Organization History (OH$_x$)

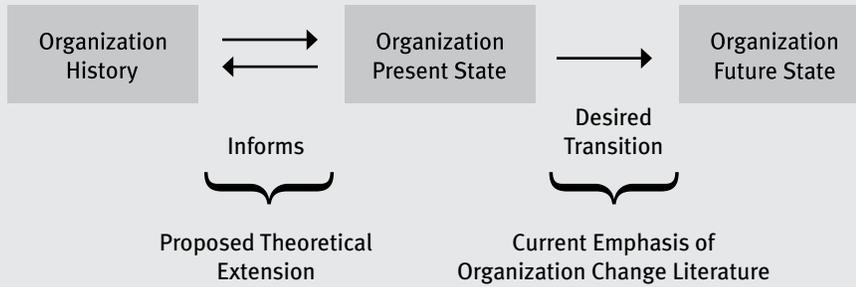## Making the Construct Explicit in Organization Change Literature

By Yaron Prywes

There is a clear and present need for greater understanding of organization change efforts (Burke, 2011). The need is driven by the fact that organizations today are constantly attempting to adapt to an external environment that is discontinuous and changing more rapidly than ever before (Foster & Kaplan, 2001; Drucker, 1969). Unfortunately the reality is that many organization change efforts fail, including 75% of mergers and acquisitions (Burke & Biggart, 1997), and organizations today simply do not survive as long as they have previously (Foster & Kaplan, 2001; Weisbord, in press). Although there are many reasons for these failures, prominent social scientist Whyte recognized the importance of history in organization change: "Without historical data, our theories of development and change are bound to be faulty...Successful introduction of change...requires devising a strategy that can be linked with structures and social processes that have deep roots in history" (1984, p.161). Burke, a leading organization development scholar and practitioner has noted, "History is an important variable in the understanding of any organization" (2002, p.185). Like a physician getting a patient's medical history (commonly notated as "H$_x$"), organization change consultants routinely inquire and intuitively know that understanding an organization's history is critical.

Despite recognition from certain prominent scholars and practitioners in the field, organization change theorists have comparatively neglected organization history (notated henceforth as "OH$_x$") as an important construct. Of the numerous organization models used to guide change (e.g., Burke & Litwin, 1992; Friedlander & Brown, 1974; Pascale & Athos, 1981; Peters & Waterman, 1982; Porras, 1987; Porras & Robertson, 1992; Tichy, 1983; Weisbord, 1976), only one mentions history explicitly (Nadler & Tushman, 1977). Often the role of history is indirectly recognized by theories in specific subsets of the organization change literature such as mission and vision statements (Collins & Porras, 1996; Pearce & David, 1987), strategy and culture (Porter, 2000; Schein, 1991; Schwartz & Davis, 1981), and organizational learning and development (Greiner, 1998; Levitt & March, 1988). Perhaps the relative neglect of history as a prominent variable in organization change theories reflects cultural influences of the profession (Schein, 2004): research has demonstrated that Anglo-Americans are oriented primarily toward the near future (Kluckhohn & Strodtbeck, 1961), and that economic development is correlated with a future orientation (Hofstede, 2001).

The lack of an explicit historic perspective in organization change models may also be influenced by the current and historic bias in western science towards a mechanistic, analytic approach rather than a holistic, ecological view (Capra, 1996). Valuing an organization's history acknowledges the importance of a contextual approach advocated by systems thinking scientists (e.g., Capra, 1996) that find value in putting the phenomena in question (in this case organization change) into the context of a larger whole (in this case how

Figure 1: Holistic Organization Change Model

Organization History ⇄ **Organization Present State** → **Organization Future State**

Informs

Desired Transition

Proposed Theoretical Extension

Current Emphasis of Organization Change Literature

Organization Change literature currently emphasizes the transition between the organization's present state to its desired future state. Proposed is a theoretical extension that recognizes the organization's present state being both informed by and informing its history.

the change fits with the organization's overall development). Regardless of the causes of its relative absence, the purpose of this paper is to make the case for OH$_X$ as an important construct and data gathering point in organization change efforts, and seeks to find its place in the organization change literature.

