

Available online at [www.sciencedirect.com](http://www.sciencedirect.com)

SciVerse ScienceDirect

journal homepage: [www.elsevier.com/locate/orgdyn](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/orgdyn)

# Seeing and realizing organizational potential: Activating conversations that challenge assumptions

Katherine Heynoski, Robert E. Quinn

What if all organizations are filled with untapped resources? What if seeing and utilizing resources depended upon how people see and talk to each other? What if changing the way we see and talk to each other could transform organizational capacity?

This paper is about learning to activate conversations that challenge assumptions, stimulate learning and facilitate change. We begin with a case that illustrates the failure to see potential. We propose that the ability to see potential is rooted in shared assumptions and beliefs, and link these assumptions to organizational discourse. Through a second case example, we show the difference that discourse can make. We conclude with an assessment tool that managers can use to help themselves and others reflect on their assumptions, alter their discourse and access vital resources.

## CASE 1: THE INABILITY TO SEE POTENTIAL

In the 1950s General Motors (GM) initiated a “sunbelt strategy” which involved building plants in the southern and western states. The United Auto Workers union determined that it was a move to undermine the union, and these new plants became conflict-ridden. One of the most extreme was the plant in Fremont, CA. Union absenteeism was at 20 percent. There were approximately 21 grievances filed each day by union members. Wildcat strikes happened regularly. Costs were 30 percent higher than the costs of Japanese competitors. Sales, quality and productivity were all very low. At the cost of millions of dollars, many interventions were tried, but little success followed. In 1982, GM closed the Fremont plant. Normally this would be the end of the story, but GM made an unprecedented move. Two years later they entered a joint venture with their chief competitor, Toyota, to collaborate on the design and production of a new car at the defunct Fremont plant.

In proposing the new endeavor, GM indicated that there would be constraints. The plant could not be remodeled, and

the old equipment had to be used. The former and most senior UAW workers had to be hired first. This meant the most disgruntled people had to return. Toyota accepted these constraints under the condition that Toyota managers run the plant.

The plant was reopened and named NUMMI—New United Motors Manufacturing Incorporated. Toyota managers introduced the Toyota Production System (TPS) to the employees of NUMMI. TPS is an operational excellence philosophy based on a set of principles that seemed foreign to the employees of the former Fremont plant. These principles, which continue to be a central part of Toyota’s philosophy today, are continuous improvement and respect for people. Naturally employees expressed skepticism, but the Toyota managers consistently responded in a manner that reinforced these principles even in the face of significant challenges and intervened when employees failed to adhere to them. In doing so, Toyota managers initiated new conversations that helped transform the way employees viewed their work.

At the end of one year, sales began to climb. Quality and satisfaction went from being the worst to the best of any other GM plant. Productivity doubled the corporate average. These positive changes lasted for decades. When asked for an explanation, UAW workers talked about changes in management, changes in the culture, and changes in their own behavior. Union members went from going home at night thinking about how to disrupt the organization to being completely committed to the success of the organization.

## Assumptions and Potential

There are many points that could be made about this case, but one important lesson is that the plant was teeming with potential that was not visible to GM executives. The executives had tightly held assumptions. They assumed that the extensive conflict was the fault of union members. They firmly believed that union members were beyond

redemption, but the outcome of this case shows that what they assumed to be true was wrong. Under Toyota executives, the union members changed. The GM executives could not realize the potential in their own organization because they could not see it, and they could not see it because of the assumptions they were making, which led to forms of discourse that reconfirmed their incorrect assumptions.

Assumptions are beliefs that have become so deeply engrained that they are accepted as the “truth.” Here are some common assumptions about how people tend to act in organizations.

- People pursue their self-interests
- People pursue external rewards
- People live in assumptions of exchange
- People minimize personal costs
- People prefer the status quo
- People become distrustful
- People communicate politically
- People see constraints
- People assume hierarchy
- People compete for scarce resources

This list seems to have a slightly negative tone, but these assumptions reflect what social scientists tend to find when they study organizational life. Economists, for example, often begin with the assumption that resources are scarce, and people are embedded in networks of self-interested transactions. These assumptions also tend to hold for practicing managers. We call them normal assumptions because they are the implicit beliefs from which we tend to operate.

