

**ARTICLE**

## **A discursive approach to organization development**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This article presents a conceptualization of organizational discourse as situated symbolic action that is then illustrated through an analysis of a meeting of senior managers during an organization development intervention. This perspective encourages a more holistic understanding of organizational contexts and offers an actionable framework to help make sense of workplace episodes and choose appropriate interventions. The ways in which action research was conceptualized and applied are also discussed.

### **KEY WORDS**

- action research
- organization development
- organizational discourse
- situated symbolic action

## Introduction

This discussion draws on ideas from the emerging field of organizational discourse to suggest a novel perspective that can be used to assess organizational situations and guide action choices. The specific context for the discussion is a meeting of the top management of a high-tech organization to decide on a new business model. One of the authors participated in the meeting in the role of an organization development consultant. An action research orientation, wherein the consultant is both an active participant and reflective observer, was used to reflect on and analyse the data and events. Some of the issues associated with an action research orientation in this instance are also identified and discussed.

We begin with a brief discussion of organizational discourse and how conceptualizing discourse as *situated symbolic action* helps to address important challenges and advances thinking in the field. This is followed by a discussion of the action research orientation used in the study. An extended discussion and analysis of the meeting based on a layered consideration of what the participants said in terms of ‘discourse as action’, ‘discourse as situated action’, and ‘discourse as situated symbolic action’, is then presented. Finally, the implications of augmenting organizational discourse and organization development frameworks with a discourse as situated symbolic action orientation are presented.

## Conceptualizing discourse as situated symbolic action

The term *organizational discourse* has come into use in the past decade to broadly define an emerging orientation in the organizational and social sciences. In organization theory the term connotes an eclectic variety of approaches based on a range of disciplines where the central focus is the role of language and linguistically mediated experience in organizational settings (Marshak, 1998). Whether focused on discourse, text or other abstract media, discourse analytic approaches are now used to study many aspects of managerial and organizational phenomena (Grant, Hardy, Oswick & Putnam, 2004). With these developments have also come scholarly questions about the theoretical, methodological and empirical limits of the current approaches used in organizational discourse (e.g. Grant & Hardy, 2003).

Specifically, several scholars have called for the development of discourse analysis approaches that not only consider discourse and text as data sources, but that are more sensitive and holistic, paying attention to how nested levels of context interrelate and interpenetrate with the discourse (Hardy, 2001; Keenoy, Oswick & Grant, 1997). In this context, and with the organizational level of analysis in mind, we propose an approach for addressing the integration of text, context and symbolic meaning through conceptualizing organizational discourse

as *situated symbolic action*. This conceptualization draws primarily on speech act theory, rhetoric, ethnography of communication and social constructionism.

### Discourse as action

Austin's (1962) speech act theory offers an influential statement of *discourse as action*. Austin's work challenged the traditional assumption of the philosophy of language, that 'to say something . . . is always and simply to *state* something', that is either true or false, and developed the influential thesis that 'to *say* something is to *do* something' (Austin, 1962, p. 12, emphases in original). Extending Austin's speech act theory, Searle (1975) introduced the notion of indirect speech acts where the connection between the intended meaning and the utterance is not clear and direct. In addition to being highly influential in the philosophy of language, the insights of speech act theory formed the theoretical foundation for discourse pragmatics, the study of language-in-use (Blum-Kulka, 1997).

Even though speech act theory has laid the groundwork for understanding discourse as action, it essentially remains at the micro level of single utterances without extending to the broader level of discourses as bodies of texts pervaded or patterned by structural features (Heracleous & Barrett, 2001). Nor does it explicitly address context. So, for example, speech act theory does not readily apply to what van Dijk (1977) has termed 'macro' speech acts, or Alvesson and Karreman (2000) term 'grand' or 'mega' discourses.

### Discourse as situated action

Rhetorical analysis provides a contextually sensitive approach that can contribute significantly to viewing *discourse as situated action*. Rhetoric can explore holistically the situation, the audience, the rhetor, and textual features such as structure, temporality, and metaphor, not for their own sake, but to discover how rhetorical discourse can influence actors' perceptions and interpretations by eloquently and persuasively espousing particular views of the world (Aristotle, 1991; Gill & Whedbee, 1997). Rhetoric aims to explore the 'dynamic interaction of a rhetorical text with its context' (Gill & Whedbee, 1997, p. 159). The important influence of the context or situation on what should and could be said was highlighted by Aristotle's definition of rhetoric as 'an ability, in each particular case, to see the available means of persuasion' (Aristotle, 1991, p. 36).

