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The Generative Foundations of Action in Organizations: Speaking and Listening

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The Generative Foundations of Action in Organizations: Speaking and Listening

Robert Dunham

We can see organizations newly as shaped by generative acts, based on the perspective that language is generative, not just descriptive. Speaking and listening produce action and coordination of action, as well as possibilities, identities, purpose, and worlds. The organization will be more effective when it integrates the generative capabilities of people into its conceptions of the organization, and not limit itself to mechanical and process paradigms. An organization can be understood as a network of commitments generated and maintained in a network of conversations, and communication and coordination includes the body and emotions, which are all shaped by history and practices. 'Taking care' is the fundamental aspect of action that brings meaning, value, and satisfaction. You can enhance your impact as a coach and leader in organizations with generative skills.

Organizations must produce effective, cohesive teams and aligned organizational action from its membership of individual performers. How do we get people to work and coordinate together as effective teams? When we coach people in organizations not just as individuals, but as members of the organization or as teams, we must connect the individuals to the context of the purposes and commitments of the organization. To accomplish this, we must have a generative framework for producing the relationships of organization members to the organization, and to each other in the networks that form the organization. By “generative” I mean distinguishing and producing the actions that produce the desired outcomes. A *generative* interpretation is opposed to a *descriptive* interpretation, where outcomes are described but the actions to produce the outcomes are not clear.¹

Part of our generative perspective is that organizations exist to produce some kind of outcome, for the sake of some purpose. People in organizations come together to make and fulfill promises that are beyond what individuals can fulfill, and they must coordinate their actions to be effective in fulfilling the commitments and purposes of the organization. The organization must make and fulfill relevant offers and produce competitive value for the customers, clients, and stakeholders of the organization. The organization members must overcome a host of inescapable breakdowns that arise in doing so. There is tremendous waste in most organizations due to incomplete, unclear, and uncommitted communication, making the organization

¹ All the content, distinctions, descriptions, interpretations, and explanations in this paper come from my work developed since 1981, and is presented in my workshops, programs, and unpublished papers.

experience one of friction, difficulty, and dissatisfaction. Just how do leaders, managers, and the members of organizations and teams overcome poor communication to produce effective action - how do they generate it?

With all the vast work that has been produced to address organizations, management, and leadership, I believe that this question still lacks a powerful response in the current mainstream common sense. We explore this question with the criterion that we are looking for a generative foundation for action in organizations. New foundations that have been developed over the last three decades provide potent answers and make a strong contribution to the theory and practice of management, leadership, coaching, and organizational dynamics. And in order to answer this question well, meaning that we meet our generative standard, we must address even deeper questions, including “what is action,” “what is an organization,” and even “what is a human being.” These questions are not theoretical or irrelevant. Far from it. We already live our default answers to these questions, and these answers shape our possibilities, actions, outcomes, and futures. Only by paying attention to the answers we are already living and by taking the questions seriously can we open the room to develop more rigorous and powerful answers.

ORGANIZATIONS – WHY SPEAKING AND LISTENING?

The territory in which these questions and answers will be explored is the territory of generativity. What is generative, and what are the elements for making things happen, producing action, and generating outcomes? In this territory we find that speaking and listening are fundamental to action and being generative in organizations.

Yet mainstream conceptions of communication regard it as descriptive, not generative. Communication is considered to describe things, not generate them, to be the transfer of information, with an emphasis on good presentation rather than listening skills. Language is interpreted as providing names and describing what we see in the world. Conversations are seen as necessary to transfer information or provide descriptions, but are wasteful of time and energy as we commonly experience in unproductive meetings. Real action and productivity is considered to come from focusing time on needed activities, getting to work and not wasting time on conversations talking about the work.

We are going to engage with an understanding of language different from the mainstream: that language is generative in addition to being descriptive. We will focus on the aspects of language and communication that generate action, and thereby results; generate possibilities, meaning, value, and satisfaction for ourselves and others; and even generate moods and emotions in our experience. From this perspective we will discover how

the structure and dynamics of organizations inescapably involve the full dimensions of a human being in life, taking action and living in care, and how we can understand organizations from the generative acts of the people in them. This will not only open a rich, relevant, and valuable framework for coaching, but is a foundation for management, leadership, and understanding the challenges and power of how we come together socially in the world to take action and produce the futures we care about.

I'm going to give you a tour of generative perspectives that have been developed over the last thirty years by myself and my colleagues, including Julio Olalla, the founder of the Newfield Network, inspired by the original work of Fernando Flores and others, and often referred to as the *ontological* tradition. As you read, I invite you to open up to exploring new territory, looking at a new way to look, and to not get too caught up in trying to fit this new territory into what you already know. This can produce new eyes with which to see. Although the perspectives and distinctions that we will encounter may be clear, and even simple to understand, as in any field it may take years of practice to become skillful in action with them.