Organization History Defined

If an organization's culture is "the way we do things around here" (Burke, 2002, p. 13; Deal & Kennedy, 1982), then an organization's history is *how the way we do things came about*. More formally, OH$_X$ is a narrative that chronologically tracks the developmental events of the organization. This new definition explicates the developmental impact of organization history, as well as the socially constructed nature of its narrative. Organizations are social constructs: a creation of someone's ideas, vision, and beliefs, and depend on the actions of human beings (Morgan, 1997). As a product of this social construction, OH$_X$ changes and grows as the organization develops.

It is useful to recognize both the linear and non-linear aspects of OH$_X$. The Life Cycle Theories of organization development (e.g., Greiner, 1998) recognize that an organization "follows a single sequence of stages or phases, which is cumulative (characteristics acquired in earlier stages are retained in later stages) and conjunctive (the stages are related such that they derive from a common underlying process)" (Van de Ven & Poole, 1995, p. 515). Thus,

OH$_X$ may be thought of as a record of an organization's "age" in its life cycle, or alternatively, its "life story." However, while a linear narrative is useful for its simplicity, a more accurate portrayal of an organization's history is dynamic and complex. An organization will likely have numerous accounts of its history including official and unofficial versions that may conflict. Furthermore, one's individual perspective on an organization's history will be informed by one's tenure and role in the organization. Since leadership positions often require taking the most long-term perspective (e.g., Jacques and Clement, 1991; Zaccaro, 2001) and leadership behavior may represent the organization as a whole (Alderfer, 1987), it is recommended that at a minimum the most senior members or founders of an organization be consulted when investigating OH$_X$.

Why Is History Important?

An understanding of an organization's history is important because static, "present-only" views of organizations are limited in helping one understand why an organization succeeded or failed, and why it currently behaves the way it does. Furthermore, as this paper will demonstrate, OH$_X$ can help an organization in its change efforts towards the future.

Linking the Past with the Present and Future
The historical perspective complements most organization change theories, which tend to focus on the link between

the present and desired future state. For example, Weisbord (1976) believed organizational diagnosis involved the degree of discrepancy between "what is" and "what ought to be." Beckhard and Harris (1987) described their organization change model as involving three distinct conditions: "the *future* state where the leadership wants the organization to get to; the *present state*, where the organization is currently; and the *transition state*, the set of conditions and activities the organization must go through to move from the present to the future" (p.29, as cited by Burke 2002). Cherniss (1988) argues that organization change will receive more support if the perceived end state is congruent with current organization culture and values. Collectively, these theorists make the case that getting to the desired future state requires an understanding of the present state, but neglect to explicitly link the past to the present. *Figure 1* makes the link between present and past explicit.

History's Impact is Ubiquitous
History traces the trail of choices made by an organization like a decision tree, and upon reflection it becomes clear that these choices ruled many options out and at the same time ruled many options in. This is what led change theorist and researcher Gersick to state, "The tenacity of initial choices...are most fateful" (1991, p. 16). An organization's culture, for example, reflects what's worked in the past and influences the current behavior of managers (Schein, 1991; Schwartz & Davis, 1981). Nadler and Tushman (1977) recognized the impact of history on the patterns of employee behavior, policy, the types of people the organization attracts and recruits, and even how decisions are made in crisis. They also acknowledge that history influences an organization's strategy, which is how the organization configures its resources to capitalize on the opportunities in the environment. As will be explained, history also influences an organization's leadership of change and whether or not it will be resisted. Overall, then the impact of OH$_X$ is ubiquitous, forming a backdrop to all of the organization's present activities.

Numerous companies explicitly

recognize the interplay between OH$_X$ and the living culture of an organization. BMW has an official history and museum dedicated to its "living history." The company's website states, "BMW does not just stand by its history, but deliberately preserves it as a vital element of its identity." American Airlines also has a museum and can trace its history back over 80 years. The airline continually and deliberately refers back to its history as an aviation pioneer to create a sense of identity and meaning for its people (Bains, 2007). Finally, Goldman Sachs recently employed anthropologists to dig into its history and culture to unearth key themes. The financial service company also embeds stories that demonstrate its cultural values throughout the firm's learning and professional development efforts (Bains, 2007).

