A Rhetorical Critic of Organization

James R. Barker

An Attitude Toward Organizations

I study organizations from a rhetorical-critical perspective, a perspective that reflects more of an attitude (at the term is term was used by Kenneth Burke, 1973) rather than a particular methodology. Let me explain. First, why rhetorical? The answer is that all organizations, especially the highly collaborative, team-based firms that have been the focus of my work, are intensely rhetorical sites. The traditional study of rhetoric has focused primarily (albeit not exclusively) on how people use language to create persuasive messages, such as the familiar political speech. While workers in highly collaborative organizations may not do a lot of public speaking, they certainly engage in persuasion, a persuasion that molds and shapes their experience of work and of themselves.

Collaborative work systems – as we have grown fond of calling team-based organizations these days -- revolve around the creation of shared discourses as a means of controlling work activity (Barker & Cheney, 1994, p. 20). From the senior executive’s articulation of a company vision statement to a self-managing team arguing over how best to solve a problem, people in collaborative organizations use language to create ways of working together. They use language to persuade themselves as to how best to work together for the company. They use language to control their work activity and work lives (Tompkins & Cheney, 1985, p. 195; also see Watson’s, 1994, ethnography of ‘ZTC Ryland,’ which concerns persuasion and discourse among the firm’s workers).

I would like to go back to rhetoric’s focus on how people use language for a moment. As a rhetorical critic of collaborative work systems, I am keenly interested in assessing this sense of how people use language to do things. And, this perspective on “how” becomes a key demarcation point for an organizationally-focused rhetorical critic. The organizational perspective moves from the traditional rhetoric point of how to make a good speech (drawing on the rhetorical cannon of invention) to the organizational rhetoric point of how do people use language to solve collective problems at work (which also draws on the rhetorical cannon of invention). Cushman and Tompkins (1980) first developed the perspective on problem solving that I am describing here.

By taking a rhetorical attitude, I am focusing my attention on how collaborative workers use language empirically to solve their organizational problems through their creation of shared meanings together and the creation of shared social consequences together that naturally stem for their problem solving activity. For me, an analysis of the expressed experiences of collaborative workers, such as the empirical indicators of teamwork’s social consequences, reveals the complex and varied ways in which we use persuasive language to control our own activities in collaborative work (e.g., team meetings, spontaneous problem solving sessions, disciplinary confrontations, and even mundane conversations on an assembly line). All organizational activity is rhetorical, is problem-solving directed, and language is the tool of such rhetoric, especially in collaborative work. As workers in a collaborative organization, we engage in a complex process of persuading ourselves of how to work in the best interests of the organization. These “complex processes of persuasion” can be both nice and not so nice.

We should bear in mind here that “rhetoric,” as we take the practice from the Ancient Greeks, is an original and novel human problem solving mechanism. Rhetoric enabled the ancients to move from philosophical thinking to technical practice; to move from mythos to logos. Essentially, rhetoric was, and still is, the organizational theory – the persuasive process of turning our abstract shared values into rational collective practice.[1]

The attitude of a rhetorical critic of organization also reflects a quite traditional yearning for amelioration or more often seen today as the Habermassian view of emancipation. That is, as a
rhetorical critic of organizations, I am interested in identifying the social consequences of collaborative work as they reveal themselves through the use of language by organizational members; but I am also interested in doing something to change the negative consequences and maintain the positive consequences. Collaborative organizations can become powerfully controlling social forces. As team members, we pay a social price for participating together (such as the conscription of our individual identity for the good of our team, Barker & Tompkins, 1994). As paradoxically as it sounds, we may even have less real freedom to act in collaborative organizations as in more bureaucratic firms because of the way we persuasively control our work activity. Identifying, examining, and then addressing such consequences has been my goal as a rhetorical critic of new work organizations.

Further, as mentioned above, the traditional study of rhetoric has always sought to establish very practical knowledge, such as “How to make a good speech.” In traditional rhetorical criticism lies an inherently humanistic spirit generally aimed at creating useful and good ways for us people to use persuasion as a means of doing things collectively. We want the teams on which we work to solve their problems with words not with regrettable actions or the implementation of draconian control practice (such as the panoptic attendance rules I described in Barker, 1993 and 1999). The rhetorical critic of collaborative work takes on the belief that the organization and its members can find mutually beneficial ways of working together through the creative use of language. Such an attitude also means that the critic should articulate ways for people to use language creatively as a means of mediating the social consequences of persuasive organizational action.

