

My Practice Is My Strategy— Values in Organisations

CATHY ROZEL FARNWORTH, BARUN GURUNG AND JANICE JIGGINS



‘Tempered radicals’ create change in their organisations, by narrowing the gap between personal values and the values of their organisations. Their experience of championing the role of women in society, community participation in agricultural development projects and social science approaches in technical organisations is explored by three authors who have been engaging with tempered radicals over a number of years.

KEYWORDS: Tempered radicals, authenticity, values, organisation change

Introduction

We have been working over the last four years on developing our understanding of ‘tempered radicals’ (Meyerson & Scully, 1995). Tempered radicals experience the values and beliefs of the organisation or profession within which they work as a violation of the integrity and authenticity of their personal values and beliefs. They pursue advancement within the organisation or profession at the same time as *criticising the status quo and seeking to transform it*. They seek ways to manage the resulting ambivalence and tensions in their position.

We have had the opportunity in the course of our work with the CGIAR (the Consultative

Group on International Agricultural Research) to talk with over 80 people who feel themselves to be in this situation. We have deepened and extended our understanding by talking in depth with individuals from the organic food and farming sectors and natural resource management. The findings reported here are drawn from a total of 12 conversations with individuals (6 male, 6 female) in 11 organisations, held over a five year period in an opportunistic series of encounters with those who self-identified as in some sense a tempered radical. We asked questions like:

- *What is your experience of ‘ambivalence and tension’?*
- *What approaches to change work? What approaches fail?*

- *What kind of characteristics do you need to have, as a person, to initiate radical change in particular situations?*
- *Is there a role for networks and networking in your change strategies?*

Analysis of the data has led us to identify a number of emergent themes. We draw upon anthropological literature to further analyse and interpret those salient for the theme of sustainability and the readership of this special edition.

Exploring concepts

The concept of ‘tempered radicals’, first introduced in an article (Meyerson and Scully, 1995) and followed up in a book (Meyerson, 2001), captured our imagination because of the way it recast the notion of leadership and organisational change. The central idea is that change in the workplace is less about radical transformations and more about ‘small wins’ resulting from the ‘strategic actions’ of ‘everyday leaders’. Even more compelling was the idea that every day leaders ‘provoke change’ by sticking to their values and asserting their agendas—yet do not jeopardize their careers (Meyerson, 2001).

The concept of change and leadership provided by the model of a tempered radical allowed us to reframe the disconnections often experienced by members of organisations between personal values and those of the organisations they work in. Previously imagined situations of despair and hopelessness could become opportunities for ‘ordinary’ members to exercise leadership.

Yet the image of a strategic change agent who is actively looking for, and achieving, ‘small wins’ makes the nature of change in social systems seem too simple and deliberate. We felt that the relationship between the ‘system’ (the organisation) and the ‘change agent’ must be more complex. Given that the adjective ‘tempered’ brings to mind both a passion to open up liberat-

ing spaces—but also encounters with strong powers trying to force compliance—we asked ourselves whether an internal change agent could really be free of an organisation’s influence.

One way of thinking about this question is to use the anthropological concept of ‘serious games’. This is based on earlier formulations of Practice Theory according to which the ‘system’ influences, and is influenced by, people’s practices (Bourdieu, 1977; Giddens, 1973). Talking about ‘games’ allows the following dimensions of change to be captured: (1) organisations are culturally organised and constructed by the people directly involved, as well as by the rules and goals of the organisation; (2) organisations consist of webs of relationships. When people change their ideas they change—advertently or inadvertently—the organisation’s relationship webs, i.e. individuals are not entirely ‘free agents’ able to do and think what they will, but they do have what is known as ‘agency’, i.e. “skills, intention, wit, knowledge, intelligence” (Ortner 1996:12). The conscious deployment of agency is refined through encounters between people working outside the organisation’s boundaries. The idea of serious games allows us to see that social change can result from encounters between arenas of practice (within and beyond one’s own organisation), organisational cultures and the values that tempered radicals themselves hold. The idea that the game is ‘serious’ adds the idea that power and inequality pervade the game of life in multiple ways and that while there may be playfulness and pleasure in the process, the stakes can be very high (Ortner, 1996:12).