REVIVING THE ORGANIZATION

The mainstream understanding of organizations has evolved over the last five hundred years - the period referred to as modernity - and particularly over the last two hundred years, within modernity's emphasis on rationality and mechanical metaphors in which the world became understandable as material and mechanical processes. More recent developments, such as quantum physics, chaos and complexity theory, postmodern philosophy, and biological systems approaches have opened new conversations about how to think about organizations, but the mainstream common sense is still dominated by the mechanical thinking of processes, cause and effect, and analytical models. For example, knowing how our nervous system works doesn't change the challenge and opportunity of facing our future, our choices, our relationships and world, our cares and the consequences of our actions with others.

We have the opportunity to go beyond the perspectives of human beings as "resources," "units of production," and mechanisms in processes. We can reconnect to the lived experience of action in organizations and to the generative foundations of organizational actions and results arising from human beings. This generative perspective illuminates and enables more effective actions and practices in organizations by focusing on and recovering the human acts that generate our outcomes, actions, interactions, and experience. Rather than assume that our internal experiences, moods and emotions are disconnected, or should be disconnected, from our actions, we see that our moods and emotions are fundamental to shaping our actions and our possibilities for action and outcomes.

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With this generative approach we have the opportunity to re-humanize business and the organization, in order to produce better businesses, organizations, communities, and futures. By saying this, I do not mean that business, organizations, technology, or mechanical and analytical frameworks are bad or inhuman. All of these domains are very human domains of action. The issue is that many current interpretations and leadership styles focus on people primarily as units of production or mechanisms and leave out the generative potential of people, and thereby limit the true generative potential of businesses and organizations, no matter how successful they appear to be. By bringing the full human being back into our work and organizational paradigms we are not engaging in an either/or contest with technology and/or the mechanisms of business processes. Rather we are bringing back and reintegrating the value of committed and aligned action by people based on a pragmatic foundation for effective action. We are reviving the organization.

By reviving the organization, we are enhancing the ability of organizations to generate value, satisfaction, meaningful work and valuable offers in their markets and communities. Only people, not mechanisms or processes, can provide passion, innovation, ownership, accountability, relationship, improvisation, coordination of action, teamwork, leadership, and taking care – exactly what organizations and their customers need and want. We need to go beyond considering these as “soft” skills, by which people often mean that they are unreliable, perhaps irrelevant, and messy. These skills are the foundation for all the results of an organization, including the development, management, and maintenance of “hard” processes. We can now distinguish new regularities that make these behaviors more observable, executable, and learnable.²

For example, in the popular work of Jim Collins with his books *Good to Great*, and *How the Mighty Fall*, he distinguishes the regularities his research revealed of common patterns of behavior, strategy, and focus in organizations that led to uncommon success or to faltering and failure. Our generative perspective can help us translate those strategies, decisions, and patterns of behavior into the originating conversations and conversational skills that produce them. The generative aspects of language and human interaction are not discretionary techniques. They are at work in all of us, and in every organization. They are the root cause of our successes, and our failures.

My colleagues and I have consistently seen improvements of results in organizations that have put appropriate focus on engaging in more generative conversational practices. One organization went

² The term “regularities” is a term of observation and design referring to structures of reality that we can observe. For example, chemistry distinguished the regularities of materials, physics of energy and action.

from not being able to get new products updates out the door to releasing updates to thirty five products on schedule every six months with improvements in quality by a factor of ten. Another organization improved their net margins by five percentage points in six months. Another organization went from delivering products late with low quality to on time with excellent quality³.

These and many other examples show that this is not about softening the organization. Rather, it creates a more effective organization because it allows people to see and eliminate waste from communication, coordination, and teamwork. It also brings forth people's awareness of and engagement in more generative behaviors, and empowers people to elevate their impact as managers, leaders, and professionals. To do this, it is important to understand how we create action in language, how we connect to care in order to create meaning and value, and how we shape the commitments and actions of teams and organizations.

GENERATIVE LANGUAGE

The relevance of speaking and listening for organizations, leadership, and coaching is to recognize the generative power of language. One way that language is understood in our current age is as a description of our world, a set of linguistic tokens for entities in reality, a medium for the transfer of information. Much research in language has worked in this framework - that words correspond to entities and phenomena in the world. We see that a word like "chair" corresponds to an artifact by that name in the world. As I have said, this perspective hides that *language is generative*, not just descriptive. Language has the power to generate action, the outcomes of action, possibilities, commitment, identities, opinions, and much more.

In the 1940's the philosopher John Austin at Oxford pointed out that we perform acts in language that are not descriptive, but that generate commitments and the future. He discovered that when we make a promise, for example, we are not describing something in the world. Instead we are making an act, and the act is one of commitment – showing what the speaker is committed to – for the future. A request is a similar act, in which we do not describe something, but we make an act that shifts the future through the commitment that is spoken, listened, and asked for. Austin called these linguistic acts "speech acts."⁴

Rather than assume that our internal experiences, moods and emotions are disconnected, or should be disconnected, from our actions, we see that our moods and emotions are fundamental to shaping our actions and our possibilities for action and outcomes.