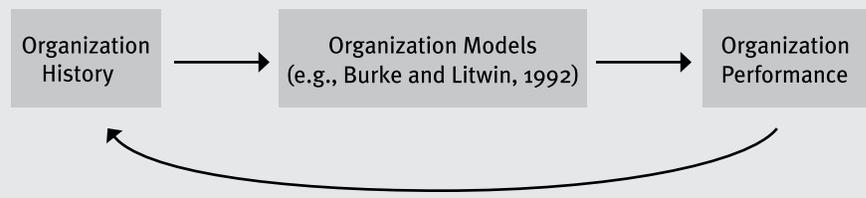## Utilizing Organization History

History as Input and Output
Figure 2 is presented to illustrate that OH$_X$ is both an input and an output of an organization. Nadler and Tushman (1980) define *input* as, "factors that, at any one point in time, make up the 'givens' facing the organization" (p. 39). Organization history helps account for these givens by capturing and being sensitive to initial conditions, to borrow a phrase from complex systems scientists Svyantek and Brown (2000). As Burke (2002) points out:

> Two organizations in the same domain (e.g., business) that originated at the same time under similar, if not identical conditions can become very different from one another over time. Small differences at the beginning can lead to large differences years later due to the highly specific, even undetectable, behaviors, being consistently reinforced in the first year. (p.128)

This conceptualization accords with organization research on the tenacity of initial choices (Gersick, 1991), particularly those made by founders (Schein, 1983), as well as with the cognitive school of thought on strategic change. This school of thought identifies *managerial cognitions* (such as core beliefs, causal maps, and knowledge structures) as one of the keys to explaining why different organizations respond differently to a similar context (Rajagopalan & Spreitzer, 1997). Ultimately, then, utilizing OH$_X$ requires tapping into cognitions of tenured organizational members, such as senior managers, to explain an organization's response to initial conditions.

Despite it being on the left in *Figure 2*, organization history is also an output. Although Nadler and Tushman (1980) defined an output as, "what the organization produces, how it performs, and how effective it is," they did not recognize history as something an organization produces (p. 43). Perhaps this is because organization history, more precisely, tracks an organization's output. Ultimately an organization's output, whether the performance is a success or failure, creates another chapter of organization history that cycles back to affect future organization functioning. By way of both positive and negative feedback, early behaviors in an organization's developmental stages get reinforced and stabilized (Burke, 2002). In this way the feedback cycle solidifies the organization's deep structure (Gersick, 1991): "Deep structure is the set of fundamental 'choices' a system has made of (1) the basic parts into which its units will be organized and (2) the basic activity patterns that will maintain its existence" (p. 14). This is similar to Schein's point of view that in a fairly mature organization – that is, one that has a long and rich history – one will find assumptions of success and failure patterned in a cultural paradigm that frame how members view the organization (1983). OH$_X$ then, by tracking the developmental feedback cycles, helps one gain a better understanding of the organization's deep structure.

Leading Organizational Change
An understanding of an organization's history is particularly important to leaders since they are often the ones who lead significant organization change efforts and use history to frame the change effort within the context of the organization's vision or strategy. Visionary theories of leadership (e.g., Bass, 1998; Bennis & Nanus, 1985), as well as leading change specialists, such as Harvard Business School's Kotter (1996) and Columbia's Social-Organizational Psychology Program Director Burke (2011), emphasize the role of leaders in developing and communicating a vision that focuses and motivates collective action by followers in an organization. How does a leader focus and motivate followers? There are multiple ways, but Harvard leadership scholar Gardner (1995) identifies story telling as a key mechanism – successful leaders captivate followers in part with stories about where the organization comes from and where they are headed. Effectiveness thus involves fit: "the story needs to make sense to audience members at this particular *historical* moment, in terms of where they have been and where they would like to go" (Gardner, 1995, p.14, italics added). Many successful long-term change efforts involve leaders and managers working to make sure the core theme of the change vision relates to and is consistent with some of the historical core values of the organization (Bains, 2007; Nadler &

Figure 2: The Organization History Feedback Mechanism

Organization History affects Organization Performance through the organization's functioning. Various models exist that describe the multiple aspects of an organization's functions, such as Burke and Litwin (1992). Regardless of which model is used, Organization Performance contributes to Organization History creating a feedback mechanism.