We began our conversations with tempered radicals by trying to understand who they were: their values, ideologies, and their perspectives through their personal histories. We moved on to their understanding of the culture of the organisation they worked in, what the rules of the game were and who sets these rules. We then delved into the encounters between the

'system'—constituted by the organisation's structure and culture—and the individual as an actor shaped by their histories. This allowed us to build narratives of intra-organisational encounters through time and developed our understanding of the other games the tempered radicals played through their networks of colleagues, peers, friends and supporters inside and external to the organisation.

Personal histories

The people we interviewed each brought their particular histories to their encounters with the dominant values of their workplace. Such histories can be viewed as social and cultural filters through which individuals 'select or reinterpret events' that are part of their external encounters (e.g. Geertz, 1973; 1980; Rosaldo 1989; Sahlins 1981; Ortner 1989). Their histories reveal three major dimensions of influence:

1. Parental influences

Many of our interviewees talked about the importance of their personal beliefs in shaping their attempts to achieve change within their organisations. In many cases these beliefs were rooted in their own parents' beliefs and values. The interviewees explained how these formed the basis of their views, political allegiances and acted as sources of their own radicalism:

My father was a forester and I have always had a good relationship to trees, to the environment, to nature. (Interviewee 3, woman).

My father became a farmer when I was eight. Until then, and for a period after, he worked in heavy industry. I think the exposure to the two environments...has been important in the development of my views. (Interviewee 1, man).

I think it comes from my mother. She brought us up to think 'do unto others as you would like them to do unto you'...and this converts into a very strong sense of social justice. This was a very fun-

damental part of my personality formation. She was a rebel of sorts...she was the first in the family to go to college, was a member of the communist party, and this combined strongly with the tradition of social liberal thinking in Britain. (Interviewee 7, woman).

2. Confronting fundamentally-held, often unconscious beliefs

Equally significant to our interviewees were transformative events or life experiences that resonated with their present values and identity. These chime in with theories of adult learning that hypothesise that transformations begin with 'disorienting dilemmas' (Mezirow, 1981:8). Disorientating dilemmas are events in which one's old patterns of response to situations become ineffective, prompting self-examination and assessment of one's assumptions and beliefs. For one of our tempered radicals, this transformative experience was based on travel overseas; for two others it was centred on their gender and professional identity:

I think that with me my experience of going overseas in 1996 to work in Nepal, working with local communities on health and sanitation technologies, exposed me to life. The exposure I had to poverty woke me up. I realised that things had to change. Prior to that I was half-asleep. I was exposed to a truth, to a reality that I couldn't accept. (Interviewee 6, man).

I was incredibly naïve when I started. I really thought if I was professionally qualified, talented, I could go ahead...and now the learning for me has been that this is not true [laughing ironically]. For instance, when I was appointed as director of research, many asked...'What is she doing in a position like that?' It was a reaction to me, as a woman, as a social scientist. (Interviewee 7, woman).

In this meeting, despite my repeated attempts to ask a question (I was waving my colourful scarf), the chair—male—did not call on me. [This shaped her belief that, "It doesn't matter how old or senior you are, you are still invisible"]. (Interviewee 8)

Experiences such as these were transformative in that they helped create a resolve in the interviewees to become change agents within the system in which they were working.

3. Engagement with alternative discourses

Encounters with intellectual discourses that were new also provided significant disorienting dilemmas. For one person it was an encounter with the “inseparability of economic development and growth with environmental concerns” (Interviewee 4, man) that grew out of his formal educational experience in the 1980s. For others it was the radicalism and idealism embedded in the social movements of the 1960s that “reinforced my belief in the importance of people having power over what happens to them” (Interviewee 8, woman).

Organisational cultures: setting the rules of the game

Organisations have come to be viewed as distinctive cultures (e.g. Alvesson, 1993; 2002; Smircich, 1983; Pfeffer, 1981). How does culture influence the actions and practices of tempered radicals? One interviewee referred to the cultural rules of his organisation by saying, “They develop guidelines for our work. We have a bewildering range of guidelines, actually, that govern things like how we are supposed to answer the phone, how we are to write letters, what we can and cannot say” (Interviewee 6, man).

