

Being a Positive Social Change Agent through Issue Selling

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Business academics have increasingly turned attention to the role of organizations in fostering social change. One way in which organizations become engaged with social change is through issue sellers, individuals who act as change agents inside mainstream business organizations by trying to convince others to direct attention and resources to issues (Dutton & Ashford, 1993; Howard-Grenville, 2007; Sonenshein, 2006). This chapter unpacks not simply how individuals sell social issues, but more specifically, how individuals engage in issue selling as *positive* social change agents. By positive, I refer to goodness and generativity in terms of both processes and outcomes (Roberts, 2006). I highlight how shifting the examination of the process of issue selling to a more positive perspective can help identify more positively-oriented methods for social change agents to use to foster social change (positive issue-selling processes) and accomplish more positive outcomes (positive issue-selling outcomes).

Shifting our perspective of issue selling to a positive one is important for several reasons. First, while issue selling was originally theorized as having both instrumental and symbolic properties (Dutton and Ashford, 1993), most issue selling research has historically taken the instrumental approach in which change agents factor the potential for benefits versus harm to their careers as they determine whether or not to sell an issue (e.g., Ashford, Rothbard, Piderit, & Dutton, 1998). As a consequence, change agents facing work contexts inhospitable to the change they are trying to foster are more likely to abandon their plans (e.g., Dutton, Ashford, Lawrence, & Miner-Rubino, 2002; Dutton, Ashford, O'Neill, Hayes, & Wierba, 1997). However, social change agents often make great sacrifices in pursuit of their causes despite the likelihood of failure or professional damage. A positive perspective on issue selling helps explain this resiliency by unpacking how social change agents persevere even within inhospitable contexts.

Second, existing conceptions of social change often conjure images of rancorous discourse dominated by the harsh criticisms of radicals operating outside the focal organization. Popular examples include Greenpeace's confrontation with Shell Oil over Brent Spar (Zyglidopoulos, 2002) and the media's hostile coverage of Chiquita (Were, 2003). However, by unpacking issue-selling from a positive perspective, I reveal how social change agents may foster more generative and effective dialogues from *inside* organizations.

Third, by applying a positive issue-selling perspective onto social change, new questions about issue selling, such as its outcomes, are brought to light and the multiple levels in which social change can be positive—such as for the change agent, the organization, and society—are emphasized. This allows for a focus on outcomes that transcends the immediate self-interests of the social change agent, thus advancing issue selling research beyond its frequent focus on instrumental motivations to include a more complex set of drivers (see also Ashford & Barton, 2007).

Brief Review of Issue Selling Research

To understand the relevance of issue selling for social change agency requires both a rudimentary understanding of the extant issue-selling research as well as details of how core properties of this literature must shift to accommodate a more positive view.

In brief, issue selling research originated in the study of upward influence attempts of middle managers working for the attention of top managers for strategic issues (Dutton & Ashford, 1993). Middle managers are theorized to “sell” issues to top managers using tactics including building consensus by talking to others about the issue or logic (Piderit & Ashford, 2003). A key principle of issue selling is that organizations are a marketplace of ideas (Dutton,

Ashford, O'Neill, & Lawrence, 2001). However, with a finite amount of attention to dole out (Ocasio, 1997), top managers give attention to issues they find most compelling.

While issue-selling research originated with a focus on upward selling, the concept now also recognizes downward and lateral influence (e.g., Sonenshein, 2006). This expanded focus is important for theorizing issue selling because it extends the designation of “change agent” (and by extension, “social change agent”) to individuals outside middle management. For example, top managers can sell issues downward to subordinates by using an arsenal of issue-selling tactics similar to that of a middle manager. While these top managers may opt to exercise their positional power to garner support, issue-selling research reminds us that effective change comes from how the meanings of issues are shaped by change agents and not the formal power of the change agent alone.

Another important innovation in the issue-selling literature is the move from a primary focus on strategic issues to include social issues. As a result of this expansion, scholars have focused on a range of issues with important implications for social change, such as the natural environment (Andersson & Bateman, 2000; Bansal, 2004; Howard-Grenville, 2007) and gender equity (Ashford et al., 1998). This move makes sense from an issue-selling perspective because, by definition, no issue is inherently “strategic.” Rather, through issue-selling processes, any issue can be viewed as strategic as the meaning of issues is malleable. Put another way, issues do not have inherent meanings but are given meaning through the claims-making process (Best, 1995; Spector & Kitsuse, 1977). Individuals make claims about the meaning of an issue using language to construct it in a manner that weaves the issue into a dominant organizational logic, thereby increasing its perceived legitimacy (Sonenshein, 2006). For example, because economic logic

dominates many work organizations, issue sellers may highlight the “business case” of an issue to increase its perceived legitimacy (Dutton et al., 2001).

