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# JOURNAL OF MANAGEMENT INQUIRY

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The **JOURNAL OF MANAGEMENT INQUIRY**, sponsored by the Western Academy of Management, is a refereed journal for scholars and professionals in management, organizational behavior, strategy, and human resources. Its intent is to explore ideas and build knowledge in management theory and practice, with a focus on creative, nontraditional research. The journal seeks to maintain a constructive balance between innovation and quality, and at the same time widely define the forms that relevant contributions to the field can take.

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**ESSAYS**

## Editors' Introduction

RAMON J. ALDAG  
DEBORAH DOUGHERTY

In his essay, "The Idols of Organizational Theory: From Francis Bacon to the Dilbert Principle," Eric Kessler employs Francis Bacon's "four idols which beset man's mind" as an organizing mechanism for organizational theory research and applies the mechanism to the Dilbert principle. Widely praised both by the popular press and management scholars, Scott Adams's book *The Dilbert Principle* asserts that "people are idiots." Kessler notes that whereas the book and related work have successfully portrayed dysfunctional aspects of the workplace, Adams has expressed little interest in drawing prescriptions regarding appropriate coping mechanisms to deal with those dysfunctions or managerial actions to address their root causes. Kessler discusses Bacon's idols of the tribe, idols of the cave, idols of the marketplace, and idols of the theatre. He shows how they identify alternative sources of idiocy and relate both generally to issues in organizational theory and specifically to Adams's views on leadership, change, communications, personality, power, and other organizational topics. He then provides related suggestions for ways to make organizations "idiot-proof" (if the idols of the mind are viewed as irreversible) or to reduce idiocy (if it is assumed that the idols can be purged). For the latter set of suggestions, Kessler employs a contingency perspective for managing different idiocies differently. This contingency perspective offers approaches for changing each of the idols, including appropriate actions—elucidation, broadening, facilitation, and liberation—and corresponding goals—increasing capacity, tolerance, cooperation, and synthesis. Kessler shows how philosophy, the study of the meaning of life, can provide insights into the function and

management of social systems, and even into the perverse actions of Dilbert, Dogbert, Catbert, and crew.

In contrast to Kessler's focus on organizational idiots, in our second essay Cornelia Hegele and Alfred Kieser develop a very interesting argument about the role of legend in modern business writing and a very interesting analysis of Jack Welch as a legend. First, a legend is a simple, easy-to-follow narrative about miraculous and heroic deeds and emphasizes the virtue of various beliefs and behaviors. In Jack Welch's case, these include downsizing, applying Darwinian principles to management of employees, and setting shareholder value as the overall goal of the company. The authors' ideas made me smile and made me cringe. They are fun to read because they add to our notions of fad and fashion, but they also highlight the complicity of academics in the legendizing business. First, many of us "scholars" recount tales of Jack Welch to illustrate our points, so we contribute directly to creating the legend. I have not done a study, but many popular books and regular textbooks contain tales of Jack, as if he is one of just a few real managers in the world. This is not to say that Jack Welch is anything but a fabulous manager but rather to say, How do we know that? Many examples come from materials approved if not propagated by Mr. Welch himself, according to these authors. Second, Hegele and Kieser point out that the purpose of legend is legitimization of practices that might, just might, not be entirely above reproach. Many managerial books push legends (not only of Mr. Welch, of course) and are popular simply for that reason—they legitimize. The authors point out that these books do not actually spell out management techniques or exactly how certain approaches really work. How much of our managerial literature is more legend, more a romanticized view of leadership, than theory? Do we need to increase reliance on legend to become more practical and useful? Readers interested in new ideas about old problems and in thinking again about what it is we do and should do will enjoy this essay.

## The Idols of Organizational Theory From Francis Bacon to the Dilbert Principle

ERIC H. KESSLER  
*Pace University*

*The comic strip Dilbert has been commercially successful in portraying dysfunctional aspects of the workplace. However, it is not well linked to related academic work, and its descriptive success is not matched by its prescriptive usefulness. This article (a) employs Francis Bacon's "idols of the mind" framework (b) to organize academic research in the field of organizational theory (c) for the purposes of better understanding the Dilbert principle and outlining appropriate coping mechanisms or, if changeable, managerial actions to address its different root causes.*

**T**he comic strip *Dilbert* has found an audience in corporate America. It has spawned several best-selling books and numerous popular Internet sites, has received prominent mention in such business publications as *Fortune* and *Business Week*, and is common fodder for cubicle bulletin boards across corporate America. At its foundation is a simple ontology, termed "the Dilbert principle" (Adams, 1996), which states the following: "People are idiots."

The overwhelming public response to Scott Adams's thesis is YES! Adams's book jacket reports that *The Wall Street Journal* reviewer called *The Dilbert Principle* "the best management book I have ever read." The *Washington Times* called it "the management book of the century." Even management guru Michael Hammer is quoted as commenting that it

"provides the best window into the reality of corporate life that I've ever seen." Moreover, *The Tampa Tribune* ("Dilbert: A Prophet," 1996) reports, "Ye who seek managerial enlightenment: Worship not at the feet of Peter Drucker. Forsake the search for excellence. Turn thy head from quality circles. Dilbert is the new management messiah." To add further perspective to *Dilbert's* popularity, the comic strip has more than 1,000 newspaper clients worldwide, is read by more than 60 million people daily, its Internet site receives over 500,000 hits weekly, and Adams himself receives between 350 and 800 e-mail messages each day.

*Dilbert's* popularity indicates that Adams's thesis has an overwhelming bottom-up, grassroots appeal. In contrast to ivory-tower conceptions of management, Adams's commentary is one of the few perspec-

tives on organizations that is practitioner driven. In this sense, it has similar beginnings as the writings of Barnard and Sloan. Adams confesses that now his comic strip is essentially written by the people living it, that is, by workers' e-mails and other correspondence. It therefore offers a less filtered (and potentially more valid) representation of what is really happening in organizations, albeit an atheoretical one. This contrast between normative theory and Adams's realistic explanations probably accounts for much of *Dilbert's* popularity.

Adams demonstrates his thesis through humorous stories and cartoons. Most of *The Dilbert Principle* is spent comically portraying such phenomena as humiliation in the workplace, getting your way, performance reviews, meetings, marketing, sales, project management, downsizing, and team building. But the question that goes largely unanswered is, Why are people idiots? Adams's precursory, somewhat evolutionary explanation is that the complexity of life has increased at a greater pace than humans' capacity to manage it. This is consistent with arguments advanced by Toffler (1970) and others. However, this abstract reasoning is too global and hence of little practical use to managers. Although Adams is clearly effective at illustrating the principle (the commercial, more profitable avenue), he spends less time and is less effective at tracing the root source(s) of people's idiocy so that it can be better understood (the academic alternative) and perhaps even reduced through effective management practices (the practical alternative). This is something Adams readily admits, stating in a *Newsday* interview (Locke & Kitchen, 1997) that

for every person who's a manager and wants to know how to manage people, there are ten people who are being managed and would like to figure out how to make it stop. You have a choice of appealing to the one or to the ten, and I simply choose the ten.

Therefore, given the Dilbert principle's wide appeal, we as scholars and managers have several options for using Adams's insights: (a) *Dilbert* is an outlet for frustration, disappointment, or perhaps futility in understanding the complexities and dysfunctional aspects of human business interactions, or (b) *Dilbert* is an opportunity and challenge to systematically dissect the idiocy that infects human business interactions. The assumption of the former approach is that people cannot change or be changed, and its practical implication is that organizations should try

and muddle along while attempting to idiot-proof the workplace. The assumption of the latter approach is that people can change or be changed, and its practical implication is that organizations should offer appropriate methods for reducing the idiocy and its dysfunctional consequences in a world of Dilbert.

Of the two, the former approach is most often taken. By Adams's own admission ("The Anti-Management Guru," 1997), Dilbert is typically used as "a safety valve, a harmless way for disenchanted employees to laugh off their anxieties." This article adopts the latter perspective, which is the road less traveled. However, some precedent exists. For instance, Debra Comer of Hofstra University and Gayle Porter of Rutgers University are reported to use *Dilbert* comic strips to spur discussions in their classes, providing a contrast to what Comer terms the textbook "utopian view of the world of work," which holds that "if you're a conscientious, dedicated, smart person, you'll get ahead" (Locke & Kitchen, 1997). Also, the *Los Angeles Times* (Hamilton, 1997) recently featured a debate on management practices between *Dilbert Principle* character Dogbert and noted academic Warren Bennis.

This article represents another attempt at answering the challenge by adopting a phenomenological perspective (cf. Daft & Lewin, 1990) to understanding the rationale implicit in Adams's theory. To this point, I draw on the philosophical work of Francis Bacon (1620/1861) as well as more contemporary research in organizational theory (OT). Specifically, the article uses Bacon's "four idols which beset man's mind" to organize OT concepts into a multitiered explanation for suboptimal behavior in the workplace (i.e., why people sometimes act like idiots). It then explores two alternative scenarios: (a) If this idiocy cannot be changed, it explores coping mechanisms that can be employed, and (b) if this idiocy can be changed, it develops a typology of managerial actions that can address the different types of trappings manifest in organizations.

## PHILOSOPHY AND OT

This article seeks to merge thinking in philosophy and OT to better understand and address the Dilbert principle. Therefore, a brief description of the literature is appropriate. Philosophy is at its core the study of the meaning of life. It is composed of five fields concerning (a) logic, the study of ideal method of thought; (b) esthetics, the study of ideal form or beauty; (c) eth-

ics, the study of ideal conduct; (d) politics, the study of ideal social organization; and (e) metaphysics, the study of ultimate reality and knowledge (Durant, 1961). Philosophy is distinguished by many great thinkers who have struggled with many of the same fundamental questions and human implications faced today in the social sciences. Thus, it would be a mistake to ignore their ideas when exploring issues relevant to structure and behavior in organizations.

OT is a body of thought concerned with the function and management of social systems at both micro and macro levels of analysis (Astley & Van de Ven, 1983). OT is a synthesis of streams and disciplines such as psychology, sociology, anthropology, political science, industrial engineering, general systems theory, decision theory, economics, mathematics, and practitioner experience (Koontz, 1980). Its development has been marked by a progression from (a) classic doctrines such as scientific management and bureaucracy; (b) neoclassical theory such as human relations, power and politics, and decision-making schools; and (c) modern theory such as contingency, communication networks, and open systems models (Perrow, 1973; W. G. Scott, 1961) to (d) radical structuralist theory. The elements or major subject areas of OT include leadership, power and politics, culture, learning, decision making, goals, performance, structure and design, technology, strategy, environments, innovation, and change (W. R. Scott, 1992).

It is often said that the more things change the more they remain the same. This certainly appears to be true of our discipline. The context-specific answers generated by OT can largely be seen as derivative of the general questions, issues, and debates raised long ago in philosophy.

Consider, for example, the following lines of inquiry: How can we be internally consistent in our thoughts and actions? What are the limits of human reasoning? What are the motives of individuals and the goals of collectives? What is an appropriate code of behavior? and How should governance mechanisms be constructed? These questions are fundamentally philosophical but become managerial when applied to the specific domain of organizations. Thus, it may be useful for theory development if we consider the arguments and insights of history's greatest thinkers.

Indeed, a philosophical approach to exploring OT is useful insofar as it informs the fundamental concepts, explains divergency of theories, and answers various questions and objectives of our discipline.

Hartman's (1988) survey of the conceptual foundations of OT attempted to ground our discipline in an underlying logic and fundamental questions. Hartman argued that a discipline can only "free itself from philosophy" when it develops a precise vocabulary and agreed-upon rules and evaluative criteria: OT is far from such a consensus (Pfeffer, 1993). Another effort to relate the theories of OT to the underlying issues of philosophy was undertaken by Burrell and Morgan (1979), who observed within the fundamentally sociological debates between objectivism versus subjectivism and regulation versus radicalism four philosophically based paradigms of organizational analysis. Morgan (1986) continued this analysis in his metaphor-based attempt to categorize organizational theories into different "frames," many of which were linked to philosophical roots. A fourth attempt at uniting philosophy and OT is represented by Badaracco's (1992) survey of different spheres of business ethics that developed a system of three areas based in philosophy and manifest in OT theories.

These authors have surveyed some of the philosophical roots of the major paradigms and metaphors of our literature. In addition to this approach to uniting the disciplines, another strategy would be to classify OT perspectives by their emphases on different aspects of a single philosopher or philosophy. That is, one can also exploit the overlap between philosophy and OT by exploring the manner in which current theories take up one or more features of a philosophical framework. In the philosophy of the 17th-century Englishman Francis Bacon we can find such a basis for organizing many of the perspectives of our field.

Francis Bacon saw philosophy as an endeavor best concerned with "the real business and fortunes of the human race" (if only all academics were so inclined!). He sought to answer questions that dealt with the nature and origin of knowledge (epistemology) as well as its practical application to human affairs. In perhaps his greatest work, the *Novum Organum*, Bacon (1620/1861) attempted to discover how we could advance our understanding and subsequent usefulness through systematic observation and empirical analyses. Primary in this endeavor was the detection and correction of human prejudices and fallacies or, as Bacon termed them, false idols.

The foundations and objectives of OT do not differ significantly from Bacon's, though they do apply their principles to a more specific domain. The basis of OT can be found in its attempt to increase theoretical, empirical, and practical understanding of business

and other types of organizations. Much of the emphasis of OT researchers, like Bacon's, is on detecting suboptimizing behaviors, strategies, cultures, or configurations and suggesting remedial action. Thus, the remainder of the article traces Bacon's idols to OT concepts and then to the Dilbert principle, culminating in managerial recommendations for managing in the world of Dilbert.

### THE IDOLS WHICH BESET MAN'S MIND (OR, SOURCES OF IDIOCY)

To Bacon, "knowledge is power." Exploring this aphorism, Bacon sees knowledge as the ability to perceive, interpret, and generalize from the senses. Power is represented by one's command over events rather than events' command over him or her. Therefore, Bacon argued that nothing can be consistently controlled, altered, or predicted without first being understood. His first step in furthering our understanding is to identify and purge the idols of our minds (i.e., sources of idiocy, from *The Dilbert Principle*). He argues that man is handicapped by different types of false ideas in his efforts to understand the world and act objectively. These idols become deeply rooted in our minds to the extent that they take possession of them, strongly resisting our efforts to understand the world and act rationally within it. Bacon believed that we can guard against these idols only if we become aware of what they are and how they mislead thinking and fortify ourselves against their assaults. These idols were proposed to fall into four categories: (a) idols of the tribe, (b) idols of the cave, (c) idols of the marketplace, and (d) idols of the theatre.

Idols of the tribe are common to all humans because their source is human nature itself. These idols arise from imperfect perceptions and imperfect interpretations inherent in the human capacity for observation and thought. Most basic, what we see is not objective reality but our limited conception of it, thereby biasing the very foundation of learning by distorting the information on which knowledge and understanding are based. Similar to Einstein's ideas on relativity, reality is imperfectly represented by people in general differently because "the human mind is like a false mirror, which, receiving rays irregularly, distorts and discolors the nature of things by mingling its own nature with it" (Bacon, 1620/1861, p. XLI). Idols of the tribe

arise from the "dullness, incompetence, and deception of the senses" (p. L). Consequently, this idol is manifest in our superstitions (because we are reluctant to abandon simple interpretations even when contrary evidence is found); in a general unwillingness to recognize the limitations of our abilities to understand the world (because of a need for comprehensible meaning and order); in emotion swaying us from reason; and, ultimately, in the systematic deceits of our perceptions (due to the defects of our sense organs and the boundaries of our capabilities to interpret them). Thus, we can say that they refer to idiocy due to human perceptual and interpretational limitations.

Idols of the cave are peculiar to individuals. They represent erroneous conceptions resulting from individual predilections, specifically due to the mental and bodily idiosyncrasies of different individuals. We all have diverse backgrounds, therefore, we "refract and discolor the light of nature" (Bacon, 1620/1861, p. XLII) and construct reality based on the interests and values inherent in these backgrounds. Whether biased by our unique education, culture, readings, authorities, or acquaintances, we are all dwellers of our own caves. Using Plato's famous cave analogy, whereas the idols of the tribe emerge from our collective attempts to decipher truth from shadows, the idols of the cave represent the individual differences in the fires we light and the frames and perspectives we adopt. Idols of the cave arise from "peculiar constitution, mental or bodily, education, habit, and accident" (p. LIII). Bacon gave particular emphasis to the idols caused by "predominance of a favorite subject . . . excessive tendency . . . or out of partiality" (p. LVIII). For example, these idols are manifest in our different cognitive styles (emphasis on differences or similarities), different time orientations (emphasis on past versus future), and different decision-making styles (emphasis on programs versus creativity). Thus, we can say that they refer to idiocy due to individual backgrounds and biases.

Idols of the marketplace are contingent on the patterns of "intercourse and association of men" (Bacon, 1620/1861, p. XLIII). In short, they represent confused ideas resulting from the nonsensical or loose (e.g., vague or ambiguous) use of language. Thus, the prejudicial nature of communication and of definitions is seen by Bacon (1620/1861) as yet another impediment to objective and accurate understanding. "Empty controversies and idle fancies" (p. XLIII) are the result of

subjective and flawed communication and other means of interaction. To Bacon, these are the most troublesome of all, for they arise from the equivocality of socially constructed (e.g., Berger & Luckman, 1967) “words and names” and influence fundamental disagreements over definitions. Idols imposed by words fall into two categories: names for things that do not exist and names for things that exist but are confused and ill defined. Thus, we can say that they refer to idiocy due to interpersonal and group communication.

Idols of the theatre are systemic. These biases emerge from the dogma, ideology, and institutionalized false arguments of past works. Bacon (1620/1861) argued that they have been instituted mainly through “tradition, credulity, and negligence” (p. XLIV), whereby the drivers of truth are not scientific but instead based on fashion, networks, and/or flawed practices. These idols are not innate but instead imposed by systems and regulations. In other words, faulty principles, axioms, and assumptions can also skew understanding and bias action. Specifically, they take the form of maladaptive principles and rules that create systems that suppress rather than harness human potential. In Bacon’s words, “The lame man who keeps to the right road outstrips the runner who takes the wrong one.” Thus, we can say that they refer to idiocy due to systems and context (e.g., organization structure).

To further differentiate the idols from each other, a computer-based analogy is employed. Idols of the tribe have their foundation in human nature, or inadequate hardware (limited capacity). Idols of the cave have their foundation in individual differences, or inadequate software (peculiar styles and predilections). Idols of the marketplace have their foundation in language, or inadequate modem hookups and network connections (communication breakdowns). Idols of the theatre have their foundation in rules and systems, or inadequate corporate policies regarding programming and usage (ill-fitted structures and procedures).

### IDOLS AND OT (OR, ELEMENTS OF IDIOCY)

*Idols of the tribe.* Idols of the tribe are sources of idiocy due to human attention and perceptual limitations. Perception and attention are important insofar as they influence the distribution of energies as well as

the assignment of slack in organizations (March, 1988). Many OT theorists have advanced our knowledge of specific tribe-based limitations that affect organizational life. For example, Simon (1976) told us that because of our limited knowledge of alternatives, consequences, and preferences, as well as our limited ability to process information, we operate under bounded rationality. Because of these bounds, we engage in restricted searches and routines, develop a simplified model of the world, and satisfice (versus optimize) to predetermined aspiration levels. Kahneman and Tversky (1979) made us aware that the reference point we adopt in processing information has a powerful impact on whether we perceive potential gains or potential losses, and this perception influences our behavior toward risk-averse or risk-seeking ends. Weick (1979) similarly, but perhaps most directly, argued that our perceptions are our reality. More specifically, he told us that we enact or create our own environments through the bracketing of ambiguous information in an effort to reduce deviations in our understandings, often resulting in self-fulfilling prophecy.

Adams’s (1996) views on change and change management are based in the idols of the tribe:

People hate change, and with good reason. Change makes us stupider, relatively speaking. Change adds new information to the universe; information that we don’t know. Our knowledge—as a percentage of all the things that can be known—goes down a tick every time something changes. And frankly, if we’re talking about a percentage of the total knowledge in the universe, most of us aren’t that many basis points superior to our furniture to begin with. . . . The goal of change management is to dupe slow-witted employees into thinking change is good for them. (p. 198)

One can also see Adam’s views on leadership here:

Any good leader operates under the assumption that the people being led are astonishingly gullible. . . . The most important skill for any leader is to take credit for things that happen on their own. In primitive times, tribal chieftains would claim credit for the change in seasons and the fact that wood floats. They had the great advantage of the ignorance of the masses working in their favor. (p. 288)

I don’t mean for this chapter to imply that leadership is the same as a con job. The differences are substantial, in the sense that leadership pays much more and doesn’t require quick wits. (p. 310)

Dilbert: I'm CEO, what am I supposed to do?

Advisor: You're supposed to make superficial statements about how good the company is, then hope something lucky happens and profits go up. It's called leadership, sir.

Dilbert: Make it so. (p. 289)

Adams also commented that one's height and the quality of one's hair are essential to be selected as a leader. In this reference to perceptual simplification and halo effects he writes,

Boss: Dilbert, I'd like you to meet Ben, our newest fast-track manager. Ben has no real experience but he's very tall, so we know we'll go far.

Ben: I also have executive-style hair.

Boss: We think it will turn silver. (p. 309)

*Idols of the cave.* Idols of the cave are sources of idiocy due to individual backgrounds and preferences. The effect of cave-related biases on organizational processes have been explored by several OT researchers. For example, Dearborn and Simon (1958) and others showed us that the base of an individual's judgment (e.g., attitudes, interests, training) exerts a strong influence on how he or she interprets and subsequently reacts to his or her environment. This premise is reinforced in the motivation literature (e.g., Alderfer, 1969; McClelland, 1961), where, for instance, McClelland (1985) argued that our motives for achievement, affiliation, and power determine what we do. Individuals with a high need for achievement will take moderate risks, whereas those with a high need for power may be more likely to engage in political activity.

Adams's (1996) views on the differences between marketers and engineers are based in the idols of the cave:

If the Engineering Department keeps asking for market requirements, [marketers can] take one of these approaches: (1) Insist that you've already specified the requirements when you said it should be "high quality and low cost." Complain to the engineer's boss that the engineer is stalling. (2) Ask the engineer to tell you all the things that are possible plus the associated cost so that you can choose the best solution. Complain to the engineer's boss that the engineer is uncooperative. (3) Specify market requirements that are either technically or logically impossible. Complain to the engineer's boss that the engineer is not being a can-do person. . . . Engineers are the natural enemy of marketing people. (pp. 144-145)

However, engineers' myopia and personal characteristics do not escape the wrath of Adams:

Engineer 1: I think it was fifty gigabits.

Engineer 2: I think you mean *megabits*.

All: (much laughter)

Engineer 3: We're so fun-loving. You'd think one of us would have a friend outside of work. (p. 170)

Engineer Identification Test: You walk into a room and notice that a picture is hanging crooked. You . . . (a) straighten it. (b) Ignore it. (c) Buy a CAD [computer-aided design] system and spend the next six months designing a solar-powered, self-adjusting picture frame while often stating aloud your belief that the inventor of the nail was a total moron. (p. 172)

*Idols of the marketplace.* Idols of the marketplace are sources of idiocy due to interpersonal and group communication. The effect of suboptimal communication in organizations, both intentional (i.e., political) and unintentional, has been explored by many researchers. For example, Daft and Lengel (1984) demonstrated that mismatches between the complexity of our messages and the richness of the channels we select to convey these messages can result in poor communication due to overcomplication (too much irrelevant "noise") or oversimplification (too few cues). In addition, Whetton and Cameron (1995) informed us that communication can be biased by nonsupportiveness or the engendering of defensiveness and disconfirmation. This may occur through overly evaluative or person-oriented correspondence.

Thus, idols of the marketplace can arise because of unintentional inaccuracies or nonsupportiveness. For example, communication can be biased because someone uses the wrong medium and undercomplicates a message (e.g., sending a memo to division heads to announce a major strategic alliance) or because someone is overly person oriented in their communication (e.g., telling someone they are always wrong when in fact only the action they committed happened to be wrong in the specific context in which it was taken). They may also arise because of intended manipulation. March (1962, 1988) highlighted this in his discussions of organizations as arenas of negotiations and shifting coalitions where conflicting preferences, power relations, and political behavior affect the transmittance of information; the relationships between participants; and, ultimately, the control of the firm. Political gamesmanship often results in dis-

torted objectives, suboptimized division of labor, and displaced goals (Mintzberg, 1983).

Adams's (1996) views on business communication are based in the idols of the marketplace. To illustrate, consider the following examples:

The real objective of business communication is to advance your career. That objective is generally at odds with the notion of "clear transfer of information." (p. 35)

Boss: Good report, but change the word "use" to "utilize" in each case. Change "help" to "facilitate" and replace "do" with "implementation phase." Hmm . . . it's still a bit too readable.

Dilbert: I could reduce the type size and run it through the fax. (p. 46)

Chapters on "great lies of management" (e.g., "We reward risk-takers," "I haven't heard any rumors," "We don't shoot the messenger"), "humiliation" (e.g., cubicles, dress clothes, and so forth as methods for lowering self-esteem), "meetings" (e.g., a type of performance art), and "Machiavellian methods" (e.g., provide bad advice, shade the truth, withhold information) also speak to idols of the marketplace. Consider the disconfirmatory message sent by cubicles:

Boss: We've got a lot of empty cubicles because of downsizing. I hired the Dogbert construction company to convert part of the office into prison cells which we'll lease to the state.

Dilbert: Sounds like a big job.

Dogbert: Nah, a little paint, new carpet, and we're there.

The chapter on Machiavellian methods "contains many surefire tips for gaining wealth and power at the expense of people who are studying to be team players" (Adams, 1996, p. 62). For example:

Dilbert: Wally, you never really answered the question I left on your voice mail. Is this a case of simple incompetence or a preview of something far more sinister?

Wally: It's the sinister one. I've adopted a defensive strategy. I'm withholding information to make myself appear more valuable. Now I only return phone calls late at night and leave incomplete answers. In person I act overworked and irrational so people stop asking questions. If cornered, I sigh deeply and recount old war stories that don't relate to the question." (Adams, 1996, p. 68)

*Idols of the theatre.* Idols of the theatre are sources of idiocy due to contextual circumstances. The impact of these theatre-related biases on organizations has been studied by OT researchers at many levels. For exam-

ple, the dysfunctional consequences of the bureaucratic theatre (a favorite target of Dilbert) bracketing organizational life has been examined by several authors. March and Simon's (1958) seminal work detailed some of the idols discussed by Merton (excess rigidity), Selznick (subgoal displacement and conflicting interests), and Gouldner (satisficing behaviors and increased tension). In addition, Kerr (1975) explained how misguided reward systems lead people to poor performance. The larger theatre, or interorganizational institutions, has also been shown to constrain human behavior and limit innovation, for instance, through extreme isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991). Isomorphism is a constraining process that forces one unit to resemble others through coercive, mimetic, or normative pressures. J. W. Meyer (1991) even argued that these legitimizing pressures of institutions "tend to lower the structural rationality of formal organizations" (p. 263), and J. W. Meyer and Rowan (1991) argued that formal structures of organizations often reflect the myths of their institutional environment rather than the demands of their technologies and core activities.

Adams's (1996) representations of "pretending to work" (e.g., by using computers), "budgeting" (e.g., padding your budget, spending it all), "business plans" (e.g., padding predictions, adopting unrealistic assumptions), and "ISO 9000" (e.g., overdocumentation) are derivative of dysfunctional work contexts and, hence, based in the idols of the theatre. For example, due to the perverseness of many performance appraisal systems, Adams argued that it makes sense for workers to work on projects with no verifiable results and to avoid jobs that can be measured. As a result, micro logic (i.e., what is best for the individual) is different from macro logic (i.e., what is best for the company). Also, consider the following illustrations of contextual dysfunctions manifest in budgeting and downsizing.

Dilbert: On the advice of [Dogbert], I'm asking for an additional ten million dollars for my project. That will make a more spectacular failure, thus guaranteeing a promotion for me.

Boss: As your boss, I'd get recognition too. . . . Okay. (p. 206)

Dogbert: I've been asked to reduce headcount. To be fair about it I created a scientific algorithm to decide who goes.

Executive 1: I thought you were firing the employees with the highest salaries.

Dogbert: Okay, maybe "algorithm" is an overstatement. (p. 255)

## IDOLS AND THE DILBERT PRINCIPLE— PART I (OR, WAYS TO IDIOT-PROOF)

If Scott Adams is right that people are only a “few base points superior to our furniture” with respect to their ability to understand what’s going on around them and act in a rational manner, then it follows that any such effort would prove futile because the raw material managers have to work with isn’t up to the task. That is to say, the age-old idols of the mind are irreversible. We cannot overcome our bounded rationality or escape our perceptual limitations (tribe), see beyond our training and motivations (cave), communicate with perfect accuracy or supportiveness (marketplace), or create wise structures and institutions. This is probably why so many OT-based interventions work so poorly.

To be fair, one objection to the assertion that people are idiots (and hopelessly idiotic at that) is based in the argument made by Nisbett and Ross (1980) that “if we’re so dumb, how come we made it to the moon?” To this point, Bacon (1620/1861) warned that any attempt to praise the accomplishments of man in the sciences and arts should be tempered by the recognition of how ignorant we still are in these areas. For example, how much do we really know about the moon (or the earth, for that matter), and how many celestial bodies have we yet to explore? He added that quite ironically, much of our knowledge is set forth with such ambition and parade that it comes across as more complete than it really is.

So the question remains how managers can idiot-proof their organizations (see Table 1). Regarding idols of the tribe, organizations need to simplify (or dumb down) jobs and uncomplicate roles so as to remove many of the demands required of their employees. That is, if humans are inherently bounded, then dumb down jobs so that job requirements are within the capacity range of the job occupants. This is similar in spirit to Taylor’s (1911) ideas on job design. For example, given that information-processing ability is limited, jobs should be designed with limited discretion and cognitive requirements. Also, because sensory information is framed, jobs should provide appropriate reference points (e.g., goals, criteria). Thus, the goal of dumbing down jobs is to decrease demands.

Regarding idols of the cave, organizations need to program jobs and functions so as to remove the judgment component from decision making. The issue here is not capacity but differences in individuals’ pre-

dilections. For example, the effects of attitudes, interests, and training can be neutralized if these factors are not given the opportunity to exert an influence on the role-occupant’s decisions because there are explicit rules and regulations governing the execution of that role. Moreover, the influence of tangential motivations (e.g., politicking) can be limited if there are strict guidelines for behavior with little gray area. Thus, the goal of programming is to decrease discretion.

