"Using the metaphor of micro-blogging when relating to others in organizations provides opportunities to be aware and intentional of thoughts and behaviors within smaller time segments. This opens a new space to approach change and development."

Metaphorically Speaking

Micro-blogging as a Way to Reframe Workplace Interaction

By Bauback Yeganeh
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Metaphor is the chief vehicle through which we advance our understanding of social life.

(Gergen, 1990, p. 267)

Introduction

Metaphors have been used in organizational theory in a range of ways. One way is to understand familiar experiences through unfamiliar lenses. Doing so opens new possibilities and choices. Shifts in social experiences are often accompanied by opportunities to engage new metaphors. One such shift is the use of micro-blogs (such as tweets on Twitter or status updates on Facebook) within the realm of online social networking to relate to one another. Micro-blogs limit us to interact in smaller slices of time and with compressed amounts of information. Using the metaphor of micro-blogging when relating to others in organizations provides opportunities to be aware and intentional of thoughts and behaviors within smaller time segments. This opens a new space to approach change and development. It enables individuals to mindfully focus on small, time-limited thoughts, feelings, and behaviors referred to in this article as micro-actions. The purpose of this article is to use micro-blogs, as a way to understand and take advantage of these small-scale choices during interactions at work[1]. A generative metaphor is presented that frames

1. While this metaphor is not limited to organizations, for the purposes of this article it is being discussed in the organizational context

new possibilities for thinking and acting, along with suggestions for how to practice this ability.

The Use of Metaphor

People use metaphors to relate to and understand the environment (Gergen, 1990; Marshak, 1996; Morgan, 1980). Metaphors emerge when people transfer one area of knowledge onto another (Boxenbaum & Roulue, 2011). This is essential to human learning and development as "perception and knowing are linked in an interpretive process that is metaphorically structured" (Smirich, 1983, p. 340). In essence, the mind uses metaphors to bridge understandings of experience.

With new metaphors new lenses are applied to situations, bringing forth new knowledge. Metaphors are said to "make the familiar strange" (Bethanis, 1995, p. 191) by dissolving the influence of currently held mental models. When this happens, metaphors have a generative impact (Cornelissen & Kafouros, 2008; Senge, 1990) allowing individuals new vantage points from which to conceive possible behaviors.

Psychologists have long used advancements in technology as metaphors to explain human experience; e.g., photography, automobiles, switchboards, and computers (Gentner & Grudin 1985). As technological advancements become embedded in our current culture they impact "ways in which we intently listen to, look at, or concentrate on anything" (Crary, 1999, p.1). One reason this happens is that interactions with new technology establish

new patterns of experience, which can create awareness of new aspects of interaction beyond the interface with the technology itself (Crawford, 2009). Therefore, technological advancement offers fruitful ground for the emergence of new metaphors, which can be useful in expanding the bounds of human potential. Micro-blogging is one such advancement.

Micro-blogging

Micro-blogging has become a global phenomenon impacting the scale and constancy of how people interact with one another. Micro-blogs (such as Twitter, Jaiku, Plurk, Tumblr) are becoming an established category within the general group of social media (Kaplan & Haenlin, 2011). As of 2009, 55.6 million adults in the US reported visiting micro-blog based online social networks at least monthly (Anderson, et. al., 2009). *PC Magazine* defines micro-blog as "A blog that contains brief entries about the daily activities of an individual or company. Created to keep friends, colleagues, and customers up-to-date, small images may be included as well as brief audio and video clips."[2] Most people reading this article are familiar with some form of micro-blog, whether through status updates, commenting on photo posts, sharing a viral video on a social network site, or something related. Micro-blogging changes how humans are able to interact and connect with each other and shifts the way they socially present themselves.

In the age of the social web, many people broadcast themselves to the world, but not everyone does it in the same way. Like any form of interaction, people range in degree of intentionality. The Buddhist concept of co-emergence can be used as a framework for analyzing micro-blogging. From a standpoint of co-emergence, phenomena are neither positive nor negative, rather they become helpful or harmful, encouraging wisdom or confusion, based on how the mind attends to them (Nichtern, 2011). The question that guides our work (Good, Yeganeh, & Yeganeh, 2010) is: "how can people increase awareness, range

2. http://www.pcmag.com

of behavioral options, and intentionality of choice?" Micro-blogging as a metaphor for micro-actions may provide one answer.

The New Metaphor: Micro-blogging to Micro-actions

"Technologies can open, close, and otherwise shape social choices, although not always in the ways expected on the basis of rationally extrapolating from the perceived properties of technology'' (Dutton, 1996, p. 9).

