The dark tower
Using visual metaphors to facilitate emotional expression during organizational change

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Abstract

Purpose – To provide a descriptive case study showing how the construction of drawings as visual metaphors can help work groups "give voice" to their emotional reactions to organizational change events, and provide groups with a vehicle for interpreting and framing their experience of organizational change.

Design/methodology/approach – A seven-person focus was asked to construct a drawing that would serve as a visual metaphor for conveying the group's reaction to ongoing organizational changes within their company. Following this construction, the group engaged in a self-interpretation of their metaphor.

Findings – The work group's feelings regarding organizational change were encapsulated in visual metaphor of "dark tower"; a metaphor of which revealed that team members shared several strong, negative emotions regarding the organizational change event. A review of how the group's changes in metaphor construction evolved over three successive drawings showed how certain elements of the metaphor came to play a central role in the team's emotional expression of organizational change events.

Research limitations/implications – This case study did not attempt to provide a comparative review of metaphor constructions across work groups, nor did it include the use of other research methods, such as structured interviews, to confirm these findings.

Practical implications – This study illustrates how the construction of visual metaphors can be used to help researchers gain a more in-depth understanding of the subjective, felt experience of groups during organizational change events.

Originality/value – The group's reflections on how their successive drawings changed over the course of the construction of their metaphor sheds light on how "visual narratives" take form over time.

Keywords Organizational change, Corporate identity, Metaphors, Facilitation

Paper type Research paper

Employees frequently encounter organizational barriers to free and open emotional expression. These barriers make it difficult for individuals to openly convey and articulate their emotional reactions to organizational change events through the use of traditional research tools, such as surveys or interviews. This descriptive case focuses on a single work team, to illustrate how such barriers to emotional expression can be overcome by engaging team members in the joint construction of a drawing as visual metaphor. The case study shows, how visual metaphors can be used to help work groups "give voice" to their emotional reactions to organizational change events, and to help group members arrive at a common framework for interpreting and making sense of those events.

Emotion as an essential element of organizational analysis

In attempting to understand organizational cultures and work settings researchers frequently rely upon the use of such analytical methods as surveys and questionnaires. These methods provide the obvious advantage of yielding data that is relatively easy to gather, sort, and analyze. However, when organizational assessments are limited to the exclusive use of such quantitative measures something is also inevitably lost, which is an understanding of the felt experience of organizational members. This view reflects the interpretivist perspective in organizational research, which focuses on uncovering organizational life as it is perceived and interpreted by organizational participants (Burrell and Morgan, 1979, p. 253).

A central, but frequently overlooked, component of this felt experience is human emotion. Because organizational cultures are "infused with emotion as well as meaning." and organizational members tend to respond in highly emotional ways when their ideologies and cultural practices are challenged or questioned (Trice and Beyer, 1993, p. 6), any attempt to understand an organization must incorporate a deep understanding of the emotional experiences of its members.

The attempt to understand the emotional component of organizational experience is particularly challenging when we consider the fact that all organizations have certain implicit cultural taboos or prohibitions regarding the expression of emotions (Larcon and Reitter, 1984; Moingeon and Ramanantsoa, 1997). Many organizations go further, in treating emotional expression as an aspect of communication that is illegitimate or inappropriate (Putnam and Mumby, 1993). In cases in which individuals feel pressured by their organizations to communicate feeling states that are inconsistent with their true feelings the result may be emotional dissonance, as members attempt to reconcile these contradictory feelings and expectations (Hochschild, 1983; Martin and Meyerson, 1998). Such a case would be a group of customer service representatives who are expected to present themselves as being happy and relaxed, in stark contrast to their actual feelings of extreme frustration, anger, or stress (Ashforth and Tomiuk, 2000). For managers and executives, these prohibitions frequently take on the more subtle form of implicit organizational expectations that leaders should be able to control and regulate their own emotional expressions (Conrad, 1988; Mizrahi, 1984). These organizational prohibitions may make it difficult for individuals to openly acknowledge or express emotionally charged organizational experiences, or to convey these experiences through the use of such analytically-oriented consulting tools as surveys or interviews (Jones, 1996, pp. 36-45).

Emotional expression during organizational transitions

A number of studies (Bridges, 1991; Bucholz, 1987; Eriksson, 2004) have shown that employees who encounter rapid and severe organizational change frequently experience higher degrees of anger, anxiety, disorientation, and depression. This is particularly evident in situations in which such changes lead to the loss of organizational power, status, or job security. Examples include the emotional experiences of anger, despair, and loneliness that have been reported, both for employees who have lost jobs as a result of organizational transitions (Bennett *et al.*, 1995; Leana and Feldman, 1992) and for the survivors of those transitions (Brockner, 1988; O'Neill and Lenn, 1995).