One of the key limitations of existing issue selling research in respect to social change is the motivational model implicit in this body of research. As suggested above, issue selling takes primarily an instrumental approach, with change agents making calculative assessments of the career implications of selling a particular issue. As Figure 1 illustrates, issue sellers make calculations based on the relative career benefits and risks of a particular issue, therefore potentially thwarting action if this calculus turns negative. As a result, in its current form, issue selling research struggles to explain why social change agents might nevertheless attempt social change when the calculations predict a harmful impact on the change agent.

****INSERT FIGURES 1 and 2 ABOUT HERE****

Issue Selling and Social Change: Starting Premises from a Positive Perspective

Issue selling research examines the processes by which individuals at work draw attention to issues (Dutton & Ashford, 1993). Presumably, these issues may include even those issues viewed by some as tangential to an organization’s strategy including corporate social responsibility initiatives. To include such types of social responsibility initiatives, it is important to recall the premise that a key process of issue selling is the construction of an issue in a way that weaves the issue into the dominant logic of an organization, thereby increasing the perceived legitimacy of the issue (Sonenshein, 2006). However, to do so, particularly in light of desired outcomes of social change raises the question—what is positive about issue selling?

To answer this question requires rethinking the role of the social change agent. As previously mentioned, much of the social change research involves external, and often

antagonistic, critics exerting pressure on business organizations to engage in social change, such as through social movements (e.g., Davis & Anderson, 2008) or via social activists (Den Hond & De Bakker, 2007). Figure 2 provides a visual depiction of this, in which external change agents seek to impact societal-level outcomes through hostile discourse with organizations. While this approach can lead to dramatic social change (Marquis, Glynn, & Davis, 2007), it suggests that the resources (such as change agents and the meanings they use) must be external to the entity that is the center of change. Such an approach has an intuitive appeal as it is difficult (but not impossible (Reay, Golden-Biddle, & GermAnn, 2006)) for individuals within a social system to change that very system (Battilana, Leca, & Boxenbaum, 2009; Meyerson, 2001) and our beliefs about social change have historically privileged the external social critic over the internal one (Sonenshein, 2005).

Conversely, an issue-selling perspective firmly plants the origins of social change *inside* the social system that is the focus of change, therefore extending social change agency from a singularly exogenous perspective to include an endogenous change agent. Similar to other internal social change perspectives (Meyerson, 2001; Meyerson & Scully, 1995; Scully & Segal, 2002), issue selling can explain how, despite the challenges, individuals internal to a social system, particularly an organization, can change that system. This shifts the research from examining how social forces exogenous to the organization impact social change by instead spotlighting the often relentless efforts of those inside the business organization, with a specific emphasis on how these change agents construct meanings that balance the need for conformity and stability with the desire for social change (Battilana et al., 2009; Meyerson, 2001).

To appreciate how social change can unfold endogenously, consider Bollier's (1996) telling of how five employees at Inland Steel confronted a culture of workplace discrimination

and successfully advocated for the implementation of company-wide diversity initiatives. The issue selling process began when four minority employees started to share stories with one another of the subtle stereotyping each had experienced during their tenure and discuss the pervasive feeling that minorities were passed over for promotion. After meeting, the employees approached an upper-management sales executive, Steve Bowsher, to convince him that Inland's culture prevented minority workers from excelling. As with many issue selling attempts, the social change agents directed their efforts at upward influence (Dutton & Ashford, 1993). The social change agents described to Bowsher their predicament of "never getting the opportunity to succeed in a job... being called names, being told racists jokes." In addition, the issue sellers framed the meaning of the issue in terms they believed would resonate with Bowsher. As one change agent told him, "We can multiply [our] profitability twice if we had all of our people in power to move ahead... particularly our minority employees" (Bollier 1996: 113). This is a classic example of a meaning construction process in which the issue seller crafts their meaning (in this case, diversity) in a way that is likely to be viewed as legitimate by top managers (Sonenshein, 2006).

