

# Gauging Openness to Written Communication Change: A Case Study

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Both practitioners and researchers claim that change has become a constant in organizational life. International competition, alterations in markets, new technologies, mergers and acquisitions, rapid new product cycles, and inefficient organizational routines have required many organizations to alter significantly processes, structures, and even cultures. In fact, Beer and Nohria (2000) claim quite dramatically that many organizations must change or die.

Even if organizations face extraordinary, compelling reasons to drive change, implementing it, particularly in large bureaucracies, can be extremely difficult. NASA provides a striking example of that difficulty. In 2003 the Columbia space shuttle disintegrated over the southwestern US, causing the deaths of its seven crew members. The Columbia Accident Investigation Board (2003) determined that the same cultural, communication, and organizational structure problems that caused NASA to neglect O-ring problems that resulted in the the space shuttle Challenger's shuttle's fuel tanks exploding in 1986 were also responsible for downplaying the danger of foam insulation sloughing off launch fuel tanks and damaging Columbia's wing. In short, despite the 1986 Challenger disaster, a highly critical Rogers Commission report, and significant congressional and public scrutiny, NASA was unable to change significantly its communication processes and the culture that helped create and institutionalize those processes.

The NASA example provides dramatic proof that organizations vary significantly in their openness, willingness, and ultimately their capability to change. Gauging that openness is critical if leadership is to design change processes and strategies that are understood, perceived as credible, and believed to be of value to workers and the organization. Unfortunately, openness to change has received limited attention in the organizational change and strategy literature and none in the business, managerial, and professional communication literature.

## Research Purpose

This article's goal is to begin the incremental process of generating knowledge about organizational openness to communication change. Its specific purpose is to gauge workers' degree of openness to significant changes in written report organization, style, and document design by analyzing their language—their talk about their report reading tasks that comprise most of their work—and the organizational root metaphors that steer or influence that talk. From this research we can identify whether organizational talk, particularly the metaphors people often use, can be a useful tool to assess workers' perceptions toward change. In the following sections of the paper, I

1. review briefly the literature treating organizational openness toward change and derive a baseline definition to ground our understanding of this concept;
2. explicate root and generative metaphor theory to provide a framework for discussing and analyzing the research data;
3. describe the study's participants and their work context
4. describe the research design with particular attention on individual and group interview methods
5. analyze the interview data, paying particular attention to the metaphors members used to describe their report assessment task

## **Literature on Openness to Change**

Change researchers are just starting to systematically investigate openness to organizational change. Because this research is still in a formative stage, there isn't an agreed on language to describe this individual or organizational state. In fact, researchers have used terms such as "openness," "readiness," "capability", and even "resistance" toward change somewhat interchangeably, causing conceptual confusion (Armenakis, Harris, & Mossholder, 1993; Jansen, 2004). To help mitigate this confusion, Chawla and Kelloway (2004) divide change into attitudinal (cognitive) and behavior responses. "Openness" to and "readiness" toward change are attitudes or psychological conditions, while "resistance" and "capability" are behaviors.

Fishbein and Azjen (1975) point out that an individual's attitudes precede and affect behavior; consequently, degree of openness toward change can predict overt actions people take. To put it another way, openness is the cognitive precursor to behaviors of either embracing and working toward implementing a change effort or resisting and even actively undermining that effort. Research, thus, enables us to define openness toward change as a psychological state reflecting an attitude or perception toward change that influences workers' behavior

This causal relationship between attitude and behavior is important because it enables us to make clear distinctions between openness and resistance toward change. This distinction has practical value because it allows change agents to diagnose the degree of organizational openness to change before crafting a change strategy. That degree of openness can influence the timing of the change, the framing of the change message, the amount of change that can be expected from each change campaign, the number of change champions required to drive the change, the communication change strategy, and a number of other factors.