We suspect that it was normal for the executives at GM to make these kinds of assumptions about union members. Imagine, for example, that such a manager tried to introduce a change and union members immediately began to resist. The resistant behavior of the union members would then reconfirm the executives’ beliefs that the union members were at war with management. These executives then would be justified in feeling that they had been attacked by an enemy. Such experiences would continually reconfirm the truth that they lived in a world of conflict. Their thoughts in any given conversation would be based on the fear of conflict. Acting on their negative feelings, they would implicitly or explicitly communicate distrust to the employees. This would give rise to more conflict, which would confirm that the executives were right in the first place.

In this process, the assumptions become constraints. Because the managers are unable to challenge their own assumptions, they are also unable to change how they implicitly and explicitly communicate those assumptions to others. In this situation, assumptions shape organizational discourse, and organizational discourse in turn perpetuates the prevailing assumptions. Without an intervention to challenge assumptions, it becomes impossible to recognize or realize the potential in the “enemy.” In this imagined (and therefore real) war, each side blames the other for any problems or setbacks. In enacting their dysfunctional assumptions, managers become carriers of the disease they are trying to eradicate. The conflict and distrust in the system, something they detest, is actually embodied in their

core assumptions and communicated by their every word and action. They are caught in a vicious cycle that may eventually lead to great failure, as illustrated in the case of the Fremont plant.

Because normal assumptions are so deeply engrained, they become expectations. Every conversation and decision begins to reflect these assumptions. When managers consciously and unconsciously design organizational processes based on normal assumptions, these processes incent people to continue to behave in normal ways. Unfortunately, normal assumptions and normal behavior do not result in extraordinary organizational outcomes.

We refer to the previous list of assumptions as the normal lens. We use the word “lens” because we tend to see what we assume we will see. In making normal assumptions and enacting the normal lens, we tend to ensure that we will get normal outcomes. The organization thus stays on its current trajectory, or it breaks down and moves to an even more negative trajectory. Good becomes average, average becomes bad.

## Seeing Organizational Potential

So how do we move from the normal lens to a lens that might give rise to a positive trajectory? This paper is part of a special issue on positive organizational scholarship. Positive organizational scholarship is an area of study that is concerned with what people and organizations are like when they are at their very best. When social scientists use the lens of positive organizational scholarship, they study exceptional rather than average performance. The data generated from these studies tend to capture people and organizations on an upward trajectory.

When examining organizations at their best, social scientists find intrinsically motivated people, who make assumptions of contribution while sacrificing for the common good. They are willing to go beyond normal expectations. They exist in communities in which hierarchy still exists, but it becomes latent. Relationships are based on trust and a sense of equality. In these communities people are not trapped in their own past; they envision possibilities and initiate change. Through this creative process they become more effective versions of themselves and tend to expand the existing pool of resources. We call this pattern positive organizing. It is a contrast to normal organizing as shown in [Table 1](#). The previous list of normal assumptions appears on the left and positive list appears on the right.

The common reaction to this set of positive organizing assumptions is, “That is unrealistic.” Actually the positive assumptions are realistic. They are just unusual or outside normal expectations. Excellent functioning is seen less frequently than normal functioning. The assumptions in the positive lens, nevertheless, are as valid as the assumptions in the normal lens. They describe how people behave when they transcend normal expectations.

To change the trajectory of an organization, the people in the organization must move from the assumptions on the left to the assumptions on the right. When they do, they engage in a more positive form of organizing, and the system moves on an upward trajectory. This move is dependent on a change in expectations.

**Table 1** Two Sets of Organizing Assumptions.

Assumptions of Normal Organizing	Assumptions of Positive Organizing
People pursue their self-interests	People sacrifice for the common good
People pursue external rewards	People pursue intrinsic satisfaction
People live in assumptions of exchange	People live in assumptions of contribution
People minimize personal costs	People exceed expectations
People prefer the status quo	People initiate change
People lose trust	People build trust
People communicate politically	People communicate authentically
People see constraints	People envision possibilities
People assume hierarchy	People assume equality
People compete for scarce resources	People expand the resource pool

### Realizing Organizational Potential: Transforming Assumptions Through Discourse

Where GM managers failed to change expectations, the Toyota managers succeeded. They successfully altered a seemingly intractable culture and transformed the GM plant into a thriving organization. The transformation at NUMMI was not about a single, charismatic leader driving change through the organization, but a team of people who challenged the prevailing assumptions by consistently communicating a new set of positive organizing principles.

