

Deborah Wise
Essay #1
EDLI 7300-3
March 13, 2009

“We find that the Big Assumptions often got their start long ago...usually long before they (*we*) became grown-ups.”
- Kegan & Lahey (2001, p.84)

How do we define change? How do we know (as individuals) that we are in need of change unless our interactions over time reveal that the “status quo” no longer works? According to Clarke (2003), change over time through engagement in activity is the definition of *learning*. Learning then, is the process of realizing our perceptions, actions, and the lens we view our world through needs to be reconsidered. That is where I find myself. My perception of my own identity is in the process of change, from that of someone who has spent a career in the corporate world to that of a person who has crossed over into academia. It has been a difficult transition, as I have discovered both environments require equal amounts of dedication.

Merriam (2005) says that “change is fundamental to adult life.” She describes life’s transitions as the alternating between periods of stability, and those where something needs to be revisited. These transitions include life events and the social roles they involve (p.4). My transition to the world of academia isn’t just a vocation change; it is a change in the very nature of my personal and professional relationships and how I view myself, which up to this point were a collective part of my identity.

In this paper I will take the reader along on my transformational journey from corporate leader to academic hopeful. While I will represent this by primarily using the Seven Languages of Kegan & Lahey (2001), I will also visit Bateson’s Systems Theory, the Four Frames of Bolman and Deal, and Individual and Organizational Change from Clarke, et al. Together, these authors have created a framework and a methodology for identifying change, how I view the change (as a subject or an object), the primary lens I see the world through (and the problems that has caused) and finally...that change over time through engagement in activity is how I can *learn* to live and prosper with the identity that emerges.

How History Affects Identity

My identity as a person – as an individual system – has been crafted over years of adaptation to the survival tactics necessary to navigate fields of power and meaning in the particular cultural and historical context in

which I was raised. I knew nothing of flourishing; all I hoped for was survival and not to repeat the environment of my youth. The perceptions I gained, the frame of my disposition, and the ways in which I handled change and conflict all reflected these years of conditioning.

Certainly there were reflective moments; socially I had a much more difficult time establishing healthy relationships and it was difficult for me to embrace conflict as a constructive means to resolution. When I stopped to think about it, I *knew* I was different- I just had no idea what “normal” was. Losing myself in my studies would have been at least a noble pursuit; instead, I looked for that line out on the horizon where I could skirt trouble without really getting *into* trouble. My identity became more of who I needed to be in order to survive, than actually crafting an identity that was uniquely mine.

Once my youngest child entered high school, the waters seemed to part in my favor. I had come to a fork in the road regarding what I could accomplish with an undergraduate degree and while I wasn't sure what I wanted to accomplish, I knew I could accomplish more than I had. What made this change in direction different from other changes was that this time it was *my* preference that would be taken into account. I found a pilot program in international IT that enabled me to not only obtain a graduate degree, it enabled me to travel internationally and work on global teams to complete assignments. Graduating from this program was a milestone in my life, both personally and professionally. My degree was in an emerging technology and I felt as if I had become bulletproof professionally.

Ironically, I finished my graduate program shortly after September 11, 2001. Not only were there no jobs to be had, the Denver area had been hit particularly hard in the tech industry. People who had years of experience in this field couldn't find work, much less those of us with an education but no time in the industry. It took three years to finally be employed in my field - at the same level of income I was making prior to obtaining my degree. After another year I had my dream job at a university as the Director of Learning Technology. This was my first immersion into the academic system and while my shiny new graduate degree in multimedia learning systems was impressive in the corporate world, it wasn't a show-stopper in academia. Everyone in leadership had a PhD after their name. Again, I felt as if I wasn't living up to my potential.

I remember the group interview that was part of the application process to the Educational Leadership and Innovation (EDLI) program. We were all nervous; there seemed to be so much riding on the interview. We broke into small groups where a member of the faculty started a discussion

question and those around the table took turns in response. I can remember thinking, “These people are all educators; they know regulations and standards I can’t address working in for-profit higher ed. I feel like an idiot.” We completed our writing assignment and then had an opportunity to talk to the advisors in the area we wished to study. I remember being asked if I was prepared to make the sacrifices necessary to be in a doctorate program. My youngest was now entering college, my spouse was supportive, and my focus in the program blended with what I did professionally. If I wasn’t ready at that point, when would I be?