Regarding idols of the marketplace, organizations need to segment jobs. This is because communication is assumed to be inherently flawed, biasing understanding and creating ill will and disharmony. This can take the form of reducing the need to share information (e.g., creating self-sustaining groups, divisions, or profit centers) and creating integrative mechanisms to share information only on a need-to-know basis. For example, irrelevant noise can be reduced with segmented work units. Restricted interpersonal associations will also reduce defensiveness and disconfirmation. Moreover, intended manipulation will be reduced if face-to-face meetings and other opportunities for gamesmanship are curtailed. Thus, the goal of segmenting is to decrease interaction.

Regarding idols of the theatre, organizations need to institute a system of checks and balances so that the dysfunctional effects of contextual misrepresentation and suboptimization are curtailed. More specifically, problems of subgoal displacement, conflicting interests, and isomorphic pressures will be less likely to constrain human potential and limit its achievements when a system is in place that can correctly localize failures and counteract internal malevolence. Thus, a system whereby constraints are placed on its parts will be better able to limit the damage that can be done by false arguments or maladaptive principles. For example, functional, geographic, and other differentiated parts of organizations sometimes need to be restrained in their endeavors. At the public level, many would argue that governments also benefit from a system of internal constraints (on its members and its branches) and institutionalized stability. Thus, the goal of checks and balances is to decrease systemic distortion.

## IDOLS AND THE DILBERT PRINCIPLE— PART II (OR, WAYS TO REDUCE IDIOCY)

The above interpretation of Bacon’s idols is that people are hopeless idiots and that they are doomed to

Table 1  
*Managing the Idols of the Mind to Address the Dilbert Principle*

<i>Idol</i>	<i>Constraint</i>	<i>Idiot-Proofing Mechanism</i>	<i>Goal</i>	<i>Action to Reduce Idiocy</i>	<i>Goal</i>
Tribe	Perception/interpretation	Dumb down	Decrease demands	Elucidate	Increase capacity
Cave	Background/prejudice	Program	Decrease discretion	Broaden	Increase tolerance
Marketplace	Language/communication	Segment	Decrease interaction	Facilitate	Increase cooperation
Theatre	Systems/context	Checks and balances	Decrease distortion	Liberate	Increase synthesis

lives of error and suboptimization. However, Bacon (1620/1861) disagreed with this negative interpretation. In short, he claimed he had been taken out of context and that we can overcome the idols:

The doctrine of those who have denied that certainty could be attained at all, has some agreement with my way of proceeding at the first setting out; but they end in being infinitely separated and opposed. For the holders of that doctrine assert simply that nothing can be known; I also assert that not much can be known in nature *by the way which is now in use* [italics added]. But then they go on to destroy the authority of the senses and understanding; whereas I proceed to devise and supply helps for the same. (p. XXXVII)

Thus, Bacon believed that there is still hope. Men need to realize the value of objective knowledge and rationality and then revamp the current system to overcome the barriers (i.e., idols) that stand in the way of achieving it. We will never get close to the truth if we are continuously hampered by these idols. Instead, we need to purge these idols and open our minds, lest we suffer the consequences of stagnation and status-quoism:

And as the immense regions of the West Indies had never been discovered, if the use of the compass had not first been known, it is no wonder that the discovery and advancement of the arts hath made no greater progress, when the art of inventing and discovering the sciences remains hitherto unknown. . . . And surely it would be disgraceful, if, while the regions of the material globe . . . have been in our times laid widely open and revealed, the intellectual globe should remain shut up within the narrow limits of old discoveries. (Durant, 1961, p. 102)

Thus, this section builds on the previous discussion by adopting a contingency perspective (c.f. Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967) to offer a framework for managing different idiocies differently (see Table 1). That is, the theme of this section is that different sources of

Dilbert-related idols can be changed but that they need to be managed differently.

The primary constraint of idols of the tribe on people is perception and interpretation. The appropriate action is to elucidate. More specifically, this type of idiocy can be reduced by expanding the bounds on rationality and increasing people's awareness regarding the frames that influence them and the enactments they create. To the extent that we are better aware of our limitations, we are more likely to appreciate them and take a conditional approach to them. To the extent that we can push back these boundaries through training, skill development (c.f. Whetton & Cameron, 1995), and sharing information (e.g., open-book management), we are less likely to fall prey to these biases. Thus, the goal of elucidating is to increase capacity.

For example, in the famous parable "The Blind Men and the Elephant," different people came upon different parts of an elephant (read "reality") and, hence, came to different conclusions on the nature of the elephant; for example, the person who felt the leg thought the elephant was like a tree, and the person who felt the tusk thought the elephant was like a spear. If the men were cognizant of their perceptual boundaries, then they would be less likely to make unwarranted generalizations and trumpet false relationships and claims of causation. If they were trained to perceive more effectively, then they would be likely to see more of the elephant in the first place.

For idols of the cave, the primary constraint on people is narrowness of background and prejudice. The appropriate action is to broaden. More specifically, this type of idiocy can be reduced by helping employees emerge from functional silos and appreciate (or even capitalize on) diverse needs and motivations. To the extent that we can appreciate the differences manifest in divergent personality characteristics and functional training, we would be less likely to stereotype others and adopt dysfunctional in-group and out-group mentalities. To the extent that we can capitalize

on diverse personalities and bases of expertise, we would be in a better position to exploit the many advantages of diversity (e.g., multiple perspectives, breadth of information, etc.). Thus, the goal of broadening is to increase tolerance.

The rise in the use of cross-functional job rotation and cross-functional teams represents efforts to reduce idols of the cave. Cross-functional teams are particularly relevant to the management of innovation and new product development, where new and unfamiliar problems push managers to abandon traditional conceptions of cave-like divisions in favor of integrative, holographic teams (Ancona & Caldwell, 1990; C. Meyer, 1993). Different yet complementary skills of team members help to build a "creative tension" that facilitates innovative activity (Jain & Triandis, 1990; Pelz & Andrews, 1966) while also improving the integration and collective understanding of the entire team (Brown & Eisenhardt, 1995; Emmanuelides, 1991).

For idols of the marketplace, the primary constraint on people is language and communication. The appropriate action is to facilitate. More specifically, this type of idiocy can be reduced by strengthening the accuracy and supportiveness of communication as well as by reducing dysfunctional politicking. To the extent that we can communicate more accurately and more supportively, we can increase the opportunities for productive interaction and foster the transfer of knowledge without engendering feelings of defensiveness. To the extent that we can develop shared goals and reduce illegitimate political behavior, we can focus energies more fully on relevant tasks and challenges. Thus, the goal of facilitating is to increase cooperation.

It is axiomatic to organizational studies that good communication is required if groups or organizations are to perform to their potential. Communication serves four major functions: control, motivation, emotional expression, and information (W. G. Scott & Mitchell, 1976). That is, good communication offers employees clear guidelines to direct their activities, clear goals and feedback to motivate their progress, opportunities for social interaction, and the data required to make necessary decisions. It also enhances the relationship between parties (Whetton & Cameron, 1995). Training people to facilitate exchanges can be accomplished by concentrating on such skills as public speaking, business writing, listen-

ing, and supportiveness. In addition, developing common goals, collaborative techniques, and a strong culture can work to limit tangential politicking and increase collaborative efforts. For example, congruent value systems have been shown to positively influence company performance (Gordon & DiTomaso, 1992). However, firms need to beware the dangers of isolating key suppliers and customers and, instead, include them as partners in culture building.

For idols of the theatre, the primary constraint on people is systems and context. The appropriate action is to liberate. More specifically, this type of idiocy can be reduced by helping employees break out of dysfunctional or overly constraining structures, institutions, and cultures.

To the extent that we can match the structural characteristics of an organization to its desired action pattern, we could eliminate needless obstructions and constraints for workers. Moreover, achieving a fit between the context and the purpose of activity creates internal harmony (in the biological sense). Thus, the goal of liberation is to increase synthesis.

One way of interpreting Adams's character Dilbert is that he is made a prisoner inside his own organization, confined by his cubicle and his boss, and misguided by senseless policies and procedures. Thus, companies would do well to fit their structure to their strategy (Chandler, 1962). For example, more innovative firms tend to benefit from a less bureaucratic, more "organic" form of governance (Burns & Stalker, 1961; Daft, 1982; Galbraith, 1982), where traditional rigidities give way to an evolving "boundarylessness" (e.g., General Electric). General Motors, realizing this, has distanced itself from its innovative Saturn division to limit bureaucratic intrusions. Similarly, such firms as AT&T (Bell Labs) and Xerox (PARC) have separated research and development activities from the parent organization.

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

In an attempt to clarify the relationship between organizational theorists and practitioners, Astley and Zammuto (1992) argued that scientists "should be viewed not as engineers offering technical advice to managers, but as providers of conceptual and symbolic language for use in organizational discourse" (p. 443). That is, how we say things as well as what we

say can contribute to the management of organizations. This article has addressed the “how” consideration by building a bridge between three distinct yet interrelated streams of thought: the philosophy of Francis Bacon, the arguments of OT theorists and researchers, and the insights of Scott Adams. I argue that creating a common ground for these collections of ideas advances our ability to understand and manage organizational phenomena. Thus, one important message of the article is that we should not consider these ideas in a vacuum but take advantage of important overlaps and interdisciplinary connections. This is not a new argument but one that continues to convey significant insights and advantages.

The Dilbert principle is familiar (we see it all around us) yet elusive (we are unsure how to manage it). Scott Adams shocks us, and makes a truckload of money in the process, into seeing the gap between normative and descriptive management. However, he makes no false arguments about trying to do something about it: “My goal is not to change the world. My goal is to make a few bucks and hope you laugh in the process” (Locke & Kitchen, 1997). One may combine Adams’s statement with the preceding commentary to infer that we (I by writing it, *JMI* by publishing it, you by reading it) are elevating a comic strip intended to make a few bucks and generate a few laughs to a status it was never intended to have. However, like many innovative ideas and perspectives, its impact is more important than its intentions. The literal reply is, yes, of course we are making more out of *Dilbert* than Adams intended. The caveat to this is that we are probably underselling it in relation to the important insights it makes and the topical issues it raises. We hope we will see more efforts that attempt to bridge the worlds of academic and Dilbertian views of management.

More specifically, if *Dilbert* is indeed the “management book of the century” and provides “the best window into the reality of corporate life,” or if it even comes close to justifying these claims, then it is adding something valuable to the organization management literature. I argue that we should take advantage of this opportunity to reconcile its insights with the empirical evidence and theoretical developments of academia. This article represents an approach at integration, merging an element of Francis Bacon’s philosophy with the findings of several academic researchers, to explain, cope (i.e., idiot-proof), and possibly

address (i.e., manage) the implications of Adams’s thesis. Future research can strengthen this connection.

If we adopt the assumption that people are forever doomed to idiocy, they must be carefully controlled and closely managed. Then workers will be protected from themselves. Thus, this approach is more in tune with calls for standardization, formalization, and supervision.

Moreover, if, indeed, people are hopelessly idiotic, an important message of the article is that *Dilbert* represents the failure rather than the manifestation of OT to make plain the way organizations really work. That is, *Dilbert* can be viewed as not only addressing the how we say it issue but also the what we say issue. At the center of this controversy is the assumption that *Dilbert*’s popularity among practitioners is due to its compensation for theory. If this is true, then future research can also probe *Dilbert* for clues as to the areas that OT has neglected and should subsequently address. It can also further develop the above coping strategies and suggest other ways to idiot-proof the workplace.

If we adopt the assumption that people can rise above this idiocy, an important message of the article is that we need to dissect the root sources of *Dilbert*-like idiocy if we are to better understand and effectively manage this idiocy (cf. Kerr, 1975). Then, people will be freed from their artificial restrictions as well as the constraining practices of poor management, which according to Adams (1996, p. 14) is the home of the most ineffective workers. Thus, this approach is more in tune with calls for development, empowerment, and delegation. Specifically, it is argued in this article that we need to adopt a contingency approach, matching the intervention to the appropriate OT-related idol. For example, idiocy due to tribe-based perceptions should be addressed differently than idiocy due to cave-based prejudice, marketplace-based communication, or theatre-based context. In this sense, this article offers itself as one step in linking organizational reality, theoretical comprehension, and managerial remedy. Future research can further develop and refine this model.

So where do I stand on the issue of idiocy in the workplace—hopeless or hopeful? I would agree that as currently managed (by selves, by others, by organizations), there are more than a few examples of idiocy to be found by people in the workplace. However, it doesn’t have to be this way. That is, we are not irrev-

cable idiots, at least to the degree Adams tends to imply. Instead, we are each combinations of imperfect attributes operating in imperfect contexts.

Therefore, it stands to reason that some individuals and some firms are less idiotic than others (to the extent that idols have been purged). However, it is not easy to eliminate or even reduce these deep-seated idols (e.g., opening minds, overhauling communication systems, establishing cross-functional integration). Development may be the more desirable action, but it may not always be enough to overcome ingrained habits and motivational deficiencies. Consequently, a combination of idol purging and idiot-proofing is probably organizations' best bet, with a gradually increasing proportion of development relative to control. What is your opinion?

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# Control the Construction of Your Legend or Someone Else Will

## An Analysis of Texts on Jack Welch

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*Jack Welch, the CEO of General Electric, has been upheld by many as the incarnation of a corporate chieftain. Countless publications praise his astonishing achievements. The authors demonstrate that these texts are modern legends, that they adopt similar forms and serve similar functions as medieval legends, and that they also incorporate patterns of the frontier legend. They also point out that a critical text on Welch can be compared with counterlegends that were launched during the Reformation to fight the impact that traditional legends had on people's faith. They then try to explain why managers read texts that praise the uniqueness of a manager like Welch and yet do not contain precise and detailed recipes for effective management. Finally, the authors discuss whether the shareholder value of a company can be increased by an effective communication policy as it is practiced by Welch.*

Move over, Karl Marx. Here comes Jack Welch.  
—Slater (1993, p. 238)

Jack Welch, the CEO of General Electric (GE), is regarded by many as one of the most ingenious managers of our time. His fame is not only spread through-

out countless articles in newspapers and management journals, as well as TV features, but also throughout numerous books (Lowe, 1998; Slater, 1993, 1994, 1999; Tichy & Sherman, 1995), in which the journalist Slater has proved to be the most diligent chronicler. *The Economist* ("The House That Jack Built," 1999, p. 23) aptly

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calls Welch the “Princess Diana of the business press.” It is obvious that “since the Odyssey it has been a lucrative and entertaining business to sing of heroes” (Neuberger, 1994, p. 47). In the many publications that focus exclusively on Welch and GE, many management tools or leadership concepts are linked to his name. If it has been touched by Welch’s light, it must be powerful.

Jack Welch has become a hero and modern saint. In this article, we claim that publications about him not only fulfill the same functions that legends or hagiographies have fulfilled in former centuries, but they are also similar in structure.

Legends and hagiographies usually start with miracles. So do the texts on Jack Welch. *The Economist* (“The House That Jack Built,” 1999), for example, says, “Thanks to his [Welch’s] continual revolution since becoming boss in 1981, GE’s revenues have quadrupled and its share price has risen thirtyfold. Its market capitalisation exceeds that of all Latin American stockmarkets put together.”

Other chroniclers point out that GE’s shareholder value has been increased from \$12 billion in 1981 to more than \$500 billion—a rise of more than 4,000%. Yet, another miracle is that Welch was able to reduce a workforce of 402,000 to approximately 270,000 by closing at least 98 production sites in the United States, that is, 83% of those that existed in 1980 (figures from 1998), and that he was able to cut the number of hierarchical levels from nine to four. Welch’s miracles even tend to spill over into his private life: His golf game is so good that he beats pros (Byrne, 1998a), and a badly injured knee doesn’t prevent him from skiing extreme slopes for several days at a time (Lowe, 1998).

Thus, it is no wonder that Welch was voted Most Respected CEO four times by *Industry Week* and that *Business Week* elected him as the “gold standard against which other CEOs are measured” (Lowe, 1998, p. xi). *Fortune* named him the “manager of the century” because “in addition to his transformation of GE, he has made himself far and away the most influential manager of his generation” (Colvin, 1999, p. 185).

### FORMS AND FUNCTIONS OF LEGENDS

Legends are narratives that focus on saints or heroes (in medieval times, heroes were saints and saints, heroes) and the miracles they brought about.

They were the preferred story and reading material of the medieval population, which was very uncertain due to the dubious circumstances following the plague epidemics and numerous wars of the time (Williams-Krapp, 1986). Usually, a legend does not provide a detailed account of the life of the saint; rather, it presents episodes that can be assumed to be typical of his or her character (Jolles, 1972). It tries to raise admiration, adoration, and loving affection for the saint. Thereby, it creates trust in God or in the belief system that the saint or hero stands for. The legend calls on the readers or listeners to imitate the saint. It is obvious that the highest form of virtue that the saint represents is unreachable, yet the saint’s virtue is described so concretely that everyone can recognize and imitate it, at least partially. The saint is an “imitabile.”

In contrast to a myth, a legend describes “occurrences that are close to daily life” (Ecker, 1993). For example, the saint typically begins his or her career as an ordinary person, though in many cases the circumstances of birth indicate that the newborn must fulfill a special order. The legend provides examples that prove that virtue—nothing other than true virtue—can make the downright incredible (nowadays, many prefer the expression “quantum leaps”) happen. The saint conveys edification and motivates emulation at the same time (Jolles, 1972; Riehl, 1993). That the legend leaves many questions unanswered should not disturb the reader: Doubting the truth means doubting the *magnitudo Dei*, the principle (Dorn, 1967)—and therefore it really cannot be explained so clearly and in every detail how miracles happen. The medieval legend was considered true when the sources (the church or the holy tradition) appeared trustworthy. Moreover, according to a church doctrine an invented legend could, with God’s help, become a true legend if only the addressees believed it strongly enough (Schreiner, 1966).

By presenting miracles that cannot fully be explained—at least at first glance—the legend creates cognitive dissonance, builds up suspense, but solves it right away by indicating that nothing but unshakable faith and virtuousness (though with God’s help) can cause miracles such as the reported ones. Societies need saints as well as loathsome criminals (who also often populate legends) as instruments for measuring moral quality (Jolles, 1972).

The saints and heroes of our times are sport stars, pop stars—or supermanagers. All of these outstand-

ing figures embody a virtue—most of all the virtue of success—that contemporaries consider *imitabile*, that is, worthy of imitation. They wish to learn more about these extraordinary figures. To some extent, they even identify with them. The celebrities provide reassurance that in principle, everybody can make it, if not the big success then at least the local one. It is the power of faith that matters most.

### THE LEGEND OF JACK WELCH

As we have seen, it is usually pointed out in legends that the hero had to fight his way up from an ordinary, even underprivileged, childhood. This is also true for Welch as he wrote of himself:<sup>1</sup>

My parents were about 40 when they had me, and they had been trying for 16 years. My father was a railroad conductor, a good man, hardworking, passive. He went to work at 5 A.M., got home at 7:30 at night. . . . I was very close to . . . [my mother]. She was a dominant mother. She always felt I could do anything. It was my mother who trained me, taught me the facts of life. . . . And I was just nuts about her. (Lowe, 1998, p. 12)

His Catholic mother attended 6:00 mass with her son every day and made him an altar boy. From the time he was 6 years old, his mother's training included poker for real money—with his meager allowance, even cents were amounts that pained or brought happiness. As a child, Welch stuttered—a handicap that still befalls him at times, especially when he is enraged, which is relatively often. It is easier for the average person to identify with a hero who has some weak spots. Efforts to receive a scholarship to a better college came to nothing (O'Boyle, 1998). In his own words, Welch was an adolescent who "always had my nose pressed against the glass" (cited in O'Boyle, 1998, p. 48). In the high school newspaper, "his depressed desire" is noted as "to make a million" (O'Boyle, 1998, p. 48). In the meantime, Welch has made more than \$400 million on stock options alone.

There is wide agreement among the legends on Welch that his enormous success as a manager or leader (he prefers the latter expression) has to be attributed mainly to the following factors: (a) an uncompromising commitment to and an unshakable faith in shareholder value as the company's top goal; (b) substituting a conventional strategic plan with simple rules such as "Number 1 or Number 2 or out"

and their resolute realization; (c) the downsizing and delayering program, which Welch initiated earlier than other managers and that he carried out on a large scale in which it was not meant as a rescue from a threatening crisis but aimed to further increase a shareholder value that was already above average; (d) GE's transformation from a company in production, which owed its success mainly to its engineering knowledge, to a service company with its focus on financial service; (e) the "software revolution"; and (f) the talent with which Welch communicated all these measures to his managers and the public. It is in having the right faith that predominantly enables a hero to find simple but powerful solutions.

Most chroniclers follow Welch in dividing his unique work for GE into two phases: a hardware revolution characterized by a rigorous restructuring and downsizing strategy and a software revolution predominantly aimed at the empowerment of the employees, as if he was implementing a master plan in which these two steps had been conceptualized from the very beginning. In Welch's own words,

the decade of the 1980s imposed two distinct challenges: In the first phase, through 1986, we had to pay attention to the "hardware"—fixing the businesses. In the second phase, from 1987 well into the 1990s, we've had to focus on the "software." Our sustained competitiveness can only come from improved productivity, and that requires the bottom-up initiatives of our people. (cited in Lowe, 1998, p. 97)

Welch calls the hardware revolution "the easy part." The software revolution he perceives as more problematic by far because during its course not only the "physical makeup" had to be changed but also "ourselves, an infinitely more difficult task that frankly, not all of us in leadership positions are capable of" (Lowe, 1998, p. 126). Welch started the hardware revolution, as the legend goes, with a dramatic regrouping of the business portfolio by using the notorious Number 1 or Number 2 rule. Each of GE's business units was required to play a leading role in its respective markets. Those that did not were sold. The "three circle" concept is pictured as another of Welch's master strokes. Welch drew three circles on a sheet of paper. He labeled them "core businesses," "high technology businesses," and "service businesses." These were the businesses that were to lead GE into the 21st century. This little chart "sent shivers through the organization" (Slater, 1993, p. 84) because of the

numerous businesses that were “left by the wayside” according to the rule “fix, close, or sell.” Only a few were able to fix things; the others were liquidated or sold. The chroniclers praise Welch’s ability to convey crystal-clear messages with these simple rules. For those who in desperation tended to reinterpret the rules, Welch eliminated any doubt: “I put you outside my circles, not to encourage you to work harder so you could get inside, but because I am putting you on the chopping block!” (Slater, 1993, p. 84). The hardware revolution also encompassed a radical downsizing—Welch prefers the word *rightsizing*—and delayering.

The chroniclers are full of understanding for the hardware revolution, which Welch initiated during a phase of relative success. Slater (1993), for example, laconically quoted a CBS reporter: “There really isn’t a good guy and a bad guy in this story. GE is doing business just like everyone else. The bottom line isn’t people. It’s profits” (p. 91). Slater reported that the numerous firings were “very painful” for Welch, that he was really very sensitive and hated his image as a downsizer. Welch felt the nickname Neutron Jack extremely inappropriate, as Slater went on to report with sympathy, because in his eyes, his firmness was precisely how he acted in his employees’ best interest.

When Welch describes the software revolution—and the chroniclers do little more than quote and paraphrase him—his key words are “simplicity,” “speed,” “self-confidence,” and “boundarylessness” (Lowe, 1998, p. 126). Great ideas, according to Welch, are simple. Because they’re simple, they make sense to everyone quickly—“simple messages travel faster” (cited in Lowe, 1998, p. 139). It all depends on generating and realizing simple, and thus good, ideas fast—definitely faster than the competition. To achieve speed through simplicity, as Welch points out, employees must be empowered and given self-confidence:

Just as surely as speed flows from simplicity, simplicity is grounded in self-confidence. Self-confidence does not grow in someone who is just another appendix on the bureaucracy. . . . People who are freed from the confines of their box on the organization chart whose status rests on real-world achievement . . . those are the people who develop self-confidence to be simple, to share every bit of information available to them, to listen to those above, below, and around them, and then move boldly. (cited in Lowe, 1998, p. 141)

To be able to produce, pass on, and realize simple ideas quickly, the barriers between departments and

between the environment and the company must also be torn down—a boundaryless organization must be created.

The institution that is supposed to enable the employees to live all of these values is the work-out. For 1 to 3 days, representatives from various hierarchical levels and functions come together, usually outside of their regular work area (e.g., in Crotonville, GE’s training center) to discuss a complex of problems or an essential process, aiming to improve it. Typical work-out subjects are speeding up product development, improving the purchasing strategy, or improving cooperation between functions. After a top manager has presented the complex of problems, the assembly divides into small groups for brainstorming. Afterward, they all come back together for the “town meeting” to evaluate the generated ideas. The leader of the affected unit must reach a decision immediately after a certain idea has been discussed: “Approve it, kill it, or defer it for further study” (Ashkenas & Jick, 1992, p. 270). A follow-up process ensures that the generated ideas are realized.

In addition to books that focus on Welch, there are many that deal with individual management concepts such as rhetoric (Eccles & Nohria, 1992) or communication across departments or functions (Ashkenas, Ulrich, Jick, & Kerr, 1995) and that derive a large number of their examples from Welch’s GE (Slater, 1994, and Tichy & Sherman, 1995, also belong in this category). These books claim, even more than the books that deal exclusively with Welch and GE, to convey operational knowledge—the exact practices to which Welch and GE owe their success. They back up this claim by reproducing rules, principles, and checklists, and even questionnaires with which the readers can test for themselves how much or how little they or their companies resemble Welch or GE, respectively. However, most of these instructions and recipes are familiar from the actual management literature. The authors do not point out, at least not in a reconstructable way, how they obtained this knowledge, that is, which methods they applied in recording the reality of the GE corporation. Hardly an author who writes on concepts like downsizing or reengineering can resist the temptation to claim that just this version of the latest fashion was decisive for GE’s enormous success.

Modern legends are all the more effective the more they fall back on themes that are anchored deeply in a collective consciousness. Thus, it is not surprising to

find storytelling patterns in the reports on Welch that are familiar to us: namely, plots from Wild West myths and legends, from the frontier. One must hardly use force on a general summary of texts on Welch to bring it into the form of a Wild West story:

Welch is the tough and lonely cowboy who fights like hell against the powerful competition, mainly from abroad, and against bureaucrats. He does not do it for himself but for the many shareholders in the country, whose savings he wants to multiply. He believes in his ideals. In the beginning, a large number of people tried to stop him, even among the stock market experts, and among his own ranks some did not share his ideals, but Welch continued on his way, did what a man's gotta do. He impresses friends and foes alike with occasional demonstrations of his unbelievable fitness and speed—although he does not ride through the Rocky Mountains at night or draw faster than a rented gunslinger, even though he's been shot—nevertheless, he defeats a golf pro (Byrne, 1998a) and sweeps over the snowy slopes of the Rocky Mountains for days with an injured knee (Lowe, 1998, p. 20)—and lets the press know this. He avoids no duel. He lets his opponents know "You'd better get prepared like you've never been prepared . . . to operate . . . and not flinch!" (Bernstein, 1997, p. 113). Righteous anger lets him leave the battlefield regularly as the winner. His bonanza lies behind the mountains and holds immeasurable gold treasures for the shareholders. It must be defended against trespassing, greedy Japanese, and value-destroying bureaucrats in a fight right down to the last man. But Welch is always watchful. In the past there have been wars in which he has even delivered warriors who fought decently but could not manage to be Category 1 or 2 soldiers to the enemy, in order to make his troops more mobile, leaner. He keeps saying "[You've got] to have the guts to remove those fairly and kindly who aren't the very best" (Slater, 1999, p. 293). To prevent his men from weakening in better times, he paints their ever-present enemy to them in horrible colors and keeps them fit through exercises like the work-out, stretch, or six sigma. They remain loyal to Welch—also because they share in the bonanza, but mainly because they are aware of the superiority of their values and their system. But now it is time for Welch to give way to the younger ones. Soon he will be "riding into the sunset." (Laing, 1999, p. 23)

As in western legends, so in the Welch reports the American dream or the American virtues are embodied by the hero:

The complexities of social and historical experiences are simplified and compressed into the action of representative individuals or "heroes." The narrative of the hero's action exemplifies and tests the political

and/or moral validity of a particular approach to the use of human powers in the material world. The hero's inner life—his or her code of values, moral or psychic ambivalence, mixtures of motive—reduces to personal motive the complex and contradictory mixture of ideological imperatives. (Slotkin, 1992, pp. 13-14)

When Americans accuse a president, Carter, for example, of lacking in leadership, then they basically speak of heroic leadership as it was represented by John Wayne and Ronald Reagan (Teddy Roosevelt, at least, was still personally involved in war activity in the Wild West, Ronald Reagan only virtually, as a cowboy actor in B westerns).

Connecting tough heroic leadership and bonanza is as typical for Welch reports or business press articles on the New Market as it is for western legends:

Beginning with the California gold rush of 1849, the "bonanza" became the characteristic theme of each new frontier enthusiasm. The bonanza frontier offers the prospect of immediate and impressive economic benefit for a relatively low capital outlay." (Slotkin, 1992, p. 17f)

Boundarylessness is a modern version of the bonanza-frontier metaphor "as a place of windfall profit, of plenty of magic, of positive transformation" (Slotkin, 1985, p. 40).

The western legend, the hagiography, and the Welch legends are committed to the same understanding of truth:

Cody [alias Buffalo Bill, the creator of the extremely successful Wild West Show] was . . . well aware that his representation of historical events was inaccurate, to say the least. But he seems to have been sincere in his belief that the Wild West offered something like a poetic truth in its representation of the frontier. (Slotkin, 1992, p. 77)

Our analysis has produced some evidence that the texts on Welch show the typical characteristics of legends: The hero whose praises they sing started out as a normal person with a lot of human frailties; however, this did not prevent him from bringing about fantastic miracles (quantum leaps). The explanation for these miracles remains incomplete and vague. For most readers, it is therefore not possible to copy the strategies and the success that Welch has achieved with their help. Ultimately, it is the genius of Welch and his unshakable faith in the values he stands for that bring

about all these miraculous quantum leaps. The attractiveness of the texts on Welch is enhanced through the use of narrative patterns of the legends of the frontier.