The metaphor being presented here

is the experience of micro-blogging as a new way to frame micro-actions when interacting at work. In order to develop this metaphor, one must extrapolate particular properties of micro-blog experiences that resonate with work interaction experiences. Primary among these is brevity of time/space, which equates to limited information. Micro-actions then can be thought of as small acts delivered in thin slices of time, perhaps no more than 5 seconds and often shorter. Here the term "small" refers to limited information, as a micro-blog is limited in character space. The term "thin slices of time" refers to brevity of space within which the act is taking place.[3] Because they are smaller in size, micro-actions express minimal context in and of themselves. For example, asking a question after a comment to gauge somebody's interest is a neutral micro-action. The observer, however, embeds that micro-action in a context of personality, work style, relationship, work project, team,

3. This is not to be confused with "thin slice" research that suggests that individuals judge others and situations based on very limited data (Gottman, 1979; Gladwell, 2005).

culture, organizational history, and so on. In fact, the context of micro-actions is often defined by the observer based on the broader narrative of the actor and environment as it unfolds.

Micro-actions provide an anchor in smaller bits of space/time. While space/time limitations come with restriction in both micro-blogging and micro-actions, focusing on the choices in smaller space/time frames, enables a plethora of opportunities for interaction. Often, something as small as a micro-action, may be falsely seen as having limited impact. For example, con-

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sider how often facial expression is taken for granted. The face is so central to our socio-cognitive and emotional processes that individuals actually seem to mirror others' moods by simply looking at their facial expressions (Zajonc, 1980; Goleman, 2006). There are obviously many examples of how micro-actions create cascades of larger impact.

The micro-blog experience is built around a limitation of space/time and yet has opened a whole new way of interacting. Similarly, focusing on micro-actions, also bounded by space and time, will open a whole new way of interacting. By observing interactions in very short slices of time, one increases opportunities for fresh interventions. For example, quantitatively, there are 12, 5-second options for mindful action in a minute. Considering routine meetings that can go past an hour in which no new behaviors are engaged, this can be quite profound.

Ambient Awareness

Social scientists have defined a new form of peripheral social awareness based on micro-blogging technology called ambient

awareness. It is the result of taking in short bits of information that people choose to transmit, creating a collective picture of that person in the mind of the observer. Ambient awareness is "very much like being physically near someone and picking up on [their] mood through the little things [they do, such as] body language, sighs, [and] stray comments…"(Thomas, 2008). The micro-blog to micro-action metaphor invites people to assess how intentional they are being in the micro-actions they display to others at work. This awareness and a specific practice around managing micro-actions, which is discussed later, enables more mindful approaches to facilitating others' ambient awareness. Just as people generate impressions of others online through small bits of information via micro-blogs, one way that impressions are generated during work interactions is through observation of small bits of information via repeated micro-actions. In the social cognition literature Susan Fiske and colleagues (1987) assert that people merge multiple concrete experiences of a person into a coalesced judgment. The judgment is then recalled rather than the actual memory from a specific event (Riskey, 1979). Further, it is recalled by first searching for a trait by which to summarize the individual (Wyer & Srull, 1989).

Small gestures and interactions, naturally preceded by internal processes, can then be thought of as intentional tweets or updates that shape perceptions. Ambient awareness happens at work, based on our interactions with others. The accumulation of micro-blogs creates an ambient awareness of a person online, just as the accumulation of micro-actions creates an ambient awareness of a person at work.

Micro-actions and Self Development

Five seconds matters. At first glance it seems like a small amount of time, certainly when alone. However upon mindfully observing how much happens in work interactions by counting 5-second intervals, the data can seem endless. Think about all of the little choices during interactions you make in a day. Now reflect on all the small choice points that are not necessarily

obvious because they are made automatically. At work they may include whether or not you went out of your way to speak with someone, a smile towards a colleague, or whether or not you asked an extra question in a meeting to invite responses. Each of these choices can be thought of as micro-actions. Despite the simplicity of micro-actions, individuals continue to struggle with the unintentional routinization of unwanted behaviors. Clearly, changing behavior is far different than understanding ways that behavior can be changed.

Individuals in organizations have been trained to emphasize context in pursuit of competency development. Yet an over-emphasis on context may inadvertently restrict awareness for small interventions in our daily interactions. Learning to better recognize and seize opportunities to engage desired micro-actions instead of acting on auto-pilot frees individuals to practice change at any moment in time, without having to wait for a specific scenario that has been rehearsed.

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The metaphor of micro-blogging can help enhance awareness and intentionality when interacting with other people at work. Thinking of behavioral choices in terms of micro-actions helps to focus on a detailed unit of analysis that can be analyzed, tracked, reflected upon, and changed as desired (Good, Yeganeh, & Yeganeh, 2010). It helps individuals think of a detailed and specific way to contribute during social interactions. Micro-actions, like any behavior can be done mindfully or mindlessly. By understanding interactions in terms of smaller slices of time, choices can be made that may collectively have a broad impact on others and ourselves.