Despite ample evidence that points to the emotionally-laden nature of organizational change, it has been suggested (Bryant and Wolfram Cox, 2006; Freedman, 1997) that organizational leaders and change consultants frequently operate

from implicit mental models that emphasize the rational and logical aspects of change, at the expense of minimizing or ignoring the important role played by emotional expression. In addition, Freedman (1997, p. 53) also suggests that some leaders and consultants operate from a "pseudo-psychotherapeutic model" of organizational resistance, in which "the implicit assumption is that there is something 'wrong' with individuals who resist and that they have to be 'fixed.'" Emotional expression is therefore seldom viewed as a natural and expected part of organizational transition, but rather is treated as either an anomaly that can be carefully engineered out of the change management process, or corrected through the "management" of individual workers.

For their part, employees who experience disruptive organizational change may be reluctant to directly express their emotions for fear of being labeled by their managers as being "resistant to change." Support for this position comes from a study by Bryant and Wolfram Cox (2006), who examined the retrospective narrative accounts of employees who had undergone organizational changes from several organizations within Victoria, Australia. The authors found that participants reported feelings of sadness, anger and grief as a result of encountering organizational changes that resulted in the loss of promotional opportunities, demotions, or terminations. At the same time, participants talked about having to carefully control their expressions of these emotions, which were viewed by their organizations as being "inappropriate." Participants explained that displays of fear, anger or frustration resulted in reprimands from their managers, who informed them that such emotional displays were "not in the best interest of the organization" (p. 123). The authors further concluded that the prolonged tension of having to control and suppress emotional expression "can be intensive, taxing and detrimental for some employees" (pp. 124-5).

The use of metaphors in organizational expression

If emotional expression is a critical element of organizational change and organizational barriers exist that limit such expression then we, as researchers, have an obligation to seek out innovative research approaches that can shed additional light on the emotional impact of organizational change. It is for this reason that consultants have increasingly begun to explore the use of such alternative assessment techniques as collages, metaphors, and stories that employ the imaginative use of symbolic communication to facilitate emotional expression.

Of these varied techniques, metaphors provide a particularly potent vehicle for interpreting the emotional aspects of organizational experience. Metaphors can be defined as "the understanding of one kind of thing in terms of another" (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980, p. 5). A metaphor can be a verbal representation of one thing for another, or can take non-verbal form through the use of a picture or organizational artifact. Metaphors constitute a very natural and critical aspect of our everyday thinking process (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980).

Metaphors possess several qualities that make them potent conveyers of emotional experience. First, they are compact, in that they make use of a single word, phrase, or visual symbol or object to convey a complex event or process. In doing so, they provide us with a means of linking a broad array of interrelated thoughts, feelings, and beliefs (Ortony, 1993). Thus, managers who communicate about their business in terms of the metaphor of "business is war" set into play an interpretative framework within which all

aspects of their organizational experience begin to be constructed in terms of warfare. Competitors are transformed into "the enemy," business partners become "allies," and shifts in market share come to be regarded as "victories" or "retreats." If this "business is war" metaphor becomes a dominant expression of organizational will and action, the metaphor may begin to serve as a selective lens through which organizational members filter their interactions with employees, customers, and suppliers.

Metaphors are also incomplete, in that they merely suggest or imply, rather than attempt to explain in a literal sense (Ortony, 1975). Because they "leave room for the imagination to fill in details" (Trice and Beyer, 1993, p. 99), they draw our attention to those dominant features that are commonly associated with a given metaphor. To state "our leader is a lion" is to encourage others to view the leader in terms of the lion-like features of strength, courage, and nobility, while at the same time directing attention away from those leadership qualities that are inconsistent with this image. By directing our attention towards certain aspects of organizational experience while forcing other aspects into the background, metaphors slant our perceptions and reinforce a selective and partial view of organizational experience.

In addition, metaphors provide us with vehicles for expressing feeling-states that would be otherwise difficult to communicate through linear thought, because they "are either too vague, too complex, or too intense for ordinary speech" (Siegelman, 1990, p. 7). Metaphors provide organizational members with an essential vehicle for emotional expression, in that they help to synthesize and integrate the complexities and ambiguities of organizational experience (Feldman, 1991), and "often contain painful truths that individuals would never divulge face-to-face to superiors" (Brink, 1993, p. 371). As vehicles for the integration of organizational experience metaphors provide "an ideal vehicle for embodying both conscious and unconscious, both affect and cognition" (Siegelman, 1990, p. 11), and facilitate our ability to express "complex and intimate experiences which cannot easily be described because of linguistic and grammatical constraints" (Chia, 1996, p. 136).

Given these unique characteristics, several researchers (Larwood, 1992; Brink, 1993; Stein, 1994; Kets de Vries, 1995) have proposed that, the study of metaphors can yield vivid and profound insights on organizational culture and experience. As a tool for organizational analysis, metaphors provide researchers with means of capturing the essence of what it means and feels like to be an organizational member (Conrad, 1983, p. 187; Cleary and Packard, 1992, p. 230; Stein, 1994, p. 91). In extending this line of thinking, several researchers contend that metaphors provide a symbolic vehicle for helping organizational members recognize motives, issues, and concerns that lie beneath the surface of organizational behavior (Stein, 1994, p. 42; Burke, 1992, p. 225). These characteristics enable metaphors to "serve as the common medium for diagnosing and addressing theories-in-use, cultural assumptions and beliefs, and unconscious dynamics" (Marshak, 1998, p. 151).

