Developing Social Network Propositions to Explain Large-Group Intervention Theory and Practice

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Developing Social Network Propositions to Explain Large-Group Intervention Theory and Practice

Stephen K. Garcia

The problem and the solution. In response to turbulent business environments, organizations are increasingly calling on the human resource development (HRD) function to facilitate organizational change. Thus, HRD professionals are looking to new forms of organization development that promise more rapid, whole-system change. One approach is large-group interventions. Although practitioners and researchers recognize the efficacy of large-group interventions, many researchers contend that the underlying theoretical mechanisms by which these interventions operate are poorly understood, resulting in a gap between research and practice that makes it difficult to say with certainty how large-group interventions operate, when they are appropriate, or how they might be integrated with other approaches. This article suggests that a social network perspective can inform our understanding of how large-group interventions work. Drawing on the social network and organizational change literature, the article develops four propositions for future empirical research. These propositions may ground large-group intervention methods in social network theory.

Keywords: organizational change; large-group interventions; social networks

Forces such as globalization and the information revolution have dramatically increased the complexity of our environment (R. Axelrod & Cohen, 2000; Burke, 2002). Foster and Kaplan (2001) contend, for example, that the turnover of companies on the Forbes top 100 and the Standard and Poor’s 500 has accelerated because of greater environmental complexity. Increasingly, organizations are calling on the human resource development (HRD) function to help manage...
this complexity by devising and implementing organizational responses (Dilworth, 2001; Grieves & Redman, 1999; Madsen, Miller, & John, 2005). According to Dilworth (2001), those who serve in HRD roles “have increasingly become change agents, or facilitators of organizational learning and architects of organizational transformation” (p. 103).

In response, HRD professionals and other change practitioners are looking to new organization-development approaches that promise more rapid whole-system change (Dewey & Carter, 2003; Marshak, 2004; Polanyi, 2001; Wheatley, 1999). One such approach is large-group interventions (Austin & Bartunek, 2003; Bramson & Buss, 2002; Bryson & Anderson, 2000; Bunker & Alban, 2005; French & Bell, 1999). Unlike change processes that focus on changes at the individual or group levels, large-group interventions seek to affect whole-system change by simultaneously engaging the entire organization in understanding the need for change, determining what to change, and implementing the change. As a result, this method can include anywhere from 30 to 2,500 participants. According to Weisbord and Janoff (1995), large-group interventions provide an opportunity for “getting everybody improving whole systems” (p. 2).

Researchers and practitioners from a variety of fields, including HRD (Dewey & Carter, 2003; Nixon, 1998), organization development (Bunker & Alban, 1997, 2005; Burke, 2002; French & Bell, 1999), and public administration (Bastianello, 2002; Bramsom & Buss, 2002; Bryson & Anderson, 2000), have recognized the efficacy of large-group interventions in affecting organizational change. Many researchers contend, however, that the theoretical mechanisms that underlie these interventions are not well understood (Austin & Bartunek, 2003; Bryson & Anderson, 2000; Weber & Manning, 1998). According to Bryson and Anderson (2000),

We have seen many different kinds of [large-group interventions] work very successfully, often in very different circumstances. . . . But most [large-group interventions] have been developed by practitioners who are less concerned with clarifying the theory supporting their methods. (pp. 152-153)

Given the lack of agreement regarding large-group interventions’ theoretical basis, it is difficult to say with certainty how large-group interventions work, under which circumstances they are appropriate, or how they might be integrated with other forms of organization development.

This article proposes the use of a social network perspective to better understand how large-group interventions work. Drawing on the social network and organizational change literature, I will develop a set of propositions for future empirical research in the sociological tradition following Nan Lin (2001). Lin’s work generated a list of propositions focused on social capital; my work here will do likewise, but it is focused on social networks and their role in large-group interventions. If pursued, these propositions may help to ground large-group intervention practice in social network theory.
The article begins by discussing the role of social networks in organizational change. Next, the article describes large-group interventions and the evidence to suggest that their success may be attributable, at least in part, to their capacity to restructure social networks. The article goes on to derive four propositions aimed at understanding how large-group interventions may affect social networks to achieve organizational change. Finally, the article discusses implications to theory and practice.

