Managing Organizational Change

Process, Social Construction and Dialogue

Second Edition

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CONSTRUCTING CHANGE

Learning objectives

By the time you have completed your study of this chapter, you should be able to:

- Discuss the assumptions underlying the social construction of change.
- Discuss the difference between the Cartesian and the constructionist perspectives on change.
- Discuss the role of language in managing change.
- Discuss the notion of change as an outcome of social construction involving the lives of the people who make up an organization.
- Discuss levels of analysing change in ways that will enable us to see how social construction filters through levels of analysis.
- Discuss the role of social construction in helping us make sense of the relationships between culture and structure.
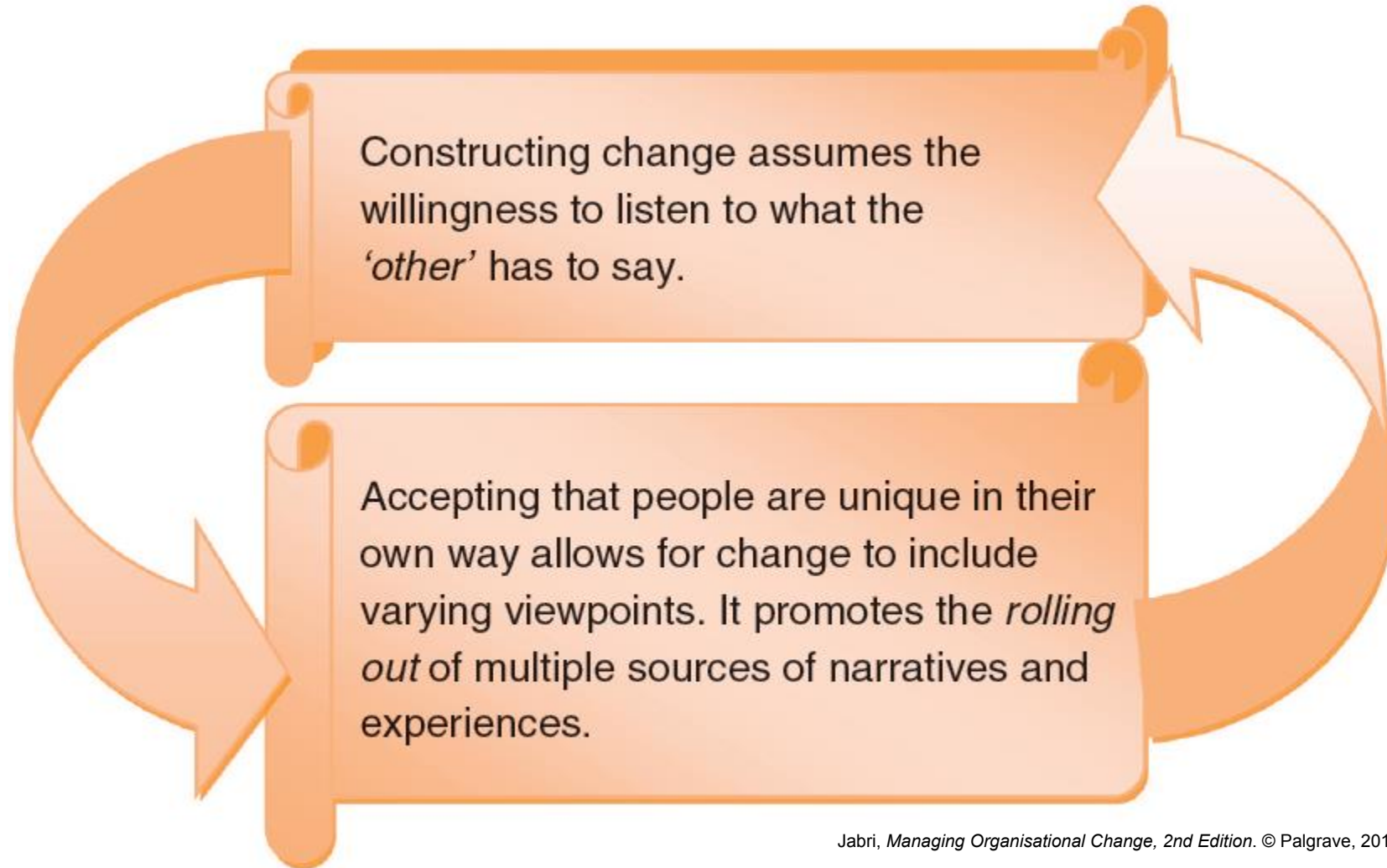
What is social construction?
Social construction is about human interaction in managing change. Under the social construction model, communication is an act – a sort of an achievement achieved through social interaction.
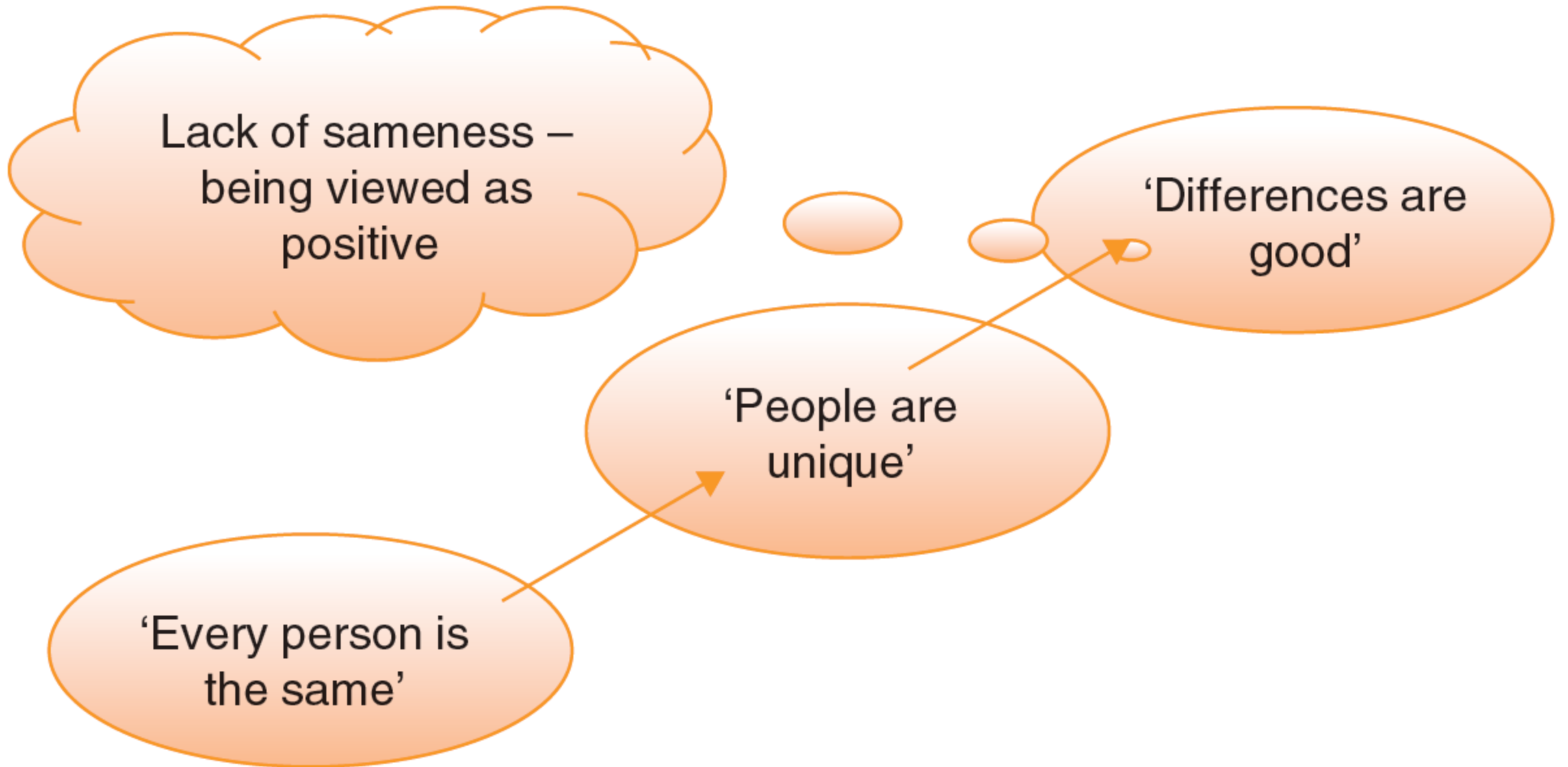
Social interaction involves recursive talk. By *recursive* talk we mean *responsive* talk, where the outcome of an utterance *runs back* in order to feed the conversational process *itself*.