Granted, the perspective I have described here really appears to be a form of high modernist critique. But for me, as an organizational critic trying to find my way in the world, the rhetorical-critical perspective gives me insight into the fundamental organizational process of collaborative work: a set of exceedingly meaningful processes at once highly abstract and highly material, at once deeply complex and apparently simple, at once very personal and very organizational, and at once exceptionally powerful and exceedingly persuasive.

As a brief aside, the reader can find the theoretical foundation for my perspective in chapters by Tompkins (1982) and Burke (1973) and a good example of this perspective in practice in Cheney’s (1999) Values at Work.

“Tightening the Iron Cage” Revisited: An Exemplar

To offer an example of a modern rhetorical criticism of organization, I would like to revisit my 1993 article in Administrative Science Quarterly on concertive control – “Tightening the Iron Cage: Concertive Control in Self-Managing Teams” (Barker, 1993). When I wrote the article, I had two primary aims, both implicitly rather than explicitly rhetorical: (1) to provoke debate about the character of contemporary teamwork and (2) to make a conceptual contribution about control in contemporary organizations. Allow me to take the latter point first. The core purpose of my original article was to make a conceptual contribution, to elaborate on the processes and consequences of “concertive control” in collaborative organizations. In a nutshell, concertive control is an ideal type that refers to the character of control in highly collaborative organizations. Workers in such environments will act “in concert” with each other to create a system that controls their own behaviors in a direction functional for the organization. Although not readily apparent, my purpose here was very rhetorical in that the team members I studied developed concertive control as a “how” method for solving a dire problem they faced: Their former system of control had gone way, and they had to create discursively a new system. Thus, I argued that concertive control arises in any peer-based environment: self managing team organizations, highly collaborative knowledge work, airline flight crews, strategic planning groups, in short, any organization that requires participative, collaborative activity. Concertive control is the “how” that solves the problem of control in a collaborative system.
Tompkins and Cheney (1985) first articulated concertive control as a theory. They saw it characterizing control behaviors in the popular R&D laboratories that arose in the 1980s. They argued that the members of peer-based organizations created a system of control that extended from their shared values of how to do good work and their strong identification with these values. Drawing on the work of Tannenbaum (1968), they further hypothesized that because of the peer-based character of concertive control (and its concomitant peer pressure to conform), this form of control represented a powerfully constraining system difficult for any one peer to resist. Concertive control, then, could become a more powerful form of control than the bureaucratic forms it replaced.

As part of the concept building process, my *ASQ* article then further developed concertive control within Edward’s (1981) control framework (simple, technical, and bureaucratic) and drew on Weber to argue, historically, that concertive control is the type of control that marked the participative trends of the 1990s. In the study, I investigated how the members of self-managing teams developed a concertive system through the evolution of their ways of talking with each other. I studied how the team members used language (e.g., team meetings, problems solving sessions, informal conversations, and so forth) to create a new system of concertive control in the wake of the organization’s swift and dramatic change to teams.

To further depict the solving of the “how” problem, I argued that a concertive system first evolved from the value consensus of team members as to what constituted “good” teamwork for them. They had to reach a consensus on such values as “What does team work mean for us?” “What does it mean to be a good team member?” “How do we support the organization?” and “What are individual responsibilities to the team?” They had to act in concert with each other to create a system that controlled their own behaviors. Once these values were in place, the team members first created a system of normative behaviors that enabled them to put their values into action and later a system of rational rules that enabled them to instill their values quickly into new members. Team members required themselves to identify strongly with these values and rules and readily used peer pressure to enforce compliance. A subsequent quantitative study of the organization (Barker & Tompkins, 1994) confirmed the demand for high team identification.

As to the social consequences of this new way of working, I argued that concertive control was characterized by a system of rational rules, like the former bureaucracy, but instead of strong hierarchical supervision, the teams used peer pressure to enforce their rules. The perceived legitimacy of their shared values gave the team members the “right” to control themselves, a right they readily exercised. They demanded from themselves identification with and obedience to their rules. And they readily disciplined any deviant behaviors. These consequences were strong evidence to support the assertion that a concertive control system was more powerful than the bureaucratic form that had preceded it. Concertive control was paradoxically both liberating for its members (they could control their own work) and oppressive (they controlled their own work very powerfully). Hence, the reality of team participation was the tightening of Weber’s iron cage of rational control rather than a loosening.

