

# Power of positive words: communication, cognition, and organizational transformation

Power of  
positive words

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Senthil Kumar Muthusamy  
*School of Business, Middle Georgia State University, Macon, Georgia, USA*

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – In the extant organizational change literature scant attention has been given to the communication and cognitive processes consequential to organizational transformation. From the communication and sense-making perspectives, this study discusses the role of positive communication involving stories, metaphors or axioms in fostering socio-cognitive routines necessary for organizational change. The study further examines the empirical link between positive communication and organizational transformation with the survey data from professionals who have experienced the organizational change episode. The paper aims to discuss these issues.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The study examines the empirical link between the positive communication and organizational transformation with a survey data collected from 174 management professionals who have recently experienced the organizational change episodes such as restructuring, reengineering, TQM adoption or new strategy implementation. With the content analysis of narratives containing metaphors, axioms and stories, the study unravels the underlying clusters of organizational and socio-cognitive dimensions associated with organizational transformation.

**Findings** – The study results affirm the importance of positive communication and its effects on the emotional buy-in, learning and transformation occurring at the individual level, and attest to the transformational effect of positive axioms, metaphors or stories on the organization. The study also revealed that the positive communication diffusing social, cognitive or emotional attributes such as commitment, trust or optimism produces the desired transformational effect.

**Practical implications** – It is imperative for managers to understand the relationship between socio-linguistic processes and cognitive attributes such as trust, commitment and learning. With the help of right metaphors, stories and axioms that resonate with changing industry conditions, managers can effectively orchestrate the strategic intent and organizational transformation.

**Originality/value** – Most studies on the relationship between managerial communication and organizational transformation are primarily qualitative case studies focusing on the dialectics of organizational change. This study carries the strong external validity by capturing the connection between managerial communications and their transformational effect with the help of data collected from the management professionals across multiple industries.

**Keywords** Organizational transformation, Sense-making/social construction, Organizational cognition, Positive communication, Words, Axioms, Metaphors

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

Explaining the systems and processes that trigger organizational transformation is one of the primary streams of research on organizations (Maitlis and Lawrence, 2007; Russell and Russell, 1992; Senge, 1990; Weick, 1995). While the extant research literature has extensively focused on the links between organizational culture, structure and change, scant attention has been paid to the communication and cognitive processes that are consequential to realize organizational transformation (Armenakis and Harris, 2009; Jones *et al.*, 2004; Luscher and Lewis, 2008; Maitlis and Lawrence, 2007; Ocasio *et al.*, 2015; Weick *et al.*, 2005). Albeit organizational scholars have extensively enunciated that change agents should certainly employ axioms, metaphors and stories in their organizational change discourse, very little empirical research is available on how positive managerial communication facilitates organizational transformation (Cleary and Packard, 1992; Küpers, 2013; Morgan, 2006).



Within the domain of organization research, the significance of managerial communication process has been illustrated for a variety of management practices including leadership (Grisham, 2006), decision making (Griffin, 2006), organization design (Daft and Huber, 1987), strategy (Foreman and Argenti, 2005; Steyn, 2004), organizational culture (Cameron, 2008; Ocasio *et al.*, 2015) and organizational transformation (Armenakis and Harris, 2009; Elving, 2005; Lundberg, 1990). In this paper, by focusing on the link between organizational change and managerial communication, we explain the role of positive managerial communication routines in organizational transformation. Also, we demonstrate how the axioms, stories and metaphors explicate the significant organizational and socio-cognitive dimensions that underlie organizational transformation.

In the beginning was the “word” professes scriptures. Words have laid the foundation for all thought systems across the world. Words charged with utmost meaning turn into a literary work that can stand the test of time. Words manifest in many forms – axioms, parables, metaphors, stories and hymns – and form the basis of our culture, organizations and socio-economic-political systems. Religions have spread and political institutions are built with the stories and fables of mystical legends and deeds. Words not only connote the objective phenomena that determine our lives, but also assist in the creation and enactment of the novel, imaginative or subjective ideals that shape our lives and provide meaning to our existence. In fact, the very purpose and meaning of the human existence are often governed by words and the subjective worlds that we construct with words. Words constitute the cognitive capacity – an important trait of biological order – which differentiates humans as superior and sentient in comparison to other lives on the planet. Consistent positive communications shape thoughts, behaviors and help transform individuals and organizations, and are known to greatly foster progress, change and success (Armenakis and Harris, 2002, 2009; Elving, 2005; Lewis, 2011; Marshalk, 1993; Morgan, 2006; Weick *et al.*, 2005).

From the communication and sense-making perspectives, first, we discuss the role of positive communication in terms of genuine, considerate expression of words, axioms, stories or metaphors in the functioning of organizations and markets. Second, we narrate how managerial communication involving positive stories, metaphors or axioms nurtures the social capital necessary for organizational change by spawning the shared cognitive-linguistic domains. Further, we examine the empirical link between the positive communication and organizational transformation by a two-fold analysis of survey data collected from 174 management professionals who have recently undergone the organizational change episodes such as restructuring, reengineering, TQM adoption or new strategy implementation. The survey elicited responses on the extent and content of literal and metaphorical communications echoed by the leaders/managers during the change episode, and whether these discourses had the transforming effect on the organization in terms of resolving conflicts, overcoming resistance to change or implementing a new strategy. With the content analysis of narratives containing metaphors, axioms and stories reported by the respondents, we unravel the underlying clusters of organizational and socio-cognitive dimensions associated with organizational transformation and demonstrate how transformation is manifested through considerate communication of positive words.

### **The function of words in organizations and markets**

Words expand the cognitive and physical spheres of human activity, and can induce the needs and desires, and thus drive us to seek, design or pursue the products, services or lifestyles. Take for instance, the subject of “affinity” – we have abundant number of words to express this principal dimension of human relationship: love, compassion, affection, kindness, kinship, friendship, motherhood, brotherhood, fraternity, partnership, companionship and compatriotship; each word, however, takes on a new dimension

bestowing the foundation for a variety of ideals, values and forms of associations. Several classical and modern philosophical works have reflected upon how words can help us imagine and create a world of new institutions and phenomena – be they are subjective or objective – that give us meaning and happiness (Cornelissen *et al.*, 2015; Luchte, 2007; Oizerman, 1981). Similarly, organizational scholars have traced how expressive communications play a central role in the creation, diffusion and change of institutions that govern collective thoughts, intentions and behaviors (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Searle, 1995). Seen in this light, words have potential to create quite distinct thought worlds and organizational systems and thus can expand our cultural sphere.