Within six months of starting the program, I was unemployed and divorced. Being a doctorate student didn’t hasten the demise of my marriage but something that was said during that group interview kept coming back to my mind. “Are you ready to make the sacrifices necessary to be in a doctorate program?”

In the corporate world, I had found a balance between my personal and professional life. I had time for travel, for my friends and family, and could still perform admirably at work. As a doctorate student, my professional life *was* my personal life. My academic life became the priority not only in my life, but the lives of everyone around me. Making a commitment to the PhD program was my statement to the universe that I wanted to separate myself from my peers. “Good enough” was no longer good enough. As I progressed through those first two years of EDLI, I was being transformed into someone who could no longer “settle.” The expectation of my professors was that I would be a contributing scholar... geez lady, all I wanted was to *get* a PhD...not *become* one.

A Framework of Life Behind the Scene

Kegan & Lahey (2001) talk about how individuals have a powerful inclination *not* to change and how “The processes of dynamic equilibrium, which, like an immune system, powerfully and mysteriously tend to keep things pretty much as they are” (p.5). If that doesn’t seem disheartening enough for someone who knows they need a change, the authors (on page nine) add insult to injury by saying, “Sustained learning of a transformational sort may require a social arrangement that supports it.” All this time I had been hoping I could quietly make this transformation alone in front of my computer, eating Twinkies and drinking Mountain Dew by the light of my monitor. Apparently, change doesn’t happen that easily. The authors (heretofore known as K&L) know that and have come up with a four-column map and no less than seven languages (four of which are highlighted here), to help those of us who approach change with guns loaded.

First, the table 1):

map (see

Commitment	What I'm Doing or Not Doing That Prevents My Commitment From Being Fully Realized	Competing Commitment	Big Assumption
1.	1. 2.	1.	1.

Fig 1: The Four-Column Map of Transformation

The Language of Complaint vs. Commitment

The K&L framework begins with our complaints. I could have made a list of complaints about being a doctoral student:

- I have no social life (not that I was social to begin with)
- I can't travel because if I miss class, I have to prostrate and flail myself before my professors and be penitent for the remainder of the semester
- Any employer who might be interested in hiring me (after all, I have gotten used to eating regularly), will have to live with classes that demand I be on campus twice a week, sometimes as early as 4PM
- Forget a date life. The program has me on a schedule that a prison warden would be proud of. Plus, I don't know what a regular conversation is anymore. "What methodology are you using to determine where we are going to eat dinner?"

The authors have me figured out:

Usually, we swing between fixing upon this channel (becoming preoccupied with our complaints, and creating elaborate narratives about their origins, costs and consequences (p.31).

Here is the rub - they also know me better than I know myself:

But people only complain about something because they are committed to the value or importance of something else (p. 30).

The more I looked at my complaints, the more I saw a pattern: they assumed I had no control over my circumstances. I was *embedded* in the complaint. My complaints didn't describe what I stood for; rather, they were a signal of something I really cared about: completing my PhD program well, with a research emphasis that is interesting and innovative. I wasn't the subject (victim) of the complaints; I chose this path and the sacrifices are experiences I have – they don't have me.

Interestingly, the way I labeled my complaints also says a lot about me and how I view the world. My complaints were primarily social; this isn't by accident. Authors Bolman & Deal (2008) have developed a four-frame model of how people tend to view the world around them. These frames are a “mental model - a set of ideas and assumptions” (p.11) that create that first, immediate impression of how we view a situation, and sets the tone for how we will respond (see figure 2):

	Structural	Human Resource	Political	Symbolic
Metaphor for organization	Factory or machine	Family	Jungle	Carnival, temple, theater
Central concepts	Rules, roles, goals, policies, technology, environment	Needs, skills, relationships	Power, conflict, competition, organizational politics	Culture, meaning, metaphor, ritual, ceremony, stories, heroes
Image of leadership	Social architecture	Empowerment	Advocacy and political savvy	Inspiration
Basic Leadership Challenge	Attune structure to task, technology environment	Align organizational and human needs	Develop agenda and power base	Create faith, beauty, meaning

Fig2: The Four-Frame Model, from Reframing Organizations: Artistry, Choice, and Leadership. Bolman & Deal (2008)

Someone who sees situations through a primarily *structural* frame will have a respect for organizational structure, believing that organizations act as machines – systems for the efficient and effective attainment of rational goals, using the diverse efforts of it's people to optimize technology while minimizing deficiencies through analysis.