Ethnographies of communication (Hymes, 1964) offer further support for a view of discourse as situated action, emphasizing that discourse cannot be adequately understood, or appropriately produced in separation from its context of use. In an organizational context, Samra-Fredericks (2003) has employed an ethnographic approach combined with conversation analysis to study how everyday discourse links to the accomplishment of strategy. Hymes (1964) has

proposed several useful contextual elements for understanding communicative events; the participants, channels, shared codes, setting, messages, and topics. Furthermore, the embeddedness of discourse in its context is not limited to the immediate situation, but is nested in wider social and cultural systems (Gumperz & Levinson, 1991).

### **Discourse as symbolic action**

Constructionist approaches present *discourse as symbolic action*, viewing reality as a social construction and individuals as symbol creators and consumers (Morgan & Smircich, 1980). Berger and Luckmann suggested that social reality is known to individuals in terms of symbolic universes constructed through social interaction. They viewed language as the ‘most important sign system of human society’ (1966, p. 51), the primary means through which ‘objectivation’, the manifestation of subjective meanings through actions, proceeds. Language makes subjective meanings ‘real’, and at the same time typifies these meanings through creating ‘semantic fields or zones of meaning’ (1966, p. 55) within which daily routines proceed. Searle (1995) more recently provided a further landmark rendition of social constructionism in his view of institutional facts as language-dependent. Discourse, in addition, creates mental frames that are ‘metacommunicative’ (Bateson, 1972, p. 188), simultaneously highlighting certain meanings and excluding others. Discourse is thus not simply symbolic, but at a broader level of framing evokes particular associations through connotation (Phillips & Brown, 1993) and invites others to view the world in these terms.

Discursive construction takes place through social interaction; in the organizational context it occurs when organizational members ‘author’ their experiences in the process of interacting with others, simultaneously constructing a shared sense of their identities, their organization, and of appropriate ways to discourse and act (Cunliffe, 2001). Language, in this perspective, does not simply mirror social reality but constitutes it, creating conditioned rationalities as widespread ways of thinking within particular social systems (Gergen & Thatchenkery, 1996).

## **The emergent process of action research at Systech**

### **Background**

In the Spring of 2002 one of the authors met with the President and Vice President, Human Resources (HR) of one of the major divisions of Systech (all names have been disguised) to discuss possible organization development interventions to address a number of issues. These included pressures from the

President's boss (the Group President) to change the organization's operating structure and culture, integrate a recent acquisition, and create alignment on business strategy within the top team of executives. At that time, detailed information about the situation and the actors involved was provided and recorded in notes taken during and immediately after the interview discussion. Shortly thereafter, however, the budding project was 'indefinitely delayed', according to the VP, HR, 'because the President was too consumed with the operational issues of a new work program'.

No further contact occurred until almost six months later when the VP, HR called to request help for a critical meeting that would take place in a few days. The VP explained that 'the President decided at the last minute that a good facilitator was needed otherwise the meeting could be a real disaster; and you know the background and seem to have the skills'. After agreeing to help out on extremely short notice, additional information was provided by an Assistant to the President and the President himself in a further telephone conversation. The main objective of the meeting according to the President was to 'get everyone aligned around a new business model being advanced by my boss'. The President went on to say that 'the meeting could be very difficult because most of the top team will be opposed to the proposed new arrangement and I'm not so sure about it myself'.

For the meeting the requested form of organization development was process consultation, or, in other words, to facilitate and make process interventions so as to help the group of executives reach the stated objective of achieving alignment around a new business model (Schein, 1969). This type of consulting work requires more than good meeting management skills, and depends on the facilitator's competencies to quickly 'read' individual, group and organizational dynamics while making choices in real time about how to intervene. Running notes as to the events, impressions, quotes of participants, and 'hunches' were kept during the meeting by the facilitator as a way of tracking developments as they emerged. More detailed notes and reflections as to emergent themes and patterns were recorded after the session in preparation for further interventions; and as a means of reflecting on and interpreting what took place in the meeting.