Words play a significant role in the creation and sustenance of organizations and markets (Cornelissen *et al.*, 2015; Morgan, 2006). Positive words carry enormous motive force and stimulate sublime emotions. Positive words in the form of metaphors and axioms can help create the shared mindset, articulate the mission and vision and channel the energy of all members toward the common goals and objectives. A metaphor is the use of figurative language in communication. For instance, the simple metaphors like “Life is a dance,” “Life is a magic” or “Life is an adventure” can stimulate “aesthetic keenness,” “seeking wonder” or “inclination toward risk-taking,” respectively. Similarly, positive axioms or sayings can create a magnified emphasis or embellishment effect; like “this idea could revolutionize everything” or “iPod reinvented an entire industry” (Küpers, 2013; Wilson, 2011). Positive metaphors or axioms have been found to be more effective in managerial communication for describing innovations in the absence of concrete quantitative data to capture the emergent phenomena.

Positive words of wisdom shared in the course of leading, motivating or rewarding can add substantial value to the performance rewards be it extrinsic or intrinsic and can boost the inspiration and motivational drive of employees. Stories of sacrifice or cooperation toward a greater cause can enlighten the stakeholders, and facilitate the cohesiveness and commitment required for achieving organizational synergy. Most coveted organizational factors which are considered the pillars of success including trust, integrity, vision and commitment are often a sheer enactment of positive words of wisdom (Cornelissen, 2005; Hill, 1990; Lewis, 2011; Muthusamy and White, 2005; Newberg and Waldman, 2012; Pfeffer, 1981).

Figurative and metaphorical communication can be of great help in conceptualizing the abstract and vibrant changes emerging in the market-place. Markets are quite dynamic with a constant rendering of complex market segments, novel product configurations and uncommon patterns of consumer behaviors. Through right metaphors, managers can provide contextual verbalization required to capture the complex configurations or emergent outliers. As dynamic industry and market changes are often unobserved or overlooked, communication charged with provocative axioms and metaphors can play a critical role in sensitizing the managerial cognition so that the emergent social phenomena can be effectively captured for managerial analysis and decision making (Muthusamy, 2008; Newberg and Waldman, 2012; Simon, 1993; Weick *et al.*, 2005).

## Theory and hypotheses

### *Positive communication, cognition and organizational transformation*

Explaining the systems and processes that trigger organizational transformation is a well-established stream of research on organizations (Morgan, 2006; Ocasio *et al.*, 2015; Senge, 1990; Weick, 1995). Albeit the extant research literature has elaborately discussed the links between the organizational culture, structure and change, limited empirical research available on the communication and cognitive processes – how managers articulate and influence change through positive communication fostering shared socio-cognitive-linguistic routines (Armenakis and Harris, 2009; Jones *et al.*, 2004; Maitlis and Lawrence, 2007; Weick *et al.*, 2005). Positive sayings, stories or metaphors can be an effective communication

vehicle for implementing organizational change (Holt *et al.*, 2007; Küpers, 2013; Lewis, 2011; Lewis and Seibold, 1998). From a strategic communication perspective, positive axioms or metaphors can serve as the information source, a platform to create a sense of community and an uncertainty reducer, and thus can enhance the organizational readiness for change (Holt *et al.*, 2007; Lewis and Seibold, 1998; Maitlis and Lawrence, 2007).

From the sense-making perspective, the most fundamental aspect of organizational change involves altering the extant value and meaning system (Gioia, 1986; Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991). In this light, the organizational change slogans must make sense or fit into the cognitive or interpretive scheme and offer a revised conception of the organization (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991). To bring about intended transformation successfully, managers must continuously engage with the critical stakeholders through sense giving and sense-making to work out a revised or new negotiated reality of the organization (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991). For a successful organizational transformation – because organizations are socially constructed or negotiated realities – managers should engage as many employees as possible in the discourse, and articulate the desired collective futures to build consensus on envisioned new realities (Cornelissen, 2005; Gergen, 1994; Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991). Organizational change through sense-making involves generating positive sentiments like hope, excitement, inspiration, camaraderie and joy through communication of positive slogans and stories. Managers can clarify themselves and make their decisions understandable to stakeholders through positive stories they tell, and members can make sense of their organizational experience through the stories they share (Cornelissen, 2005; Gergen, 1994).

Persuasive managerial communication – eloquently articulated in the guise of positive metaphors, axioms and stories – can help an organization to manage the ambiguity and chaos in the environment, and enhance the creative learning among its employees (Cornelissen, 2005; Küpers, 2013; Maitlis and Lawrence, 2007; Morgan, 2006). Metaphors and stories envisage “imagining a future” that might otherwise be perceived impossible, and facilitate the stretching of resources toward accomplishing ambitious strategies. Metaphors can help managers achieve a right balance between man and nature, between private and public good and between corporate and societal interests. A strategic metaphor – constructed with carefully chosen words – offers a linguistic bridge between organization’s strategic intent, values and stakeholders’ emotions.

The creative capacity to solve the complex organizational problems is often constrained because of managers’ excessive emphasis on rationality and the logic of economic efficiency (Arthur, 1994; Simon, 1993). In contrast, planning and strategy discourse augmented with positive communication – in the form of metaphors, stories and axioms – can amplify the cognitive resources, and complement the creativity and learning (Küpers, 2013; Morgan, 2006). By promoting the mediums and forums for sharing positive communication among significant stakeholders, an organization can enrich the cognitive and linguistic domains of its employees, and thus can generate the cognitive flexibility and variety required for learning and change (Muthusamy, 2008; Powell, 1992).

