

APPRECIATING THE NARRATIVE BASIS OF WORKPLACE HOPE EXPERIENCE

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Abstract *In The Psychology of Hope, Snyder (1994) asked, “What is this thing called hope?” Unfortunately, despite its pervasive expression a simple response remains obscure. Only recently have scholars appreciated hope’s potential workplace experience influence. This exploratory narrative inquiry highlights the lived hope experience in a workplace. Seven human resources managers in a retail organization narrated about a workplace experience they found hopeful, and which were particularly influential in their decisions to stay with the organization in the future. Four exemplar narratives are analyzed using hope theory (Snyder et al., 1991). A narrative inquiry approach offers a unique perspective toward making workplace hope visible to scholars and practitioners. The findings indicate workplace hope can be made visible through narrative. In making hope visible, leaders and human resources managers have a potent lever for encouraging workplace vitality and effectiveness.*

Keywords: *Workplace Hope, Narrative, Workplace Vitality.*

Hope’s workplace influence remains modestly appreciated in organization scholarship (Hutson & Perry, 2006) and largely under-explored (Snyder & Feldman, 2000, p. 403). One exception was Ludema (1996) calling out hope’s capacity for empowering organizations. As another exception, Hutson and Perry (2006) proposed that hope might be summoned and sustained when working communities articulate experience. In that regard, hope theory (Snyder, et al., 1991) offers an empirically situated foundation for exposing hope structures in workplace experience narratives and appreciating hope’s potential for richly enhancing organization health, vitality, and effectiveness. The next section briefly summarizes a theoretical framework. After outlining the inquiry methodology, hope indicators are highlighted in four exemplar workplace experiential narratives. Subsequent sections offer management scholars and practitioners insights into hope’s potential workplace influence and additional research prospects.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Unfortunately, hope lacks a broadly accepted operational definition (Harris, 19891), thereby resulting in varied research text characterizations (Kozak-Krueger, 1991). For example, Lopez, Snyder, and Pedrotti (2003) identified at least 26 hope theories or definitions in literature. Perhaps this definition reflects Jevne’s(1994) observation that hope has a unique significance for each person. More poetically, French philosopher Marcel (1978) situated hope as a mystery and not a problem to be solved. Lamm (1995) suggested that hope scholars’ focus should be “to materialize hope and to give it shape, to take a sensation and make it

into a structure” (p. 21). Avoiding the definition quagmire, my inquiry appreciates hope’s role in the work place. The following description summarizes a theoretical foundation underlying this exploration.

Hope Theory

Snyder, et al. (1991) considered hope as a two-dimensional construct consisting of the sense that goals could be successfully met (agency or way power) and that plans facilitating goal achievement could be developed (pathway or willpower). In their theory, agency and pathways are reciprocal, additive, and positively related and both must be present to sustain goal achieving progress. When both dimensions are present, the hoping person will: (a) perceive a higher potential for goal attainment, (b) focus on achievement rather than failure, (c) become energized by a sense of challenge, and (d) sustain an affirmative emotional state encouraging sustained effort to overcome obstacles interfering with goal achievement. Hope theory posits hope as action promoting rather than as a simple state of being.

Hope in the Workplace

Snyder (2000) observed that work influences a person’s hope and vice versa and may influence job satisfaction. Snyder and Feldman (2000) noted that in high-hope environments, workers tend to have more freedom of goal determination and pathways finding. Juntunen and Wettersten (2006) further proposed that hope at work may contribute to work meaningfulness. Hutson and Perry (2006)wrote: “Building

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a strengths-based enterprise, where people can show their best and be challenged for more, where the safety and health of everyone is a priority, and where all who belong want to belong, is the hard work of organizational hope” (pp. 3-4). The authors further noted that settings deficient in hopeful vocabularies can stand in the way of achieving strengths-based enterprises.

Hope Narratives

Narrative has been mentioned as one possible manifestation of hope. For example, Charlesworth (1979) indicated that hope is coupled with meaning-making. Averill, Catlin, and Chon (1990) proposed that hope inducing narratives might be found in maxims, folk sayings, and colloquialisms. Snyder (1995) noted that hope indicators might be highlighted in success oriented self-talk and reminiscing about former successes. Other scholars have suggested that hope might be shared through storytelling (Lopez, Floyd, Ulven, & Snyder, 2000; Shade, 2001). Johnson (2004) explicitly stated that narrative is “the principal vehicle through which hope is experienced, expressed, and cultivated” (p. 32). Averill and Sundararajan (2005) have said: “An analysis of the narratives of hope is, therefore, necessary to the understanding of hope as a human experience” (p. 134).