At the outset, Bowsher, who was white, struggled to grasp the meaning and ramifications of the issue. Undeterred, the social change agents began sending workplace diversity reading materials to him, eventually sending a brochure for a race relations seminar that Bowsher decided to attend on his own time and with his own funds. This seminar served as a turning point for Bowsher—he was the only white upper-level manager and the participants were primarily African-American. Bowsher recalls his experience: "For two days, they basically ignored me. They would not respond to my questions, they wouldn't listen to me... it clearly opened my

thinking so that I could understand what [my employees] had been telling me” (Bollier (1996: 114).

Bowsher returned to Inland transformed by the experience and, by extension and became an issue seller himself, thereby illustrating an upward spiral as the issue selling spread (Cameron, Dutton, & Quinn, 2003). Having taken on the role of a social change agent, he used his more formal power to continue the upward sell of social change to top management, eventually convincing Inland president, Robert Darnall, of the importance of promoting diversity and cultural understanding at the organization. He did this by getting Darnall to attend the same diversity seminar that had given meaning to the issue for him. By the experience of participating in the seminar as a racial minority, Darnall returned similarly changed as Bowsher and with a much better understanding of the plight of his minority workers. Taking it a step further, Darnall also constructed the economic meaning of the issue and became convinced that, with minorities comprising 40% of Inland’s employee population, managing diversity was essential not just to stay competitive, but to attract and retain quality employees as well. Put another way, Darnall constructed the issue of diversity as a vital competitive advantage for Inland. This facilitated resources that trickled from the bottom up to top managers through how internal social change agents translated an important social issue into something that resonated inside the organization, thereby continuing the upward spiral in which more and more members of the organization began to embrace the same meanings as the original four employees who served as social change agents. In the end, what started as a grassroots effort by a few social change agents percolated up to top managers who helped reposition Inland as an organization that valued diversity.

Positive Issue-selling Processes

Generative dialoguing. While issue selling holds the promise of a theory of social change agency that unfolds endogenously, there are important shifts that must occur in theorizing how social change agents engage in issue selling from a positive perspective that depart from how scholars usually understand social change. As previously mentioned, research on social change often depicts a rancorous process complete with activists engaging in disruptive activities and hostile discourse. In fact, research suggests that for external social change agents, negative emotions—including anger—can motivate change agents, such as through how they denigrate the out-group (i.e., the organization they are trying to change). Conversely, negative emotions are detrimental to the internal social change agent as they can narrow their creativity (DeCelles, Sonenshein and Hoffman, 2010). Accordingly, a shift in theorizing offers the promise of clarifying positive processes around social change by examining the generative (versus antagonistic) dialogues stimulated by social change agents. *Generative dialogue*—discourse that “brings into being a mutually satisfying and effective organization” (Gergen, Gergen, & Barrett, 2004: 45)—can lead to a more sustained engagement with social change. The Inland Steel example shows how issue sellers, by engaging in generative dialogues and making connections between positive social outcomes and business objectives, can expand the opportunities and benefits afforded an organization and create change that benefits both the organization and society. The following example illuminates another aspect of generative dialogue—*productive differences*—which sustains or extends debate about an issue in a positive manner (Gergen et al., 2004).

When Barbara Waugh (Anonymous, 2004) was a personnel director for HP labs, she learned that HP would not be extending domestic partnership benefits (DPBs) to its gay and lesbian employees. Her first reaction was to initiate a non-generative dialogue; responding to the

organization by demonizing it and casting it as an “evil corporation.” This type of response is a conversation stopper that, while making the point that the social change agent is angry about a decision, usually curtails debate and may even stymie the change agent. Upon further consideration, she opted for a more generative approach—Waugh sought to *extend* the conversation rather than shut it down. She first *widened* the conversation by collecting stories from HP employees about how homophobia impacted their productivity. Furthermore, she *enriched* the dialogue by engaging in “narrative and temporal integration”, an approach using accounts of the past to create compelling, reliable and significant portraits of reality (Gergen et al., 2004). More specifically, she turned the stories she collected into a play. When top management learned of the play, they responded to her efforts by affirming the dialogue. In fact, top management encouraged Waugh to stage the play across the company and supported 60 performances in the following six months. While top management had been confident and firm in their decision to not extend DPBs, Waugh’s use of generative dialogue successfully engaged both other employees and senior management and kept the issue alive. In doing so, she contributed to HP’s reversal of its decision and helped lead HP to become the first Fortune 500 company to offer DPBs to gay and lesbian employees. Instead of following her initial reaction that would have closed debate, Waugh widened and enriched the dialogue and, in turn, management joined in leading to social change happening through the collective activities of both the change agent and the top management team. Similar to what unfolded at Inland Steel, the issue seller successfully invited others to join a generative dialogue.