Organization History → Organization Models (e.g., Burke and Litwin, 1992) → Organization Performance

Tushman, 1989). Organizational theorists and consultants Nadler and Tushman refer to this as "organizational resonance" (1989, p. 199). OH_x is thus hypothesized to be critical for developing effective visions and ensuring that change efforts have organizational resonance.

Consequently, an organization's history is also important since failure to acknowledge the past can lead to significant resistance of organization change efforts. The work of Bridges (1980) on individual resistance to change highlights the need first and foremost for *endings,* which involves letting go of the past and of previous ways of doing things. The implication for leaders of change is the need to be sensitive to and not rush people through achieving some closure about the past (Burke, 2011). To use Lewin's (1947) change process terminology, acknowledging an organization's history may influence the unfreezing process so that leaders can create motivation and readiness for change.

Two Contrasting Cases

A major supermarket chain in the UK, J. Sainsbury, provides a good example of an organization utilizing its history in a successful turnaround change effort. Sainsbury's was an iconic leader in the retail sector in the 1970s and 1980s, only to be surpassed by their competitors ASDA and Tesco in the 1990s (Bains, 2007; Blyth, 2007). Repeated efforts to resurrect Sainsbury's status as the company against which all other similar companies were measured failed due to strategic initiatives that were "more and more divorced from the underlying DNA of the business, and its history" (G. Bains, personal communication, August 16, 2007). A successful turnaround was mounted when the new CEO partnered with organization consultation firm YSC and together they selected a subset of high profile employees to create a retrospective presentation of the company's glory days. This presentation was held at an executive board meeting and consisted of a room full of memorabilia, books, old adverts, and slogans which rekindled the pride and memory associated with the organization's identity and values. New strategic change initiatives were formulated to embody Sainsbury's forgotten history, which successfully galvanized the organization's comeback (Bains, 2007; Blyth, 2007; Eglin, 2007).

Bethlehem Steel, one of the most powerful symbols of American industrial manufacturing leadership for over 100 years, provides a good example of an organization that ultimately was crippled by its organization history. OD practitioners may be familiar with the company since it was there, at the turn of the 20th century, that Taylor refined his principles of scientific management. Taylorism is characterized by a management style that emphasizes efficiency, standardization, labor productivity, and elimination of waste. The approach was innovative in its time and for over 50 years it served Bethlehem Steel well. In the 1950's the company was manufacturing approximately 23 million tons of steel a year and in 1958 its president was the highest paid U.S. business executive (Bethlehem Steel, 2011). The company contributed steel and helped erect many of the country's landmarks, including the Golden Gate Bridge, Empire State Building, and Hoover Dam.

However, in the 1970s competitors in the global market developed state-of-the-art mills and continuous casting techniques which Bethlehem Steel resisted. The company would start losing $80 million a month and, despite this, would struggle to relinquish a micro-management mindset that had gotten out of control. In the early 1980s, when the consulting firm BPW – named after organization change specialists Block, Petrella, and Weisbord – was invited to help, Bethlehem Steel had 14 levels of management, over 3,000 different wage incentive plans, and 400 industrial engineers who timed jobs and set production rates. BPW's Weisbord would go on to implement innovative, large-group meetings to disrupt this mindset and replace it with a whole-system perspective. The meetings created new mechanisms to support learning and innovation, and over the years the positive effects rippled across the organization. One plant called Sparrows Point ultimately involved 2,000 people in improving their own work systems. However, despite "putting a stake in the heart of Taylorism" and transforming the company's culture, it was too late (Weisbord, 2004). The organization could not bear the weight of its own inertia and would eventually go out of business, failing to adapt to the business challenges of last quarter century. Sparrows Point would become one of two surviving plants, out of the original eleven, and still operates to this day under new Russian ownership. The Plate Mill where BPW's work began, on the other hand, is no more.