Visual metaphors and emotional expression

In studying metaphors, the focus of most research has been on the use of verbal metaphors. However, individuals also frequently make use of such non-verbal metaphors as drawings, icons, or artifacts to give voice to their organizational experiences (Stein, 1994).

The use of non-verbal metaphors may make it easier for organizational members to bypass organizational prohibitions regarding emotional expression. For this reason, it can be argued that, compared with traditionally quantitatively-focused research

tools, visual metaphors can provide a deeper and more substantial view of organizational experience. Meyerson (1991, pp. 263-6) takes this position in contending that, in contrast to the use of such diagnostic methods as organizational interviews, visual data collection methods "such as collages, videos, graphs, and simple pictures are more immune from social-desirability effects, or conscious filtering on the part of organizational members." She adds that, these differences in filtering are likely to be particularly important "when the content of the representations is emotionally hot or value laden, and thus difficult to talk about" (p. 266).

Such a situation is revealed in Zuboff's (1988) research involving clerical workers, who constructed drawings to facilitate the expression of their emotions of anger, frustration, and stress following the introduction of new computer technology. One participant's drawing took the form of a prison metaphor, in which her office was transformed into a prison cell, complete with prison bars on the window and prison stripes for her clothes (p. 147). In discussing the incorporation of drawings into this study Zuboff concluded that "these pictures functioned as a catalyst, helping them to articulate feelings that had been implicit and hard to define" (p. 141).

Metaphors and organizational change
Given that individuals who encounter disruptive change frequently experience strong emotions such as anger or anxiety, and that organizational prohibitions may inhibit those individuals from openly acknowledging or expressing these emotions, metaphors may provide a useful avenue for facilitating emotional expression in response to organizational change events. Individuals who are undergoing rapid organizational change are likely to "experience difficulties expressing themselves. Metaphors 'give them a way of explaining their perceptions indirectly, yet lucidly'" (Fox and Amichai-Hambruger, 2001, p. 88).

Apart from the simple facilitation of emotional expression, the use of metaphors can help organizational members better interpret and make sense of organizational change. Sensemaking refers to the process by which organizational members seek meaningful interpretations of, and explanations for, organizational events (Weick, 1995). It is through this sensemaking process, that "organizational members develop a shared understanding that helps frame future action" (Greenberg, 1995, p. 185).

In striving to arrive at a meaningful interpretation of organizational change, members' emotional responses to those change events constitute an important part of the sensemaking process (Conrad, 1983). Because disruptive organizational changes are frequently characterized by high degrees of emotional tension, uncertainty, and ambiguity (Greenberg, 1995, p. 185), members "need to make sense of the change and reestablish a share level of understanding" (Greenberg, 1995; p. 184).

Metaphors offer a particularly potent way for members to confront this organizational confusion and ambiguity by interconnecting a broad array of interrelated thoughts, feelings, and beliefs (Aleksandrowicz, 1960; Ortony, 1993). This ability to communicate through both cognitive and emotional levels enables metaphors to play a critical role in helping individuals translate, what are often confusing and potentially overwhelming change events, into a series of readily understandable and meaningful images. In this way organizational groups "encode in metaphors who 'we' in organizations perceive ourselves to be and how 'we' experience trauma" (Stein, 1994, p. 95). Metaphors therefore help organizational members give voice to their collective experience during times of

emotionally turbulent organizational change, and provide those individuals with an interpretative platform for framing their experiences of organizational change.

Metaphors as social constructions

The social constructionist perspective emphasizes the degree to which our organizational roles, and the social realities in which we live and work, are constructed through the process of social interaction (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Madsen, 1999; Ford, 1999; Barner and Higgins, 2005). Implied within the social constructionist perspective is "the understanding that an organization contains a 'deeper' level of latent, embedded phenomena, such as human assumptions, values and perception" (Stiles, 1996, p. 192). A critical part of this interactive process involves the interpretation of symbols by organizational participants (Brown, 1978), with culture viewed as "the product of shared and negotiated symbols and meanings" (Meek, 1988, p. 463).

During volatile periods of organizational change "any shared image of wholeness is fractured" leading groups to "search for new meanings and metaphors to articulate and attempt to mend the threatening situation and divert catastrophic feelings" (Stein, 1994, p. 43).

Metaphors constitute an important powerful vehicle in this search for new meanings. Because, they tend to exaggerate certain aspects of experience while minimizing or ignoring others, metaphors act as selective filters for shaping our interpretation of experience. During periods of organizational change this characteristic of metaphors means that work groups can use them to arrive at a set of symbolic images that represent the most salient aspects of their organizational change experience.