Hope has also been interpreted as an interpretive sense-making lens. Ludema (1996) wrote, “Hope can be used as a conceptual lens through which organizational life is read, interpreted, and given meaning: it offers a positive methodological imperative” (p. 89). Later, Ludema (2000) suggested organizational “vocabularies of hope” could be developed through stories, theories, evidence, and illustrations and catalyze positive transformation. Ludema explained, “textured vocabularies of hope provide the linguistic resources necessary to build new social architectures for transformative human organizing and action” (p. 266). White-Zappa (2001) proposed hope is a useful conceptual lens for generating organizational life and provides a configuration for improving organization effectiveness.

Making Hope Visible

Hope theory (Snyder, et al., 1991) offers several advantages for exploring workplace contexts. Snyder’s theory magnifies hope as a narrative enhanced cognitive-behavioral process with visible structural elements. The agency and pathways components conceptually represent structural indicators potentially made visible through narrative analysis. Because workplace experience is pervasive in human experience, understanding hope’s influence in that domain is a worthy endeavor.

METHODOLOGY

Polkinghorne (1988) proposed that sense-making is narrative based. Narrators use language to create descriptions of past experience. In turn, these narratives convey meanings. Riessman (1993) pointed out narratives structure experience and facilitate organizing memory. Pentland (1999) argued that narrative does not just describe features of experience but helps construct the world as experienced. Inquiry into the structure and meanings within experiential narratives might disclose more about how people come to find order in their world and make sense of experience (Riessman, 1993). Webster and Mertova (2007) proposed that narrative inquiry reaches further than rhetorical structure by attuning to the underlying insights a narrative illustrates.

This section outlines a methodology for exposing the narrative basis of hope in a workplace organization. The data analyzed for this manuscript was originally collected as part of my doctoral dissertation (Buckham, 2009). Unlike previous research, the analysis described in the following section specifically attunes to narrative structure as a window through which to identify hope indicators.

Four Inquiry Phases

The first phase included meeting with organizational leaders, making initial contact with inquiry participants, and obtaining voluntary participation form signatures. The second phase involved data gathering. Participants were asked to narrate a story of a hopeful workplace experience. Probing questions fleshed out details, context, emotions, and feelings relative to the experience. Conversations were digitally recorded and transcribed by the researcher. Participants were invited to review interview transcripts, further clarify points, or contribute additional observations and comments. Phase three involved analyzing experiential stories, participant reflections, field notes, and organization documents. The final phase included writing up the results and consulting the existing literature.

Participants and Location

Participants were purposefully nominated as what Lincoln and Guba (1985) referred to as knowledgeable informants. Human resource managers were specifically targeted as participants because of their connection with organizational disposition. Considerations for inclusion in the inquiry group were tenure, gender, age, professional specialization, and willingness to participate. Human resource managers in this organization typically have one to five years of experience, are predominately female, and have an age range of 25 to 60.

Data Analysis

Snyder et al. (1991) described hope in terms of goal related thinking with way-power and will power dimensions. McDermott and Snyder (1999) advised that hope can be analyzed by reading experiential stories and identifying markers or words and phrases used to reflect how someone feels or thinks about themselves in terms of goal setting, will power, and way-power. With this in mind, four exemplar hopeful experience stories were disaggregated into goal, way-power, and will power components. This structure became a framework through which to look deeper into the hope meaning-making processes.

For purposes of this inquiry, will power is represented by narrative expressions suggesting a driving force, mental energy, or determination and commitment toward achieving a goal. Persistence in applying for work might be an example of will power. Way-power includes narrative scripts outlining plans or roadmaps for achieving some outcome, or scripts indicating a capacity for finding ways to overcome obstacles. A specific set of sequential actions as part of a purposeful and comprehensive plan toward obtaining a job offer might indicate a sense of way-power. A goal is represented by narratives describing a desired change, something to be attained, something to be achieved, an obstacle to overcome, or a problem to be resolved. For example, the offer of a new job could be considered as something to be attained. A promotion could be considered as something to be achieved. Lack of resources might be considered an obstacle to overcome. Inadequate performance could be an example of a problem to be resolved.

FINDINGS

A workplace experiential story is a lengthy and context specific narrative that tells the workplace experience in a meaningful way. Participant stories generally consisted of distinct and temporally sequenced events combined to create a general plot. Story structure and meanings were identified and analyzed through a hope theory framework (Snyder, et al., 1991). Four exemplar stories follow. Goal, will power, and way-power elements are highlighted.

