



Newcastle University ePrints

Reissner SC, Pagan V, Smith C. ['Our iceberg is melting': Story, metaphor and the management of organisational change.](#)

Culture and Organization 2011, 17(5), 417-433.

Copyright:

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in *Culture and Organization* on 20th December 2011, available online: <http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/14759551.2011.622908>

Date deposited: 24th October 2014



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License](#)

ePrints – Newcastle University ePrints

<http://eprint.ncl.ac.uk>

‘Our Iceberg is Melting’: Story, Metaphor and the Management of Organisational Change

Stefanie C. Reissner¹, Victoria Pagan¹, and Craig Smith²

¹Newcastle University Business School and ²Flint Consulting

Correspondence address:

Dr. Stefanie C. Reissner
Newcastle University Business School
5 Barrack Road
Newcastle-upon-Tyne
NE1 7SE
UNITED KINGDOM
Tel. +44 191 208 1717
Email: stefanie.reissner@newcastle.ac.uk

(Received 31 January 2011; final version received 15 August 2011)

This article offers two contrasting readings of the business novel *Our iceberg is melting*, which was written to advocate Kotter’s approach to organisational change management. The orthodox reading draws on the modernist paradigm which assumes that organisational change can be actively managed. This reading analyses how the structure, themes, tropes and metaphoric representations employed in the book reinforce its underlying message. It assumes that readers will accept this message and adopt the advocated change management approach. The alternative reading is more critical. It questions the idealistic representations of characters’ roles and behaviours, and demonstrates how organisational actors may subvert the book’s story and metaphoric representations to resist change. This article demonstrates through the two readings that story and metaphor as tools to facilitate organisational change open up space for differing interpretations, which may not match the authors’ intent. It concludes that story and metaphor can reinforce a book’s underlying message, but that their ambiguity and interpretative flexibility always allow for unintended, dissenting and potentially subversive interpretations.

Keywords: allegory, business novel, metaphor, organisational change, story

‘Our Iceberg is Melting’: Story, Metaphor and the Management of Organisational Change

Introduction

The linguistic turn in the study of organisations (Gabriel 1998) has led to a growing interest among management scholars, practitioners and consultants in story and metaphor as a means to interpret and manage organisational change differently (Palmer and Dunford 1996a). Storyⁱ, it is argued, can help managers communicate more effectively, spark action (Denning 2005) and engage organisational actors in change (Armstrong 1992; Neuhauser 1993). Metaphorⁱⁱ, in contrast, ‘carries over’ meaning from one domain to another (Morgan 1996) and can open up new ways of thinking and acting (Barrett and Cooperrider 1990, Broussine and Vince 1996). Brought together, story and metaphor can enhance communication about organisational change and its management.

In this article, we analyse the business novel *Our iceberg is melting* (Kotter and Rathgeber 2005). This book is a fableⁱⁱⁱ in which a colony of emperor penguins serves as an allegory (extended metaphor) of business organisations. We seek to demonstrate how the story and metaphoric representations of characters in the fable can be subject to different readings (of which we offer two), with subsequent impact on expectations of how organisational change is managed. The first reading is informed by a modernist view of organisations (Cummings 2002) characterised by certainty, logic and control; this appears to be in line with Kotter and Rathgeber’s intentions. The second reading is more critical and explores alternative interpretations of the book’s underlying message. Our argument centres on the notion of allegory, ‘a story ... which can be interpreted to reveal a hidden meaning’ (*The Concise Oxford English Dictionary* 2010), with allegory acting as a bridge between story and metaphor. We suggest that the use of metaphor and metaphoric representation of characters in the fable contributes towards an ambiguity of meaning and interpretative flexibility that may be unintended by the book’s authors.

This article consists of six main parts and is structured as follows. Following the introduction (Part 1), Part 2 provides a brief conceptual background of the role of story and metaphoric representations in the context of organisational change. Part 3 retells *Our iceberg is melting* in an abbreviated form so that the readers of our article can join in our two readings. Part 4 represents an orthodox reading of the fable that analyses its structure, metaphoric representations, themes and tropes, demonstrating how these elements are employed to communicate the book’s central message. Part 5 represents a more critical reading that

focuses on the symbolic use of language and behavioural norms that are implicitly advocated by the fable. It explores how different interpretations of the metaphoric representations and resulting actions impact on the relationship between different organisational groups. Part 6 discusses the main findings of the two readings and concludes this article by highlighting the interpretative flexibility and multiplicity of meaning that can be taken from the ambiguity of story and metaphor as employed in *Our iceberg is melting*. Authors/users of story and metaphor need to be conscious that readers may interpret text in different ways, therefore impacting upon the intended message.

On story, metaphor and organisational change

The role of story and metaphor in the study of organisations has long been established (e.g. Morgan 1980, Rhodes and Brown 2005). More recently, story and metaphor have been applied in business novels through the use of fable to advocate a particular approach to organisational change management among practising managers and management consultants (e.g. Johnson 1998, Kotter and Rathgeber 2005). Such publications seek to exploit the creative potential of a fable's ambiguity to provide new solutions to the management of organisational change. A fable brings together story and metaphor through the use of allegory as demonstrated in *Our iceberg is melting*. While in a fable story and metaphor work hand-in-glove, they have different roles.

Story is the prime means for the construction of social reality (Bruner 1991) and for the creation of meaning (Weick1995). Its strength is its ability to establish coherence and causal relationships between different actions and events by means of a plot (Polkinghorne 1995). The plot adds meaning to the actions and events told by a story (Riessmann 2008), and this meaning is subject to interpretation by the audience (Abbott 2007). It is this ambiguity of meaning that allows for multiple readings and differing interpretations of the management of organisational change. While ambiguity of meaning can encourage more creative approaches to organisational change management, it can also be problematic for practising managers as diverging interpretations may lead to fragmentation among organisational actors, thus increasing the complexity of change management.

