Stories of the Ordinary Experience (Knowledge Management, Part 6)
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Please note: This transcript has been edited for clarity.

Words matter. But what also matters is which words you choose and how you use them to describe your experiences and behaviors and those of the organization you are observing. You can't model everything. So what is most important now? The corporate vocabulary that I addressed in the previous episode helps you describe what's going on. But the temptation is to strip away that which is not interesting to us and focus on only certain things in the fact we've built a model in our own mind and now we're going to foist it on the situation. We might start with a diagram or a two by two matrix and force fed everything into it. It is understandable because it is so hard to deal with complexity. We can get overwhelmed. So how do we capture and eventually model the organization in ways that preserve complexity?

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

This is a very challenging episode to come up with because now what I'm going to be doing is talking about how I approach modeling. I mean, we're still in the "Describe" side of things, and a lot of what I mentioned in the introduction is the tendency to try to jump to the explanation before you've done the description. It's almost like you're trying to interpret the results of your empirical study without actually presenting the results, which is, of course, a no-no.

What I'm trying to do here is talk about the precise mechanics of going through and developing this rich description of the organization, the environment and the situation that we're dealing with, which sounds really easy to say, but is hard to do. I want to give an example of where this sort of thing happens. There's a graphic that's going around, and the purpose of the graphic is to try to show a simple explanation of what equity and fairness and justice are about. There's multiple different kinds of it, but they all sort of approach it in a similar way.

You have a simple cartoon, and the one that I have in particular in mind is one that involves an apple tree and two people, I believe they're depicted as little girls. The tree is leaning in one direction. So you have a bunch of apples that are on the tree and each of the girls has a ladder and they are climbing the ladder to pick the apples off the tree. Because of the way the tree is leaning, one girl is able to access the apples and the other is not. The way that this is used is then is to show that, well, from an equality standpoint, the ladders are the same height and therefore it's equal. But there's inequity because of where the ladders are positioned. One is able to pick the apples and the other is not.

Equity is then depicted as well. The one who's in the disadvantageous position is given a taller ladder and therefore both are able to pick apples. And then justice is described as a means of intervention to change the system so that everybody has the same ability to, in this case, pick the apples. And the intervention is depicted as physically modifying the tree that is using braces and supports in order to straighten the tree so that the branches are equally high or low regardless of where you stand under it.

Now, my point in using this as an example is not to critique how terms are depicted, because what we're talking about here is a very, very simple, clear explanation of how terms are defined with a simple visual that helps people grasp what is really a difficult and complicated concept. Clarity wins out over accuracy most of the time, but the challenge is in the quest for clarity. There's a lot of detail of potential activities, decisions, [and] what have you that are being overlooked or ignored. And in this particular case, all the focus is on the girls and the ladders and not potentially on how the intervention into the tree could damage the tree or change the behaviors of other actors within the system that are not depicted, such as birds or insects or other creatures that may be depending on that tree. Now, of course, one can say that I'd be overthinking it if we're trying to put in that level of realism, which is not necessarily welcome in this kind of a poster.

But if we're going to be modeling organization behaviors, we've got to avoid falling into the same trap of trying to pursue the simple, narrow angle and ignore all of these other associated questions because they do become very important. For example, why not simply have both girls on the same side of the tree and no intervention is necessary? And so the point of this is that because the descriptions are not all that rich and they don't account for the system as a whole, then as presented, the explanation becomes pretty easy to pick apart. All of the things that I raise as questions are things that are going to enter naturally the minds of individuals who are looking critically at this sort of a model.

So we have to do is we have to go back and figure out how to build a rich description of the system. So what I try to do is I try to use a little bit more of [an example based on a known] public good, and I like to use things like driver's licensing as the metaphor I use for those same terms. Because it's very, very easy to put people in the position of being in the Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV), getting a driver's license, and to think about the people who are working at the DMV and thinking about the administrators from afar, and the facilities and the infrastructure and all of that sort of thing. There's a whole bunch of richness in being able to explain how the same terms can bring out an interplay when we talk about the experiences of either pursuing, applying for, issuing, etc., a driver's license that can be both accurate and clear.

So how can we do this? This is my attempt to try to explain just what goes through my mind, and it is challenging to try to explain what goes on in one's mind. But I'm going to do my my best to do so. The start point is the parts of speech, and it's literally sorting things into nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs, because it's even easy, like in the case of the the girls and the apples example, the word justice, is it a noun, a verb or an adjective? And that's actually a pretty interesting question because I was somewhat taken aback of how justice was being shown as an intervention, a verb, whereas I have

always thought of it as an adjective, which is to say a descriptor or a condition of the environment. Now we're starting to get into how we express things.