SB – the Magic of Hope

SB's experiential workplace story is about the opportunity to assume a newly created position in the organization. The experience had occurred about a year prior to the original interview. At that time, the organization was embarking on a critical information systems change. A team of in-house technology experts had been appointed. The project leader determined it would be advantageous to appoint someone to facilitate the team's internal dynamics as well as the team's

interactions with other departments.

SB was offered the facilitator position which required a decision. However, an important goal can be inferred when SB described why the position currently held was so attractive. SB had been in the position for a year and "was really enjoying it." In SB's own words, "I was getting great exposure to our executive team and feeling like I was making a significant impact for a one woman show." It's probably reasonable to infer that SB's goal was to hold a position with similar characteristics. However, a significant obstacle made accepting the new position problematic. SB stated the new position "hadn't been anything we had done in the past." Inexperience with new positions heightens risk of failure. Or, the organization may later determine the position is not worth the expense and the prior position may have been filled. SB insisted that certain conditions have to be met to reduce these risks.

According to Snyder's hope theory, the way-power dimension includes contemplating action steps having a high potential for success. One such step entailed SB setting certain risk-reducing conditions for accepting the position. SB stated, "...I came back to the agreement that if certain conditions were met I would be happy to do it." As another success enhancing element, SB discovered there would be a team of highly competent co-workers assigned to the project. And, a particularly competent co-worker, SB had great confidence in becoming a direct participant. He said: "The other piece of that that was really neat was that another gentleman in finance was selected to be my teammate and I was also very excited about working with him and being a great team with him. And I knew that our partnership was also going to create a really dynamic team and a dynamic kind of a dynamic duo".

Will power indicators are also evident in the story. SB noted that company executives were paying attention to the project. Another willpower driver is evident when SB indicated the company's executives "...really, really felt an internal candidate was needed...." Adding to the attention this appointment was getting from executives, SB noted "and that they had specifically talked about me as being a really great person to do this." This extra recognition seemed important to SB and not wanting to let the executives down might sustain extra efforts if required by the project. Such an inference is warranted by SB's disclosure:

And, I just was very honored that people thought highly enough of me to ask me a second time, and basically say, "this is a great opportunity for you, we're selecting people to work on this project who have demonstrated, you know, high competency and we think with your knowledge of the organization and your interpersonal skills you would be a great candidate for this role, and we really would like you to think about it.

And, I remember when I made my decision finally to accept the offer, I was very, very hopeful and I think the biggest thing that was driving that for me was two things. One was the fact that people thought highly enough of me and respected me and my experience enough to really want me to do this and I felt like I was really helping the organization at that point and was really doing the right thing for the organization. And then I thought again it was doing the right thing for the organization as well as a great thing for me and my career.

From a structural perspective, Snyder et al.'s (1991) hope theory helps researchers appreciate the lived workplace hope experience. SB's goal was to have a position offering opportunities to make meaningful contributions to organization's progress while also making available possibilities for personal recognition and satisfaction. Initially SB envisioned the new position as presenting several obstacles to goal attainment. Only later as willpower and way power were engaged was SB able to appreciate the possibilities in the opportunity. Will power was engaged through a conversation with the project manager and through SB's own contemplations. Way power was engaged by mentally framing and then enacting a series of specific action steps. It appears that the interaction between goal, will power, and way-power enhanced SB's hopeful state which in turn encouraged a sweeping aside of inhibiting doubts. With doubts swept aside, SB was willing to make the change. Snyder (1994) suggested that goal, will power, and way-power need all be present. In SB's story all three hope factors are visible but it appears that will power may have been the dominant contributor to a heightened sense of hope. SB summarized the experience this way: "So that's an interesting part of hope for me. I think when I'm hopeful about something, it feels like that I have the opportunity to make something happen in a positive fashion, and I think that's been the case for me throughout my life".

JD – Hope as Being Appreciated

JD's workplace experience story was about finding employment after moving to a new city. The goal evident in JD's narrative is simply finding employment. Following a fifteen year management career with a different organization, JD faced several obstacles in meeting this goal, including limited job opportunities and few personal contacts that could aid the job search. Another potential obstacle included having to take a typing test. As JD noted, "...I hadn't typed since high school...."

Way-power is evident in the sequential steps JD took toward finding employment. For example, JD proactively sought employment, researched the company, made an application, and took the test. Will power is evident when JD talked about taking a typing test and, not being satisfied with the

first result, asked for permission to take it a second time, and was granted.