How positive metaphors, axioms and stories translate into organizational change and learning capability has been expounded by several organizational scholars (Morgan, 2006; Nonaka *et al.*, 2000; Sackmann, 1989). Metaphorical communication can change employees’ thinking, feelings and their construction of reality, and can trigger a perceptual shift and facilitate organizational transformation (Sackmann, 1989). Because commitment is the central element of creativity and learning, the metaphorical communication carrying the cues and signals that cater to personal aspirations will trigger organizational transformation (Ginsberg, 1994; Lundberg, 1990; Polanyi, 1966). Metaphors and axioms effectively mediate between a speaker and a listener by verbalizing the affective states. Metaphors and axioms that articulate one socio-cognitive domain are often projected onto

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another related organizational domain in order to structure the experience in a meaningful and new way. Accordingly, metaphors and axioms are a way of bridging two dissimilar domains (Küpers, 2013; Lakoff and Johnson, 1980). Thus, metaphors and axioms can connect abstract constructs and concrete things (Ortony, 1979) or between the familiar and the unknown (Merleau-Ponty, 1995; Morgan, 2006; Nonaka *et al.*, 2000).

Like metaphors, stories are a potent literary resource (Cunliffe, 2002) for managers and leaders and they can function as a dynamic and performative communication instrument (Küpers, 2013; Mackenzie, 2009). Stories are not only helpful in conveying a message in a linear fashion but can also manifest as a socially effective reflexive process (Peterson and Langellier, 2006). Stories diffuse the clarity achieved in one dominion of experience to another domain that is less orderly and thus carry an inherent capacity to address ambiguity, uncertainty, complexity and dynamism of individual, group and organizational phenomena (Weick, 1995). Consequently, stories can serve as a medium for accessing, capturing and transferring ideas, emotions and tacit knowledge (Küpers, 2013).

Managers involved in organizational change efforts often do not fully appreciate the merits and consequences of positive communication routines at the planning meetings (Kotter, 1996). Articulating the organizational change mission through positive stories and metaphors can induce visceral emotions of the employees. Lacking emotional involvement, managers will find it impossible to gain the consensus to rally the entire organization toward transformation. Change management expert Kotter (1996) asserts that “if you can’t describe your change initiative in five minutes or less, and have it understood by your audience, you are in for trouble”. If the strategy or change mission is not communicated in an understandable manner, change efforts are going to stumble. Employees cannot adopt a change process that is neither convincing nor communicated to them in an understandable manner (Kotter, 1996).

The South Korean firm Samsung’s transformation journey “from a sluggish domestic company churning out vast quantities of cheap products to a world’s leading most innovative global brand in state of art technology products” began two decades ago in a planning session among the senior managers when its former Chairman Lee Kunhee pronounced a striking phrase “Change everything except your wife and children.” This axiom turned into a most powerful transformational slogan metaphorically capturing the essence of changing all the systems, practices and products without compromising on the core values. Samsung’s internal documents and industry reports attest that from that day on, Samsung started its ascent from a second tier manufacturer to a world’s topmost TV and smartphone maker (Song and Lee, 2014). The transformation that had begun at the Samsung from that moment onward have provided the impetus to alter the course of entire Korean business culture paving the foundation for the spawn of several successful global competitors out of Korea (*The Economist*, 2011).

Former Chief Executive of Tata Consultancy Services (TCS) Ramadorai recounts in his memoir *The TCS Story and Beyond*, how the organizational change initiative designated with a campaign slogan “Experience Certainty” reiterated throughout the TCS organization using bulletin boards, banners, documents, advertisements, telephone rings and computer jingles, rallied the entire organization around the theme of “certainty.” The “Experience Certainty” slogan transformed the entire organization in myriad ways and helped TCS accomplish multiple strategies. From transport chauffeurs to corporate executives were reminded about how best they could perform their roles toward improving customer service and brand value. The certainty theme boosted the employee morale and pride, and all employees in the company felt it was something to live up to anytime and all the time. Within a few years since the campaign had begun, post-implementation measures indicated that TCS achieved quite a remarkable progress in employee’s motivation, brand value, innovation and project execution. TCS did “deliver certainty” in terms of quality and results outperforming the industry average and major competitors (Ramadorai, 2011).

Several case studies affirm that stories, metaphors or axioms have played a significant role in formulating and implementing corporate, business or alliance strategies (Cornelissen, 2005; Cacciaguidi-Fahy and Cunningham, 2007; Morgan, 2006; Muthusamy, 2008). For instance, in one of the most successful transnational alliances – Renault–Nissan joint venture – managers were able to overcome their cross-cultural differences – right from the pre-alliance process, structuring the governance to managing for results – through effective use of metaphors (Cacciaguidi-Fahy and Cunningham, 2007). For instance, “conquest of the inner frontier” was emphasized to appreciate and learn from each other’s position to transform the routines in two large complex organizations. Similarly, Renault–Nissan alliance managers reinforced an image of equality and trust through metaphors and slogans such as “marriage of equals,” “union of opposites,” “pact of different perspectives,” “working with Japanese/French partners” and “subtle balance between two partners.” In a recent study of international joint ventures, Liu *et al.* (2015) explored how the relational metaphors that describe organizational relationships are extensively employed to reflect the quality of a cooperative relationship between international alliance partners and how they further reinforce the stability of the strategic alliance.

Minnesota Mining and Manufacturing Company (3M) is an exemplary story of how the company fostered a culture of innovation and continuous transformation through communication of inspiring stories, charming metaphors and captivating slogans. 3M boasts itself as one of the most innovative companies in the world with a claim of more than 50,000 innovations, with over 100 major new product offerings every other year. While resource allocation and R&D spending at 3M has been exceptional, 3M’s organizational routines and communication protocols depict another genuine picture of its history of innovation feats. One of its executive directors recounts, “Stories are a habit of mind at 3M, and it’s through them – the way they make us see ourselves and our business operations in a complex, multidimensional forms – that we are able to discover opportunities for strategic change” (Shaw *et al.*, 1998).