Once formed, metaphors not only reflect change but can shape organizational change, by providing organizational members with a means of extending their interpretations and emotional responses to others within their organization. The metaphors that become dominant during an organizational change can affect the outcomes of that change, so that "how a situation is assessed – the metaphor(s) one uses to define what is happening – will lead to different courses of action" (Marshak, 1993, p. 52). Similarly, Ricketts and Seiling (2003, p. 37) contend that "each image carried forward leads to a different organizational structure and outcome."

The metaphors that a group employs to represent organizational change may shed light on the unique way in which that group uniquely interprets that change (Schon, 1979; Srivasta and Barrett, 1988). Following this line of thought, variations in metaphor usage by different organizational groups or work units may reveal significant differences in the cultures, ideologies, underlying beliefs (Trice and Beyer, 1993, pp. 98-9), and the competing world-views (Krone and Morgan, 2000, p. 87) of those different groups.

Greenberg (1995) describes a case study in which an executive undertook a reorganization that included dividing an organizational unit into two separate units. The executive gave these units the nicknames "the blue and the gray," the organization's corporate colors, to represent a symbol of unity. For those subordinate managers who were directly impacted by this change, "the blue and the gray" quickly assumed a completely different interpretation, by bringing to mind the metaphor of civil war between rival fractions. In discussing the results of this study Greenberg (1995, p. 384) concluded that because metaphors may be interpreted quite differently by different individuals or organizational units, "a metaphor serves as a marker that divides the members of the organization into groups." For these reasons, metaphors

have value in revealing how work groups interpret and make sense of certain organization change events (Whiteley, 1997, p. 154).

The following descriptive case study shows how engaging members in the construction of a common visual metaphor helped those employees to "give voice" to their experience of organizational change, and to arrive on a deeper understanding of their interpretation of that change. From the perspective of the organizational researcher, the case study sheds light on the unique interpretative, metaphorical framework through which this team "made sense" of a critical organizational change event.

Methodology
Background and context
During the past ten years the author has made frequent use of visual metaphors to help work groups express their reactions to organizational change. The following illustrative case study comes from a consulting project carried out by the author in 2004 with a large, US-based manufacturer of consumer goods. The author was brought in as an external consultant for the purpose of helping the company's HR leaders evaluate employees' reactions to a recent organizational redesign effort. The redesign project had been initiated by the organization's senior leadership team, many of whom had been only recently been brought on board by the company's new CEO. Because, the redesign effort shifted the structural boundaries for many departments, and in some cases resulted in significant changes to grade levels and reporting relationships, the company's HR department had anticipated that these changes would be stressful to work associates. At the same time, these HR leaders also hoped that the communication processes that they had put into place, including the use of all-employee e-mails, town hall sessions, and informational web conferences, had helped to mitigate any potential negative responses to these changes.

As a means of soliciting work associates' reactions to the organizational redesign process the author was asked to conduct ten focus groups, of seven employees each. Five groups exclusively comprised non-managerial employees, while the other five included only managers. Participants were drawn from an initial pool of 200 associates who had been nominated by their line managers. The criteria for the initial nomination pool was that participants had to have worked for the company for at least six months prior to the study, and could not, at the time, be under review for serious performance or disciplinary problems. From this pool, participants were randomly selected by the researcher. The selection process was reviewed and approved by the company's HR department prior to initiating the study.

The case study that is presented here focuses exclusively on the metaphor construction of one of these groups, the seven members of one of the company's operations teams. The author chose this group for several reasons. First, all of the members of this team had worked together for the past two years, with no losses or replacements during that time. This factor eliminated having to account for how the group's joint decision-making process may have been influenced by the addition or loss of members. In addition, this particular focus group represented a good balance in terms of gender and ethnicity. Members included two white males, one black male, one Hispanic male, one black female and two white females. Furthermore, being one of the five work groups that were comprised of non-managerial employees, this group provided a means of seeing how the organizational change process, which had been so positively framed by the HR department and senior executives of this company, was experienced by non-managerial employees.

Initial instructions to participants
As the starting point for the project each candidate was asked to attend one of four sessions as a means of introducing them to the project's purpose and to confirm their willingness to participate in the study. The candidates were told that they represented an initial pool from which 70 participants would be randomly drawn and if selected, they would be assigned to one of the ten focus groups.

Each group was asked to independently complete the following steps. First, they would meet with the author for a three-hour session. During the first part of this session they would work together to identify a visual metaphor that described their reactions to the recent organizational redesign process, then use the materials provided to construct a flipchart drawing depicting this metaphor. During the final hour the group would be asked to share with the author the thoughts and feelings that they associated with their visual metaphor.

