

A Theory of Action: What is Sustainable Change and How Do CFGs Support It?

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Theory of Action for Sustainable Change

What is a theory of action?: Various philosophers involved in the study of Action Theory and behavioral theorists that write about organizational behavior and organizational learning hotly debate this basic question. These debates have significant range and depth, encompassing such things as the nature of intentionality, the purpose of reflection and the existence (or non-existence) of a split between theory and action. Even a moderately faithful summary of these debates would take up most of my time here, so instead of heading off in that direction, I think it more productive to head off in a different direction. Most of the Action Theorists are interested in defining basic concepts and components of action and decision-making and so they disparagingly label as “folk theories” the kinds of theories that scholars in the field of organizational behavior develop or that consultants like myself develop. Now I might take offense to that were it not for the fact that my own academic training is in the field of folklore, and I think my folk theory then is appropriate for a folklorist.

It makes sense to me, for that different direction for a start that I mentioned before to be what theorists have come to agree on rather than where they differ. A theory of action might be two completely different things – depending on who you talk to – but almost all scholars from all different fields agree that it has two dimensions. It is on the one hand 1) an explanation of what we are or were doing – what Organizational Development scholar Chris Argyris calls a theory of action and/or on the other hand 2) a mental “map” we use to make decisions in the course of our work – a thing Argyris calls a “theory-in-use”.

So, in order for either of these dimensions to be fulfilled and for a theory to be useful to us, it needs to accomplish various things: a) promote understanding, b) enable us to imagine possibilities, c) support planning, d) serve as a compass for decision-making, and e) provide a basis for critical reflection. The model I present here today has served all those purposes for me, and so in my view it has become sufficiently fleshed out and clarified for me to describe it to you here. My greatest desire is to get a bit of feedback from you all so that I can continue to develop these ideas, so don't think my mind is made up about all this – I'm really just beginning to understand how this structure can be useful to us all in using CFGs to promote sustainable change in teachers, schools, and school districts across the country.

First and foremost, it feels right to me to use a developmental approach to our work in supporting change. William Perry has had the greatest influence on my thinking about development and developmental approaches. His classic book on the cognitive and ethical development of college students from 1970 has had an impact far beyond students, into the world of faculty development and, some have shown in studies, that his scheme holds for most adult learners as they progress from novice to expert in any field of study. Perhaps the most important area in Perry's scheme for me is how he explains a learner's relationship to authority as that learner moves closer to position 5 – relational knowing. What characterizes a college freshman's attitude toward and expectations of an authority figure such as a teacher, are similar to my own when I take a class in mathematics, for example. What Craig Nelson describes as the "Sgt. Friday" stage, the first two positions in Perry's 9 point scheme are characterized by a desire on

the students part to get “just the facts” from the teacher. This stage – which Perry calls dualism – is the stage of right and wrong answers, stark contrasts and absolute authorities. Students do not have a sense of their own power to direct their own learning, nor do they much consider the possibility of guiding the teacher to address their needs. Students emerge from dualism into what Perry calls multiplicity, in which many answers may exist to one question, and authority itself is something to be questioned. Nelson calls this stage the “Baskin Robbins” stage – one in which the fact that many answers exist means to students that one answer is just as good as any other. Late multiplicity is the stage at which students are not only willing to, but see the value in playing the teacher’s game, and contextual relativism, or “relational knowing” is typically the space occupied by a learner who is not playing anyone’s game but their own. Students at this stage have an understanding that the many answers to a question spring from the various contexts in which that question may be asked and how those contexts influence both the question itself as well as the answers. When one is at this stage, one understands that there are answers which are more right than others, and those are answers that incorporate more contexts than other answers. That final cognitive developmental leap is necessary for developing meaningful expertise – characterized by self-direction in engaging in meaningful inquiry.

In making a transitional connection between Perry’s developmental scheme and my own notion of both the theory of action and the theory in use, I’ve found Jack Mezirow’s work on Transformative Learning very useful. He proposes a three-part model in which transformative learning happens in stages – much like the

developmental scheme Perry proposed 25 years earlier. For Mezirow, this profound learning develops as first a perspective shift, then some active surfacing of assumptions and work with one's expectations and habits via the avenue of critical reflection, and finally, learners demonstrate transformation through making different choices. Once a learner has worked through the three stages, and is making different choices, he or she has undergone a transformative experience.