A few years ago, I published a book length monograph (Barker, 1999) in which I ventured a much broader development of concertive control that makes a more thorough development of the “how” issue in collaboration. In the book, I described how a system of concertive control creates intricate dynamics of community, identification, and control – deliberately seeking a more complex articulation of my concepts as some critics had requested. I also delved more into the working of power and knowledge in a concertive system, although I readily admit to remaining within the rhetorical-humanistic constraints of my particular critical perspective. I also reviewed other studies of concertive control both before my 1993 article (e.g., Bullis & Tompkins, 1989) and after (e.g., Papa, Auwal, & Singhal, 1997. Interested readers should also consult Ezzamel & Willmott (1998) and Sewell (1998) as they also engaged some of my arguments.
Tis’ a Gift to be Simple.

Critics of my concertive control studies have asserted that my 1993 claims were “oversimplified.” And, I agree. At the time of publication, I would have readily argued the point, but not after 10 years of hindsight, of additional research, of reading what others have written about the article and of more experience with collaborative workers. Let us recall the time at which my article first appeared. In the early 1990s, when I was writing the article, there were few rigorous accounts of the development of teams that presented a cautionary tale, which dared describe the social hazards of teamwork. I had been both a work team member and a trained researcher of teams, and I did not agree with the conventional wisdom of the time. From a rhetorical “attitude;” my experience with team discourse did not match the writing on teams at the time. In my 1993 article, I wanted to provoke a healthy discussion on the social consequences of teamwork. I perhaps wanted this even more than I wanted to make a conceptual contribution that drew on the rhetorical “how” of collaborative workers solving the problem of control. The article has created its own discourse, which from the standpoint of a rhetorical attitude, is a good thing.

As I have read others’ comments on my article, I have been surprised at what my provocation has wrought. Some interpretations go beyond what I “thought” I had meant back then. A control phenomenon I thought I had argued as a powerful social force becomes a totalizing concept. Concertive control argued as a naturally social and rhetorical, albeit unobtrusive process becomes sneaky and sinister. But, with the benefit of hindsight, I now see such claims as directly related to the article’s ability to provoke. The article does get a reaction.

I mentioned above that, besides making a conceptual point, I had hoped that the article would provoke a healthy discussion of the consequences of teamwork – its own discourse if you will. To provoke, however, especially recalling the conventional wisdom of teams prevalent at that time, I had to be simple, straightforward. The conceptual contribution, itself, was a simple building upon Weber and Edwards, while the rhetorical trappings were underplayed. The consequences were stated bluntly (e.g., team members controlled their behavior tighter than management had controlled it before). I supported my claims with the discourse of the team members and left the readers to judge my assertions, to be provoked.

Again in hindsight, people resonated more to the provocative consequences than to the conceptual contribution. That is, people naturally gravitated to the rhetorical “how” issues in the article. Readers who had once found themselves caught in the “eye” of their peers’ norms understood what was happening on these teams. In light of the consequences I described, we would expect negative experiences with teams and concertive control such as those encountered by Levi Straus (King, 1998). As with any control mechanism, a concertive system can become useful and harmful, easy to manage and difficult to manage. A concertive system does control peer activity, but it has its own costs – costs mostly writ on the peers themselves. Such is the rhetorical character of human discourse in organizations.

Ultimately, taking a rhetorical-critical attitude, with concertive control as its example, concerns how we constrain the way we create meaning through our own collaborative language use at work. The rhetorical-social consequences of concertive control are all our consequences. They are our own intimate creations – simple on the surface with many complex layers below. The consequences of concertive control, as simply and bluntly stated in my 1993 article, get the point across. To provoke rhetorically, I needed to be simple.

Keep Hope Alive?
Of the many discussions raised by readers of my 1993 ASQ article, the criticism that concerns me the most is that “the theory leaves no basis for action,” no hope for redemption. Now, I would not be a good rhetorical critic of concertive control if I did not attend to this complaint for I have responsibilities beyond the scope of the present paper. To claim ground as a rhetorical critic of organizations, I assume other responsibilities to the team members I studied besides simply provoking scholarly debate. I have a responsibility for finding some way to deal with the consequences I argued.

Since the publication of my 1993 article, I have spent considerable energy in figuring out ways of mediating the social consequences of concertive control. In 1996, I published an article (Barker, 1996) that, in part, outlined how senior managers and team members can more openly approach and create the necessary value consensus for a concertive system. My goal was to help team members become better critics of their own participation by recognizing that they had to review their shared values and become aware of the constraints they were placing on themselves, particularly in terms of peer pressure.