### **An action research orientation**

This consulting episode at Systech presented us with an opportunity to test and illustrate our conceptualization of discourse as situated symbolic action. Our approach is consistent with viewing *action research* as a process of both helping organizations as well as gathering data for further scholarly reflection and potential contribution to knowledge, wherein the researcher is an active, reflective participant in whatever effort is underway (e.g. Checkland & Holwell, 1998; Dash, 1999; Dickens & Watkins, 1999).

Although the organization development consultation was not originally conceived as a formal action research project, upon reflection we realized that the data collected would be valuable in illustrating how the perspective of discourse as situated symbolic action could prove useful for organizational discourse analysis. In addition, it could help us illustrate how this perspective can aid both managers and organization development practitioners in gaining a more informed, contextual understanding of organizational situations, thereby better informing their actions and interventions. As Eden and Huxham note in their discussion of the process of action research:

. . . this is not intended to imply that the researcher should have a precise idea of the nature of the research outcome of any intervention at the start. Indeed, since action research will almost always be inductive theory building research, the really valuable insights are those that *emerge* from the consulting process in ways that cannot be foreseen. Whilst it is legitimate for an action researcher to enter a consultancy interaction with no expectation about what the research output will be, it is crucial that an appropriate degree of reflection by the consultant is built into the process, and that the process includes a means of holding on to that reflection. (1996, p. 81)

### **Ethical dilemmas in action research**

There can be a number of ethical dilemmas associated with action research, relating to such issues as participant selection, divergences in the needs and interests of organizational actors and researchers, or anonymity and confidentiality of information provided (e.g. Walker & Haslett, 2002). The dual purposes in action research of combining interventions with research, and whether participants are fully aware of the research aspects of the process, however, are not generally considered to be key dilemmas. According to Huxman and Vangen, ‘. . . the approach does not imply inherently that the practitioners in the researched organization should be concerned with – or even conscious of – the research aspect of the intervention’ (2003, p. 385).

Similarly, in our case, meeting participants were not aware that the facilitator’s working observations and notes might later serve as field notes for an academic article. This was not possible as, at the time, the data were not intended to be utilized as such. However, we believed that the organization should be informed of any research relevance arising from the consultation. Consequently, a draft of this article was reviewed by the Vice President, Human Resources on behalf of Systech who both validated the description and analysis of the episode as well as approved publication as long as the names of the organization and participants were disguised for confidentiality reasons.

### **Action research as a methodological approach**

Some concerns about the action research approach include the low reproducibility of setting and findings, limitations on the means of collection and documentation of data, and the manner in which the personal interests, knowledge and competencies of the researcher influence the research (Huxham & Vangen, 2003). These apply to some extent in any research effort. Within the context of the action research approach, it would be impossible to replicate the setting given that it is a live, actual organizational situation with all its inherent complexity. What matters therefore is to document as much relevant data as possible, as accurately as possible given the circumstances, be reflective on what the data mean, apply a thoughtful analytical framework to the data, and arrive at some valid insights that contribute to knowledge in some significant way. In our case, the perspective of discourse as situated symbolic action was applied to arrive at a nested, additive interpretation of the episode.

Some of the important advantages of action research that were applicable in this case include being taken 'behind the scenes', being afforded access to sensitive information and to the participants' real experience as it was happening. It also provided access to contextualized and live organizational settings which afforded rich data not obtainable through isolated and segmentalized laboratory experiments or surveys (Huxham & Vangen, 2003; Schein, 1987).

### **Role and orientation of the facilitator**

An additional dimension of this particular project was the role and orientation of the facilitator. As previously noted, this role required making real-time process observations, interpretations and interventions as events unfolded. The diagnostic and intervention actions of the facilitator, which are usually based on knowledge of group and organizational dynamics, were in this case also augmented by a discursive orientation to organizational phenomena. The facilitation was therefore also guided by in-the-moment interpretations and hypotheses about the meaning and impact of the emerging group narratives. In that sense, the action research question constantly being asked during the episode was 'How can I best understand the dynamics of this situation based on the actors' talk, in order to best facilitate the desired outcome?' This orientation was to an extent naturally occurring, given that the facilitator is also a scholar with an interest in organizational discourse. As will be discussed later, one of the ways to best understand what was happening overtly and covertly was to consider the discourse surrounding the episode as situated symbolic action.