Successful iterative interaction between goal, way-power, and willpower was important in motivating JD to keep pushing toward a desired future outcome. For example, having a clear goal probably engaged the willpower that drove JD's request to retake the typing test and improve chances for a job offer. For JD, a meaningful personal goal may have been the dominant contributor to a heightened sense of hope.

PK – Hope in Serving Others

PK's workplace experience story is primarily about helping an associate overcome performance obstacles. This associate was recruited to the organization about the same time as PK, but had been frustrated in a previous job. PK's goal can be clearly identified in the statement: "So, there was work to be done to get her ready to move into the next position so that she really could be someone who could lead, motivate, and inspire people as well." Several obstacles made this a difficult goal. As PK noted, this individual "had been in a negative place for a while" and this person's skills and dedication had deteriorated. Unfortunately the negativity came with the associate to the new company.

Way-power is clearly visible in the steps PK took to accomplish the goal like initiating open and honest communication, identifying potential promotion opportunities, and action planning improvement steps.

I talked about the growth potential, knew that there were additional stores coming, knew that positions would open up and was able to bring her.

And in that year and a half I passed her over twice for open positions and she still stayed. And I think a large part of that was because I was open and honest with her about where she was and the fact that I was able to finally promote her to assistant manager.

But we also worked and maintained that hope in keeping the lines of communication open, and knowing what potential positions were going to be open, talking about areas of strength, but also talking at great lengths about areas of opportunity, and action planning, and game planning together and discussing how to attack those areas of opportunity and grow from them.

PK's will power is evident in the propensity to work with this individual to overcome the performance obstacles. This is reinforced in PK's revealing comment: "And so, one of the experiences that I do recall and one of the reasons that I still enjoy being with the company has to do a lot with the personal relationships that I've developed."

The interaction between goal, willpower, and way power enhanced PK's hopeful state by encouraging a focus on a long term goal. As in other workplace experience stories, all three hope factors are evident. However, I would suggest that for PK having a clearly defined goal may have been the dominant hope factor with will power and way-power providing the catalyst to success. PK summarized the experience by stating: "So I think that would be an example of hope. I think I came here out of hope. She came here out of hope, a hopeful feeling that it would be better."

KJ – Hope as Service to Others

KJ also was a mid-level manager in this organization. During our conversations it became clear that religious faith is an important element in KJ's hope experience. The narrative addresses a specific instance where KJ had to provide critical assistance to a badly ailing employee. This employee "had gotten in a really bad car accident" that resulted in tooth damage to the point that KJ noted the employee "evidently had an abscess on all...teeth" and "I could clearly see that [the] life force was going away and I knew that...was... big trouble." The employee had been turned away from the hospital since he had neither insurance nor money. KJ's goal was to provide aid and comfort to an employee suffering deleterious effects from an accident. There were several explicit obstacles. The employee was very ill, so quick action was required. It was not an ordinary situation. KJ had to act but lacked authority or guidance on how to proceed.

KJ's way-power is noticeably evident in the number of steps taken to alleviate the immediate crises. "We were able as an HR department to work with doctors, to work with dentists in the area to get [the employee] in very quickly, so we could mitigate [the] health situation." KJ also arranged for dental work to be paid for from contributions made by other employees. Will power is shown in KJ's willingness to assume responsibility and take immediate action. In addition, KJ's willpower is sustained by faith. "What happened was a complete miracle I would say." KJ's willpower was also sustained in a personal philosophy and organizational creed as described below:

So the hope in that message is we can make a difference in people's lives. We can touch a soul every single day. We can make a concerted effort to make an impact in this organization. And that's what my HR department and I do. I mean our motto is touching one life at a time by showing that we care.

It seems to me that religious faith provided a source of will power energy. I believe that the successful interaction of goal, will power, and way-power reinforced KJ's confidence for taking immediate actions that were outside normal

responsibilities. As was observed in other participant stories, I believe for KJ will power may have been the more important hope factor.

DISCUSSION

Snyder et al.'s (1991) hope theory may offer an enlightening framework for making visible how narrative structure influences workplace hope experience in sense-making. Hope theory provides a context for understanding participant's self-talk as they interrogate experience and make sense of experiences. The analysis of participant workplace hope experiential stories may indicate that for them hope is more than an emotion and more than an optimistic anticipation. Rather, the iterative interactions between goal, will power, and way-power attaches hope to something specific and makes hope a catalyst to action. For these participants in this organization, workplace hope is partially manifested as an active openness to inspirational possibilities within opportunities.