³ These example companies are Motorola Computer Systems; Market Intelligence, which has since been acquired; and one of the largest software companies in the world. There are many other examples from our work in companies over the years, and from the work of students in the Generative Leadership Program offered by the Institute for Generative Leadership.

⁴ His work was further developed by John Searle at the University of California at Berkeley, incorporated by Fernando Flores into a discipline he called Ontological Design, and extended by myself and others.

Speech and listening acts

There are six fundamental speech acts that we can distinguish in any language:

- Requests – asking for someone to perform;
- Promises – committing to an outcome for someone else;
- Offers – extending a promise to perform, if accepted;
- Assessments – opinions, which shape the requests and promises that are made;
- Assertions – claims of facts that evidence can be provided for; and
- Declarations – speaking that brings something into existence, e.g., when a judge declares a verdict, a manager hires or fires, when we accept a proposal of marriage, or we make a commitment.

Action is coordinated with the speech acts of requests and promises. The acts of requests and promises do not arise with particular words, but with how the acts are listened to as asking for action, of committing to action, and of making agreements. A request can be made with a wave of the hand, and doesn't need words, but it is still interpreted as a request to act, such as "come here." It is still a "speech act" as it shows up in the interpretation of the listener. If we are more rigorous, we can see that this is a "*listening act*," not just a speech act. Every speaking produces a listening in a listener. Listening is shaped by the history, standards, culture, practices, and interpretations of the listener. As a speaker, we provoke the nervous system of the listener, and they can only listen what their nervous system can distinguish. My grandfather spoke only German, which I never learned. No matter how carefully he spoke, my structure and nervous system could not distinguish what he was saying. He could not speak in a way that produced communication in the structure of my nervous system.

The example of someone speaking in another language may seem obvious, but in organizations people use the same words and there is an assumption that they are communicating. Yet common words have different interpretations by different listeners, and the unspoken background and context of people's listening varies. What people interpret by the words "action," "team," "management," and "leadership" can vary greatly. In other words, no matter how well we speak, it does not predictably determine what is listened. The skill of effective communication is not fundamentally the clarity or brilliance of our speaking. It is the ability to listen to the listening of the listener, and to adjust how we speak in order to connect and communicate. *Speaking effectively is a skill in listening* in how others listen to our speaking.

Because of a cultural assumption that words have definitions and meanings, we find that the emphasis in communication in our culture is still to use the right words. This takes our attention away from where it needs to be: on the listening. We can see that coordination, the foundation of action and results in organizations, is being initiated and shaped by how the members of an organization engage in “speech acts” and “listening acts.” The claim that is important to understand from this point of view is that speaking and listening, and speech and listening acts, are not discretionary techniques to be learned or applied. They are fundamental parts of human behavior that is going on all the time already, and they shape our understanding, actions, and outcomes.

Speech and listening acts meet our criteria for what is generative, which is that these are acts that we can see and do, and are already part of our reality - they are not abstractions, metaphors, or models. They produce our futures, generate action, produce what we see and do, and the outcomes we produce. The speech and listening acts are a powerful and accessible entry point into observing and learning to produce generative action.

OTHER GENERATIVE DIMENSIONS

Effective communication, coordination, and leadership are based on the skills of listening to what you are provoking in the listening of others. Our cultural common sense is that “listening” and communication happen in language, but there are additional dimensions of communication and coordination to which our culture has been largely blind. How we listen to each other and the world, what we see, what our reactions are, and what actions we take are based on the interconnections of various aspects of our being human that include:

- Language
- Body and Embodiment
- Moods and Emotions
- History
- Practice

When we listen, all of these dimensions are concurrently present as part of our listening. Although we have language to distinguish each of these dimensions separately, they are always all present together. When we act, they are all part of our embodied expression of action. A change in any one of them affects all the other dimensions. For example, when we are in an emotion, e.g., anger, corresponding narratives, body shapes and dispositions show up. How we react to and embody our anger is based on our history and practice with it. If we change the narrative, the body and emotions will shift. If we change the body, the narrative and emotion will shift. When we change the emotion, the body and narrative shift. The changes are an intervention in our history and can be the beginning of a possible new practice, which will lead to a new embodiment, and so on.

The skill of effective communication is not fundamentally the clarity or brilliance of our speaking. It is the ability to listen to the listening of the listener, and to adjust how we speak in order to connect and communicate.

As coaches, and as leaders, seeing these interrelationships opens a powerful new way to see people and the world. Our cultural common sense and rationalistic tradition has us privilege and attend to the dimensions of language and cognition, ignore body and emotions as interference, and interpret language as the transfer of information. The generative way of seeing, what we call being an “observer,” sees these dimensions as a unity. What we pay attention to is the *coherence* of these dimensions in any individual. Body, emotions, and language are present in every moment. History and practice are ways to understand how a person’s coherence has been shaped, and what is shaping them. *This is not a discretionary model.* This perspective reveals aspects of our reality that are already there to see.