Social Networks and Organizational Change

Understanding how organizations change through changes in social networks is common in the literature. More and more, researchers are recognizing the influence of social networks on organizational outcomes (Cohen & Prusak, 2001; Cross, Borgatti, & Parker, 2002; Cross & Parker, 2004; Cross, Parker, Prusak, & Borgatti, 2001; Krackhardt & Hanson, 1993; Monge & Contractor, 2003; Sparrowe, Liden, Wayne, & Kraimer, 2001). For example, at the individual level, managers whose social relationships allow them to serve as go-betweens, linking otherwise disconnected groups, are more likely to receive positive performance evaluations and promotions (Burt, 2004). At the team level, the structure of social relationships that interconnect team members affects team performance and viability (Balkundi & Harrison, 2006). At the organizational level, the position of the firm within the larger, interorganizational social network works in conjunction with the firm’s internal capabilities to affect innovativeness (Zaheer & Bell, 2005).

Given the impact of social networks on organizations, change theorists are looking to social networks to explain organizational change (Burke, 2002; Krackhardt, 2003; McGrath & Krackhardt, 2003; Mohrman, Tenkasi, & Mohrman, 2003; Tenkasi & Chesmore, 2003). According to Mohrman et al. (2003), for example,

Lasting change does not result from plans, blueprints, and events. Rather, the changes must be appropriated by the participants and incorporated into their patterns of interaction. It is through the interaction of the participants that the social system is able to arrive at a new network of relations and new ways of operating. (p. 321)

Two common assumptions underpin the social network perspective on organizational change. The first is that organizational change is an ideational process (McGrath & Krackhardt, 2003). That is, organizational change is predicated on a change in people’s awareness, outlook, and beliefs about the change. The second is the view that organizational change is a dynamic process of social influence. From this perspective, organizational change involves a lengthy process of persuading organizational members, who in turn convince others, to adopt the change (McGrath & Krackhardt, 2003; Rogers, 1995).

Organizational theorists have applied this social network perspective to inform our understanding of both how change agents can successfully implement change
and how the process of change occurs. In regard to change implementation, Krackhardt (2003) and McGrath and Krackhardt (2003) suggested that practitioners can leverage social networks to execute organizational change by identifying critical stakeholders and influential change agents. According to McGrath and Krackhardt (2003),

Networks are a natural focus for change agents. We often look for central opinion leaders to be the leverage points for change. Once we have identified them, we focus our change efforts on them, and according to the theory, the rest of the organization follows. (p. 324)

In regard to change process theory, organizational theorists have sought to use social network constructs to explain how planned change occurs and why it succeeds or fails. Macdonald (1995) and Beer, Eisenstat, and Spector (1990) suggested that social relationships provide access to new, innovative information, which serves to stimulate organizational change. Krackhardt (2003), McGrath and Krackhardt (2003), Mohrman et al. (2003), Stephenson (2003), and Tenkasi and Chesmore (2003) indicated that social relationships can help to diffuse change throughout the organization and to overcome resistance to change. Finally, Kilduff and Tsai (2003) and Brass (2003) maintained that the configuration of social networks within an organization can foster or stifle the resource sharing and collective action necessary to achieve organizational objectives.

Large-Group Interventions

Like other approaches to planned organizational change, large-group interventions constitute a form of organization development (Burke, 2002; French & Bell, 1999; Weisbord, 1987). Bunker and Alban (1997) defined large-group interventions as a whole-system change process that allows a critical mass of people to participate in: (i) understanding the need for change; (ii) analyzing the current reality and deciding what needs to change; (iii) generating ideas how to change existing processes; (iv) and implementing and supporting change and making it work. (pp. xv-xvi; also see Bunker & Alban, 1992b)

Organization-development scholars have classified a number of different organization-development approaches as large-group interventions (please see Table 1).

Although scholars’ respective lists of large-group interventions differ, there is general agreement on which approaches can be called large-group interventions. For example, Bunker and Alban (1997), Manning and Binzagr (1996), Bryson and Anderson (2000), and Weber and Manning (1998) all identify future search, open space technology, and search conference as large-group intervention approaches.