The principles at the heart of the Toyota Production System (TPS), which is more commonly referred to as lean production, are respect and continuous improvement. Employees model respect when they build trust, accept personal responsibility, and invest in the development of themselves and others. Continuous improvement is an ongoing commitment to initiate change. As a philosophy of operational excellence, TPS emphasizes collaborative problem solving to eliminate sources of waste from organizational processes. Employees at NUMMI were not only challenged to engage in new behaviors, they were supported as they experimented. They found themselves taking part in a discourse of learning and development. It is through discourse that we establish, maintain, and change our assumptions. Discourse includes not only spoken and written language, but also nonverbal cues and context. Together the elements of discourse create experiences in which people share not only factual information but also impressions, ideas, and beliefs. These social interactions, rather than just our own internal reasoning, shape our assumptions. Discourse is transformative when employees revise their shared assumptions.

Consider what happens when a new employee joins an organization. Through their daily interactions, new employees begin to learn group norms and acceptable standards of behavior. Because the way employees talk to each other often reflects the assumptions of normal or positive organizing, over time employees internalize many of these shared assumptions. These shape the way they perceive and respond to their surroundings. In this context, organizational discourse maintains the dominant assumptions. We refer to this as “passive discourse,” because it does not promote change. In other instances, new employees may question or challenge the prevailing assumptions. In doing so, they create the conditions under which change can occur. We refer to this

type of discourse as “generative discourse,” because it supports the development of new understanding. Since all employees contribute organizational discourse, everyone has an opportunity to participate in revising shared assumptions.

In the next section, we introduce a second case example to illustrate these two types of discourse and discuss how discourse can either undermine or support a desired transformation. The case examines an organization where senior managers introduced a change in an effort to shift the organization from good to great. We show how most managers in this organization engaged in passive discourse that reinforced normal assumptions. This made it impossible for their employees to learn a new set of assumptions. Then we examine the one successful group within this organization. From this positively deviant group we learn an alternative approach to discourse, one that facilitates learning and results in the realization of potential. Managers within this group introduced generative discourse that challenged employees to re-evaluate their assumptions.

### CASE 2: THE ROLE OF DISCOURSE

For our second case example, we present the account of another U.S.-based manufacturer that tried to emulate a Toyota-style system of continuous improvement. This company manufactures products for the transportation industry and will be referred to by the pseudonym Transport. In 2004, senior managers at Transport launched a “lean transformation program” modeled after the Toyota Production System (TPS), with the intent to transform the organization’s core processes and culture in support of their goals for organic growth. The company invested millions of dollars to convert several production lines into lean production lines. While most areas of the business failed to significantly change the way they operated, one successful department began to operate in a fundamentally different way. We use data from this case to show how managers’ discourse contributed to these different outcomes.

Within Toyota, lean improvement tools and techniques are part of a larger system of learning and problem solving that is guided by Toyota’s long-term philosophy. At its core, lean production emphasizes giving support to people so they can continually improve the processes they work on. An internal company document, *The Toyota Way 2001*, is one attempt to make these central values explicit. The purpose of this document is to help employees throughout Toyota’s global

**Table 2** Contrasting Approaches to TPS.

	Toyota	Transport
Improvement approach	Rapid problem solving is conducted at the lowest possible level of the organization	"Experts" formulate and implement large-scale improvement strategies
Relationships	Managers support employees' learning and development	Managers monitor task completion and enforce rules
Objective	Learning	Profitability

operations develop a consistent understanding of Toyota's guiding principles. Without this understanding, managers can't lead in the true spirit of the Toyota Way.