Developing methods to assess organizational openness to change poses an interesting methodological challenge that researchers are beginning to confront. McCall and Bobko (1990) recommend using qualitative techniques for work in dynamic, fluid environments such as organizations. In particular, they suggest that to understand workers' attitudes or perceptions analyses that interpret organizational semantic, symbolic structures are particularly useful. For example, Jansen (2004) has observed that workers in some organizations rigidly follow organizational routines, repeating--in fact often clinging to-- past actions and patterns of activities. Significant organizational energy is spent maintaining current organizational processes. Consequently, there exists limited psychological energy toward change, resulting in a

lack of openness toward new ways of thinking and acting. In short, organizational inertia has set in. That inertia can be heard in organizational talk and seen in metaphors found in documents.

In contrast, some workers and organizations exhibit an attitude of flexibility, lack of patience with the routine, and a need for challenge and excitement. That psychological state, which Jansen (2004) characterizes as change-based momentum, translates into an openness or willingness to attempt new ways of working, different ways of interacting with workers and customers, and novel organizational structures and processes. Organizational talk and organizational artifacts, particularly documents, also reveal this psychological state. As we've seen, organizational change researchers have just started to grapple with the organizational openness toward change concept. Furthermore, only a small handful of researchers have recognized that organizational language can serve as a barometer to assess the degree of openness to change. However, these researchers have yet to examine the role that organizational metaphor, particularly root metaphors, play in revealing an organization's openness to communication change.

### **Organizational Discourse, Openness to Change, and Root Metaphors**

An increasing number of organizational theory and communication researchers claim that organizations are discursive constructs because discourse—talk and text—is the foundation upon which organizational life is built (Fairhurst and Putman, 2004; Ford, 1999; Heracleous, 2002; O'Connor, 1995). Organizational discourse is more than mere talk; it is central to individuals' interpretation of their work and guides their action (Heracleous, 2002). Consequently, analyzing organizational discourse, particularly the metaphors people habitually use, can enable us to gain access to the conceptual world of an organization's workers. Specifically, determining and assessing an organization's root metaphors can help us uncover workers' degree of openness toward change, which in some cases may be tacit.

Root metaphors are macro-level, linguistic organizing frameworks that enable workers to code, sort, and make sense of their organizational experience. Gergen (1999) describes these metaphors as forestructures that workers help create and use to interpretively shape their organizational world. We can also compare these metaphors to lenses that help workers focus and foreground what they see and how they interpret it.

What extends the power and influence of root metaphors are its entailments, other metaphors that detail and help illustrate that root metaphor. In many respects, the strength and organizational influence of a root metaphor is similar to a dense, tightly coupled social network: the greater the number of entailments (nodes) and their connectiveness to each other and the root metaphor (e.g. network density), the greater the root metaphor's strength and ability to influence workers' attitudes and actions. Lakoff and Johnson (2003), for example, claim that one dominant root metaphor in this culture is "argument is war." What makes the "war" metaphor powerful is its dense network of entailments: we "win or lose" arguments, we "defend positions," we "attack weak positions," "demolish" claims, "shoot down" arguments, we plan and use "strategies," and we abandon positions to take "new lines of attack." Since this root metaphor is so deeply embedded into our thinking, attitude, and action, we are often unaware of how it shapes our

current communication practice and how it restricts different ways of thinking about argument—argument as dialogue or conversation.

Marshak (2002) claims that organizational language can be a liberating force or a prison. That's particularly true of root metaphors; they can provide either a means for control or potential for change. Schon (1993) describes those metaphors that help workers create new perceptions, explanations, and novel ways of thinking as generative. In an organization such as Disney Enterprises, the “other land” and “happiest place on earth” root metaphor and its entailments (visitors are “guests” who interact with “security hosts” or “cast members” who are always in “costume” when “on stage” at the “park”) serve as a tight control system that constrains thinking and action, making change a challenge. Disney Enterprise has consciously institutionalized this unique vision through language, training, and rewards and punishments that are aligned and thus support each other. To put it another way, veteran “cast members” have to such an extent grooved and regrooved the “other land” metaphor and its entailments into their language, thinking, and practice that entertaining other possibilities for talking about and doing their work is difficult. However, in other organizations such as the Medic Inn, a branch of the Cleveland Clinic, and, rather surprisingly, the Marine Corps their root metaphors—“5-star customer service” and “three-block war” are generative; they have the paradoxical capacity to simultaneously guide thinking, attitude, and practice yet create potential for new language, novel thinking, and different action. In short, these metaphors both reflect and help generate an openness to change. To illustrate a generative root metaphor, I'll briefly discuss the Marine Corp's “three-block war” metaphor.

