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Thomas Paine: Creating the New story for a New Nation

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ABSTRACT

Large-scale change at the institutional level is built on four major foundations: change theory, institutional theory, organizational culture and leadership, and contextual discourse and rhetorical persuasion. Thomas Paine's writings, a provocative stimulus for the new United States of America during its revolutionary crisis, employed all four of these in creating the nation's new "story." In this case, the institution is the pre-Revolutionary concept of governance and the change, driven by multiple forces, is the breaking away of the 13 colonies from England. Paine's powerful pamphlet, "Common Sense", as well as his other writings, reflected his rhetorical expertise and served as a cognitive foundation upon which the fledgling nation could build its new script and create new processes of institutional governance. As any good storyteller does, Paine engaged his readers in a conversation that allowed them to construct an organizational reality that articulated their collective identity. He was the change agent whose interventions helped with the birth of a new nation. One Paine biographer (Kaye, 2005) argues that Paine's "rhetorical patterns" helped to create the "vision of America as a nation gifted with a special mission" and are still quoted by Republicans, Democrats and Libertarians alike without apology (Ferguson, 2000).

I shall conclude these remarks, with the following timely and well-intended hints. We ought to reflect, that there are three different ways by which an independency may hereafter be effected, and that one of those three, will, one day or other, be the fate of America, viz. By the legal voice of the people in Congress; by a military power, or by a mob: It may not always happen that our soldiers are citizens, and the multitude a body of reasonable men; virtue, as I have already remarked, is not hereditary, neither is it perpetual. Should an independency be brought about by the first of those means, we have every opportunity and every encouragement before us, to form the noblest, purest constitution on the face of the earth. We have it in our power to begin the world over again….
WHEREFORE, instead of gazing at each other with suspicious or doubtful curiosity, let each of us hold out to his neighbor the hearty hand of friendship, and unite in drawing a line, which, like an act of oblivion, shall bury in forgetfulness every former dissension. Let the names of Whig and Tory be extinct; and let none other be heard among us, than those of a good citizen, an open and resolute friend, and a virtuous supporter of the RIGHTS of MANKIND, and of the FREE AND INDEPENDENT STATES OF AMERICA.[10]

So was born the idea of the democratic union of the United States. The language of Thomas Paine's appeal to the common man was simple and straightforward. He saw

[10] From the Appendix to the Third Edition of "Common Sense" by Thomas Paine, 1776, retrieved from http://www.ushistory.org/paine/commonsense/sense6.htm

America as full of possibilities, full of promise (Kaye, 2005). His “common sense” argument created in many minds a picture of truly representative government, where every male citizen had a voice, and had an equal responsibility to exercise that voice in support of the common good. One New York reader of this anonymous pamphlet (Paine did not reveal his authorship until after the formal declaration of independence) shared the following: “This animated piece dispels, with irresistible energy, the prejudice of the mind against the doctrine of independence, and pours in upon it such an inundation of light and truth, as will produce an instantaneous and marvellous change in the temper - in the views and feelings of an American” (Kaye, 2005, p. 17).

Paine was able to encourage the coming together of the thirteen diverse colonies, and helped sustain this energy even during the harsh and demoralizing winter of 1776 when Washington's troops were ready to quit. The first sentence of Paine's “Crisis Papers” is well remembered: “these are the times that try men's souls,” and was so inspiring an account of the budding republic's difficulties, challenges and future possibilities in 1776-77 that Washington ordered it read to his troops. In this and other writings Paine advocated a system of checks and balances, separation of church and state, support of universal human rights, the importance of technology to economic development, help for the working poor, and the need to support the union through appropriate taxation. Even though his radical religious views voiced in 1794 in “Age of Reason” drove his name underground, his ideas are still used today by progressives and liberals to argue controversial issues in the name of “public interest”.

Given Paine's enduring legacy, what can his story teach us about management and organizational inquiry? Several applicable theories come to mind:

- Change Theory - Paine was an acknowledged change agent, during a time of environmental “jolts” to the equilibrium of the existing system; arguably an example of “punctuated equilibrium”, or revolutionary change (Burke, 2002; Gersick, 1991; Greenwood & Hinings, 1996; Romanelli, 1991; Weick & Quinn, 1999). What was it about the environment that made it ready for change? Can we learn something that might make us more useful change agents today?

- Institutional Theory - The new “organizational form” Paine was promoting needed to mesh with broad social values in order to be considered legitimate and attain needed resources to survive (Dacin, 1997; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Oliver, 1991; Scott, 2003; Singh, Tucker & House, 1986; Suchman, 1995; Zucker, 1977). External institutional agents' demands or professional expectations of compliance create a natural tendency toward isomorphism. How can we sustain legitimacy while crafting a new organizational form?