At first glance, this set of dimensions and their interrelationships may look complex, but as with any discipline they become clear, familiar, and straightforward through practice. Experiments by Albert Mehrabian at UCLA demonstrated that when people were asked what they paid attention to when listening to another speak about their feelings, on average they reported fifty five percent of their attention went to the face, thirty eight percent of their attention went to the tone or mood of the speaking, and only seven percent of their attention went to the words. These results have been misinterpreted and generalized by some to be percentages for all communication, which they are not. However, while the percentages of attention vary in different types of communication, the listening in all communication is shaped by the dimensions of language, body, and mood to the degree they are attended to or missing for the listener (Argyle, Salter, Nicholson, Williams, & Burgess, 1970; Mehrabian, 1972, 1981).

In my teaching of generative leadership, coaching, and communication I have pairs of people do an exercise where they speak only the words “I will” to each other. They must produce at least ten separate meanings being communicated from how they say the words by modifying their tone and bodies. It’s easy for them to see where “I will” can mean “I won’t,” “you’re crazy,” “sure I will,” “count on me!” and so on from variations in tone and body. From this perspective, by leaving any of the dimensions out of what we observe will produce the consequences of blindness, not seeing what is there and reducing our capacity for effective listening and action.

We can better understand the interrelationships of these dimensions when we realize that language, emotions, and the shaping of our bodies all occur in our nervous systems. We are biological and, therefore, embodied beings, and our nervous systems respond to the perturbations of our environments, including language (Maturana & Varela, 1987). What we see, how we feel, and what we do are based on our personal and family histories and experiences, our learning and training, our background, as well as the history of the culture of the communities we live in and have lived in.

Practices deserve particular attention, since they are missing from most of our mainstream education and learning approaches, where concepts and understanding are what is taught. Practices are how we learn and what shapes our capacity for action. From the perspective of the body and embodiment, *we are what we have practiced, and we are becoming what we are practicing*. Practice is not just a “thing to do.” Our bodies are biologically always practicing, always learning, always coping with what is presented to them. Practicing does not mean going to the gym, since we are already always practicing. The relevant questions are “what am I practicing, and is it producing what I want or need in my embodied skills?” Any skill area is a product of embodiment and practicing, and this is a powerful perspective to coach from (Strozzi-Heckler, 2007)⁵. What practices are my coachees already in? For example, what do they ignore and avoid? What practices do they need to engage in, in order to be more capable to produce the actions, outcomes, futures, and experience of life that they care about?

*If we change the
body, the narrative
and emotion will shift.
When we change the
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and narrative shift.*

SEEING ORGANIZATIONS WITH NEW EYES

As human beings, we always live in the world that we can see. We also live with what psychologists call “cognitive blindness.” Blindness is the condition where we don’t know what we don’t know. For example, I have not been trained as a physician, so I do not have the distinctions, the “eyes” to see what a physician sees. The physician sees bodies differently than I do. I don’t know what I don’t know about what physicians see – I’m blind to what they see. The same is true with any set of distinctions and skills - we either participate in them, are ignorant of them (meaning we know that we don’t know), or are blind to them – they don’t exist for us.

We are in an historical era where our cultural mainstream is blind to the generative dimensions that surround us. Some few people who are naturally talented have some facility with generativity, since these are regularities of our reality, but we have not had the mainstream discourse to reveal these regularities to our cultural common sense. We need new distinctions to give us new eyes to see with. We need new practices to open up new capacities for action through embodied learning.

For example, only after Pasteur discovered germs could we see that they were there already before he discovered them. Prior to Pasteur, as a culture we were blind to germs. We just didn’t have the eyes, nor the linguistic distinction “germ,” to see them. In the same way, speech and listening acts are always going on, triggering interpretations and reactions, shaping coordination, and shaping the results that people have and haven’t produced. We just have to develop the skills to observe and hone them. There is a cost to not

⁵ Richard Strozzi-Heckler’s discipline of somatic leadership outlined in his book *The Leadership Dojo* is a powerful development of these principles.

being able to observe key regularities in our reality, and when we distinguish a new domain of regularities, we also open up a new domain of design.⁶

Before Pasteur discovered germs, physicians and health care workers didn't have the standard practices of washing hands and hygiene. They cared, they worked hard, and then spread germs and infections blindly. Physicians did the best they could with what they did know. But the mortality rate for women in child birth was much higher in hospitals than out of hospitals. New practices of antiseptics were developed based on the knowledge of germs to curb the spread of germs by physicians as they were trying to heal and cure. The new practices produced new and better results.