### THE COUNTERLEGEND

During the Reformation, counterlegends played an important role: The Reformers recognized how important the legends of saints were for the people's faith, and so they spread stories in which they ridiculed popular Catholic legends, thus making them unbelievable, or they gave the legends a rational, and thus completely unspectacular, ordinary turn (Schenda, 1974). Since 1998, the hagiographies about Jack Welch have also shared such a counterpart: the critical depiction of Welch's management by O'Boyle (1998).

O'Boyle's (1998) story goes like this: Welch's main characteristic is unrestrained ambition. He can, when necessary, develop a captivating charm but also—and this occurs more often—roll over the person standing opposite him without mercy. For him, managing a company is synonymous with leading a war—leading a war to unconditionally increase shareholder value, whereby not only the employees are left by the wayside but also the tangible and intangible bases for profit. Opponents are all those who stand in the way of this goal: the competitors, but mainly all GE employees who are lacking true courage or who simply appear superfluous. It is a war in which no prisoners (compromises) are taken. His managers—the officers—are driven from battle to battle by Welch through greed and fear. Managers who achieve the short-term operational goals—the brutal performance requirements—are rewarded with a rapidly rising career as well as princely salaries and bonuses (stock options). Those who are not victorious, that is, those who do not fulfill the ambitious requirements and also those who are lacking in unconditional loyalty, are fired without mercy. Everyone who does not share the values, whatever they may be, falls into disgrace—and, in most cases, out of the company. The extent of personal responsibility is not of interest when failures occur. Past merits, no matter how triumphant, do not count. Neither does personal closeness to Welch. Welch's management made a merciless Darwinian system out of GE.

The aggressiveness that Welch brings to confrontations with his managers is part of this Darwinian system. Senior managers who are ordered to see him

shake at the knees. In 1984, Welch was voted toughest boss with twice as many votes as the second-place winner. From the laudatory article: "According to former employees, Welch conducts meetings so aggressively that people tremble. He attacks almost physically with his intellect—criticizing, demeaning, ridiculing, humiliating." The journal cites an anonymous employee: "Working for him is like war. A lot of people get shot up; the survivors go on to the next battle" (cited in O'Boyle, 1998, p. 83). In an article in *The Wall Street Journal* in 1988, an employee says, "You can't even say hello to Jack without it being confrontational. If you do not want to step up to Jack toe to toe, belly to belly, and argue your point, he does not have any use for you" (cited in Lowe, 1998, p. 42). The hagiographers also describe Welch as a rugged guy, but they see these characteristics in a positive light.

Under Welch's merciless pressure, O'Boyle (1998) maintained, the last remains of ethical values crumble as numerous environmental scandals, frauds, incidents of blackmail, and violations of the laws of competition show at GE. Processes that were set into motion by whistle-blowers were dealt with at GE with an armada of the most expensive lawyers (who have to be paid by the losers of the lawsuit), or, if still necessary, with high settlements that silenced the informant. O'Boyle further accused Welch of turning a company that had been led to greatness by its engineers' inventiveness and its workers' qualifications into a financial holding, a big financial gamesmanship, and, worse yet, of having systematically sacrificed the foundation for high tech innovations to the shareholder value, letting GE bleed dry. Society also has a price to pay, according to Boyle, because Welch's strategy, which has been copied by many companies within and outside the United States, stirs up social conflicts. It contributes to rising unemployment, to a wider gap between the rich and the poor, and to a radicalization of marginal groups, as well as to the disintegration of virtues like loyalty, fairness, morality, and diligence. In the long run, O'Boyle concluded, the price that many—lastly, even the shareholders—must pay for the increase in shareholder value is too high.

O'Boyle (1998) warned not to adopt Welch's "recipes for success." Based on several companies that are also very successful but, contrary to GE, depend on values like loyalty to employees, investments in knowledge, and true participation, he wanted to show that today there are alternatives to the strategy Welch embodies.

**HERESY IS A DANGEROUS BUSINESS:  
REACTIONS TO THE COUNTERLEGEND  
AND WHAT THEY TELL US ABOUT THE  
FUNCTIONS OF MODERN LEGENDS**

O'Boyle's (1998) counterlegend was not at all well received in the business press. In a review in *Business Week*, Byrne (1998b), who in his own articles also described Welch as inconsiderate and obsessed, rejected O'Boyle's critique as "unfair, misleading, and often just plain wrong." He supported his verdict mainly with one of O'Boyle's allegedly wrong accusations: a lawsuit in which the head of GE's industrial diamond business charged that he was fired because he alerted the Justice Department to an alleged price-fixing scheme with the de Beers diamond cartel. However, a judge dismissed two of three wrongful-discharge counts in the manager's civil lawsuit against GE. The third was settled between the parties, including a substantial financial compensation for the manager. The Justice Department's case was thrown out by a federal judge. O'Boyle did not conceal these facts. What Byrne holds against him in the end is "that the author tells the story as if Russell's [the manager's] accusations were fact." If this is all the counterevidence that a careful review of the numerous cases of unethical or criminal activities on the part of GE produced, O'Boyle's investigation can't be too bad after all. There is a sentence in Byrne's review that tells more about the reviewer than about the reviewed author: "Welch, who . . . runs the most admired corporation in the world and who has delivered more wealth to shareholders than anyone other than Microsoft Corp.'s Bill Gates, doesn't deserve the unflattering portrait found in this book." Apparently, business heroes who have created that much shareholder value do not deserve criticism, they deserve nothing but praise!

Another review in *The Economist* ("You're Alright, Jack," 1998) states that "Mr. O'Boyle goes too far." How far may critics of Jack Welch go? This reviewer does not make the slightest attempt to invalidate O'Boyle's accusations. He just sweepingly argues that the "thuggish, error-prone Mr. Welch in the book could barely have run a whelk stall, let alone increased GE's market value tenfold since he took over in 1981." The reviewer also criticized some court trials in which Welch's GE was involved that came to nothing (O'Boyle described why whistle-blowers and witnesses often became silent) and went on accusing O'Boyle of being "even more unfair in what he leaves

out": "There is virtually no mention of GE Capital, the successful finance arm that now accounts for nearly half GE's profits." Too bad: Aren't success stories exactly what the usual buyer of texts on management heroes really wants to read? Finally, the reviewer questioned, "Is it really so unusual . . . for defence contractors to rip off Pentagon, for industrial firms to be polluters, or for bosses to sack people?" As if a business hero could sanctify problematic management practices just because he also applies them. In a later article in *The Economist* ("The House That Jack Built," 1999) one can read that "a leftish [!] author called Thomas O'Boyle had a go at dismantling the Welch legend." The author insisted that O'Boyle "failed to carry his central charge—that Mr. Welch was the unacceptable face of American capitalism." This is certainly true because Mr. Welch represents a face of American capitalism that is highly acceptable, especially for those whose wealth has been increased by Welch and his imitators.

Interestingly enough, the books by Slater (1993, 1994, 1999) and the hagiographers have never been accused of being selective or biased, though they undoubtedly are. Selectivity is all right as long as the "right" belief is supported. It just cannot be that the hero, Jack, owes his success not only to his ingenious visionary leadership but also to ruthlessly putting people under pressure. To pull the hero, Jack, down from his pedestal would mean questioning all the values and strategies that have been linked to this shining light like shareholder value, downsizing, globalization, or the value of good investor relations—values that are propagated by business magazines, analysts, professors of business schools, consultants, and managers of pension funds. In the view of all the shareholders and stakeholders, O'Boyle's counterlegend is not only an attack against the hero, Jack, it is an attack against their belief system, their wealth, and their aspirations. Heretics or critics of widely adored heroes always fall into disgrace with those who strongly identify with the criticized legend.

Slater receives mostly praise for his kind of one-sidedness (Queenan, 1994). An example: "Every once in a while, a business book comes along that is so innovative, so daring, and so perfectly attuned to the reigning zeitgeist that its almost certain to be a monumental national best-seller" (Queenan, 1994, p. 52). To the "illustrious ranks" of people like Tom Peters and Lee Iacocca, the reviewer now adds "Robert Slater's stellar *Get Better or Get Beaten!*" Though this reviewer is aware that "most of the credit for this valuable tome

goes to Welch himself, who supplied Slater with his 31 leadership secrets, including such exquisite proprietary terminology as the concept of 'delaying,'" he also thinks that "Slater . . . deserves tremendous credit for the admirable job he has done in delineating Welch's views" (Queenan, 1994, p. 52). Very rarely does one come across more critical comments (of the same book!) than the following: "So, what makes the man [Welch] so successful? Well, unfortunately, Slater provides not a single word or a single sentence that goes to the heart of it" (Lipschutz, 1999). This critic is certainly not aware of the latent functions that are fulfilled by modern legends.

Asking the question who is closer to the truth, Slater and the other hagiographers or O'Boyle, is beside the point. Perhaps, business historians will sometime in the future be able, on the basis of a careful analysis of internal GE files and reports of Welch's allies and enemies, as well as neutral contemporary witnesses, to write biographies of Welch that approach truth as defined by the criteria of the science of history. On the basis of information that is available in the form of legends and counterlegends, it is futile to ask who the "real" Jack Welch is. In our view, the only adequate question here is which functions the publications on Welch fulfill.

#### **WHY DO MANAGERS LIKE TO READ ABOUT JACK WELCH AND OTHER SUCCESSFUL LEADERS?**

What can a Danish machine-tool manufacturer, a supplier to the automobile industry in the Alsace, or the purchasing manager of a construction corporation learn by reading texts on Welch? Best practices and detailed, generally applicable solutions that the managers can apply in their companies are hardly offered, even though the questionnaires and checklists sometimes create this impression. Analysts and investors let Welch get away with the diversification strategy, but with regard to other companies, they will hardly ever accept it to such an extent. There are not many managers who run a company in which they can apply the Number 1 or Number 2 rule. The others could become (probably naive) software revolutionists at best. However, they then face the dilemma that the descriptions of Welch's strategies, organizational solutions, and management style are just as vague as what one finds on these subjects in most other management best-sellers (Kieser, 1997). Even the most dili-

gent reader of Welch literature cannot say with certainty what work-out, stretch or six sigma really is or how downsizing is handled without endangering productivity and profitability in the long run. The authors who emphasize Welch and GE as good examples seem governed by the rule "keep it simple but keep it vague." The more ambiguous the recipes for success are, the more readers can use them as justification for their own actions. Hence, they do not offer solutions but rather mainly legitimization: for setting shareholder value as the overall goal of a company; for a vision of the company as a portfolio for financial investments; for rigorous downsizing and outsourcing; for preferring services, especially financial services, over manufacturing; and for radically applying Darwinian principles to management of employees and to relations with external partners.

As Hirsch (1986) pointed out, on the basis of an empirical analysis of the business press, texts on hostile takeovers provide a "linguistic framing" that fulfills three basic functions: (a) It helps participants and observers "to describe, order, and make sense" of startling new managerial practices; (b) it legitimizes and thereby reduces the stigma and strain experienced by actors involved in practices of this sort; and (c) it facilitates institutionalization of the new practices by disseminating and routinizing these and building consensus around them (p. 823). These functions are also served by texts on Welch. They not only legitimize and enable institutionalization of hostile takeovers but also of downsizing, stretching employees to extreme performance, and subordinates' challenging managers in work-out exercises. According to his chroniclers, Welch created or made popular new practices like downsizing that were at first perceived as highly problematic. And, legends of a hero who not only invented practices of these kinds but made them big successes provide for those who want to apply to these or similar practices a useful rhetoric. Thus, many managers might buy and read books on Welch and give them to their colleagues and subordinates as gifts because they are convinced that the ideology that these books contain is supportive of the pursuit of their strategies. These managers recognize the instrumental value of ideologies that are contained in modern business legends.

Other functions that texts on business heroes possibly serve can be derived from psychoanalytical theory. According to Freud (1961), the heroes (idols, stars, celebrities) in legends, folk tales, or movies fulfill two basic functions for their admirers: identification and

projection. Heroes are ego ideals that serve as a yardstick for one's own achievements. They embody the perfection that one wishes to reach oneself. Therefore, the admirers want to copy their ego ideals as much as possible. The ego ideals replace childhood narcissism in which the child is his or her own ideal. The admirers identify with their hero; they wish to put themselves in his place, to merge with him. At the same time, the admirers contribute to the idealization of the hero. Through the identification with a powerful model, the identifier can claim some of the model's fame for himself or herself. He or she can bathe in the hero's glory.

In the process of projection, unattainable desires that cannot be fulfilled are projected onto the hero, are transferred to him or her. In their imagination, the admirers participate in the fulfillment of the hero's desires that are also their own (Neuberger, 1994, p. 53). They feel rewarded themselves if the hero receives rewards. This reinforcement that the observer receives by projecting himself or herself onto the admired person amplifies the observer's wish to imitate certain behaviors or traits of the hero. Heroism that is (still) denied to one's self is delegated to the hero. If one were in his or her shoes (instead of being, for example, a subdepartment head), then one could surely achieve similar heroic deeds. For this reason, kids read legends of Superman and—as managers—legends of supermanagers.

The identification with heroes is facilitated if they share some characteristics with their potential admirers. For example, the hero's origin is the middle class; he or she loves sports—or stutters. Identification is further facilitated if the hero expresses attitudes and opinions that are shared by his or her admirers. On the other hand, one tends to assume that persons whom we admire think similarly to us. Causality works in both directions.

On the basis of a sociocognitive approach, Meindl, Ehrlich, and Dukerich (1985) pointed out that observers of and participants in business companies tend to develop "highly romanticized, heroic views of leadership" (p. 79). They considered these romantic views of leadership to be "a response to the ill-structured problem of comprehending the causal structure of complex, organized systems." Romanticized leadership thus reduces complexity. And, in addition, the stylization of extremely successful managers like Welch fosters the conviction that "true" leadership makes a distinction.

However, a romanticized view of leadership is not only functional for the observers of business compa-

nies but also for those who occupy positions of formal authority within business companies. As Meindl et al. (1985) argued, "It may be important for organizations to have leaders who operate, at some level, on the assumption that they do make a difference and that they are in control" (p. 97). Reading publications on managers who are undoubtedly in control because there is no other explanation for their extreme success helps enormously to keep up this working assumption.

There are, as we have seen, a number of factors that explain why managers develop a need for reading texts on business heroes such as Welch. Authors, journalists, publishers, editors of business magazines, consultants, and organizers of executive seminars and conferences, as well as management gurus, are only too happy to serve—and stimulate—this need. By making and selling business heroes, they can push their respective businesses. Of course, not every successful leader of a company can be made a hero. Success alone is not sufficient. It helps if the candidate himself or herself is a great communicator.

#### **WHAT ONE CAN REALLY LEARN FROM TEXTS ON JACK WELCH: EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION PAYS**

What is conspicuous is how often the hagiographers follow Welch's own interpretations: If Welch sees it this way, this is how it must be! Inasmuch as other witnesses are heard at all, they are almost always GE managers or advisors working for Welch who express unrestricted admiration for their employer. The authors not only quote extensively from the numerous publicized speeches and interviews, but they also proudly use lengthy passages from the interviews that Welch granted them specifically. The great CEO's words, and those of his apostles, make up almost the sole empirical sources that support the hagiographies. "Control your destiny or someone else will" is one of Welch's famous rules (which Tichy & Sherman, 1995, chose as the title of their book). He certainly controls, to a high extent, the construction of his own legend.<sup>2</sup>

In a survey conducted by a consultancy, it was found that "CEOs represent 45% of a company's reputation" and that "a massive 95% of financial analysts . . . buy stock based on a CEO's reputation, and 94% recommend a stock to clients on that basis" ("CEOs Make Up Half," 2000). Of course, surveys by

consultancies have to be taken with more than the usual grain of salt. Still, the assumption that a company's shareholder value is to some extent dependent on the company's communication or the communication of its managers, especially its CEO, has some truth to it. If the analysts are convinced that a remarkable CEO is at work, this should have a positive effect on their evaluation of the stock in question. And the company whose CEO is generally perceived as outstanding is, to a certain extent, successful due to that very fact alone: higher share prices, better initial conditions for mergers and acquisitions, more influence on politics, and so forth.

For example, in an article in Germany's leading business magazine (Nölting, 2000) on financial analysts, one reads that "while in former times analysts looked at fundamental data and forecasts, nowadays it is predominantly the story that counts" (Nölting, 2000, p. 199). Only the story, the author argues, can be convincingly communicated to other actors in the market. Communication creates success, and communicating this success creates more success.<sup>3</sup> But, whether journalists and analysts—the public in general—classify managers as excellent is greatly influenced by the communication they and their employees generate. Seen in this light, positive stories on Welch that add value to the company are communicative products that he supplies to a large extent himself, through numerous speeches to stakeholders and other auditoriums, in-house publications, and interviews with selected authors and journalists. He provides the chroniclers with the most important input for their publications. Especially in highly diverse and quick-changing companies, the depictions of projects and the management system that come from the company itself, as well as the CEO's charisma, become the main sources for evaluations and prognoses.

In this respect, it is remarkable that from 1981 to 1988, Welch's strategic focus was on the radical restructuring and regrouping of the portfolio. During this period, that is, before the start of the so-called software revolution, the rise of the classical performance indicators was even steeper than afterwards.<sup>4</sup> One could ask what led Welch to change the course. A very important reason seems to have been that the share price appeared to be humiliatingly low to him compared with what had been achieved.<sup>5</sup> The analysts felt that GE was too complex, not focused enough, and too much of a conglomerate (a banned word at GE since then). Welch's reaction was to establish a communication program that seemed suitable to counter these

accusations with an image of "integrated variety" and boundarylessness, and thus, the time for initiating the program was chosen cleverly: "It was no accident that by fall of 1988 Jack Welch was ready to begin the second phase of his revolution" (Slater, 1993, p. 209).

Several books on GE now came onto the market. The legend of Welch and GE played into the hands of the actors in the management fashion market, into which Welch had already fed several slogans and metaphors. In the end, it proved useful to the company and was therefore supported by Welch. He preferred to lead and create the management fashion market instead of following it. GE had demonstrated the superiority of a concept, and other companies copied it. Welch became more open to the writing profession since the beginning of the software phase, though he tended, simultaneously, to nourish the cult of secrecy that existed around his person or around GE. When inspecting Welch's management style more closely, it cannot be assumed that this second phase was or is literally soft, but the software phase's rhetoric and the metaphors that Welch later created in this connection (such as work-out, boundaryless organization, etc.) seemed to increasingly appeal to the public at large as well as to the analysts and thus to have achieved the desired effect as also regarding the share price.

Welch always tested the effect of his rhetoric on the stock market:

To Welch 1991 was a watershed year for General Electric, an important test of the effect his rhetoric and his accent of soft values had had on the company's balance sheet. Welch sensed that he was trying the patience both of GE shareholders and Wall Street analysts by touting the virtues of speed, simplicity, and self-confidence, of boundarylessness, and Work-Out. He knew that cynics would contend that while his hardware changes of the early 80s had brought growth and profit to GE, the company had been aided in great measure by the nation's decade-long prosperity. The early 90s however, had witnessed yet another American recession along with a decline in the world economy. The Welch Revolution faced its most serious challenge. (Slater, 1993, p. 258)

Looking at the development and stock price and market value of GE, it seems obvious that the revolution was won. The legend lives on and is more alive than ever (even though a very few are trying to scratch the surface). Our point is not that there is only rhetoric behind Jack Welch's success. What we intend to express is that mastering communication management is a highly important dimension of success in

stock markets. In this respect, it pays (in economic value) to create one's own legends.

## CONCLUSION

Publications on influential and admired management personalities are sold and read with the argument that knowledge on successful management and organization can be extracted from them. In this essay, we have studied which image of successful management such books convey and which knowledge the manager can get out of them. We argued that these publications are well described through the genre of the legend. Such legends entail a modern version of the myth of the bonanza frontier and deliver an image of heroic (or despicable) leadership. The values they convey are the most important message. Successful communication of management and organization, which consists of both fulfilling the expectations of an (institutionalized) audience as well as transcending (or restructuring) them, is, lastly, a kind of symbolic capital that can be turned into material capital on the corresponding markets (for example, increasing shareholder value). By consuming books on Welch, the reader may get some ideas on how to improve his or her style of communication, assuming first that these abilities are of universal character, at least to a certain extent, and second that they can be learned at all.

We now have come to a rather unspectacular end of our analysis of legends and counterlegends around Jack Welch. The legend as well as the counterlegend convey the message that Welch brought about quantum leaps for GE by, in his own words, creating "an atmosphere where excellence and performance are always in demand." This atmosphere, he goes on, is

an atmosphere that encourages breaking the rules. . . . At the Olympics we've heard people talking about steroids and suspicions. As we hear people wondering whether the pressures of competition are driving people to cheat. Those isolated violations cast their shadows on the real champions. What's the resolution? Tell athletes to run slower, jump lower, so they'll be above suspicion? Our view, put in those terms, is that you must run as fast as you can, and jump as high as you can, but if you break the rules, your medals are gone and you're out of the game for good. That's our view of competitiveness and integrity, and every leader in our company is striving to get that message across. (Slater, 1999, p. 247)

Are these the words of a good hero or a bad one? The audience, the business community, has chosen to let Welch shine as a good hero. Legends are not falsifiable, either by O'Boyle or by historians who collect evidence in a more scientific fashion. They live as long as the believers want them to live, or they die if more attractive heroes come along.

A little more than 100 years ago, a bishop from Linz in Austria wrote in the preface of a collection of legends that for him good legends belonged to "the most useful books in the house." Good legends could be recognized by the fact that they only reported the truth, albeit leaving out whatever was not edifying, whatever "could tarnish the imagination" (cited in Ecker, 1993, p. 158). They emphasized what was characteristic of each saint, used coherent language, and added religious lessons to the story. They were illustrated by pretty pictures, and last, the advantage of being short spoke for them, as they were also suitable for hard-working people. Nothing more apt could be written on the functions of modern legends.

## NOTES

1. The chroniclers do not apply psychological theories to delineate Welch's character. Thus, they do not refer to Freud (1961) who was convinced that men who as children were adored by their mothers are predisposed to become heroes: "I have found that persons who find themselves preferred and distinguished by their mothers show that specific self-confidence, that unshakable optimism that makes them appear as heroic and force real success" (Vol. 2, p. 404, footnote).

2. Welch just received an advance of \$7.1 million, the highest advance ever paid for a nonfiction book (another miraculous record for Welch!) from Time Warner Trade Publishing for a book on his ideas that he will write with John A. Byrne, one of his most eager chroniclers, and that will appear in 2001 ("Jack Welch erhält als Autor," 2000).

3. One of our anonymous reviewers urged us to present evidence in support of this claim. We approached a number of colleagues who are experts on capital markets. They were in agreement with our hypothesis but assured us that so far, there is only anecdotal evidence.

4. The turnover rose from \$28.9 million (1984) to \$50.1 million (1998) (after the start of the management program the increase was less but still good: a turnover of \$62,304 in 1992). The increase in profit was significantly higher than in turnover (11% from 1988 to 1992). GE's performance was significantly better than the average of the *Fortune* 500 companies.

5. Although the Standard & Poor's Index had recovered by 21.4% after the stock market crash, GE's share only increased by 0.9% during the same time frame. When report-

ers asked Welch to explain why GE's return on equity was "only" nearing the high point of 20.2% from 1979, he exploded and threatened to break off the interview: "Then he calmed down and answered: 'From peak to trough, it's a 10% change! If you were talking about a 30 percent drop, maybe you'd have a discussion'" (Slater, 1993, p. x).

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## REFLECTIONS ON EXPERIENCE

# Editor's Introduction

BARRY Z. POSNER

Today marks my 1,876th day as the dean. An announcement such as this often provokes laughter from my audience. "Are you counting every day?" someone asks. And, I say "yes" and explain that each and every day is another opportunity to make a difference and to be of service. I also explain that I chose to do this (count) in order to signal to my academic colleagues that I enjoy my job and *look forward* because, I maintain that "most academic administrators, especially department chairs, count down, as in 'I only have two more years (or 16 months, or 12 weeks) to do this and then it's over' (as in never again!)."

Department chairs make a difference and each of us in the academy knows first-hand how it feels to be in a department with good versus indifferent-to-poor leadership. The same, I'll bet, can be said about our experience with Deans, Vice Presidents, Provosts, and University Presidents. A small but growing number of colleges and universities are starting to invest resources into the leadership (and management) development of academic (faculty) administrators, and Lillas Brown provides one of the first personal stories about this experience. She gives heart, as well, to those who serve as educators for such programs, and she offers poignant and subtle wisdom to these guides, often toiling unappreciated and behind the main campus tents.

In the end, leadership development is the development of self, an inner journey exploring who we are ourselves and what we care about. Brown notes that we cannot separate who we are as individuals from what we do as leaders.

Most faculty will have the occasion to volunteer, if not forced (as in "it's your turn"), to provide leadership for their institutions. Think about how you can (and will) do this in ways that build capabilities and capacities. What will others remember about your stint as leader? How would you like

to be remembered and then set out to make that aspiration a reality. What kind of difference do you want to make?

This past academic year, I received more than 75 inches of unsolicited materials from other business schools, their deans, and program directors. Not a day goes by without receiving some new report, announcement, brochure, promotion, and the like. I do think it's interesting and important to know what's going on within other institutions and how they see (and position and posture) themselves. Yet I can't help wondering if this is overkill, and at the same time, I think (worry?) that maybe Santa Clara is not doing enough to get its message out there!

So I was very intrigued by Deone Zell's article "The Market-Driven Business School: Has the Pendulum Swung Too Far?" Where is the pendulum stuck, or swinging, these days? Zell's study reflects conversations within the Academy about the role of both students and the marketplace (e.g., rankings) in what we're doing in the ivory tower. Her informants add additional fuel to the raging discussions within business schools. There is something here for every reader to agree and disagree with. We hope it will stimulate your own thinking on the role of "clients" (who are they, anyway?) in business schools.

Many deans and faculty concede that the rankings have helped make their schools more responsive to the needs of both students and the business community. At the same time, many believe that the various lists exert an undue influence on students and that they hardly offer a complete or accurate picture of an institution. Most would agree that there are problems underlying the philosophy and the methodology of academic rankings (from whatever source).

One reviewer comments that this is in some way a form of the restructuring that has affected other industries (e.g., health care). It's ironic that the student as consumer is partly caused by universities themselves raising tuition so high that education has become a commodity rather than a privilege. This may be another example of extrinsic factors driving out intrinsic factors, for students and even faculty. The fierce competition for students has turned them into consumers. Meanwhile, schools do such a good job of telling students how elite (special, talented, gifted, fortunate, etc.) they are that they come to believe it and act accordingly (unappreciative).

Circulate copies of Zell's article among your colleagues—maybe among your students and alumni. Talk about the issues raised for your own institution. But in the end, let's all be careful not to become overly enamored with our own press releases.

# Leading Leadership Development in Universities

## A Personal Story

LILLAS M. BROWN  
*University of Saskatchewan*

**T**oday's universities face a multitude of challenges: leading institutional renewal; attracting and retaining top quality faculty, staff, and students; embracing learning technologies; meeting increasing demands from the public, funding agencies, employers, students, and university employees; and seeking new and alternate sources of funds and financial models. This new organizational environment requires leaders who thrive on the challenge of change; who foster environments of innovation; who encourage trust and learning; and who can lead themselves, their constituents, and their units, departments, and universities successfully into the future. Research from the Conference Boards of the United States and Canada reports that leadership is the number one competency that business and organizations seek to develop in their people (Hackett, 1997, and McIntyre, 1997, respectively). These groups see that leadership is in short supply and are interested in developing leaders throughout the business or

organization, not just at senior levels (Benimadhu & Gibson, 1999, p. 3; Conger & Benjamin, 1999, p. 1; Kouzes & Posner, 1995, p. xx).

In the past decade, we've witnessed a shift in emphasis from management development to leadership development. Management focuses on structuring goals, tasks, and roles, whereas leadership focuses on influencing direction and change, developing quality relations, and bringing out the best in oneself and others (Conger & Benjamin, 1999, p. 4; Kotter, 1999, p. 53). Effective leaders develop both managerial and leadership behaviors and qualities. Many management development programs today include a much greater emphasis on the leadership component, and many have renamed their programs "leadership development" to communicate and reflect this emphasis. An investment in the development of leaders is an investment in individual and organizational growth and renewal. As Kouzes and Posner (1995) suggested, "The most significant contributions lead-

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ers make are . . . to the long term development of people and institutions who adapt, prosper and grow" (p. xxv). Yet leadership development is an underutilized strategy at most universities. To meet the current challenges in higher education, dynamic leadership is needed throughout the university among faculty, staff, deans, and provosts and among chancellors, vice presidents, presidents, and students. Academic leadership development could build leadership capacities deep within the organization by paying greater attention to people and process and more consciously practicing the principles of effective leadership.

I'd like to offer as an example a leadership development program for department chairs that we've developed at the University of Saskatchewan. In addition, I'll describe some lessons that I've learned about myself and my own leadership in the process. This article will describe the two main components of leadership development—the inner work of intense personal development and the outer work of leadership in action. I will use myself as the main character in a personal story of my own self-development as the leader of leadership development for university department chairs (called "heads" in Canada). I choose storytelling as my method, for, as Howard Gardner (1995) has stated,

The artful creation and articulation of stories constitutes a fundamental part of the leader's vocation. Stories speak to both parts of the human mind—its reason and emotion. It is stories of identity—narratives that help individuals think about and feel who they are, where they come from and where they are headed . . . that is one of the most powerful leadership tools. (p. 43)

The context for the story will be provided by first describing the Department Head Leadership Development Program (DHLDP) and four key lessons I learned in its evolution.

For me, leadership is a personal commitment to make a difference in the lives of other leaders and their constituents. Leadership involves inspiration, motivation, aspiration, relationship building, and creative change. Leadership development requires a process of intense introspection and of "finding your own voice" by determining who and what you are (Kouzes & Posner, 1999, p. 146). As Conger & Benjamin (1999) have explained, "Because credibility and authenticity lie at the heart of leadership, determining one's own guiding beliefs and assumptions lie at the heart of

becoming a good leader" (p. 28). We have to be able to lead ourselves first before we can effectively lead others. When leaders do this inner work, their authenticity and genuineness show in their actions. As a leader of leadership development, I felt a special responsibility to take to heart and model these principles. My leadership development began when I took on the challenge of providing leadership development for chairs. My own self-directed leadership development program is woven into my experience and has greatly influenced the design and delivery of the DHLDP.