In the late 1990's the Marine Corps, under the leadership of General Charles Krulak, adopted a new metaphor, the “three-block war,” to reshape soldiers' thinking and action so they will be better prepared for radically new operations and missions, called “military operations other than war.” This new metaphor indicates that within three contiguous city blocks a Marine may be required within a tight time frame to conduct full scale military action, engage in peacekeeping operations, and provide humanitarian relief. In other words, any Marine—officer or enlisted—must be capable of analyzing complex, evolving, time-critical information and determining if he or she simultaneously should function as a civil-military negotiator, a source of humanitarian relief, a liaison with tribal or small local government officials, or a warrior. The metaphor “strategic corporal” soon evolved as an entailment of the three-block war metaphor to indicate the new leadership, contingency planning and thinking, and decision-making capabilities that lower-ranking soldiers must be capable of. Soon afterwards another important entailment of this new root metaphor developed; the Corps now describes itself as the “911” of the military, capable of quickly responding to any crisis requiring swift, flexible, yet measured response.

This “three-block war” metaphor and its entailments suggest that soldiers require different modes of thinking and new skills, particularly in communication, to be successful in this ever-shifting environment. Furthermore, this new environment makes it impossible to develop standard operating procedures or prescribed routines to deal with situations. As one corporal commented, “acting the same way twice can get you killed.”

To summarize, root metaphors and their entailments are important barometers that can indicate degree of openness to change. As we saw in the Disney “other world” and “happiest place on

earth” metaphors, some root metaphors constrain significantly people’s thinking and action, resulting in an attitude that reflects lack of openness to change. In contrast, as the Marine Corps “three-block” war metaphor demonstrated, some root metaphors create, invite, or even demand possibilities for new thinking and action that generate an attitude of openness to change. I am not suggesting that root metaphors are deterministic, that workers’ degree of openness toward change is defined entirely by an organization’s root metaphor. They are, though, an important linguistic indicator that can help reveal attitudes toward change that are unconscious or tacit.

## **Research Context, Design, and Methods**

This research was conducted at a medium-size public sector agency with multiple locations. The organization’s mission is to determine whether people who perform sensitive tasks should be given access to proprietary information. These decisions are important because they help insure information security and they affect people’s careers: a worker denied information access is very difficult to promote.

Information contained in written reports provide the sole basis for these proprietary information access decisions. Report Assessors (RAs), the target group for this research, read these reports, ranging from 20-50 pages, and decide to grant or deny information access. Reports are filled with complex financial, personal, and workplace performance information that requires careful interpretation.

Organizational policy directs RAs to use specific criteria contained in a Report Assessment and Determination Manual (RADM) to guide their information access decisions. This seeming lack of autonomy to use information context and individual judgment to make decisions is reinforced by the organization’s structure, a functionally organized bureaucracy, and power relationships defined by its hierarchical structure and clearly defined job roles. However, as we will see in the next section, not all RA work sites interpreted and acted on these constraints in the same way.

## **The Catalyst for Change: Decision Quality and Computer Technology**

Senior management strongly believed that the document design, organization, and style of reports RAs currently read affected the quality of their decisions to approve or withhold information access. Managers based their perceptions both on anecdotal information provided by RA supervisors and on the increasing number of denial of information access decisions being challenged in the courts. Furthermore, previous research I conducted found that RAs did indeed have difficulty reading and interpreting reports, though, oddly enough, they were unaware of that difficulty. Finally, new technology and cost cutting measures would soon result in RAs reading these reports on computer screens rather than on paper. To make these reports easier to read and interpret on screen, senior leadership believed that significant changes in report organization, style, and document design were necessary. Senior leadership had communicated these concerns to RAs; however, as will soon see, RAs at the various sites had significantly different degrees of openness to changes in the style, document design, and organization of the reports they read.

