

REFLECTIONS ON MANAGEMENT

WITH TOM GALVIN

AUDIO TRANSCRIPT



Organizing Information Through Meta-Narrative (Knowledge Management, Part 3)

Season 7, Episode 3 – originally released 28 June 2022

Please note: This transcript has been edited for clarity.

When we organize our individual files and folders and store them, there is a relationship we construct among those items we file together. The relationships form a model of how we individually manage our data that helps us remember where we put things for later retrieval, or decide what to throw away. The trouble at the organizational level, where archives represent the sum total of whatever individuals store, is that we often see conflicts among the individuals' frameworks and whatever may pass for the organization's preferred framework, if it exists. In this episode, I will talk about building the organization's framework through structured narratives.

My name is Tom Galvin and these are my Reflections on Management.

When we organize our individual files and folders and store them on our disk drives or whatever, there is a relationship that we have constructed. Among those items, the relationships form a model of how we individually manage and understand our data that should help us remember where we put things for later retrieval or perhaps decide what to throw away. Now, the trouble at the organizational level in archives may only represent the sum total of these individuals' own models. There may not actually be much of an organizational framework to begin with, and the individual models may conflict. So where do we go? My position here is that we have to find an organizational framework, but it is not going to be necessarily singular or unified. My name is Tom Galvin, and these are my reflections on management. When I say that organizational frames may not exist or may not be clearly evident, there's certainly a reason for it. And when you think about what I brought up in the previous episode about what I discovered is I went through the DVD archives, it became evident that there isn't necessarily an organizing framework of as context free except for things like how we might organize things by calendar. If we're doing budgets, we'll separate things into the 2020 archive, the 2021 archive, the 2022 archive. And of course there is also partitioning by department, by function, by project in which subgroups within the organization simply take full, complete ownership of that partition.

And there's not necessarily a clear connective tissue that has those that connects those subgroup's common knowledge, common information, common data necessarily together the fragmentation is probably OK as long as everything is interdependent. But what happens is that it leads to redundancy, duplication. It can also lead to conflict between version control issues if different parts of an organization are operating on different versions of the same products. These are all things I talked

about in the previous episode. So, the question now is what do we do about it? I'll start with a very, very simple question. You know, is there some sort of an underlying narrative or an underlying story that can be used as a useful construct to figure out how an organization views what it considers to be important, something other than its divisions or structures, something other than time, something that actually puts information into context and reasserts the meaning that was missing when these things were sort of stored context free into the archive in the first place. Well, the obvious answer is yes, we can come up with such a story, but you run up against a particular problem. That goes back to what I just said about individuals. Everybody manages their information differently. And the thing is, is that if you come up with a metaphor, you run into the problem that was highlighted in the main program, talking about Organizations Podcast Episode 41 on Gareth Morgan's images of organizations.

We have to accept the fact that if we come up with a framework that's going to serve as a metaphor for how the organization views its information, and therefore we sort our data, our products, whatever against that metaphor, the metaphor is inherently incomplete. It can explain certain things well, it doesn't explain everything well. So, a single unifying metaphor may not be possible. And I would argue that a single metaphor is probably not even desirable, because what you wind up with if you try to force fit everything into a single model, no matter what the model is, well, you've got two problems. You've got the exceptions will soon outnumber the regular cases. And the other thing is that the narrative has got to be a timesaver because we think about why the archives look kind of dorky to begin with is because, yeah, the metaphor that was underlying the framework of the archive when it started that narrative may very well have changed. Meanwhile, the structure, if you change the narrative that determines the structure of your archive, then what happens is that it takes so long to redo the structure and it'll cause incredible confusion. It's almost better to just leave it alone. Just let people just continue to use the structure as it is rather than try to re-engineer it, which is part of the reason why you end up with the archive not really making sense when you're examining it so many years later.

You know, if you're going to say that we've got to come up with some sort of a model, a narrative to attach meaning to the model. It really does have to be right in the first place. It has to be good enough, and it probably can't be a single model. It probably has to be multiple models that coalesced together in order to handle what would be some anticipated exceptions. So, I'm going to use an example of, say, Burke's three phases of change. This is the pre-launch, the launch and the post-launch phases of organizational change that he has in his book. It's a very nice metaphor because let's say for any given project, presuming that you use these three phases, well, the phases correspond to different activities that you perform. So, the pre-launch phase is about requirements, generation, analysis, planning. Perhaps to some degree, the launch phase is heavily about communicating and the post launch is about implementation, correction, termination, every sustainment. So, you have a way of differentiating, say, within a project, those things that belong in this one area or this one bucket, like the planning and the coordination here in this bucket, the communications and the launch activities go in that bucket, etc., and you can sort of sort information that way.

Now, the challenge is that in addition to the challenge of the metaphor being incomplete, when you look at every single individual file or you review the data that has been collected and archived, it

isn't just that figuring out which one of the folders with this go into an individual product may very well span. You know, the information in it may very well span all three. And so now we've got a problem of the document serving multiple purposes, which means that now either you have to choose which one is going to be the primary or does it get replicated and placed in all three buckets so that people can find it, which then incurs a potential version control issue. And that's where the challenge of exceptions, I think, starts to appear as you start finding these cases where either a product doesn't fit into the narrative as designed or it covers multiple of the categories in which you've assigned, which then potentially makes it challenging for the central narrative to determine where every single item goes. Then you have the other problem in which you have, well how do you interrelate these projects? How do you interrelate the various organizational activities into a more strategic organizational frame or an organizational narrative that is much, much more difficult if especially if you're trying to build this from the bottom.