### LEADERSHIP IN ACTION—THE DHLDP

In the winter of 1993, I was a newly recruited faculty member hired to lead a start-up operation, Business and Management Programs, Extension Division, at the University of Saskatchewan. Shortly after my arrival, the vice president academic (VPA) approached me to collaborate with his office in designing and delivering a development program for the 85 academic department chairs. These middle managers were recognized as key leaders within the university. Up to this point, chairs received only an annual orientation, and a few chairs were sent to national administrator development programs. We set out to design and deliver a comprehensive, systematic, and planned approach to chair development by following adult learning principles, drawing on best practices in management and leadership development, and making creative use of university resources. Serving individual, departmental, and institutional goals, the program currently offers learning events throughout the year, including an annual half-day orientation for new chairs, an annual session on collegial processes, and several skill-development workshops such as Managing Conflict or Managing Performance in Your Department. There are several deans' and department chairs' forums and dialogue sessions with the president and individual vice presidents on strategic issues such as Enriching the Student Experience or Recruiting and Retaining Faculty. Finally, we have held a 4-day leadership retreat four times in the past 5 years. Over the past 7 years, the DHLDP has evolved along with my own evolution as a leader of leadership development. I offer four key lessons from my experience that I hope will guide others seeking to develop a similar program or strengthen an existing one: (a) Follow a process-driven model of individual and organizational development in

designing and delivering your leadership development program, (b) ensure that development and delivery are driven by primary stakeholders, (c) use a leadership competency model as a framework for learning leadership, and (d) provide leadership development retreats.

### **Adopting a Process-Driven Model of Individual and Organizational Development**

A process-driven model of individual and organizational development is important to ensure that your program will not run the risk of a quick-fix solution but rather will be enduring, stronger, and appropriate to your institution. I adapted a model from the Center for Creative Leadership that includes seven components.

#### *Model of Individual and Organizational Development<sup>1</sup>*

- Determining program purposes
- Developing buy-in and champions
- Determining competencies to develop
- Obtaining feedback on behaviors
- Orienting managers
- Designing development strategies
- Evaluating and committing to continuous improvement

This model is an essential tool for designing, delivering, and strengthening a comprehensive leadership development program. Because leadership development is a process, not a one-time event, each step is critical. We learned just how much time it takes and how vital it is to build buy-in and readiness. At first, we tried to do so by conducting two learning needs assessments, creating a DHLDP advisory committee and cultivating the VPA as the champion of the program. I now realize we should have spent more time orienting managers, in our case the deans, to encourage and support their chairs in attending programs and in coaching their day-to-day leadership development. We have now included a dean on our advisory committee. Last year, the deans had their own leadership retreat and participated in a 360-degree feedback process that has strengthened both their own leadership and their support of the leadership development program. Precisely because our model is process driven, it is self-correcting. Actively involved in communicating, planning, evaluating, and committing to continuous improvement, the stakeholders drive the

program, identifying necessary changes, and the program evolves as they do.

### **Obtaining Primary Stakeholder Involvement**

A second important lesson is to identify your primary stakeholders—in our case chairs (as learners), deans (the learners' managers), and the VPA (as champion)—and their respective roles and to make effective use of them in the program. This maximizes support and ownership, minimizes resistance, strengthens relationships, and ensures that your program is meeting real learning needs. In the DHLDP, the VPA champions the program, provides opening comments at all events, leads some sessions, and plays the participant/resource person at retreats. Finally, all official program communication comes from the VPA's office. In the 7 years of our program, there have been three VPAs—and I have taken the time to orient all of them to their champion role, to listen to their academic agendas, and to learn how each planned to strengthen the program. Their contributions have been vital. The VPA provides the strategic topics in the academic agenda, and the chairs provide the specific issues that "keep them up at night." Both are essential to create a meaningful program that meets the combined goals of chair development and the university academic agenda.

The deans, as key stakeholders, are in a position to influence, support, and encourage chairs' ongoing leadership development and their attendance at all DHLDP learning events. The deans select a member of deans' council to be on the Program Advisory Committee. The program offers two annual joint sessions with deans' council around strategic topics, and deans are often resource persons for program events.

Our Program Advisory Committee, representing the chairs, is composed of one chair from each of the departmentalized colleges and, as mentioned earlier, one dean. This committee plans and evaluates the program and offers advice on communication and promotion of the program to other chairs. The members' individual roles include being resource persons for sessions; briefing speakers; communicating to their peers about the program; and making sure we are drawing on solid applied research, models, and materials. They also ensure that all chairs are involved as much as possible in the learning needs assessments, through informal feedback, and session evaluations. For the most part, I have found our advisory commit-

tee members committed to making our academic community into a healthy, productive, nurturing environment.

### Selecting a Leadership Competency Model

Third, selecting or developing a leadership competency model for your program serves as a framework and provides a common language for the learners' ongoing dialogue and learning about leadership. As Conger and Benjamin (1999) pointed out, "It is clear from our research that a single well-defined model or framework of leadership improves participant learning. Having a well-defined model allows more opportunity to explore in depth the various dimensions of a given framework" (p. 33). There are many models of leadership. The DHLDP uses Kouzes and Posner's (1995) leadership challenge model, a well-researched contemporary transformational model of leadership with associated behaviors. One of the coauthors (Barry Posner), in his role as a faculty member and dean at Santa Clara University, contributes to the model's face validity in a university context.

The leadership challenge model is grounded in extensive research that demonstrates sound psychometric properties—reliability and validity (Kouzes & Posner, 1997b, p. 27, and Appendix C). Kouzes and Posner (1995, 1997) studied how ordinary people accomplished extraordinary things in organizations. Their research demonstrates that leadership is a pattern of behavior that can be developed. It also shows that those who engage in these behaviors become more effective leaders. The authors found a consistent pattern of behavior described by five distinct practices and 10 commitments.

#### *The Leadership Challenge Model<sup>2</sup>*

##### *Challenging the Process*

**Search** for challenging opportunities to change, innovate, and improve.

**Experiment**, take risks, and learn from the accompanying mistakes.

##### *Inspiring Shared Vision*

**Envision** an uplifting future.

**Enlist** others in a common vision by appealing to their values, interests, hopes, and dreams.

##### *Enabling Others to Act*

**Foster** collaboration by promoting cooperative goals and building trust.

**Strengthen** people by giving power away, providing choice, developing competency, assigning critical tasks, and offering visible support.

##### *Modeling the Way*

**Set an example** for others by behaving in ways that are consistent with your stated values.

**Plan** small wins that promote consistent progress and build commitment.

##### *Encouraging the Heart*

**Recognize** individual contributions to the success of every project.

**Celebrate** team accomplishments regularly.

The leadership behaviors associated with this model can be measured with an empirical instrument, the Leadership Practices Inventory (LPI) (Kouzes & Posner, 1997a). We use the 360-degree feedback process because feedback on leadership behavior is a critical component of learning effective leadership. Typically, leaders have few opportunities to learn how their constituents perceive them. The feedback on chairs' leadership behaviors is used to guide individual development plans, and group feedback drives the agenda of development programs. From my own experience, when the LPI is introduced following the method in the facilitator's guide, participants understand and buy into this model of leadership because it is grounded in leaders' experiences and has high face validity. The entire model has helped us learn and talk about leadership, frame strategic issues in a leadership context, and develop a common language about leadership.

### Conducting a Leadership Retreat

The fourth and final key lesson from the DHLDP involves the 4-day Strengthening Departmental Leadership retreat, where the most in-depth and meaningful leadership development occurs. We have held four retreats over the past 5 years, with approximately 20 chairs at each. Most chairs attend once during their term, typically early in their term to benefit from the network building, chair role clarification exercise, and the overall understanding of leadership. The retreats are cofacilitated by the director for organization and employee development and myself. The VPA spends at least 2 days at the retreat, participating in the learning activities and acting as a resource person for one or two sessions. Other resource persons have included the president, a dean, experienced chairs, or members

of the participant group with specific experiences to share such as leading strategic planning within their departments.

At the retreat, chairs focus on their understanding of leadership, with the leadership challenge model providing the framework. The retreat is divided into five modules following the model's five broad practices of leadership—challenging the process, inspiring shared vision, enabling others to act, modeling the way, and encouraging the heart. These practices are presented, discussed, and applied in the context of current university challenges and strategic issues. Chairs receive feedback on their leadership and engage in personal development activities such as developing a personal and professional vision and a values statement that reflects the kind of leader they want to be. They build new skills through practical sessions on a topic such as conflict management, managing performance, or leading change in their departments. Finally, they create and strengthen their learning and support network with other chairs, the VPA, and resource persons from across campus.

The retreat is held at a university-owned retreat center on a beautiful northern lake. Being in nature, away from day-to-day distractions with ample time for reflection, helps facilitate contemplation and dialogue with one's innermost self. Time for reflection is essential for participants to evaluate their own experience and retain new lessons and insights. A chair who attended stated,

The annual retreat provides useful session material and setting that is highly conducive to reflecting and gaining perspective on the role of the head and the personal adjustment that must be considered, as well as for strengthening my network across campus.

The first retreat was the hardest to recruit for, primarily because of the 4-day time commitment. Those who attended subsequently became great advocates for the program.

### CHALLENGES FACING DEPARTMENT CHAIRS

Most chairs in our program had not aspired to being chairs, nor had they considered successful management and leadership part of their career paths. Typically, most faculty do not think they need leadership and management. Paul Ramsden (1998)

described "the two cultures of management and the academy crossing swords along the frontier defined roughly by the caricatured problems that they have with each other" (p. 27). Such problems include management's problem with the slowness of academic collegiality; academics' lack of accountability and unwillingness to share the burden imposed by tighter budgets; and their complaints, negativism, and cynicism. Academics traditionally complain about management's rejection of collegiality, being burdened with administrative tasks that take valuable time from their academic work, and increasingly intrusive assessment processes. Because of their bridge role between faculty and administrators, it is a challenge for chairs to lead well, but they can do so by respecting and working with both cultures. Such a creative dialogue would also benefit the university on a macro level. Currently, academic leaders (chairs and deans) and administrative leaders (managers, directors, and administrators) have separate development programs. In the future, joint development sessions on topics of mutual interest would build relationships and develop greater understanding between the two sides of the university.

### STRATEGIC GUIDELINES FOR CHAIRS' DEVELOPMENT

Recent national and international conference presentations on academic department chair leadership development and discussions with chairs at several universities in Canada, the United States, and Australia have revealed these common themes that provide valuable strategic guidelines for chairs' development.<sup>3</sup>

- **The best source of help and support to a chair is another chair.** As I've found in the DHLDP and at other universities, chairs are excellent resources for one another. They are eager to create and strengthen collegial relationships with their counterparts across campus and share challenges and best practices.
- **New chairs are initially overwhelmed and need a solid orientation.** A new chair's orientation should cover the administrative aspects of the job, time lines, and whom to contact for advice and information. In the DHLDP orientation, we include a panel of experienced chairs who describe the transition from faculty to chair and the life cycle of the chair from beginner to seasoned chair. They field questions for new chairs and share the top 10 things they wish they had known when they started.

- **Chairs typically find personnel problems the hardest issues to handle.** Probably the most commonly asked questions I receive from chairs are, “How do I motivate people?” “How do I improve morale?” “How do I deal with difficult people?” “How do I deal with a performance problem?” or “How do I deal with an employee’s personal problem?” Chairs benefit greatly from sessions on human resource practices for chairs, plus timely access to consulting and coaching services from human resources when they experience a problem.
- **Most midterm and outgoing chairs discover opportunities for creative leadership and want to make a difference in the lives of their constituents, their department, and the university.** Like participants in other executive development programs, chairs are highly educated in their specific areas. They see the need to strengthen their leadership capabilities and appreciate the social psychology of leadership, which is most often a new area for them. Chairs typically discover the deep rewards of the position. After the first year or two, they realize that their new leadership skills are transferable to the classroom, to their research, and to service to the university and the broader community, as well as to their personal lives.
- **Succession planning and transition planning for new chairs are a big gap in most universities.** Perhaps if academic leadership development were provided for faculty, being chair could be seen as a valuable developmental opportunity. Knowing there would be adequate preparation and support before going into the role would help mitigate the current negative attitudes about taking the position.

Most chairs express negativity and reluctance going into the role. Many did not see administration as part of their university career paths. The position of chair is also unique in that as faculty, chairs go into the role for typically 3 to 5 years and then return to a faculty position. The chair is perceived by faculty more as a peer, and the chair often prefers to be seen this way. Hence, chairs need to learn to use their influence and persuasion, experience, and expertise to lead changes and make things happen in the department as opposed to using the power of their position.

Chairs struggle to harvest the rewards of the position. Many express concern about work/life balance and balancing teaching, research, and administration. They worry that being chair might actually be detrimental to their careers by derailing research or jeopardizing opportunities for promotion to full professor. This is something the DHLDP is beginning to address by offering chairs programs on balancing teaching,

research, and administration and work/life balance; providing opportunities to strengthen their leadership capability and the leadership capability of others in their department; and helping them discover opportunities for leadership action. Chairs are finding rewards in the program, the lessons it offers, and in their new or strengthened network across campus. They are discovering the deep satisfactions of leadership development, acquiring skills that will enhance all aspects of their personal and professional lives.

In the early years, our program focused more on training. It has now evolved to reflect a broader learning and organizational development approach designed to meet the combined goals of chair and university development. The program partners with Organization and Employee Development (O&ED) of the Human Resources Division to provide specific skill-training programs. Several programs are devoted to facilitated dialogue between chairs and senior leaders (deans, vice presidents, and the president) around strategic issues. We have found communication to be a foundational skill of leadership—specifically, active listening and speaking in a way that contributes to quality dialogue while building respect and trust.

#### EVIDENCE OF MAKING A DIFFERENCE

Most trainers struggle with questions of what difference they are making. Coming to grips with how the success of a leadership program for chairs would be measured is important from the outset. There are both quantitative and qualitative measures of program effectiveness. The quantitative measures we use are an evaluation questionnaire after each learning event and an attendance record. The qualitative measures include comments from open-ended questions on the learning event evaluation forms and advisory committee formative and summative evaluation comments. The advisory committee uses this information to strengthen and evolve the program. I will share some chairs’ comments about the program and some of my own observations and perceptions of the program’s making a difference.

An early success was the first leadership retreat where we introduced Kouzes and Posner’s (1995) leadership challenge model and the LPI. Department chairs are first and foremost academics, with finely honed skills in research and intellectual debate. Fortu-

nately, the Psychology Department chair in attendance liked the LPI instrument, and the Organizational Behavior Department chair appreciated the leadership challenge model so much he adopted Kouzes and Posner's text for his leadership class. Intellectually and personally stimulating, the retreat was a great success, resulting in testimonials and word-of-mouth promotion for subsequent programs and retreats. As one chair stated,

I highly recommend participating in the DHLDP. The monthly sessions cover key areas of concern and the opportunity to network with chairs and resource people who are willing to help when new issues or problems arise. The retreat was a valuable experience. The content was sequenced and presented in a manner that allowed chairs plenty of time to grapple with the issues and to reflect on personal practice. The group discussions were lively, animated and always focused on developing leadership abilities. After a busy academic year, this retreat was truly a professional boost.

Informal feedback from participating chairs consistently underscored how rewarding leadership development is for academic leaders.

In the past few years, many department chairs have initiated their own departmental strategic planning retreats, calling on the O&ED director and me for facilitation services. Hence, we have seen firsthand process-driven planning that involves all departmental members in these new ways of communicating and working together. According to the O&ED director, as a result of the program, many chairs have sought consultation and intervention services around challenging human resource situations and encouraged their departmental members to attend learning programs offered by the Human Resources Division.

Following the success of the DHLDP, leadership development programs have been provided in the past 3 years for other leader groups on campus including deans, administrators (managers, directors, and administrators), and student leaders. As all these leadership groups address strategic issues such as enriching the student experience and performance management, they are coming together to create a leadership culture at the university. Academic leadership development for faculty is the next program opportunity that I personally would like to help lead. Inspired faculty with high morale are essential to instilling a passion for lifelong learning and inspiring their students toward lives of leadership and purpose. Parker Palmer (1998), in his book *The Courage to Teach*, stated

"that good teaching cannot be reduced to technique and that good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher" (p. 10). The same holds true for leadership; when reading his book, I found I could substitute *leader* and *leading* every time he used the words *teacher* and *teaching*. Both teaching and leading are dynamic processes of human interaction.

Further evidence of the DHLDP's impact is that the language of leadership is being used across campus, and in public forums, the comments and questions reflect leadership concerns. For example, at a VPA candidate presentation to the academic community, a chair asked of the candidate, "Do you see yourself more as a manager or as a leader?" More recently, the current VPA stated,

At this particular moment in the evolution of the university, the language of entitlement has given way to the language of expectations. We are entitled to hope for a better future but we are expected to show why we deserve it. The task of the academic leader is to encourage risks that will inspire hopes.

By making the atmosphere of our leadership retreats and ongoing programs as respectful, open, honest, and supportive as possible, I had hoped participating chairs would take back some of this atmosphere to their respective departments. In the 7 years of the DHLDP, we have developed a critical mass of department leaders, the language of leadership is being used around campus, and our university leadership development initiatives are becoming increasingly aligned. Our program has been a powerful catalyst to developing a leadership culture at the university.

#### *Summary Lessons of Leadership in Action*

- Follow a process-driven model of individual and organizational development to design, deliver, and evaluate your leadership development program.
- Identify who your primary stakeholders are and their roles to ensure that you maximize their involvement in the program.
- Choose a leadership competency model as a framework for learning leadership.
- Provide leadership retreats designed to meet chair and university development goals.

## THE INSIDE STORY: UNCOVERING THE SPIRITUALITY OF LEADERSHIP THROUGH ONGOING PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

From the beginning of my career, leadership development has captured my heart, mind, and soul. Before coming to the university I had worked hard and been successful as a human resource development manager in a corporation. However, what was missing from this context was attention to people and process. Ideally, one manages the work and leads the people. My early work experience, however, is better described by John Kotter's (1999) statement "that most organizations are over managed and underled. They need to develop their capacity to exercise leadership" (p. 51). I wanted to make a difference in the lives of leaders and their constituents in the workplace.

When I began my new position at the University of Saskatchewan, I realized that if I was going to lead leadership development through extension programs and the DHLDP, I needed to learn and live leadership practices and principles. That first year, I read all I could about contemporary leadership models, tools, instruments, and development and attended conferences and a program at the Center for Creative Leadership in San Diego, California. The work of Conger, Kouzes, and Posner greatly influenced my approach to leadership development. A trusted friend and colleague, Linda McCann, director, O&ED at the University of Saskatchewan, and I became learning partners and supported each other in the area of university leadership. But along with all the reading, networking, and conferences, I realized that I needed to spend more time on my own personal development, as I had been far too activity or "doing" focused. I recognized that I needed to lead myself more consciously. Now that I had tremendous influence over many others, I had a responsibility for thoughtful, appropriate personal and professional leadership action. Developing my inner life to meet this challenge, I took workshops on creativity, wellness, and spirituality and committed to yoga, meditation, reflection, and journalizing.

I believe in the need to elevate the value of inner work as part of leadership development programs. The best leadership models, techniques, and strategies in the world will fall short if a leader cannot instill trust and lead with courage, vision, and heart. As Kouzes and Posner (1999) stated, "People don't follow your technique. They follow you—your message and your embodiment of that message." They go on to add, "Finding your voice is absolutely critical to

becoming an authentic leader" (pp. 146-147). People learn and respond to who and what we are. Palmer (1994) explained that the activities that constitute inner work are as important as any other project or task—activities like journalizing, reflecting, reading, spiritual friendship, and meditation. "We must come to understand," he pointed out, "that if we skimp on our inner work, our outer work will be diminished as well" (p. 38). Palmer further stated that although inner work is deeply personal, it is not necessarily a private matter. Being with one another in community and being present to a person's solitude, a person's mystery, while that deep inner work goes on are a powerful experience (p. 38). We lead from an inner place—the very core or essence of who we are. Katherine Tyler Scott (1994) linked this inner place to leadership when she observed,

The overemphasis of the external in our culture has contributed to a devaluing of the internal life of the leader. Self-reflection, exploration, and analysis in any depth frequently and divisively are referred to as touchy feely. This is a character that colludes in the separation between public and private, and in my view dismisses a discipline that powerfully forms and informs the nature of leadership. (p. 70)

Because of this imbalance, the developed world has evolved in material and outer ways but remains impoverished in inner ways. Within the human heart, Palmer (1998) pointed out, "is the salvation of this human world . . . in the human power to reflect, in human meekness and in human responsibility." He quoted Vaclav Havel, president of the Czech Republic: "Without a global revolution in the sphere of human consciousness, nothing will change for the better" (p. 20). I have experienced my own and witnessed chairs' readiness for this deep personal development work of leaders—discovering and expressing their souls at work and further developing their innermost selves.

There are low points and high points in my inside story of leadership development. The low points have to do with my strengths taken to extreme becoming weaknesses and also the growing pains of a new program and its struggle for acceptance and credibility. When I have an excessively external focus, characterized by a lot of activity and doing, I don't spend as much time as I need to in reflection and contemplation. My passionate commitment to my work can also lead to impatience when I don't see immediate results. I continue to remind myself that leadership develop-

ment is a long-term process for the individuals and for the program, hence my need to be patient and look to the long term.

Many challenges and low points occurred for me in the first couple of years. I was new to the university and, like any new leader, had to earn credibility. In any organization, credibility building is a process that takes time, hard work, devotion, and patience. What differs in an academic environment is the hypercritical culture of the university. I soon found myself and the DHLDP on the receiving end of critical feedback. For example, a chair on our advisory committee who had not been on the leadership retreat stated that the retreat was a waste of money and that faculty don't want to be led. The next day, this individual partially apologized, saying he or she was under personal stress. I admitted there was an element of truth in the statement "faculty don't want to be led," particularly in the traditional top-down sense of leadership. This chair went on the next retreat and found it a worthwhile learning experience. On reflection, I realized what had initially felt like mean-spirited criticisms were usually reactive comments, generalizations, personal attacks, or opinions stated as facts rather than specific, balanced feedback. Balanced feedback provides both constructive critique and positive reinforcement. All too often feedback comes only in the form of critique. At first, when criticism came, I was overcommitted and exhausted. I felt defensive and vulnerable. I have learned not to react defensively but to frame critical comments as resistance to change and to ask for more details. I strive for a constructive discussion that builds support for the initiative and strengthens our relationship in the process.

Feedback is most welcome, but I prefer feedback given in a spirit that is useful and respectful. I am reminded of the Sufi lesson concerning the three gates that verbal communication needs to pass through. The first gate is, Is it the truth, including the hard truths? The second gate is, Is it important? Does it serve a purpose? And the third gate is, Is it delivered in a way that shows respect and that you care? (Easwaran, 1991, p. 159). We all recognize what mean-spirited feedback does to the receiver, but it also damages the sender at a very deep level as well. Easwaran (1991) stated,

We need to choose words that will be supportive and loving, not words that embarrass or wound another person. All of us understand what blows can do to someone, but we do not realize that words can create a more painful injury, one that can last for many years. Nor do we understand the terribly destructive impact

words can have on the consciousness of the person who uses them. (p. 159)

When I shared this Sufi lesson with a colleague recently, he responded, "Yes, you can't love people too much!" I would like to hear more people at the university responding like this! This is something I have given a lot of thought to, and I strive to leave all my encounters with people with the feeling that I care. I would like to think of the university as a loving organization. I am reminded of my favorite leadership quote:

We suspect the best kept secret of leadership is love: being in love with leading, with the people who do the work, with what their organizations produce, and with those who honor the organization by using its work. Leadership is an affair of the heart, not of the head. (Kouzes & Posner, 1995, p. 305)

In the early years, some naysayers dismissed my work, saying, "That is a business model," or "You can't herd cats," "Watch the fluff," and so on. Painful as some of this was at the time, it not only contributed to my challenge, but it caused me to persevere and develop a thicker skin. It also taught me a valuable lesson by negative example. It reinforced my intent to contribute to a more encouraging and nurturing culture than what I was experiencing.

As a high achiever, soon I realized that passion, when taken to extremes, becomes obsession and leads to a total loss of work/life balance. After the first 2 years providing the program, along with my other extension programs, I had too much of an activity or doing focus, was overcommitted, felt exhausted, and lost much of the joy of my work and life. I also recognized these symptoms in many of the university leaders with whom I worked. I have found that many dedicated people at the university run the same risk of overwork. This realization forced me to become more centered, to be clear about my priorities, and to say no to some good ideas in order to say yes to others. Appropriate passion for me is being devoted to leadership development at the university but not obsessed. What has helped me the most is ensuring that I take some time daily for reflection and contemplation through personal journal writing. This keeps me centered in the present, makes me more thoughtful and conscious in my leadership development work, and makes it easier for me to be congruent with my values. Increasingly, I accomplish what really matters

to the university and me while being more able to enjoy my life.

In early years, I used to worry about why some chairs never came to programs. I feel less worried now as I realize there will always be some who choose not to participate. Leaders must want to engage in personal development. An important factor in leading is the desire to learn, change, and grow. All the university can do is to make the best leadership development program available. I believe we are developing a critical mass of chairs who are embracing leadership development and integrating it into our university culture. I have now seen a new chair become an advisory committee member, serve his 5 years as chair, and then become dean. He enthusiastically encourages his chairs to attend the program and has recently encouraged a student leadership initiative in his College Student Association.

The highlights of the program for me include the in-depth personal development work at the 4-day leadership retreats, evolution of my professional interests and finding my unique core competence, and being able to link this process to my life's work. The outcome is finding greater balance, meaning, and joy in my life.

For our chairs, the high point of our program is definitely the 4-day leadership retreats, where the most in-depth personal development occurs. The subsequent changes applied to their personal and professional lives result in transformational leadership that produces extraordinary results. Ultimately, the personal is the professional. As a facilitator at these retreats, I create and hold a sacred space, an environment where true thoughts, feelings, insights, and inspirations can safely emerge. Chairs come together in community as the group meets in a circle for much of the retreat. Group guidelines are established that include deep listening and truthful speaking designed to encourage authentic dialogue. If we want to grow as leaders, we must talk to each other about our inner lives. This is new for most chairs in a learning and university context. Typically, the culture of educational institutions is bureaucratic and competitive, valuing the rational way of knowing. Within the retreat, we are creating a culture that fosters collaborative leadership and values learning in the broadest sense, including personal and subjective ways of knowing.

As a facilitator, I have moved away from the trainer approach and am increasingly including less content and structure and playing a less central role. I find the more I hold back, the more others bring forth their own answers. This allows me to pay closer attention to

the immediate needs of the individuals and the group. Becoming more flexible with the agenda, I can modify it to meet these needs. Being more fully present, I am able to uncover and utilize the resources and talents in the group. For example, in one retreat the chair of the English Department created an exercise on encouraging the heart through the use of metaphor, and in another an aboriginal senior leader (a dean) concluded the retreat with an aboriginal traditional round dance, where all participated.

I take calculated risks by going deeper into personal development components, such as providing chairs with the opportunity to walk the labyrinth or participate in a strength bombardment exercise. The labyrinth is an ancient walking meditation tool that exists in many spiritual traditions. Each person's experience is different. In my case, walking the labyrinth quiets my overactive mind. Labyrinths have only one path leading to the center and back out again. For me, this path symbolizes going inward in contemplation, reflection, and thoughtfulness (inner leadership) and then back out into the world of people and events (outer leadership in action) with heightened consciousness.

The strength bombardment exercise is best done toward the end of the retreat when participants know each other better. They are given a short presentation to remind them of the guidelines for giving and receiving feedback—both constructive critique and positive reinforcement. Participants reflect on the successes they have had in life and work and then, in small groups, briefly share their success stories. The others listen for the strengths and talents underlying their successes and feed them back to the storyteller. People often need others to point out to them their strengths and talents so that they can draw on them more often. Chairs experience giving and receiving positive reinforcement firsthand, hence, experiencing what the leadership practice "encouraging the heart" feels like, instead of just having an intellectual discussion about it. This exercise is also an opportunity to storytell, actively listen, and to be reminded that acknowledging successes and pointing out strengths are part of performance management feedback. They return to their departments reminded that recognition is a powerful leadership strategy for bringing out the best in people. My experience tells me never to underestimate the readiness of the group for such deep personal development work.

Finally, I am conscious of modeling the practices of leadership in my daily life and most certainly in the

retreat. The DHLDP experience has strengthened my overall professional work, as I have moved to a broader learning consultant and facilitator approach in the retreat and in overall DHLDP and extension programming. It has contributed to my developing a unique core competence in leading leadership development at the university. It has focused my business and management extension work in leadership for public, customized, credit, and noncredit programs. Recently, we have changed our name to Business and Leadership Programs to reflect this core competence and are gaining a national reputation for our agricultural leadership programs. With the chamber of commerce, we have initiated a community leadership program. Plans are in process to offer a master's degree in agricultural leadership and a new leadership development certificate program.

By seeking to live the leadership principles I teach, I have achieved better balance, satisfaction, and joy in my life. I feel very blessed for the work I do, for the joy of learning, and the joy of leadership and what it brings to individuals and organizations. I am uncovering the spirituality of leadership by being congruent with my soul and clearer on my life's purpose, connecting it to my life roles and helping create sacred space to help others find this vital connection in their own lives and work. This deeper work in leadership is about living with integrity, a point captured beautifully in a book by Diane Dreher (1996), titled *The Tao of Personal Leadership*, which, incidentally, she wrote while being the chair of the English Department at Santa Clara University. She describes the four stepping stones to developing greater integrity: to live values consistently, to maintain a spiritual practice, to tell the truth, and to practice openness (p. 220). Similarly, Thomas Teal (1996) defined integrity in leaders as "being responsible, communicating clearly and consistently, keeping promises and knowing oneself" (p. 37).

In writing this article, I was initially hesitant to use words like *soul* and *spirituality* because of their broad meaning, their somewhat taboo nature in business, and their overuse in popular culture. However, not only were these words very prevalent in my personal journal, they have occurred with increasing frequency in leadership books over the past decade. These linguistic clues point to a paradigm shift: a growing recognition that spirituality is essential to leadership because leadership emerges from our essence as human beings. As Russ Moxley (2000) stated in his book, *Leadership and Spirit*, "Spirit works within us. It helps define the true, real, unique self that is us. . . . We

are who we are because of spirit" (p. 23). The implication of this concept for other leaders of leadership development is the vital importance of personal authenticity and genuineness, deep caring about people, leading from the heart, living daily leadership principles and practices, seizing the opportunity to do your own inner work in the process, and knowing it will show in your outer work. In the process, you will discover how deeply rewarding it is to grow yourself and make a solid contribution to leaders at your university or organization.

