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Positive Perspectives on Organizing and Organizational Change: A Conversation with Gretchen Spreitzer

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Positive Perspectives on Organizing and Organizational Change: A Conversation with Gretchen Spreitzer

Abstract

Professor Gretchen was the Distinguished Speaker for the Organization Development and Change (ODC) Division at the 2018 Academy of Management Meeting held in Chicago. In her address, she shared her latest thinking on coworking and thriving at work, and explored the implications for organization development and change. Following the presentation, we interviewed her about these topics and her broader contribution to the field of positive organizational scholarship. During our conversation, we discussed some of the formative influences on Professor Spreitzer's career direction and scholarship. Then, we explored her enduring commitment to researching and promoting a positive orientation towards organizations and organizational life. Finally, we concluded by eliciting her ideas on the future of work and the concomitant implications for organization development and change.

Positive Perspectives on Organizing and Organizational Change: A Conversation with Gretchen Spreitzer

Introduction

Gretchen Spreitzer is the Keith E. and Valerie J. Alessi Professor of Business Administration at the Ross School of Business at the University of Michigan (RSB). She has authored many articles on contemporary issues in organizational behaviour and change in leading journals such as the *Academy of Management Journal* (Spreitzer, 1995a, 1996), the *Academy of Management Review* (Mishra & Spreitzer, 1998; Rajagopalan & Spreitzer, 1997; Roberts, Dutton, Spreitzer, Heaphy, & Quinn, 2005), *Administrative Science Quarterly* (Brockner, Spreitzer, Mishra, Pepper, & Hochwarter, 2004), and the *Journal of Applied Psychology* (Gerbasi, Porath, Parker, Spreitzer, & Cross, 2015; Spreitzer, McCall, & Mahoney, 1997). She has also co-authored seven books including *How to Be a Positive Leader* (Dutton & Spreitzer, 2014); *The Best Teacher in You* (Quinn, Heynoski, Thomas, & Spreitzer, 2014); *The Oxford Handbook of Positive Organizational Scholarship* (Cameron & Spreitzer, 2012); *The Future of Leadership: Speaking to the Next Generation* (Bennis, Spreitzer, & Cummings, 2001); *A Company of Leaders: Five Disciplines for Unleashing the Power in Your Workforce* (Spreitzer & Quinn, 2001); and *The Leader's Change Handbook: An Essential Guide to Setting Direction and Taking Action* (Conger, Spreitzer, & Lawler, 1999).

Professor Spreitzer's research has been concerned with aspects of employee empowerment and leadership development, particularly within a context of organizational change and decline. Her recent research examines 'co-working' (Bacevice, Spreitzer, Hendricks, & Davis, 2019; Garrett, Spreitzer, & Bacevice, 2017; Spreitzer, Bacevice, & Garrett, 2017; Spreitzer, Garrett, & Bacevice, 2015; Spreitzer, Garrett, & Cameron, 2017) and how organizations can enable 'thriving' (Carmeli & Spreitzer, 2009; Gerbasi, Porath, Parker, Spreitzer, & Cross, 2015; Porath, Spreitzer, Gibson, & Garnett, 2012; Spreitzer, Bacevice, & Garrett, 2015; Spreitzer, Bacevice, & Garrett, 2018; Spreitzer & Hwang, 2019; Spreitzer,

Sutcliffe, Dutton, Sonenshein, & Grant, 2005). This is part of a broader movement in the field of organizational behaviour and change, known as 'positive organizational scholarship' (Cameron & Spreitzer, 2012; Spreitzer & Cameron, 2012; Spreitzer, 2013, 2008a; Spreitzer, Myers, Kopelman, & Mayer, 2019).

The title of this article is informed by an address Professor Spreitzer gave as the Distinguished Speaker for the Organization Development and Change (ODC) Division at the 2018 Academy of Management Meeting in Chicago[1]. In this presentation, she shared her latest thinking on the 'new world of work' in terms of the implications for organization development and change. The talk focused on aspects of coworking and thriving at work and it is these themes, along with her wider contribution to developing the field of positive organizational scholarship, that formed the basis for the unfolding interaction that is presented in this article.

