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Generative Artificial Intelligence and Generative Conversations: Contrasting Futures for Organizational Change?

Abstract

To what extent are ‘generative AI’ (as a machine-based form of decision-making) and ‘generative dialogue’ (as a human-based form of decision-making) complimentary or competing? What takes precedence in generative change processes? More fundamentally, should generative AI processes assist human decision-making or should human processes assist generative AI decision-making? The possible implications of these questions are explored. Moreover, it is posited that as generative AI evolves, and gains more traction in organizational change initiatives, it is important that it is deployed in ways that support generative conversations rather than ways that undermine or replace them.

Generative Artificial Intelligence and Generative Conversations: Contrasting Futures for Organizational Change?

Until recently, if you mentioned AI to most hardcore change practitioners, they would assume that you were talking about ‘appreciative inquiry’ (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987; Cooperrider et al., 2003) rather than ‘artificial intelligence’. That has changed. It is perhaps symptomatic of the burgeoning relevance of artificial intelligence to all aspects of human activity, including the world of work. Beyond broadly framed concerns about humans being replaced by machines and human decision-making being marginalized by rapidly advancing forms of sophisticated machine learning, there are arguably some fundamental and profound implications for how organizational change is undertaken in terms of underlying values, diagnostic processes, and intervention strategies.

The primary purpose of this editorial piece is to raise some tentative questions about two potentially incongruent future directions for planned organizational change. More specifically, it considers the extent to which ‘generative AI’ (as a predominantly machine-based form of learning and decision-making) and ‘generative dialogue’ (as a predominantly human-based form of learning and decision-making) could be regarded as incompatible or, at the very least, create inherent tensions and operational challenges in terms of their contrasting approaches to identifying the need for change and developing effective change strategies in organizations.

Human-Based Change Practice

It has been noted that organizational change processes started to become less prescriptive and more discursively oriented in the early 2000’s (Bartunek, et al., 2021; Tsoukas, 2005). By the late 2000’s, the advent of ‘dialogic organization development’ (Bushe & Marshak, 2009)

signalled a significant shift away from more traditional, top down, diagnostic change approaches towards ones which were more inclusive and conversational in nature.

Treating organizational change as a generative activity in which large groups of organizational stakeholders come together to interact to co-construct a desired future has gained considerable traction (Oswick & Li, 2023). The relevance and growing popularity of this approach to change is evident in recent academic debates (see for example: Bartunek et al., 2021; Hastings, 2020; Hastings & Schwarz, 2022; Marshak & Bushe, 2022; Oswick & Oswick, 2022) and via the proliferation of books produced by, and for, practitioners (see for example: Averbuch, 2021; Bratt, 2020; Bushe, 2020; Lewis, 2021; Marshak, 2020; McKergow, 2020; Stirling-Wilkie, 2021).

At the core of dialogic change initiatives is the ‘generative change model’ (Bushe, 2013, 2020, 2021; Marshak & Bushe, 2018) which asserts that meaningfully engaging in processes of complex change relies upon “identifying an adaptive challenge” and “engaging diverse stakeholders in generative conversations” (Bushe, 2020:13). The emphasis on generative conversations clearly and explicitly places organizational stakeholders at the heart of the change process, and therefore, it foregrounds an inherently inclusive and human-centric way of undertaking effective organizational change.

AI-Based Change Practice

According to von Krogh et al (2023), “artificial intelligence (AI) has the potential to transform the management field” (p. 367) and it has been suggested that AI is having an increasing impact upon decision-making and problem-solving within organizations (Bailey et al., 2022). Organizational change, as a realm of activity which encompasses processes associated with complex decision-making, has not escaped attention. Indeed, Kanitz et al (2023) have recently observed that “with the increasing availability and versatility of GAI

[generative artificial intelligence] systems, the nature of change and strategy professionals' work is going to change" (p. 359), and they have also asserted that "we need a better understanding of what constitutes a high proficiency in using GAI systems (e.g., which tools are available, how to write professional prompts, how to work with the responses?) and how this relevant skill for change professionals can be built" (p. 360). The focus of Kanitz et al (2023) seems to be how GAI can be incorporated into, and aligned with, the activities of change agents (i.e. as a tool). This is different from this editorial which raises a wider concern about the privileging of GAI (i.e. as machine-based decision-making) which, albeit unintentionally, has the potential to undermine and marginalize dialogic change methods (as a human-based form of generativity).

An Inherent Tension?

In the late 1970's, Richard Hackman (1978) raised concerns about the future management of human resources and posited that the design of work could take either of two routes. He asked: "Does the future belong to a Route One approach to managing human resources - fitting jobs to people - or to a Route Two approach - fitting people to jobs?" (1978:3). This prompts similar questions about the future for organizational change. What takes precedence in generative change processes? Does GAI assist humans or do humans assist GAI?

Arguably, one of major advantages dialogic approaches have over diagnostic approaches is that a wide range of stakeholders are actively involved in co-creating change rather than being passive recipients of top-down change initiatives. The active involvement of stakeholders in change processes has been demonstrated to be highly effective in terms of outcomes (Hastings & Schwarz, 2022). Moreover, being part of the process of change, rather than having it imposed by others, has been shown to engender commitment, increase engagement and minimise change resistance (Bushe, 2020). There is perhaps a risk that the

deployment of GAI could inadvertently signal a return to the ‘bad old days’ of planned organizational change where employees had limited involvement, limited control, and limited agency. The only difference being that “managed from the top”, a characteristic of Beckhard’s (1969) classic definition of OD, is replaced by “managed by machines”.

In an era where equity, inclusivity, voice, and engagement have rightly gained prominence in the workplace, it is important that the progress we have made in terms of the concomitant evolution of inclusive approaches to organizational change is not undermined by GAI. Hence, GAI needs to be utilized in ways that support generative conversations rather than replaces or diminishes them. The JABS community undoubtedly has an important role to play in ensuring the right kind of future for organizations, organizational change, and organizational stakeholders.

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