## The Systech new business model meeting

### The context

Systech is a large, global computer systems and information technology (IT) corporation. Historically it was a primary provider of computer hardware and support services. In more recent years it expanded its system engineering, IT, and systems consulting services to become a major provider of information systems hardware, software and consulting services.

In 2002, the Advanced Services Division (ASD) of Systech expanded its consulting capabilities by acquiring an operating unit consisting of some 180 people from Consultco, a large management consulting company. These people were added to the existing ASD workforce of about 1500 people. The acquisition was spearheaded by Group President John Duke, a former partner at one of the 'Big 5' accounting/consulting companies, who was hired in 2001 to head up the consulting services area for Systech. Duke's vision was to transform the more hardware and systems engineering 'products' strategy of ASD into a high end 'consulting services' business model.

Following the traditional 'Big 5' model, he envisioned a business operating model wherein highly compensated Principals were responsible for P&L and all products, services and ASD employees associated with a particular client organization. In this model most of the actual client work is done by lower paid and more junior consultants, thereby achieving significant leverage and profitability for the services provided under the auspices of a Senior Principal. This was different from the traditional Systech operating model wherein Business Development (BD) and Sales Managers were responsible for bidding on and selling contracts which were then fulfilled through different functionally organized, operational Business Units (BU). There were also Customer Relationship Executives (CRE) to help coordinate different interfaces, while ensuring service and delivery to the client organization. Duke's principal-led business model would dramatically alter the relatively balanced power of the BD, CRE and BU managers in favour of Principals (most of whom would come from the ranks of the newly acquired Consultco employees), change the delivery operations of ASD, and impact the traditional culture(s) of ASD and Systech by placing greater emphasis on leveraging and profitability over technical depth and product/service development. It would also tend to alter the traditional distribution of power, status and rewards within ASD that was based on technical expertise and distributed across multiple functional areas, towards a much steeper and narrower distribution in favour of principals.



## The actors involved

To initiate the new principal-led business model, a meeting of the top executives of ASD was set up so that 'issues could be worked through and agreements reached'. The meeting would be chaired by Sam Klein, the President of ASD, who reported to Group President Duke. Attending the meeting would be President Klein's direct reports and key staff. These included Lance Collins, Senior Vice President of Business Development and Sales; Steve Grant, Senior Vice President and Managing Principal; John Marshall, Vice President of Operations; Ron Hogan, Vice President of Sales; Cal Ramsey, Vice President of Business Development; and Mark Flowers, Vice President of Human Resources. All the participants, except Steve Grant who was the former Managing Partner of the newly acquired Consultco unit, had between 12 to 30 years' tenure with Systech.

An external consultant was asked to facilitate the meeting to help ensure it was as productive as possible since the general expectation of everyone was that it would be a highly contentious and unproductive session. In preparation for the session, Mark Flowers provided the consultant with further background information about the situation and also commented that 'It had been decided that John Duke would not attend the meeting for two reasons. First, because of his domineering personal style and second to insure that President Klein and his team would accept and implement the new model on their own.' In addition, it was thought that the new member of the ASD team, Steve Grant, who had recently headed up the acquired Consultco unit, would be able to fully describe the principal-led business model. Flowers went on to say that ASD President Klein was expected by Duke to implement the new principal-led business model even though Klein and the other members of the team were openly sceptical about it. Flowers concluded by observing, 'Didn't we just buy Consultco? If the consulting model is so good and our model so bad, how come we bought them? We should be calling the shots.'

## The showdown and implicit negotiation

President Klein opened the meeting by introducing the facilitator and stating that 'the purpose of the meeting is to discuss how to take ASD forward' and that 'first and foremost we have to remember that the customer's first!' There was no mention of the new principal-led business model. Different participants then offered comments about what had to be addressed with most agreeing that 'motivation and morale are so low we could start losing people'. After about 30 minutes the facilitator interjected that he thought morale was an important topic, 'but wasn't the purpose of the meeting to address the new business model?' President Klein said nothing, but Steve Grant began to explain the proposed principal-led business model. Almost simultaneously, Lance Collins said that

Systech ‘couldn’t have a principal-led model because it is a publicly held company not a partnership’. Both Grant and Collins continued to give virtually simultaneous ‘speeches’ for a few minutes before the facilitator stopped the interaction and summarized the points each was making as a way to document the different considerations as well as to invite more listening and understanding.