Regarding sustainable change, I have come to use the underlying notions I diagram on the handout as various things – a diagnostic tool in working with individuals, CFGs, and schools; a map for understanding the direction in which we need to go; a support for planning; and a guide for making decisions in the moment.

How CFGs do the work they do:

As a contextual introduction to what I perceive as the greatest strength of CFGs, I want to refer to a notion from my own field of folklore called liminality. Anytime I can put in a plug for the field of folklore, I take a shot – we folklorists don't often get a chance. The term comes from the Latin word *limen* which means threshold, and the adjective "liminal" gets used in lots of contexts from psychology to cultural analysis to medicine referring to the notion of approaching or crossing a threshold of some type. In 1909 the great folklorist Arnold van Gennep wrote a classic work in the area of ritual studies called "Rites of Passage" in which he lays out a three part model, based on the Hegelian dialectic, for how Rites of passage work. First of all, he conceived rites of passage as specialized rituals. The progression, according to van Gennep, goes

something like this: first separation – a child, for example, is separated from his or her parents upon entering adolescence in many cultures, but since that child is clearly not yet an adult, he or she enters a marginal or liminal period during which he or she is becoming an adult, and finally, the emergence of that adolescent into adulthood is called reintegration. Another example might be the transition from being single, to being engaged, to being married. Now van Gennep was focused on Rites of Passage in particular, but Cultural Anthropologist Victor Turner's work on ritual and festival both broadened and focused van Gennep's concept of liminality. Turner wrote extensively on a concept he called "liminal space", which he proposed was a critical function of rituals and festivals. Festivals, like Mardi Gras for example, create liminal spaces where important social work can be done. The typical power structures are suspended and the ordinary social categories are turned on their heads allowing people who don't normally associate with one another to come together and allowing ordinarily disempowered people to make hearty fun of those who ordinarily control their fates. The Winter Meeting, or any other big meeting that takes us out of our ordinary context, is another example of a liminal space created as a result of a kind of festival since it provides a context for us to explore important ideas that we either don't have time to explore or are not safe to explore at home,

What I want to propose to you all here today is that CFGs are as effective as they are because they create liminal spaces, perhaps not through the festival aspects of them so much as through the ritual aspects of them. Rituals provide structures for the transmission of traditions, and other cultural information, and CFGs help in providing structures that support sustainable changes in teachers, schools, and school districts.

Ritual acts, like opening moves, protocols, closing moves, final reflections, etc. are structures that provide a foundation for the creation of liminal spaces and what happens in those liminal spaces can serve to support sustainable change. Structure is an extremely important consideration in learning and motivation – especially at the beginning of learning or the beginning of a change – and a recent book by educational psychologist Marilla Svinicki called *Learning and Motivation in the post secondary classroom* provides some very fine notions about the benefits of highly structured presentations in teaching concepts, and narrated modeling or talking while doing in teaching skills. Svinicki essentially says that providing learners with a lot of structure in the beginning supports them taking over their own learning much faster and at much deeper levels than otherwise – sounds like common sense, but many teachers and many leaders of organizational change do not pay attention to this important notion. Providing a clear framework for learning and change speeds the “buy-in” that’s necessary for people to develop a sense of efficacy and ownership over the learning or the change.

Rituals are, in essence, structures for transmitting culture and tradition, and the Attention CFG process pays to the intentional creation of rituals supports the creation of alternatives to the current culture and traditions – a key obstacle in sustainable change. What I’d like to present to you all today, then is a model for stages or phases of sustainable change that happens in the context of CFGs – a context in which ordinary cultural agreements are disrupted and replaced with structures that are intentionally designed to promote critical reflection, equity in the conversation, and connections

between people that allow them to express their commitment to someone else's success.

With that bit of context, let's turn to the graphic on the bottom of the handout that is going around.

William James wrote: "Genius... means little more than the faculty of perceiving in an inhabitual way."

The **perception** stage refers to the careful and accurate perception of the environment which one inhabits. In CFG work, the Collaborative Assessment Conference, for example, supports this deliberate explication of the current reality, generally through the lens of some dissonance with that reality.

Imagination is developing a vision of alternate realities or at the very least being able to envision alternatives to one's habitual actions or reactions. Consultancies help a great deal with this.

Belief is the moment at which we begin to suspect that changes can occur and that we can create something new. Tunings are a powerful tool for supporting these realizations.