Now, as obvious as this may sound, my approach is therefore that what I refer to as a noun is a concrete object, a person, a place or thing, as opposed to an abstract concept. A verb is an action or an activity. It is something that is done. And again, I try to keep it concrete when it comes to adjectives. Then I'm basically talking about anything that describes the environment or is a characteristic of the environment. So in the case about justice or fairness, instead of treating it as an abstract noun I treat it as an adjective, which is to say that something is fair or something is just. Adverbs I try to avoid. Because when it comes to descriptors of activities, I find that [adverbs] actually adds confusion rather than clarity. And as a former speechwriter, it was always advised to avoid using adverbs because it makes you [sound] desperate to make things sound greater than they really are. So, I'm only going to focus on nouns, verbs and adjectives.

Now, what we want to avoid is the temptation to go straight to a model. Because with nouns, verbs and adjectives, it's really simple. You take all the nouns and turn them into nodes in your graph, and the edges are the verbs, you know. And some edges may be unidirectional, and others may be bidirectional or whatever, but that's not what we're after. So, what we're after really is the individual experience. And the way to capture that is not mathematically or not through a graph, but it's through the stories, it's through the experiences themselves which we want to capture in a certain way, but not capture in a way that we get completely, totally overwhelmed. One of the challenges with node-edge diagrams is that they can become incredibly complex, when in fact much of the information is similar.

When you think about the ordinary experiences of going to the Department of Motor Vehicles in order to get a driver's license, most of the time the experience is the same or very similar to that of hundreds of customers. We might call this the "unremarkable case." This is the case where basically the task is completed without much in the way of deviation. There's no mistakes, no issues. And one presumes that the organization is designed to make the unremarkable case as routine as possible. So my general approach is to leverage this unremarkable case or the set of unremarkable cases as kind of like the foundation for the intended or the normal organizational behavior, and then capture the stories in such a way that we can reason about how the organization handles progressively more complicated or more deviant cases.

I'm going to use a mathematical metaphor, ironically, because I think it helps with trying to understand different degrees to which we find ourselves deviating from the unremarkable cases. So the mathematical model I will use is effectively the normal distribution and the standard deviation. And the idea being, if we assume that the experiences generally follow a pattern by which the unremarkable cases are the most common and that the deviations are progressively less and less likely, then what we can do is think about categorizing behaviors sort of along those lines. And so closer to the mean you have the unremarkable cases, you get progressively more deviant cases all the way down to the tails of the distribution, which are then essentially the emergency cases which are so unusual. It's not something that we would expect the organization to be designed to handle.

So now let's put this in practical terms with our Department of Motor Vehicle example within the first standard deviation, which notionally (and strictly notionally) is 68% of the cases of the experience going through. We assume they're unremarkable cases that whatever is done is done according to the design of the organization. Those who have the paperwork with no deviations or no issues get their license and those who do not have their stuff right then the process would deny them the driver's license. So 68% is a good notional way of thinking about it. It's obviously not empirically demonstrated - that's not the point. I call that the 1st-order ordinary case.

So then when we go to the second standard deviation, then we're adding about another 27.2% notionally speaking cases. And this is what I call 2nd-order ordinary. This is where there is some deviation, some small deviation, where the customer either has an issue or there's a problem on the motor vehicle side in which the experience is not 100% smooth. It might have been like in the case that I committed an error one time where I reported to get my driver's license renewed and I was missing something. I had to go home and get it. Well, you know, mistakes get made in some cases. In other cases, there's an actual error or a procedural problem that that basically means we get the license, but we might be delayed in some way, shape or form. It will not be as efficient an experience as we would like. So those would kind of be the 2nd-order ordinary cases because they happen routinely. But again, the organization should be designed to handle it, just not happily, because now we've got not just a disruption from the customer's perspective, but also from the worker's perspective. There's impacts on other customers, etc. inconvenience, but not a problem.

Now, the 3rd-order, when we think logically of something that's three standard deviations away, you know, now we're talking about 4% of cases in a notional sense. And we're talking about those cases where the number or quality of the deviations is so significant that it requires the organization to intervene in some way. The ordinary processes for which the organization is designed for simply don't work or aren't very well equipped necessarily to handle, but it's still ordinary, which means that at some point the right decision is brought to, you know, it's still a matter of license or no license based on the conditions of the case. But the organization's behavior is much more disrupted because of the extent to which you have this deviance. And this might be something where a customer gets ornery or irate and starts lashing out, or it might be where a system is malfunctioning such that the ability to deliver the driver's licenses is disrupted in some way, such as like a central database being down. And of course, during the day when you're handling hundreds of driver's license applications at a single station, there is that natural percentage where there's problems, there's issues, there's something unusual about it. One or two or however many customers are up at the counter having difficulties, arguments with staff or what have you, that's how that's kind of captured. But we still haven't really broken the mold.