Candidates were instructed that following the completion of all of the sessions the author would attempt to identify those themes that appeared to be common to the ten focus groups. In addition, approximately two weeks after the conclusion of the project the author would attempt to integrate the information provided by the ten groups into a final report, which would be presented to the company's senior managers and HR leaders. These executives would also have a chance to view each team's drawings, along with a summary of each group's verbal explanation of their metaphor. All individual responses would remain anonymous and would only be quoted to illustrate the dominant organizational themes that were associated with each metaphor.

At the start of the session each team was given a set of ballpoint pens and a stack of letter-size paper for making their initial sketches, and colored markers and flipcharts for recording the final version of their visual metaphor. All sessions were self-facilitated. That is, each group was free to determine the process that they chose to follow in constructing their metaphor. The teams displayed some differences in their facilitation processes, with some teams choosing to start off by selecting a facilitator, while within other groups (with the group under review being one of these) the facilitation role appeared to shift among participants as their discussion progressed. Teams also appeared to vary widely in terms of the number of visual iterations they required (from two to six iterative drawings) before they were ready to construct the final versions of their metaphors on their flipcharts.

Methods of data interpretation
During the discussion stage of this exercise each group proceeded through successive iterations of their drawing, to their final construction. Throughout the team's discussion, the author attempted to be guided by each team's unique perspective and personal interpretation of their drawings. That is, during the review phase questions were not used to challenge a group's interpretation of their metaphor, but rather to encourage that group to expand and elaborate on their interpretative process. This questioning approach is designed to allow the interpretation of visual metaphors to unfold from the personal perspectives of the participants, rather than being externally imposed by the researcher. Lawley and Tompkins (2003, p. 28) refer to this approach as the use of "clean language," and they suggest that, "It is the 'cleanness' of your questions that minimizes the imposition of your 'map' (metaphors, assumptions and perceptions) upon the client's Metaphor Landscape." The importance of clean language is that it operates within the perceptual

field of the organizational member, in that "it acknowledges whatever the client is describing in a way that allows space and time for their symbolic perceptions to emerge and take fold" (Lawley and Tompkins, 2003, p. 28).

At the conclusion of each team's self-review, the author attempted to summarize the key organizational change themes that emerged from the team's construction of its visual metaphor. During this project phase group members were encouraged to clarify, revise or embellish on these themes, and to share their views regarding the relative importance of each theme. In this way, the group's feedback served as an important "member check" (Patton, 2001, p. 560) to insure that the author's final analysis truly represented their views.
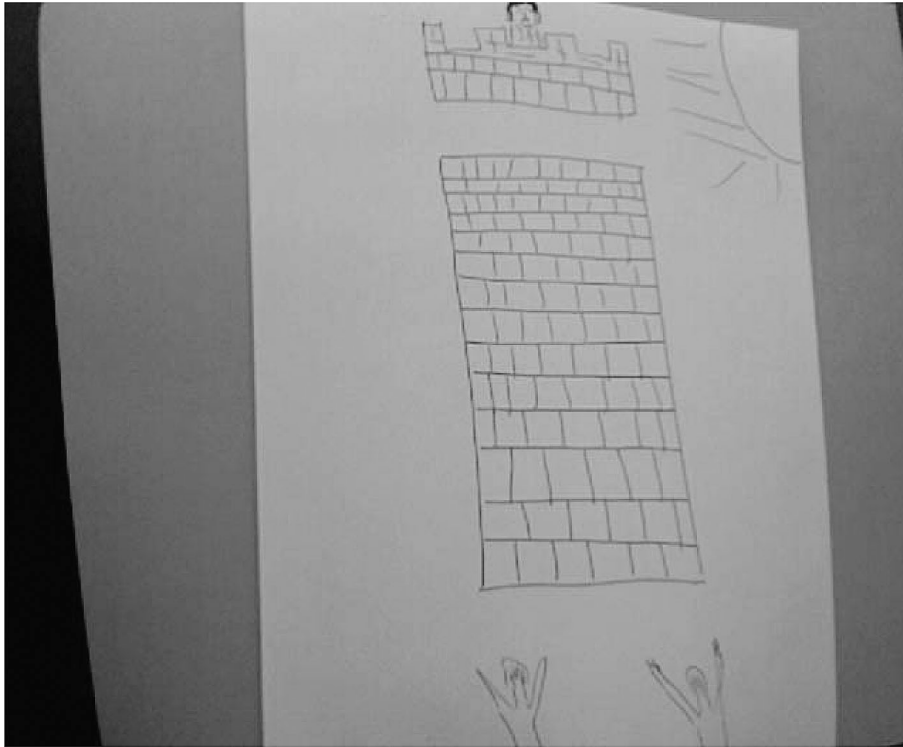
A review of the findings

Photos of the group's first two sketches are shown as Figures 1 and 2, with their final creation shown as Figure 3. In discussing their first drawing the team explained that, they had briefly explored a number of metaphors but that none of these "seem to fit." About 15 minutes into their discussion one team member made a comment about executives being "locked in their ivory towers" and the metaphor of "the dark tower of the executive floor" (the floor of the corporate building in which the (predominantly new) executive team resided) immediately resonated with the group, and they quickly began to quickly elaborate on it.