The *human resource* frame assumes that organizations and people need each other: organizations need talent and ideas and people need the place to develop to their fullest potential while pursuing a cause they can believe in. This mutual reciprocity enables both individual and organization to move forward without taking advantage of the other. In the end, both succeed.

The person who forms their ideas and assumptions through a *political* frame understands that organizations are “coalitions of assorted individuals and interest groups.” (p. 194). These differing interests are constantly at conflict over the distribution of assets, making power and the ability to influence others at the center of day-to-day dynamics.

The fourth frame is *symbolic*; it looks not at what happens, but the *meaning* behind what happens (how it is interpreted). This frame is concerned with a strong development of culture, and the moral and inspirational value of the stories that are developed as a part of history. This strong cultural “glue” bonds the organization and its people, and helps an organization accomplish its goals.

How do these four frames influence my transformation from corporate life to the academy? Once I realized the frames that were primary in the creation of my own mental model, things began to make more sense. All I had to do was look back at my own life history. I was the oldest daughter of an abusive father. He was the second son of parents who migrated from Sicily. In the old country, wives and children were property and my father was regularly beaten into submission, just as my mother and I were. As unhealthy as this was, at the same time it created a very strong sense of being identified as an Italian and that family came before everything else. At the same time, I was always aware of my “role” in the family and there were “rules” that always had to be followed.

When my mother reached the point where my father became so abusive that she feared for her life (and those of her children), she divorced my father. If this had happened in today’s society, she would have been applauded for her bravery. But this was 1963, and my mother was a single white woman who *chose* to divorce with three children under the age of five. We were immediately classified as second class citizens and relegated to live on the integrated side of town, where the low-income Jews, Hispanics and Black people lived. We were all poor, and our existence was a day to day survival. I don’t remember being White...I remember being poor.

Despite our circumstances, my mother was determined not to be a statistic. She worked during the day and went to school at night, leaving

me to care for my younger brother and sister. Ours was a structured existence with only so much money and food to be rationed at any one time. My mother was able to ultimately be awarded a graduate degree in Psychology, buy some acreage and build a four-bedroom house – all as a single parent. Even today, this would be a heroic feat but she did this in 1969.

My pointing in recounting so much of my own history is to emphasize that the frame we perceive life circumstances through is usually not accidental. My strong sense of family, championing the cause of the underdog, and empowering people to their fullest potential is because I *was* that underdog. As a result, I identify more with the human resource frame than any of the others, with a healthy respect for structure thrown in.

The transformation begins...

The Language of Blame vs. Personal Responsibility

Let's return to the Kegan and Lahey four-column model, called "What I'm Doing or Not Doing That Prevents My Commitment From Being Fully Realized." I call it "What I Do to Be My Own Worst Enemy." Once I had my epiphany about the frames (human resource, structural) I viewed the world through, I was able to take a more objective look at what I did to circumvent my commitment:

I didn't spend enough time in independent study, reading toward my dissertation topic. The reasons for this were...

1. I had competing information from advisors and others as to what I did or didn't need to read
2. I was conflicted as to what conceptual frameworks I should be considering
3. I didn't have enough of a personal life balance to block out extra time for study

With my more objective mindset, was able to see how I had succumb to the language of blame that K&L described on page 45:

- Holds the other person responsible for gaps between committed intentions and reality
- Frequently generates frustration, alienation and impotence in the speaker
- Frequently generates defensiveness in others

- Nontransformational; rarely goes anywhere

What I saw was a thinly-veiled blame that I was placing on those people who were on my EDLI committee, rather than taking responsibility for my own actions (or lack of them). This was a cold slap in the face but an even greater revelation was emerging. I realized that I had been straddling the chasm between my corporate life and my academic life, with an identity in each place, rather than committing myself entirely to one or the other. There were several reasons for this. First, I had years of experience in the corporate world. I understood how that world worked. The corporate world values *results*, which intimates *action*. As a result, I am a high-energy person who is used to making a decision and then bursting out of the starting gate toward a result. You would think that would have made me a CEO by this time but my Achilles heel is that I *hate* politics. Having been abused by someone in power (my own father), I have always been the irreverent deviant, who dwelled more on the fringe than engaging in the political maneuvering that is prevalent (and necessary) in most organizations. Had I been better at gamesmanship I would have been far more successful in my corporate life but as it was, it was the only life I knew.

My academic identity was developing but not without its problems. Unlike the corporate world my street value increased as my knowledge spanned across disciplines, in academia it is the opposite. It is by drilling down to a singular subject that one marks their reputation. This created an identity conflict that leads us to the next language.