#### WHERE INNER AND OUTER LEADERSHIP COME TOGETHER

I have come to believe that the greatest leverage to being a better leader is emotional and spiritual development. This process is difficult, complex, and often overlooked in a culture that focuses almost exclusively on intellectual and physical development. Yet the wisdom of this inner work reaches from recent leadership studies to as far back as Socrates. We lead from the essence of who and what we are. Knowing ourselves is as crucial to leadership as knowing our people and knowing our organizations. The best leadership cannot be reduced to technique. It arises from our identity and integrity and appears in authentic leadership behaviors and action.

For good leaders, doing and being work together in a dynamic relationship. However, the being part has to come first. We have to answer the question, What do I want to be? before What do I do? We have to uncover the leader within. Who and what you are as a leader powerfully influence behaviors that affect others and the organization. Doing without being results in inauthenticity, which can be felt by those around us. It can also trap us in frantic, harried activity; preprogrammed behaviors; and workaholism. On the other hand, being without doing leads to passivity, escapism, and delusion. We need to hold the creative tension between the two: to heighten our consciousness, being mindful of our inner thoughts and feelings as well as outer people and events. Where these inner and outer worlds meet, in the present moment, is our point of power as leaders.

Organizational leadership requires us to be effective in the moment of action. Yet organizational life, with the fast pace, ambiguity, and chaos that accompany challenge and change and the growing demands of stakeholders, is full of distractions that pull us out

of the present moment. It takes concerted effort to be a leader. Learning more about ourselves and improving how we use our knowledge, skills, and abilities in loving service to our constituents and organizations make us effective leaders. This point where inner and outer leadership come together is the secret that enables a leader to make a lasting difference. This is the essential challenge of leadership, and my greatest desire is that I achieve this creative balance and have a positive impact on my constituents and my organization. As I conclude, I realize that the challenge is ongoing, that I write what I struggle with, and my leadership story is still a work in progress.

### NOTES

1. For a full description of this model; its application to this Department Head Leadership Development Program; and how it can be used as a tool to design, deliver, or strengthen similar programs at a university or any other organization, see Lillas M. Brown (2000) *Learning to Lead: Facilitating Leadership Development at the University*, Working Paper #2000-x, Leavey School of Business, Santa Clara University.

2. Adapted from Kouzes and Posner (1995). Copyright © 1995 by Jossey-Bass, Inc. Reprinted with permission.

3. Discussions about chair leadership development at the Universities of Saskatchewan, Regina, Santa Clara, Missouri, and Canberra and San Francisco State University, as well as at The Conference Board of Canada Quality Network of Universities May 2000 meeting, and conference presentations titled "Academic Department Chair Leadership Development" at the 1999 Canadian Association for University Continuing Education Conference, the 1999 United States Conference on University Management and Executive Development, and the 1999 United States Conference of the College and University Human Resource Association.

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# The Market-Driven Business School Has the Pendulum Swung Too Far?

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In the 1950s and 1960s, management education was generally considered a trade school that was very relevant to business, but not very academically rigorous. In the 1970s and 1980s, a whole new generation of faculty were trained in hard sciences such as statistics and econometrics and mathematics, so the academic level rose. But into the 1970s and '80s, we became a bit too esoteric and lost touch a little. Fortunately, our audience, which is basically corporate America, told us this through the *Business Week* surveys, by punishing those who only do esoteric material and don't teach a really good managerial program. So now we are being held accountable for two audiences. We have to be academically rigorous, but we also have to be relevant.

—Professor, Public University Business School

Today, fundamental changes in the world of business, urging on the part of business schools' primary accrediting agency, and the arrival of national rankings that transformed students and employers into customers are fueling a reform movement that has exacerbated the traditional tension between academic rigor and applied relevancy.<sup>1</sup> Nowhere is this philosophical struggle more visible than in America's top business schools, where the transition toward becoming market driven has produced heated debate among

faculty members over the future direction of their institutions.

This article, based on an empirical study funded by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, provides a detailed look at the dynamics surrounding this shift in a top-tier business school.<sup>2</sup> Over the course of a year and a half, in-depth interviews and participant observation were conducted with the majority of ladder faculty and top administrators at the business school of a large, public research university.<sup>3</sup> The findings, revealed in faculty members' own words, explore the consequences of becoming "revenue driven" and "customer-focused." As the case shows, growing pressure to become market driven is having a profound effect on the Public University Business School (PUBS).<sup>4</sup> Although some faculty members acknowledge that the rankings have had some positive effects, among them forcing professors to improve the quality of teaching and the relevancy of business courses, most feel that the changes have gone too far and have come at too high a cost.

## BACKGROUND

The PUBS School is a top-tier business school located at a large, public research university. The school

is home to a large cadre of tenure-track faculty members supplemented by a substantial number of adjunct and visiting faculty. The school's flagship program is the master of business administration (MBA) degree, which is offered on a full- and part-time basis. The school also offers a doctoral program as well as an Executive Education program that provides business education to corporate executives.

### Declining Public Funding

Over the past two decades, the PUBS School has felt the effects of declining state funding for higher education. Between 1978 and 1997, the proportion of the school's revenue that came from the state fell by over half, creating a dilemma for the school. The dean explained, "The state is less than a third of our total budget and falling. We are competing for tuition dollars directly with Stanford and Harvard, who are far better capitalized than we are. It's difficult to compete in that crowd." Business schools raise their prestige largely by hiring top faculty members (known as "stars"), sometimes by luring them away from other top schools. Without the ability to offer high salaries to stars, it was virtually impossible for PUBS to compete. One professor explained, "Faculty salaries have gone up and competition for the best faculty has grown more intense. So to have the best students and to have the best faculty, we need resources. You have to keep in mind the economic forces."

The most viable way for PUBS to increase revenue was to raise tuition and fees. Over the past 5 years, the school raised the cost of out-of-state tuition to the full-time MBA program by more than 40%, bringing it in line with the tuition for comparable business schools. Raising tuition, however, was not enough to bring in the revenues needed to compete in the "big league." The dean explained,

We are at a juncture where we compete with the top institutions across the country. We internally have to make some decisions about our resolve to compete, and to secure an operating environment that allows us to do it. It's possible to do, but it's not easy. The fees that we have been allowed to charge have been instrumental in getting us to this point, but it's up to us to take command of what is going on, and to create a financial future that will allow us to keep going.

To help raise additional funds, the school established two part-time MBA programs in the 1980s—one for

individuals who work full-time and one for corporate executives. Together, in 1997-1998, these two programs constituted more than one quarter of the school's total revenues.<sup>5</sup> More recently, the school expanded its Executive Education program, which quickly became recognized as a critical source of revenue. A top administrator explained,

In the past, when we largely funded by the state, the Executive Education program was looked at as a little golden pot of money that the dean used for discretionary funding for professors who needed things, and to do things here and there. But now it's almost part of the operating budget.

The trend toward executive education, however, is not without controversy. No one disputes its potential as a revenue generator, but some question whether it fits inside the school's mission. Many voice concern that the Executive Education program compromises the school's research orientation, leading to what one called a "dampening of the research model." Some faculty point out that although teaching high-level executives is challenging, the intellectual content of the material covered is sometimes at the "elementary undergraduate" level and related little, if at all, to professors' research. Others perceive the school's activities as drifting closer to those of corporate training programs—which, they feel, could have serious consequences. One faculty member explained,

We're doing things that aren't necessarily based strictly on our research. We have to do them in order to maintain quality of the institution as a whole, but it does lead us into areas where it's not entirely clear what our core competence is, so to speak. And you know, once we start getting into some of these areas we're competing with private consultants and corporate training programs and all of a variety of other things, it does raise some difficult issues about where we draw the line between the kinds of programs and the kinds of things that we will do, and the kinds of programs and the kinds of things that we won't do. It raises questions about the kinds of criteria we use in promoting our faculty, and this will ultimately lead to the dilution of our research orientation.

Despite the controversy, there is no question that the alternative and executive MBA programs have substantially changed the financial profile of the school. Between 1986 and 1997, the proportion of the school's total revenue attributable to these programs grew from approximately 15% to almost 45%.<sup>6</sup>

Tuition has become so substantial as a source of income that it essentially supports faculty members and their research. The dean explained,

We now have the capability to raise so much money from fees that the competition is more of a marketplace competition [rather than competing with the rest of the campus for state funds]. A relatively small amount of our total budget comes from the state, but tuition is what funds our faculty salaries.

As a result, few professors seek external sources of funding for their research. One faculty member explained, "People in business schools don't very often make grant proposals. That's not the way we do research. We're subsidized by the teaching side."

### **Business Week Rankings**

The increase in the school's market-driven behavior was compounded by the emergence of national rankings published by periodicals such as *Business Week*. The rankings, based on surveys of *Fortune* 500 recruiters and MBAs' retrospective evaluations of their schools, debuted in 1988.<sup>7</sup> Their arrival was considered a turning point in the history of the PUBS School because it marked the first time it had been ranked on factors other than scholarly activity. One professor remembered,

The watershed event was the fall of 1988 when *Business Week* published its first survey. I was just off the boat, and I said, "this is a revolution," because what it did is it ranked business schools not on anything having to do with research, but entirely having to do with the student experiences and the market reaction to the students.

*U.S. News & World Report* soon followed suit with a survey of its own, based on a variety of numerical measures including Graduate Management Admission Test scores, placement rates, and faculty salaries. The *Business Week* survey, however, seemed to receive the most attention because it included students' opinions. One professor explained, "We've had other kinds of rankings but *Business Week* is the one that is more widely published, it's been given more hoopla, and it has this consumerist notion of asking the students to rate it."

Many faculty members dismiss the rankings, citing flaws in the survey's methodology. Ranking the uni-

verse of 700-plus business schools may be valid, they explain, because it reveals gross differences between schools and groups them into tiers. Ranking the top 10 or 20, however, becomes unreliable because "it is impossible for schools to fluctuate so wildly from year to year." A professor elaborated,

You can look at how the [top 10] schools change in the rankings from year to year and think of that as variance. Then you can think about whether the school could actually be changing in its quality that rapidly. The answer is no. So you see, there is an enormous amount of "noise," meaning the oscillation within the top 10 is just as likely to reflect a statistical error as genuine improvement in a school's performance.

Others criticize the rankings because they do not include any measure of research excellence or faculty productivity. One commented, "We can all be Nobel prize winners and end up being the number 200th-ranked business school."

Despite their criticisms, professors acknowledge that the rankings are a valid barometer of how the school is perceived by students and the *Fortune* 500 companies—and as such, cannot be taken lightly. One professor said, "It's picking something up. Whether it's accurate or not is beside the point. In a marketplace, it's perception that counts."

### **IMPACT ON CURRENT OPERATIONS**

In the past few years, the rankings have, in fact, had a substantial effect on the school's operations. Their impact became most visible one year when the school slipped out of *Business Week's* top 10. One professor believed that falling out of this echelon was indeed an indication that something had gone wrong. He said, "It is a signal that something is not quite what it should be. Our perception is that we should be at least among the top 10 business schools in the country. But the ranking tells us we are not."

Unfortunately, it is the marketplace perception that counts. Professors explain that some high-end consulting firms recruit from the top 10 schools only. Consequently, when the school's ranking dropped below 10th, they stopped recruiting, raising concern among administrators. An official from the school's career placement office explained, "The dean and the career center worry that if the PUBS School is ranked 20th or 15th, rather than 5th, somehow their people aren't as

marketable as the ones that are in the top 5.” The withdrawal of top recruiters does not sit well with students either, who see their employment prospects dwindle. “When [the top companies] stopped coming,” said one professor, “students became enormously enraged.”

More troublesome, faculty and administrators fear that the drop in ranking could affect revenues because some top consulting firms will apparently only pay for their employees’ tuition to a top 10 business school. One professor said,

One of my best students—she got an A+ in my class—said that when she came here, she was at McKinsey, and they said that they normally only [pay for tuition] to the top schools. She said she wanted to go to the PUBS School. We were [not in the top 10] at the time, and they were reluctant to pay. So it has a huge impact.

Professors and administrators worry that a relationship exists between the school’s ranking and the number of applicants, although such a pattern is difficult to discern. Numbers were available for the regular MBA and one of the part-time MBA programs. The year the school’s ranking dropped out of *Business Week’s* top 10, applications to the regular MBA program, which had risen by more than 20% the previous year, rose by less than 5%. The picture is clouded, however, by the fact that when the school was ranked below the top 10, the number of applications to both programs continued to rise approximately 12% per year. Moreover, the rise and fall in the school’s applications may reflect national trends, which would need to be controlled to reveal the rankings’ unique effect.

### The Ph.D. Program

As the MBA program grew, the Ph.D. program shrank—by 40% between 1993 and 1997. Professors provided a variety of reasons for the downsizing. Some explained that market demand for Ph.D.s declined after the growth of business schools peaked in the late 1980s and that to avoid producing a surplus of Ph.D.s, the school made a conscious effort to reduce supply. At the same time, professors say, the applicant pool has weakened. One faculty member explained,

Part of our obligation is to help our students find jobs. But now, the market is very tight. So unless the candidate is truly outstanding, it’s not fair to them to invest that kind of duration to do a Ph.D. and not be able to find a decent job.

Others, however, maintain that the Ph.D. program has declined because it is too costly to maintain. Typically funded for the first few years of their program, Ph.D. students are viewed as a drain on resources. One professor said, “The argument is made that there aren’t any jobs and so on. But there actually are jobs; it’s just that it’s expensive to have these doctoral students around because they compete for resources with other hungry mouths.”

The Ph.D. program is especially difficult to maintain and support because it is so fundamentally different from the MBA program. One professor explained,

Doctoral level coursework is very disjointed from the MBA program. Doctoral students do take MBA courses, but they really need to have special doctoral courses. Our MBA program is professional. It’s trying to produce practitioners, not academicians. The Ph.D. program is designed to produce faculty. And the two don’t overlap that much. That makes the Ph.D. program very, very hard to support in a school that is basically funded by tuition rather than research.

The decline in the Ph.D. program troubles some professors. They believe it threatens the long-term viability of the school because it is the Ph.D. program that helps fulfill the research mission of the institution. One professor explained,

The doctoral program is not high on the list for fresh resources because it’s not seen as something that, in the short term, will bolster our revenue-generating capacity. And in the short term it probably won’t. But in the long run, if we don’t have a vital research center to the school and a research orientation, which I think depends in part on having a thriving doctoral program, we’re in a sense eating our seed corn.

Echoing the sentiments of his peers, this faculty member predicted that should the school’s emphasis on doctoral education continue to decline, its credibility will come into question:

We’ve established ourselves as the premiere research-oriented management school in [the area]. How can we profess to be a school based on research and yet have hardly any doctoral students? If we continue to allocate resources [away from the doctoral program], we’ll become a little more hucksterish.

### Emphasis on Teaching

Many professors explain that teaching has become much more important in management schools than it

was 20 years ago, another trend at least partially attributed to the rankings. One professor explained,

A huge shift, one that really impacts our lives, is that teaching has become much more important in a management school than it was 20 years ago. Good or bad, the fact is that the *Business Week* ratings have a lot of influence. A big part of the rating is student satisfaction and the quality of teaching. So [here], if you talk to people who've been here a long time, they will tell you that the emphasis on teaching is probably the single biggest change in the profession in the last 20 years.

Some professors acknowledge that improvements in the quality of teaching were needed. One explained,

It's true that all our faculty used to say, "I don't give a rat's ass what the students think." They didn't put their syllabi together, were very unorganized, and didn't think about how to put the material together in any kind of interesting or coherent way. But by God, we just can't put up with that anymore. So that's a positive outcome.

Improving the quality of teaching was considered so important that in 1995, the school hired a consultant—a teaching coach and theatrical director—to show professors how to be more effective. She used theater as a metaphor for the classroom with the instructor being the director, actor, and playwright. Professors could participate either in group sessions or schedule one-on-one consultations with her. Although participation was voluntary, approximately half of the professors participated, including many of the senior faculty. The vast majority of those who participated found the workshops useful. One professor explained,

She would give you pointers on what you could do better. Raise your voice level, or become more energetic. I, for instance, use a lot of handouts, and look for some discussion among the students in the courses to the extent that it is appropriate. I would basically stand close to the lectern and be going over the handouts. She gave me some hints in terms of becoming a bit more animated. I found it very helpful.

The focus on teaching has meant that professors must spend more time than ever before preparing. One explained,

Ten years ago, you could just go in and talk. You didn't have to spend very much time preparing. Now, I spend much more time preparing materials, cases for discussion, updating, et cetera—it's not a matter of

just going in and talking. So there's more work involved.

Another said, "I have to spend a third more time preparing, even on a course I've taught 17 times before. But I still get lower teacher ratings than I used to."

The emphasis on teaching has, in effect, raised the bar for assistant professors, who must now be superior teachers as well as researchers. This expectation is relatively new and signals a change in the school's culture. One professor explained, "At least for junior faculty, those good ratings are needed for the promotion system, but it establishes a zeitgeist in which that level of teaching evaluation is expected for what would be considered acceptable performance in general." The shift in expectations is difficult because, as one professor explained, "We don't hire people who like to teach. We hire researchers and then later turn them into teachers." Moreover, finding such a combination of talent is not easy because, according to some, the two qualities do not often go together. One tenured professor explained,

We are becoming so picky, almost hardly anybody cuts the mustard anymore. It is unbelievable how demanding we are. We want people to be absolutely top flight scholar-wise. And we want them to be really dynamic and engaging in the classroom. That's a totally different skill set. Good researchers tend to have a certain personality type, and now we need people who are sort of gregarious and have certain teaching abilities. So few people meet that criterion.

### Rigor in the Classroom

Some professors also note on the part of students a decreasing tolerance for theory. One said, "The MBAs, they don't want to hear the R word—research—forget it. Or the A word—academics." Another grumbled,

In the MBA program you can't possibly try to teach any of them complex mathematics. They don't want to [learn that]. That's what my students tell me. They just want to use Excel and solve an 8 by 8 program.

These professors explain that students no longer react the same way to courses they have taught for years. One professor said,

Students are starting to come back and say the classes are too theoretical. That's interesting, because it's the same class—the level of theory I'm teaching is the

same as 6 or 7 years ago—but the students are reacting to it differently.

Another explained,

Ten, 15 years ago I was maybe the best teacher in the school. Today if I stick to my guns about what I think ought to be a good course, the students are mixed about it; they're not sure they like it.

In place of theory, professors sense a growing demand for relevance and the need to explain the importance of theories in terms that are crystal clear. One said,

They want the content delivered in a way that the connections to their careers—to their potential roles as managers or consultants or traders on Wall Street or whatever it is they choose to do—is pretty darn immediately clear.

When professors do decide to teach theory, they feel pressured to justify doing so to students. One explained,

If you say, "We're going to study demand curves (an aspect of micro economic theory)," you need to explain to them the reason why: "Because you need to be able to do forecasting, understand reservation prices, price elasticity, et cetera, all these things that are vitally important for you as a manager to understand." You need to be constantly motivating and linking and justifying [for them].

Some faculty members, however, believe that professors should be linking theory to practice. The *Business Week* rankings, they suggest, conveyed the message that business schools had "lost touch" with the business world and need to be more applied. One professor, who said he "enjoyed" the challenge of applying his research to practice, said, "There has been a change. Our research now needs to be academically rigorous while at the same time retaining managerial relevance. That's where our research ideas can bridge into the classroom, if you do it right."

### Role of Adjunct Professors

The emphasis on achieving excellence in teaching has also raised the profile of the school's adjunct professors, whose sole responsibility it is to teach. Adjuncts are valued for their real-world experience and customer focus. One professor explained,

The adjunct nonladder faculty . . . oftentimes are the people who have the real-world experience, who have the contacts, who understand how to deliver a product to, a teaching product or some other kind of partnership product to someone in the private sector.

Adjuncts teach approximately 30% of the courses in the school and are becoming increasingly visible—especially after two adjunct professors were recognized as "outstanding professors" by *Business Week*. This has created a dilemma for regular professors, who realize that they must conduct research to gain tenure but also feel held up to the same teaching standards. One said,

The incentive structure is such that if you don't do the research, you're going to lose your job. So you have to think, "Well, I could spend an extra 8 hours making this class absolutely top notch or I could spend 8 hours doing something else and leave the class as being pretty decent." That trade-off depends on the individual. But the adjunct's teaching is absolutely outstanding, so it makes it harder for the rest of us. You know, we have some professors here who after every class will send an individualized e-mail to every student in the classroom reporting on their performance. I mean that's the extent of customer service that some of the students can get.

The dilemma is especially poignant, some professors say, for assistant professors, who expend much of their energy conducting research that they must leave outside when they enter the classroom. One tenured professor explained,

The great adjunct professor gets the teaching awards. Well, now, how do you think assistant professors feel? They're supposed to come in here and be academic and crank out research papers and yet that whole side of them isn't allowed to show in the classroom. Well, they're disenfranchised.

### Use of Technology

Some professors are also mixed about the new technology recently adopted by the school because of its unexpected effects on teaching and learning. All students are required to purchase laptops and bring them to class, enabling them to connect to both the Intranet and Internet from their classroom seats. This enables professors to access and alter students' work in real time, for everyone to see. One explained enthusiastically,

The effect of that on what happens in the classroom, particularly in the more analytically oriented courses, is just phenomenal to see. An instructor can have any student put up on the screen, from his or her seat in the class, some analysis that that student has done. Maybe it's part of their case analysis or some other analytical exercise like a financial analysis. It becomes a very dynamic process in ways that just weren't possible before. You might start with a particular response that some student has done in preparation for the class. But you don't have to stop there—you're not stuck with what people have done in preparation. You can change it online, during the conversation. You can change variables, you can change assumptions, you can compare that to somebody else's at the same time, right up there on the screen!

Professors and students also rave about having direct access to the Web. The effect, as another professor explained, is "the ability to go between a presentation that I'm making on PowerPoint, Excel spreadsheets that the students prepared, and gathering information about a company on the Web, all in one seamless presentation." As a result, he says, "I think the students appreciate that and, I think, I can get them to learn a little more than I would have been able to otherwise."

On the other hand, the advances in technology have had some unanticipated and surprising drawbacks, some of which may work themselves out in time. Several professors said they are just now learning how to use the technology effectively and that it will be another 3 to 5 years before they truly use laptop computers pedagogically. The school librarian said, "One of the biggest challenges is to integrate technology into what goes on around here so the students don't feel like they're carrying around laptops that are nothing more than expensive paperweights."

Taking advantage of the Internet requires faculty to spend considerable amount of time redesigning their syllabi, creating Web pages, uploading slides, and so forth. Some faculty resent this added work, especially when they feel they are rewarded for research rather than teaching. Others note that excessive use of PowerPoint slides and presentations creates too passive an environment for students to internalize material and actually learn.

By far the most common complaint, however, was that students use their laptops for entertainment or other purposes during class rather than learning, which is exacerbated by the fact that because students

face the professor, the professor cannot see the students' screens. One professor said,

In the last 3 years, there's been a disastrous change in the classroom climate. Students sit there with laptops open on their desk, plugged into the network. If you sit in the back of the room, you see they're watching Pointcast, Web browsing, doing their e-mail or their finance homework. The PointCast technology is noxious because it's a screen saver, so if you're not doing anything it comes up. It sucks data off the Web and presents it in sort of a visual animated format. So a student can honestly say, "I'm not using the computer." But it's sitting there like a movie, feeding them CNN, the front page of the local newspaper, *The Wall Street Journal*, stock prices, all this stuff going on, while you're trying to teach a class! And they're watching the tube! Noxious.

One professor who sat in the back of the room one day while his guest lecturer spoke to the class was amazed to observe students' apparent lack of couch. He said,

I was watching a guy buying a Jag in the back of the classroom—scanning car statistics, Jags, BMWs and Mercedes, that sort of thing. Somebody else was reading today's edition of the *Cambodian Times*. Another guy was logged on to the Playboy Web page. So there's been a lot of flaming stuff going back and forth. I had a Nokia client who was doing an international field study sitting in my class, and about five students had playmates on their screens. He essentially ignored that. He was fascinated by the lecturer, thank God.

Although the logical solution might be to ask students to turn off their computers, this would in essence defeat the purpose of the technology and would be highly unpopular among students. One professor explained,

If you were to turn to your class and say, "I want these computers turned off; we're having a discussion here," you'd hear howls of protest, your teaching evaluations would go into the toilet, and the dean would hear about it. That's the social tension we're under here.

## STUDENT AS CUSTOMER

Although it would have been unusual a decade ago, today it is not uncommon to hear professors talk

about students in terms of the “customer.” A few factors have fueled this shift. First is the dramatic rise of MBA salaries, which began in the 1980s. Back then, MBAs became known as “golden passports” to success. “There were some pretty outrageous salaries being handed out to people without a whole lot of experience,” one professor explained. After a temporary dip tied to the recession in the early 1990s, MBA salaries continued to rise.<sup>8</sup> Second is the rising cost of the MBA degree itself.<sup>9</sup> “Students are paying more, so they want more,” said one professor, echoing the sentiments of many. Another explained, “We’ve raised tuition to the point that students now calculate how much each course costs, and they want to get their money’s worth. They want to get what they pay for.”

Third, the rankings were also influential in forcing professors to view students as customers—a concept that not all professors were eager to accept. One explained,

At the beginning, many people just hoped [the rankings] would go away. But it didn’t. The rankings created a groundswell and started to gain momentum. As it did, it made teaching more important. It just raised the salience of teaching. It empowered the student as “customer,” not just as student. That changed some things.

MBA students are apparently not shy about exercising their rights as customer. According to professors, many students want a teaching experience that is more akin to “entertainment than traditional education.” Professors say their students want them to be “enthusiastic, exciting, and dynamic.” One explained,

They want to know that every moment they are sitting there, their mind is going to be stimulated and they are going to think this is terrific and interesting and impactful. When that doesn’t occur, rather than think it’s normal or OK, or that maybe they as the student should integrate the material, they think the professor is not doing his or her job.

Rather than a standard lecture, professors say, students now expect multimedia presentations and a well-orchestrated performance. When their expectations are not met, they let their dissatisfaction be known. One professor explained,

They want everything choreographed so, so it’s like walking into a play for the evening. They want the materials to be ready and to look all nice and neat and

slick, and everything to be laid out and planned. They want to have a set of bullet points on the Net that they can look at when they hear a lecture. They pick on us about petty things, like whether your handouts are three-hole punched or not, or whether your overheads are in PowerPoint. And they want to have the current newspaper show up in class every day in some unusual way. They want to see juggling and video clips, stuff like that. That’s increased significantly over the last 3 to 5 years.

Although many professors have changed the way they teach, not all accept the new demands readily and quite a few express considerable resentment. One professor said in amazement, “I had a student who said, ‘Look, I’m a busy person; I need to be spoon-fed.’ He actually used the word ‘spoon-fed!’” Others are downright disgusted, such as the following professor: “What’s been happening is that they’ve been forcing me to do more teaching here, higher quality. This current crop of students is the most vindictive little turkeys I’ve ever met—very vicious little bloodsucking leaches. They’re demanding everything.”

### Perceptions of Student Motives

Faculty members’ annoyance with students’ rising expectations is exacerbated by the perceived change in students’ motivation to obtain an MBA degree. One professor commented,

Students have changed. Fifteen years ago, the kind of student who came to a graduate school of management was not mainstream—they were making a nonpopular choice. They wanted to be a manager. Now people come here because they don’t know what to do with themselves. They’re mainstream students.

Increasingly, they say, students want to get an MBA not for their own intellectual pursuit but to advance their own careers or to get a raise. One professor explained,

With the MBA thing, they became more oriented in, you know, this paper degree. It’s like selling soap, like you’re Procter and Gamble. They don’t care about actually doing anything to actually improve the company. The whole objective is to get their piece of paper so they can get a raise. Nobody cares about learning anything.

Other professors say students are more and more interested in obtaining a “stamp on the forehead” for

the least amount of effort possible. Speaking on behalf of his peers, one said, "The faculty are upset that we have a culture of students who live here for 2 years, kicking back, doing as little work as possible, and then get a big salary increase." Another explained how this is a clear departure from the past:

Fifteen years ago, students would struggle with the questions that you posed to them. Today they say, "Well, you haven't made it clear. How do I get an A?" And you say to them, "Well, the subject matter isn't clear. That's the whole point." And they'll say, "Well then, why don't you teach us something that is clear?" They are less committed to the notion of management as a profession, more committed to getting the degree and getting out.

Some professors have grown to resent the growing demands of students, especially when they view students as working less hard than ever. One professor explained,

The problem is that they're not willing to put forth the effort. I would be perfectly happy to spend a lot of time with them if they were willing to actually do their part of the bargain, but they're not doing that. So we have to do things like grade-school shit—make them hand in weekly homework, disconnect the network during class so they can't send e-mail back and forth or call up the Playboy page. It's somewhat childish behavior.

Over time, the perceived change in students' motives rubs off on professors, some of whom have become increasingly cynical about teaching in the MBA program. One said,

To me, what you have is a tremendous cynicism that has developed about the MBA where there's this complete severance from any intellectual pursuit. Nobody really gives a damn, whether the students or the faculty, whether they're learning as long as they get the piece of paper. Go and interview the students. They'll tell you they came here to get this piece of paper so they can get a raise. They're not coming here to learn anything about the history of the Western civilization, the rise of mathematics, or the import of optimization. It's a joke. Everybody's cynical about the whole damn thing.

### Student Evaluations

Another way in which students exercise their rights as customers is through teaching evaluations, which

are conducted at the end of every quarter. At the end is one question that asks the student to rate the instructor overall. It is this question that receives the most attention from professors.

The evaluations are taken seriously because they are factored into professors' personnel files and often play a role in promotion decisions. Faculty agree that student evaluations are valid in elective courses because students self-select into them and are therefore motivated to learn. It is a different story for the professors who teach the large core classes that often seat 65-plus students and that are mandatory. As a result, student evaluations often become popularity contests based on non-teaching-related factors. One professor explained,

Every Thursday there's a beer bust. So if you teach on Thursday and invite your students to a beer bust, you'll have a hell of a lot better chance of getting teacher of the year, because your students are here to vote and they'll give you good ratings. And if you teach on Monday/Wednesday, those students aren't here on Tuesday/Thursday. Or, if you teach small classes instead of large, you'll never get the number of votes.