As can be seen in Figure 1 the tower dominates the center of the picture, with employees looking up to it. When asked to describe words that they associated with the
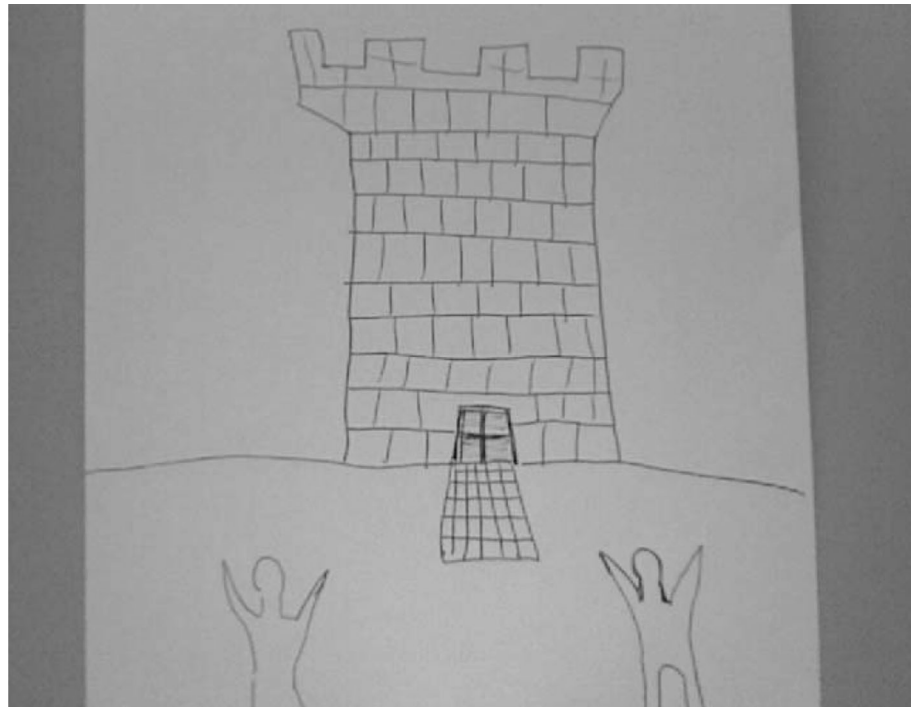
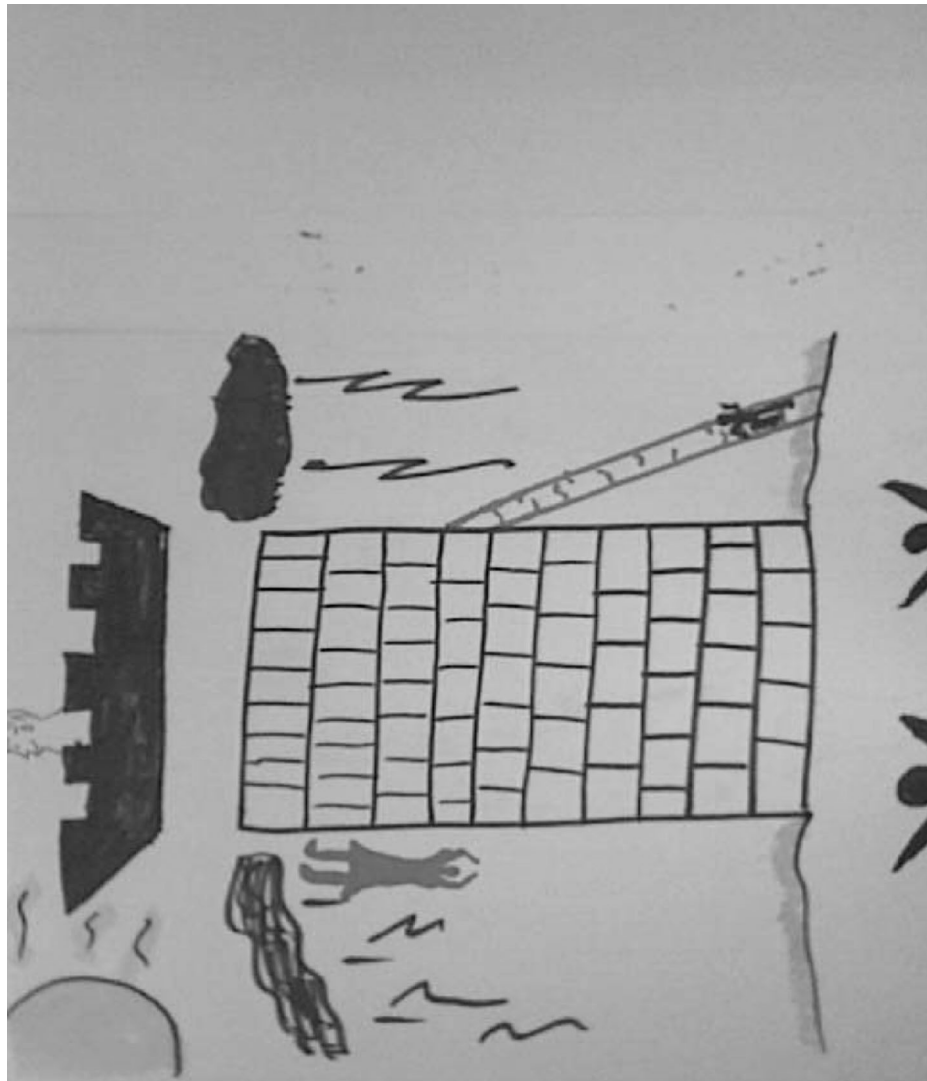