Reclaiming “dead” issues. Another way of theorizing social change from a positive perspective is through the process of reclaiming “dead” issues. While social change is difficult, issue selling

assumes that meanings inside organizations are always in flux and that there are always several ways to construct the meaning of an issue (Dutton & Ashford, 1993; Sonenshein, 2006). This allows for at least two different ways to reclaim a dead issue. First, as the organizational context shifts, the original meanings used to sell the issue may become more legitimate. In this case, the organization “catches up” to the issue seller because the larger environment has shifted (e.g., other companies offer DPBs). As the environment or context changes, the values of past meanings change and the opportunity to revisit previously unsuccessful issue-selling attempts and to renew social change processes arises. A second and perhaps more powerful approach is for the issue seller to reframe the meaning of the social issue, thereby attempting a new issue-selling approach for the same issue. While current conceptualizations of issue selling tend to view the construction of meaning as a single event, it is possible to theorize issue selling as a succession of attempts to exert influence over the meaning of change. By doing so, social change agents can attempt to sell the same issue using a different set of meanings to infuse thwarted conversations about social change with new energy, excitement and perspective.

A good example of reclaiming dead issues comes from a group of employees at “Metropolitan Healthcare” (Githens & Aragon, 2009; a pseudonym representing events at two healthcare organizations) who approached management with a number of concerns and ideas about how the company could foster a more positive culture for its gay, lesbian and bisexual workers. The employees described to management the unwelcoming attitudes and unfavorable conditions they had encountered in the workplace and asked that the company alter its non-discrimination statement to include ‘sexual orientation’ as a protected class. In addition, the employees requested that management extend its DPBs to unmarried partners. Although the request to alter the non-discrimination statement was granted within two years of the request, the

issue of DPBs was a problem. The social change agents met with upper management many times but were unable to make headway. The social change agents, frustrated with their lack of progress, tried a new strategy: they formed a coalition with union leaders who agreed to support DPB's in its negotiations with management. Despite this, almost eight years after presenting the issue, no progress had been made. In 2000, a new opportunity to sell the issue arose: the company's diversity manager suggested the group become a formal "employee network." The LGBT and Allies Network became an officially recognized employee network—a position that provided leverage as they renewed their efforts to advocate for DPBs. The group continued to sell the issue to management and, thanks to a number of efforts including a benchmark analysis comparing Metropolitan Healthcare to other U.S. employers who had instituted DPBs, as well as continued support from the unions and other allies within the organization, in 2004, Metropolitan Healthcare approved the debut of DPBs. This case shows that, particularly over time, the meanings and support structures (in this case, a coalition of individuals) of issues are malleable. In other words, meanings about an issue, and meanings about an individual or entity selling that issue, are in flux. In this sense, an issue is never dead but instead just dormant. With persistence, resilience and creativity, social change agents can reinvigorate a dormant issue by changing its meaning (as in this example by transforming an informal group to an "employee network" and building bridges to new allies) as they reevaluate and reconstruct the meanings of their issue.

Positive Outcomes

I now turn to unpacking three positive outcomes—two of which the issue-selling literature has previously considered (positive outcomes for the organization and positive outcomes for the issue seller)—and a third that is relatively absent in the literature (positive outcomes for society).

Positive outcomes for the organization. As stated, existing research in issue selling often takes an instrumental view proposing that individuals are more likely to engage in issue selling if they perceive career benefits (Dutton & Ashford, 1993). An extension of this reasoning suggests that the selling of certain issues might result in benefits to the organization (and, in turn, the issue seller). These positive organizational outcomes can indirectly create a positive social impact. For example, a major cost savings for an organization may also translate to less environmental waste. Such “win-win” scenarios for organizations and society can further encourage organizational support of social change as they legitimize social change advocacy by creating not only concrete examples of successful social change attempts but blueprints for how to do so as well.