A potentially more dire consequence is the impact that teaching evaluations have on the curriculum. Some professors, especially new faculty members who are working toward tenure, are loathe to incur negative evaluations that could impede their progress. One professor explained the impact on course content:

Professors who teach the large, core courses don't want to be rated as bad teachers. So they shape the courses to please students who don't want to be there in the first place. [The result is that] in essence, students dictate what's being taught.

Once aware of their power, students are not reticent to use it. Faculty members also say that MBA students are quicker than ever before to voice unhappiness, complaints, or dissatisfaction with their classes or instructors. One professor provided a vivid example:

Students know they can hurt us through evaluations. Last year a student came to me, said he didn't get a good grade in a market research class. He started arguing about his grade, but could not convince me that he deserved a higher grade. Then he said, "Well, I'll fill out the evaluation suitably." He was threatening to give me a poor evaluation!

This professor maintained that he was not influenced by the student's threats. Not all professors, however, feel so immune, and alter their courses accordingly. He explained,

I don't feel intimidated by it, because I cannot be hostage to somebody's evaluations. But I'm sure there are teachers who are. Evaluations have become so important, because of the incentive structure, that people are changing how they teach. And that's the worst thing that can happen.

Indeed, many professors confirmed the tendency to alter courses—essentially making them easier—to obtain higher evaluations. One said, "To get good ratings from our students, we've watered down the curriculum." Another explained, "Professors feel they must pander to students to get better evaluations." Another said,

We're student driven. We have to get good student ratings or we are marginalized by the school. We would get kicked out of the course we want to teach and forced to teach other courses. Increasingly, the way you get good ratings is to teach a simpler course with less content. Everybody knows this and is honest about it. Basically, you dumb the course down to get good ratings. You make it an experience where everybody feels like they were able to surmount the hill.

The pressure to simplify courses is especially distasteful to new hires who, according to one professor, feel disenfranchised as a result. Speaking on behalf of an assistant professor, he explained: "You just hired me in here from MIT [Massachusetts Institute of Technology] or Stanford, I'm a hotshot young academic, and now you're saying that's all crap, I've got to go and pander to the MBAs?!"

A number of professors believed that professors should pay less attention to student evaluations because they measure students' enjoyment, not learning. One professor commented,

You have to find the right mean on all this stuff. Because if you go too consumeristically oriented, then the sole measure of how well I did in class today is did they enjoy it? Did they have fun, or do they think it's a good class? If that's your measure, you're probably not stretching their brains enough. I think if we all forgot about the ratings for a while and spent more time thinking about what we're teaching and what we're learning, we'd all be a lot better off.

Professors' tolerance for what they saw as a decline in rigor appeared to reach its zenith in 1997. One professor said, "We have to make some fundamental improvements in our MBA program to make it more academically rigorous. It has been corrupted to a substantial extent by the tyranny of the teaching evaluation by MBA students." As a top-level administrator explained:

This trend toward dumbing down the courses and giving more A's has reached an extreme. The pendulum is now swinging back. Faculty here want to have a high-quality product that gives the MBA students practical training, but it's not an on-the-job training program. It comes from a research institution, and they want this curriculum to reflect that.

An MBA task force including professors from all departments was launched and began meeting weekly to investigate how the MBA program could be made more rigorous. One outcome was the decision to standardize core courses and exams. In the early 1990s, professors explain, "Anybody could do basically what they wanted, even in a core class." Now, there is a concerted effort to establish common syllabi and exams, linkages across the curriculum, and faculty discussion groups to circumvent individual efforts to dumb down the curriculum.

## OBSERVATIONS

Based on interviews and participant observation conducted over an 18-month period at the school, the following observations can be made.

### Shift Toward Privatization

Numerous changes suggest that the school is on a course known as privatization. In a seemingly never-ending search for more funds, the school has embarked in the past few years on a major development and alumni relations program in an effort to recruit additional funding. One professor put the trend in a historical context:

Many of the issues that face PUBS, and even the university today, stem from pressures that universities historically were sheltered from either because they were private and students paid entirely for their own

way and/or there were endowments, or they were public and there was rest-assured revenue from the government. But that's changed. Private universities feel it as well, because they can't cover their costs in today's environment through traditional tuition costs, research grants costs and endowment.

Along with the effort to strengthen ties with alumni, the school has tried to distinguish itself as a more private, autonomous, professional school. This is evidenced most clearly by downplaying its affiliation with the public university in which it resides and changing its name to the PUBS School. In so doing, the school is following the trend that has been established by other top business schools such as the Wharton School and the Kellogg School, which are now better known for themselves rather than for the university they inhabit.

The shift toward privatization is not without controversy. Becoming market driven and separate from the larger university has, some professors feel, led the school away from the priorities of a research institution. One professor explained,

The need to raise money used to be at the bottom [in terms of priorities]. Controlling our own fate is driving us to activities which consume a lot of time and are not amenable to [our image of a university as] a place where you do research, and by the way, teach—which is where I think our priorities ought to be.

### **Tension Between Research and Practice**

The perceived loss of rigor in the MBA program, coupled with the decline in the Ph.D. program and growth of the Executive Education program, has led some professors to express concern that market forces are leading the school away from what it does best: research. One explained, "As we stray further and further away from our core competence, which I think is our research and scholarship, we essentially risk betraying our mission."

Interestingly, some professors want to increase the relevancy of their research but feel trapped by the school's incentive system—which, they say, rewards publishing exclusively in top-tier journals. One faculty member who expressed a desire to publish his research findings in journals that would appeal to consultants explained,

I publish purely academic stuff. And that's, to a certain extent, because the 1-A journals publish only purely academic stuff. So I'm stuck. It has to be purely

academic to get into the journals because that's all they use to evaluate your tenure status here.

Several professors criticized this incentive system. One called it a "closed system that has no impact on the rest of the world," whereas another went so far as to call it an "unconscious collusion of all the faculty members in the United States to pretend that the research they're doing is of social value." One professor explained how his priorities shifted to application once he received tenure:

In the past I wrote for journals, academic journals. Essentially that stuff is read by a couple hundred people. A very small audience of scholars—basically my colleagues. Now I'm a chaired professor. My priority now is writing for a managerial audience. It's time for me to say something to society, to the people out there who actually manage.

An incentive system weighted so heavily toward research is troubling, say some professors, given pressure from the public for applied relevancy. One predicted,

[The emphasis on research] is something that is going to be tough to sustain in the environment where we have constituencies demanding more of us to spend more time on things that are not going to lead to journal articles.

Faculty members appear to be split on the issue of which values—academic or market—should prevail. One professor explained the divide:

These pressures are market pressures, but the university is really not a market institution, and that's where some of the real friction is. We have increasingly a kind of schizophrenia—we have people who have real market mentalities, and people who have strong antimarket mentalities who don't see scholarship and research as something that sits easily with the market orientation.

Exacerbated by the increasing reliance on adjunct professors, the difference in philosophies has become so apparent, according to one faculty member, that the faculty are at risk of being split into two factions—specifically, of becoming "polarized into a research camp that can't teach and a teaching camp that has no academic credibility." More than a trivial difference of opinion, faculty members say the split symbolizes a fundamental dilemma facing professional schools. One professor explained,

We're stuck between a rock and a hard place, so we have to do the best we can in managing and always doing things that as much as possible are based on our core competence. I see that as about the most difficult issue that universities and professional schools face.

A few professors believe the solution lies in bridging the gap between research and practice, and call for a redefinition of academic excellence. One explained,

We are struggling with too narrow a focus of what research is and how it should be rewarded. The successful management professor of the future—and the one that should be rewarded by the system—provides a very rich blend of academic contributions and managerial contributions by taking his or her research ideas published in good journals and translating them into actionable items for executives or MBA students or executive MBAs. . . . In the future we're going to have to do more of that and look more at that blend. So, what academic excellence is in a professional school such as ours needs to be redefined.

### Search for a Niche

Tired of feeling buffeted by market forces, many faculty members talk about the need for the school to establish a "vision of what it wants to be." Some professors maintain that rather than try to be everything to everybody, the school should develop an identity, or a niche in which it can excel. One explained,

People think some major change is necessary in order to establish an identity. We have tried to do too many things for a very broad range of constituencies, to be everything to everyone. With 1,000 students here at any one time, of course, there is a lot of emphasis on teaching, emphasis on satisfying some lowest common denominator.

Another, echoing a similar sentiment, said the school must differentiate itself from the other business schools:

We cannot be the best at everything. We need to decide what is our strength, and what do we want to deliver. What's our product? What are our advantages, and what niche can we fill? Should we just continue with everybody else in the nation, or is there something that defines us, that's our characteristic, that's different from others?

One professor suggested that the school reverse the current trend of trying to be everything to everybody

and leave teaching mass quantities of MBAs to other business schools. He explained,

We need to devise a competitive strategy to position the school, so we have maximum comparative advantage. We will never be able to compete with Harvard, Stanford, or MIT on salary. So we need to make ourselves attractive for other reasons. We need to be known as an intellectually rigorous niche. As a place that doesn't just train MBAs and has giant teaching loads. Leave that to the [others]. We need a different focus.

Other professors maintain that the school needs to think more seriously about what it does well and build the MBA program around it rather than the other way around. He said,

Our main output as seen externally is the MBA degree. But there is no agreement about what we should be producing. All the MBA programs want to be highly ranked so there's a lot of competition, and it seems to me that we should find something that we do really well and build an MBA program around it, which is not what we're doing now.

In a similar vein, another professor suggested that the PUBS School become the "Cal Tech [California Institute of Technology]" of business schools. He explained, "Cal Tech in California is known for the greatest physics—every physics student wishes he were there. It is very specialized." Becoming more of a Cal Tech would mean, according to one professor, downsizing the number of students, reducing the number of MBA programs, increasing the emphasis on research and bringing more of it into teaching, and decreasing the growing emphasis on executive education and nondegree programs.

Not all professors, however, believe the school should focus on a niche strategy and disagree with the Cal Tech idea. They point out that becoming specialized is a dangerous move because it could be interpreted as a sign of weakness. One professor explained,

If you look at the landscape of management schools around the country, I'd say the top 20—those who think of themselves as being in the top 10—typically don't specialize. If you read their mission statements, how they describe themselves, they like to think of themselves as full service management schools, of all having the character of Harvard. They think of themselves as across-the-board, high-quality institutions covering all aspects of management. Below that group, you see niche specialization. Babson calls itself the entrepreneurial school. The business school at

Sonoma State calls itself the wine business school. Thunderbird in Arizona calls itself the international business school. But among the top players, there is not much specialization. Management is a synthesis. People want to think of themselves as generalists. It would be less appealing if students thought there was an aspect we didn't cover. We don't want to say that any one of our departments is less than stellar.

Others suggest that becoming specialized would translate into a reduction in revenue—a prospect that would not sit well with the administration. Others pointed out that focusing on a certain area would be difficult given the multidisciplinary nature of the school:

[The Cal Tech] idea came from somebody quantitative, from finance or management science. But people who are in other areas probably would feel we shouldn't do that, because that would mean we are going to be very technical and to use computers and things like that. And not everybody here accepts that view. That's the problem. We have different people. In a business school there are different disciplines, from mathematics, economics, psychology, and therefore, we have different backgrounds.

Another high-ranking administrator focused on the Ph.D. program as the source of reclaimed excellence. She said,

The doctoral program has numerous specializations. But they don't really have the ability to support that in a way that would really make that an excellent program. We have to decide, okay, what areas do we really want to excel at? And then use the resources to do that.

Regardless of the direction, some professors predicted that the change would be slow due to self-governance and the democratic nature of the university culture, which is markedly different from that of private business. One explained,

Everybody is struggling with it. We're having lots of meetings about it. Everybody's got such a different point of view and perspective that it's hard to get consensus on what the next best thing to do is. It's a collegial organization filled with people who have lifetime employment guarantees. You don't have the CEO saying, "This is the strategy; this is what we're going to do." Everything has to come from coalitions and change is very slow. There is enormous inertia because you know the ship isn't going to sink tomorrow; it's going to sink slowly over the next 20 years.

A number of professors say that at the very least, the school should stop paying so much attention to the *Business Week* rankings. One suggested the school would be better off focusing on the long term. He explained,

We ought to do what we can do and do it well, and let the rankings fall the way they fall. As soon as you start reacting to every little change in the way the winds blow, you're doomed to be blown every which way. I choke down nausea every time I see one of these things. "Oh, the latest ranking is out. The sky is falling." If we just worked more on building long-term strength, I think we'd be a lot better off.

## QUESTIONS AND REFLECTIONS

This article reports the findings of a study on organizational change in higher education funded by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation. It is important to note that this study was based on one top-tier business school at a public research university and that the findings may not generalize to all business schools. It is possible that the viewpoints from other schools and faculties may differ substantially. Moreover, the study was based on interviews and participant observation with core faculty and administrators and did not include the voices of other important stakeholders such as adjunct faculty, students, and employers. Although beyond the scope and resources of this study, these stakeholders should be included in future investigations to determine if differences in perception exist.

It is also important to note that I did not intend this article to read as a discourse for—or against—change in traditional business programs. Ironically, because of the study's grounded theory perspective, the issues that are documented in this article were not identified as topics for study at the outset. Personally, I was unprepared for both the volume and intensity of opinions—some of which were highly conflicting—that surfaced regarding the apparent increase in market-driven behavior. What I have presented represents my best attempt at a balanced portrayal of issues that emerged.

What this case undeniably does show is the profound effect that national rankings and the quest for revenues are having on the PUBS School. Despite its controversial methodology, the rankings have helped transform students and employers into customers and intensified competition between business schools for inclusion in the elite top tier. At the same time, the

decline in public funding has forced the school to offer alternative programs beyond its traditional research mission. The resulting changes have produced heated debate. Some faculty members fear that the increase in market-oriented behavior is compromising the school's core competence, research. They are troubled both by the diminished importance of scholarship and by the increasingly superficial motives they perceive on the part of MBA students. Others suggest that the *Business Week* rankings are a message that business schools must increase their relevancy—a message they wish to heed—but feel trapped by an incentive system that heavily rewards research. Some predict that the growing visibility of adjunct professors will lead the school to bifurcate into two camps: a research camp that cannot teach and a teaching camp without academic credibility.

Tired of feeling buffeted by these forces, many professors feel the school should establish a vision of what it wants to be. Faculty members are split, however, between two possible paths. Some believe the school should maintain its generalist strategy because specializing is a sign of weakness. Others believe the school should develop a niche because differentiation is an inevitable trend as competition among the top schools intensifies. The one thing faculty members agree on, regardless of camp, is that the school administration should pay less attention to the national rankings.

It is indeed difficult to believe that the rankings could have such an effect, especially since the survey's methodology has been questioned and is highly controversial.<sup>10</sup> The impact, however, is not imagined.<sup>11</sup> In a 1995 interview, noted Stanford professor James March explained that the rankings, despite their questionable procedures, symbolize a shift in power from the ivory tower to its customers:

The process [of shifting power] is exemplified by the dramatic way business schools as a group have lost control over their rankings. As long as the business school community could control the way schools were ranked, there was a stable social order. Everybody knew where everyone stood. While it was possible to argue about the details, dramatic changes were unlikely. The more or less preemptive strike by the business press to capture those rankings for their own purposes has upset that order and led to efforts to exploit the uncertainties. Although many in academia have claimed that there's really no intellectual basis for these new rankings, they've proven politically important. For better or worse, they have diminished

the power of the research-oriented faculty in business schools.<sup>12</sup>

Some readers may suggest that the rankings illustrate a classic case of a measurement system run amok. Indeed, evidence of the rankings' dysfunctional side effects has already emerged.<sup>13</sup> As noted earlier, some professors have succumbed to pressure to raise students' evaluations of their courses by watering them down. Students have tried to game the system as well. In 1998, *Business Week* found that students at five schools had secretly campaigned to inflate their schools' responses on the student portion of the survey in an effort to boost their institutions' rankings—and, therefore, their own marketability.<sup>14</sup> The choice of a ranking system as the best way to evaluate schools' performance may also be called into question. Why, for instance, are schools pitted against each other in a zero-sum game rather than graded using a simple letter system that allows more than one school to occupy the highest band?

Perspective may be gained by placing the dilemma facing business schools in a wider context. Interestingly, the business press rankings are no longer limited to business schools. *U.S. News & World Report* now ranks a variety of graduate and professional schools, from engineering to library science.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, the dilemma facing business schools is not unlike that facing other industries such as health care, entertainment, and journalism that have restructured or are undergoing restructuring due to a clash between traditional professional standards and market forces. Together, these shifts may signal that consumer empowerment is a growing trend—and that progress is made only through healthy debate involving both sides that may result in a new paradigm or model of professional practice.

Although somewhat annoying to most professors, the rankings may be the spark that ignites necessary discourse about a host of interrelated issues facing business schools. First, the rankings have exacerbated the traditional tension between academic rigor and applied relevancy, threatening the historic preeminence of scholarship and suggesting the need for a redefinition of academic excellence. What is the optimal blend of theory and practice, and should incentive systems be redesigned to encourage a broader range of activities? More fundamentally, the rankings have brought into question the role of professors in a market-driven enterprise. That today's faculty have evolved far beyond our monastic predecessors in a

capitalistic society is not surprising, but to what degree should we view students as customers and let knowledge become a mere commodity? Has, indeed, the pendulum swung too far? If changes are needed in the jobs of business school professors, how should they be handled? Finally, if the tension between research and practice remains unresolved, will, indeed, business schools bifurcate into two camps? Signs of this trend already exist, as evidenced by the growing number of schools that hire "clinical" faculty at lower salaries to teach, freeing up higher paid ladder faculty to pursue their research. What are the long-term implications should this tendency continue?

Clearly, this study has raised more questions than it has answered—questions that future studies should address. My hope, however, is that in so doing, it has also surfaced a number of "undiscussables" and provided the fodder necessary to fuel needed debate within the academy about issues that are producing fundamental changes in the business school enterprise and the institutions that we call home.

## NOTES

1. For recent discussion of this issue, see the American Assembly of Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) (1996, April) *Report of the Faculty Leadership Task Force*, available at AACSB's Web site: <http://www.aacsb.edu>. For earlier discussions of master of business administration (MBA) reform, see Julie Cohen Mason's (1992, September) "Business Schools: Striving to Meet Customer Demand" in *Management Review*, 10-15, as well as Brian O'Rielly's (1994, January 24) "Reengineering the MBA" in *Fortune*, 38-45.

2. Defined as the top 25 business schools according to *Business Week* rankings.

3. Research was conducted as part of a larger study that attempted to model universities as "open systems," sponsored by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation. Structured interviews lasting between 45 and 60 minutes were conducted with two thirds of ladder faculty and the school's top administrators. Interview questions focused on academic life, teaching, research, service, and perceived changes in the academic unit and/or its environment. Questions were asked in the most general, nonleading manner possible (e.g., "What environmental forces are shaping your school?") to avoid biasing the responses. All interviews were tape-recorded with the permission of the interviewee, transcribed, and entered into a computer database. Although choices were made regarding which data to include and

exclude, care was taken to ensure that the data represented both the range and concentration of opinions held by faculty members at the school. Data were analyzed using NUD\*IST, a software package for qualitative data analysis and reduction, and analyzed using the principles of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Quantitative data (financial, admissions, etc.) were gathered both from the school and from the university's financial services department.

4. A pseudonym was used to protect the school's identity. Moreover, all facts and figures (e.g., program enrollments and costs) that could be used to identify the school were omitted.

5. Figures obtained from an administrator in charge of MBA programs.

6. Data derived from numbers obtained from the university's financial services department and from the administrator in charge of MBA programs.

7. For a complete explanation of the survey methodology, see *Business Week's* Web page at <http://www.businessweek.com/bschools/98/index.htm>.

8. The average base salary offered to a graduate of a top-tier business school in 1998 was in the \$75,000 to \$80,000 range. Source: *Business Week* Web page at <http://www.businessweek.com/bschools/98/index.htm>.

9. In 1998-1999, the average out-of-state tuition and fees to a top-tier business school was over \$22,000. Source: *Business Week* Web page at <http://www.businessweek.com/bschools/98/index.htm>.

10. For a critique of the methodologies of both the *Business Week* and *U.S. News & World Report* rankings, see Ilija Dichev's (1999, April) "How Good Are Business School Rankings?" in the *Journal of Business*, 2-11.

11. See Eli Seleg, Adi Raveh, and Moshe Farjoun's (1999, June) "Conceptual Maps of the Leading MBA Programs in the United States: Core Courses, Concentration Areas, and the Ranking of the School" in *Strategic Management Journal*, 20(6), and Kimberly Elsbach and Roderick Kramer's (1996, September) "Members' Responses to Organizational Identity Threats: Encountering and Countering the Business Week Rankings" in *Administrative Science Quarterly*. Rankings were also a factor that led to the reengineering of the Wharton Business School (see *The Economist*, April 13, 1996, p. 65).

12. Schmotter, J. W. (1995, Winter). An interview with professor James G. March. *Selections*, 2-12.

13. For a discussion of the problems associated with reliance on student evaluations of teaching effectiveness, see Leon Winer's (1999, August 2) "Pursuit of Customer Satisfaction Ruins Schools" in *Marketing News*, 11.

14. See Jennifer Reingold and Hala Habal's (1998, October 19) "How We Kept the Data Unsullied" in *Business Week*, 94.

15. See *U.S. News & World Report's* graduate school ranking Web page at <http://www.usnews.com/usnews/edu/beyond/bcrank.htm>.

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**NONTRADITIONAL  
RESEARCH**

## Editors' Introduction

KAREN GOLDEN-BIDDLE  
ROYSTON GREENWOOD

The article by Bradbury and Mainemelis, "Learning History and Organizational Praxis," offers rich reading for researchers engaged in fieldwork of all types. Developing the methodology of learning history, the authors propose and explicate a way of conducting action research in which individuals in organizations engage the past in connection with the present to actively shape their future. This article contributes to action research and in particular distinguishes itself from traditional organizational action research in two respects. First, the authors incorporate reasoned conversation and the creation of an interactive text to create a new action methodology. Second, this methodology is built on the maintenance of the distinct roles and perspectives of the research and practice communities. That is, it offers a methodology in which researchers do not become consultants but rather situate themselves as engaged historians "in the thick of organizational life."

Spell's analysis of management fashions adds to the growing literature on how ideas about management arise and how they become popular. The article uses several examples of management fashions such as quality circles and management by objectives that have risen to prominence and then declined over the past 30 years. Spell looks at the types of publication outlets that signally promote these fashions and appear significant for their popularization.

Readers should enjoy reading Carl Rhodes's analysis of *The Simpsons*. I am, of course, assuming that readers have seen the popular television series. If anyone has not, Rhodes will persuade you to do so. Those who have seen *The Simpsons* will do so with a new perspective. Read on . . .

# Learning History and Organizational Praxis

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In the history of the living, every moment, every change, whether it resulted in survival or extinction, has arisen along a path of preferences.

—Maturana & Bunnell (1999, p. 84)

In this article, we argue that a desired organizational future is one that approaches unconstrained, creative interaction among its members, generated by a reasoned analysis of both the limits and potentials of the present organizational form. Such organizing approaches “organizational *praxis*,” which derives from the Aristotelian term “*πρόξις*,” meaning “intentional practice” (Aristotle, 1992, 1993). In the left Hegelian tradition, *praxis* is usually defined as “reflection on action for emancipation,” (e.g., Freire, 1992). In the critical tradition of organizational scholarship, organizational *praxis* was defined by Benson (1977) as “the free and creative reconstruction of social arrangements on the basis of a reasoned analysis of both the limits and potentials of present social norms” (p. 16). We wish especially to build on the original Aristotelian definition that preceded the dichotomiza-

tion of scholarship and practice (Eikeland, 2000), making it appropriate for the work of action research. We therefore define organizational *praxis* as dialogic reflection on past action for creating a desired future.

The purpose of this article is to build on the notion of *praxis*, as we have defined it, through the introduction of a new action methodology, the learning history. The learning history is designed to allow recognition of what is taken for granted and, based on ensuing conversations from multiple perspectives, to facilitate the dialogical generation of a new future. Conversations are facilitated through dissemination of the text among the primary original audience about whom it’s written and, as importantly, among those who wish to build on the learnings in a new venture but who may be located in other domains.

Whereas descriptive overviews of the methodology of the learning history have been offered elsewhere (Bradbury, 1998; Kleiner & Roth, 1996), here we examine in depth its theoretical framework, design principles, and validity criteria.

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## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR THE LEARNING HISTORY: CONTENT AND PROCESS DESIGN

The learning history has been developed and tested in different forms in organizations affiliated with the Society for Organizational Learning, Cambridge, Massachusetts. The first author was a member of the group of people who helped develop the new methodology. As an intervention methodology, the learning history is situated within the field of action research. Action research, as conceived by Kurt Levin (1951) and developed in a multitude of arenas (for an overview, see Reason & Bradbury, 2000), seeks to fruitfully facilitate the creative tension inherent in the relationship between action and reflection by catalyzing synergy between scholarship and practice. Knowledge, within the paradigm of action research, is about rendering useful interpretations for preferred action in the world rather than simply knowing more "facts" that are thought to describe an independent reality. In this sense, action research can be understood as a part within the wider trajectory of pragmatism (cf. Rorty, 1989).

The content and process design requirements of a learning history stem from insights associated with different theoretical streams, which also explain its name. The content design draws on theories of learning, which stress the importance of integrating reflection and action (Argyris & Schoen, 1996; Freire, 1992; Kolb, 1984; Kolb, Boyatzis, & Mainemelis, 2001; Senge, 1990), and theories of social construction of reality, which emphasize the importance of history as an informant of organizational awareness, learning, and preferred action (Barrett & Srivastva, 1991; Maturana & Bunnell, 1999).

*Learning as a dialectical process between action and reflection.* Learning theory suggests that reflection and action are two independent and dialectical processes for transforming experience (Dixon, 1999; Freire, 1992; Kolb, 1984; Kolb et al., 2001; Mainemelis, Boyatzis, & Kolb, in press). Reflection is an inward process related to observation, sense making, and analysis, whereas action is an outward process related to goal setting, planning, and implementation. As many organizational authors have suggested, it is the integration of the two processes that allows the organization to learn and grow in a holistic, transformative, and generative manner. For example, the integration of action and reflection has been related to organizational innova-

tion (Bartol, 1992; Drucker, 1985), organizational transformation (Evans, 1992; Senge, 1990), visionary organizations integrating vision and execution (Collins & Porras, 1994), strategic innovation through "active thinking" (Markides, 1998), and mastering of competing organizational values (Quinn, 1991).

*Organizational history as leverage for insight and preferred action.* When organizational members do not reflect on what they have collectively created, they tend to attribute to organizational realities an autonomous or immutable existence, without realizing that these realities are largely products of their own past actions (Morgan, 1997). The key to transformation is the ability to see that organizational reality is not reified, but rather it is open for reconceptualization through changing old, shared cognitive scripts (Bartunek, 1993) or mental models (Forrester, 1982; Senge, 1990) and learning how to "unlearn" the past (Kolb, 1996).

Barrett and Srivastva (1991) wrote that reflection on organizational history can function as an important mode of inquiry in organizational life. It does so by allowing organizational members to acknowledge how they have themselves created the organizational order through their collective intention and preference for the future as well as contingency, accidents, and the working out of contradictions. When organizational members recognize that the present organization has resulted from historical action, it becomes possible to stop seeing the organization as reified, or as historically given and immutable.

The learning history methodology that we propose facilitates the integration of action and reflection by allowing a working community to reflect together on what it has created through its past actions. We suggest an engagement with history not for the sake of the past but precisely for the sake of informing the present of the possibilities for creating the future (Maturana & Bunnell, 1999). The learning history methodology offers an architecture for capturing the historicity and continuity of organizational life and the contingencies and decisions made through time.

### Process Design for a Learning History: Increasing Access to Linguistic Capital

The process design for the learning history is informed especially by the belief that dialogue and conversation allow for better thinking together

(Isaacs, 1999). Conversation has been suggested as the most appropriate mode both for integrating action and reflection (Baker, Jensen, & Kolb, 1998) and inquiring into, and possibly transforming, the values from which one is operating (Nielsen, 1996; Schein, 1987; Torbert, 1991). Written texts complement conversations by recording and crystallizing the conceptual and pragmatic products of dialogue. Appropriately constructed texts offer to communities a concrete platform for focused conversation (Carlile, 1998; Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995) from which praxis may evolve.

Noting that the work of organizational learning and change occurs through conversation (Ford & Ford, 1995) does not obviate the extent to which some people's words have more effect. Those with "linguistic capital" (Bourdieu, 1991) are capable of speaking with ease and authority and having their words accorded value. These people have a capacity to engage in and direct or regulate the types of conversation considered important. Such people thereby acquire linguistic capital and can use it to create what accords with their interest. The acquisition of linguistic capital is a self-reinforcing dynamic. The process that a learning history engenders is not merely to promote more conversation but to allow more members to partake of linguistic capital, or at least to open up the possibilities of this ongoing task.

The goal of a learning history is to increase participation in a dialogic reflection on past action for creating desired future practices. As Levin (1939/1999) noted more than 50 years ago, autocracy continues to remain the norm in organizational processes. Going beyond the traditional concern for "the primacy of the practical" (Heron, 1996) most often associated with action research, and flowing from the concern for increasing participation, the following four elements together form the design criteria for a learning history: (a) orienting the work of future organizational design by making it possible to discuss the multiple perspectives and contradictions that coexist, (b) combining scholarship and practice through the synergy of scholars and practitioners beyond the traditional "pay for hire" relationship, (c) creating an interactive text (usually deemphasized in traditional action research), and (d) seeking to clarify what is valuable and useful in the work of action research and operationalizing this in a set of criteria for validity to enrich the work of the learning history. We will first elaborate on the four design criteria, and then we will illustrate their use with an example of an actual learning history.