The same thing is happening in our organizational life. Because our mainstream culture is blind to fundamental regularities of how action is generated in language and listening, we have leaders, managers, and professionals who care, are committed, try their best, work hard, and wind up producing negative results because they don't know how to see the "germs" (the speech and listening acts) that generate the actions and results they are engaged in. We have some talented leaders and managers with a natural sense of what works, but there is an immense opportunity to improve the overall performance of organizations, the value of professional work, and to reduce the waste and friction of organizational life that is so common in today's world. The improvement is achieved through new awareness, standards and practices based in the generative aspects of speaking and listening. Through generative speaking and listening we have the opportunity to provide a more rigorous foundation for management, leadership, professionalism, and action in organizations.

COACHING IN ORGANIZATIONS

When we coach and lead to affect the results of an organization, we need to not only bring our skills for coaching individuals, we also need a context to understand the individual's role in the organization and a context for the organization itself. I mention coaching and leading together, because they overlap. Leaders must coach to build effective teams, and coaches must lead to get others to engage in new behaviors.

We must understand that an organization must have certain concerns addressed for it to succeed, or even to exist. One of these concerns is how action is coordinated to produce results⁷ (Maturana & Varela, 1987; Winograd & Flores, 1986; Searle, 1969). This is always part of the relationship between the organization and the individual within it.

⁶ Fernando Flores articulated this connection between new regularities and opening a new domain of design.

⁷ The coordination of action is an area with deep foundations of research and thinking. The coordination that happens through speech acts, for example, is rooted in our biology.

Organizations exist in order to produce an outcome. When organizations are unclear about this, they falter and perhaps disappear. The necessity to take care of an outcome requires certain kinds of actions within an organization. Coordination of action requires certain kinds of conversations. In general, the identity, power, and relevance of an individual in an organization are determined by the perceived value of their capacity for action to take care of the concerns of the organization, to contribute to the organization fulfilling its purpose.

When we coach someone in an organizational setting, a number of concerns are common. We can focus on the concerns of the individual, breakdowns they face, their ambitions in the organization, or their issues with their experience and life in the organization. However, their relevance in the organization will always show up in the context of how others see them enable the fulfillment of the commitments of the organization, or not. There will ultimately be some assessment of the value of a person and their role in an organization. I say “ultimately” because there can also be periods where the local dynamics in an organization shift attention elsewhere for a number of reasons, and the organizational purpose can be eclipsed by more local concerns. Over time, the purpose of the organization will either demand addressing the contributions people make to the actions, commitments, and purposes that drive the organization, or the organization’s existence will be in jeopardy.

How do we produce value in organizations and value for the people in the organization with our coaching? How do we take care of the concerns of both? In order to answer these questions, we need to come back to the purpose of the organization to produce an outcome, and how the people in organizations engage in that purpose and produce that outcome. This brings us to speaking and listening as the unavoidable source and foundation for all action and coordination in organizations.

THE ANATOMY OF ACTION

If we look at our cultural mainstream understanding of action, we see that our common sense is that action produces results. This common sense is a product of our history with science and technology, and dominates our understanding of action today. To show that this is an interpretation we have only to note that in prior eras, results came from the will of the gods, not just human action. In our organizational life, we are constantly looking for how to improve our actions to improve our results, but we tend to restrict our interpretations for action to movement and activity. We need a more fundamental understanding and new interpretations of action.

A generative view of action shows how action itself is generative and shaped. The perspective that has been opened by speech acts is that commitment shapes action. This perspective is valid and

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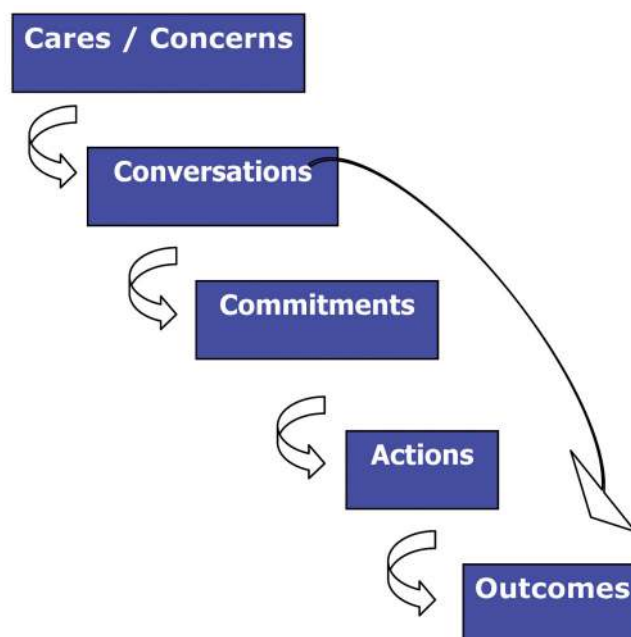
useful when we are speaking of intentional action, particularly the actions of coordination that are fundamental to organizations. There are other categories of “action” that are not intentional. For example, having a physical event such as a heart attack or epileptic fit is not “action” from this point of view, it is reaction. We can also see that habits, particularly those outside our capacity to change, don’t necessarily reflect commitment. These demonstrate the challenge of linking action to commitment. But this perspective provides us with a crucial claim about intentional action, which addresses the acts made by people in coordinating action:

Action is shaped by commitment - by the commitments we make or don’t make, the clarity of the commitment, and the ownership and importance of the commitment to the person committing.