At Toyota, continuous improvement is carried out in rapid problem solving cycles called Plan-Do-Check-Act cycles (PDCA). PDCA is a structured process for experimentation that promotes learning. Daily problem solving is an integral part of employees' jobs. Changes are implemented at the lowest possible level within the organization. Managers support these activities by developing employees' problem solving capabilities and facilitating improvement activities. While it is difficult to establish a clear relationship between incremental improvements and changes to the bottom line, Toyota places a high value on learning, under the assumption that it will enable the organization to meet its desired long-term objectives. The emphasis on collaborative learning is important. Under normal assumptions, people in higher positions are assumed to be knowledgeable. Because they know, they tell people in lower positions what to do. The emphasis on learning is at the center of the positive organizing process. It suggests a much more active form of discourse.

Although senior managers at Transport made culture change a strategic focus in support of the improvement activities being modeled after TPS, they repeatedly undermined their vision for change. The focus became integrating lean tools and techniques with traditional practices and structures rather than learning to operate in a manner that was consistent with the principles of TPS. As employees tried to make sense of the ongoing change activities, they constructed meanings that were markedly different from Toyota's. They were holding people in the assumptions of normal organizing.

At Transport, improvement activities were primarily tied to large-scale events and projects. Internal change agents were hired to plan and implement these activities. The intent was to eventually transition these responsibilities to the operations team, but after five years change agents continued to be primarily responsible for process improvements. Rather than facilitate continuous improvement, operations managers focused their efforts on monitoring output and enforcing policies. Transport's improvement activities were driven by the desire to produce measurable results, and short-term output requirements took precedence over process improvement, as shown in [Table 2](#).

### Passive Discourse: Reinforcing Shared Assumptions

The case of Transport highlights the stark contrast between the original model of TPS and Transport's version of TPS. Rather than transform the organization, managers at

Transport filtered TPS through their normal lens. As managers tried to spread and build support for change throughout the organization, their message reflected normal expectations. In this section, we focus on one aspect of TPS that Transport wanted to replicate. Senior managers wanted to replace the current top-down style of process improvement with a bottom-up approach. Despite creating a clear vision, the passive discourse within the organization ultimately eroded the value of the changes that senior managers attempted to implement.

A strategic thrust within senior managers' overall vision was to actively engage union employees in improvement activities. In addressing the workforce, the general manager of operations characterized lean production as a "team sport" in which every employee played a role. He further explained that the role of union employees was to creatively think of ways to improve production processes. This desire to more fully utilize all of an employee's abilities aligns with a lean focus on waste elimination, one aspect of which is categorized as unused employee creativity.

As part of their strategy, senior managers set a goal of adopting a process improvement approach that more closely mirrored Toyota. In TPS, rapid problem solving is led by employees directly involved in the process. Senior managers at Transport also recognized that culture change was needed to support this transition. They used the analogy of "flipping the pyramid" to describe the desired cultural transformation. The organizational hierarchy was depicted as a pyramid with senior managers at the peak and union employees as the base. Rather than the few managers at the peak of the pyramid directing the activities of everyone below them, the pyramid needed to be rotated so that it balanced on its peak, and the role of managers became to support and mentor their employees.

Although this was a central piece of senior managers' formal strategy to implement lean production, this change never fully materialized. In the absence of ongoing conversations that challenged normal assumptions, the organization remained captive to its past. Employees were unable to learn new ways of behaving because they were constrained by existing practices and beliefs. While the average duration of improvement projects decreased and the frequency increased, projects continued to be largely planned and led by lean "experts" rather than operations employees or teams of union employees. As managers worked to implement the lean production strategy, they continued to express normal expectations. Employees at Transport became more entrenched in the status quo. The original vision for change, rather than the organization, was transformed. The end result was a hollow shell of change. Although production lines were visibly altered, the physical changes overlaid an untouched core of normal assumptions and behaviors.

Most change management experts advocate that successful change begins with leaders establishing the need for change in order to generate commitment to the change. What does the normal lens tell us about needs? The normal lens tells us that people are extrinsically motivated and structure their lives around expectations of fair exchange. Under these assumptions, managers must offer something of value in return for employees' agreement to go along with a change. At Transport, discourse took the form of a sales pitch as managers attempted to coerce, cajole, and entice employees to get on board with the change program. Senior managers perceived the central dilemma to be selecting the "right" combination of incentives to purchase employees' compliance.