Metaphor transfers meaning through a similarity of different concepts (Gabriel 2008) while acknowledging the differences between them. The strength of metaphor is the ability to provide a different angle for the analysis of organisational situations through ambiguity of meaning that 'allows for multiple interpretations to coexist but at the same time can provide a shared direction' (Jacobs and Heracleous 2006, 211). Such ambiguity of meaning, in turn, encourages organisational actors to discuss the appropriateness and usefulness of different

meanings, thus potentially creating new knowledge (Grant et al. 2004) and influencing behaviours (Palmer and Dunford 1996b). Yet, as with story, there is a risk of fragmentation among organisational actors and associated risks to the success of organisational change management.

The combination of story and metaphor in a fable allows managers and management consultants (the target audience of business novels) to encourage creative solutions to organisational change while providing shared meanings and interpretations. A fable is a prime example of allegory that has the ability to ‘say one thing and mean another’ (adapted from Fletcher 1964, 2) through metaphoric representations of organisational reality. Like with simple metaphors, readers can identify with a fable’s animal characters at an emotional, creative and innovative level (Cornelissen 2005). This emotional engagement with a fable allows for the discussion of otherwise uncomfortable issues because its allegoric qualities work at a different level and help overcome organisational actors’ defensive reactions (Simmons 2003). Yet, there is also a risk of seducing the audience to think and behave in a particular way, thus manipulating both cognition and behaviour.

As all fables are necessarily allegoric, the notion of allegory requires further investigation. Allegory works at multiple levels and employs different poetic tropes (Gabriel 2000) that can shape both intended and unintended interpretations of organisational change. The poetic tropes applied in this article are summarised in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Poetic tropes (Gabriel 2000)

Poetic tropes	Definition
Attribution of agency	‘Turns something passive ... into something active, purposeful, and conscious, something capable of being an agent’ (p39).
Attribution of unity	‘An entire class of people ... are treated as an undifferentiated unity’ (p38).
Attribution of motive	Causal relationships between different events
Attribution of fixed qualities	The labelling of individuals following certain behaviours.

These poetic tropes are not static, but subject to dynamic interpretation, which is aided by the use of metaphor. We argue that organisational change can be seen as a multi-story process (Buchanan and Dawson 2007) in which some interpretations will be advocated while others

will be neglected and forgotten, or sometimes even silenced (Reissner 2008). Managers are likely to be bound up in a modernist paradigm which assumes that organisational life is indeed manageable and that it is their role to create a sense of unity among organisational actors to produce a certain set of results (Cummings 2002). Critical questions about how such unity is produced are often unwelcome and ignored. Yet, it is managers' responsibility to translate the insights gained through publications such as *Our iceberg is melting* into organisational practices that exploit the creative potential of story and metaphor rather than stifling it.

Hence, more attention needs to be given to the seductive and manipulative power of story and metaphor in management writing and practice. With the use of story and metaphor increasingly being advocated as tools to manage organisational change (e.g. Brown et al. 2005, Denning 2005), both the mechanisms that make story and metaphor effective communication tools and their potential to seduce and manipulate the audience into thinking and behaving in the advocated way need to be examined more closely. We demonstrate how story and metaphor can be interpreted flexibly to meet organisational actors' as opposed to managers' agendas. Our article seeks to contribute to this debate.

Our iceberg is melting retold

A colony of penguins lived a contented life on their iceberg. Fred, an observant penguin studying the iceberg, found that it was in danger of breaking apart. He shared his concerns with Alice, one of ten members of the colony's leadership council. Alice was sceptical, but Fred showed her fissures underneath the iceberg that might fill with water, which, if expanding in the freezing temperatures in the forthcoming winter, could break the iceberg apart. Alice shared Fred's concerns and informed her fellow leaders about what Fred had shown her, and after some deliberation Fred was invited to present his ideas. He constructed a model of the iceberg with which he explained his observations, but NoNo dismissed Fred's theory and some other penguins agreed. As proof, Fred filled a glass bottle, which had been found near the iceberg, with water, and as predicted it broke apart the following night. The leaders called a general assembly, in which Alice told the colony everything that had happened.

Head penguin Louis formed a change team to lead them through the challenge. He appointed Alice and Fred, an intellectual bird nicknamed Professor, and Buddy, a young and charismatic penguin. The change team began to explore potential solutions to their melting iceberg, all of which were found to be too time-consuming (the next winter was only two months away) or otherwise not workable. The breakthrough came when Fred spotted a

seagull on the iceberg that was interrogated by several members of the change team. They concluded that they could learn from the gulls' nomadic lifestyle, moving from one habitat to another, as conditions required. Louis called another general assembly and Buddy told the colony about their encounter with the seagull and the adoption of a nomadic lifestyle. NoNo regarded the proposal as far too risky, as the theory of the melting iceberg had not been proven. At the end of the meeting, some penguins were digesting the information, others were confused or sceptical, and a minority were convinced of the absurdity of the plans.

To convince more penguins of the value of a nomadic lifestyle, posters were put up on the iceberg and its surroundings to constantly remind all penguins that a nomadic lifestyle was their future. An increasing number of penguins joined the change effort. Scouts were sent out to search for suitable icebergs to which the colony could move before the forthcoming winter. NoNo worked very hard to create panic among the colony. Louis assigned the Professor as a constant companion to keep NoNo out of mischief – successfully.

The biggest challenge was the penguins' need to build up fat reserves for the long winters. Sending out scouts to discover potential new habitats would leave them with insufficient time to catch the required amounts of fish as the penguins in this colony only share their fish with their offspring. However, the chicks organised a festive celebration for the returning scouts and charged two fish per penguin as admission fee. No parent dared to stay away or come without the two fish. The scouts were honoured for their heroic deeds on their return and presented with the fish and a medal. The colony listened carefully to the scouts' tales about life beyond their iceberg, relieving some of their fears about a nomadic lifestyle. A second wave of scouts was sent out to find the best possible iceberg and just as winter was about to begin, the colony moved to their new home. The leadership team continued with their mission to find richer icebergs every season, and soon the colony had become nomads.