Rather than try to capture all of the issues covered in our conversation with Professor Spreitzer, we have focused on the intersections between positive scholarship, organizations, and organizational change. There are five main parts to this paper. First, we begin by exploring some of the foundational influences on Professor Spreitzer's career direction and scholarship. Second, we discuss her enduring interest in aspects of empowerment in organizations. Third, we reflect upon an unwavering commitment to exploring and accentuating the positive aspects of organizational life. Then, we consider her more recent research on thriving in organizations. Finally, we conclude by eliciting Gretchen's ideas on the future of work and the implications for organization development and change.

Early Aspirations and Inspirations

RO & CO: So, Gretchen, could we start by asking what lead you into an academic career?

GS: My Dad was a sociology professor and when I was in college I was interested in working with people and wanting to help people and I thought maybe I wanted to be a social worker

and my dad said to me, “Gretchen, you would be the worst social worker ever”. My dad was a really encouraging person so, when he said that I was a little confused. He said: “I know you love helping people so much - but, you would have a hard time kind of, stepping back and being objective and that sort of thing”. So, I said: “Okay, well, that’s what I really think I want to do, what do you suggest?” He continued: “I love the life of an academic”. It’s one where you can have a lot of autonomy and you can choose to work on the things that are most important to you”. He said: “You have this wonderful cycle to the academic year. You have time to work with students some parts of the year and you have more time to do research other times of the year. It’s a place where you’re really helping develop the next generation and I think that would be a great career for you.” And, so, he really encouraged me to think about that.

I was thinking about applying to psychology and sociology programs. But, the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) had some fellowships where they were trying to encourage more women and under-represented minorities to be in business schools. I had never heard of the field of organizational behaviour or organizational studies and although I didn’t get the fellowship they were offering, it did open my eyes to being in a business school rather than one of the traditional disciplines. So, I applied and was thrilled to get into the University of Michigan. I had grown up about an hour and a half south and Ann Arbor was always like a Mecca. A wonderful place to visit. It felt like really interesting things were always happening there. So, yeah, that was the beginning of my academic career.

RO & CO: If you had to identify some early influences, some people who inspired your work, who would that be?

GS: Well, one thing I would say is that small connections and interactions can make a big difference. My undergraduate degree had been in systems analysis, which is more technology related. So, when I came into the doctoral programme [at Michigan] I thought I was probably going to be interested in studying the role of technology on people’s work

experience and that sort of thing. During the first year in the doctoral programme I had a scholarship - but, the topic wasn't a very good match. So, my research wasn't off to a really great start. At the beginning of my second year I was at a department event. It was actually at Kim Cameron's house. We were playing volleyball, and after a match I started a conversation with Bob Quinn. He had actually just arrived from the University of New York at Albany. And, he expressed interest in my work and my experience in the first year of the programme and I was honest with him. He said: "come to see me next week - we gotta talk". It was a really exciting time because he and Cameron were really pushing out, in a lot of different directions, the 'competing values framework' (Cameron & Quinn, 1999; Quinn & Rohrbaugh, 1983) - taking it to an organizational culture level and validating ways to measure it. Bob brought me into that and I think, kind of, the rest is history.

An Enduring Engagement with Empowerment

RO & CO: Your doctoral thesis was concerned with empowerment (Spreitzer, 1995a). Can you tell us a bit more about this work?

GS: Well, I got interested in organizational change and development and Bob was a really encouraging supportive advisor and he was also the kind of advisor that wanted you to study things that made a difference in the world. And, around that same time, there was a really large programme going on with the Ford Motor Company's executive education programme. At that time, they were very hierarchical. They had 18 levels of management and levels 11 and 12 were a set of middle managers [and they] talked about downsizing and getting rid of that level and somebody had the insight of maybe they would add a lot more value if they were to empower employees. This was in the late 1980's and into the 1990's, empowerment was kind a buzzword. And, at that time, it was really unusual for doctoral students to have any interaction with exec ed. We were supposed to be in our office crunching numbers or whatever. But, Bob had me sitting in on programmes and consuming data and conducting interviews with middle managers. And they would come in really cynical because they would come in like: "You want to empower me - but my boss is really controlling". It really opened