Micro-actions can be thought of as small, time-limited behaviors. They can include expressions of thoughts and feelings. Micro-actions often happen during face-to-face interaction so they tend to consist of verbal and non-verbal communication. For example non-verbal micro-actions include facial expression, eye contact, hand gestures, and posture. Verbal micro-actions include voice intonation, volume, words chosen, and how many words spoken between breaths. To what/whom we attend in these ways is also important to consider.

It takes a great deal of intention, awareness, and effort to change any of these. Some techniques to support putting micro-actions into practice are offered below.

Putting it into practice

What if people were intentional about the micro-actions they displayed, as if they were writing a micro-blog with their behavioral choices instead of a few sentences online? Thinking about and extending micro-action repertoires is a powerful way of actively and mindfully developing the self. Additionally it provides an actionable framework for practicing mindfulness, linking mindfulness and action in the workplace. Such links between mindfulness and action are often neglected, as present centered awareness is seen as a substitute for engaging new behaviors (Good & Yeganeh, 2006; Yeganeh & Kolb, 2009).

As micro-blogging has emerged as a standard technology, so too have analyses of "best" practices. There are multiple guides to becoming a better Twitter user, including "5 Ways to Use Twitter for Good"

and "20 Twitter Tips to Make You a Better Twitter User" (Brogan 2007; Morgan 2008). These aid in the development of communication norms, as do more heated debates about "good" versus "bad" twittering.

The metaphor presented in this article extends the experience of online micro-blogs to the micro-actions available during work interactions. Upon research and reflection, the micro-blogging metaphor provides powerful implications for developing the self and enhancing interactions on a micro-level scale. If much of our social lives consist of accumulated micro-actions, and micro-actions are used to make sense of one another, then there may be some best practice guidelines for them as well. The next section outlines some practices that leverage the metaphor of micro-blogging.

Ambient Awareness and Slow Scanning

The understanding that people form an ambient awareness of others based on small bits of information sheds some light on how to self-monitor micro-actions. Self-monitoring, which refers to the degree to which individuals tend to be motivated toward and capable of actively controlling and shaping their public images and behavioral expressions (Snyder, 1974), is a prerequisite to improving self-management of any behaviors. So how does one go about self-monitoring micro-actions when they happen so quickly and on such a small and fast scale? One answer is to anchor observations to the smaller segments of time/space that we are attempting to impact. This can be done by implementing a mindful practice of slow-scanning. By intentionally giving more time to each concrete stimulus as opposed to limited time (fast scanning), one more mindfully observes concrete experiences that are often neglected. Such a practice increases awareness and options for choosing micro-actions.

Take a few seconds to practice slow scanning right now. Move your eyes more slowly on the page than you normally do. Let the words read more slowly. Lengthen the amount of attention you give to

Table 1: Steps for Practicing Micro-Actions

1.	Observe	Scan slowly to orient toward interaction in thin slices
2.	Scenarios	List recurrent interactions you are curious to explore/impact
3.	Routinization	List micro-action routines used in these interactions
4.	Replace	List micro-actions that may be impactful in these interactions
5.	Determine	Narrow down the list to 1 or 2 micro-actions
6.	Practice	Deliver micro-action when deemed appropriate

concrete stimuli, rather than quickly noticing them and moving on. Really observe. You may begin to observe the objects around you that you were currently neglecting. With the next person you interact with, scan him/her slowly to pick up on smaller slices of time. Really observe the person's face, voice, gestures, and subtle cues being presented. Now, think about the micro-actions you are displaying. What is the smallest level of action you can provide to support this interaction? To heighten awareness of thinner slices of time/space that micro-actions can be practiced in, slow down and slow scan.

Practicing New Micro-actions

The following section outlines a process to support the practice and implementation of micro-actions at work *(Table 1)*.

1. *Observe yourself in thinner slices of time during interactions.* This is a new practice, so it is suggested that one first begin to orient him or herself to slow scanning and noticing the opportunities for detailed micro-actions that happen in smaller slices of time/space.

2. *Identifying scenarios* is a useful first step to focusing on any kind of behavioral change. Keeping in mind that micro-actions happen in small slices of time/space and with limited information transmitted, one must think of the smaller slices of time within interactions where change is desired. In addition to interactions in which you want change, also consider your work routines and the individuals you pass by or share space with in limited frames of time.