3M has a strong directive for its executives so that idea champions can take ownership of the product ideas with no interference from the top management. 3M has floated an array of metaphors and stories to describe the top management’s commitment to new ideas, e.g., “the captain bites his tongue until it bleeds.” The executives are referred to as coaches and mentors rather than bosses. 3M’s value system flaunts sound edicts to protect the innovative culture. For instance, an “eleventh commandment,” that is, “thou shalt not kill a new product idea.” Although such an edict may conflict with regular business operations, 3M’s culture assures that the burden of proof is on the top management to stop an idea. Innovators gain encouragement from the tales of heroes that continue to reinforce the message, “don’t kill ideas, pursue, failure is OKAY.” There is a conviction spread throughout 3M that virtually any idea is acceptable and any idea will find its customer someday. There are several well-liked stories such as how “a failed ribbon material that became a failed plastic cup which then became a safety face-mask” – which was later adopted by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration as a safety standard. 3M limits the reach of bureaucracy by simplifying the innovation proposals requiring an abridged narrative that can generate excitement among employees, rather than a list of measures or objectives (Hill, 2013; Shaw *et al.*, 1998; Peters and Waterman, 2004).

Positive metaphors and meaningful narratives or stories can function as “windows” to organizational or task identities (Heracleous and Jacobs, 2008), and can be quite instrumental for generating positive vibrant images about the task roles and creating fascinating moments within organizations. Consequently, positive metaphors, axioms or stories can play a vital role in the management of resources, technology and business operations. For instance, positive words are quite important in the job analysis and job design. An organization aiming to enhance the productivity, commitment and satisfaction of

its employees will designate the professions and careers in a manner they will enhance the dignity, worth and social recognition. The right choice of words will not only stretch the physical and cognitive dimensions of work, but also will augment the organization's intellectual capital necessary for innovation and transformation.

To examine the proposition that the positive communication discourse – involving axioms, metaphors or stories – deliberated by managers and leaders in the course of organizational change episode will have a significant transformational effect on the individual and organization, we have empirically tested the following two hypotheses with data collected from the professionals who have recently undergone organizational change episode:

- H1.* The positive communication from the managers and leaders during the organization change episode will have the transforming effect on the individual.
- H2.* The positive communication from managers and leaders during the organization change episode will have the transforming effect on the organization.

## **Methods**

### *Data collection*

To examine the usage and transforming effect of positive communication involving axioms, metaphors and stories during the course of organizational change, we conducted an online questionnaire survey among the management professionals active within a LinkedIn network. The survey was restricted to participants directly connected to professional groups in which authors are members. The network included 700 senior, middle-level and functional-level management or administrative professionals as the target for the survey. And the targeted professionals belonged to the industries including education, computers and software, telecommunication, electronics, automotive and non-governmental organizations and the employee-size of the respondents' companies ranged from 28 to 305,000 employees. Survey invitation explicitly targeted the members who have experienced a major organizational change episode in the recent past.

The survey along with a note inviting voluntary participation from those who had undergone organizational change within past three years at the time of data collection (2016–2017) was posted on the LinkedIn network portal. Out of 270 potential network members who read the invitation within four months of the survey published in LinkedIn, 174 usable responses received (a response rate of 64.44 percent out of 270 who read the survey; a response rate of 24.85 percent out of all 700 members in our LinkedIn network). All those 174 respondents have indicated that they had undergone major organizational change or strategy implementation, and the survey responses are specifically connected to the company, the context of change experienced and the literal positive slogans, metaphors or stories that respondents have been exposed to.

### *Measurement*

Following the extant literature on communication and organizational transformation, and the guidelines for building multi-item scales, we have adapted multi-item scales to measure the usage and influence of positive words, metaphors and axioms on the individual and organizational transformation (Cameron, 2008; Kotter, 1996; Maitlis and Lawrence, 2007). Before administering the survey, face validity of the selected variables were assessed by testing the survey instrument with two business school faculty members, and the questionnaire was pilot tested with 15 potential respondents from the LinkedIn group. Based on the pilot testing, questionnaire items were further refined. With 174 final usable responses, factor analysis, correlation analysis and reliability analysis were performed to test and evaluate the measurement-related validity

(Cronbach, 1970; Nunnally and Bernstein, 1994). Details of measures, their reliability and measurement validity are presented in Tables I and II.

We measured the extent of positive communication received by the respondents from their managers and leaders with three-item scale ranging from 1 to 5. We captured the transformational effect of positive words, sayings or axioms on individual and organization transformation with two sets of three-item measure with scales ranging from 1 to 5.

Measurement items on scales ranging from 1 to 5	Cronbach's $\alpha$
Extent of positive communication (positive sayings/metaphors/stories) from managers and leaders during the organization change episode	0.89
(1) My managers and leaders communicated positive axioms, metaphors or stories	
(2) My managers and leaders shared positive slogans or sayings with fellow employees during the change episode	
(3) Our organizational leaders and managers articulated change through positive slogans or maxims	
Transformational effect of positive communication on the individual (as perceived by the respondent)	0.88
(1) I have been personally influenced by the words of wisdom shared by our managers	
(2) My aspirations and routines were influenced by the positive words/axioms	
(3) I have been personally transformed by the positive words or axioms or stories deliberated in the workplace	
Transformational effect of positive communication on the organization (as perceived by the respondent)	0.96
(1) The positive communications such as axioms, metaphors or slogans played a significant role in organizational transformation or implementing new strategy	
(2) The positive slogans or phrases or sayings substantially helped our organization to overcome the conflicts, turf-wars or dysfunctional behaviors	
(3) The positive slogans or sayings shared among the employees greatly helped our organization to overcome the resistance to change	

**Table I.**  
Measurement items and reliability (Cronbach's  $\alpha$ )

**Note:**  $n = 174$

Measurement items	Rotated component matrix ( $n = 174$ )		
	1	2	3
(1) My managers and leaders communicated positive axioms, metaphors or stories	0.271	0.857	0.257
(2) My managers and leaders shared positive slogans or sayings with fellow employees during the change episode	0.297	0.830	0.221
(3) Our organizational leaders and managers articulated change through positive slogans or maxims	0.196	0.836	0.266
(4) I have been personally influenced by the words of wisdom shared by our managers	0.263	0.357	0.788
(5) My aspirations and routines were influenced by the positive words/axioms	0.130	0.128	0.859
(6) I have been personally transformed by the positive words or axioms or stories deliberated in the workplace	0.242	0.314	0.845
(7) The positive communications such as axioms, metaphors or slogans played a significant role in organizational transformation or implementing new strategy	0.931	0.245	0.211
(8) The positive slogans or phrases or sayings substantially helped our organization to overcome the conflicts, turf-wars or dysfunctional behaviors	0.936	0.244	0.216
(9) The positive slogans or sayings shared among the employees greatly helped our organization to overcome the resistance to change	0.909	0.285	0.208

**Table II.**  
Factor analysis (principal components extraction with varimax rotation)

**Notes:** Extraction method: principal component analysis; Rotation method: varimax with Kaiser Normalization



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The inter-item correlations (Cronbach's  $\alpha$ ) for each measure was higher than 0.70 and principal components factor analysis with varimax rotation revealed that items loaded onto the corresponding measures (0.70 and above) confirming measurement validity.