In some ways, Transport was in an enviable position because demand was strong and the company had a large backlog of orders. Unlike the GM plant, there was no immediate concern for the company's long-term viability. Instead senior managers sold the change based on the need for increased capacity and efficiency. Most production areas were staffed across three shifts, which limited senior management's ability to continue to grow the business. Furthermore, a product design change mandated by tighter government regulations eroded a large percentage of the company's profit margins on its main product line. Senior managers tried to assure employees that by working together to eliminate waste from production processes, they would both strengthen the company and create greater job security for themselves.

As they worked to convince employees to accept change, managers' discourse created meanings that departed significantly from the underlying principles of TPS. At Toyota, cooperation is built on mutual trust. Toyota develops that trust in part by making a long-term commitment to its employees. Employees are viewed as the company's greatest asset, and Toyota invests time and money in their ongoing development. In contrast, managers at Transport used logic and pay incentives to try to persuade union employees to behave in a fundamentally different way, while doing very little to develop their understanding of lean production techniques. Their discourse maintained a culture of knowing and telling as opposed to a culture of learning and sharing.

Among the union employees, lean became known as "less employees actually needed." Historically, Transport had experienced fluctuating periods of high and low demand, with extensive layoffs accompanying the down cycles. While senior managers claimed that the planned growth would help them level the demand, union members believed that improving efficiency would result in more layoffs during the next downturn. Union employees also reacted negatively to the words used by managers to define lean production. Lean production was described as a methodology to increase capacity and improve efficiency through the elimination of waste. Many union employees felt threatened by the use of the word "waste." They believed managers were either insinuating that union employees weren't doing their job or that employees themselves were the waste.

While managers tried to reassure union employees that they wouldn't lose their jobs as a result of implementing lean production, at times they directly and indirectly contradicted this message. For example, an initial priority for lean implementation was to convert stationary production stands

into one-piece flow lines. These changes required large investments, which senior managers would only approve if the savings were expressed as headcount reductions. Funding was denied if managers showed the savings as an increase in capacity on the production line. Managers also tended to express a pragmatic view of employment. As one manager explained, "This is an agency that's trying to make a profit. If our profit is going into expenses, which is headcount, then we've got to reduce that."

At Transport, passive discourse maintained normal assumptions and further divided managers and employees into separate camps. Although communicating a clear need is considered to be an essential part of fostering support for organizational change, it does little to generate genuine commitment to change when the message reinforces normal assumptions. As the lean initiative matured, attempts to try new things often got held up by protracted negotiations between human resource managers and union officials, as each side tried to extract greater benefits and protect self-interests. These interactions created winners and losers rather than a partnership. The exchanges also fueled distrust and did little to abate employees' concerns about job security. Discourse became an ongoing negotiation between management and union employees rather than a vehicle for the growth and development of employees.

### **Generative Discourse: Transforming Shared Assumptions**

The positive lens turns attention to what is going right. It poses counter-intuitive questions. In a normal or decaying system, do we find exceptional patterns of excellence? In this case, do we find any subsets of people who are engaged in positive organizing? The surprising answer is yes.

While the dominant discourse patterns within Transport reflected and strengthened normal assumptions about organizing, one workgroup took an entirely different course. They transcended the normal assumptions and managed to create an island of generative discourse and positive organizing. The workplace dynamics on this line were noticeably different from other lean production lines. Transport's CEO noted that this production line "is a great example of people who get it and are engaged in making lean work."

The shift from normal to positive organizing was fostered by lower level managers within the group rather than orchestrated by senior managers. In particular, there were three salaried employees who played a central role in the development of this positively deviant workgroup. These three individuals proactively initiated new conversations and established new channels for open communication to involve employees in the lean initiative. One of these managers described this transformation as a gradual process of "building person by person" through a series of "one-on-one conversations every day." The employees began to view change through the positive lens.

In many ways, lean implementation began on this production line in the same manner that it had in less successful areas of the organization. A manager was assigned to lead the lean transformation, with the direction to create a one-piece flow line from the current static build process. As with most managers at Transport, this manager had no previous experience with TPS, and he was skeptical that it would work.

During the previous two years, many problems had arisen as other production areas tried to implement lean processes. This also created a lot of resistance to change among the union employees.