The pattern of virtually simultaneous speeches, for and against aspects of the principal-led model, given by Grant and Collins and then summarized by the facilitator, continued for another 30 minutes or so with the other participants, including President Klein, mostly quiet or asking a few clarifying questions. The breakthrough in the meeting came when Steve Grant in a conciliatory voice acknowledged to Lance Collins that, ‘Yes, things are different in Systech than in Consultco and maybe some responsibilities should be shared.’ Lance Collins quickly remarked, ‘You’re right’, and began to discuss how things could be shared. Everyone then joined in with a burst of team productivity and quickly developed a new option where a matrixed ‘Integrated Strategy Team’ for a client organization would be convened by a Principal and include the relevant Business Development, Customer Relations, and Business Unit managers, who would continue to report within their own organizational units. This integrative business model, as several of the team members remarked, ‘seemed to capture the best of both the new and the old ways of operating’.

### **Naming the new business model: should it be ‘principal-led’?**

The participants were pleased and surprised at their agreement and ability to work together on fleshing out the Integrated Strategy Team model. At this point Mark Flowers wondered if the model could just be called ‘the Business Model’ and to drop the term ‘principal-led’ entirely ‘because it would be unnecessarily provocative’. This sparked some discussion that came to a halt when President Klein said ‘John Duke expects it to be called principal-led and he would not be happy if it was called something else.’ This generated considerable push-back from all the other participants, including Steve Grant, who said ‘the model we just agreed on was one of shared responsibility and saying it was principal-led would be misleading’. The meeting adjourned with general agreement that the new way of working should be called ‘The ASD Business Model’. It was proposed by Lance Collins and agreed to by all that Steve Grant should be the one responsible for writing up a summary of the ideas, concepts and agreements from the meeting, coordinating with Lance Collins as needed.

A week later when President Klein’s office distributed the summary report after clearing it with John Duke the title read ‘The ASD Business Model (Principal-Led)’. Naturally, this caused uncertainty whether or not Duke indeed accepted the substance of the proposed integrative model. A summary of the flow of events is provided in Table 1.

**Table 1** Sequence of events

<i>Contest</i>	<p>Group President Duke, a newcomer from a 'Big 5' consulting company, directs ASD President Klein to implement a new 'principal-led' business model.</p> <p>Debate ensues between Grant, a newcomer from Consultco, and Collins, a 30-year Systech veteran, over existing and new models.</p> <p>Other meeting participants remain mostly quiet.</p>
<i>Transition</i>	<p>Grant acknowledges to Collins that: 'Yes, things are different in Systech than in Consultco and maybe some responsibilities should be shared'.</p> <p>Collins agrees and offers some ideas which leads to a burst of productive energy by everyone.</p>
<i>Collaboration</i>	<p>Everyone participates in developing a new integrative business model combining features from the current and proposed 'principal-led' business models.</p> <p>Grant, the newcomer, is invited to summarize the meeting.</p> <p>The name 'principal-led' is intentionally dropped as too controversial and no longer accurately representing the adopted model.</p>
<i>Coda</i>	<p>Group President Duke via ASD President Klein reintroduces the label '(Principal-Led)' in the name of the ASD business model.</p> <p>Re-introduction of '(Principal-Led)' leads to uncertainty as to whether the Group President accepts the substance of the integrative model.</p>

## Analysis and discussion

When we examine the Systech episode from the three key frames of analysis – discourse as action, discourse as situated action, and discourse as symbolic action – we discover that each adds a further layer of meaning to create a more holistic understanding of what went on in the meeting. Although these layers are presented sequentially, they are intended to provide a nested, complementary, and additive analysis. The raw material for this analysis comes from the consultant's field notes taken before, during and after the episode. The analysis is also informed by knowledge of the interactional and organizational contexts acquired through the intervention experience.