3. *Reflect on your micro-action routine.* What were the various micro-action choice points made in the interaction you have identified? Did you choose

to speak or withhold your voice? Did you smile when you spoke? Did you raise your voice? Did you speak with confidence or shyness? Keep in mind that a micro-action routine normally involves multiple micro-actions at play. For example, someone may speak with a particular person, in a particular way, about a particular topic, with multiple gestures displayed. Listing all the micro-actions is important.

4. *Brainstorm a list of replacement micro-actions.* Without narrowing down too rigidly, brainstorm alternative micro-actions that may helpfully modify the micro-actions previously demonstrated. Keep in mind a limit of 5 seconds to qualify as a micro-action. List the micro-actions, for example "I could have spoken more loudly, about x topic, while softening my facial expression, and followed with an open ended question."

5. *Determine 1 or 2 new micro-actions* you would like to intentionally engage. Narrow down and select the micro-actions that you would like to engage in similar future interactions. *Table 2* presents reflective questions to narrow down and select from the new micro-actions you generated in step 4.

Upon integrating the new micro-actions into your routine, you can use this process to then introduce more new micro-actions in specific situations.

6. *Put it into practice.* Visualize how you would like to display micro-actions in a given scenario. Practice in the scenario and reflect afterwards on whether or not you succeeded. Tracking specific new micro-actions provides a rigorous way to practice this small-scale approach to change. Additionally, practicing intentional micro-actions

throughout the day strengthens the ability to practice them during specific scenarios.

Implications for Large System Change

The butterfly effect in chaos theory suggests that small variations on initial conditions in a nonlinear system can produce large variations in the system behavior at a later state (Lorenz, 1972). Focusing on the micro-actions that will contribute to an organization's desired culture is a powerful technique for creating collective mindfulness. In terms of culture change, large multi-stakeholder efforts to determine micro-actions that can improve organizational reality may be a powerful way to leverage the butterfly effect. This is because micro-actions accumulate toward collective norms, behaviors, and culture.

Limitations

The essence of metaphor is exaggeration. Metaphors focus entirely on selected aspects of phenomena while disregarding the rest. In this way they tend to distort reality (Tsoukas, 1993). Comparisons are leveraged while differences are set aside. There are clearly some differences between micro-blogs and micro-actions. The first is an online platform vs. work interactions in real time. While the norm for micro-blogging is to interact quickly in small bits of space/time, online platforms enable users to retroactively edit and/or delete entries and range in level of engagement, often with minimal consequences. This differs from interactions at work where behaviors cannot be edited once they are acted out, and disengaging from others for long periods of time comes with potential severe effects. Additionally, one acts out many more micro-actions at work than micro-blogs online. There is also more time to choose micro-blogs than micro-actions. Another potential limitation is that focusing on small-scale behaviors can lead to neglect of overarching themes happening in longer stretches of time. Thus integrating this approach within a systemic developmental framework is suggested. Finally, given the brevity of 5 seconds,

Table 2: Questions to Support Micro-action Selection
» If I were completely intentional about the interaction, what micro-actions would I use?
» How would I like to be breathing during the interaction? Deeply? Normally? How will I make sure to be breathing intentionally?
» How can I discover the most important aspects of an interaction for myself and the other person, and tend to them?
» What kind of status update are you intentionally giving? A comment? A judgment? An observation? A question? An action? A gesture? An emotion?
» How would I like to physically appear?
» To what degree are we thinking together in new ways vs. limiting our conversation to past norms?
» How can I make the other person feel comfortable? Safe? Challenged?
» What would you like to pay more attention to during interactions?
» How can I use physical distance/closeness to impact the interaction?
» Which micro-actions will be creative vs. reactive?
» What vocal tone and volume would I like to use?
» What do I want my emotional presence to be?
» How can my micro-actions contribute to the culture I would like to see more of in the organization?
» Which micro-actions will reflect who I would like to be in the organization?
» How many questions vs. statements would I like to make?
» Which topics are most important to prioritize in the short amount of time we have to interact?

micro-actions present limitations of depth in behaviors that can be displayed. Despite these limitations, using the metaphor of micro-actions can provide a novel tool for change.

Summary

This article presents a new metaphor for individual development in organizations. The shifts in social experience toward micro-blogs help to understand new ways of interacting at work. Specifically the concept of micro-actions, or small, time-limited thoughts, feelings and behaviors were discussed. By increasing awareness and intentionality of micro-actions, individuals are presented with continual opportunities to mindfully move to action. This is a new area of exploration for organization members, which means there is plenty of room to experiment with the metaphor. On a final note, there is an element of hope that accompanies smaller slices of interaction. Even if things are not going well in an interaction, all is not lost. Another opportunity is just 5-seconds away.

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