### *Analysis and findings*

We examined the connections between positive communication and organizational transformation by a two-fold data analysis. First, with the word-content analysis of narratives –containing metaphors, axioms and stories – that respondents' reported, we identified the underlying clusters of socio-cognitive and emotional attributes (e.g. trust, commitment, teamwork and optimism) complementing the organization transformation, and demonstrated how positive communication manifests into organization transformation through socio-cognitive and emotional dimensions. Subsequently, based on the survey responses, we tested the empirical relationship between the positive managerial communication and its transformational effect on the individual and organization.

The questionnaire survey invited the respondents to share the narratives and frequently repeated phrases by their managers and leaders in their discourse within the context of organizational change episode or new strategy implementation. The survey elicited 223 narrative statements in reference to organizational transformation that included new strategic intent, axioms reinforcing collective aspirations such as teamwork, hard work, commitment, quality or service, entrepreneurial dreams or foresight and business slogans emphasizing organizational change, strategy or results. These narratives also contained axioms or sayings which have had the transforming effect on the respondents (personally) including motivational slogans emphasizing trust, compassion, hope, hard work, commitment, rights and perseverance. The researcher along with another business school faculty coded these statements to identify the organizational, cognitive and social dimensions represented in the narratives. With 96 percent inter-rater correlation (reliability), 36 variables under five broad categories, namely, political, change, goals, strategy/mission/vision and ethical values were identified. The frequency counts of these 36 variables (446 counts) are provided in Table III.

With the help of QDA Miner (data mining and word analysis software), we examined the variables co-occurring along with other variables representing related segments. QDA Miner provides tools to assist in the coding of descriptive statements and conduct a comparative and exploratory analysis of codes and words from the descriptive statements. With these tools, we can identify regularities, patterns and clusters to uncover hidden relationships between codes and words (Wordstat, 2014; Provalis Software). The analysis revealed the codes co-occurring in proximity to significant organizational, social or cognitive attributes: e.g., change, commitment, productivity, trust and optimism. Table IV reports the top 5 variables co-occurring with each of these attributes. Table V reports the words most frequently found in the respondents' narrative statements and the number of cases they represented. Figure 1 presents the number of words in all the narrative statements corresponding to coded variables.

Based on the data of frequency, co-occurrences and proximity of these 36 variables to each other from the 223 narrative statements, we performed a cluster analysis using QDA Miner software to identify the underlying organizational, social and cognitive dimensions and the relations among them as reflected in the statements (Wordstat 7, 2014). These clusters are based on co-occurrences of codes within each of the statement as well as overlapping segments. QDA Miner identifies the clusters based on similarity index that measure the ratio of number of cases where two items occur in each segment and the number of cases where one item is found not the other (Such as Jaccard's coefficient: this is calculated from a four-fold table as  $a/(a+b+c)$ , where  $a$  represents cases where both items occur, and  $b$  and  $c$  represent cases where one item is found but not the other or Sorensen's coefficient:  $2a/(2a+b+c)$ , with matches weighted double, where  $a$  represents cases where two items occur, and  $b$  and  $c$  represent cases where one item is present but the other one is absent).

Category	Variables (codes) from respondents' narratives	Count	% of occurrence	
Change	Proactive/Change	28	6.20	
	Learning	23	5.10	
	Courage	14	3.10	
	Risk Taking	9	2.00	
	Long-term/Futuristic	9	2.00	
Goals	Creativity	5	1.10	
	Commitment	33	7.30	
	Hope/optimism	33	7.30	
	Hard work	31	6.80	
	Productivity/Efficiency	25	5.50	
	Competence	16	3.50	
	Timely	13	2.90	
	Unity	9	2.00	
	Quality	9	2.00	
	Service	6	1.30	
	Information/Knowledge	3	0.70	
	Incentive	1	0.20	
	Strategy/Vision	Results	54	11.90
		Trust	18	4.00
Teamwork		12	2.60	
Customer Driven		11	2.40	
Challenge		11	2.40	
Discipline		10	2.20	
Leadership/Eloquence		9	2.00	
Pride		9	2.00	
Empowerment		3	0.70	
Truthful/Honesty		13	2.90	
Ethics	Love/Compassion	11	2.40	
	Equality	6	1.30	
	Justice	4	0.90	
	Austerity	4	0.90	
Political	Social Responsibility	3	0.70	
	Individual Rights/Liberty	3	0.70	
	Patriotism	2	0.40	
	Progressive	2	0.40	

**Table III.**  
Variables reflected by the respondents' narratives (axioms & metaphors)

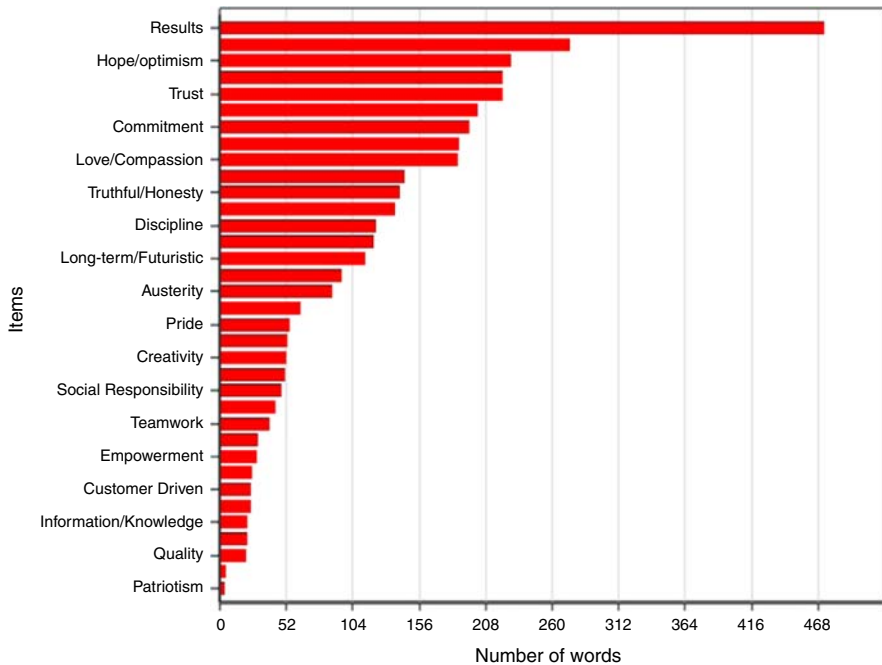
Analysis of co-occurrence of coded variables revealed that 10 clusters are prominent out of 36 variables (organizational, social, cognitive and emotional dimensions) identified from 223 statements. A 2-Dimensional image of cluster mapping of the 36 variables is presented in Figure 2.