## **Study Design**

This research is part of a larger study that analyzed differences, if any, in RA decision quality between current reports and revised, high-impact (HI) reports. Because the two studies are inter-related, I first briefly describe the research design of the decision quality study and then the design for the openness to change research.

Forty RAs from four agency locations—Ohio, Washington, Maryland, and Virginia-- participated in the larger decision quality study. After carefully reading over 50 reports from the organization's report clearing house, I chose two reports, which I named Czarnek and Rokitka, that represented typical reports. I then revised the reports using as criteria results from numerous research studies that pinpointed the organization, style, and document design factors that make documents easy to understand. I called these revised reports high-impact (HI) and the original reports low-impact (LI). I also took great care to insure that the revision did not change the content of the original reports. Two experienced senior-level administrators reviewed the revised reports and determined there were no differences in content, though the reports "looked and read differently."

Next, I conducted a quasi-experimental study at RAs' work spaces. At each site, the RAs were randomly divided into two groups with each group assessing two reports. Group I received the revised HI treatment of the Czarnek case and the original LI treatment of the Rokitka case. Group II received the original LI treatment of the Czarnek case and the HI treatment of the Rokitka case. This 2 X 2 design insured that each RA responded to two different reports: one written in the typical low-impact style and one in the revised high-impact style.

After reading each report, RAs completed a questionnaire that asked for their report decision—grant, deny information access, or request additional information—and the rationale for the decision. To determine the "correct" report decision, protocols were conducted with six, senior supervisory RAs from three of the four assessment sites. The same 2 X 2 design was used. All six RA supervisors would have granted information access for both cases. This "grant" decision was the study's measure for decision quality.

The results were surprising. At three of the four sites there were no statistically significant differences in decision results between the HI and LI Rokitka and Czarnek cases. However, the Maryland RAs made different assessment decisions, statistically significant at the .01 level, compared to their counterparts at the other sites.

### **Openness to Change Research Design**

To determine openness to change, the focus of this study, I conducted 18 semi-structured interviews (6 each from the Maryland, Washington, and Ohio sites) with RAs almost immediately after they assessed the two cases. Each interview lasted 20 to 40 minutes. I either taped the interview or took notes, which I transcribed within 12 hours of the interview.

Approximately three months later, I returned to each site and conducted group interviews with all RAs who assessed the reports. During these interviews I reported the study results and gathered additional perceptions of reactions toward the HI report treatments. To jog RAs' memory of the task and the reports, I provided copies of the reports they assessed. These

interviews, which were taped and transcribed, lasted between 95 minutes and almost 3 hours. Finally, I obtained additional information about RA reaction to the HI reports during luncheon meetings and over coffee. Although the RAs knew these conversations were “on the record,” these small group conversations were very informal. To preserve that informality I merely jotted notes; however, immediately after these informal talks I took detailed field notes.

### **Overview of the Results: Different Root Metaphors at Different Sites**

The Maryland RAs used fundamentally different metaphors to interpret their information assessment tasks and organizational environments than RAs at the other two sites. Maryland RAs constantly described what they called the “whole man” or “whole person” approach when assessing reports. In contrast, the Washington RAs discussed the need “to paint by the numbers” to make correct assessment decisions, and the Ohio site rather colloquially referred to their assessment process as “look and cook”: read the report (look) and follow the criteria in the RADM (cook through use of a recipe). These three linguistic constructions represent the root metaphors at these sites. Supporting these root metaphors are a constellation of metaphoric entailments that I will integrate into the explication of these root metaphors.

Space constraints cause me to focus on the Maryland and Washington interview data. Furthermore, even though Washington’s “paint by the numbers” and Ohio’s “look and cook” metaphors are different, my analysis revealed both root metaphors indicated a similar lack of openness toward change. A more detailed study will include the Ohio results.