- Organizational Culture and Leadership - An understanding of the existing culture, and an understanding of mechanisms useful for changing that culture, as evidenced by George Washington's awareness of Paine's ability to articulate a new kind of “sensemaking”, helped create an enduringly effective “organization” (Chakravarthy & Gargiulo, 1998; Daft & Weick, 1984; Schein, 1985; Schein, 1983; Schwandt, 2005; Weick, 1988; Wilkins & Bristow, 1987). What does leadership have to know about the culture of the organization in order to enact appropriate strategy for change?

- Contextual Discourse and Rhetorical Persuasion - It may have been Paine's ability to articulate a common vision, some say a “new political language”, that persuaded the Americans of his

day to adopt a democratic solution, deciding to interact in a politically different way, a new kind of cultural expression (Elsbach & Sutton, 1992; Ferguson, 2000; Greene, 1978; Hardy, Lawrence & Grant, 2005; Massey, 2001; Robichaud, Giroux & Taylor, 2004; Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005; Weick & Browning, 1986). What kind of communication strategies might be most effective in helping organizations change, especially in times of crisis?

Answers to these questions, informed by theory and research, might provide insights into how change occurs at both the individual organization and institutional levels. Further discussion might allow for generalization to international policy decision-making, public and corporate governance and non-profit strategies.

SETTING THE STAGE

Change Theory. Fundamental change does not happen easily, especially in human systems; however, new forms of human organizations do emerge. Although the theoretical literature is not consistent, there are some preliminary explanations for how organizational evolution occurs. One viewpoint suggests variation is random, in the Darwinian evolutionary tradition; another proposes consideration of initial conditions, with resulting contextual constraints caused by the "imprinting" influence of founding fathers; a third identifies resources and access to information as dynamic variables opportunistically acting to create socially constructed organizational forms, dependent on the interdependencies of human networks for their long-term survival (Romanelli, 1991).

The creation of the uniquely democratic United States of America owes a lot to the transformational rhetoric of Thomas Paine; and Paine owed many of his ideas to his father's Quaker beliefs and his unique experience as a workingman in England. Paine might never have come to the colonies except for a serendipitous meeting with Benjamin Franklin in London in 1774 (Kaye, 2005); therefore, random forces were in play.

The arrival of Paine in Philadelphia was also serendipitous, because it was there that the intellectual diversity, resources and access to information were most vibrant and available. Even though the initial conditions created by the influx of immigrants from all over Europe may have provided an opportunity to accelerate the pace of change, that was no guarantee that revolution would occur. Whatever the model of change processes or theory of change management, all agree that resistance is inevitable. In fact, many major change efforts may result in initial failure due to the difficulty of overcoming organizational inertia and apathy, or possibly overt defensive activity on the part of sometimes very diverse stakeholders (Burke, 2002).

The kind of change that occurred in America in 1776 could be conceptualized as a kind of "punctuated equilibrium". As described by Gersick (1991), systems, especially human ones, partake of a "deep structure", or "network of fundamental, interdependent choices," that characterize the system's interaction and resource exchange with the environment (p. 15); and "during equilibrium periods, systems maintain and carry out the choices…make adjustments that preserve the deep structure against internal and external pertubations" (p. 17). However, "systems' histories are unique", so evolution does not occur via a uniform series of stages. Instead, incremental change will be "punctuated" by tradition-shattering, revolutionary change, which fundamentally alters the underlying deep structure (p. 13). Therefore, truly fundamental change does not proceed either gradually or comfortably.

So what triggers this kind of fundamental change? It's possible that newcomers to the system, because of their unique perspective, may identify failures of "inappropriate deep structures". In a fairly new system, one without a deeply entrenched history, there

may also be a sense of goals to be met, or "temporal milestones" established to gauge progress. If expected progress is not made, then pressures from the external environment may be more acutely felt. Certainly, as important catalysts, an influential outsider or transitional entity may inspire confidence and enthusiasm by articulating a new vision of the future. Whatever the trigger, "no one change can convert an entire system instantaneously" (Gersick, 1991, p. 30). Revolutionary change must begin with a "nucleus", a rapid transformation in a small "population" that is "isolated enough for the change to take hold" and able to resist being diluted.