An orthodox reading

Our iceberg is melting was written to illustrate John Kotter's(1996) eight-step model to managing organisational change. It follows in the footsteps of other business novels (e.g. Blanchard 1981, Johnson 1998), seeking to teach their audience otherwise abstract concepts in a more entertaining and memorable fashion. Such books provide a welcome change from often explicitly prescriptive and jargon-ridden management publications. *Our iceberg is melting* is a story that entertains, explains, inspires, educates and seeks to convince its readers (cf. Gabriel 2000, 1) of a particular approach to organisational change management. It tries to meet a managerial need for 'insights and recipes that are punchy, succinct, explicit, and plausible' (Sorge and Van Witteloostuijn 2004, 1207).Kotter's approach to change

management is summarised in Table 2 below, followed by a brief outline of its underlying assumptions.

Table 2: The eight step model (cited in Kotter and Rathgeber, 130-131)

Step	Definition
1. Create a sense of urgency	‘Help see others the need for change and the importance of acting immediately.’
2. Pull together the guiding team	‘Make sure there is a powerful group guiding the change – one with leadership skills, credibility, communications ability, authority, analytical skills, and a sense of urgency.’
3. Develop the change vision and strategy	‘Clarify how the future will be different from the past, and how you can make that future a reality.’
4. Communicate for understanding and buy-in	‘Make sure as many others as possible understand and accept the vision and the strategy.’
5. Empower others to act	‘Remove as many barriers as possible so that those who want to make the vision a reality can do so.’
6. Produce short-term wins	‘Create some visible, unambiguous successes as soon as possible.’
7. Don’t let up	‘Press harder and faster after the first successes. Be relentless with initiating change after change until the vision is reality.’
8. Create a new culture	‘Hold on to new ways of behaving, and make sure they succeed, until they become strong enough to replace old traditions.’

This approach assumes that organisational change can be managed through a step-by-step process, that the leaders’ authority is not being challenged, and that effective communication ensures organisational actors’ buy-in. It is informed by a modernist view of organisations (Cummings 2002) and organisational change management, which regards change as a normal part of organisational life (Morgan and Spicer 2009). Change is closely linked here to action, which gives managers a crucial role in conceptualising, implementing and managing organisational change (Sorge and Van Witteloostuijn 2004). The following analysis of *Our iceberg is melting* demonstrates how the skilful use of story and the controlling features of metaphoric representations (Fletcher 1964) can convince readers to adopt this approach to organisational change management.

The structure of the fable

Structural analysis is about how a story is told to fulfil the narrator's aims (Riessmann 2008). *Our iceberg is melting* seeks to persuade readers to employ Kotter's approach to change management and to persuade organisational actors to participate in it (attribution of unity). Such persuasion is sought to be accomplished through the fable's structure (cf. Burke 1952) that enables readers to organise information, memories and experiences into a temporal order (Bruner 1990) and give them a sense of coherence (Linde 1993) through processes of emplotment (Polkinghorne 1995).

Our iceberg is melting is an epic story (Gabriel 2000) with the following structure: stable state (penguins living happily on their iceberg) – crisis (Fred's discovery and the subsequent events) – crisis resolution (nomad penguins); Bruner (1986) calls this a 'life-like story'. The way to the climax builds tension and makes readers want to learn more about the ending of the story, engaging them emotionally. This structure moves the story forward (Abbott 2007) without a natural break for reflection. It strengthens the assumption that the status quo of an organisation (stable state) is not sustainable (crisis), and that it needs to be altered to give the organisation a better future (crisis resolution). The metaphor of the journey from iceberg to iceberg mirrors the fable's structure and further reinforces the need for change. The content of *Our iceberg is melting* becomes more memorable (Morgan and Dennehy 1997) through the sequence of events than more abstract coverage would provide. Readers can recall different elements of the story in relation to a crisis that they may be facing, and they can draw lessons from it (attribution of motive).

The metaphoric representations in the fable

The characteristics displayed by the penguins are metaphoric representations of human-like traits, roles and behaviours that are widely experienced in real-life organisations (attribution of agency). We propose that emotional engagement with the fable is created through the use of these metaphoric representations, which encourages readers to connect the story with their reality. Readers can see similar traits in their organisations and identify with the penguins' characteristics, problems and actions.

Fred is 'unusually curious, observant and creative; level-headed' (Freifeld 2008. 28) and represents those organisational actors that see both perils and possibilities at an early stage. The fable directs readers to recognise that such characters are important players in organisational change, raising awareness about potential difficulties before they become apparent, providing evidence for their existence and seeking new ways of approaching them.

Alice is a ‘tough, practical bird with a reputation of getting things done, ... impossible to intimidate’ (ibid) and represents the ideal manager. She is focused on the task but demonstrates awareness of the political nature of organisations and her own power. The fable suggests that such characters are often respected for their drive and ability to gain support; they are seen as central in the implementation of change as they will deal with resistance and achieve results.

Louis is ‘patient, conservative, not easily flustered, respected by all except NoNo and the teenagers, smart’ (ibid) and represents the ideal CEO. The fable depicts the intelligence and wisdom of such characters who know when to act and when to do nothing, which gives them dignity and respect. It is telling that Louis becomes ‘grandfather Louis’ at the end of the book, epitomising his experience and wisdom.

The Professor is ‘an intellectual heavyweight’ and ‘well read, fascinated by interesting questions’ (ibid). The fable proposes that such characters have a wealth of knowledge, excel in exploring new ideas and can help overcome barriers to organisational change through questioning, exploring and explaining.

Buddy is a ‘quiet, boyishly handsome penguin everyone liked and trusted; not ambitious, not an intellectual heavyweight’ (ibid). The fable highlights that such characters with charisma and people skills can reassure other organisational actors and contribute empathy and emotional intelligence to organisational change management.