Another interviewee mentioned the frequently paternalistic attitude of technologically-oriented organisational cultures towards those they represent as the beneficiaries of their technologies:

Agricultural science is very conservative in the sense of viewing science as rational, objective, rigorous methodology ...and this knowledge is conveyed to others. A very engineering model of

science, the very antithesis of which would be the notion of social constructivity of knowledge and reality. The idea that knowledge is to be ‘taken’ to the communities one works with and that such a process requires the social construction of reality...is so totally alien in this environment. (Interviewee 7, woman).

Patterns of inclusion and exclusion are characteristic of organisational cultures. In organisations that prize ‘science and technology’, the non-economic social sciences and their practice often are cast as the ‘*other*’:

When I first came to work in this system, social science was viewed as a ‘nuisance’...sent by outside interests...to evaluate other people’s [scientists] work...and to play the role of ‘annoying’ critic. (Interviewee 7, woman).

Our interviews showed that women professionals often feel ‘excluded’ simply by virtue of their gender. They felt marginalised from positions of power and decision-making, particularly if they also happened to be social scientists in technologically-oriented research organisations:

When I came to interview for the social science position in the faculty of forestry, the chair informed me that they were looking for a recreational post¹ to be filled. I flatly refused. (Interviewee 8, woman).

Encounters: incomplete hegemonies and strategising actions

‘Hegemony’ denotes total control. The notion of ‘incomplete hegemonies’ is derived from Gramsci (see Ortner, 2006: 7) who suggested that the power of culture is never totalising because it is mitigated by the continuously changing webs of social relations in which dominant cultures are enacted. Individuals are engaged simultaneously in other cultural games

¹ A recreational post in this context means a position dealing with the recreational use of forests.

and encounters, they draw upon their personal histories as they engage in these games and encounters.

Their strategies often were experienced less as a conscious attempt to affect transformation as such than as an *authentic enactment of their values and beliefs, which were embedded in their experiences and histories*. Typical examples include the ways in which they networked with colleagues and individuals external to their workplace in order to expand the boundaries of the spaces for meaningful encounters and increase their influence within their organisation. Our interviewees consciously learnt to speak the language of their workplace whilst continuously expanding their conceptual vocabulary to help legitimise their practice.

1. Building influence

Many interviewees talked about the strategic importance of building alliances both within and outside the organisation:

There was a group of people working on that [attempting to integrate participatory approaches in agricultural research organisations] largely from the donor community, which then created an enabling environment for me to move forward. And their support was critical in bringing about the acceptance for people and pro-poor oriented participatory research processes to become accepted in the system. (Interviewee 7, woman).

2. Speaking the organisation's language

Speaking the organisation's language in order to be able to effect change was acknowledged as an important strategy:

You need to speak to your target group, speak and challenge in terms they understand ... You need to speak to people in their own language, you need to put a mirror to them and counter their facts with your facts. (Interviewee 3, woman).

In the case of technologically-oriented research organisations, tempered radicals felt

that speaking the 'right language' meant doing the 'right kind of science'. For social scientists this often meant that you are recognised for doing quantitative rather than qualitative research. A rural sociologist told us how she engaged in quantitative research to show that she was a 'serious' researcher:

When I discovered New Institutional Economics, it was a real turning point for me. My colleagues were all neo-classical economists and had not been trained in NIE, but NIE had just won the Nobel Prize in economics, and was the hot new field. NIE gave me the 'language' to communicate why what I studied—norms, culture—was important, and provided the bridge between my work and that of others in my institute. (Interviewee 9, woman).

In male dominated, technologically focused research organisations an identity as a female social scientist added another dimension to what constitutes appropriate language within the organisation. By avoiding confrontation over language she was enabled to use her qualitative research skills when the moment came to engage with others on themes that in themselves could be seen as controversial:

Being a woman and social scientist in a predominantly male, technologically oriented research organisation also meant suppressing controversial topics like gender ... "As a young woman and the only sociologist, I was not going to marginalise myself further by also taking on gender research". [However, spaces opened up for this particular interviewee when two of the more respected men] "came to me and asked me to join them in working on gender issues". (Interviewee 9, woman).