One example of a win-win outcome comes from the story of Barbara Roberts’s (Bollier, 1996) who, as president of the stock photography firm FPG International, was committed to promoting diversity within the company she was hired to run. Roberts observed an opportunity for FPG to distinguish itself in the industry by promoting multicultural stock photography—photographs depicting individuals, groups and situations that, at the time, were underrepresented in stock photography (such as photos depicting minorities, battered wives, the physically challenged, etc.). Roberts, who describes herself as committed to eradicating stereotypes and promoting a realistic and multicultural view of society, linked her ideas for social change to her plan to create a competitive advantage for FPG. FPG’s 1994 catalog, filled with a diverse array of subjects and situations, led to strong sales. Ultimately, Roberts’ decision to link social change with business decisions led to success for FPG, which is now regarded as “the artistic, technological and commercial pacesetter for stock photography.” More generally however, it

also shows that an organization can actually *advance* their profit objectives through social change—a meaning that issue sellers can exploit when they advocate for change.

Positive outcomes for the social change agent. In addition to positive organizational outcomes, a positive perspective on issue selling also offers opportunities to examine dependent variables that are positively deviant with respect to the issue seller (Spreitzer & Sonenshein, 2004). These may include how engaging in social change can lead to the increased courage of social change agents—individuals willing to risk their careers to champion a speculative, but nevertheless important, social issue—or ways that engaging in social change can build an issue seller’s competencies—competencies necessary to make social change happen.

Consider Julia Stasch (Bollier, 1996) who, while employed by real estate development company Stein & Company, was instrumental in developing and implementing programs to provide equal employment opportunities for women and minorities. When Stasch joined the firm, she was “openly committed to a civic and social agenda of racial justice and gender equity” and determined to enact social change by promoting new and innovative business practices. From within, Stasch advocated that Stein & Company could distinguish its contract bids, attract better workers and attract more business by including affirmative action plans and, more generally, embracing equal employment opportunities. After her firm won a major bid to build AT&T’s regional headquarters, Stasch proposed assembling a task force to ensure the representation of minority- and women-owned firms on the job site. The project, as well as Stasch’s efforts to promote the use of minority- and women-owned firms, was a success. Not only were Stasch’s social objectives met but the values she espoused were becoming an increasingly important part of the firm’s identity as noted by a customer, “The firm won this

plum contract in part by using its signature technique: distinguishing itself in the area of affirmative action” (Bollier 1996: 129). Stasch next turned her sights to helping tradeswomen succeed in an industry notoriously unwelcoming of females. By building on the lessons learned in the previous project, Stasch was able to persuade contractors to support her goals, including recruiting and hiring women. Ultimately, Stasch’s initiatives were successful not only in creating opportunities for females and minorities in the construction industry, but also in bolstering her company’s reputation and ability to secure contracts. Stasch, a former high school teacher, experienced personal positive outcomes beyond just the satisfaction of her social advocacy goals. Starting her career at Stein & Company as a secretary, she was promoted to project coordinator, executive vice president, and chief administrative officer before taking on the role of chief operating officer.

Positive outcomes for society. While much research has focused on trying to link social change to economic performance (Margolis & Walsh, 2003), it is also important to understand the (positive) impact such initiatives have on society. A positive perspective on issue selling reminds scholars and practitioners of the outcomes designed to benefit society, not just the social change agent or their organization.

An example of societal impact comes from Chris Weeks (Rigoglioso, 2006), a DHL International logistics manager who was on loan to the Disaster Resource Network as part of DHL’s corporate responsibility program. It was after a 2003 earthquake in Iran that Weeks experienced firsthand the challenges of coordinating the logistics of disaster relief. Because the earthquake had immobilized much of Iran’s infrastructure, Weeks was unable to direct a substantial amount of relief aircraft and supplies into the country to help the Iranian people.