NoNo represents the ‘unteachable, stubborn [and] dangerous traditionalist ... waiting for you to fail’ (ISB Worldwide 2007) who sabotages change. NoNo can also refer to more impersonal barriers to change, such as ineffective systems and procedures (ibid).

Finally, in the fable the scouts (who become heroes) are courageous, exposing themselves to considerable danger to explore new territories to help the colony make change come true.

The characters in *Our iceberg is melting* can be categorised into heroes (leadership council, change team, penguin chicks and scouts) and villains (NoNo and his allies). The former are described in idealistic terms – level-headed, practical, patient, respected, liked, trusted (Freifeld 2008) – and their actions are portrayed as vital to achieving organisational success. The latter are described in negative terms – unteachable, stubborn, dangerous (ISB

Worldwide 2007) – which suggests that resistance to change endangers the colony (organisation) and its survival (attribution of fixed qualities).

The characters described above and their status as hero or villain encourages readers to emotionally engage with the story and to reflect on their own organisational situation to aid their analysis and management of organisational change. We argue that the fable directs managers towards connecting their reflections with action (attribution of agency). In particular, Kotter (as cited in Freifeld 2008) advocates that managers construct their change team in a similar way to that taken by Head Penguin Louis to ensure that the characters’ key traits (except NoNo’s) discussed above are represented to make organisational change a success.

In addition, there are other important metaphors representative of factors in organisational change, the skilful use of which will increase the readers’ emotional engagement with the story. These metaphors will further enable them to see their own organisational situation through the story; they are summarised in Table 3 below.

Table 3: Key metaphors and their meaning (ISB Worldwide 2007)

Iceberg	Habitat or something else that an organisation depends on (e.g. market segment) or that is has strong bonds with (e.g. location).
Cave, fissures, bottle	Visible evidence for the need for change (e.g. declining market share or customer satisfaction). It is such visible symbols that can help to convince organisational actors of the need for change.
Hero medal	Visible recognition of achievement in the change process (e.g. public thank you, award, promotion).
Seagull	Source of inspiration that can become the basis of a new vision for the organisation.

Such emotional engagement complements the epic nature of the fable (see Gabriel 2000); its emphasis on action encourages readers to interpret how they can play their part in making change come true in their organisation (attribution of agency). The metaphoric nature of the characters and symbols can give readers a new language to conceptualise organisational change differently and to make the case for change and for a particular approach to change management. Notions of ‘iceberg’, ‘bottles’, ‘fissures’ etc. allow readers to examine change

in their organisation and to identify threats and opportunities from a different and potentially less threatening angle. In particular, the fable can introduce new interpretive frameworks that allow organisational actors to modify prevailing ones in line with organisational change (Armenakis and Bedeian 1992), by reflecting on their experiences and changing their perceptions. The interplay of story and metaphoric representations in the fable can thus open up new ways of thinking and acting (Barrett and Cooperrider 1990), and of facilitating organisational transformation (Sackmann 1989)^{iv}.

Our iceberg is melting demonstrates that the leadership council (senior management team) and change team initiate and direct organisational change. It also suggests that each member of the colony (organisation) has a place in the hierarchy that contributes to organisational change as part of the plan. The fable illustrates how different organisational actors can and should have a role in organisational change. For example, each penguin of the change team was selected because of their specific skills (attribution of fixed qualities) – Fred for his foresight, Buddy for his charisma, and the Professor for his analytic thinking. Even characters that are easily overlooked, such as the penguin chicks, have been assigned a crucial role by Kotter and Rathgeber. The message for leaders, advocated by the fable's authors, is this: they need to design organisational change in such a way that all organisational actors can play an active part. The stereotypical nature of the characters in *Our iceberg is melting* may help them identify the key skills and strengths in their colleagues and subordinates to build a change team with the skills to lead and manage change effectively (Kotter as cited in Freifeld 2008).

The themes of the fable

Thematic analysis of a story concerns the meaning of its content (Riessmann 2008). *Our iceberg is melting* has been skilfully put together to encompass Kotter's (1996) eight steps of change – urgency (a solution to the iceberg in danger of breaking apart is needed quickly), change team (different characters contribute their unique skills to the change process), vision and strategy (becoming nomads), communication (meetings, posters, etc.), empowerment (assigning the penguin chicks a role), short-term wins (the scouts returning unscathed), relentless pursuit of the end goal (constant moves from iceberg to iceberg) and creating a new culture (penguins having adopted a fully nomadic lifestyle).

The emotional engagement of the audience through structure and characters encourages readers to relate the events in the story to their own experiences, blurring the lines between the fable and organisational reality through the use of allegory (Fletcher 1964). Kotter and Rathgeber's (2005) intention was that readers would associate the colony with an

organisation (probably their own), the leadership council with senior management, and that they would relate the individual penguins' characteristics to themselves and to their colleagues (see Kotter as cited in Freifield 2008). Through the use of metaphoric representations, readers are encouraged to translate the penguins' solution to their own situation, learning from their actions and heroic deeds. After all, who wants to be outdone by mere penguins?

The structure and themes of the fable are reinforced by the four poetic tropes (Gabriel 2000) introduced above. They strengthen the readers' emotional engagement with the fable and underline its central message. Throughout the fable, these elements work hand-in-glove to create a compelling narrative with a happy ending. The fable's life-like structure (Bruner 1986) is complemented by the metaphor of the penguins' physical and cognitive journey in what Browning (1991) calls an ascending storyline. The stable state, epitomised by life on the iceberg, and the subsequent crisis represented by cave, fissures, and bottle is transformed into a nomadic lifestyle through agency and heroism. *Our iceberg is melting* is an allegory which encourages readers through emotional engagement to revisit change in their organisation as well as their own behaviours (Armenakis and Bedeian 1992).