### **Maryland RAs Initial Reactions to the New Reports**

After the Maryland RAs completed the assessment of the HI and LI report cases, I asked each RA the same open-ended question: “What are your reactions to the Czarnek or Rokitka report ( for each interview I chose the report written in the HI style).” Each RA was eager to talk about the “new” (HI) reports. The following interview snippets illustrate the content and the tone of the six interviews :

- Who wrote that report [HI version]? It wasn’t no IG [information gatherer]. That report threw me...but after a couple of pages it started to make more sense than the other one [LI report]. You know... I found myself thinking more about that fellow Czarnek [HI report] than that other one [Rokitka LI report]. That’s good.... that helps to see the whole person.
- Seeing those two reports back-to-back was real interesting. The new one [HI version] might make me better at my job.... I can really pay attention to all the stuff...the details...help me see the whole man instead of just figuring out what’s going on.

Although RAs were initially “thrown” by the HI reports because of their novel document design and organization, they quickly saw ways that these reports would help them more effectively do their jobs: process information more easily, focus more on the person being assessed, and reduce work stress. These RAs demonstrated an open, flexible, even somewhat imaginative response to the novel HI reports. Key to understanding that openness and flexibility was the “whole person”/“whole man” metaphor each RA mentioned several times during the interviews. That

metaphor, which seemed like a slogan because RAs mentioned it so frequently, became a focus of discussion during the interviews conducted 3 months later.

Surprisingly, not one Maryland RA mentioned that the HI reports violated organizational norms, policy, or guidelines. Furthermore, no one mentioned senior management's belief that the current LI reports required change.

### **Three Months Later: Maryland Group Interview**

I returned to the Maryland site approximately three months later to discuss the decision results from the HI and LI report assessment experiment and to gain additional insight into the RAs' degree of openness to the HI case treatments. To refresh RAs' memories of the experimental task, I provided copies of the HI and LI treatments of both cases. The decision results, which I provided in a handout, indicated Maryland RAs made different assessment decisions, statistically significant at the .01 confidence level, compared to RAs at the other agency sites. Specifically, RAs reading the HI Rokitka report made better quality decisions (decisions matching those of their superiors) than those who read the LI Rokitka report. Surprisingly, report style and organization had no effect on Maryland RA decisions for the Czarnek case.

My handout listing the decision results from all sites was the initial prompt I used to start the discussion. I asked additional open-ended questions as the discussion progressed. The Maryland RAs reveled in the decision differences between their site and the others. They explained why they were different by referring to the "whole man" metaphor to characterize how they approached report assessment. One RA's comment well summarizes their explanation: "look, you've been around us for a while now—drank coffee, had lunch, sat with us when we did our work. We talk about this [whole man approach]. That's how we approach the work." In contrast, they claimed RAs at other sites merely followed the "rule book" [the RADM] and were "slaves to the rules because they're so damn political" which resulted in their being "rigid," "kind of mechanical," and "not using judgment that comes from real-world experience" when assessing reports. When asked how did they know how RAs in other agencies approached their work, one RA replied a bit sarcastically, "we do get out and talk to other RAs ...we're not kept down on the farm." Another RA indicated that once a year the RAs attend a conference where they interacted with RAs from other agencies and "swapped lessons learned and best practices."

The RAs used a network of other metaphors that complemented and provided additional insight into the RA-constructed meaning of the whole man approach, the attitude toward work that the metaphor both reflected and further reinforced, and the behaviors that resulted from this attitude. To interpret a report well and make a good assessment decision, RAs stated they had to "go beyond the words on the page," "not be a slave to the RADM," "be open and flexible to people's [individuals being assessed] circumstances," "hold off judgment while reading the report," "be the person in the report," "be open to surprises—good ones and bad ones," and the paradoxical "judge while being non-judgmental." These entailments of the "whole man" metaphor emphasize openness, autonomy, flexibility, and withholding judgment. Clearly, the whole man root metaphor and its entailments reflect and attitude of openness toward change.