Researchers’ efforts to distinguish large-group interventions have led them to identify a number of features that characterize large-group interventions and differentiate them from other forms of organization development. The most basic of these features is an emphasis on whole-system change as opposed to...
more modest incremental change (Bunker & Alban, 1997; Manning & Binzagr, 1996; Weber & Manning, 1998). This emphasis on changing whole systems leads to a requirement that large-group interventions be highly participative (Bryson & Anderson, 2000; Bunker & Alban, 1997; Manning & Binzagr, 1996; Weber & Manning, 1998). A fundamental belief underpinning large-group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Authors</th>
<th>Identified Large-Group Intervention Methods</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bunker and Alban (1997)</td>
<td>Fast cycle full participation work design</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Future search</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Institute of Cultural Affairs (ICA) strategic planning process</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Open space technology</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Participative design</td>
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<td>Real-time strategic change</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Real-time work design</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Simu-real</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The conference model</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The search conference</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Work-out</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manning and Binzagr (1996)</td>
<td>Fast cycle full participation and the conference model</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Future search</td>
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<td>Large-scale interactive process methodology</td>
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<td>Open space technology</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Search conferences, participative design</td>
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<td>Simu-real</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bryson and Anderson (2000)</td>
<td>Future search</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Open space technology</td>
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<td>Real-time strategic change</td>
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<td>Strategic choice</td>
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<td>Strategic options development and analysis</td>
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<td>Technology of participation</td>
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<td></td>
<td>The search conference</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Large-scale interactive process methodology (real-time strategic change)</td>
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<td>Managing organizational change</td>
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<td>Open space technology</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Search conferences, participative design</td>
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<td>Self-design for high involvement</td>
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<td>Simu-real</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Technology of participation</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Total transformation management process</td>
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</table>
interventions is that to affect whole-system change, organization-development approaches must intervene accordingly at the whole-system level (Manning & Binzagr, 1996). To achieve this transformational effect, large-group interventions seek to bring together everyone affected by the change, including organizational members from multiple organizational functions and hierarchical levels. Large-group interventions can therefore include hundreds, even thousands, of participants working together at the same time and in the same space.

Also stemming from large-group interventions’ focus on whole-system change is an emphasis on mutual understanding and dialogue among organizational members (Manning & Binzagr, 1996). If organizations represent whole systems, then effective organization development requires an understanding of how all the elements in the system interrelate. Large-group interventions use several tools to achieve a system-level understanding. For example, the approaches emphasize collective dialogue, in which participants conduct a shared inquiry into the processes and assumptions that compose experience within the organization. In addition, large-group interventions utilize future visioning, in which participants collectively define the organization’s preferred future.

Finally, large-group interventions rest on an assumption that the collective perceptions held by members of the organization greatly influence the organization’s reality (Manning & Binzagr, 1996). Thus, large-group interventions endeavor to modify organizational outcomes by reshaping individuals’ mental models. To this end, large-group interventions minimize organizational diagnosis, the first step in many organization-development approaches. Instead of focusing on existing problems, large-group interventions emphasize the creation of a future vision for the organization that organizational members collectively share.

As the field of organization development shifts its focus away from incremental change toward whole-system change, the emphasis on large-group interventions has increased (Bunker & Alban, 2005; French & Bell, 1999; Weisbord, 1987; Worley & Feyerherm, 2003). Proponents of large-group interventions identify numerous advantages to the approach. First, they contend that large-group participation taps the collective wisdom of the organization. That is, by involving more participants and giving everyone an equal chance to be heard, large-group interventions generate a broader array of potential change strategies, which in turn enrich the change process (Bryson & Anderson, 2000; Bunker & Alban, 1992b, 1997; Weisbord, 1992). Second, because large-group interventions involve a large percentage of an organization’s employees, the approach reduces resistance and builds commitment to change (D. Axelrod, 1992; Bryson & Anderson, 2000; Weisbord, 1987, 1992). Simply put, people are more likely to embrace what they have helped to cocreate. Third, by engaging the entire organization at once, participants are more apt to understand the organization as a complex system and their roles within it (Weisbord, 1987; Weisbord & Janoff, 2005). This improved understanding informs their future decisions and increases the likelihood that they will make choices optimized for the organization as a whole. Finally, as a result of each of these factors, large-group interventions are
said to allow more rapid organizational change than traditional organization-development approaches (Bryson & Anderson, 2000; Manning & Binzagr, 1996).