An alternative reading

Ambiguity is an inherent feature of allegory that allows for multiple interpretations of story and metaphor. Our second, more critical reading^v examines how the fable implicitly advocates the stigmatisation and silencing of dissenting voices (cf. Grey 2003) through the metaphoric representation of its main characters. We argue that the fable may legitimise the manipulation of organisational actors' thoughts and behaviours by managers. The fable sanctions a dominant view that normalises organisational change and puts organisational actors into a 'permanent state of emergency' (Morgan and Spicer 2009).

Behind the metaphoric representations in the fable

The previous reading has established that *Our iceberg is melting* is an epic story (Gabriel 2000) with a strong focus on agency and heroism. Critical readers, however, recognise that the allegory is idealistic because the characteristics of organisational actors are more complex and fluid than the description of characters in the orthodox reading suggests (attribution of fixed qualities). While there is merit in creating a typology of roles and behaviours for analytic purposes (as we suggest Kotter and Rathgeber have purposively done, cf. Freifield 2008), in practice there is a risk that the typology limits managers' expectations of which roles and behaviours organisational actors demonstrate. These expectations can lead to

organisational actors being pigeonholed, which in turn may stifle their repertoire of potential roles, behaviours and skills that they contribute to organisational change.

The categorisation of characters' behaviour as heroes and villains remains unchanged for this reading, yet the interpretation of which behaviours characterise them as heroes and villains is dynamic. For instance, only a fine line separates the definition of the patient and conservative Louis and the stubborn and unteachable NoNo. The orthodox reading interprets critical questioning like NoNo's as resistance to change, which in itself is regarded as an irrational response ('villainous behaviour') by mainstream management thinking. Critical readers challenge this interpretation in line with recent research (e.g. Ford et al. 2008) which argues that what is widely labelled as resistance can be a resource for organisational change ('heroic behaviour').

Critical questioning of organisational change and its management is an important function in the change process to test the drivers and potential merits of a change initiative and to allow for modifications at an early stage. We propose that such behaviour is heroic because it takes courage to challenge beliefs that are widely shared within an organisation. Such behaviour also transfers abstract notions of heroism (as advocated by the orthodox reading) into real behaviour; it translates into the role of the 'devil's advocate' to ensure that multiple options are considered and decisions are taken in the organisation's best interest.

In the orthodox reading, the approach to organisational change management is to stigmatise dissenting voices as a 'terrible NoNo' when their only concern may be to alert others of impending danger or an obstacle that others have not yet seen – just as Fred does at the beginning of the fable. Critical readers recognise the risks associated with the stigmatisation of dissenting voices as implicitly advocated in the fable and act differently. Critical readers listen, accept and acknowledge dissenting voices to ensure that other possibilities and alternative courses of action have been explored before a decision is made.

The orthodox reading suggests that dissenting voices will easily be silenced just like NoNo in the fable. Critical readers understand that dissenting voices in organisations, despite being marginalised, continue to be present. Dissenting voices often generate an undercurrent (see Gabriel's 1995 notion of 'unmanaged organisation') that undermines the change message and that grows stronger as other organisational actors join in for whom the story of change in their organisation does not make sense.

Furthermore, critical readers reject the authoritarian position taken by the orthodox reading. In *Our iceberg is melting* it is the leadership council and change team that initiate and direct change, while ordinary penguins have little say. The latter are portrayed as passive actors who will eventually be persuaded by the posters around them that becoming nomads is the right solution to their (apparently) melting iceberg. Critical readers do not take for granted that the leadership council (senior management) knows what is best for the colony (organisation) and that the rest of the colony (organisation) follows in the direction set before them – albeit sometimes grudgingly.

Critical readers also reject that it is only the leadership and change teams that drive change; they understand that managing organisational change is a more democratic process than the orthodox reading suggests. The colony^{vi} is one of the key metaphors in *Our iceberg is melting*, yet one that is largely taken for granted. The orthodox reading constructs the image of a colony as a place of unity, solidarity and harmony that is being disrupted by dissenting voices like NoNo's. Critical readers, in contrast, associate the notion of colony with democracy, multiplicity of voice (cf. Buchanan and Dawson 2007) and interpretative flexibility. In this understanding, *Our iceberg is melting* can be regarded as a call for more democratic and pluralistic organisations rather than the authoritarian depiction of colony (organisational) life advocated in the orthodox reading – organisations in which dissent is regarded as an inherent and important part.

Penguins in the boardroom?

Without a critical lens, *Our iceberg is melting* both draws on and feeds a simplistic view of organisations that has dominated mainstream management thinking for decades (Cummings 2002). The fable attempts to promote an optimistic interpretation of organisational change management, which a more critical interpretation challenges. *Our iceberg is melting* offers a neat step-by-step approach to organisational change management that managers and management consultants can follow in the intended, prescriptive fashion. Critical readers, however, understand the risk of manipulating organisational actors into thinking and behaving in a particular way fostered by such a story. Although readers are aware of the allegoric qualities of the fable – they know that *Our iceberg is melting* is not about a colony of emperor penguins but about organisations, they may feel protective about the penguins and wish them to succeed, and the notion of colony will also evoke a powerful picture in readers' minds about the qualities that organisations are supposed to have. Such emotions and images may encourage readers to identify with the fable too readily, discouraging them to examine its structure, themes, tropes and metaphoric representations as well as any potentially hidden meanings.

The orthodox reading of the fable (which, we argue, is what Kotter and Rathgeber intended) takes for granted that both the change issue (the melting iceberg) and its solution (learning from the seagulls' nomadic lifestyle) are exogenous forces. Critical readers question if the iceberg is indeed melting (i.e. whether there is a change issue in the first place, cf. Sturdy and Grey 2003), if action is required (Sorge and Van Witteloostuijn 2004), and if solutions can be found more fruitfully within the organisation; these are important questions that the fable ignores.

It is also worth highlighting that in many instances, crises will disappear without negative implications when simply ignored. This is one of the inherent problems with organisational change management; nobody can know what would have happened if a different course of action (or no action at all) had been taken (Sturdy and Grey 2003) and when the success of organisational change can be reliably measured. Critical readers realise that *Our iceberg is melting* simply pretends these dilemmas do not exist; but they are conscious of such dilemmas and seek to address them in their own management practice.