More recently, I have collaborated with a professional mediator to write a paper detailing the application of mediation practices in team-based environments (Barker & Domenici, 2000). In the paper, my co-author and I describe ways that team members can use language to create more open and positive environments in which to make decisions and solve problems. We designed our work here to confront directly some of the negative consequences of peer pressure and oppressive control. Further, I have the afore-mentioned book-length monograph on concertive control (Barker, 1999) in which I more systematically detailed the theory and offered a developed set of practices for dealing with the consequences of a concertive system. These practices hinge on our ability to use language to mediate the constraints we create for ourselves via the way we use language. In the book, I argued that we must recognize how we constrain ourselves through the way we talk at work (the criticism). To move ourselves away from these self-imposed constraints, we must create new methods of taking with each other about our work (the redemption). Today, I am working on developing practical, value-based methods for collaborative workers to control their work that avoid the problems and oppressive tendencies of such devices as team codes of conduct.

Granted, my most recent work, as described above, moves me somewhat away from traditional criticism. However, such an approach is a natural direction for the rhetorical critic of organizational practice, which requires the scholar to conduct a delicate dance between description and prescription and between creativity and control. Besides, such a dance helps me find the rhetorical creativity necessary to deal with the social consequences of collaborative work.

With this thought in mind, I see an even more critical task ahead for the rhetorical critic of organization. I believe that the most imperative task facing organizational scholars today is one of, again taking inspiration from rhetorical theory, creating “rhetorics” about contemporary work practices. By “rhetoric” I refer to a moral position from which to engage reality – an ethical, value-based set of arguments for how we should live and work with one another in the organization. I am arguing here that we ought to dive into the issue of “How ought we to organize and control ourselves in knowledge-based work?” and develop creative mechanisms for doing so. We can only navigate the cosmological dance between creativity and control with ethics. And ethics are a derivative of rhetoric. Certainly, such is a difficult task for us as we are very comfortable lodged in the tradition of value neutrality. However, wading into ethical issues in the organization, creating useful rhetorics about work life, is an essential task for us scholars – holding forth on how we create meaningful reality and arguing how we could do a better job of such creation.

**Conclusion**

In sum, as a rhetorical critic of collaborative work, I study how we use language in such organizations to control our own behaviors – that is, “how” do collaborative workers use language to solve their problem of control. In particular, I study the social consequences of contemporary control practices
and develop ideas that people can use to mediate these consequences. For me, criticism is an essential act of provocation that we must have present in our organizational lives. Today and in the future, we will continue to use language as the tool for enabling us to work together. Because we are bound and limited by our ability to use language, we will always face the dilemmas and pitfalls that mark the consequences of that necessity. As a free people, we must be able to conceptualize and critique how we use language on ourselves. Freedom only resides within a set of boundaries and constraints, and we people who work in collaborative organizations must have the ability to create and apply those boundaries and constraints in a “good” manner. We must have the ability to provoke ourselves toward thinking about work and organization in innovative and creative ways. We must move ourselves toward an open consideration of the positive and negative social consequences found in today and tomorrow’s organizations. Such is the task of the rhetorical critic in organization studies.

Endnote

[1] The rhetoric scholar, Phillip Tompkins (see Tompkins, 1982, 2003) provided the following illustration of the development of rhetoric as organizational theory in a personal communication 21 May 2003:

The Romans borrowed from the Greeks whatever they perceived to be practical. They deemed rhetorical theory to be practical, if not vital, to a Republic for the same reasons the Greeks had discovered. Rhetoric thus became central to the educational system and the practice of politics. The high ideals of rhetoric were debased by the emperors. The demise of the Senate under the emperors transformed public oratory into a "second sophistic," polite discourse on matters of little traction with public affairs. A series of emperors produced such irresponsible administration that it was necessary to create grants to pay teachers of rhetoric for practical reasons, the revival of old values regaining the trust of the people. In addition, the training in rhetoric was intended to produce a new class of administrators, able young men who would enter the civil service (Conley, 1990, p. 38).

A more organizational application of rhetoric was therefore central to the day-to-day affairs of the Empire. Kenneth Burke, the most important 20th century theorist and critic of rhetoric, discussed these activities under the heading of "administrative rhetoric," and its practice continues today. One could even say that in the shift from the Republic to the Empire, the practice of rhetoric changed directions and became a vertical, top-down activity rather than the horizontal one it had been with equals addressing each other in the Senate. The Romans preferred persuasion and peace in their occupied lands, using force as a last resort. Burke also saw force itself as persuasive; in his classic work, *A Rhetoric of Motives*: "military force can persuade by its sheer 'meaning' as well as by its use in actual combat" (Burke, 1950/1969, p. 161). Rhetorical theory was the decision-making theory--if not the management theory--of the Roman Empire. Men knew how to make arguments designed to lead others to clear conclusions.

References