Recognizing that more could be done, Weeks went to Bob Bellhouse, then the executive director of the Disaster Resource Network, to pitch an idea: an organization staffed by volunteer logistics experts that could be rapidly mobilized to help airport managers in disaster-ravaged locations coordinate incoming relief planes and the aid they contained. With Bellhouse's support, Weeks sold the idea to DHL as a way to connect to the world community by utilizing their logistics expertise to provide quick and specialized help after disasters. With DHL committed to the effort, Weeks approached other global shipping companies including TNT, Aramex, Dnata, and Emirates Air, with similar proposals. Weeks' brainchild, the Airport Emergency Team, is now a volunteer team of personnel who—with the blessings and support of their employers—are able to fly anywhere at a moment's notice to help coordinate disaster logistics. In addition, DHL has expanded on the idea with its own disaster response teams and emphasizes disaster relief as one of its key initiatives as an organization. While this example highlights a substantial positive outcome for society, his efforts earned Weeks a position in keeping with his personal social principles: Director of Humanitarian Affairs at DHL.

Towards a Model of Positive Social Change Agency

Figure 3 contains a summary and integration model for theorizing social change agency as issue selling from a positive perspective. It integrates the previously discussed Figures 1 and 2 to show how the model of positive social change agency I presented builds off of existing research in issue selling and social change, while also extending these literatures. Starting from the top right, the big arrow signifies external social change in which social change agents from the outside of organizations attempt to foster social change by interjecting external arguments (such as

fundamental values that may differ from those of the organization) to pressure organizations to change.

****INSERT FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE****

These social change agents, often activists, are primarily concerned with positive outcomes for society (represented with an arrow from external social change to positive outcomes for society) with little concern for what is best personally or best for the organization they are trying to influence. In fact, their discourse may even need to create these binaries (i.e., change agent benefit versus societal benefit; social good versus organizational good) to emphasize the sacrifices they must endure in order to be accepted by other activists or to denigrate the business organization to motivate action.

The circle on the left represents a traditional issue-selling perspective: a perspective that has not historically focused on either social change or positive processes of change. The processes of change represented here are internal to the organization and the emphasis on outcomes is primarily focused on what is best for the change agent.

The circle in the center represents the recasting of issue selling from a positive perspective focused on social change. The circle representing the organization is both wider (to signify a widened dialogue that accounts for a broader range of stakeholders) and thicker (to signify a richer dialogue) than the traditional issue-selling circle. The circle nested within it represents reclaiming dead issues that can be re-introduced to the broader dialogue about social change inside an organization. The view of issue selling from a positive perspective is also concerned with all three types of outcomes—for society, the change agent and the organization—as represented by the arrows linking this circle with all three types of outcomes. In sum, the model depicts how a theory of social change agency as issue selling from a positive

perspective draws from both social change's historical emphasis on positive outcomes for society as well as from issue selling's emphasis on positive outcomes for the issue seller and internal meaning construction processes. This combination, along with theorizing positive processes such as generative dialogues and reclaiming dead issues, grounds a perspective on social change agency that locates the resources (such as meanings and change agents) as endogenous to the organization.

Discussion

Implications for theory. This chapter contributes to the literature on both social change agency and issue selling. For social change agency, issue selling adds an important emphasis to meaning construction processes, particularly those internal to the organization. These internal processes suggest that the raw materials for making social change happen can be endogenous to the organization itself (e.g., Sonenshein, 2005) and contrast with the more traditional perspective of organizations being pressured by outside activists or non-governmental organizations to conform to some external standard (e.g., Argenti, 2004; Mirvis, 2002; Zyglidopoulos, 2002). Instead of creating tension and using external standards that pit social interests versus organizational interests, a positive perspective on issue selling illustrates how internal social change agents can foster generative dialogues that widen and enrich discussion about social change. Through opening up debate by enlisting new and different players and meanings (such as arguments about an issue), issue sellers use processes likely to lead to a greater variety of morally imaginative solutions that can provide a host of positive outcomes (Werhane, 1999). In fact, a key question in research in positive social change (and positive organizational scholarship more generally) is, "*Positive to whom?*" summing up the sense that one person or entity's benefit can only come at

the expense of another. While this is certainly true in some cases, it is not universal. In fact, one of the common threads uniting the social change agents introduced in this chapter is their ability to create positive outcomes across a wide range of domains—for society, their organizations and themselves. Artificially created binaries that separate “business” and “society” obstruct scholars and practitioners from seeing that these different types of outcomes need not be mutually exclusive. Issue selling, through how it allows for social change to be malleable and how it fosters generative dialogue, enables the transcendence of these artificial boundaries. For the issue seller, social change can be constructed and subsequently enacted as a beneficial process that can have a positive impact on society, the organization and the change agent collectively.