A silver lining to the Bethlehem story is that the large-group methodology pioneered by Weisbord in the 1980s would eventually become Future Search, a facilitation method that helps organizations examine their past, present, and future timeline (Weisbord & Janoff, 2010). "One benefit of Future Search," writes Weisbord in a book now in press, "is that those responsible for the present revisit the past together, reminding each other of where they have been. They also interpret their experience in light of world events. This sets the stage for systemic action – if those in charge choose to take it." Future Search is one of the few change management interventions that explicitly recognizes the importance of an organization's history – arguably a necessary but insufficient component of successful change efforts.

Summary

To recap, organization history is important because:
» Static, present-only, cross-sectional views of organizations are limited. They do not reveal how or why an organization evolved, or why certain organizations succeeded while others failed.
» An organization's initial conditions are key because even small differences at the beginning can lead to large differences years later. Organization history seeks to capture the organization's response to initial conditions by tapping into cognitions of its tenured members.
» The impact of organization history is ubiquitous.
» An organization's history has linear and non-linear components.

- » Organization history both affects an organization's performance (as an input) and is affected by it (an output), forming a feedback loop.
- » Effective leaders of change relate stories to followers that link the past with the present ("where we've been") and the present with the desired future state ("where we're going").
- » Understanding an organization's history allows change agents to understand better the current situation and whether or not the proposed change is in line with the organization's culture and values. This is critical since greater congruence leads to greater "organizational resonance" and less resistance from individuals, groups, and/or the total system.
- » OH_X is likely a necessary but insufficient component of successful change efforts.

Conclusion:
History's Rhyme and Reason

It is often stated, more as conventional wisdom than verifiable truth, that history repeats itself...History never repeats itself because every historical moment is unique. Nevertheless, the process of history does admit to a poetic quality that more accurately depicts its true character. History *rhymes* – not repeats – in revealing parallels between the events, actors, and outcomes from different periods. Implicit in this approach is the idea that the subject of history is not only continuity, but also that history is about development and change. (Fields, 2002, p. 266)

Building on communications Professor Fields' eloquent point about the rhyme of history, this paper presented the reasons that organization history should be made an important, explicit construct in the organization change literature. Although history is often conceptualized as linear, it reflects both the content and process of organization change (Burke, 2002), and is thus dynamical like the very nature of the organization change it tracks. The image

that comes to mind is an equiangular spiral, illustrated in *Figure 3*.

The weaknesses of adding historical methods to organization change research are similar to those of an ethnographic approach (i.e., only a small number of cases can be studied and these may not be representative in certain regards), but these are often offset by the insights that historical and longitudinal analyses can provide (Schein, 1988). To borrow terminology from the famous developmental psychologist Erik Erikson, a "generative" organization is one that is a "creative ritualizer": one that glorifies neither innovation nor tradition but has an appreciation for the necessities of both (Browning, 1973; Erikson, 1958). The future and past are intimately related, and OH_X provides organizational theorists, researchers, change agents, and consultants critical grounding to leverage deep organization change.

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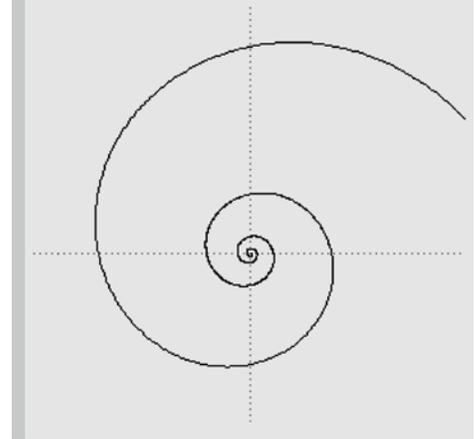
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