 53(3):477-512.

Stake, R.E. (2003). Case studies. In Denzin, N. and Y. Lincoln (red.), *Strategies of Qualitative Inquiry*.California: Thousands Oaks pp.134-164.