up a dissertation topic for me and that was “Why do companies when they’re saying they want to implement a change and be empowering to swathes of the organization…. how come in those cases often do managers feel more disempowered than ever?” And, “What are the ways we can try to change that calculus so that the empowerment actually is authentic?” So, when it came to my dissertation topic, again it was one of those things that encouraged me to be courageous. At that time, at the University of Michigan, people would rarely do a problem centred dissertation. But, he [Bob Quinn] said: “You know if this is something that you’re passionate about and you feel like it’s gonna make a difference in the world and you’re doing high quality empirical work behind it then it shouldn’t be a problem at all.” So, that lead to my whole body of research on the psychological experience of empowerment at work and the importance of people actually feeling a sense of empowerment not the organization just churning out a few favours. Giving people control over decisions they don’t care about like what colours shall we paint the walls. Do they really want control over those decisions?

RO & CO: You seem to have an enduring interest in empowerment (De Janesz, & Quinn, 1999; Mishra & Spreitzer, 1998; Quinn & Spreitzer, 1997; Spreitzer, 1995a, 1995b, 1996, 2007, 2008b; Spreitzer & Doneson, 2008; Spreitzer, Kizilos, & Nason, 1997; Spreitzer & Quinn, 1996; Spreitzer, Quinn, & Fletcher, 1995). Indeed, we noticed your website lists ‘employee empowerment’ as one of your current interests. And, you mentioned in your previous response that empowerment was quite a buzzword in the 80’s and 90’s. It’s quite interesting that you continue to use the word as a way of identifying your work when quite a few people have jumped on the bandwagon of ‘engagement’. So, what is it that you find enduring about that term and why do you continue to use it?

GS: I think that what’s important with empowerment is that it actually has the word ‘power’ in it and I think empowerment is so much more about a connection to your work than engagement because one of the dimensions is meaning and purpose. But, I think in some ways that engagement might be the new iteration of empowerment. Then, I think we’ve lost

some meat and some oomph that comes from having power in it. That's unfortunate. I think engagement is about helping employees to feel good and not actually giving them the tools and the resources in order to really have a say - to have a voice to do things in the organization. I'm glad organizations realise that they have to pay attention to employees' experience at work and want them to have a good one – but, if it's without having power to actually do things then I think it's more of a 'band-aid'.

The Pursuit of the Positive

RO & CO: You're a tremendously positive person, and when we look at your work there is an enduring interest in the 'positive'. This is apparent in your research on 'positive organizational scholarship' (Cameron & Spreitzer, 2012; Spreitzer & Cameron, 2012), positive leadership (Dutton & Spreitzer, 2014; Quinn & Spreitzer, 2006; Spreitzer, Coleman, & Gruber, 2006), positive change (Spreitzer, 2017), *and positive deviance (*Spreitzer & Sonenshein, 2004)*. Why is it, do you think, that you focus on things that are 'sunny-side-up' not 'sunny-side-down'? Is it deliberate or is it something that has just emerged over the years?*

GS: You'd have to ask my family whether that's my personality or not. They might tell you that's not always the case for me at home. But, I certainly do think that there are important things that we can learn from by looking at the bright spots of an organization, and that's the purpose of positive deviance (Spreitzer & Sonenshein, 2004). In any organization there are things that are working well. Identifying those things and supporting them is a much better strategy than looking at your competitor or looking at somebody in another industry that has another idea or practice that you think you want to bring in house. Finding things that are already working in your system and ways to spread those is really cool.