The Language of Competing Commitments

The more I straddled my two worlds, the more they seemed to be diametrically opposed to one another. I had always been marketable in the corporate world being something of a jack-of-all-trades. This wouldn't create an identity crisis if my intent was to obtain a PhD and go back to corporate life. As I tried to keep that door open, it became increasingly difficult to appear attractive to an employer. My level of education now made me "overqualified" for most of the jobs I interviewed for. Employers (who had less education) were concerned I was becoming more of a theorist and less of a practitioner. Despite everything I was doing to try and keep my options open, the door to my return to the corporate world was closing.

Unfortunately, the door to my academic world wasn't opening to a corresponding welcome. I had spent what by that time was three years, drilling down on a subject I was passionate about, in the hopes that

someone, somewhere would hire me to be able to communicate that passion to others. This was an academic crap-shoot in my mind and went against everything I learned in the corporate world. Moreover, the academy is its own system with its own set of rules. The rules of the academy intimate that if one hasn't come up through a career in the educational system, it is unlikely they will embark on a career in higher education at my age coming from the corporate world (although I can't imagine Bill Gates couldn't get a job as a professor if he wanted one). The academy also implies that until a student has reached candidacy (through their comprehensive exam), that they most likely would not be considered for an open position. In fact, most position announcements require the candidate to already possess a terminal degree. If that is the case, then I have no idea what the reception to my topic area will be or if anyone will even be interested because I can't look for work in the academy.

In light of this, I have several competing commitments:

- I keep a network of corporate contacts and continue to work various contracts that keep my foot in the corporate world because I fear there will be no academic outlet for me
- Having a well-established identity in the corporate world, I have no corresponding information about the value I have in the academy
- I fear discrimination in both worlds

The corporate world has pulled in the welcome mat and the academic world hasn't sent the invitation yet, leaving me in employment Purgatory. No wonder I have competing commitments – I have no identity!

The Big Assumptions

This phase of the K&L model is aptly called, "From the Language of Big Assumptions that Hold Us to the Language of Assumptions We Hold." If the last three columns didn't require enough gut-wrenching soul searching, then this exercise was the icing on the cake. The authors say that the big assumption is a belief or a perception that *has us*. The authors state

“The psychological idea is that the underlying architecture or transformational grammar of qualitative change is the moment from subject to object – that is, the movement of our meaning making from a place where we are it's captive to a place where we can look at it, reexamine it, and possibly alter it” (p.76).

Rather than being captive to the Assumption, the goal is to build a relationship with it by understanding its history – how we arrived at that Big Assumption to begin with. If, as a reader, there was ever a “chill” that went up my spine in reading a passage, it was where the authors said that the Big Assumption usually has its roots in something “long before people became grown-ups.” At the moment I read those words, I realized my fear was all tied up in the feelings of abandonment and worthlessness I had felt as a child. No matter what I did to try and gain my father’s love and acceptance, I was never able to be his daughter and when he died suddenly of a massive heart attack, I realized just how much had been left unsaid. Given my history, no wonder I formed the Big Assumptions:

- I fear there will be no place of employment for me and I will either have to do something I don’t want to do or am not passionate about, just to survive (*I’m not worthy and survival is all I know*)
- I will have taken a huge risk that won’t pan out and I will be saddled with student loan debt and not enough income to repay them
- I won’t be able to make enough money in the years I have left to secure a comfortable living in my senior years

Of course, the Big Assumptions always hold some grain of truth, otherwise we would be seen as mentally unstable. Why wouldn’t a cautious, financially responsible person be concerned about being able to pay back student loans and save money for retirement? The difference is that these assumptions have their base in *fear*; they are based on a personal history and assumptions that have never been tested. Kegan and Lahey suggest that I put these assumptions through qualifiers – amendments, attachments, and exceptions, to move these assumptions from where they *have me*, to where I *have them*.

Reflections

“An important aspect of leadership in today’s complex and risky world is to develop an approach that emphasizes learning about oneself and talking oneself through difficult situations” (Clarke & Edge, 2009).