The following section reports the results of empirical analysis examining the effects of positive sayings or axioms on the individual and organizational transformation. A correlation analysis was performed to check the extent of associations among the variables of the study. Table VI reports mean, standard deviation and correlation among the variables. Correlation analysis revealed that the study variables of interest the “transforming effect of positive communication on the individual,” the “transforming effect of positive communication on the organization” and the “extent of positive communication from the managers and leaders during the organization change episode” are significantly correlated ( $p < 0.001$ ). As study variables had strong correlations with each other, we assessed the degree of multi-collinearity through the computation of tolerance value and its inverse – variance inflation factor (VIF). The tolerance levels were well above the 0.10 cutoff and the VIFs were much below the 10 cutoff for all the predictor variables indicating there is no multi-collinearity.

Organizational/Individual attributes	Variables in proximity	Co-occurrence counts	Power of positive words
Change	Hard work	4	<b>113</b>
	Optimism/Hope	4	
	Results	5	
	Creativity	2	
	Long-term/Futuristic	2	
Commitment	Hard work	9	
	Results	8	
	Optimism/Hope	5	
	Courage	3	
	Learning	3	
Productivity	Results	5	
	Learning	5	
	Timely	3	
	Knowledge	2	
	Service	2	
Trust	Love/Compassion	5	
	Leadership	2	
	Teamwork	2	
	Commitment	2	
	Equality	1	
Hope/Optimism	Results	13	<b>Table IV.</b> Top 5 variables in proximity with significant organizational, social or cognitive attributes
	Hard work	5	
	Commitment	5	
	Courage	4	
	Change	4	

Most frequent words	Frequency	% of all words in narratives	No. of cases	% of cases	
Change	37	9.71	28	6.17	<b>Table V.</b> Words most frequently found in the respondents' narratives
Life	35	9.19	31	6.83	
Work	31	8.14	28	6.17	
Time	28	7.35	20	4.41	
Things	24	6.30	21	4.63	
People	21	5.51	19	4.19	
Good	18	4.72	16	3.52	
Success	17	4.46	17	3.74	
Hard work	15	3.94	15	3.30	
Strength	14	3.67	14	3.08	
World	14	3.67	14	3.08	
Love	14	3.67	13	2.86	
Man	14	3.67	11	2.42	
Build	14	3.67	11	2.42	
Tough	14	3.67	7	1.54	
Make	13	3.41	13	2.86	
Live	13	3.41	9	1.98	
Makes	12	3.15	12	2.64	
Goal	12	3.15	6	1.32	
Trust	11	2.89	11	2.42	

We examined the survey data using multivariate regression analysis and tested the empirical relationships between “the extent of positive communication from the managers and leaders during the organization change episode” and “the transforming effect of positive communication on the individual” (*H1*), and “the transforming effect of positive communication on the organization” (*H2*). Regression models



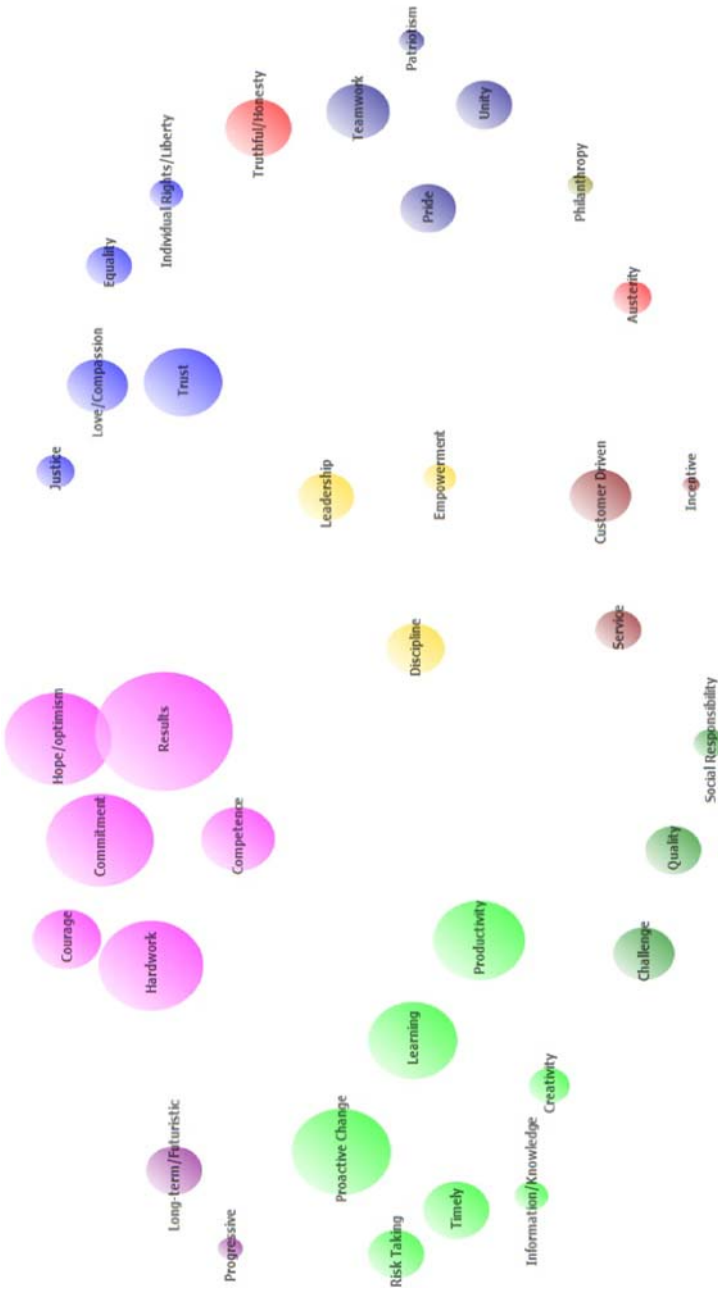
**Figure 1.**  
The number of words  
in the respondents'  
narratives  
corresponding to  
coded variables