Similarly, issue-selling processes can bring new life to previously thwarted attempts at social change through unearthing new ways of understanding social change and its impact. In short, positive social change agents view their focal organization not as their adversary, but rather as their partner in trying to make social change happen, using (but also repackaging) the meaning of its discursive resources (Hardy, Palmer, & Phillips, 2000). Yet, advocating positive social change through issue selling is not a naïve process either—social change agents can use sophisticated tactics to influence and persuade others inside their organization to adopt social change (Piderit & Ashford, 2003). The basic shift, however, is from viewing the focal organization as a battleground to the perception of the organization as a repository of meaning resources—such as compelling arguments (Sonenshein, 2006) or collective identities (Creed & Scully, 2000; Dutton & Dukerich, 1991)—from which issue sellers can frame the meaning of social change for themselves, their organization and society at large.

While issue selling is a useful framework for theorizing change agency, this research has largely narrowed its focus to the instrumental perspective of the change agent (Ashford &

Barton, 2007) thereby obscuring how issue selling can ground a more encompassing view of change agency that includes with it positive outcomes for society. For example, by rethinking issue selling as a positive process and applying it to social change, the manner in which issue selling captures the important processes and outcomes that transcend the narrow interests of the change agent unfolds. Issue selling need not always be a contingent, career building process. Fundamentally, issue selling can instead be about asking questions that make the world a better place (Margolis & Walsh, 2003). A near exclusive focus on the instrumental benefits bestowed upon change agents obscures important positive outcomes, particularly those most relevant to society. Accordingly, this chapter suggests that issue-selling research broaden its study of dependent variables beyond its usual constructs (Ashford et al., 1998; Dutton et al., 2002) to include the potential for social impact as well as independent variables that explain why social change agents, despite formidable personal challenges, nevertheless persist in trying to make social change happen through constructs such as identity (Ashford and Barton, 2007) or positive meaning (Sonenshein, DeCelles and Dutton, 2010).

This chapter also contributes to two distinctly positive processes of issue selling—generative processes (widening and enriching dialogues) and re-claiming dead issues. Issue-selling research has predominately focused on processes that involve coalition building, framing, controlling demeanor and timing (Piderit & Ashford, 2003). While these processes are important, they supplant opportunities to view issue selling as an ongoing effort to create new ideas by enriching debates and revisiting past change attempts. On this latter point, by theorizing social change agency as issue selling from a positive perspective, issue selling is recast as an ongoing conversation that can create upward spirals, such as when new dialogues yield incremental social change that, in turn, serves as the foundation for social change for a larger constituency.

Implications for practice. Social change agents can be internal change agents who work to advance social outcomes, benefit their focal organizations and seek personal gains—not just the external, rancorous change agent that engages in hostile discourse sometimes at great sacrifice. While not all three constituencies can always benefit from change, social change agents can take advantage of malleable meanings to increase the chances of achieving a host of positive outcomes. This can lead to new opportunities as the social change agent examines issues, including those previously deemed dead, in new ways.

This research also suggests that being a social change agent need not involve a contentious battle with others, a role that can lead to burnout from the exhaustion of trying to make change happen (Maslach, 1982). Instead, a social change agent can find a viable voice by working with an organization to create change from the inside (e.g., Meyerson, 2001). Tools such as enriching and widening debates can help along these lines and reframe social change as a partnership between the social change agent and the organization.

Conclusion

Perhaps more than ever, the world needs business organizations to participate in meeting society's demands. While there are a variety of motivations for and consequences of engaging in social change, there has been limited attention to the ways in which individuals go about being social change agents inside business organizations. This chapter has examined but one possibility: that of the internal social change agent as molding the meaning of an old or new issue to foster generative dialogues. In doing so, I take an important step in recognizing the

internal change agent and the power they hold in making a positive, impactful difference for themselves, their organization and society.