One of the lean manager’s first actions was to spend time with the more experienced lean managers. As he learned about the problems they encountered, he became convinced that a lean production line could never be successful without everyone’s commitment to change. Although senior managers had made employee engagement a core part of their formal vision for lean, most managers continued to define success using normal terms of exchange. In return for their investment, they expected to see a visibly transformed line, employees who adhered to the new work processes, and higher levels of output. In contrast, the key salaried employees in the positively deviant workgroup defined success as a high level of involvement and teamwork between union employees and management. They initiated a discourse of contribution rather than exchange as they worked to develop a cohesive team.

As the three salaried employees created opportunities for union employees to participate in conversations about change, discourse began to take the form of a two-way dialog rather than a monolog or negotiation. Managers involved union employees in the construction of a shared vision for change, and the union employees become more personally invested in the change process. One approach that managers used to increase employee engagement was through the establishment of a weekly meeting to gather employees’ suggestions for the redesign of the production line and to address their concerns. Another was through informal conversations with individual employees to confront issues and misconceptions. For example, one manager described sitting down with the department’s union steward, who was strongly against lean, to have a frank conversation about lean. Another manager talked about proactively initiating conversations with union employees to resolve issues before they escalated to formal grievances. The managers knew these conversations had an impact when they began to observe the union leadership take a more active role in advocating change to the union members.

As employees became more engaged in the change process, improvements began to emerge from the ground up

instead of being imposed from the top-down. One of the salaried employees who played a central role in this transformation described this change.

*“We’ve grown in this department from the bottom up. . . There’s much more involvement, with the management working together with the people on the floor to figure out what’s good for all of us. It’s a win-win situation, not management says you’re going to do this and the employee is then forced into doing it.”*

As momentum began to build, managers were able to transition more ownership for the changes to the union employees. For example, when union employees pushed back on process changes that managers had developed with their input, managers turned the process redesign over to the union employees. Managers were able to use the employee feedback as a springboard for higher levels of engagement instead of treating the push back as a threat. Rather than resisting the managers’ offer to redesign the process, the union employees took it as an opportunity. The change process became more collaborative, as managers and union employees drew on their unique strengths and knowledge to contribute to the overall plan. The lean manager provided guidance on lean principles and the overall vision, while operations managers and operators contributed their process expertise.

The conversations taking place in the production group were a new kind of experience. The novelty led to new assumptions about what was possible. The vision to implement became a shared purpose. While the hierarchy still existed, people became partners in relationship of possibility, trust and learning. The dialogs were conversations characterized by active and constructive challenge that fostered real learning. As their discourse came to reflect these assumptions of positive organizing, the group began to excel and was recognized as excellent in the implementation of lean production. Indeed, senior managers were excited about how this workgroup was performing and wanted to capitalize on the positive transformation taking place in this line. The department was beginning to operate in a way that was consistent with senior management’s espoused vision for lean production based on TPS. Yet an interesting thing happened. The process of generative discourse was disrupted

**Table 3** Assessing the Conversations in Your Organization.<sup>a</sup>

Discourse of Normal Organizing		Discourse of Positive Organizing
People are pursuing their self-interests	1 2 3 4 5	People are sacrificing for the common good
People are focused on external rewards/punishments	1 2 3 4 5	People are intrinsically motivated
People speak in terms of what is fair and unfair.	1 2 3 4 5	People speak in terms of what they can contribute
They are negotiating		
People seek to minimize their personal costs.	1 2 3 4 5	People are investing, stretching, learning, and exceeding expectations
They want to do as little as possible		
People prefer the status quo. They resist new initiatives	1 2 3 4 5	People suggest and support new initiatives
People do not trust each other	1 2 3 4 5	People trust each other
People speak based on a political awareness of what is acceptable	1 2 3 4 5	People engage in authentic dialog, constructively challenging each other
People see the constraints	1 2 3 4 5	People see the possibilities
People speak from their hierarchical positions	1 2 3 4 5	People speak to each other as equals
People are competing for scarce resources	1 2 3 4 5	People are creating resources as they speak

<sup>a</sup> This tool is based on this paper and is meant for heuristic purposes. It is not a scientifically validated instrument.

when all three key players, in two cases as a result of their success, were promoted into new roles. With this transition, the frequency of interactions characterized by generative discourse began to decline. In their former roles, the key salaried employees had actively solicited union employees' ideas and probed for feedback. After the changes in staffing, these types of conversations were replaced by normal patterns of knowing and telling. The learning process ground to a halt as the group went back to normal organizing assumptions and passive discourse.