Organizational scholars disagree, however, on the extent to which the theoretical mechanisms that underpin these interventions are understood. Although some suggest that large-group interventions are rooted in a strong theoretical basis (Bunker & Alban, 1997; Dewey & Carter, 2003; Weisbord, 1987), others suggest that the specific theoretical mechanisms by which these interventions work have not been adequately articulated or tested (Austin & Bartunek, 2003; Bryson & Anderson, 2000; Manning & Binzagr, 1996; Polanyi, 2001; Weber & Manning, 1998). According to Weisbord and Janoff (2005), “We cannot say for sure how these processes work. We can see results” (p. 80).

To date, most research efforts have entailed (a) analyzing the large-group intervention methodologies defined by practitioners or (b) conducting individual case studies of specific large-group interventions. Although these approaches are informative in suggesting hypotheses about cause and effect—for example, that large-group interventions employ the power of group dynamics to create commitment (Dewey & Carter, 2003)—neither tests the proposed hypotheses. In particular, they provide no quantitative evidence, which, as Creswell (2003) indicated, is preferable for theory validation. Moreover, although many of these studies claim that large-group interventions are an entirely new phenomenon, they make little effort to look beyond conventional organizational theory to explain them (Marshak, 2004).

Evidence That Large-Group Interventions Affect Social Networks

Tenkasi and Chesmore (2003) were two of the first researchers to suggest that the efficacy of large-group interventions might be attributable to the capacity to restructure social networks:

It may be that the reported success of organization-development interventions, such as whole system design and search conferences, can be explained at least partially by social network theory, in that such forms enable the creation of networks and strong ties between networks of actors in the organization. An interesting area of future research would be to examine whether and what kinds of networks emerge as a result of whole system design interventions. (pp. 297-298)

The author is aware of only one study, however, that attempted to empirically test this proposed relationship. Clarke (2005) examined the impact of a trans-organization development intervention on the communication network of 12 county-level mental health agencies. Specifically, Clarke investigated the intervention’s 2.5-day convention stage, which Clarke described as a form of search conference. Clarke found that, as a result of the convention stage, a new set of agencies emerged as central players in the agencies’ communication network. Although Clarke’s research supports the hypothesis that large-group interventions can modify social networks, several questions remain. It is
TABLE 2: Case-Based Anecdotal Evidence

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<tr>
<th>Authors</th>
<th>Anecdotal Findings</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Arena (2001)</td>
<td>The ability to restructure informal social networks was a key enabler of the interventions’ success. According to Arena, “These large-group interventions provided the opportunity for connections to evolve. . . . These relationships helped to unify the organization” (p. 4074).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bunker and Alban (1992a)</td>
<td>Changed relationships between bosses and subordinates. According to Bunker and Alban, the work-out intervention “not only solved problems and improved productivity but also gave employees the experience of enacting the kinds of relationships with each other and with bosses that were needed” (p. 587).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dannemiller and Jacobs (1992)</td>
<td>Increased cross-functional communication, with senior leadership reporting that the intervention dramatically improved employees’ work relationships with internal counterparts, up, down, and across the organization.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>French and Bell (1999)</td>
<td>Cross-divisional communication increased, interunit cooperation increased, and changes in interaction patterns were immediate and positive.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weisbord and Janoff (2005)</td>
<td>It is possible that intervention enables something not otherwise available, “a gestalt of the whole in all participants that dramatically improves their relationship to their work and their coworkers” (p. 80).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whittaker and Hutchcroft (2002)</td>
<td>The intervention was beneficial for initiating dialogue and stimulating networks.</td>
</tr>
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</table>

unclear from Clarke’s study whether the changes in the communication network of mental health agencies were a central, causal element in the change process or whether they were exogenous to the change process. In addition, Clarke’s study examined network changes at the interorganizational level. In contrast, other large-group interventions can take place within a single organization. As a result, Clarke’s findings may not be applicable to these types of large-group interventions.