Capitalizing on the initial upheaval, effective change agents can use this as an opportunity to change meaning systems by speaking differently, communicating alternative schema, reinterpreting revolutionary triggers, influencing punctuation, building coordination and commitment to the new order (Weick & Quinn, 1999):

> In the logic of attraction…people change to a new position because they are attracted to it, drawn to it, inspired by it. There is a focus on moral power, the attractiveness or being state of the change agent, the freedom of the change target, and the role of choice in the transformational process (p. 380).

The above makes it sound like the revolution in America was inevitable because of the random events surrounding Thomas Paine's arrival in Philadelphia in 1774, the pressure of British regulation on a diverse and energetic population trying to define itself as something new, and the presence of extraordinary individuals with leadership capabilities. However, "radical change is problematic because of the normative embeddedness of an organization (or system) within its institutional context" (Greenwood & Hinings, 1996, p. 1028). The entire system must have convergent interests, with associated congruent value sets, and both the capacity and power to act on those interests, as well as the stamina to see it through. Change is painful.

Institutional Theory. Consistent with the above discussion, it's helpful to think of an organization, or system, as a socially-constructed, goal-directed entity. Also, that the organization is interdependent with other entities in an open system environment, therefore vulnerable to external forces and in need of boundary-spanning mechanisms to help with assimilation of needed inputs and protection against agencies that would seek to destroy the character of the system (Scott, 2003). Adaptation is the key. Survival belongs to those who develop mechanisms to adjust to the inevitable uncertainty present in both the internal and the external environment.

The organization exists in its environment as part of a population of other organizations, or systems of government which operate according to established norms or commonly accepted codes of behavior. These organizational forms, due to beliefs shared between groups, procedures developed and standardized over time, and regulations established by legal statute, can be considered legitimized institutional structures (Meyer & Rowan, 1977), which inhabit an organizational field or economic community of interdependent suppliers, consumers, intermediaries, regulatory agencies, professional associations, all sharing the same assumptions, exhibiting similar structural characteristics, and therefore considered isomorphic (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983).

In addition, some relationships between elements in the system are stronger than others. Some kind of organizational structure is necessary in order to control and coordinate the flow of energy through the system. Organizations that are part of an institutionalized organizational field may have to adjust their relationships with the external environment to comply with the demands of external institutional agents. By incorporating institutionalized elements, and becoming

isomorphic with the institutional environment, Meyer and Rowan (1977) proposed that "the organization becomes, in a word, legitimate, and it uses its legitimacy to strengthen its support and secure its survival" (p. 349).

Legitimacy, or reliance on socially-constructed institutional practices, is "likely to be of paramount importance both prior to creation and early in the life of an organization" (Dacin, 1997, p. 74). Founders may feel the need to create a plausible future based on normative factors. Especially young organizations, or systems, are prone to succumb to the "liability of newness," since they have to learn new roles and acquire new skills in order to compete effectively. External legitimacy "significantly depresses organizational death rates" (Singh, Tucker & House, 1986, p. 171).

America in 1774 was not inevitably headed for revolution. As a new colony, testing its limitations, the loosely connected thirteen provinces were growing rapidly. Both ethnically and religiously diverse, this colonial culture may have needed British rule of law to provide political cohesiveness. In addition, American leaders, including John Adams, Thomas Jefferson and even George Washington, continued to toast King George III and otherwise avow the need for a union with Great Britain. Even the budding radicals wondered how to govern themselves without the support and legitimacy of the British constitution, and how to attract needed resources from across the Atlantic without the security and support of British commerce (Kaye, 2005, p. 41). Institutional forces were causing inertia; however, those same institutional forces were also causing pain.

Oliver (1991) proposes that organizations may choose to react in different ways to institutional pressures. Organizational response may take the form of acquiescence, compromise, avoidance, defiance and manipulation, depending on how willing and able the organization is to conform:

> "organizational questions about the legitimacy or validity of the institutional status quo, political self-interests among organizational actors that are at cross-purposes with institutional objectives, and organizational efforts to retain control over processes and outputs limit the willingness of organizations to conform to institutional requirements"(Oliver, 1991, p. 159).

Given "legitimate" concerns about access to future resources, when breaking the old institutional relationship, organizations or systems struggle to create new norms, rituals, and symbols of legitimacy. These new legitimate forms may be "pragmatic, based on audience self-interest; moral, based on normative approval; and cognitive, based on comprehensibility" (Suchman, 1995, p. 571)-they need a new and sustainable "story".

Organizational Culture and Leadership. America may have been fortunate in its youth and diversity, because its European roots provided "the greater the degree of institutionalization, the greater the generational uniformity of cultural understandings, the greater the maintenance without direct social control, and the greater the resistance to change through personal influence" (Zucker, 1977, p. 742). Providing participants a "voice" in decision-making at the early stages of the transformation process legitimizes the transition (Chakravarthy & Gargiulo, 1998). Paine was a strong yet skillful leader, one capable of creating and then manipulating the developing culture (Schein, 1985).