I'll tell you the story behind making 'positive' more official, as part of my identity, and that was when I had a chance to move from the University of Southern California to the University of Michigan. It was right after the 9/11 terrorist attack, and several colleagues

where struggling to figure out how we as organizational scholars could maybe help with the healing process: Jane Dutton had been dabbling in ideas about compassionate organizing (Frost, Dutton, Worline, & Wilson, 2000; Kanov, Maitlis, Worline, Dutton, Frost, & Lilius, 2004); Kim Cameron had been dabbling in ideas about forgiveness at work (Cameron & Caza, 2002); and Bob Quinn had been looking at transformational leadership (Quinn, 2000). So, that really was the genesis of the 'positive organizational scholarship movement' that I also came to be involved with as soon as I arrived [at University of Michigan] in 2001. I think that, for me, kind of formalized that I really wanted to look at things that where working. Not to say focusing on the things that aren't working isn't important - but, if we only put our emphasis there then we miss opportunities to leverage strengths.

RO & CO: When we talk to executives about 'positive leadership', one of the reactions that we get is that you can't be positive all the time. You also have to be negative. Are they misunderstanding positive leadership?

GS: Yes, and I'm so glad that you asked that question, because I think that is a very stereotypical view of what positive organizational scholarship is and it's actually wrong. If you think about the 'competing values model' (Cameron & Quinn, 1999), it talks about two dimensions [i.e. flexibility versus stability/control and internal focus versus external focus] that juxtapose into four quadrants and there are competing tensions especially if you look at the diagonals of those quadrants. And, one of those tensions is in the upper, left hand quadrant [i.e. clan oriented] a focus on people in teams and a community and having a human focus in the workplace and that's in conflict or in tension with competitiveness, time pressure, and getting things done [i.e. market oriented]. Then, the other tension is about creating new things and vision and thinking outside the box [i.e. adhocracy oriented] and that's in tension with hierarchy and processes and systems and reliability and structures [i.e. hierarchically oriented]. Positive leadership is about keeping all of those tensions in place and if we're only in the yellow quadrant [i.e. a clan orientation] - the people, the work, the community - and we neglect those other quadrants, that's an unsustainable system. So,

when I think about positive leadership, and when I think about what our Center [for Positive Organizations] is trying to do; it's to see what kind of mixture of those things are needed.

Barbara Fredrickson at the University of North Carolina - she used to be at Michigan - studied what enables people to flourish, and at the individual level she looked at successful marriages or pairs in relationships and then successful teams (Fredrickson, 2009, 2013; Fredrickson & Losada, 2005). And, all of those teams, all of those different levels, are working at their best when they have a ratio of positive to negative interactions of around 3 to 1. Here's what's important about that, we know from other researchers, like Roy Baumeister and others (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, & Vohs, 2001), that the bad is stronger than the good and we pay a lot more attention to threats and what's not working. Those get our attention.

We are evolutionarily programmed from our days as cave people to pay attention to threats. What that means is that to keep the system in a flourishing mode we have to overcompensate for the positive. We're not getting rid of negative. It's got to be there for us to be realistic. But, we have to inject more 'positives' into the system to create that flourishing and so the positive leaders are the ones who are creating practices that elevate their energy. That enables followers to believe there's really a purpose for them to be part of this organization. But that also has to be coupled with asking hard questions, bringing up uncomfortable topics, giving negative feedback in a respectful way, so that people can grow and develop. So, positive leadership isn't fluffy stuff. It really has to be in a system that enables all of those tensions to be happening. But, we need to oversee the positive side because the other things can really drown it out.

Thriving on Organizational Thriving

RO & CO: One of your most recent areas of research interest is co-working (see for example: Bacevice, Spreitzer, Hendricks, & Davis, 2019; Garrett, Spreitzer, & Bacevice,

2017; Spreitzer, Bacevice, & Garrett, 2017; Spreitzer, Garrett, & Cameron, 2017). Could you tell us a little bit more about how this interest developed and what you think the implications are for organizations and organizational change?