The impact of this whole man root metaphor is clearly demonstrated when RAs were now asked (3 months after their initial exposure to these reports) their reactions to the HI reports. The RAs indicated they now believed the HI reports more clearly told the story of the person's life and that they could "better figure out the whole person ... spend more time thinking about what they did ... than trying to figure out what they did." The RAs pointed out they didn't realize until they read the HI reports that they had spent so much time trying to untangle the story line in the LI reports: "I didn't realize the drain on me it was reading these reports [LI reports]. A lot of us use different colored markers, sticky notes, a whole bunch of things to help us read these things... All that takes time." Another RA added, "we make real good decisions here.... because, you know, we talked about this before we take a whole man view... but I'd bet that after a while we'd be able to make better decisions on really complicated cases with these new reports."

The Maryland RAs' openness to the HI reports surprised me because of the strong resistance toward the new reports I had encountered earlier from RAs at the other sites (the next section describes the Washington site reaction). I asked the RAs why they were so open and accepting of the HI reports. One RA was rather taken aback by the question: "Look, we're interested in anything that could help us do our jobs better.... These new reports could help." Another said, "we're pretty flexible here, though most probably wouldn't think so. Our GS 13 and 14s [rank of supervisors] give us a lot of room to do our jobs."

I next asked if their "whole man" approach had anything to do with their openness to the HI reports. Initially, the RAs were silent; the question surprised them and caused them to think about the approach in a way they hadn't before. Finally, one RA speculated, "probably the whole man approach is more than about making assessment decisions.... It's probably about how we look at a lot of things .... at life." Another RA answered, "Janice might be onto something here.... This whole person way of looking causes us to see things differently.... Lord knows we hear about how we always want more facts... more stuff... before deciding. Maybe we do see things differently and these new reports are just another different thing."

I reported to the Maryland RAs that their counterparts at other sites were strongly opposed to the HI report treatments, believing that the new reports violated agency policy about IGs making assessment decisions and that the new reports could cause their jobs to be downgraded to a lower pay classification. All the Maryland RAs laughed. One stated, "compared to us, those RAs are inexperienced, they're scared, they're young, they follow the rules because they want to jump [work for another agency] and they probably have [supervisors] beating them over the head to make sure they follow the rules. I can see why these new reports would make them nervous." Another RA added, "those RAs don't have confidence.... Now everyone here is confident they can do the job.... so when we see something like this new report we think 'can this help us to the work better?' It's [HI reports] not a threat." One RA well summarized the importance of perception or interpretation of the job and attitude toward the HI reports: "I guess if you think about the job as following the rules in the RADM, then I can see why the new reports would make you nervous. But the whole man way... we've talked about it a lot today... is about judgment, experience, reading what's not there and what's there. No difference in the way a report is written can replace that."

In summary, the Maryland RAs' "whole man" root metaphor is a generative or growth inducing root metaphor that serves as a mental model or interpretative framework for how these RAs think, their attitude toward their work, and their workplace behavior. As we've seen, this "whole man" approach is a flexible, contingency based approach toward report reading, interpretation, and ultimately assessment based on RAs' lived experience, their values, and the ability to see the report as a complete information set rather than merely as discrete facts applied to rigid criteria in a report assessment and determination manual (the RADM). This flexibility and perceived autonomy to do their work to make the best assessments decisions led to openness toward the novel HI reports. Indeed, as the RAs comments about work indicate, the "whole man" approach both reflects and helps to continually reinforce openness toward change as long as RAs see the value of that change.

The next section, which focuses on the Washington RAs, reveals a different root metaphor and hence a different attitude toward work and change.

### **Washington DC: "Paint by the numbers"**

During my RA interviews immediately following their assessment of the two cases, one comment well captured the site's root metaphor and reflected the limited degree of openness to change at this site:

You know this work isn't really all that difficult... You just have to learn to paint by the numbers. You know what I mean ... those old paint sets... the ones that had pictures with numbers on them. You match the number with the paint and fill it in. That's about what we do here.

This "paint by the numbers" metaphor reflected RAs belief that the RADM provided rules rather than guidelines, and it was politically strategic to rigidly apply those rules when assessing reports.

This metaphor and its entailments appeared repeatedly during the interviews immediately after RAs completed their case assessments and 3 months later when I reported decision results and conducted group interviews to gather additional information about the participants' reactions to the HI reports. For example, one RA said she had to make sure she didn't "color outside the lines" when assessing reports. Another RA mentioned that she "just colored in the blanks" when making decisions. Finally, a third RA said "I have to be careful to stay within the lines" when assessing these reports.