Now that I have learned about myself, I can talk myself through the process of a changed identity as I move from the corporate world to the academy. The first thing I need to reason is that each of these environments (corporate, academic) are *systems*. According to Wikipedia (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Systems_theory) a system “is a framework by which one can analyze and/or describe any group of objects that work

in concert to produce some result.” Bateson (1999) also describes individuals as systems, comprised of a multitude of internal, smaller systems (i.e. nervous system) that operate in harmony to make sustained life possible. Bateson describes people as “self-corrective systems,” always working toward conservation of the status quo. In the same manner, more complex systems (such as the corporate and academic worlds) also work toward some point of equilibrium. In a system, learning (remember Clarke: Change over time through engagement in activity) occurs in order to “conserve the opinions and components of the status quo” (p. 436).

As a system, the corporate world is structural (remember the Bolman & Deal frames). It exists in order to perpetuate some common goal (which makes shareholders happy) and uses the experience and talent of the systems within it (technology, people) in order to reach the desired result. At the same time, the corporate world is political. Those who master the gamesmanship necessary to rally resources and power behind their causes will see the greatest result.

The academic world is also structural. Within it there exists a definitive path toward a completed goal, with required coursework, credit accumulation, pricing structures and tasks that must be completed with a purposeful division of labor. Politics? Oh my...at least in the corporate world no one tries to hide the political behind altruism; the academy is one of the most political environments I have ever been witness to – just ask someone who is trying to obtain tenure.

If these two systems are both structural (which is consistent with my own thinking) and extremely political (which stands my hair on end), why would I as a reasonable individual want to move from one to the other? The answer is in: 1) The way they view reproduction, and 2) Their product. With rare exception, the corporate world has taken on a short-term, profit at all costs consciousness. Bateson states:

“Today the purposes of consciousness are implemented by more and more effective machinery, transportation systems, airplanes, weaponry, medicine, pesticides, and so forth. Conscious purpose is now empowered to upset the balances of a body, of society, and of the biological world around us” (p. 440).

Bateson is describing the increasing consumption of resources (ecological, human) that fail to balance the very systems it takes from. Our natural resources are being depleted and jobs that aren't downsized or outsourced to other countries, are not enabling employees to get ahead financially. This is all for the product of profit – at all costs.

Stop the corporate bus – I would like to get off.

The academy may be a wolf in sheep's clothing but at least my perception is that the academy functions to replenish. Its product is learning and in the process of creating this product, it is using its resources to bring innovation and improvement to just the systems Bateson speaks of: body, society, and the biological world around us. As someone who sees life through a lens that focuses on people and their empowerment, I have finally realized that the academy is where I belong and knowing my aversion to politics, I need to become a better gamesman as I move closer to this identity.

Bateson's Cybernetic Explanation (1967) mentions how restraints - options that eliminate themselves as choices based on any number of factors – tend to “stack the odds” of one alternative having a greater probability of occurring than another. In other words, the course of events in a particular situation is subject to any number of options, and cybernetics seeks to identify and reduce probabilities of occurrence, based on the presence or absence of restraints. This is all fine, but how does it apply to my situation?

If I had experienced a greater level of success in the corporate world – if all the puzzle pieces had fit – I would never have made the decision to return to school. If my father hadn't died suddenly and left all those things unsaid about the value I had in his life – I wouldn't be in school. I could name any number of events that might have acted as restraints to inevitably cause me to be where I am right now. I no longer see myself as the possessor of an identity that *had me*; I see myself as the creator of a identity that *I have* within a new context.

What I have tried to do is resist changing my old identity, despite my new environment. This is because as a living system, I resist change (Clarke, 2003). Everything in me tries to maintain the status quo of a life I no longer lead. But according to Clarke, systems are dynamic – my opportunities will come around again and I expect to be able to influence academic in a way I could never have influenced the corporate world.

In the end, Clarke has summed this up for me:

“We can only hope that the values we hold and the direction in which we want to move can somehow be translated into meaningful action that reverberates throughout the system and results in noticeable changes” (p.45).

References

- Bateson, G. (1999). *Steps to an ecology of mind*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Bolman, L.G. & Deal, T.E. (2008). *Reframing organizations: Artistry, choice and leadership*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Clarke, M.A. (2003). *A place to stand: Essays for educators in troubled times*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Clarke, M.A. & Edge, J. (2009). Building a communicative tool kit for leadership. In M.A. Christison and D.E. Murray (Eds.), *Leadership in English language education: Theoretical foundations and practical skills for changing times* (pp.187-199). New York: Routledge.
- Kegan, R. & Lahey, L.L. (2001). *How the way we talk can change the way we work: Seven languages for transformation*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Merriam, S.B. (2005). How adult life transitions foster learning and development. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, 108, 3-13.