### Discourse as action

At the level of discourse as action, we might note the indirect introduction of the meeting by President Klein, not mentioning its purpose, and posing 'customers first' as a superordinate goal. President Klein in this case may have been intending to start off the meeting by seeking to encourage unity, bearing in mind the divergent positions and political stakes that were involved. The relative silence by President Klein for the remainder of the meeting is also open to a range of interpretations, ranging from pre-existing intentions to give others a chance to own

the issues, a desire to avoid conflict or confrontation, or even passive resistance to the new business model initiated by Group President Duke. The engagement by all participants in a discussion of declining motivation and morale could again be seen as an attempt at group unity and/or avoidance of the underlying conflict in the group. Both the style and substance of Grant's and Collins' remarks, in addition, could be seen as argumentative attempts to demonstrate that their positions were the right thing for the organization. This level of analysis of discourse as action focuses primarily on who said what and what they seemed to be overtly intending to achieve.

### **Discourse as situated action**

In viewing discourse as situated action we must add several frames of context to more fully understand the actors' intentions and their effects. In addition to the interactional context of the meeting, we have to add the organizational context and the broader industry context. The meeting was mandated by Group President Duke to initiate a principal-led business model. Duke came from one of the 'Big 5' accounting/consulting companies and had joined Systech less than two years earlier. Duke had initiated the acquisition of the Consultco unit where Steve Grant had been the Managing Partner. Duke intended to change the Systech Advanced Services Division's operating model and culture in line with his previous experience in a major accounting/consulting firm.

President Klein was a 23-year Systech employee charged with implementing this new business model. It might be inferred from his silence and introduction to the meeting that he was perhaps manoeuvring to not get caught in the crossfire between his new boss and his old colleagues. Lance Collins had 30 years experience at Systech and as head of Business Development and Sales had the most to lose in power, status and rewards with a change to a principal-led model. It was hard to ignore in this context the irony that the relatively small, newly acquired, Consultco unit (represented by Grant) was now positioned by Duke to tell the much larger acquiring Systech ASD how to do business. Ultimately, then, the meeting was about power, change and adaptation; that is, a power struggle between old-timers and newcomers over the appropriate operating structure and culture of Systech. Would a new, principal-led business model advocated by newcomers win out over the interests of the old-timers? Was this model indeed superior to Systech's pre-existing model?

### **Discourse as situated symbolic action**

Finally, in viewing discourse as situated symbolic action, we go beyond the specific words and view the discursive exchanges at the meeting as a symbolic 'showdown' between the proposed new culture and power arrangements and the

established culture and power arrangements of Systech ASD. The initial discussion in the ASD team about low motivation and morale could be interpreted as an unconscious projection or an indirect means of expressing their own sceptical feelings about Group President Duke's intentions.

From a symbolic perspective, Grant and Collins can be seen as champions of each camp engaged in combat over power, prestige, respect and validation, in addition to the business future of ASD. After initial tests of strength, Grant's concession that, 'Yes, things are different in Systech than in Consultco and maybe some responsibilities should be shared', was a pivotal moment. That comment may have simultaneously signalled willingness to compromise and an acknowledgement of the legitimacy of the established ASD culture and its managers. In the context it is important to note that it was the newly acquired Grant representing the new business model who made the initial conciliatory remark. This was reciprocated by Collins and an understanding of how to share power in an integrated model containing aspects of both the old and the new models was quickly reached by everyone.

Thus, at a symbolic level, the participants worked out their relative power positions in ASD and the framework for how to integrate or blend the old and the new. Group President Duke, however, who was not part of the symbolic negotiation, would not necessarily agree with the negotiated outcome. Duke's absence may have allowed the agreement to be reached, but not necessarily carried out, at least in name.

At the level of the symbolism of words, the label 'principal-led' was a focus of debate, not only because it would influence existing power arrangements by symbolizing who would have the power to control the sales and delivery process, but because it summed up and evoked in a single word the entire contest between old-timers and newcomers over the future business model and culture of ASD, including all the associated thoughts and feelings of the involved participants. The later re-introduction of '(Principal-Led)' into the title of the meeting report suggests that further negotiations with Duke may be needed to see if the substance of the new integrated model is, indeed, acceptable. Table 2 presents an outline of the above discussion.