Figure 1.
The focus group's initial drawing

image, participants mentioned that the tower was "cold … like stone is cold," "rigid" and "self-contained or isolated from everything else." For the group participants the tower is the place of organizational power where their executives reside. The two people standing outside the tower are employees. They are looking up the tower, which is "a little scary." They are, as one participant put it, "outside, looking in."

At first glance, when compared with Figure 1, the landscape shown in Figure 2 appears to be a more emotionally positive setting. The sun is shining, and at the top of the tower stands a central Figure (representing all company executives) who is smiling at the people below. They, in turn, stand with arms raised as if in celebration or praise. However, the group's self-interpretation of their drawing calls forth a very different set of meanings and emotions. Although the sun is shining, the sun's rays reach only the executive at the top of the tower, who views the surrounding landscape as bright and sunny. However, the executive is blind to the anger, frustration, and confusion of the two employees who stand at the tower's base.

The disconnection between how the change process is experienced by the executive at the top of the tower and those rank-and-file employees who stand outside on the ground looking in, is accentuated by the fact that in this second drawing the top of tower has now become totally disconnected from the base. It floats in the sky, to symbolize that the people at the top are, as one group member put it, "cut off from what's real to the rest of the organization." The figures on the ground are not

Figure 3.
The focus group's final
drawing

celebrating, but rather are reaching up to the top of the tower for recognition and acceptance. As a central metaphor the dark tower now represents the separation or gulf that separates non-managerial employees from their senior executives. From his isolated position at the top of the tower senior executive aloof and inaccessible, and largely removed from the high degree of fear, anxiety and frustration that employees were experiencing. One group member put it this way:

> The new managers who were hired in recently have sealed themselves off from the rest of us. They've made a lot of change that have hurt people here, without bothering to first take the time to get to know our business.

Another ominous change has occurred in this drawing, which is the disappearance of the front gate. As one participant commented:

> We decided to get rid of the gate. A gate means that there's a way in or out, but for us the tower is really sealed off from the rest of our company.

In the final construction we see that the metaphor of the dark tower is now fully developed. In the middle of the picture stands the dark tower. The figure at the top is still shown smiling, but is now shown turned away from those employees who stand outside. Instead, the figure faces the sun because "he sees what he wants to see." The sun gives out its rays, but as one team member put it, "it's storming on the rest of us." The grass, which is green at the edge of the drawing, fades to a brown, dead color near the base. Nothing grows there.

In this final metaphor, the actions of the other characters take on a more central role in the metaphorical narrative. A figure attempts to scale the tower via the ladder, but cannot make it up. The ladder represents the "career ladder" that the group feels "is now missing some of its rungs." In discussing this, the team explained that traditionally one's career path depended upon the degree to which one possessed company experience and operational skills. However, during the past year the group had watched as executives and managers who lacked this experience were hired into key jobs over long-term employees. When asked to describe the climber's feelings one participant said, "he just can't get a grip. He sees that there's no way up. He feels hopeless." Another addition to the drawing is the figure in red who had made it to the base of the first part of the tower only to have fallen over the edge. Participants explained that, this image represents the many women managers who had lost their jobs or been demoted during the past year. The group voiced the concern that these changes reflected a lack of concern for equal treatment for men and women under the new management structure.

Participant reactions to the exercise

Immediately following each focus group session the author posed the following three questions to participants, as a means of informally assessing their reactions to the use of the visual metaphor technique:

(1) How comfortable did you feel in using this technique to share your feelings about, and reactions to, the organizational changes that are now underway in your company?

(2) Researchers use many different methods for gathering information on organizations, such as surveys, questionnaires, or interviews. It is possible that some of you have previously had the opportunity to participate in one of

these techniques. If so, could you share with me how the method that you've just explored was similar to, or different from, those techniques?

(3) What, if anything, did you personally learn or gain from this exercise that was valuable to you?

The operation group's responses to these questions closely mirrored those provided by all ten focus groups. These responses suggested that:

(1) Participants felt quite comfortable working with this technique, and their comfort level increased over the duration of the exercise. As one member of the focus group put it, "The more that we worked together the easier it became to discuss our feelings as a group."