Haven't broken what the task is about that comes in the 4th and the final order, which is more than three standard deviations away from the unremarkable case. These truly are the remarkable emergency cases that represent less than a percentage, like about a 10th of a percent. And if we're following the normal distribution and this is where it constitutes some sort of a crisis, this is not ordinary anymore. It's extraordinary. So, we've got three degrees of ordinary that cover the

overwhelming majority of experiences that should be anticipated in the organization. And then you have this small, small number of extraordinary cases that is highly, highly disruptive.

And here this is where I like to bring in Gundel's (2005) typology of crises because he describes two different dimensions of a crisis. Now those two dimensions are predictability and influence ... . What he does is he examines different crises in terms of how in terms of predictability, whether it should have been easy to predict or hard to predict. And then the other dimension is whether that's easy to influence or hard to influence. And then in the two-by-two matrix, he lays out these four different categories of crises. So the conventional crisis, for example, is easily predictable and easily influenceable. And in reality, the majority of those, the conventional cases are probably wouldn't fall into the extraordinary situation where they might be they might fall into some of the 3rd-order ordinary that we were talking about, because even though they are very deviant and very difficult, there's still a sense that, well, the organization should be postured to handle it. If the organization is not postured to handle it well, then there's an indicator of some sort of a problem.

Now, I won't get into the other three categories in detail but suffice to say that if you have crises that are not predictable or that the organization can't influence, then that's very significant and is something that basically is going to put the organization to the test regardless of what occurs. So, we're talking about things like, you know, major power outages or natural disaster or a significant scandal involving members of the organization because of corruption or something of that nature. Selling driver's licenses on a black market. But obviously, we're not talking about very common cases. Again, this is the less than one in 1000 cases where you really do test the organization.

So how I use this, this idea of trying to center in the ordinary and spread out then becomes a matter of trying to understand what the organization expects of itself, what it sees as ordinary. In the case of driver's licenses, you can think about what it tries to do to increase efficiency oriented on how you take those 2nd- and 3rd-order ordinary cases and try to force fit them into the ordinary rather than working on a case by case basis. And then you can think about how the behavior of the organization changes when it introduces new technologies such as offering the ability to apply or renewed driver's licenses online, which changes the dependency that people may have on physical office.

The online probably is designed to handle cases as if they were the most ordinary, and that leaves the more complex or the more deviant cases to still have to go to the office, which then changes the types of cases or the quantities of types of cases that the workers are dealing with, which may affect efficiency in a different way. I mean, that's a very simplistic explanation. But certainly we can think about how the experiences change when you introduce a new technology in this kind of way.

So let's bring this full circle then and go back to the example of equality and equity and the poster with the girls and the apples by thinking about equity as in, "Are things equitable by providing the same access to a public good?" And you can think about how equity is then affected by various behaviors, various interventions, various conditions. Now, if we believe equity is an important attribute of the environment in relation to the provision of a public good, then it becomes really important to understand what are the ordinary [unremarkable] cases, because those have to be

equitable. If the way that the organization behaves does not provide equity in its ordinary provision of services – in some way access is denied or restricted or something of that nature -- [then] there is really a problem with the organization. I think that would clearly be problematic.

Now, let's say in the ordinary case, they are equitable. Then how does inequity creep in as you expand the aperture to the less common, the more problematic cases? How they creep in can be captured by the stories on how the individual experiences change as they experience challenges to their ability to acquire a license by using the stories. It's easier to put oneself in the shoes of those who feel or are experiencing this inequity. And to then go on to try to model how the inequity is being introduced. And that would be part of the "Explain" function.

So all of these together -- the nouns, verbs and adjectives and the expressions of the ordinary to the extraordinary -- that altogether is what comprises the taxonomic meta-narrative that I've been talking about in the past few episodes. It's basically the rich description of the organization as I've been effectively putting into practice. Whether it works in the general case, I have no idea. I mean, this is basically how I've tried to explain how I do things, perhaps may be helpful for some and not helpful for others. I don't know with this is the way in which I describe the organization. Then I move to how do I explain or how do I use this type of meta narrative to explain the organization in a way that I can then subsequently help leaders intervene. And that's going to be the subject of the next episode.…

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