controlled for the age and educational levels of the respondents, and what extent the respondent believed positive communication matters in life. These variables were introduced in the regression to account for self-reporting bias and social desirability bias arising out of age, education and personal conviction toward passionate and emotive communication.

Table VII reports the results of regression models. Model 1 is significant (with  $F = 31.95$ , Adj.  $R^2 = 0.42$ ) and revealed that “the extent of positive communication from the managers and leaders” is significantly related to “the transforming effect on the individual” ( $\beta = 0.59$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Similarly, Model 2 is significant (with  $F = 23.36$ , Adj.  $R^2 = 0.34$ ) revealing that “the extent of positive communication from the managers and leaders” is significantly related to “the transforming effect on the organization” ( $\beta = 0.57$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Both Models 1 and 2 establish that the positive communications by the managers and leaders had the significant transformational effect on the individual and organization. Thus, the managerial communication in the form of positive metaphors, axioms, stories and slogans can have beneficial effects on the employee inspiration, motivation, shared organizational cognition and learning and help realize the envisioned organization transformation through overcoming the resistance to change, resolving the conflicts and the successful implementation of new strategies.

### Conclusion

By combining perspectives from the communication and organization sense-making literature, we offer new insights into the positive communication process and its transformational effect on the individual and organization. We comprehensively examined the positive managerial communication, its cognitive interface and effects on individual and organizational transformation using both qualitative and quantitative data. Specifically, we illustrate the significance of positive dialogue among managers, leaders and employees by



**Figure 2.** Ten-dimension cluster structure of frequency of codes and their co-occurrences (based on the narratives of positive communication)

**Table VI.**  
Descriptive statistics  
and correlations

Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	
(1) Transforming Effect of positive communication on the individual	2.96	1.03	1.00					
(2) Transforming Effect of positive communication on the organization	1.84	0.91	0.51	1.00				
(3) Extent positive communication from the managers and leaders (as reported by respondent)	3.14	1.15	0.62	0.58	1.00			
(4) Extent positive communication matters in life (as reported by the respondent)	3.49	1.14	0.23	0.12	0.07	1.00		
(5) Age range of the respondent	2.76 (31-40)	1.243	-0.14	-0.08	-0.06	-0.02	1.00	
(6) Educational level of the respondent	2.98 (College)	0.745	0.04	0.05	0.00	-0.22	0.07	1.00

**Notes:**  $n = 174$ . Respondent age categories – 1: between 20 and 30; 2: between 31 and 40; 3: between 41 and 50; 4: between 51 and 60; 5: above 60. Respondent education levels – 1: High School Diploma; 2: College Education; 3: Masters or Graduate level; 4: Doctorate or Professional training. All correlations above 0.23 are significant at  $p < 0.01$  (two-tailed test)

**Table VII.**  
Regression analysis of  
transformational effect  
of positive  
communication on  
individual and  
organization

Variables	Dependent variables	
	Transforming effect on the individual (Model 1)	Transforming effect on the organization (Model 2)
	$\beta$	$\beta$
Age of respondent	-0.10	-0.05
Educational level of respondent	0.09	0.08
Extent positive communication matters in life (as reported by the respondent)	0.20**	0.09
Extent of positive communications from the managers and leaders (as reported by the respondent)	0.59***( <i>H1</i> )	0.57***( <i>H2</i> )
$R^2$	0.43	0.35
Adjusted $R^2$	0.42	0.34
$F$	31.95	23.36***

**Notes:**  $n = 174$ . Table reports standardized  $\beta$  coefficients. \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$  (based on two-tailed test)

empirically examining the responses from the professional employees who have recently undergone organizational change episodes such as restructuring, reengineering, TQM adoption or new strategy implementation. The study results affirm the importance of positive communication and its effects on the emotional buy-in, learning and transformation occurring at the individual level, and attest to the transformational effect of positive axioms, metaphors or stories on the organization.

With survey data, respondents' comments and empirical examination of the usage and influence of positive words with text analysis, cluster analysis and regression statistics, we find that the positive slogans, metaphors or axioms are extensively used, and their use in the managerial discourse has transformational effect on the individual and organization. Through the survey, respondents shared several positives stories, axioms and metaphors echoed across their organizations that have influenced both individual and organizational changes. And they shared their opinions upon, why the positive communication mattered and how it prompted the individual and organizational transformation.

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Following are selected examples of axioms or metaphors from the narratives that have been deliberated by the leaders and managers which had profound influence on the corresponding respondent's organization: "Experience Certainty" (of Tata Consulting Service), "Find your greatness," "Failure is not an option," "Shopper victor" (Virgin Group), "Most unhappy customers are our greatest source of learning," "I believe you have to be willing to be misunderstood if you're going to innovate," "It always seems impossible until it is done" (Nelson Mandela), "Arise, awake and stop not until the goal is reached" (Swami Vivekananda), "The world hates change, yet it is the only thing that has brought progress," "Your brand is your culture" (Tony Heisch of Zappos), "If not I, who? if not now, when?," "quality is not an act, it is a habit," "what does not kill you makes you stronger" (Nietzsche), "good lives are made so by discipline," "act justly, love mercifully, and walk humbly with your God," "do it now; often 'later' becomes 'never'," "success is never accidental," "you can't delegate the growth or customer satisfaction," "if you don't have trust inside your company, then you can't transfer it to your customers," "there is no substitute for hard work," "knowing is not enough, we must apply; being willing is not enough, we must do," "right will always eventually triumph," "not of the letter but of the spirit; for the letter kills, but the spirit gives life" and "do ordinary things extraordinarily well."