While having lunch with 5 RAs, I mentioned the dominance of this root metaphor, asked if they were aware of how often they used this kind of language to describe their work, and asked if they had any insights as to what caused them to talk about their work that way. All RAs laughed when I mentioned the prevalence of the "paint by the numbers" metaphors. One quipped "we're all K-Mart Picassos here." However, the RAs provided important insights why this metaphor became an important part of their discourse.

The RAs pointed out they work in a “fish bowl,” a political environment caused by being within the “beltway” (a Washington DC area within the interstate highways encircling the city where much high-visibility government business is conducted). They also pointed out that most people, particularly younger ones, working in the agency are “agency jumpers”: they move fairly often to different agencies and jobs for better career opportunities. Consequently, as one RA pointed out, “we all try to keep our noses clean...not just us but our supervisors too. So we stay between the lines.” These RAs suggested that getting a poor performance review or developing a reputation for being “troublesome” could make it difficult to switch agencies. Consequently, to maintain their career flexibility, these RAs said they “paint by the numbers” or “stay within the lines.” In their current jobs that means carefully following the decision guidelines in the RADM.

These RAs also claim they are competitive and know how “to play the game.” The demographics echo those characteristics: all had college degrees, were 28-35 years old, had worked for several agencies, had between 2-3 years of experience in the RA job, and were mostly single (4 of 6 RAs). For most this job was merely a way station, a stopping point, in their career journey. That was also true of their supervisors. In short, the site’s root metaphor well captured an organization that was very political, averse to risk, suspicious of change, and focused on following prescribed routines to avoid undue attention.

### **Washington DC RA’s Initial Reactions to the New Reports**

Given the “paint by the numbers” root metaphor, it’s not surprising that the Washington RAs’ initial reactions to the HI impact reports were markedly different from the Maryland group. The Washington RAs not only were resistant to the HI reports but had a strong emotional reaction to them:

- Come on now. You’ve got to be kidding....That report was trash. It breaks the rules how these things need to be done....It’s outside the lines. You’d have to rewrite the RADM and change our jobs ... our job descriptions before those types of reports could be used.
- Didn’t like it, period. It’s too outside the box. The new type reports screw with the work we do. We do the analysis...the assessment—not the reports. I can’t see using them (HI reports)”

Unlike the Maryland RAs, who quickly saw ways the HI reports could help them do their work more effectively, the Washington RAs viewed these reports as violations of communication norms (“it’s outside the box” and “outside the lines”), job roles, and organizational policy. Not once during these after-assessment interviews did a Washington RA mention a possible advantage or benefit of these reports. Furthermore, I couldn’t detect any openness to the potential value of the HI reports to improve decision making, decrease report reading time, or reduce stress caused by difficult-to-read reports. Surprisingly, not one RA mentioned senior leadership concerns about report decision quality and the HI reports as a possible remedy to that problem.

The “paint by the numbers” root metaphor and its entailments well captures an attitude toward work, perhaps even a work philosophy, that causes these RAs to be suspicious of change and to see it as a potential cost, particularly to their careers. This metaphor indicates they perceive their work as a series of rigidly defined organizational routines that, if performed correctly, provide

them with protection from supervisors who might use their power unjustly or unethically. Ironically, RAs have significantly more protection from unjust work actions (firing, denial of promotion, withholding merit pay increases) than most private sector employees.

### **Three Months Later: Washington Group Interviews**

As with the Maryland group, I returned to the Washington site to discuss decision results from the HI and LI report assessment experiment and to gather additional information about the RAs initial, rather hostile, reaction to the HI reports. All RAs attended the group interview, which lasted 2 hours and 40 minutes. As with the Maryland group, I provided copies of the HI and LI treatments of the Rokitka and Czarnek cases to refresh their memories of the experimental task they had completed 3 months ago. After I described the decision results to them in a handout I provided, the remainder of the session was a very animated discussion about their reactions to the HI reports and the reasons for those reactions.