This is crucial for our understanding of action in organizations, because *the fundamental unit of work in organizations is the agreement*, not the task. Agreements are commitments. Where do these commitments come from? They always arise in conversations. This is particularly obvious when they arise in interaction between people.

Commitments arise in conversations, particularly those of coordination between people.

Even commitments with ourselves arise in conversation, or can be traced back to an earlier conversation. This reflects the structure of relationships that I call the Anatomy of Action, shown in Figure 1.



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Figure 1. The anatomy of action

When we bring this perspective to observing action, we see that it is not a technique or a model, but that these relationships, these regularities, are there to observe in the actions and conversations around us. This brings us to a crucial claim for understanding how we generate action in organizations:

All results, both individually and socially, have as their root cause prior conversations, conversations which are had, conversations which are missing, conversations that are performed well or poorly.

We care because we have a future, and we have assessments of futures we want and futures we don't want.

This is a powerful claim that emphasizes the pragmatic relevance of the generative perspective – that all results are ultimately shaped by conversations and the skills of conversation. Conversations are not just language, but interactions that involve and are shaped by the body and emotions as well, and have a background of history and practice. The Anatomy of Action is a fundamental set of relationships that are foundational for management, leadership, organizational action, and coaching. This is not just a model. These relationships are not discretionary. They exist in reality if we have the eyes to see them, and we will pay the penalty of blindness if we ignore them. This perspective gives us a generative place to look for how to generate, shape, influence, and produce the outcomes and results that we and others value.

In the Anatomy of Action we also see the role of Care. We can care about our results, about our commitments, and our actions, or we can carry them as burdens, obligations, and fall into compliance rather than commitments. We can bring our care and concerns to our conversations, or have our conversations only be degraded discussions of transactions and activities. The quality, power, and effectiveness of all our actions depend on our relationship with care.

THE PRIMACY OF CARE

We need to understand the fundamental role of care in conversations and in human life. In the common sense of our current culture, care has been compartmentalized as an emotional state or a personal experience regarded as separate from organizational action. It may be an important personal experience, but our cultural common sense says that actions occur in the external world and are connected to movement and activity. In organizations we commonly find that what is cared about is only the outcomes of action and not the experiences of people in the process. This leads to limited focus on the numbers and measures, activities, and “getting things done.” Emotions in general have been relegated to personal, internal experiences that are disconnected from action, unless they get in the way. The success of science, technology, and systems thinking, and the resulting celebration and privileging of rationality has led to a commonly held view that rational thinking is best, and that means that emotions must be suppressed or excluded (though “dispassion” is an emotion itself). Care has been treated in the same way as other emotions.

Care is more than just another emotion. It is an emotion, yet it is a curious one that is related to all other emotions. For example, let's take anger or sadness. We aren't angry or sad unless we care about something, something that been damaged or been lost to us. So care is fundamental to most, if not all emotions. We care because we have a future, and we have assessments of futures we want and futures we don't want. This generates our embodied coherence of care, with its assessments, opening and closing of our body to action, and the emotional energy of care. Yet it is still just an emotion, right? It's still regarded in the mainstream rational common sense as not relevant for the "real" action, the "hard" productive actions – it's just part of the "soft" stuff that has to do with people but should be eliminated to produce hard results.

Yet emotions and moods constitute a *predisposition to action* – we cannot separate action, moods and emotions.⁸ Conversations about action will be entirely different if they occur in a mood of ambition or if they occur in anxiety, distrust, resignation, or resentment. We see with effective leaders, managers, and communicators that they engage and provoke appropriate emotions in their interactions, and don't just deliver clear, dispassionate communications (Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee, 2002). Emotional intelligence is now recognized to be fundamental to personal and organizational action and performance (Goleman & Cherniss, 2001; Druskat, Sala, & Mount, 2006; Smith, 2007).

Yet in English we have the phrase "taking care,"⁹ which is a *description of action*. We take care of patients, we take care to do a job well, we take care of our clients, we take care of our children, we take care to be accurate, and we take care to get the right result. These are statements of action and intended results, not just descriptions of emotional states. This understanding, that care has to do with action, with "taking care," is a fundamental insight that returns care to its relevant place in action. It is the link of the emotional world to the world of action, the internal world of experience and the external world of action and results, as shown in Figure 2.

This leads us to another fundamental claim:

Care is a fundamental dimension of all action. It can be present or absent, but in either case it has a fundamental shaping of how the action is carried out, and the meaning and value of the outcomes to be produced.