Moreover, the fable can be a powerful tool for dissenting organisational actors to subvert the orthodox interpretation of *Our iceberg is melting*. The didactic nature of the fable makes it particularly vulnerable to subversive interpretations if it is highlighted that the underlying facts are incorrect, as Mitchell (2007) suggests:

If you pay attention to the facts, you'll find that their story doesn't quite make sense. Emperor Penguins live on the pack ice that forms seasonally. As the pack ice retreats, they simply move to the edge. Seldom would they stay on an iceberg. Why? Because the ice breaks up when the youngsters are old enough to swim to the main ice pack. If you read science articles, you'll also learn that what is more likely to threaten a penguin community is that their iceberg drifts into an area where the winter freeze isolates the colony too far from the open sea. The penguins have to walk to the sea rather than dive in to get food. Also, most icebergs are going to eventually release into warmer seas and melt that way rather than be split by freezing water as described in this book.

Kotter and Rathgeber (2005, 4) make explicit that fables must not be judged by criteria of factual truth: 'life for our penguins is not exactly as you would find it on a National Geographic documentary. Fables are like that'. Yet, the lack of factual truth in the fable ('sloppy biology') provides dissenting voices with a case to challenge the credibility of the advocated approach to organisational change management; in other words, sloppy biology is equated with sloppy thinking. Dissenting organisational actors can legitimately question the wisdom of following the advice of someone 'who does not even know that ...!'

Disaster is never far away in an epic and heroic tale like *Our iceberg is melting*, and the proximity of epic agency and heroism can also be exploited by dissenting organisational actors: the story can be brought to a different and less happy ending, thus challenging the wisdom of the fable and sowing seeds of doubt among organisational actors about the advocated approach to change management. One alternative ending could be: on one of their journeys from one iceberg to another, the nomadic penguins are happily devoured by a pack of hungry seals. End of story.

Discussion and conclusion

Evidently the story and metaphoric representations *Our iceberg is melting* can be subject to different readings, with subsequent impact on expectations of organisational change. Our first reading has demonstrated that story and metaphor combined can be a powerful way to engage the audience (Armstrong 1992, Neuhauser 1993) and to communicate an otherwise abstract model of organisational change management (cf. Denning 2005). Its power lies in the way in which structure, metaphoric representations, themes and poetic tropes interact to reinforce the book's central message and to encourage readers' engagement with the advocated approach to organisational change management. It is a story that convinces many readers (practising managers and management consultants) that this approach will work successfully in their own organisation (just as it worked for the penguins) and that they ought to give it a try. This is reflected by customer reviews on Amazon.co.uk (e.g. Bretts 2008, Fielding 2009). It can therefore be regarded as a good story – a story that educates, convinces and inspires its readers (cf. Gabriel 2000).

The genre and length of *Our iceberg is melting* may also contribute to its convincing power. The use of fable is a novel way of communicating theories of organisational change management and is therefore more enjoyable; yet this approach to organisational change management remains firmly located in the modernist tradition (Cummings 2002) which, together with the authors' credentials, may enhance its credibility among managers and management consultants. The allegoric qualities of a fable allow readers to explore organisational change and its management in their own organisation in a more detached– and therefore less threatening – manner. The book can be read quickly and provides readers with a framework according to which they can construct their own journey of change through the power of story.

The fable's themes and language may provide readers with a different way of analysing, interpreting and expressing change, which makes it a potentially helpful tool for managers seeking to manage change differently. Just like the penguin chicks at the bottom of the

pecking order, more organisational actors may be given a role in making change happen, which may be an exhilarating and liberating experience for them because it gives them a sense of power and empowerment (cf. Morgan and Spicer 2009, 260).

But *Our iceberg is melting* also leaves space for readers' own contextual interpretations and solutions unintended by the book's authors, thereby potentially opening up new ways of thinking (Jacobs and Heracleous 2006) and creating new knowledge (Grant et al. 2004) through the use of metaphoric representations. Our alternative reading has raised two overarching issues: firstly, it identifies the risks associated with an uncritical adoption of the advocated approach to organisational change management; and secondly, it outlines how disillusioned organisational actors can use the fable to voice dissent. The fable carries the risk of seducing and manipulating the audience as they follow in their hurry to learn whether the story leads to a happy ending. The interaction between structure, themes, poetic tropes and metaphoric representations in the fable encourage readers to think in the advocated way (Herman and Vervaeck 2007).

The fable's characters can be categorised into heroes and villains, but what for one interpretation is heroic, can be villainous in the other and legitimise the silencing of dissenting voices in organisations. But the silencing and stigmatisation of dissenting voices can result in missed opportunities to identify obstacles or alternative courses of action, and in the loss of key players in the organisation with informal power (like Buddy in the fable), untapped skills and other people resources. Adopting a more critical and democratic approach enables managers to examine the dynamics and internal factors (like systems and procedures) in relation to the change issue and make more informed decisions. However, *Our iceberg is melting* does not explore such risks, and it could be argued that the book reinforces the often rigid power structures of organisational hierarchies rather than challenging them. Who would suspect that a colourful story with penguins as the main characters can be used as a source of control?

Both our readings have demonstrated that the ambiguity inherent in the fable allows for alternative readings and the construction of organisational change as a multi-story process (Buchanan and Dawson 2007). We use the poetic tropes identified above to offer a summary illustration of how they can be applied to the fable and how resulting interpretations differ (see Table 4 below).