(2) They believed that using the visual metaphor technique helped them share their feelings and emotions about the organizational change. One individual noted that:

> ... at first I didn't see the purpose of starting out with the drawing instead of just talking about the situation, but as we kept at it, I could see that it brought into focus a lot of the frustration that we've experienced with these changes.

Another group participant observed:

> I feel that this was an easy method to work. It encouraged discussion, not only on the surface issues, but also some of the underlying 'we versus us' feelings that we seem to share regarding our new executive team.

(3) A few participants did raise the concern that the visual metaphor technique may not have generated the amount of detailed data that they have seen obtained through the other techniques, such as surveys. However, many participants expressed the view that the use of visual metaphors offered many distinct advantages over other data gathering techniques. These included the ability to more directly represent employees' views, and to facilitate the sharing of emotions. For the focus group, these advantages were represented by the following comments:

- The thing I didn't like about the survey (an employee survey that had been administered by the HR department the previous year) is that we didn't have a say in picking the survey questions, and the answers you get are only as good as the questions you ask.

- In a picture it all comes together to tell a story ... a personal story, not just a bunch of facts and figures.

Discussion

Ford (1999) takes a social constructionist view of organizational change, by contending that such change occurs through a series of continually changing conversations among organizational members. Moreover, the "conversations" that shape organizational reality extend beyond the spoken word to include "the full conversational apparatus of symbols, artifacts, theatrics, etc. that are used in conjunction with or as substitutes for what is spoken" (Ford, 1999, p. 484).

Ford (1999, p. 488-89) goes on to explain that in the process of engaging in successive conversations team members proceed to "add, weed out, supplement, reintegrate and

organize conversations in order to construct a reality (set of conversations) that fits together with coherence and integrity." He suggests that through this process "new metaphors, narratives, and images are generated ... increasing the number of voices that can be spoken and creating new options for action" (Ford, 1999, p. 490).

Drawing from this perspective, a team's construction of visual metaphors regarding organizational change may function as a type of "group conversation" with the group' iterative journey to their final construction of a visual metaphor viewed as a type of visual narrative or story that the team continually revises or develops throughout each phase of the construction process (Baskinger and Nam, 2006). This approach acknowledges the way in which social narratives are co-constructed by participants, and play a powerful role in framing organizational experience (Barner and Higgins, 2005; Ford, 1999).

Such a narrative story is presented in the group's three drawings of the dark tower. What begins in the first drawing as a crudely articulated metaphor, evolves to increasingly emphasize such thematic elements as separation, personal frustration, and emotional turmoil. This is revealed in a number of changes that occur over the course of the three drawings. Examples include the separation of the top of the tower from the base; the removal of the tower door; the executive at the top of the tower who faces first towards, then away from, the employees who are stranded outside on the outside on the ground below; the figure who is shown falling from the tower and the other figure who strives, in vain, to climb the broken ladder; and the executive's sunny experience of the organizational change which stands in sharp contrast to group members' experience of being caught under the storm.

The conclusion that can be gained from this case study is that visual metaphor construction may not only help to facilitate a group's emotional expression regarding organizational change, but to also provide members with a vehicle for integrating their respective interpretations of organizational change. Throughout the course of construction the members of an organizational group collectively explore a variety of images, and begin to elaborate on, and revise, those that hold particular meaning for them. In this way, the group makes use of visual metaphors to co-author their story, and to convey those aspects of the organizational change experience that are emotionally relevant and personally meaningful to them.

Some final thoughts on metaphors

As this simple case study illustrates, visual metaphors appear to represent a useful tool for helping organizational members overcome common barriers to the emotional expression of organizational experience. There is, however, much more that can be gained by incorporating the study of visual and verbal metaphors into organizational analysis. Stein (1994, p. 107) suggests that organizational researchers can enrich their study of organizational life by helping "group members gain greater access to means and feelings that coalesce around explicit and implicit metaphors." Similarly, Oswick and Grant (1996, p. 210) speak of the need for extended work in metaphorical analysis, suggesting that:

> We particularly need empirical work that isolates and makes transparent the metaphors, and groups of metaphor, prevalent in the discourse of organizations and those to be found within organizational settings.

This study opens the door to questions that invite additional research on metaphors. One such question is the degree to which metaphor construction is influenced by such group variables as member composition, or whether the role of facilitator is shared by group members or held by one particularly member. A second question involves the benefits of combining the use of visual metaphors with such verbal methods as surveys or questionnaires, to produce a blended research model (Creswell, 1994) that might generate a more complete picture of organizational life.

Finally, it is possible that additional research methods could be introduced to aid work groups in exploring the sequential construction of their metaphors over successive drawings. One such method could involve videotaping team interactions at each phase of the construction process, and later working with team members to deconstruct the team's evolution to their final construction. This approach might yield valuable information regarding those factors that can support or impede the creative process through which groups construct their visual metaphors.

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