Conviction is that transitional moment when we become convinced of our belief and begin to externalize that belief. Once professional conversations get to this level, CFG participants begin to get that sense of the other members of the group being committed to their success.

Externalizing our conviction that change can occur, we begin to envision just how the current reality can be rearranged to result in a change. I'm calling this stage **Construction**, and this is the moment when change begins to be supported by our own structures, and not necessarily those we were introduced to in our coaches training. We may invent our own structures, lay claim to protocols and other processes as our own, or come by structures through interaction with peers, but the externalization of our conviction leads to the clarification of our vision.

Once our vision becomes clear regarding what the next step needs to be to bring us closer to the desired outcome we formulated back in the imagination stage, as Margaret Wheatly says, the distance between thinking and action disappears – alliances are forged, agreements reached, commitments made and we have change that both affects and informs our current reality, and then calls for an examination of what that reality has become.

Admittedly this theory has some gaps and I still am not clearly able to see exactly how these stages are supported in any given context, but one thing this conception brings to the forefront is the role of affect in our work. It is my fervent conviction that besides the creation of liminal spaces, CFGs are as effective as they are because the structures we use intentionally direct us – participants, coaches and facilitators – to pay careful attention to affect as we do difficult intellectual work in our lives – both professional and personal.

In the short piece I wrote for the NSRF featured issue of Educational Horizons, I used the metaphor of sitting at the piano bench with my son as he went through the hard work of practicing his piano exercises to highlight the importance of being supported by

someone whom you feel is committed to your success. With minor modifications, I'd like to read a section from that piece to illustrate what I'm talking about regarding the importance of the affective components of CFGs in promoting sustainable change:

As I listened to the conversations we were having in our seminar group, I recalled sitting on the piano bench in my living room and helping my six-year-old with his piano exercises. By breaking down his assigned songs into phrases, the exercises help him recognize how patterns progress in the songs. Practicing the phrases was not proving difficult for him, but playing each song as a whole was. To demonstrate what was involved, I played the simple arrangement of "Ode to Joy" in his book. He asked, "How do you do that?" and I showed him the relationship between the exercises and the song as a whole. I remained next to him on the bench while he tried to play the phrases together straight to the end of the song.

He couldn't play the entire piece perfectly right away. He kicked and screamed and told me over and over, "I can't do it"—even though he was making progress. Still, I remained on the bench with him. I had seen him play the exercises without frustration (and after all, he had volunteered for lessons in the first place). The issue, thus, was that he did not *believe* he could play the song. Soon he was close enough to "be convinced" that he could put it all together, and he calmed down and set to work playing the song all the way through. After another week of practice, he could play the song perfectly.

Hearing me play the song had not been enough for my son. He had to dispel his doubts and believe that *he* could play the song. As uncomfortable as our time on

the bench had been, in the end he seemed transformed: confident, proud, and secure in the knowledge that he could move on to more complicated pieces. He had felt supported because someone committed to his success sat with him while he struggled through the challenge.

Since CFG processes intentionally connect group members to each other in ways that transcend the intellect and address the emotional aspects of change, I see them as playing a critical role in supporting sustainable and long-term change.

Thinking about sustainable change in terms of CFGs is useful and the model I'm describing to you all has been useful to me in planning seminars and other professional development experiences for teachers, professors, and academic units at both schools and universities, but the model appears to work on various levels and in various contexts as well.

I have found it a useful diagnostic tool when I enter into a relationship with a "client" in the context of individual consultations, as well as when I enter a school or a school district where I am asked to support change. I currently work in Indianapolis in a small schools conversion project – and am working with the leadership and staffs of two small high schools. My model is useful because it gives me a framework for coaching to the two schools – one of which is having difficulty with its imagination, and one which has lots of imagination, but is struggling with its level of conviction. I apply different structures, methods and even language when talking to the two different staffs, and this model has been a useful tool for deciding which approaches to take. Ultimately, I'd like

to clarify this model enough to be able to explain sustainable change in a way that we can hit that target more often than we miss it.

Models like this one can help us to determine what kinds of effects we can have on people and organizations, and may help us to have more understanding about the circumstances under which CFGs will be successful and where they may not be as successful. That could help us to guide the teachers, schools and districts we work with in planning and implementing professional development programs that actually support sustained transformation once we are no longer there. As a consultant, I mostly always hope to work myself out of a job, and I imagine I'm not alone in that hope, and my goal in developing this theory of action is to do just that.