⁸ This perspective on emotions, as well as a powerful approach for observing and engaging with emotions called "the linguistic reconstruction of emotions", has been developed by Julio Olalla at Newfield Network.

⁹ In Spanish, German, and perhaps other languages, the word "care" does not translate directly as it is understood in English.

<i>Internal World</i>	<i>External World</i>
Emotions	Results
Moods	Activity
Thoughts	Things
Experience	Measures
Sensations	World
Feelings	Action
Care > Taking Care > Outcomes	

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Figure 2. Action connected to care is taking care - linking our internal and external worlds

This is why care is shown in Figure 1 as part of the Anatomy of Action. When present, care provides the energy and relevance for action. When it is absent, action goes from taking care of something we care about, to activity that we engage in without care – for example, routine, obligation, sacrifice, or compliance. When we “take care” of our children, we can perform an action with our care for the child that puts us in the mode of taking care of something we care about. Or we can lapse into “doing” the action compliantly, without the experience of care and caring for either the child or ourselves. We can find that in our work and organizational lives we have the same choice with every action – we can be taking care of something we care about, or doing the activity that is required, without care. Our connection or disconnection to care produces a totally different experience for the performer, for the customer, and for the quality of the outcomes. If we are to be truly generative, we must bring back our connection to our care and identify what we are taking care of in our work and lives.

VALUE AND SATISFACTION

One speech and listening act that comprises generative language and our listening is the *assessment*. An assessment is an opinion or judgment. We take action, or not, based on our assessments, and it shapes what requests and agreements we make. Sometimes we are aware of making an assessment, and more often we just fall into the automatic, unexamined assessments that arise in us. We tend to be in assessments almost all the time. It takes practice to free ourselves from the continuous stream of assessments that arise in our thinking and bodies. It also takes practice to become aware of our assessments and to put our attention to examining and designing our assessments instead of having our automatic assessments decide for us.

Two key types of assessments that we live in as human beings are *value* and *satisfaction*. These two assessments shape people's choices in life and are fundamental to business and organizational life. By understanding what drives value and satisfaction, we can see what leads to people's choices. This insight enables us to have a generative interpretation for what drives business and the success and failure of organizations.

Value is the assessment that we make, or that arises automatically (an assessment that "makes us"), that leads to making choices and taking action. It is the judgment that arises when we choose to accept an offer or promise, or commit to a course of action, including our choices for purchases, investment, and life choices. Satisfaction is the assessment that an outcome of an action, fulfillment of a promise, or an experience took care of a concern that we value, and that we are willing to experience again.

Businesses and organizations can be viewed as fundamentally succeeding or failing based on the assessments of value and satisfaction that they produce in their customers, employees, and members. In the Anatomy of Action, these assessments are part of the conversations that generate action, and that occur through the commitments, actions, and outcomes that follow.

Value and satisfaction are assessments that arise out of care. We cannot value something we do not care about. We cannot be satisfied unless something we care about has been taken care of. With this realization, we see that care is not only a pervasive dimension of action, but is fundamental to the assessments that constitute business and organizational life. With these insights we have the opportunity to reconstruct our understanding of business, organizations, and even social action based on human concerns.

WHAT IS AN ORGANIZATION?

But what is an organization? In the generative approach, we always ask this direct question for any distinction: "What is it?" For example, we ask, What is action? What is management? What is leadership? In each case we design our answers from generative distinctions, those that can be seen, executed, and learned. With the question "What is an organization?" we are looking for a generative answer, an answer that enables us to see, to act, and to generate.

The key aspect of organizational life that leads to the results that organizations do and don't produce, their success or failure, and shapes the experience of people in organizations is their coordination of action. Organizations exist to bring people together to take action for the sake of outcomes that the organization exists to produce. An organization without a clear purpose for its outcomes will eventually disappear. What enables organizations to fulfill their purpose and to sustain their existence is how they coordinate action and the emotional context that enables their

action. From the generative observer of organizations we see that actions and outcomes are produced through conversations.

An organization is a network of commitments generated and maintained in a network of conversations¹⁰ - Flores & Ludlow (1980).

This network of commitments shapes the actions and outcomes of the organization. Conversations generate the commitments, create and hold the possibilities, provoke moods and emotions, and are the environment for learning, adaptation, or the lack of them in the organization. This is an organizational perspective that incorporates the Anatomy of Action.

By observing the outcomes in an organization, all the responses, satisfactions, dissatisfactions, value or the lack of it, assessments, moods and emotions, we can begin to see the linkages among: the conversations, presence, and actions of individuals; what they produce in the network of commitments that constitute teams and organizations; and how this impacts the outcomes of the organization. By observing how the outcomes of an organization produce satisfaction and dissatisfaction we can distinguish the generative network of conversations and commitments of the organization, what is missing or possible in the network, and what missing conversations, conversational skills or conversational moves enable new and more valuable outcomes.