Cultures are patterns of basic assumptions that a given group has invented, discovered, or developed in learning to cope with its problems of external adaptation and internal integration - patterns of assumptions that have worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems.

(Schein, 1983, p. 14).

Founders usually have certain beliefs about the environment, assumptions about how things should be, based on their own unique cultural experiences and histories. In fact, some even believe it's best to first "develop a deep appreciation for the historical and cultural roots" of the system under change, while simultaneously acknowledging its limitations (Wilkins & Bristow, 1987, p. 227). However, the biggest challenge may be how to transition an organization or system to a successor:

> The ultimate dilemma for the first-generation organization with a strong founder-generated culture is how to make the transition to subsequent generations in such a manner that the organization remains adaptive to its changing external environment without destroying cultural elements that have given it its uniqueness and that have made life fulfilling in the internal environment (Schein, 1983, p. 28).

This requires extraordinarily skilled leaders who understand that the system can preserve itself over time, as long as effective information processing mechanisms are developed. Coherence among parts of the system allows the organization or system to scan its environment, view, discover and enact interpretations and solve the problem of what to do next: "to survive, organizations must have mechanisms to interpret ambiguous events and to provide meaning and direction for participants" (Daft & Weick, 1984, p. 293).

Especially in times of crisis, commitment, capacity and expectations about sensemaking are critical to adequate understanding and appropriate response (Weick, 1988). If sensemaking is a "process that includes the use of prior knowledge to assign meaning to new information", its essence therefore involves cues "that signify that meaning is required", a cognitive framework to serve as a scaffold upon which to build understanding, and a "script" to link new information to the framework (Schwandt, 2005). Leaders need to develop sensemaking skills so they can "reflect critically on underlying assumptions associated with the knowledge frames that they are using to make sense of both their actions and those of the organization" (Schwandt, 2005, p. 189).

In the summer of 1775, Benjamin Rush, a prominent Philadelphia physician and future signer of the Declaration of Independence, encouraged Thomas Paine to write something in favor of independence. Rush had thought to do so, but was hesitant because of the potential loss of status, pain, or "popular odium" such a publication might create for him (Kaye, 2005, p. 41). Paine had less to lose, so, initially under anonymity, he articulated an ideal of self-government by critically reflecting on "the very structure and character of Britain's political and social order" in a way that "spoke directly to American experiences, sentiments and values" (Kaye, 2005, p. 43). His words in *Common Sense*, and then, in the most timely publication of the first *American Crisis* papers in the winter of 1776, were a tool for George Washington to use to "recharge the revolutionary cause" (Kaye, 2005, p. 58), and later use as a source of myth-building and an impression management tactic to "shift attention away from controversial actions and toward socially desirable goals" (Elsbach & Sutton, 1992, p. 699).

Contextual Discourse and Rhetorical Persuasion. Referring back to the power of the institution, and the necessity for the leader to manipulate the organizational form, Suddaby and Greenwood observe that "the strategic use of persuasive language, or rhetoric, is the means by which shifts in institutional logic are secured" (Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005, p. 35). They suggest that language is the foundation of institutions, and therefore can directly influence institutional performance by "first exposing the contradictory meanings embedded in institutional logics and then connecting selected aspects of those meanings to

broader cultural templates in an internally consistent fashion" (Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005, p. 61). But beyond rhetoric lies the storyteller.

The story of Thomas Paine highlights how language can construct organizational reality by helping to articulate collective identity. Paine's writings helped initiate conversations about change among widely dispersed networks, and through this "discourse" brought about the possibility of effective collaboration:

> When collaborating partners discursively produce a collective identity, they produce a discursive object that refers to themselves as some form of collective, rather than as simply a set of disconnected individuals or as a group of organizational representatives. This collective identity 'names' the group - it gives it an identity that is meaningful to its members and to its stakeholders - and is shared, in the sense that members collectively engage in the discursive practices that produce and reproduce it over time (Hardy, Lawrence & Grant, 2005, p. 61).

In a good story not only does truth shine but values are also deeply embedded, consistently confirmed, and appropriate to the story: consequences are made clear and stir our emotion and imagination. A good story is accessible and bridges social hierarchies because "all people have the capacity to make rational judgments about stories" (Weick & Browning, 1986, p. 249). A good narrative "engages people in conversation who collectively strive to arrive at an interpretation that provides closure" (Robichaud, Giroux & Taylor, 2004, p. 631), simultaneously allowing diverse participants a "voice" in generating and perpetuating a legitimate structure for the organizational system.