The RAs were surprised to learn there were no differences in decision results between the HI and LI cases. They thought RAs reading LI reports would make better decisions than those reading HI ones. When I asked why they thought that, the RAs focused on their misgivings about HI reports.

Five of the 6 RAs continued to have strong doubts about the HI reports. One RA comment well represented their serious qualms:

You know after you left ... that was about 3 or so month ago, right? .... we continued to talk ... between ourselves... about those new reports. We couldn't get past the fact those reports changed the job. You have to try to understand ....those reports didn't make sense to us. Sure we could read and understand them, but it was too outside the box.

All but one of the other RAs agreed—the reports “didn't make sense”; they were “outside the box.” And they still looked and felt that way. In other words, these RAs categorized the HI reports as “abnormal” or deviant discourse that short-circuited their sense-making processes.

I asked what could be done to have the HI reports make sense and not seem “outside the box.” One RA (Adrian) shook his head and said rather dramatically “you'd have to blow up the whole damn place...change everything...the RADM...our job descriptions...how the IGs (report writers) do their jobs...everything. And I do mean everything.” Another RA added, “you'd also have to change the assessment rules ... the RADM ...and our job descriptions too. All those different things would have to be lined up before these new reports would fit in.” Finally, an RA offered: “Look, I'm always looking over my shoulder, covering my six. If all the people who write up and sign off on my evals were to say here's what you want me to read, then I'd do it. Those are the people who tell me here's your box of crayons and this is how I want you to color. I gotta be honest and I bet a lot of you feel this way, but what interests my bosses fascinates the hell out of me.”

It seems rather obvious that the Washington RAs' “paint by the numbers” root metaphor and its entailments indicate a significant lack of openness toward change, represented by the HI reports.

However, neither the RAs nor their supervisors were aware of the dominance of this metaphor and the impact it had on RA thinking, attitudes, and actions. Furthermore, the power of this metaphor and its entailments, reinforced by the organization's systems, appeared to blind these RAs to supervisors' concerns about report decision quality and the potential benefits toward improving quality that the HI report could provide.

## **Final Observations**

Determining ways of gauging openness to change, particularly significant change in an organization's communication practices, is an overlooked area in the business and managerial communication literature. This research has shown that one useful approach to determining that degree of openness is through analysis of organizational discourse. Patterns, themes, and in particular metaphors in every day discourse can reveal both conscious and tacit attitudes toward change that can predict if workers will strongly resist, even deliberately sabotage, change efforts or actively support, even champion, those efforts. Determining workers' attitude toward change—their degree of openness—is essential if organizational leaders are to develop effective strategic and tactical change campaigns.

In particular, analysis of an organization's or even a department's root metaphors provides a promising way to gauge workers' openness to changes in written communication norms. As this study has shown, the root metaphors and their entailments that emerged from the discourse of two different agencies indicated fundamentally different degrees of openness to changes in report organization, style, and document design. Maryland's "whole man" root metaphor both reflected and helped reaffirm an open, flexible attitude toward organizational work that resulted in RA willingness to entertain the value of the novel HI reports. In marked contrast, Washington's "paint by the numbers" root metaphor both reflected and reaffirmed these RAs' misgivings about changes in organizational routines which directly led to a lack of openness toward the HI reports. That root metaphor and its entailments, which the RAs were unaware of, also captured an attitude toward work and change created by RA's interpretation of the organizational systems—cultural, structural, reward, and control-- they were embedded in.

This attention to discourse doesn't require specialized research skills or a keen sensitivity to language that only researchers or consultants have gained after years of thinking about and analyzing workplace communication. Even though RA leadership, human resources professionals, and organizational development specialists at both agencies were unaware of these root metaphors and the impact they had on RA attitudes toward work and change, I strongly believe these professionals can be trained by consultants or action researchers to notice these metaphoric patterns in organizational talk and determine their potential impact on change efforts. Furthermore, this interaction between action researchers and workplace professionals can help generate important, pragmatic questions about openness to change whose answers can add to both academic and workplace knowledge.

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## Biography

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