If the narrative isn't built from the top, then it's not going to be easy to see where these projects relate to each other and therefore how the projects as a bucket, if indeed they need to be bucketed or if they need to actually have their information dispersed to fit the organization's narrative. Now, I'm still strongly in favor of using stories because what they do is, regardless of what framework you're going to use, they add meaning. They explain the relationships or capture the relationships among pieces of information that you're trying to store that can be much more easily transferable from one individual to another. If we just have a model that's just presented as a bunch of boxes and arrows, the relationships like what do the arrows represent, for example, and what is in the box can be a source of confusion because people may define those boxes in arrows a little bit differently. That's because the boxes tend to be divided into things. You know, there are a phase or a resource, some sort of a tangible object rather than the decision. I found it far more effective, far more efficient to sort things by ways as opposed to by means. So let me use an example from my current archive, which is in the defense arena, the ends in question has to do with the ability to provide trained forces for the next war.

Ready means that basically all of the personnel are trained, all of the equipment is on hand. That's sort of a thing. Now the means become very, very straightforward. So, you have some combination of personnel, material, money, time, real property strategies, etc. The tendency is that we'll divide this information in according to those means. So, we bucket everything in personnel together that covers everything from human resources to talent management, etc. And when we have another bucket that focuses on material and material solutions, etc., money, budgeting, programming, whatever, you get the idea. So that's kind of how we get the buckets. But then when it comes to really sorting things for re-use, working them around the ways, which includes what are the major, major decisions to be made, how do you do the design of the force modernizing and improving its capabilities, measuring and ensuring readiness that the ways are actually a little bit easier to explain because the ways you can craft into a story, the ways presents decisions which are based on conflicts and tensions which are rooted from long standing, enduring issues. Whereas all the means that I mentioned, those things change over time. So, it's almost like the difference between the nature of a decision versus the character of a decision we want the meta narrative to capture. The nature of the decisions, knowing full well that the decision processes may change.

I mean, how many times have you seen new decision support systems that do something very, very similar to the old decision support systems, but the name has changed or something about it is slightly changed, or perhaps a reorganization where the organizational structure has been modified, different positions or moved around the organization? But ultimately the underlying nature of what the organization does is a little bit more enduring than, say, the means associated with doing those decisions or or associated with how the organization specifically performs its tasks. So it's that underlying nature that is enduring that we want to capture and preserve because the decisions, the nature of the situation is much more stable, much more enduring. So the ways are what need to become the core of the meta narrative as the inputs change, as the organization, the mission, the outputs of the organization change, there's obviously data that's going to be collected associated with that. But what you're really after is capturing the decision spaces that connect the inputs to the outputs that essentially find roles that these pieces of data play in the organization's overall story. So I'm going to leave this with several different types of meta narratives that represent different ways of thinking about these decision spaces, which will make it easier to organize information. And the next five episodes, I'm going to explore each one of these and give some pretty concrete examples of how you use these meta narratives.

The first one is a meta narrative based on levels of expertise where the decision spaces sort of progress from, I want to say beginner level to high expert level, but they can also be looked at as first line supervisory to strategic. And we stratify our knowledge, not just the knowledge, but also the decision spaces based on the level within the organization or the level within the enterprise that they exist and the level of abstraction associated with the information in the archive. So, *level of expertise* is going to be the first.

The second one is *system-based*, and this is where you have decision spaces that are concurrent and interdependent. But there is a lot of complexity, and each decision space operates as sort of like in a part of or a subsystem within a system. So, system-based meta-narratives will be the next one.

Then there's *process-based* where the decision is completed and another phase begins. So, this may the narrative reads more as one of phasing, but perhaps sequencing would be more of an accurate description, because what we'll be talking about is that which follows another. But then there are ways in which the information gives clues to when you revert to earlier steps or if there perhaps forces or decisions that relate to going backwards through the process as opposed to forwards. So that'll be the next episode.

Then there's *causation based*. Once a decision is completed, then the result of it determines the next decision. These narratives would seem to be pretty obvious because, you know, if A causes B, then the information or the decisions around A would lead to decisions around B, but then that's actually a sequencing effect. Now what we're talking about here is a meta-narrative in which the outcomes are much more highly uncertain. And how do you organize information where there's a lot more uncertainty associated with where something falls or how the information might be deemed useful?

The last one is going to be taxonomy-based, and this is where decisions are independent and context specific. Each space, each decision space is a kind of a generalized problem. So those are going to be the five that I'll cover in the forthcoming episodes. And hopefully as you listen to these maiden narratives, how they're constructed, perhaps they can spur some ideas in your own minds about how you rethink the archived information in your own space. And with that, I'll see you next time.

... And that's all for now. The views expressed are my own and do not necessary reflect the United States Army War College, the United States Army or the Department of Defense. Thank you for listening and have a great day.

All the Best!

Tom Galvin