*Attention to multiple communities' perspectives and contradictions.* The organizational present contains contradictions, often glaring ones that are sometimes unnoticed by those inside the system. Or, these may be noticed but not mentioned, especially by those with little linguistic capital. Breaks with the present are made possible as a result of such contradictions (Benson, 1977) by making the contradictions discussible (Argyris, 1990) in a process that approaches unconstrained dialogue (Habermas, 1979). Sometimes, those contradictions are more apparent to the outside audience, who may then learn from insiders' mistakes. The assumption on the part of the learning historians is that the future is not necessarily an irreversible linear continuation of the present status quo; instead, there are many future possibilities, one of which must be chosen. For this to become probable, rather than remain an ideal, the choices must be based on an empirically grounded understanding of the limits and possibilities in the present. Contradiction, rupture, paradox, and inconsistency, which are often only visible or verifiable in the eyes of an outsider, offer a concrete path for intentional reorientation of the present into the future.

*Aspiring to a nonmarket relationship between scholarship and practice.* A learning history creates an opportunity for scholars and practitioners to work together, each using her or his own distinctive skills. This synergy is different from the relationship between scholars and practitioners in many strands of organizational action research. For example, Pasmore and Friedlander (1982) demonstrated a traditional division of labor with researchers focused on data gathering and delivery of results to top management. Barrett and Cooperrider (1990) demonstrated a quasi-unilateral intervention to bring about a more appreciative lens in an organization. In both cases, the researchers were acting as change agents and consultants. The work of the learning history, however, is more in keeping with the traditions of participative action research (Reason, 1994) in which the work is codesigned and codeveloped. The phases of the learning history offer different roles to scholars and practitioners; it is the synergy of their work together that allows knowledge to be generated between them. Insights from a learning history are expected to serve at least two audiences, the audience within and the one comprising interested people beyond the team or organization that is the subject of the inquiry. Earlier stages in the work of a learning history require the for-

mation of a partnership; middle stages require conversation between scholars and practitioners to balance the imperatives as the manuscript is developed. Dissemination, during the final stages, offers an opportunity to the practitioners to reflect with the wider organization in which they are embedded. This allows the emergent knowledge that resulted from the work of the insider-outsider, scholar-practitioner team to be integrated into the larger organization.

The learning history therefore develops and integrates the distinctive perspectives and interests of scholars and practitioners. It does not require that scholars become practitioners or consultants. Similarly, the work does not require that practitioners become scholars. Rather, it offers an opportunity to two different sets of people with their unique cultures and interests to create common ground in their shared interest in organizational life. This common ground also allows space to “agree to disagree” about what is interesting, and scholars have an opportunity to develop more theoretical work for dissemination to their own community of scholars. The typical organizational action research takes the form of a consulting relationship between researcher and client; the learning history offers something different to researchers who wish to be in the thick of organizational life but wish to situate themselves as researchers rather than as consultants.

*Creating an interactive text.* Written texts complement conversations by recording and crystallizing the conceptual and pragmatic products of dialogue. They facilitate the learning process by transforming tacit concepts to more concrete, visible, and shared knowledge (Kolb, 1996; Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). Most important, they offer a data-rich anchor from which productive conversations can develop. In anchoring a conversation in a text, the text acts as a transitional object, what Carlile (1998) and Star (1989) have termed a “boundary object.” Opinions are made discussible by reference to data contained in the document. This is especially important in organizations likely to have highly divergent perspectives. As Mintzberg (1975) noted, the primary managerial medium is that of conversation, not text. Therefore, it is important to create a document that is both accessible and attractive. The learning history methodology involves a text designed for conversation in different communities. The text takes representative voices from the original organizational context to focus a conversation for

learning in another community. The text itself is representative, illustrative, and transitional. As it is the focus of conversation, its content anchors the direction of conversation. The text must therefore be engaging.

*Seeking to clarify what is of quality in the work of action research.* Action research has been criticized for lacking validity and methodological rigor (Greenwood & Levin, 1998). On the other hand, the possibility of even having standards or criteria of validity has been questioned in this era of postmodern loss of legitimacy (Lyotard, 1984). Kvale (1989) has questioned the validity of the very question of validity, that is to say, raised a question as to whether we are foolishly trying to fit the qualities of action research into a traditional discourse about validity whose concerns have little to do with those of action research. However, Lincoln (1995), in calling for a profusion of validities that emerge from the context of a given study, began a shift in the discourse about the nature of criteriology (i.e., what they are) to their function. And with such scholars as Lather (in press), who has continued this trajectory as “a rehearsal for a new social imaginary out from under scientism,” (p. 2), we believe that criteria of validity can be made useful by helping to anticipate quality work. Validity criteria must therefore be participatively created in a learning history with the function of anticipating quality outcome.

The validity criteria for the learning history build on the work of other scholars writing outside the domain of positivist methods. Gergen (1994) stressed the importance of intelligibility, transparency, and the enhancement of human value, which underscores our concern with providing concrete description of the learning history so that others may use it in work they consider significant. Lather’s (1993) analysis of the importance of reflexive, situated, rhizomatic, ironic, and paralogic validities particularly informs learning historians’ choice about what to include in the text and how to engage with it. We find particular use for what Lather called rhizomatic validity, that is, a commitment to showing the network of interactions at play in any organizational outcome. The term *rhizome* (from the Greek *rhizoma*) refers to a mass of roots. Rhizomatic validity seeks to be attentive to the complexity of human organizing processes by including multiple voices. These multiple voices are most evident in the text of the learning history itself. Lather suggested that researchers be concerned with ironic and paralogic validity. This concern is similar to

Gergen's commitment to dialogue and Guba and Lincoln's (1989) commitment to catalytic authenticity. In essence, it refers to a researcher's attempt to avoid the semblance of closure or unity of interpretation. That is, research is aimed at fostering a useful conversation to support and provoke a new and better coordination of behaviors. As a consequence, the focus is on creating a desired future, with the researchers acting as "engaged historians," or facilitators of organizational praxis.

Implications of these design principles will be made evident in the following example of the four phases of a learning history. There is not a one-to-one relationship between a design element and a particular phase of the development of a learning history; thus, each phase will be introduced with a description of the central occupation of that phase and then elaborated on within the confines of the particular illustration. The phases are introduced sequentially to allow those interested to use the description to inform their own work. We use the language of quality and validity to help anticipate a desired outcome in the work of the learning history.

#### ILLUSTRATION: A LEARNING HISTORY OF AND FOR THE NATURAL STEP

##### Phase 1: Framing the Work With the Logic of Action Research

The purpose of the first phase is to bound the study within the larger cultural and historical context while seeking to work collaboratively with the insiders, that is, representatives of the research participants with whom we work as an insider-outsider team (Bartunek & Louis, 1996).

*Bounding the study within a whole system context.* Det Naturliga Steget, or The Natural Step (TNS), is a not-for-profit organization headquartered in Stockholm in a small office, with about 10 administrative staff. It was founded as an environmental education effort in 1989 by a Swedish cancer researcher and physician named Karl-Henrik Robèrt. Today, it operates as a network of some 10,000 Swedes who are interested in the type of education TNS provides. It has also grown into the international arena and operates networks on all continents that seek to indigenize rather than merely transplant TNS science. TNS was designed as a partnership between business and environmental educa-

tors that heralded new openness on both sides to working together. Furthermore, it has fostered a breakthrough in environmental education through its effort to articulate what it refers to as the "four system conditions for sustainability." (For more details of the actual TNS organization and the particular study more generally, please see Bradbury & Clair, 1999, and Bradbury, 1998). The organization is quite dispersed and anchored in a small office in Stockholm. Indeed, it may be best understood as a "dynamic organizing" rather than an organization per se.

Hofstede (1990) analyzed organizational cultures situated in different national contexts in terms of "power distance," "uncertainty avoidance," and "individualist/collectivist" orientations. He argued that Sweden has low power distance, weak uncertainty avoidance, and a partnership orientation. The partnership orientation (Eisler, 1986) manifests itself in caring behaviors that promote group life, and Swedes are thought to be concerned with providing a high quality of life for the whole population, which may manifest itself in a concern for the natural environment. Sweden, like most European Union (EU) countries, is a democracy with a strong liberal-socialist tradition of social welfare. Its success is internationally renowned and sometimes referred to as the "Swedish paradox" (Milner, 1989) because it represents the reputedly good things of capitalism (a vibrant economy) without the reputedly bad things of communism (decline in innovation, mobility, and economic performance). A complementary relationship exists there between the public and private spheres marked by a solidarity that allows for competition designed to foster general well-being (as opposed to localized well-being). Thus, the open market exists as a means to secure the values intrinsic to Swedish society. A quintessential element of this value set is a societal consensus orientation (Cameron, 1984; Katzenstein, 1985), which can be traced to the *bruk*, that is, the preindustrial village of Sweden (Milner, 1989). In turn, this has led to a high percentage of the labor force being unionized, high importance of collective bargaining, and high worker participation (Cameron, 1984). Thus, the original context of TNS is structurally different from the United States. The research was in large part motivated by the desire among U.S. supporters of TNS to understand to what degree its success could be replicated in the United States and how those interested in bringing the work to the United States could "piggyback" on the learning already underway, seeking to replicate in a cultur-

ally sensitive way what is worth adopting from our Swedish colleagues.

*Initiating a partnership in action research.* The founder's first visit to the United States to spread TNS message abroad was hosted, in part, by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) Center for Organizational Learning, where the first author worked. After this visit, those from the center's staff who were enthused by the message of Robèrt speculated about how to support the transfer of the work to the United States. The first author, already experimenting with learning histories and herself engaged with the environmental community, proposed that TNS might benefit from reflecting on their own successes and failures as they moved forward in the international domain. More important, it was hoped that those in the United States interested in applying this work to their own efforts might learn more about how to do so successfully by thinking about what representatives of Swedish Natural Step offered. The first author, who is Irish, though resident about 5 years in the United States after a number of years spent during the green revolution in Germany, argued that the translation of TNS to the United States might best be approached by someone who herself lived "between" Europe and the United States. The compelling mission of TNS made it easy to arrange for interested colleagues to act as outsider-partners in the research team. TNS would not have to pay anything but would offer administrative help where necessary. The resulting work would be both available to any interested parties seeking to develop the work of TNS as well as form the basis for further scholarly work. With not too much to lose, and perhaps with much to gain, a few key leaders in TNS agreed to act as the insider-partners. This research was much informed by Bartunek and Louis's (1996) descriptions of insider-outsider research. Outsider-researchers were to help develop the research proposal and interview protocol and act as devil's advocates as the coding and thematization of the data were pursued. The insiders' role was to be as actively involved as possible, especially with offering comments as to the degree that the drafts of the learning history captured what was exciting, or life-giving, to their work.

There were two primary audiences for the learning history. The first was the research participants themselves in Sweden's TNS. The second audience for the work was (and continues to be, given the concern for paralogic validity) those people in the United States

who were interested in having the work of TNS inform American organizational practices. At the time, efforts were underway to introduce TNS ideas into the United States, and it was unclear which organizational model would be most appropriate, that is, to follow a consulting/training model or a not-for-profit educational model. More generally, however, it was hoped that the learning history might provide some insight on how to indigenize (rather than simply import) the successes of TNS.

*With whom to speak: Reflective interviews and disfirming/confirming conversations.* An initial draft of the interview protocol was developed by the research team after completing five exploratory interviews with environmentalists in the United States who were familiar with the work of TNS. The goal of the interview was to begin to unravel the elements that had contributed to the success of TNS in Sweden. This was well received by the leaders in TNS, who described themselves as suffering from "homeblindness," a Swedish term suggesting the difficulty inherent in seeing or understanding one's own process. The protocol was then reviewed by leaders within TNS so as to allow for codesigning, which would ensure that their questions also would be answered.

In thinking about whom to interview, and in light of the fact that 10,000 people were part of active networks in Sweden, we decided that focusing first only on the early stages would best aid clarity about the early beginnings, assumed to be of special consequence in how the organization unfolded. It was thought important to speak with all who devoted significant effort to TNS at its early stages. Therefore, the interviewing included the scientists around the founder, some of whom were personal friends; a handful of business leaders who fostered the development of TNS as a not-for-profit organization; a small number who worked in an administrative capacity; and finally, the first people who had begun the professional networks that have since swelled to some 10,000 participants. In all, the first round of interviews in Stockholm was with 25 people who had played a significant role in the early stages.

The help of staff at the headquarters of TNS was crucial in securing interview opportunities because many of these early leaders were influential people in both the economic and cultural domains and some preferred to remain behind the scenes. Arranging for interviews included the first opportunities to learn that Sweden was not as supportive of an environmen-

tal agenda as is commonly supposed. Swedish reliance on a small number of very powerful and not always environmentally friendly industries, along with its commitment to nuclear energy, makes the business sector slow to support the transformation necessary to create a sustainable society. The outsider team also expressed a desire to speak with people who the insiders felt might have a negative story to tell. After it was clear why getting a full picture, which might include apparently negative input, was important, the insiders made a good interview sample possible. In addition to the formal interviews, many more informal, often spontaneous, information-seeking conversations were conducted with people at TNS offices. Although the former were planned and the interview protocol (shown in Appendix A) faxed to the interviewees in advance, the latter were serendipitous and were often used to elicit confirming and disconfirming information during the weeks of in-house participant observation undertaken in Stockholm.

In addition, archival data were gathered and analyzed. These included journal articles by the scientists involved as well as newspaper and magazine articles about TNS. Observation notes from a retreat for all TNS employees as well as notes and training materials from educational seminars by TNS were particularly important sources of confirmation of interviewee perspectives as well as new information. A list of all data used in the TNS learning history is shown in Appendix B.

The primary networks of scientists and business people within which TNS was embedded were identified, and the boundary-spanning work of the founder who mediated these two groups was made more visible. The first round of interviews and data collection suggested a deep-seated assumption that the success of TNS was attributable to the charisma of the founder and his engaging delivery of scientific and technical information. One executive supporter of TNS commented in a representative quote suggestive of the high esteem in which the founder was held, "If [the founder] were archbishop of Sweden, the churches would be full on Sundays."

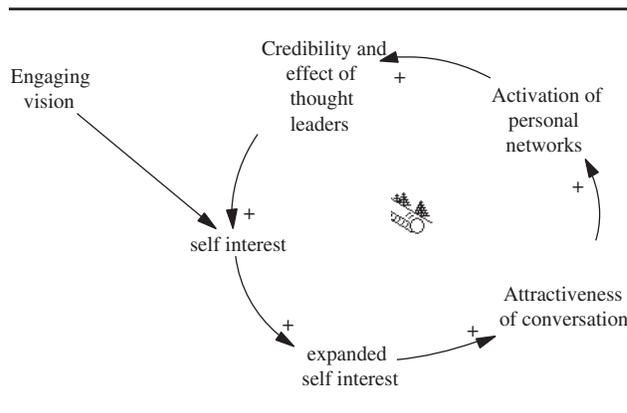
## Phase 2: Following Up Emergent Hypotheses

The central occupation of this phase was working with the insiders to better understand which organizational phenomena incite people's engagement and energy enough to generate a desired future. It is essen-

tial, but not adequate, to draw heavily from the interview and archival data. Also important for the outsider members of the research team is participation in the goings-on of the organization, which, in turn, adds a greater sense of the "big picture."

*Distillation or finding what is exciting.* All interviews, conversations, and the regular reflections (usually captured following an interview) were taped, transcribed, and distilled. The goal of the distillation was to read the written material and highlight what was exciting, that is, what appears to give life to the interviewee with regard to TNS. For example, one of the key leaders, an executive, described his high degree of commitment to the work as follows: "I got the sad news that I was sick with cancer and I decided soon thereafter that I wanted to dedicate as much work as I could to TNS." This quote, when set alongside other interviewees' explanations of their involvement, suggests what is generating energy in the organization. A second read through the highlighted portions of the transcripts marked the beginning of the coding process. The insider research team (which consisted of four people, with the first author as director) then reached an agreement as to those manifest themes (Boyatzis, 1998) that were to be coded. The specific quotes were sorted into emergent themes, and then the themes were clustered in higher order categories as per grounded theory methods (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The categories of manifest themes and sample quotes are shown in Appendix C.

Causal loop diagramming (cf. Kim, 1999), a method from the larger palette of system dynamics tools (Morecroft & Sterman, 1994; Senge, 1990; Senge et al., 1999), was used by the insider team to explain some of what is seen in the data. The process by which ordinary people were spreading the work of TNS emerges through a reinforcing causal loop rather like that of a word-of-mouth marketing campaign. The causal loop diagram shown in Figure 1 explains some of the dynamic as it relates to the growth of TNS in Sweden. The insight that was generated in the process of causal loop diagramming did not obviate the importance of the founder but rather allowed the complexity of the elements inherent in the success of TNS to become more visible. To read the diagram, consider that the arrow means that the first variable causes the second, and the plus sign next to the arrow means that the second variable changes in the same direction as the first. Catalyzed by the founder's resonant vision of a sustainable society, self-interest is activated and engaged,



**Figure 1: Causal loop diagram of the evolving theory about the success of The Natural Step**

which leads to the development of the next variable, expanded self-interest, which increases, too. Expanded self-interest in the community means that there will be more attractive conversations on the contribution of TNS, and this, by the nature of conversation requiring interlocutors, will lead again to activation of personal networks. As personal networks are activated, the credibility and effect of those thought leaders whose support began the work are increased, which in turn acts to allow people's self-interest to be expanded. This closes a reinforcing, or positive, feedback loop that will drive exponential growth in the size of the TNS community. Around and around, like a rolling snowball (as the small picture signifies), the community will grow at a faster and faster pace until it finds and reaches a limit. Thus, the process by which ordinary people were spreading the work of TNS comes to the foreground.

### Phase 3: Explication of Criteria for Quality and Verification/Validation

The learning history includes explicit reference to criteria of validity, whose function is to keep the work as faithful to its framing as possible while also permitting thoughtful, rather than accidental and possibly mistaken, divergence. In checking our own process to establish anticipatory quality in the particular context of our learning history with TNS, we could establish that the work should be judged on its ability to be (a) explicit in developing a reflective practice of relational participation, (b) guided by reflexive concern for pragmatic outcome, (c) concrete enough to anchor productive and multiperspectival advocacy and inquiry, and (d) worthy of the term *significant* in that it was fostering an emergence toward a new and endur-

ing infrastructure in support of sustainability in U.S. companies. These criteria were then available as reminders whenever choice points were reached about how to proceed. For example, it may have been less time-consuming to develop the interview protocol without much input from the Swedish insiders. Doing so, however, would assume that we already knew what was worth knowing, a rather nonlearning stance in what was ostensibly a learning-focused endeavor, whereas it would also decrease ownership of the process.

Another example concerns dissemination of the learning history to the audiences. Although concerned with verification of what was written about the research participants, the process used for disseminating is simultaneously concerned with facilitating future praxis by feeding back multiple perspectives to the research participants, who then may reflect together; in addition, dissemination is designed to allow diffusion through other interested audiences. All disseminations are carefully facilitated with participation in mind as per the commitment to a practice of relational participation.

*Attending to contradictions.* Two issues struck the outsider team as contradictory and therefore worthy of more investigation as seeds of possible praxis. The first concerned the paradoxical centrality of the founder in this decentralized movement. Almost everyone interviewed seemed to agree that the success of TNS was due to a charismatic leader with a clear message supported by a group of enthusiastic scientists and businesspeople. The centrality of the leader, however, seemed paradoxical when set alongside the fact that an important part of TNS's work was being carried out in professional networks by some 10,000 people. Interviewing the founders of these networks, the first author noted that many of these were not especially enamored of the founder. Indeed, a minority of interviewees confessed that the style of the charismatic founder was not always engaging at all. For example, one said, "[The founder] can be astonishingly unaware of the other person's perspective," whereas another complained even more strongly about the other TNS trainers, noting that they were "arrogant, like they had seen the light, preaching the four system conditions." And, the science was far from uniformly embraced. One (male) consultant said, "The science is a bit too masculine, a bit square." An agronomist involved in the development of a professional network said, "For some of us, issues such as

justice and quality come first, these are not mentioned in TNS science."

The second concerned the lack of women involved in a leadership capacity in TNS. This was especially surprising in the Scandinavian context, which is known for its efforts to create gender equality. It was also surprising given the activity of women in environmental causes in general, with the special links noted between feminism and ecology. In the early work of TNS, only two women played a significant role, one the wife of the founder, herself a well-known Jungian analytic psychologist, the other a high-ranking executive.

Thus, a second round of interviews was arranged in which more of the less visible dynamics might show up and add to our understanding of the reasons why TNS was successful and in such a way as to allow the work to spread beyond the area of influence of one charismatic man. These issues were highlighted in the learning history for future discussion during the later phase of dissemination.

*Manuscripting the jointly told tale for reflection by the interviewees.* The central occupation at this point was in making the multiplicity of perspectives discussible. Quality concerns efforts to build toward rhizomatic validity. Attention to what is included in the manuscript is balanced with attention to how to convene the important players in conversation about its meaning. It is the work of the learning historians to keep the text as a living document with a primary purpose of facilitating conversation. It is an important challenge to create the text that will foster engagement with a broad audience whose learning styles are different and to draw on extended forms of knowing rather than to concentrate on concern only for conceptual knowledge.

The learning history process has at its core a manuscript that is a "jointly told tale" (Van Maanen, 1988). Learning history work is influenced by the emerging practice of organizational dialogue whose aim is to promote participants' ability to inquire into the values from which one is operating, also called "double loop action inquiry" (Argyris, Putnam, & Smith, 1985; Nielsen, 1996; Torbert, 1991). The presentation of a learning history is in a two-column format, with sidebars and full text to support that. The right-hand column is exclusively for primary data, which are mostly interview material. It may also include speeches or other forms of primary data. The left-hand column seeks to represent the author's comment on the right-hand col-

umn. It includes questions, interpretations, attributions, summary, and implications. The learning history also contains some pieces of information that are set off in boxes. Called sidebars, these seek to present a sense of the whole but not to undermine the narrative by making an assessment of the situation. The result is that the format of the learning history is quite unusual. A sample page of the learning history of TNS is shown in Appendix D.

Action researchers are in dialogue with the research participants; this dialogue often takes the form of learning by reflecting on action as a community of inquiry. The participation allows the community to verify the importance of the information they hold and to inquire into the ways in which their own epistemological standpoint has influenced the selection. Action researchers, however, rarely focus the feedback on a document. Indeed, many action research methods eschew documents (which may be seen as reinforcing an academic approach to knowledge) and instead favor conversation or other experiential engagement with the topic at hand. The design requirements noted earlier in the article, which are predicated on learning and historical inquiry, suggest the necessity of using a text to focus the conversation and experiential engagement with the issues at hand. This additionally allows the researcher to make her or his work available for comment and criticism to the larger community of scholars and practitioners.

In the case of TNS, the document was put on a publicly accessible Web site. Much effort was devoted to creating a document that is attractive to a larger audience than just those involved in academic inquiry. Toward this end, a two-column format was used. The two columns assist in making the document engaging. It is important to note that the document is introduced as an open and interactive document, one whose goal is only to anchor a conversation, not to capture a static truth.

#### **Phase 4: Dissemination and Development of the Work**

The criteria for quality helped define how to proceed given the choice points that emerged in the work. An intentional practice of relational participation was important. This would mean, for example, that the dissemination process could not skip over difficult issues such as centralized leadership with its possible lack of inclusion, especially of women, in spite of the research participants' complicity with that leadership

style. The very process of dissemination would have to allow alternative voices into the conversation given their presence in the text. Furthermore, a pragmatic orientation pervaded the work, which essentially concerned the facilitation of organizational praxis both among the research participants and, as if not more important, among those in the United States seeking to develop the work. Therefore, contradictions had to be dealt with in their concreteness although with a facilitative touch that would not cause defensive routines to continue.

*Dissemination to first audience of organizational members.* In the case of the first audience of TNS in Sweden, the research team invited all interviewees to participate in a dissemination meeting some months after the interviews. About 50% were able to attend given scheduling constraints. All offered written comments on the document, editing it for more clarity. Thus, a group gathered in Stockholm having read the manuscript. A neutral facilitator, a Danish man, fluent both in Swedish and English, was asked to help facilitate the all-day workshop. To foster a concrete engagement with the text and to signal that this was not a regular meeting, the workshop began with an invitation to cut out parts of the learning history that resonated and stick them on a collective sheet of newsprint. Participants were then invited to walk around the newsprint and reorder them in a way, as was explained, that might capture the collective wisdom of the group present. At first, this unusual process caused consternation, but it also loosened people up. The “check-in” about what was chosen was deliberately orchestrated to allow all to speak equally, which supplanted the usual dynamic of the founder speaking a lot. Check-in is a simple group practice that allows all present to let others know what’s on their minds as a meeting gets underway. The practice originated with Kurt Levin and remains vibrant, especially among advocates of organizational learning (Senge et al., 1999) and dialogue (Isaacs, 1999).

About halfway through the dissemination workshop, an important realization occurred to one of the interviewees, a natural scientist involved from the early stages, although never quite acknowledged for his contribution. His insight was reflexively important for reorienting the inquiry and dialogue among those engaged with the action research. Having thoroughly read the learning history as preparation for the dissemination meeting, the workshop participant expressed his belief that the way in which TNS people

engaged in dialogue about sustainability was at least as important as the scientific information that TNS delivered. His insight was important for reorienting the inquiry and dialogue among those engaged with the action research. For those already oriented to the importance of process in organizational efforts, this may seem obvious, but to those with a natural science background, it was difficult even to notice—process being invisible and difficult to measure quantitatively—and then to give credit to. This insight proved valuable to the others present, as more comments were offered that sought to better grasp the importance of the dialogic process by which the work of TNS had been carried out. The importance of process as a pedagogical scaffolding for education came as quite an insight to the interviewees, many of whom had little background in developing process skills and who had been trained as natural scientists.

A pragmatic concern was served in that these leaders of TNS could begin to shift in their self-conceptualization from being tellers of scientific information to being more consciously interlocutors, engaging with those interested in making sustainable development a focus of attention. A manifestation of this major and ongoing shift is contained in the description of a workshop designed by TNS that came after the dissemination meeting. In addition to teaching the principles of sustainability, representatives of TNS facilitated a session about pedagogy, focusing on the importance of facilitating good conversations. They also included a session called “conversation in the pub,” which suggests the more participative, relaxed learning orientation creeping into an otherwise highly lecture-based pedagogy. This stands in contrast to the previous educational model used by TNS trainers, which was described by one American observer as a “Teutonic download.”

Furthermore, contradictions were discussed. Both the centrality of the leadership and the gender imbalance in the masculine culture had emerged on the newsprint as issues that people wished to speak about. The gender imbalance was discussed in its relationship to the issue of masculine leadership styles. To a degree, this was seen as inevitable given the lack of women at higher levels of science and management. However, the conversation itself allowed for much conversation into the way this taken-for-granted absence of women was being replicated inside TNS, which did have a masculine culture. Insiders struggled with what it might mean to let this go and whether the work of getting something off the ground

was indeed masculine work that could be then augmented by a more feminine approach "after the heavy lifting" had been secured. Increasingly, women have begun to play leadership roles in the organization, especially with regard to developing educational materials. Discussion about the centrality of the leader noted the existing paradox. On one level, people's insistence on the centrality of the founder turned out to be a simplified and unsystemic way to explain people's serious commitment to the work the founder represented. The founder is experienced as a charismatic leader, especially if charisma is understood as the original theological connotation meaning a gift of the spirit that allows someone to speak as an emissary for self-transcending, transcendental values or purpose. Furthermore, the founder's "American style" (by which was meant his entrepreneurial spirit, his extroversion, etc.) suggested the extent to which the work of TNS was not necessarily nourished by Swedish culture. Overall, it was thought that reliance on a single man was necessary in the short run. Indeed, the decision that the founder would play so central a role was made by the executive director early on in the development of the work. His belief was that it would give the movement an identity it needed, while using the obvious leadership talents of the founder for optimal ends. But, the reliance on one man was also seen to be unsustainable, and yet, the difficulty of finding equally talented trainers was underscored. Those with the rare balance of zeal and ability were usually off doing their own thing.

#### **Dissemination to the Second Audience: Developers of TNS in the United States**

Two orientations coexisted in the United States with regard to developing TNS (albeit not always peaceably at the start). One was more formalized than the other and included the founding of an office that at first followed a training model (with certification for trainers, etc.). It later sought not-for-profit tax status and developed a staff in what was to become a service organization located in San Francisco. The other strand of effort was less formalized and more diffuse from the start but was dedicated to bringing the science of TNS into already existing individual environmental efforts be they in organizations, consulting practices, and so forth. These people then connected themselves via an active listserv. The first author was involved in regular meetings located mainly in the

northeast United States that were part of the less formal process. The learning history was made available on a Web site for all interested to obtain and comment on. The first author also was invited to speak at workshops organized by each of the efforts. The dissemination of the material of the learning history was therefore within the confines of the official TNS-U.S. workshops that spread over a few days for paying participants. Other dissemination efforts were more organic and comprised often lengthy discussions based on the learning history as part of self-organized efforts to learn about TNS and to participatively engage with its message in a way that could inform American environmentalism. In both contexts, within both audiences, effort was made to draw people's attention to the process of engagement in dialogue that was so successful in Sweden and the paradoxical role of strong leadership looked for in the founder. People recognized the nonsustainable nature of relying on one man to galvanize a movement, while at the same time were grateful for his efforts and enormous talent. Strategies for decentralizing were particularly a focus of discussion in the Northeast. In both, women leadership was to be nurtured.

It is difficult, indeed impossible, to trace the clear effect of the learning history on its two primary audiences, those inside TNS in Sweden and those interested in developing the work in the United States. The basic message of the learning history concerned the importance of the process by which the science was to be imparted. It suggested that a partnership orientation would best facilitate the type of learning and change that sustainable development requires. For some attracted to a dialogic orientation in their work, this reinforced their way of working. For others, it brought significant and new attention to the process aspects of their work. Among the latter, people have used the message of the learning history in their own not-for-profits (e.g., Massachusetts Strategic Envirotechnology Partnership) and for profit-creating environmental work. A leader in the Northeast movement suggests that today their work consists of fully one-third process skill development, such as learning to turn argumentation into questions about strategy, and two-thirds environmental science. The influence of the learning history is publicly acknowledged in this.

Perhaps it is most appropriate to say that the impact of the ideas generated by the learning history diffused ecologically in a context that was sometimes quite prepared and sometimes quite surprised by its message.