3. Expanding conceptual spaces

When our tempered radicals felt they had found a successful means of promoting change in their organisations they tried to expand their hard won spaces. This could be risky:

Part of the excitement of what I was doing was about going outside of the box, about straying out. I wasn't always quite doing what [my organisation] wanted me to do. (Interviewee 5, male)

For this individual, becoming vice-chair of a major decision-making body and appointments to other significant industry boards enabled him to embark on a significant learning process and expand his horizons greatly. This had unexpected consequences:

Being employed by [my organisation] gave me the legitimacy to work on these boards, but at the same time being a member of these boards involved challenging [my organisation]. (Interviewee 5, male).

Another interviewee formulated it thus: "My practice is my strategy" (Interviewee 2, male). Many interviewees drew attention to the fact that their ability to give an honest account of their own practice to their colleagues was mediated by their wish to construct opportunities for discovering and modifying their organisation's practices, e.g. through in-depth work in a key area. This provided them with a sense-making template for understanding how their own practice might be used strategically to provoke transitions in organisational values and practices. The reflective and critical use of language in this discovery process and the sense of their actions as an interactive performance helped to open spaces for a more reflective engagement with 'the other'. This meant taking time deliberately to "explain, listen, work alongside" others in a practice of central importance to the organisation (Interviewee 2, man). The language of performance is important here; the tempered radical acts strategically as a choreographer of a new kind of emergent practice. Since the performance 'environment' cannot be completely designed or controlled new practice in 'liberated spaces' emerged typically in conditions of

ambivalence, even tension. "Becoming trusted" as a choreographer of new kinds of organisational performance was not so much a matter of a single transformative action by the strategic practitioner, but more often was simply a matter of "still being there" as time passed (Interviewee 2, man). Enactment of one's personal practice as the key transformational strategy also meant accepting that organisational structures are not arbitrary; they have evolved historically by necessity and contingency. By constituting their strategy of change in their own practice our tempered radicals sought to change the organisation's interpretation of and response to the events and processes its structures had evolved to manage.

CONCLUSION

One of the key lessons arising from our interviews is the explicitness with which practitioners had come to approach their work and their role within their workplace. The explicitness was directed less towards the pursuit of personal advancement but rather towards working with and through their organisations in order to build its social and organisational capabilities to advance strategic goals consonant with their own values.

Two key strategies stand out. One is working deliberately to create and draw strength from social relationships within and across the boundaries of organisations. The second involves developing professional practice as a means of eliciting a different kind of performance from the organisation.

However, tempered radicals moderated their expectations of radical change through consideration of their life experiences. They realised that limits on the change process are set by the fact that the dynamic of change necessarily rests on interaction and cannot be unilaterally imposed.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

Cathy Farnworth, PhD., is an Independent Consultant currently working on the Gender and Livelihoods Sourcebook, World Bank. She is also editing a book (with Janice Jiggins) on ethical food chains which contains a number of innovative case studies written by practitioners, and reflective pieces on how to take discussion forward. She is also working on a consultancy exploring how to enable women in developing countries to enter and succeed in local and international markets.

Dr. Barun Gurung, an ecological anthropologist, has worked extensively with ethnic communities in several Himalayan countries studying the indigenous knowledge of subsistence crops and medicinal herbs. This resulted in a network of Himalayan researchers and development professionals working on biodiversity, ethnicity and gender issues. As part of the CGIAR initiative, he led a team of researchers and trainers to provide capacity development for organisational research and implementation of change strategies in selected CGIAR centres, eight National Agricultural Research Centers of East and Central Africa, and five agriculture and natural resource management organisations in the Eastern Himalayan Region and Laos.

Janice Jiggins, PhD., is former professor of Human Ecology at the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences (SLU) at Uppsala. She is currently a visiting scholar, Communications & Innovations Studies, Wageningen University, The Netherlands, where she supervises PhD students, carries out research on water management in Europe and is involved in a programme in South Africa assisting the establishment of water catchment agencies. She also manages her own consultancy firm 'Researching Practice'.