In times of crisis, although it's difficult to do, organizations that communicate consistently can enhance their legitimacy, or at least avoid the perception of illegitimacy (Massey, 2001). Kaye (2005) and others have argued that Thomas Paine's "rhetorical patterns" helped create the "vision of America as a nation gifted with a special mission" (Kaye, 2005, p. 59), and have now become so "intrinsic to American political speech" that they are quoted by Republicans, Democrats and Libertarians alike without apology (Ferguson, 2000). Greene credits Paine for the "modernization of political consciousness" (Greene, 1978):

> Inspired by the openness, the basic modernity, of American society and impressed by the liberating and energizing character of its Revolution, Paine helped to give Americans an appreciation of their own social virtues, inner worth, and what he thought was their superiority over the old world. In the process, he laid the foundations for his subsequent contributions to a powerful new vision of political society that was the product not merely of pure reason but of reason operating on - and generalizing from - experience, the *American* experience (p. 92).

IS IT POSSIBLE TO GENERALIZE?

Guillermo O'Donnell, scholar of government and international studies, proposes that, in many forms, democracy is dangerous, and most difficult to effectively institutionalize, possibly because of the inherent contradiction between "two equally rational desires": to trust the majority to make decisions that furnish goods for public use and solve collective problems, and my to be protected from such public policies that offend my values, identity or interests (O'Donnell, 2000). Institutional mechanisms to resolve this contradiction require overlapping jurisdictions of control between relatively balanced powers, since human beings are likely to abuse such power. This rather elaborate construction of checks and balances provides an information overload of "horizontal accountability," but preserves the essence of democracy.

O'Donnell implies elsewhere that the unique form of democracy practiced in the United States IS unique because it represents success at "building a set of institutions which become important decisional points in the flow of political power…contingent upon governmental policies and political strategies of various agents which embody the recognition of a paramount shared interest in the task of democratic institution building" (O'Donnell, 1994, p. 58). The creation of the United States democratic institution owes as much to luck as it was the result of a conducive set of initial conditions. It also owes a lot to James Madison, who hoped "virtuous republicans would govern" (O'Donnell, 2000).

Institutions, as socially constructed goal-directed entities, are inherently flawed. The lessons we can learn from Thomas Paine's legacy are the following:

- If we have to change a system, hope that it is fairly new, that we have an influential outsider who can articulate a vision, and that there is a ready nucleus of key stakeholders with common values who are ready to nurture seeds of change.

- We can hope our institution is legitimate enough to provide access to needed resources, but has leadership with enough lack of political self-interest to create effectively new norms, rituals and symbols of legitimacy, a new "story" of the organization.

- We have leadership who believes in providing participants a "voice" in decision-making at the early stages of the transformation process, and who understands that the system can preserve itself over time, as long as effective information processing mechanisms are developed; and who have adequately developed sensemaking skills.

- We have individuals in the organization who understand the strategic use of persuasive language, and who are able to tell a good, consistent story.

Finally, some cautions are in order. Although it might be tempting to believe that if giving some "voice" is good, then more must be better, research suggests otherwise. Giving voice in decision-making increases satisfaction when under moderate conditions, but when leaders give participants high levels of voice, suspicion sets in and participants believe the leader is behaving inappropriately by relinquishing his or her power. The advice is for managers to consistently and systematically "follow interpersonally fair procedures" (Greenberg, 2004, p. 186).

In addition, although popular opinion is that participation, when used to redistribute and level influence and authority in organizations, can be motivating to participants, research suggests otherwise. In one study, participation correlated approximately .11 with satisfaction and performance: "changing levels of participation (i.e. from giving participants direction to allowing them full participation)…explains only about 1 percent of the concurrent change in performance or satisfaction…and fails to support the use of participation as a motivational technique in the workplace" (Wagner, 2004, p. 306). However, participatory information sharing, using participatory processes to share or redistribute information, "can have positive effects on performance when it provides otherwise uninformed individuals with ready access to requisite knowledge and insights" (Wagner, 2004, p. 307).

Organizations involve individuals, groups and organizational processes, all behaving in a way that hopefully allows and facilitates organizational effectiveness. Organizations are complex systems, open to their environment, and subject to unforgiving external forces. Change is inevitable, and painful, and organizational success in

negotiating change is somewhat a matter of planning, somewhat a matter of resources and effective control mechanisms, and somewhat a matter of leadership and luck. Thanks somewhat to Thomas Paine, we're lucky to live in America.

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