Table 4: Application and interpretation of poetic tropes in the two readings

Poetic trope	Application	Moral Reading 1	Moral Reading 2
Attribution of agency	Agency is a key theme of the fable: the penguins live a passive life which they are forced to give up to become nomads. There are other instances that highlight the notion of agency. For instance, Fred takes the courage to inform Alice about his observations. The scouts volunteer for a very dangerous assignment, and the penguin chicks organise food for the scouts.	All organisational actors have a part to play in making change happen in their organisation regardless of position or power.	All organisational actors are expected to participate in change whether they like it or not. They may feel manipulated.
Attribution of motive	Causal relationships link different elements of a story and provide coherence and meaning. For instance, the penguins need to leave their iceberg because it is in danger of breaking apart.	Life-like stories (Bruner 1986) establish causal relationships between the context, setting and characters of a story. Similarly, causal relationships can be established between the characters, their role and their achievements.	Scepticism as to whether the causal relationships established in the fable are justified (unfounded motive).
Attribution of unity	The colony of penguins is regarded as a unity as are the organisations that they	The fable demonstrates that unity is important to make change	Unity is illusory, dissenting voices are an inherent and important part

	<p>epitomise. It is a powerful image that suggests more unity than generally associated with organisations, potentially making organisational actors question their sense of unity bringing different organisational groups closer together.</p>	<p>happen – the colony can only survive if all penguins become nomads.</p>	<p>of organisational change.</p>
<p>Attribution of fixed qualities</p>	<p>Each character in the book is a metaphoric representation of a common organisational role.</p>	<p>Readers can identify with the characters and scrutinise their own behaviours, beliefs, values and norms as well as those of other organisational actors.</p>	<p>Organisational actors' roles are fluid. Stereotyping is potentially damaging and discriminatory.</p>

While *Our iceberg is melting* allows for interpretative flexibility and multiplicity of meaning as demonstrated above, the credentials of the fable's authors will favour the orthodox, dominant and intended reading. The fable offers what many practising managers and management consultants are looking for: a straightforward approach to organisational change management that provides them both with structure to guide them and space to adapt it to their unique circumstances (Sorge and Van Witteloostuijn 2004). However, it is the decision of managers how to interpret and use the fable in their approach to organisational change management.

Hence, *Our iceberg is melting* can be read as an inspiring or oppressive story (and variations between these extremes) by organisational actors. It can be inspiring if the principles of organisational change management advocated by the fable are applied in a way that respects the organisation's history and culture and helps organisational actors to 'frame future options' (Gardner 1997, 290). However, it can be oppressing if it is used as one of many 'decontextualized, universalistic, and general-purpose recipes about supposedly required business, management and organizational practices' (Sorge and Van Witteloostuijn 2004, 1208). The story can offer structure to guide organisational change, while its metaphoric qualities encourage creativity and potentially also critical discussion. We suggest that managers and employees should draw on the interpretations illustrated by both readings, using the structure and imaginative potential of the first to explore the key questions raised by the second.

In conclusion, our two readings have demonstrated how story and metaphoric representations in *Our iceberg is melting* allow for interpretative flexibility and multiplicity of meaning. While this can open up new ways of conceptualising and approaching organisational change management (Palmer and Dunford 1996b), it can also lead to fragmentation among organisational actors by shifting dissenting interpretations into the realms of the unmanaged organisation (Gabriel 1995), thereby potentially being counter-productive to organisational change management. At present, management discourse focuses on the inspirational role of story and metaphor in the management of organisational change. Our article develops this debate through a critical examination of the inherent ambiguity and interpretative flexibility in the fable and aims to raise readers' awareness of unintended and potentially subversive interpretations.

[7,258 words]

References

- Abbott, H. Porter 2007. Story, plot, and narration. In *The Cambridge companion to narrative*, ed. David Herman, 39-51. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Armenakis, Achilles A., and Arthur G. Bedeian. 1992. The role of metaphors in organizational change. *Group and Organization Management*, 17: 242-248.
- Armstrong, David. 1992. *Managing by storying around: A new method of leadership*. New York: Currency.
- Barrett, Frank J., and David L. Cooperrider 1990. Generative metaphor intervention: A new behavioral approach for working with systems divided by conflict and caught in defensive perception. *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, 26: 219-239.
- Blanchard, Kenneth. 1981. *The one minute manager*. New York: Berkley.
- Bretts, J. A. 2008. A fable that powerfully conveys management ideas. Book review, Amazon.co.uk, <http://www.amazon.co.uk/Our-Iceberg-Melting-Succeeding-Conditions/>
- Brown, John Seely, Stephen Denning, Larry S. Prusak and Katalina Groh. 2005. *Storytelling in organizations: Why storytelling is transforming 21st century organizations and management*. Oxford: Elsevier.
- Broussine, Mike, and Russ Vince. 1996. Working with metaphor towards organisational change. *Organisation development: Metaphorical exploration*, ed. Cliff Oswick and David Grant, 57-72. London: Pitman
- Browning, Larry D. 1991. Organizational narratives and organizational structure. *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, 4: 69-76.
- Bruner, Jerome. 1986. *Actual minds, possible worlds*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Bruner, Jerome. 1990. *Acts of meaning*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Bruner, Jerome. 1991. The narrative construction of reality. *Critical Inquiry*, 18: 1-21.
- Buchanan, David, and Patrick Dawson. 2007. Discourse and audience: Organizational change as a multi-story process. *Journal of Management Studies*, 44: 669-686.
- Burke, Kenneth. 1952. *A rhetoric of motives*. New York: Prentice Hall.
- Cornelissen, JoepP. 2005. Beyond compare: Metaphor in organization theory. *Academy of Management Review*. 30: 751-64.
- Cummings, Stephen. 2002. *Recreating strategy*. London: Sage.

Denning, Stephen. 2005. *The leader's guide to storytelling: Mastering the art and discipline of business narrative*. Chichester: Wiley.

Fielding, Roger. 2009. Great outline of Kotter's approach to change. Book review, Amazon.co.uk, <http://www.amazon.co.uk/Our-Iceberg-Melting-Succeeding-Conditions/>

Fletcher, Angus. 1964. *Allegory: The theory of a symbolic mode*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Ford, Jeffrey, D., Laurie W. Ford, and Angelo D'Amelio. 2008. Resistance to change: The rest of the story. *Academy of Management Review*, 33: 362-377.