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Figure 1: Internal Social Change Agent as an Issue Seller

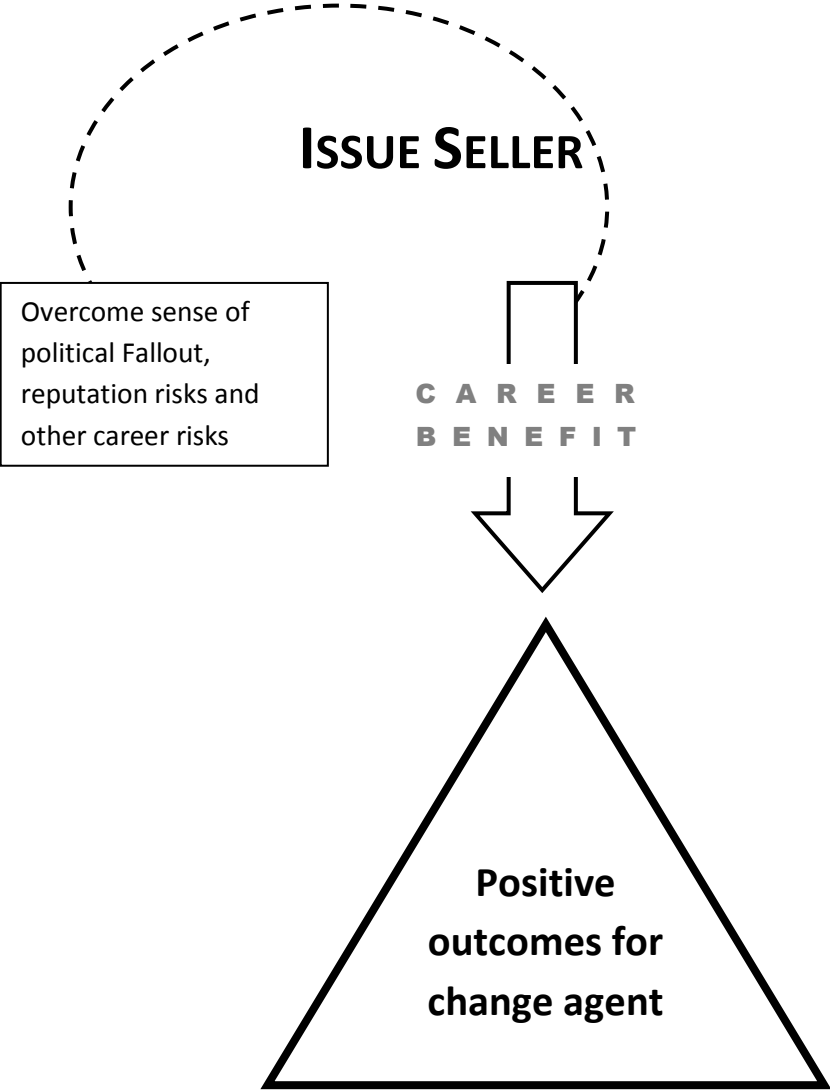


Figure 2: External social change agent

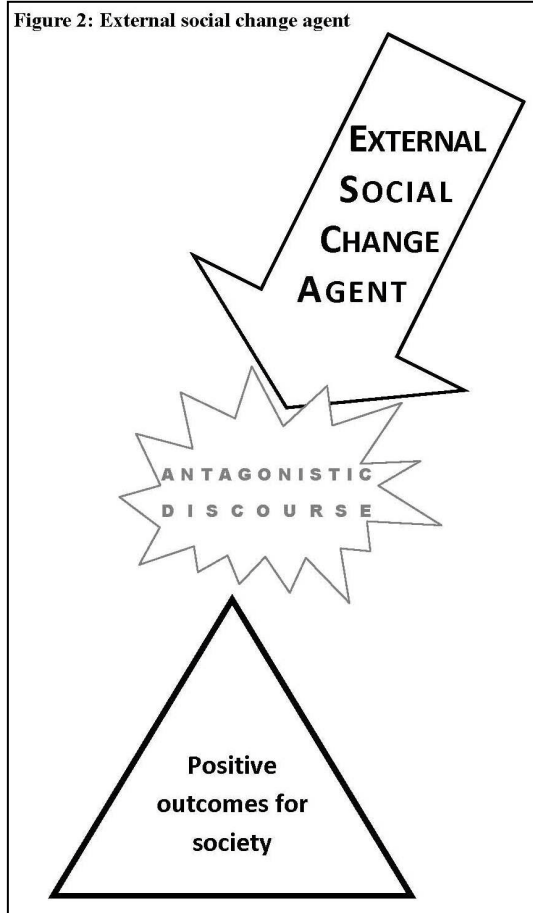


Figure 3: Summary Model of Social Change Agency from Positive Issue Selling Perspective