Respondents also pointed out the rationale for why slogans and axioms have had the positive impact during the transformation journey. The positive words: "a source of motivation and inspiration; they help rally the employees toward company mission; a positive reinforcement and feedback; a mentor, and influencing and clarifying their thoughts, helping to prioritize and screen the important from unimportant." For some respondents, positive axioms have served as stress reducers, and have boosted their self-esteem and confidence. Survey also revealed that many respondents thought well-articulated axioms or slogans translated into a strong organizational culture and fostered a right climate for strategy implementation. More than 50 percent of the survey respondents reported having witnessed a high usage of positive words or axioms in their organization.

In addition to establishing the empirical connection between exposure to positive communication and the organization transformation witnessed, we collected the narratives of axioms, stories and metaphors exchanged during the change episode and further explored the organizational and socio-cognitive dimensions underlying the narratives. By coding the narrative statements from the diverse respondents employed in different industries, and examining their frequencies and co-occurrences, this study revealed the variables related to emotional and socio-cognitive dimensions of transformation. For instance, the analysis of proximity of variables based on their co-occurrences in all the narratives that we examined, the dimension "Change" was connected to "Hard work," "Optimism," "Results," "Creativity" and "Futurism"; the dimension "Commitment" was associated with "Hard work," "Results," "Optimism," "Courage" and "Learning"; and the "Trust" was associated with "Love," "Leadership," "Teamwork," "Commitment" and "Equality." These associations reveal how the positive communication diffusing social, cognitive or emotional attributes such as commitment, trust, optimism, courage or compassion can produce the desired transformational effect on the individual and organization. By revealing the underlying common attributes of positive communication, our study reflects the thought world of managers and unravels the socio-cognitive and linguistic patterns of learning and change that are prevalent among management professionals.

Given the significance of shared cognition for creativity, learning, trust and commitment, managers need to employ relevant jargons and verbal protocols emphasizing teamwork, collaboration and collective future, and build communication channels that facilitate knowledge sharing (Cornelissen, 2005; Luscher and Lewis, 2008; Muthusamy, 2008). Nurturing a climate of dialogue and discourse with the intent of learning is essential for building the organizational capacity to innovate and change.

Dialogue will provide the opportunity for employees, customers and other significant stakeholders to share their narratives. Genuine dialogue broadens the perspectives and engenders a kaleidoscopic array of new ideas (Muthusamy, 2008). Several knowledge-era firms including Google, Apple, Cisco, Samsung and Motorola have formed organization-wide knowledge ecosystems to unite employees, suppliers and distributors into an intellectual learning community.

Some broad suggestions can be drawn about how to build advantage by employing the positive communication during the change episode. It is imperative for managers to understand the relationship between socio-linguistic processes (e.g. framing, structuring, story-telling, social rituals and protocols) and organizational and cognitive attributes such as trust, commitment and learning. This awareness will help managers diagnose the organizational climate factors that nurture (or that stifle) the creation of new insights and knowledge. Managers and leaders should employ collaborative and consensus-building socio-linguistic jargons and frames of reference to help employees find creative solutions and reconcile differences. Sharing positive communication is central to the creation, sustenance and achieving organizational transformation. Thus, the process of creating, acquiring, articulating, sharing inspiration and knowledge through positive maxims and metaphors is a core organizational capability for modern management. If managers and leaders enact the words they articulate, organizations can realize the mission and goals that seem impossible.

Organizations need to build a repertoire of positive words, stories and metaphors that inspire, orchestrate excellence and ethical wisdom. With the help of right metaphors and axioms that resonate with changing industry conditions, managers can effectively orchestrate the strategic intent and business models. Managers need to ensure that the stories and metaphors address the prowess and commitment expected, and the norms that need to be cherished. Although it is important to share the legendary words of wisdom distilled from history, mythology and industry, organizations should consider including the deeds and feats of their own employees and significant stakeholders in the stories they disseminate. Another research extension that would be relevant for managerial practice will be examining the role of visual communication in organizational transformation. Like metaphors, visual symbols and images may have the power to stimulate learning and change. Visual images and symbols can complement the positive metaphors in triggering the organizational transformation (Lester, 2013).

Despite the emphasis on the significance of cognitive and communication processes in influencing change in organizations, very few empirical studies exist on this topic. Extant studies on the relationship between managerial communication and organizational transformation are primarily single-organization based qualitative case studies focusing on the dialectics of organizational change (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991; Luscher and Lewis, 2008). This study, although not longitudinal, carries the strong external validity by capturing the connection between managerial communications and their transformational effect on organizations with the help of data collected from the management professionals across multiple industries.

There are some limitations to our study. Although we have captured the agglomerative effect of positive communication received by the respondent from the respective managers and leaders, this study is generic, cross-sectional and did not include objective measures of transformation, nor measured the transformation from multiple respondents within each respondent organization. Due to privacy and confidentiality restrictions placed on the survey, we could not ask the respondent to reveal the details of their bosses or top-level manager(s) associated with the change episode. Another limitation of the study is that we did not capture any time-bound, longitudinal, or pre- and post-communication measures of transformation. Longitudinal studies on positive communication will offer new research



extensions to help us learn the finer nuances of the communication and the associated cognitive dynamics of change.

Because the data were collected from the respondents who had directly experienced organization change episode, there is a potential problem of common method variance (Campbell and Fiske, 1959) and related concerns of consistency motif and the social desirability bias (Podsakoff and Organ, 1986). We tested the data for common method variance using Harman's (1967) single-factor test, a *post hoc* test and the results revealed no single or general factor suggesting that there was no systematic variance common among the measures. Also, we controlled for possible self-reporting bias on the results with a control variable in the regression about the respondent's belief about the significance of positive communication. We believe the anonymity and confidentiality maintained throughout the study also reduced the effects of social desirability bias (Podsakoff and Organ, 1986).

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**Corresponding author**

Senthil Kumar Muthusamy can be contacted at: [senthil4strategy@gmail.com](mailto:senthil4strategy@gmail.com)