## CONCLUSION

We began with the provocative but true statement that organizations are filled with potential resources that managers often fail to see. Managers are unable to see these potential resources because they have been conditioned to view their organization through a lens built on normal assumptions. Managers, however, do not have to remain hostages to these normal assumptions. The NUMMI case suggests that the most extreme organizations can change.

Discourse becomes transformative when we engage in experiences that challenge our basic assumptions and understandings. When we begin to embrace the assumptions of positive organizing, we see new possibilities and we create

new resources. The reader may find it useful to use the assessment tool in [Table 3](#) to analyze a given meeting or pattern of conversations. A group might even fill out the assessment in the middle or at the end of a meeting.

In this article we illustrated the lack of movement from one set of assumptions to another. We examined an organization where most managers enact normal assumptions and make it impossible for employees to implement significant change. We then showed how it is possible for a workgroup to defy expectations even when it is embedded within an organization that is locked in a stagnant pattern. Managers within this workgroup generated discourse that challenged normal assumptions and elicited the assumptions of positive organizing.

The implication is that managers have the power to awaken the potential within their organizations. For this to happen they must recognize the way their discourse contributes to the lens employees use to view the organization. They must also recognize they need to relate and interact in ways that stimulate the assumptions of positive organizing.



To order reprints of this article, please  
e-mail [reprints@elsevier.com](mailto:reprints@elsevier.com)



## SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Our arguments build on earlier work examining the role of communication in change, including: F. J. Barrett, G. F. Thomas, and S. P. Hocevar, "The Central Role of Discourse in Large-Scale Change: A Social Construction Perspective," *The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, 1995, 31(3), 352–372; J. D. Ford, "Organizational Change as Shifting Conversations," *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, 1999, 12(6), 480–500; B. Doolin, "Narratives of Change: Discourse, Technology and Organization," *Organization*, 2003, 10(4), 751–770.

For additional information on the field of Positive Organizational Scholarship see: K. Cameron, J. Dutton, and R. Quinn (eds.) *Positive Organizational Scholarship: Foundations of a New Discipline* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2003); K. Cameron, and G. Spreitzer (eds.) *Oxford Handbook of Positive Organizational Scholarship* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2012).

For further information on the Toyota Production System, see J. K. Liker, *The Toyota Way: 14 Management Principles from the World's Greatest Manufacturer* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2004); J. P. Womack, and D. T. Jones, *Lean Thinking* (New York: Free Press, 1996).

For a discussion of the organizational culture change at NUMMI see: K. Cameron, and R. Quinn, *Diagnosing and Changing Organizational Culture: Based on the Competing Values Framework* (San Francisco: John Wiley & Son, 2011); J. Shook, "How to Change a Culture: Lessons from NUMMI," *Sloan Management Review*, 2010, 51(2), 63–68; W. W. Wilms, A. J. Hardcastle, and D. M. Zell, "Cultural Transformation at NUMMI," *Sloan Management Review*, 1994, 36(1), 99–113.

Data and quotations for the second case example were originally collected as part of the following study: K. Heynoski, *Understanding Change Dynamics: Examining the Underlying Patterns that Shape Organizational Change* (Doctoral dissertation, 2011).

**Katherine Heynoski** is a consultant with Battelle for Kids. Her current research examines the practices of highly effective educators and schools using both qualitative and quantitative methodologies. She received her Ph.D. in industrial and operations engineering from the University of Michigan (1160 Dublin Road, Suite 500, Columbus, OH 43215, United States; email: [kheynoski@gmail.com](mailto:kheynoski@gmail.com)).

**Robert E. Quinn** is a professor at the University of Michigan's Ross School of Business. He currently directs The Center for Positive Organizational Scholarship. His current research interests are in leadership and change (Stephen M. Ross School of Business, University of Michigan, 701 Tappan St., Ann Arbor, MI 48109-1234, United States; email: [requinn@umich.edu](mailto:requinn@umich.edu)).