## **Conclusions and implications**

Conceptualizing and analysing discourse as situated symbolic action has a number of significant, interrelated implications. First, it can help to respond to some of the key challenges facing the field of organizational discourse. Second, it encourages a more holistic and discourse-sensitive understanding of empirical contexts by organizational researchers, in line with the tenets of methodological approaches such as action research. Finally, viewing discourse as situated sym-

**Table 2** Discursive outline of Systech episode

<i>Discursive context</i>	<i>Discursive action</i>	<i>Discursive symbolism</i>
Group President Duke hired from a Big 5 consulting firm.	ASD President Klein introduces meeting without mentioning the new business model and posing customer satisfaction as primary goal.	Attempt by ASD President to encourage group unity and avoid conflict.
Group President aims to impose a new, 'principal-led' business model based on professional services consulting model.	Participants begin to discuss low motivation and morale in ASD.	Archetypal struggle between old-timers and newcomers over future of Systech-ASD.
Systech acquires an operating unit from Consultco.	Debate between Grant and Collins over 'principal-led' versus existing business model.	Contest between Grant and Collins, two leading representatives or heroes of each camp, to see which business model will win.
Advanced Services Division (ASD) meets without Group President to discuss new business model.	Grant acknowledges that the current model has value and the principal-led model may need to be modified.	Grant, hero of the newcomers, 'yields' by acknowledging legitimacy of the old-timers and their ways of doing business.
ASD President Klein and top team are sceptical about the new model.	The entire team works to create a new, integrated model that is then labelled 'The ASD Business Model'.	With the contest over status, legitimacy and future directions settled, the entire team works on integrating the old and the new in a collaborative business model.
President Klein pressured by Group President Duke to change the Division's business model and by his team to resist this change.	Grant is invited to summarize the meeting.	
	Announcement one week later by the President's Office of 'The ASD Business Model (Principal-Led)'.	Newcomer Grant is invited to write up a summary of the new integrative model as a sign of trust and acceptance.
		Despite team agreements within ASD, the Group President's power and determination are asserted when the label '(Principal-Led)' is re-inserted in the name of the new business model.

bolic action offers an actionable framework to organizational actors and organization development practitioners for making sense of workplace episodes and selecting appropriate interventions.

### **Responding to organizational discourse challenges**

In terms of organizational discourse, our analysis confirms the well-accepted insights that ‘discourse’ cannot be adequately understood and interpreted in the absence of contextual knowledge; and that linguistic labels are more than just names, having the power, through their symbolic connotations, to influence interpretations and actions and thus social reality. Beyond that, however, the view of discourse presented here can potentially help to address some key challenges in the field of organizational discourse.

One key criticism of organizational discourse has been its lack of clarity with regard to the parameters of the field and in the specification or definition of the concept of discourse itself (Grant, Keenoy & Osrick, 2001; Keenoy et al., 1997). Alvesson and Kärreman, for example, suggest that ‘we cannot help sometimes feeling that the word discourse is used to cover up muddled thinking . . . Discourse sometimes comes close to standing for everything, and thus nothing’ (2000, p. 1128). Conceptualizing discourse as situated symbolic action can potentially contribute to addressing this challenge by providing a structured perspective that draws from well-established theoretical domains in philosophy (speech act theory, rhetorical analysis), anthropology (ethnography of communication) and social science (social constructionism). This perspective can potentially supply researchers in organizational discourse with an additional framework with which to theoretically ground the concept of discourse and with a contextually sensitive approach for conducting empirical discourse analyses.

A further main criticism of organizational discourse is that it is too abstract, an ‘intellectual self-indulgence with no practical payoff’ (Grant et al., 2001, p. 10). On the contrary, our analysis helps to illustrate that organizational discourse can be compatible and complementary with more applied approaches to social science such as action research. Furthermore, this approach to discourse can help managers and organization development practitioners interpret both the literal and the symbolic aspects of discourse and interaction in particular organizational contexts in order to make more appropriate interventions.

### **More holistic understandings**

In terms of empirical research in organizational settings, adopting a situated symbolic action perspective has a number of potential advantages. First and foremost it supports an integrative and practically oriented approach to research consistent with the purposes of action research as originally conceived by Kurt Lewin

(1947). Lewin intended action research to help address the inherent limitations of studying complex social events in a laboratory as well as the artificiality of separating out single behavioural elements from an integrated system (Foster, 1972). Lewin advocated the study of social dynamics ‘not by transforming them into quantifiable units of physical actions and reactions, but by studying the inter-subjectively valid sets of meanings, norms and values that are the immediate determinates of behaviour’ (Peters & Robinson, 1984, p. 115). Action research is intended to describe holistically what happens in naturally occurring settings, and to derive from these observations more broadly applicable principles or actionable knowledge (Argyris, 1996; Perry & Zuber-Skerritt, 1994).