Freifeld, Lori. 2008. Change with penguins: Harvard guru John Kotter's penguin fable and training program to teach organizations how to Lead Bold Change. *Training*. June 2008, 24-28.

Gabriel, Yiannis. 1995. The unmanaged organization: Stories, fantasies and subjectivity. *Organization Studies*, 16: 477-501.

Gabriel, Yiannis. 1998. The use of stories. In *Qualitative methods and analysis in organizational research: A practical guide*, ed. Gillian Symon and Catherine Cassell, 135-160. London: Sage.

Gabriel, Yiannis. 2000. *Storytelling in organizations: Facts, fictions, and fantasies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Gabriel, Yiannis. 2008. *Organizing words: A critical thesaurus for social and organization studies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Gardner, Howard. 1997. *Leading minds: An anatomy of leadership*. London: HarperCollins.

Grant, David, Cynthia Hardy, Cliff Oswick, and Linda L. Putnam. 2004. Introduction: Organizational discourse: Exploring the field. In *The Sage handbook of organizational discourse*, ed. David Grant, Cynthia Hardy, Cliff Oswick and Linda Putnam, 1-36. London: Sage.

Grey, Chris. 2003. The fetish of change. *Tamara*, 2: 1-19.

Herman, Luc, and Bart Vervaeck. 2007. Ideology. In *The Cambridge companion to narrative*, ed. David Herman, 217-230. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

ISB Worldwide. 2007. *Participant's workbook v2.8*. Dallas, Texas.

Jacobs, Claus D., and Loizos T. Heracleous. 2006. Constructing shared understanding: The role of embodied metaphor in organization development. *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, 42: 207-226.

Johnson, Spencer. 1998. *Who moved my cheese?* London: Vermillion.

- Kotter, John. 1996. *Leading change*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press.
- Kotter, John, and Holger Rathgeber. 2005. *Our iceberg is melting: Changing and succeeding under any conditions*. Basingstoke: Pan Macmillan.
- Linde, Catherine. 1993. *Life stories: The creation of coherence*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Mitchell, Donald. 2007. Penguins learn to stick their heads in the ice beneath them. Book review, Amazon.co.uk, <http://www.amazon.co.uk/Our-Iceberg-Melting-Succeeding-Conditions/>
- Morgan, Gareth. 1980. *Images of organization*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Morgan, Gareth. 1996. An afterword: Is there anything more to be said about metaphor? *Metaphor and organizations*, ed. David Grant, and Cliff Oswick, 227-240, London: Sage.
- Morgan, Glenn, and André Spicer. 2009. Critical approaches to organizational change. *The Oxford handbook of critical management studies*, ed. Mats Alvesson, Todd Bridgman, and Hugh Willmott, 251-266. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Morgan, Sandra, and Robert F. Dennehy. 1997. The power of organizational storytelling: A management development perspective. *Journal of Management Development*, 16: 494-501.
- Neuhauser, Peg. 1993. *Corporate legends & lore: The power of storytelling as a management tool*. Austin, TX: PCN Associates.
- Palmer, Ian, and Richard Dunford. 1996a. Conflicting uses of metaphors: Reconceptualizing their use in the field of organizational change. *Academy of Management Review*, 21: 691-717.
- Palmer, Ian, and Richard Dunford. 1996b. Understanding organisations through metaphor. *Organisation development: Metaphorical exploration*, ed. Cliff Oswick and David Grant, 7-19. London: Pitman.
- Parker, Martin, and Robyn Thomas. 2011. What is a critical journal. *Organization*, 18: 419-427.
- Polkinghorne, Donald E. 1995. Narrative configuration in qualitative analysis. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 8: 5-23.
- Reissner Stefanie C. 2008. *Narratives of organisational change and learning: Making sense of testing times*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.
- Rhodes, Carl, and Andrew D. Brown. 2005. Narrative, organizations and research. *International Journal of Management Reviews*, 7, 167-188.

Riessmann, Catherine K. 2008. *Narrative methods for the human sciences*. London: Sage.

Sackman, Sonja. 1989. The role of metaphors in organizational transformation. *Human Relations*, 42: 463-485.

Simmons, Annette. 2003. Story, poetry and metaphor: Subjective solutions for subjective problems. *Reflections*, 4: 41-48.

Sorge, Arndt, and Arjen Van Witteloostuijn. 2004. The (non)sense of organizational change: An essay about universal management hypes, sick consultancy metaphors, and healthy organization theories. *Organization Studies*, 25: 1205-1231.

Sturdy, Andrew, and Chris Grey. 2003. Beneath and beyond organizational change management: Exploring alternatives. *Organization*, 10: 651-662.

The Concise Oxford English Dictionary. 2010. Oxford: Oxford University Press, <http://www.oxfordreference.com>.

Weick, Karl E. 1995. *Sensemaking in organizations*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

ⁱ Story is ‘an account of imaginary or real people and events’ (*The Concise Oxford English Dictionary* 2010).

ⁱⁱ Metaphor is ‘a figure of speech in which a word or phrase is applied to something to which it is not literally applicable’ (*The Concise Oxford English Dictionary* 2010).

ⁱⁱⁱ Fable is ‘short story, typically with animal characters, conveying a moral’ (*The Concise Oxford English Dictionary* 2010).

^{iv} The workshop programme *Leading bold changeTM*, which accompanies the fable, builds on these mechanisms to enable managers to design and implement organisational change in a constructive manner (see www.leadingboldchange.co.uk).

^v Even though we refer to scholars of Critical Management Studies (CMS) in this section, our use of the term ‘critical’ is not directly related to CMS or critical theory. By critical, we mean refusing to take the fable’s message at face value, questioning its assumptions and exposing possible alternative meanings (cf. Parker and Thomas 2011).

^{vi} We would like to remind readers that colony refers to ‘a community of animals ... living close together’ (*The Concise Oxford English Dictionary* 2010).