What is an utterance?

- An utterance can be a word or a sentence, spoken or written.

- It is an expression of what the person is trying say, namely the meaning of what the person is trying to convey.

- An utterance eventually generates another.

- Utterances produce what might be called a 'stretch of conversation'.

Communication assumes very special importance. It is intertwined with social construction. Keep in mind that people are unique in their own ways and that is where listening assumes special importance in managing change.

Constructing change assumes the willingness to listen to what the *'other'* has to say.

Accepting that people are unique in their own way allows for change to include varying viewpoints. It promotes the *rolling out* of multiple sources of narratives and experiences.

The management of change has traditionally been guided by two broad preferences – rationalist (Cartesian) and the relational (social).

Under the objective mode change is assumed to reflect an underlying objective phenomenon that exists somewhere 'out there', in isolation from the people involved.

Under the relational the emphasis is placed on responsive talk - much needed for effecting change.

Cartesian/objective	Relational /responsive
'I exist, therefore I am.'	'I exist, I relate to others; others relate to me, therefore I am.'
'I think, therefore I am.'	'We talk and listen, therefore we are.'
Change is an objective phenomenon	Change is a social construction

"Language as a game of chess"

"The meaning of a word is its **use** in the language."

Wittgenstein (1978)

- Every chess piece is socially constructed. It is not pre-given.
- Every piece of chess has little meaning in any other game.

By analogy, an entity such as strategy or structure is not something pre-given. It is context dependent. It is largely based on what we make of it and how to go about go about managing it. And that is one very important reason why we need communication.

Communication is a relational process

Meaning-making under communication is a relational process, rather than seeing change as something that exists 'out there'.

Consider an organization about to establish a new customer relations department. Clearly, the intent is not only to design a new section, but also to enhance levels of service, build customer relations and increase client and customer satisfaction. The reason for the new department is largely contingent on the way points of view are put forward, namely the way through which we come to make meaning.

Social Supplement

Remember that any utterance is closely intertwined with that of another. Person 'A' cannot make it happen until person 'B' has done something with it.

Thus, there is always an utterance and its 'social supplement' .

Gergen (2008) elaborates on the need for a 'social supplement' by noting that: 'In isolation I have no ability to mean anything; I gain my ability "to mean something" through the supplemental action of others.'

Every point of view (action) is (at least) double-voiced: person A (action) says: 'This way of providing customer service is good'; person B (reaction) responds by saying: 'Oh yes, this way of providing service is good.'

To learn more about social construction please refer to Tableau 1

Tableau 1 is used to quickly capture a scene that involves an exchange of utterances. Here we have Aziz, Rita and Anne making still images with their bodies to explain differing points of view. As you read through, please note the informal exchange of viewpoints culminating in the construction of a plan for action.

Types of communication affecting the change Process

Monologic communication is based on a singular treatment (using one channel) that pushes for a dominant (authoritative, top-down) view of how change should proceed. It capitalizes on cliques for the formation of an objective system through a complex process of rewarding those in favour and politely alienating those who are against. In sum, it suppresses the knowledge of different things or courses of action.

Dialogic communication creates multiple points (multiple channels) to allow for the change to include varying viewpoints. It relies on rolling out multiple sources of narratives and experiences. It capitalizes on this multiplicity of viewpoints through a process of counterpoint and juxtaposition of conversations. In sum, it flourishes by not declaring itself to be the final word.

Kurt Lewin (1951) came up with the notion that differences in performances between people are largely contingent on how the person relates to their immediate environment. Lewin noted that people differ in their behavioural and attitudinal tendencies due to the *interactive* effect of the person and their immediate work situation (work climate). The behaviour (B) of an individual can be described as a function (f) of the person and their perceived situation (perceived work setting). In simple terms, this may be represented thus:

$$B = f \text{ (person, immediate situation)}$$

Put this way, individual performance or, for that matter, any job-related outcome, including turnover, absenteeism, stress, identification and so on, may be explained as a *function* of the person and their immediate context or situation.

Group level

Organizational level

'Organizing' the three levels is achieved through ongoing talk and conversations

Individual level