By postulating that discursive events have integrated and contextualized literal and symbolic components, a discourse as situated symbolic action perspective is supportive of the action research orientation by inviting a more holistic consideration of social phenomena. Additionally, it provides the action researcher, who is also a participant, with a dual applied and theoretical orientation to support a more reflexive stance as to the context and meaning of unfolding events. This helps to address a lacuna in the field of organizational discourse, the ‘challenge to incorporate the insights of discourse analysis into diagnostic and intervention strategies’ (Marshak, Keenoy, Oswick & Grant, 2000, p. 246).

### **Actionable framework**

Lastly, a discourse as situated symbolic action perspective is potentially useful not only from a scholarly perspective but also from an action-oriented perspective. This is achieved by providing a holistic framework for making sense of the meaning of discourse and action in workplace contexts and thereby offering clues for appropriate interventions given the situation and context at hand. Incorporating this perspective into ways of interpreting both individual discourse and group dynamics could be especially useful when working in complex and emotionally loaded situations similar to the Systech episode; and where organization development practitioners and senior managers must make intervention choices in real time based on diagnosis and interpretations of what may be happening on both the literal as well as the symbolic levels. In short, we are suggesting that organizational actors read situations with an eye on group and organizational dynamics while simultaneously listening with an ear for discourse as situated symbolic action.

As an illustration from the Systech episode, let us consider how the silence of all participants except Grant and Collins could be interpreted and what the appropriate responses by the facilitator could be. If the silence was interpreted as literal silence from the participants (because they were introverted, or because they did not want to fight for air-time), then the standard intervention might be to attempt to draw out the silent participants and/or temporarily quiet down



Grant and Collins: ‘OK, we’ve heard enough from you two for now, how about hearing what others may think?’ If the silence was contextually interpreted as perhaps reluctance to speak openly in front of their boss, Sam Klein, or in front of each other, then an appropriate intervention might be more geared towards creating greater safety and openness: ‘Let’s establish some ground rules for these discussions. First, everything said here will be confidential and there will be no retribution for anything said. Do we all agree? What else would you like to add?’ Finally, if the silence by everyone except Grant and Collins was symbolically interpreted in the context as waiting to see the outcome of an archetypal form of single combat between the champions or heroes of the old and the new ways, then intervention choices might be focussed more on ensuring a fair fight: ‘Let’s summarize what each of you is saying. Grant’s position is . . . , Collins’ position is . . . ; is that correct? What criteria are important in assessing this situation?’

As situated symbolic action, Grant’s remark that, ‘Yes, things are different in Systech than in Consultco and maybe some responsibilities should be shared’ becomes one of the critical moments in the episode. As such, the facilitator might initiate interventions to reinforce the concession and also ensure, if possible, that it was reciprocated by Collins in order to lead to a more ‘win-win’ negotiation/discussion: ‘Hmmm. So you, Grant, are saying that there are some differences here in Systech that need to be acknowledged by whatever business model is implemented; and you, Collins, are agreeing and suggesting that one possible way to share responsibilities is to . . . Can we all describe more specifically a shared responsibility model we can all agree upon?’ If, on the other hand, the facilitator interpreted the statement as simply a comment from one of the more outspoken members of the group then an appropriate response could have been to ask others to add their inputs or perhaps to make no intervention at all. This might have led to more views being expressed or more silence, but the opportunity to underline the importance of the comment (in the symbolic context) and to get an immediate acknowledgement and reciprocal statement would have been missed.

### Concluding remarks

We offer our view of discourse as situated symbolic action as an additional perspective or lens in the emerging field of organizational discourse with the intention that it will help contribute to the field’s vibrancy and promise. At the same time, we hope it will also help to address some of the field’s current challenges, including encouraging more research that integrates a scholarly orientation with applied concerns, as we have sought to do through the action research orientation of this paper. Finally, we also hope that this perspective will contribute to the practices of action research and organization development while helping organizational actors interpret discourse and action in more contextually

sensitive, symbolic ways, thereby improving their ability to assess situations and make appropriate interventions.

## Note

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