GS: Okay, so I had been studying thriving in the workplace and what were the things that make an organization thrive and develop - to keep getting better at what they're doing - and I published a piece in the Harvard Business Review (Spreitzer, Bacevice, & Garrett, 2015). The immediate reaction from someone was "If you really wanna study the organizational systems that enable thriving, you wanna study co-working spaces". This was in 2008 and I said "I don't know what co-working spaces are -- you need to tell me more". And, it really opened up my eyes to all these changing dynamics that are happening, that we call very loosely 'the new world of work'. With the new world of work, I think about three kind of dimensions [i.e. around work contracts, work location, and work time]. So, thinking about flexibility of work contracts: we're seeing more freelance workers; we're seeing more temporary workers; and we're seeing more contract workers. Sometimes it's because of economic necessity people are congregating together around temporary work. Sometimes it's by choice. People choose to be freelance because they're saying "I want the flexibility, I want to choose the kind of work I do, I want to have summers free to be home with my kids." So, in the new world of work, flexibility is around contracts. It's also about work location - where people are doing their work. I was at a session recently where people were talking about 'digital nomads' (Makimoto & Manners, 1997) - you know people that have no workplace, and they go from place-to-place, country-to-country. And then, the third dimension is around flexibility in work timing. When I was growing, up a lot of people had 9-5 jobs. Today we see much more focus on the digital tools, and so forth, and any time of the day, any place, and it really has implications for people's whole lives because they're always on. But, they can also create time to be off too.

What we found in our work is that along the three dimensions people are able to thrive and do better when they have a choice. But, it's a very dark situation when it's the organization

that is controlling when and where people work, and what the work contracts are. So, on the bright side, there can be really great things that come out of this new world of work – but, there's also a very precarious side where people have no choice.

When we think about organizations and organizational change, how do organizations adapt to support this new work? How do they attract and support the brightest to develop and to create products even when say, for example, they have very few employees and people are coming together to work on a very temporary basis, and the people are located all over the world, and they're digital nomads - but they're still trying to create an organizational culture? I'm doing some work right now with a large co-working entity [i.e. a firm that offers co-working spaces], and rather than working so much with remote workers and freelancers, they're working with large corporations to try to help them move from cubicle firms and private offices to more open office spaces and asking this 'co-working entity' to actually think about how to upgrade their work culture to be a place that's more creative and collaborative. And, so it's leading to the question today as to whether organizations can outsource their culture to another organization and that's a scary thought to me, that an organization would even want to do that, to contemplate that - but, we're starting to see that going on.

An Optimistic Future?

RO & CO: In terms of the future of work, and future directions for organizational change activity, do you see it as being positive or negative?

GS: Well, I think we have a big role as organizational scholars. Our research is helping to provide guidance for organizations that are trying these experiments, and trying to navigate themselves in this new world of work, to create the kind of practices that will allow it [the future] to be more on the positive side. I think that there is more potential for exploitation in this new world of work. And, I think there is more potential for loneliness, for employees to feel, like they are, you know, not getting the support they need to develop their career skills, and organizations just take as much as they can get. At the same time, I feel like we also

have organizations that are finding new ways to do things, in a way that elevates peoples work and their lives. So, I'm hopeful. But, I'm also concerned.

RO & CO: If you were advising someone who's maybe thinking about doing a doctorate in the area of organization development or organizational change, what topics do you think would be worth looking at? What do you think the most exciting or interesting areas might be?

GS: I'm a big fan of 'appreciative inquiry' (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987; Cooperrider & Whitney, 2001). I'm a big fan of qualitative research. I feel like we are moving more towards big data and more towards data analytics. And, we're moving more towards using technology. I think those are really important issues to understand and, for example, there is a company now that gives call centre workers feedback on their emotions working with customers. Telling them they have to be happier, or they have to be meaner, or they have to increase the pace. So, I think we need to better understand how technology is going to be influencing people in this new world of work.

I feel like we could try to understand where the possibilities are to use technology in a positive way. Where there is the possibility to use appreciative inquiry to see the bright spots - where we can offer encouragement. Because, I think there is so much potential beyond focusing on what's not working and the dark side. We can give people hope that there is potential for something better. And, I think we can do that with our students in terms of encouraging them in the kind of research they can do. I think we can also do it with our students in the classroom.

RO & CO: Gretchen, thank you for your time.

GS: No, thank you. Thank you for your questions.

Notes

1. The content of that talk is captured in the forthcoming issue of *Research in Organization Change and Development* in 2020.

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