A number of published case studies, however, provide anecdotal evidence in support of the idea that large-group interventions can modify intraorganizational social relationships (Arena, 2001; Bunker & Alban, 1992a; Dannemiller & Jacobs, 1992; Dewey & Carter, 2003; French & Bell, 1999; Weisbord & Janoff, 2005; Whittaker & Hutchcroft, 2002). These case studies examined large-group interventions in a variety of organizational settings. Each suggests that large-group interventions change the nature or the structure of social relationships within the host organization. Table 2 provides a review of these case studies.
Developing Propositions for Future Empirical Research

As described above, case-based anecdotal evidence and limited empirical evidence suggest that large-group interventions can generate organizational change by restructuring an organization’s social network. This causal link has not been adequately tested, however. In particular, the question remains, do the potential network changes brought about by large-group interventions help to explain how large-group interventions cause whole-system change, or are these network changes exogenous to the change process? Addressing this gap in our understanding would help to ground large-group intervention practice in social network theory.

As described in other articles in this issue, the social network perspective offers theoretical and methodological tools to understand how HRD works. These social network theories and tools provide new leverage to address outstanding research questions (Hatala, 2006; Wasserman & Faust, 1999). In this article, I suggest that applying a social network perspective to the question of how large-scale interventions work would be a fruitful endeavor. The underlying hypothesis is that large-group interventions modify networks, which in turn triggers organizational change. Four network constructs support this hypothesis: bridging relationships, bonding relationships, the ratio of intergroup to intragroup relationships, and network connectivity. Each is described in the sections below. At the culmination of each section, a proposition is posed for future empirical research.

**Bridging Structural Holes to Acquire Information Necessary for Change**

The social network literature suggests that new information is often acquired externally through relationships that bridge gaps in a social structure (Burt, 2003; Granovetter, 1973; Rogers, 2003). Burt (2003) termed such gaps *structural holes*. Research on the effects of structural holes indicates that it is the relationships that span structural holes that often provide access to new ideas and stimulate organizational innovation (Burt, 2004; Hansen, 1999; Tsai, 2001; Zaheer & Bell, 2005).

This structural hole perspective is based on the assumption that people tend to dwell within clusters of similar others with whom they are tightly bonded and frequently interact. Within these clusters, members are interconnected by strong, reciprocal relationships characterized by familiarity and significant information sharing. As a result of their frequent interaction, members of the same cluster typically exchange redundant and less innovative information (Burt, 2003; Granovetter, 1973; Rogers, 2003). In contrast, members of different network clusters, separated by structural holes in the social network, tend to be dissimilar. This diversity increases the likelihood that members of different
network clusters will have access to different information and ideas (Burt, 2003; Granovetter, 1973; Rogers, 2003). According to Rogers (2003),

One’s intimate friends are usually friends of each other’s forming a close-knit clique. . . . Such an ingrown system is an extremely poor net in which to catch new information from one’s environment. Much more useful as a channel for gaining such information are the individual’s more distant (weaker) acquaintances; they are more likely to possess information that the individual does not already possess. (p. 154)

Structural holes are significant to organizational change because learning, or the acquisition of new information, is fundamental to the change process (Fiol & Lyles, 1985; Lewin, 1947; Macdonald, 1995). According to Lewin (1947), for example, the first step in organizational change, unfreezing, is fundamentally a learning process by which organizational members acquire new information that disrupts the status quo and mobilizes energy for change. Moreover, in line with the structural hole argument, Macdonald (1995) asserts that the new information necessary for organizational change must be acquired from outside the system:

Deliberate change—any change that is not entirely random—requires information. Inasmuch as the information available within the organization facilitates what the organization is already doing, it is unlikely to be able to make a major contribution to change. The organization must seek most of the new information required for change in the outside world. It must bring home this new information to be mixed with resident information to shape a novel pattern of knowledge into a package that can be used. (p. 562)

To the degree, then, that large-group interventions establish new social relationships that bridge structural holes, the interventions may provide a causal mechanism for generating the new information necessary for organizational change. This possibility is in keeping with the findings and experience of large-group intervention practitioners. They argue that large-group interventions enrich the change process by generating a wealth of new and unique change ideas that come from diverse organizational members who otherwise would not have contributed. This line of reasoning generates the first proposition:

Proposition 1: Large-group interventions establish new information-sharing relationships that span structural holes in the organization’s information-sharing network.