Seeing the missing conversations

With listening for the moods and dissatisfactions in and around the organization, we can begin to distinguish missing or broken conversations. Just as a physician's training in the anatomy and dynamics of healthy bodies and common ailments enables them to diagnose and intervene in health issues, an observer trained in this generative perspective of organizational conversational anatomy can diagnose and intervene productively. With practice, we not only see the conversations that shape the organization, its actions and results, but we begin to have the sensibility to see the missing conversations. When faced with dissatisfaction, breakdown, or an opportunity, a powerful question is "what conversations are missing that would produce a different result?"

What I have found is that the generative perspective produces its greatest impacts when employed by already successful leaders, because it provides a powerful new paradigm for observing and taking action building on the strengths they already have. Just as there were talented healers before Pasteur discovered germs, these healers were able to produce significantly improved outcomes with the new regularities of the germ theory and the practices

When present, care provides the energy and relevance for action. When it is absent, action goes from taking care of something we care about, to activity that we engage in without care — for example, routine, obligation, sacrifice, or compliance.

¹⁰ This articulation was developed by Fernando Flores.

that arose out of them. The generative perspective provides a path for learning and professional development for experienced leaders and managers, as well as coaches.

THE CONVERSATIONAL ANATOMY OF ORGANIZATIONS

When we look at the generative dimensions of organizations and how they are constituted by their conversations and commitments (Flores, 1997; Flores & Ludlow, 1980), we can begin to distinguish particular conversations that are necessary and non-discretionary regularities of healthy organizations. Let me summarize some of the necessary generative conversations that organizations must do well in order to be effective, and even to continue to exist.

People in organizations must make and manage agreements in order to coordinate action and produce the results of the organization. They must have skills to recognize, address, and avoid overcommitment and overwhelm, as well as to perform competently. They must come together in order to produce actions and fulfill promises that are beyond the capacity of individuals. This creates the phenomenon of teams, and teams have a structure of non-discretionary conversations they must have in order to be effective as a team. Effective managers, leaders, and coaches must be able to provoke and manage appropriate moods and emotions. Planning, as the conversation of future actions and intended results, is not a technique, nor are plans a deliverable. Rather, they are a necessary conversation for coordinating the actions of teams and for organizing the non-trivial actions of individuals. There must be coordination of action among people in order to accomplish outcomes that we call projects and processes, but these are also rooted in the generative conversations that establish, guide, and drive them. Managing satisfaction, breakdowns, and agreements and promises are not techniques or discretionary practices – they are part of the reality of organizations, and every organization must deal with these aspects of organizational life, whether they do so well or poorly.

These are the conversations of action in an organization, and the building blocks for even higher level conversations that make up the structure of any enterprise: foundational declarations, such as the nature and mission of the organization; strategy; business plans and operational plans; execution; developing new offers; customer relationships and satisfaction; and innovation and learning. For example, in our forthcoming book *The Innovator's Way*, my co-author Peter Denning and I distinguish the conversations and personal skills of innovation, and place them in the context of the other conversations that constitute the organizations (Denning & Dunham, forthcoming). In becoming observers of this anatomy of the constitutive conversations of enterprises, teams, organizations, action, coordination, and when they are missing, we can become more effective coaches and leaders.

RECONSTRUCTION FOR A NEW FUTURE

The generative foundations that we have outlined produce a powerful framework for new understandings, distinctions, and practices of leadership, management, organizations and coaching. This foundation has been built from the criteria that the distinctions we make are observable, executable, and learnable. They provide a foundation for effective practice and paths for learning. That they are “constitutive,” meaning that they are necessary elements, and that from these elements the outcomes we are seeking are generated. They have been applied and tested for decades in the world with leaders, organizations, managers, and coaches. We refer to our building of these new understandings of the foundations of these disciplines as a “reconstruction” of our prior understanding, the development of a new way of observing and taking action, and an innovation in new interpretations and practices that enable us to produce a future different from our past. We can “reconstruct”¹¹ our organizations, the common sense of what we pay attention to, and our skills in order to produce a better future.

When faced with dissatisfaction, breakdown, or an opportunity, a powerful question is “what conversations are missing that would produce a different result?”

INVITATION TO GENERATIVE COACHING AND LEADERSHIP

We invite you as a coach, leader, and as a change agent in the world, to become aware of and take advantage of the generative regularities of life, action, being human, organizations, and leadership and management. As with all learning, it will give you new eyes to see with. You will develop yourself as an observer who can see what is missing as well as what is there, to open possibilities for new capabilities for action, to see the generative aspects of bodies and embodiment, the impact of moods and emotions, and the conversational anatomy of organizations. You will develop new relevance and value for the offers that you can make to organizations, and enhance the impact you make. You can enable yourself and others to clarify what they care about, to enhance your ability to take actions that take care of what you care about, and to produce value and a future that the world is calling for.

¹¹ This notion of reconstruction is based on the practice of “ontological reconstruction” developed by Flores, and draws on a more general notion of reconstruction from the field of philosophy.

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