Two observations surfaced for me. First, organization members' workplace experience narratives can be interrogated for structural hope indicators. This means that researchers can specifically attune to workplace hope stories as a rich source of data. At the same time organization leaders may be able to use a pool of such stories for developing and building hope initiatives aimed at improving organization health. Second, participants' experiential narratives painted compelling portraits of workplace hope as lived experience rather than just as a general state of being. However, looking beneath a narrative's surface structure brought deeper understanding of how hope is manifested in workplace experience. When connected temporally and contextually, individual events become a lived episode from which meaning is drawn as a mental narrative. Polkinghorne (1998) calls these cognitions narrative meaning. These meanings influence future action and sense-making. Hope then might be characterized as an interpretive lens through which narratives of resistance and despair can be reconstructed into narratives of possibilities in opportunities.

The capacity for altering organizational narratives may represent a lever for enhancing organizational health, vitality, and effectiveness. Such capacity may reside in hope's catalytic and transformative power. Hope is catalytic in that it encourages action over wishing. Hope is transformative in that it encourages a positive, yet well-grounded and realistic anticipation of and reaching for a preferred future. Hope encourages organization members to recognize that today's difficulties can be replaced with a vital and healthy condition if appropriate action plans are put into place alongside a reasonable belief in the possibility in opportunities.

CONCLUSIONS

Snyder (1994) proposed that in the present, memories of past successes stimulate willful thinking. Snyder wrote, "hope is a specific way of thinking about oneself rather than some nebulous, immeasurable philosophical notion" (p. 25). This willful thinking, what Stotland (1969) called interpretive mental schemas, occurs in story form. These hope stories influence how experience is interpreted. To some degree the findings from this workplace hope inquiry offer further support for Snyder's (1994) suggestion that individuals can turn to an internal self-dialogue when thinking about goals, will power, and way-power. I suggest it is not just thinking about how goals are to be reached that leads to understanding hope. Rather, it is hope's affirmative future orientation that structures thought, interpretation, and healthy action.

Ludema (2000) discussed the advantage of organizations identifying and developing vocabularies of hope through stories and illustrations to serve as an agent for positive transformation. Along the same line, Lopez et al. (2000) claimed that some experiential stories "hold clues to our hopefulness for the future" (p. 128). In addition, Jevne (1994) suggested hope "enables individuals to envision a future in which they are willing to participate" (p. 8). This to me is the epitome of workplace hope, a longing to engage in, and with a health and effectiveness promoting future outcome. Razeghi (2006) suggested the benefit of hope resides in its capacity for providing "meaning in meaningless moments" (p. 30).

Hope is not an escape from a current situation. Instead, hope is an invitation to embrace and engage with a preferred future. From a temporal perspective hope's transformative effervescence thrives where past, present, and future conjoin. In other words, hope creates a future different from what the most recent events' trajectory might have otherwise unfolded. Hope is a journey into a new world. Hope is a fresh story waiting to be authored. Hope is the living large poetic license inherent in what Parse (1999) referred to as human becoming. Hope brings together rather than disaggregates. Hope has a different kind of relationship with workplace experience. It is a revelation, and sometimes a revolution, to be enjoined. It is a narrative way of being and interpreting workplace lived experience. Hope is not socially constructed, it is socially constructing. Hope relishes disorder because it not only divorces the future from the past but it breaks the shackles of the present and reshapes the future. Razeghi (2006) concluded that hope allows one to rewrite the future and see with the heart.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONTRIBUTIONS

Although primarily exploratory in nature, this workplace hope inquiry may contribute novel insights for organizational

and hope scholars. This workplace hope exploration suggests narrative inquiry interventions may convey new vocabularies of hope through which organizations can improve effectiveness. Leaders can be both sources of hope and developers of hope in others. Perhaps more researchers will be encouraged to incorporate narrative inquiry protocols in other workplace research efforts.

Organizational leaders and human resources managers may find that active intervention in workplace hope experience facilitates improved organizational performance. One intervention might include open dialogue with employees about individual and group hope experiences. Spotting these experiences may offer encouragement to employees facing work or personal challenges. Sharing positive and hope inspiring experiential stories may facilitate the transition from negative, problem-centered organizational conversation and amplify positive, success-oriented conversations and thinking. When hope inspiring conversations become the dominant norm, workplaces can become the healthy landscape for personal and organizational vitality.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Participants in this workplace hope exploration were all human resource managers in one retail organization. Appreciating hope's workplace contribution might be advanced by conducting similar inquiries involving additional multi-discipline cohorts, additional retail, and non-retail organizations, and non-profit organizations. My hope is that this article stimulates these kinds of additional inquiries. Extending the hope conversation is in itself a hopeful experience.

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