Developing Strong Ties to Build Understanding and Commitment to Change

Change efforts are often personally threatening to organizational members who have a stake in the status quo (Stephenson, 2003). As a result, organizational members may resist the change. Such resistance represents a significant obstacle to change implementation. Overcoming resistance and gaining employees’ commitment is thus critical to successful change (Burke, 2002).

The literature on social networks and organizations suggests that strong social relationships, or strong ties, characterized by trust and frequent, rich interaction,
are crucial to the process of overcoming resistance and building commitment to organizational change (Krackhardt, 2003; McGrath & Krackhardt, 2003; Tenkasi & Chesmore, 2003). This strong tie view rests on the assumption that organizational change efforts, particularly large-scale change efforts, are systemic and multifaceted, requiring the diffusion of complex knowledge on the purpose and nature of the change (Mohrman et al., 2003; Tenkasi & Chesmore, 2003). In addition, the strong tie view presumes that the complex knowledge involved in organizational change tends to be tacit in nature and dependent on a larger system of interdependent knowledge. As a result, the knowledge is more difficult to transfer because it is noncodified and requires that the recipient have an understanding of the larger knowledge system in which the complex knowledge is embedded (Hansen, 1999). From this perspective, strong ties are critical paths for the diffusion of organizational change information. Strong ties provide frequent and richer communication, which affords a greater opportunity for explanation and feedback between parties and leads to shared understanding (Hansen, 1999; Mohrman et al., 2003; Tenkasi & Chesmore, 2003). In addition, strong ties reduce resistance by serving as foundations for trust (Krackhardt, 2003). 

From these findings, a logical assertion would be that to the degree that large-group interventions foster strong relationships among participants, the interventions may be able to reduce resistance and promote a common and supportive understanding of the change. This possibility is supported by the literature on large-group interventions. Researchers indicate that large-group interventions reduce resistance by building commitment to and understanding of the change (Manning & Binzagr, 1996; Weisbord, 1987). This line of reasoning generates the following proposition:

**Proposition 2:** Large-group interventions foster the formation of strong ties among participants.

**Increasing an Organization’s E-I Index to Promote System-Level Understanding**

There is a second assertion regarding strong ties that can be derived from extant social network and change literature. McGrath and Krackhardt (2003) indicate that, in particular, strong ties that connect individuals residing in different organizational units are critical to successful organizational change. Their argument is based on the assumption that individuals with strong interunit ties are more likely to identify with the organization as a whole. As a result, they make choices that benefit the entire organization, as opposed to choices that benefit only their own local subunit. According to McGrath and Krackhardt,

As one’s individual friendship ties are spread more widely throughout the organization, one identifies more with the larger organizational entity and is more willing to engage in cooperative and altruistic behaviors necessary to make the change work for the organization. (p. 236)
Krackhardt and Stern (1988) provide a simple measure, which they term the E-I index, to determine the degree to which an organization is characterized by interunit, as opposed to intraunit, strong ties. The E-I index is calculated as follows,

\[ EI = E - I + E + I \]

where \( E \) is the number of interunit strong ties and \( I \) is the number of intraunit strong ties.

Thus, to the extent that large-group interventions can increase an organization’s E-I index, the intervention may be able to promote participants’ identification with the organization as a whole. Again, this possibility is in accordance with the assertions of large-group intervention practitioners who maintain that large-group interventions provide participants with a systems-level understanding of the organization (Weisbord & Janoff, 2005). This line of reasoning leads to a third proposition:

*Proposition 3:* Large-group interventions increase the E-I index of an organization’s network of strong ties.

**Increasing Network Connectivity to Facilitate Achievement of Change Objectives**

Network researchers indicate that the configuration of social relationships within an organization can promote or constrain the achievement of specific organizational objectives (Brass, 2003; Cross, Liedtka, & Weiss, 2005; Kilduff & Tsai, 2003). This viewpoint is based on the assumption that social relationships serve as conduits for the transfer of interpersonal resources (Balkundi & Harrison, 2006). From this perspective, just as an organization’s formal organizational chart can be reorganized to better support an organization’s objectives, so too can the configuration of the organization’s social relationships.

In particular, network connectivity, defined as the degree to which actors within the network are linked to one another through direct or indirect ties, appears to affect task performance (Balkundi & Harrison, 2006; Cross et al., 2002; Kilduff & Tsai, 2003; Powell & Smith-Doerr, 1996). Disconnectedness in the network signifies division in the social system and may limit the organization’s ability to integrate its members’ expertise (Kilduff & Tsai, 2003). Alternatively, connectedness may facilitate increased resource sharing and collaboration (Balkundi & Harrison, 2004; Cross et al., 2002; Kilduff & Tsai, 2003) and promote alignment in norms and values (Kilduff & Tsai, 2003).

Of particular interest is connectivity within the organization’s networks of instrumental relationships. Unlike affective relationships, which are affect laden and relate to interpersonal support, instrumental relationships are focused...
on task performance and are less concerned with emotion. Instrumental relationships are thought to be particularly critical to effective task performance (Harrington, 2002).

To the degree, then, that large-group interventions can increase connectivity within the organization’s instrumental social network, the interventions may help to further the achievement of change objectives. This line of reasoning suggests the following proposition:

*Proposition 4:* To what extent can large-group interventions increase connectivity in the organization’s instrumental social network?

**Implications for Research and Practice**

HRD practitioners are increasingly taking responsibility for organizational change efforts. Although large-group interventions represent a promising approach to whole-system change, a gap exists between theory and practice. Organizational change scholars and practitioners appreciate the efficacy of the approach, but many researchers maintain that the underlying theory has not been well established or adequately tested. Compounding the problem, much of the existing theory is grounded in systems theory, which is difficult to empirically test.

In this article, I propose that a social network perspective may be useful in clarifying the theoretical mechanisms that underpin large-group intervention methods. To this end, I have drawn on the social network and organizational change literature to derive propositions for future empirical research. If empirically tested, these propositions may help to ground large-group intervention practice in social network theory. This would benefit scholars and practitioners alike. In particular, integrating theory and practice may help HRD scholars and practitioners to understand in which settings large-group interventions will work and how to combine large-group interventions with other organizational change approaches (Bryson & Anderson, 2000).

If empirically tested, the propositions developed in this article may also further researchers’ and practitioners’ understandings of how to modify social relationships. As organizations flatten hierarchies, apply matrix structures, rely on virtual teams, develop strategic partnerships, and outsource business processes, they are fundamentally putting their faith in the power of social relationships to get work done. Thus, the question of how to modify and manage these relationships is increasingly important to practitioners and scholars alike.

In particular, researchers have focused on informal networks as opposed to formal networks as the determinants of organizational success (Cross et al., 2002; Cross & Prusak, 2002; Morton, Brookes, Smart, Backhouse, & Burns, 2004; Sparrowe et al., 2001). Unlike formal reporting structures or prescribed working relationships, informal social relationships represent ad hoc relationships that are self-generated and self-managed by organizational members.
According to Cross and Prusak (2002), “Increasingly, it’s through these informal networks—not just through traditional organizational hierarchies—that information is found and work gets done” (p. 105).

Modifying informal social networks is difficult. Informal ties can provide valuable resources such as information, power, or trust, and individuals may have strong incentives not to modify these relationships (Stephenson, 2003). Moreover, researchers’ efforts have been predominantly focused on understanding the consequences of network structures as opposed to understanding what causes networks to change or how networks evolve over time (Borgatti & Foster, 2003; Brass, 2003; Kilduff & Tsai, 2003). As a result, our understanding of how to modify informal social networks is limited. Large-group interventions may offer an innovative approach, one that may be faster and more efficient than traditional approaches, such as team building. Empirically testing these propositions could help to answer this question by assessing the ability of large-group interventions to restructure social networks and by providing a reference point for comparison with other methods.

Note
1. Network researchers have also suggested that strong ties may be counterproductive to organizational change. Strong ties can inhibit organizational innovation by creating peer pressure to adhere to the status quo (Burt, 1992; Rogers, 2003). In addition, organizational change may necessitate a difficult and challenging reconfiguration of strong ties within the organization (Gant, Ichniowski, & Shaw, 2002). It may be that the impact of strong ties varies depending on the stage of the change process. In the initial stages, strong ties may constrain the change by defending against the introduction of new ideas. After the new idea gains some legitimacy, however, strong ties may serve to encourage the change by enabling rapid diffusion.

References


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