Famed systems thinker Gregory Bateson (1975/1991) used an organic metaphor to suggest the diffusion of learning of which the learning history was a part: "The ideas were interdependent, interacting, living and dying . . . struggling, cooperating, tangling like what you will find on any mountainside with the trees, various plants and animals that live there—in fact, an ecology" (p. 265). The work of TNS continues to unfold. We may say that the learning history process design was successful in instituting an ongoing organizational praxis (as suggested by requests for the document and e-mail comments about it).

A new, more decentralized model coexists quite amicably with the more formal model in the United States, whereas the more leader-centered model continues in Sweden. Board members of TNS-United States have made public their concern for a conversational-partnership model and support for women leaders. A former chair of the board explained the change in orientation from the earlier training for profit model to a service organization:

I felt the dialogue approach was more in keeping because America is surfeited with environmental consultants, and I believe TNS is not something that is consultatively delivered easily in the U.S. It is a change of thinking that needs to arise from within so needs to be instituted through conversation. As to women, that was my choice. It came from a simple observation that if America was to change, TNS needed to have America in the organization. Later, it seemed to me that there were few if any major NGOs [nongovernmental organizations] that had women leading both the board and staff, that is to say, NGOs that were not specifically about women's issues. It seemed the obvious thing to do and get instituted.

*Scholarly development.* We emphasize, often contrary to traditional action research, the importance of diffusing the insights from the learning history to the scholarly community. This stage involves constructing theory about the interesting phenomena noted in the learning history, thereby, in essence, seeking to answer the question, Why and under what conditions does this phenomenon occur? This stage therefore requires additional data analysis and the enfolding of theory that is thought to explain further and to help generalize the insights that emerge in the primary analysis of the learning history. The manifest themes coded in the distillation stage are thus clustered in more abstract "axial" categories for secondary analysis (Boyatzis, 1998; Strauss & Corbin, 1992), and new

theoretical constructs are introduced with which to theorize them (cf. Bradbury, 1998).

In further developing the work of the learning history of TNS, the importance of dialogue emerged as the most interesting phenomenon. In effect, this allowed for conceptual development concerning the importance of dialogue as a medium for organizational learning. A theory of dialogic organizing, which might be understood as a form of "structured" as opposed to "punctuated" change (Weick & Quinn, 1999), can be induced from the empirical study. For example, the themes related to the category "seeds and catalysts" such as "cultural readiness for change," "willingness to commit to the work of TNS," and the "emergence of a champion" raised the question of how to think theoretically about what had happened. Cultural issues were obviously important in the development of the work in Sweden, but so too were individual-level issues such as internal commitment and credible leadership. Turning to the work of Bourdieu (1991) and Giddens (1984) on structuration, it became possible to talk about these issues as recursively related. Thus, the efficacy of TNS is not reduced to the uniqueness of a particular culture or special individuals but instead was theorized as the potent relationship between the culture and individual thought leaders. Turning to the work on symbolic and linguistic capital (Bourdieu, 1991), it became more theoretically apparent why the particular presentation style of the leader of TNS had success in attracting the support it did (for a detailed discussion, see Bradbury, 1998, and Bradbury & Clair, 1999).

#### CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE LEARNING HISTORY METHOD TO ACTION RESEARCH AND LIMITATIONS

Expected obstacles predominantly relate to the practice of participation as it plays out both between scholars and practitioners and among the organizational members themselves. Vis-à-vis scholars, the difficulty lies in keeping appropriate practitioners keenly involved, especially as contradictions that surface threaten to evoke defensive routines. In the context of omnipresent issues of power that are central to the question of how participation is practiced, it is important to negotiate participation on an ongoing basis. One cannot wait for ideal conditions to spring forth; rather, the goal in a learning history process is to make power visible and discussible. Learning histori-

ans ought to familiarize themselves with the tried and trusted tools of action research work to support the mechanics of good conversation. Modeling of conversation skills and encouraging such tools as check-in all foster the kinds of productive inquiry that are useful. We cannot overemphasize the degree to which, as Levin (1939/1999) noted, autocracy is the default in social settings. Learning histories do not, therefore, supplant but rather augment skillful facilitation.

The active engagement of the learning history authors is crucial. The learning history breaks with traditional social science by requiring the active role of the social scientist in seeking to assist change efforts, bringing to those the clarity and balance between advocacy and inquiry that is central to good social science but leaving aside an avowed value-free stance. For much of the time, the work of the learning history is not merely the research team's project but their life, which may continue long after the learning history is written as people continue to ask for copies and advice on how to organize their own efforts in support of its message.

A next step to be taken with the development of learning histories must concern the enhancement of more experiential media. The written word, no matter how it is placed on the page, privileges conceptual ways of knowing. Video, graphics, and the like offer other opportunities to be developed. More generally, however, one might ask if a learning history offers the best method for catalyzing organizational praxis. This article does not answer this question, as the study with TNS was not designed to include comparative methods. Thus, at best we can conclude that it offers one formal, inclusive, thoughtful, effective way rather than a best way.

## CONCLUSION

We conclude with reference to the four nontraditional contributions of the learning history: attention to multiplicity of perspectives, synergy of scholars and practitioners, opportunity for praxis anchored in the text, and the usefulness of criteria of validity or quality.

The creation of a text, the heart of which is interviews with a sample of organizational members, allows for the emergence of sometimes suppressed voices and contradictions between the perspectives of those and better known voices, as well as between

espoused and actual practices. The learning history may therefore be thought of as an effort to allow increased dialogic participation in an organization so that a preferred future can be generated through dynamic alignment of voices. It is inspired by the belief that legitimate or valid knowledge results from an emancipatory process, one that emerges as people strive toward conscious and reflexive emancipation, speaking, reasoning, and coordinating action together, unconstrained by coercion (Habermas, 1979). Argyris (1990) also insisted that reasoning as an antecedent to learning can only occur in conditions in which people speak with enough concreteness to make their opinions discussible. To avoid opinion slinging, such opinions must be grounded in observable data, qualitative or quantitative, and dialogue must proceed with inquiry-balancing advocacy.

The creators of a learning history are not change catalysts or agents, rather historians or change "enzymes" who also participate in the future-oriented process and allow themselves to be educated and changed. We do not know of other action research in which texts play such a pivotal role in anchoring a dialogue across communities. Often, where texts are available in action research they merely support the transfer of data (e.g., in feedback of survey data, cf. Pasmore & Friedlander, 1982). Such a transfer is linear and as such rather different from the ecology of conversation and ideas inherent in dialogue (Grudin, 1997) that calls on people to learn to think anew together (Bohm, 1990).

The learning history makes organizational contradictions discussible because it makes them visible. Without the text, such insights may never have come to be realized by the interviewees themselves during their collective reflection. In this sense, the text becomes the mirror that the insider-outsider team holds up to the reflective community.

Learning histories are a deliberate and fairly formalized approach that offer rigor and result in the generation of knowledge that are of use to both communities. They are, however, certainly not the best or only way in which organizational scholars and practitioners can work together in the paradigm of action research. Such collaborative work is increasingly mandatory given the difficulty inherent in integrating action and reflection in organizational life (Kolb, 1996). We believe that the learning history offers a credible and productive intervention methodology in support of this.

## APPENDIX A

### Interview Protocol

The following questions are aimed at eliciting information on: (a) the development of The Natural Step and (b) the personal story of your involvement with The Natural Step.

1. When did you get involved in this work? What is your role now? How has this role changed from the early stages of The Natural Step work?
2. Tell me about the early stages of The Natural Step work as you understand them.
3. What were the original goals? What was thought to work best in achieving them?
4. What information came back that made it necessary to adapt the goals?
5. Was there a structure already present that guided the early work? Where did it come from?
6. Was there a theoretical/behavioral orientation that influenced the goals, method, and style?
7. Tell me about the evolution of the "four system conditions."
8. When were the system conditions first articulated?
9. To what extent were they the work of Dr. Robèrt, which he tested with the other scientists?
10. To what extent did they emerge from the consensus-building process itself?
11. What processes developed for effective communication and collective thinking?
12. Can you articulate process conditions (as a behavioral analogue to the system conditions) for The Natural Step?
13. In what ways did the inquiry and consensus-building process work?
14. Were the system conditions that eventually were articulated implicit in the entire approach?
15. In what ways is this process similar to, and dissimilar from, other consensus-building processes?
16. Tell me about expanding in the early stages to involve business organizations.
17. What comparison and contrast may be made between the original consensus-building process with scientists and that with business sponsors?

Before proceeding, I want to ask you if there are any questions/directions that I have not yet addressed that you would like to make sure we address. My following questions are about specific events and your own personal stories.

18. I am trying to create a *time line* of important events and notable results. (Here is my best effort so far.) What, for you, are the notable results at the early stages of The Natural Step work that I do not have on my time line?
19. What is top of mind for you about any of the events you see there?
20. From where does The Natural Step derive its "spiritual" sustenance?
21. What are the deeper principles that are moving this work along?

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## APPENDIX B

### Data Used for the Creation of the Learning History

#### Interview transcripts

The heart of the study is interviews. These include

- 5 hours of preliminary interviews with people familiar with The Natural Step (TNS) in the United States. These were used to develop a proposal for the study.
- 30 hours of interviews with 15 of the key actors in the early stages of TNS conducted in Sweden.
- 10 hours of interviews with representatives of the professional networks and consensus document developers conducted in Sweden.
- 5 hours of workshop for feedback on author's study with 12 founding and leading members of TNS conducted in Stockholm 9 months after interviewing was begun.

#### Videotapes and audiotapes

- of presentations made by Robèrt about TNS to general and scientific audiences
- of North American scientific consensus conference (that lasted 2 days) on the system conditions
- of presentations by Scandic Hotel and Electrolux on their use of TNS
- workshop with Swedes familiar with TNS but not interviewed, conducted in Stockholm

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*(continued)*

## APPENDIX B continued

## Other materials include

- journal articles published by Robèrt and other scientists on TNS science, Inc; original consensus booklet mailed to all households (first author's translation)
- consensus documents on energy and agriculture (official translations)
- dissertation of John Holmberg, the coarticulator of the four system conditions
- TNS-generated "marketing" and information brochures
- mini case studies by TNS trainers with information about TNS companies
- numerous magazine articles describing different aspects of TNS
- observation notes from a weekend TNS employee retreat and visioning seminar

### APPENDIX C

#### Categories of Manifest Themes and Sample Quotes

Category	Theme	Sample Quote (for Theme 1)
Seeds and catalysts	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Cultural readiness for change</li> <li>2. Willingness to commit to work</li> <li>3. A champion emerges</li> <li>4. Knowledge points to directions for change</li> </ol>	<p><i>Student unionist:</i> In Sweden we have excellent preconditions for environmental activism. We have many scientists engaged in environmental work.</p> <p><i>Executive:</i> We Swedes are so anxious, we like to reach consensus and to feel safe. Look at our Volvos! We are concerned about the environment and interested to hear scientific consensus on this.</p>
Consensus works on many levels	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Simplicity without reduction</li> <li>2. Developing shared understanding</li> <li>3. Consensus attracts business</li> </ol>	<p><i>Scientist:</i> The vision was to create a simply stated consensus document and to send it to the whole population.</p>
Sustaining work for sustainability	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Strategizing beyond initial impact</li> <li>2. Articulating the four system conditions</li> <li>3. Involving the youth movement</li> <li>4. Developing professional networks</li> </ol>	<p><i>Natural Step leader:</i> We organized a gala event to announce the publication of the consensus document. The king was involved.</p> <p><i>Scientist:</i> The distribution of the booklet to all Swedish households was very interesting if not a very good idea. It didn't have a major educational impact.</p>
The Natural Step's expanse to the economic realm	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Making the good guys do better</li> <li>2. Attracting good ambassadors</li> <li>3. Targeting good businesses</li> <li>4. Creating engagement possibilities</li> </ol>	<p><i>Executive:</i> I was instrumental in getting the relationship between The Natural Step and my company going. Really I was committed to the possibility of getting my company back into environmental issues again.</p>
Crisis as challenge: Reflecting to learn	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. When the others won't engage?</li> <li>2. Smear campaign</li> <li>3. Gender exclusion</li> <li>4. A unique man and/or a unique idea</li> </ol>	<p><i>Founder:</i> I was at a meeting in which I was to be guaranteed 10 million kronor. Our work really threatened the chlorine bleach process paper manufacturers used. A [representative from the paper and pulp industry] attacked me. On and on he went for 15 minutes. Everything was false.</p>

### APPENDIX D

#### A Page From the Learning History of The Natural Step

Many business people were just waiting for the tools Robèrt introduced, seeing it as a way to help their own companies.

*Insurance Company Executive:* I was instrumental [in the relationship between IKEA and The Natural Step<sup>a</sup>] because I was interested in getting this work on sustainability going. I saw it as a possibility of getting my company back on the environmental scene again.

*Scientist:* The Natural Step found a way of talking to industry without alienating them.

*Executive:* We invited Robèrt to speak. He was serious but optimistic; he was very interactive taking questions and talking informally. We liked him and wanted to work with him.

*Executive:* I was already convinced of the need to address environmental questions and Robèrt gave me the tool.

*IKEA Executive:* Our company was already quite committed to environmental activity, our German market was calling for more information on the toxicity of products, and we were tackling more and more environment-oriented questions.

*Robèrt:* I accepted the IKEA invitation with two conditions: that the meeting be named something like "Economics, Resources and Tomorrow's Market." If the title has "environmental" in it the ones who need to be there will find they can't come. I also stressed that the "top guys" be present.

Partly goodwill, partly self-interest provided the impetus for the invitation.

*IKEA Executive:* The IKEA company mission goes back to early days. We believe our mission is to create a better everyday life for the majority of people. So we have wide latitude to be interested also in environmental questions!

a. The home furnishings manufacturer, IKEA, was the first company to invite Robèrt to speak. Robèrt went as a facilitator of strategic planning, not a lecturer on the environmental problems of Sweden.

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# Management Fashions

## Where Do They Come From, and Are They Old Wine in New Bottles?

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In the past 20 years we have seen a surge in the number of books, periodical articles, and other sources describing certain management practices as a key to increasing organizational productivity and performance. The attention given to such management practices has led some to call them “management fashions” because they are adopted, in many cases, with no assurances that they will be effective.

Management fashions have been defined as “transitory collective beliefs that certain management techniques are at the forefront of management progress” (Abrahamson, 1996, p. 254). For management scholars, the questions of where they come from and how they become more popular are relevant for several reasons. Abrahamson (1996) argued that management scholars should study the origin and development of fashions to understand how they might influence the management fashion process and ultimately make it more useful for managers and other organizational stakeholders.

This article also defines fashions as transitory beliefs that if particular management techniques and practices are pursued, organizational performance will increase. Thus, management fashions are beliefs and ideas about associated techniques. For example, the belief that it is beneficial to compare one’s business processes with a successful organization’s processes leads to the practice of benchmarking. As these beliefs spread, the various applications of benchmarking may become common as they are widely accepted by managers.

This study focuses on where management beliefs come from, using several examples of management fashions that have become popular within the past three decades. It is hypothesized that some fashions may originate as reinventions of older fashions under different names or labels. In addition to the question of whether fashions are actually repackaged older fashions, the study considers the type of publications in which fashions first gain attention. It investigates

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whether fashions appear first in the popular business press, as opposed to academic publications, and whether they first appear in subfields such as industry-specific business publications or the more general business press. Although fashions could conceivably originate within consulting firms, college textbooks, and elsewhere, this study focuses on the type of print media in which management fashions first appear.

### LITERATURE ON THE MANAGEMENT FASHION PROCESS

Abrahamson (1996) proposed that management fashions were influenced by norms of rationality and progress. These ideas may be seen as an extension of institutional theory (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Scott, 1994) in that managers respond to stakeholder expectations to manage organizations rationally. Management fashions may enjoy increased popularity as managers jump on the bandwagon to give the appearance that they are progressive in pursuing the most modern practices. Abrahamson and Fairchild (1999) hypothesized that the dissemination of management fashions in the literature will rise and fall in a roughly symmetrical pattern and proposed that increased popularity of some fashions triggers a decline in other fashions.

But, if management fashions are beliefs that attain some level of popularity, it is first useful to consider where these beliefs may be coming from. In other words, how does knowledge about management originate, and how does such knowledge become widely held beliefs?

#### Management Fashions: Where Do They Come From?

Huczynski (1993) claimed that fashion creation and replacement by other fashions could be explained in several ways. One is that there is a widespread perception of a problem that can be fixed by adopting the fashion. Pascale's (1991) analysis of 27 management fads showed that the majority emerged in the 1980s, when U.S. organizations were concerned about foreign competition and quality of goods and services.

It has also been suggested that management beliefs become fashionable through recycling older beliefs that were previously popular. Huczynski (1993) claimed that many of the new management beliefs

represented repackaged, older ideas. How does the repackaging work? Huczynski used quality circles as an example and noted that

quality circles, one of the most popular management ideas of the 1980's, successfully integrated elements of group leadership, team working, problem-solving, interviewing, delegating and public speaking. Integration, once again, involves the notion of creating a non-threatening "new" idea from a set of known, non-threatening "old" ones. (p. 210)

Another example is a label such as *pay for performance* that suggests underlying concepts such as merit pay or incentive pay that are associated with the same general idea. This phenomenon can be seen in older management concepts as well: The term *management by objectives* (MBO) is associated with Drucker but was based on earlier practices described by Smitty (Greenwood, 1981).

Peters and Waterman (1982) observed that many incentive programs in the companies they studied were changed every year; new programs and techniques were seen as having life cycles similar to new products. A comment attributed to Peters (Lorenz, 1986) illustrates this point. Referring to his book, he said, "There's absolutely nothing new whatsoever between the covers. It was a translation of ideas and materials that had been around for up to 50 years. All it added was brilliant timing and packaging."

That new beliefs and ideas should be shaped out of older ones is not surprising because managers are encouraged to be constantly on the lookout for new and valuable ideas. But Huczynski (1993) also suggested that the new ideas should be similar to the older ones, for two reasons. Organizational needs (productivity improvement, quality, and morale) are broad, and the new ideas or "solutions" can replace the old ones easily if they are similar. And, because stakeholders expect managers to manage rationally and efficiently, managers must give the appearance that they are using the most progressive and efficient techniques.

Engwall (1999) defined fashions in terms of how past management beliefs influence newer beliefs through the flow of people through business schools, consulting firms, and business publications. The links between these components are significant. Engwall also noted that consultants promote new ideas through books. O'Shea and Madigan (1997) asserted that many fashions have their origins in books by con-

sultants and are spread in this way: "Get an article in the *Harvard Business Review*, pump it up into a book, pray for a best-seller, then market the idea for all it is worth through a consulting company" (p. 198).

In contrast, academic circles focus on business knowledge as a type of natural science knowledge (Mazza, 1998) and how business knowledge is selected and screened in business schools. This is not surprising given that business scholars work in business schools. This knowledge is transmitted to students, who then form beliefs about management practices based on this knowledge.

### Management Fashions and the Popular Press

The role of popular media in contributing to the legitimization of management beliefs has been largely overlooked (Mazza, 1998). This is surprising because beliefs about what is good business practice become legitimized through their acceptance and diffusion among managers, and the power of popular media lies in enhancing wide acceptance and diffusion. So instead of specialized management publications, appearance in nonbusiness publications may be a better signal of the acceptance and diffusion of management ideas and beliefs.

Mazza (1998) further argued that in the past 15 years, the commercial success of several popular books on management has established strong ties with popular culture. This has meant that business knowledge is increasingly transmitted through popular channels as opposed to knowledge generated by academic management disciplines. Business discourse is less technically oriented, being connected more with articles in popular magazines and books written by management gurus than scientific studies. In other words, what is written about management is shifting to "less formalized aspects of the business knowledge" (p. 169).

Business-related newspapers such as *The Wall Street Journal* are dedicated to interpreting business and economic indicators. However, Mazza (1998) claimed that newspapers with a broader readership have increasingly included economic indicators and business-related articles in their pages as well as regular columns devoted to business issues. By being written in nontechnical language, such business information becomes more accessible to a wider audience (Czarniawska-Joerges & Joerges, 1989).

Beyond the increasing transmission of management ideas and knowledge through popular channels, how do particular management techniques come to be perceived as rational and progressive? For example, why would 360-degree feedback be seen as rational and progressive and inherently better than the more traditional method of receiving performance feedback from a supervisor? Abrahamson (1996, p. 266) argued that consultants, business schools, and the business press shape beliefs of what constitutes rational and progressive management techniques. He held that fashions are first created through the invention of a management innovation. But fashion creation may also involve either inventing management techniques that only appear to be improvements or rediscovering/reinventing old management techniques that were invented previously and forgotten.

So although fashions are beliefs that increase and decrease in appeal, the decrease may coincide with the increase in attention given to the same fashion under another name. This may reflect efforts by those with a vested interest in a management fashion to maintain interest in fashions by repackaging existing practices as new fashions. Those who set management fashions try to produce the beliefs that certain management techniques are improvements over previous practices. So, some management fashions may represent beliefs about a new technique that is an improvement over previous methods. However, some management fashions may represent techniques that only appear to be improvements or reinventions of old techniques that were invented previously and forgotten.

To the extent that fashions are repackaged as part of the creation and selection process, we expect to find that as a management fashion declines in popularity, other labels associated with the fashion will increase in popularity.

*Hypothesis 1:* As one label associated with a management fashion declines in frequency, another label associated with the same fashion will increase in frequency.

### Fashion Emergence in the Academic and Popular Press

As noted above, a variety of management publications may play a role in transmitting fashions to their particular audiences. *Business Week*, *The Academy of Management Executive*, and scholarly journals such as the *Academy of Management Journal* clearly are read by different groups. But, are fashions noticed in one type

of publication before another? Barley, Meyer, and Gash (1988) found that attention given to corporate culture developed in the popular business press and shaped the rhetoric about culture in the academic press. These findings suggest that at least in terms of the corporate culture rhetoric, attention in academic press came after the wider business press popularized the concept. Such lags could be partly due to the lengthy peer review process and higher rejection rate in academic journals, where it takes months and even years for articles to go to press.

More often than not, management fashions may originate with practicing managers. Galbraith (1980) said he knew of no new forms of organizations or techniques invented by management theorists. If it is true that most fashions originate from managers, what is the role of scholarly management literature in the diffusion of management knowledge? Is it to critically evaluate new ideas and approaches to management? What is the relationship of what appears in scholarly journals in the management field to management fashions? If dissemination of fashions is done first by popular business press periodicals and other media before the academic press, then is it possible that what appears in the academic press is reacting to ideas first appearing in the business press?

There are undoubtedly good arguments that management scholars should not be influenced by what is portrayed as the latest management trends in the popular press. Nevertheless, very little is known about the extent to which published academic research precedes or follows the emergence of management fashions in other media. Several writers have suggested that academic research does influence the way fashions emerge indirectly, not through practitioners' reading academic research but through other publications (Beyer, 1992).

In any case, as descriptors of what is occurring in organizations, one would expect scholarly literature to reflect to some extent recent management fashions, even if their merit is not substantiated. In fact, one might be surprised if there was no relationship because a reasonable objective of management scholarship is to critically analyze fashions that emerge from consultants and other sources outside of that grounded in research. So, as particular practices and fashions receive attention in the popular press, one would expect some level of attention in the academic literature. However, the time of emergence might be somewhat later, given the time needed for the peer

review process in academic literature and the time taken for accepted articles to be published.

*Hypothesis 2:* The emergence of management fashions in the academic literature will lag that of the general business press. The lag will be associated with longer review times in the leading academic journals compared with the popular business press.

In addition to emergence from within scholarly or practitioner-oriented periodicals, other factors may determine from where management fashions emerge and diffuse. Management fashions may emerge from different subject areas within the literature or literature associated with certain industries or subfields of management. External events and historical trends can also shape the emerging management rhetoric at a given time (Barley & Kunda, 1992). Many early applications of quality control can be found in manufacturing settings such as automobile plants; they are some of the best known early examples that were published (Freund, 1982; Samiee, 1982). Thus, management fashions may get earliest attention within particular sectors of the management press that are devoted to certain industries or specialized areas and then disseminate to become more generalized fashions.

*Hypothesis 3:* Management fashions first emerge in defined areas in the business press (within literature devoted to particular industries) and then disseminate to wider arenas.

## METHOD

For this study, the fashions chosen included benchmarks, quality circles, pay for performance, and MBO. The selection of these fashions may seem arbitrary. However, they were chosen in anticipation of different life cycle stages and types of application. Pay for performance reflects practices related specifically to management of people in contrast to benchmarking, which can also be used in process control and other areas of management. Quality circles were chosen to allow comparison with a management fashion that has a longer history than the first three. MBO was included to allow comparison with a fashion that emerged well before the 1980s. Clearly, a long list of other management fashions could be chosen, but the point here is to select practices that illustrate the fashion dissemination process.

### Relative Popularity and Life Cycle of Fashions

Counts of the management fashions were initially done using searches of ABI/Inform Global. The counts shown reflect the number of instances where a management fashion was listed as the subject of the article. Each of the fashions was searched for the years 1971 to 1998.

I also wanted to compare counts of all articles with a direct reference to each practice with counts of those articles where ABI/Inform coders listed the fashion as a subject. Counts were done with direct references to MBO and compared with the counts where MBO was listed as the article subject. However, it appears that either of these approaches yields very similar article counts and has no effect on the ultimate results. The counts of MBO articles by subject compared with counts of direct references were very similar (the Pearson correlation between the two was significant at  $p < .01$ ). Also, it was learned from consultation with ABI/Inform that subject headings are assigned to articles by trained content analysts working in teams specializing in particular functional areas. Finally, the approach of using subject field is the same as used by Abrahamson and Fairchild (1999), who found very similar overlaps in their research on quality circles. They justified article counts based on subject headings for similar reasons as used in this research.

To adjust for differences in the number of journals and articles that appeared from 1971 to 1998, counts were normalized for the number of articles included in the ABI/Inform database for each year. ABI/Inform was contacted for this data and provided the total article counts for each year.

### Labeling of Management Fashions

The first hypothesis was tested by identifying a set of labels that was associated with the fashions pay for performance, benchmarks, and quality circles. A set of labels similar to each of these fashions was available by using the thesaurus function of the ABI/Inform. This function lists similar words and phrases for each of the terms listed as subjects in the database. There are undoubtedly other terms that could be considered as similar labels to the focal fashions here (benchmarks, pay for performance, and quality circles). However, the purpose here was to generate a set of terms similar, if not identical, to the focal management fashions being studied. The purpose was not to generate an

exhaustive list of all terms considered associated with each fashion. Thus, the set of thesaurus entries should not be considered as exhaustive and absolute but as terms illustrative of labels similar to that of the management fashions being considered.

### Fashions in the Academic Literature

The second hypothesis compared leading management journals to the wider business press. To test this hypothesis, it was first necessary to construct a set of leading journals in the management field. To do this, research on journal influence in the management field was reviewed. Some research has determined sets of leading management journals and their relative influence based on opinion surveys (Coe & Weinstock, 1969; Gomez-Mejia & Balkin, 1992). Other research has assessed journal influence based on objective measures such as citation counts. Salancik (1986), Sharplin and Mabry (1985), and Johnson and Podsakoff (1994) used this approach. Johnson and Podsakoff based their list of 40 management journals on number of times they had been included in previous studies on journal influence (Blackburn, 1990; Coe & Weinstock, 1984; Extejt & Smith, 1990; Gomez-Mejia & Balkin, 1992; Salancik, 1986; Sharplin & Mabry, 1985).

The list of journals adopted as influential management journals is shown in Table 1. This list is very similar to the Johnson and Podsakoff (1994) list. Although obviously not a complete list and open to some debate, this list is presented as one that represents the body of leading academic management journals. Although there are a few practitioner-related journals in this list, such as the *Harvard Business Review*, most of the journals here are academic in nature. So, the number of times a topic is published in this set of journals should indicate the general amount of attention it is receiving in the academic management literature.

Some journals and periodicals are clearly more influential than others. Thus, in assessing the attention given to management fashions, raw counts of the number of times articles on each fashion were mentioned would not accurately measure the potential for that fashion to emerge. For example, one article from a journal such as *Academy of Management Review* would presumably have more citation potential, and presumably the topic would gain more exposure (at least within the academic community) from such an article than one in a less influential journal. Thus, some

Table 1  
List of Leading Management Journals and Weightings

Journal	Weighting
<i>Academy of Management Journal</i>	2.563
<i>American Journal of Sociology</i>	2.930
<i>American Psychologist</i>	4.030
<i>Academy of Management Review</i>	5.532
<i>American Sociological Review</i>	2.685
<i>Arbitration Journal</i>	0.127
<i>Administrative Science Quarterly</i>	3.901
<i>California Management Review</i>	1.196
<i>Decision Science</i>	0.451
<i>Harvard Business Review</i>	2.754
<i>Human Relations</i>	0.854
<i>Industrial and Labor Relations Review</i>	1.494
<i>Industrial Relations</i>	0.552
<i>Journal of Applied Psychology</i>	2.283
<i>Journal of Conflict Resolution</i>	1.899
<i>Journal of Human Resources</i>	1.032
<i>Journal of International Business Studies</i>	0.610
<i>Journal of Management</i>	1.245
<i>Journal of Management Studies</i>	1.399
<i>Journal of Occupational Psychology</i>	1.871
<i>Journal of Organizational Behavior</i>	0.762
<i>Journal of Personality &amp; Social Psychology</i>	2.748
<i>Journal of Vocational Behavior</i>	2.577
<i>Long Range Planning</i>	0.593
<i>Management Science</i>	0.840
<i>Monthly Labor Review</i>	0.438
<i>Org Behavior &amp; Human Decision Processes</i>	1.364
<i>Organizational Dynamics</i>	1.088
<i>Organization Studies</i>	1.369
<i>Personnel Psychology</i>	1.238
<i>Psychological Bulletin</i>	5.590
<i>Psychological Review</i>	3.652
<i>Research in Organizational Behavior</i>	4.690
<i>Sloan Management Review</i>	2.471
<i>Strategic Management Journal</i>	1.699
<i>Social Forces</i>	1.188

Source: Johnson & Podsakoff, 1994.

method of weighting the relative influence of each journal from the list in Table 1 seemed desirable. If the purpose was to record the number of times someone is writing about a particular topic, then arguably the raw count of articles would be a better measure. But, the point here was to assess the extent of dissemination of a fashion in the literature. This is the rationale for using weights, which account for not only how many articles are written but how often information from the article is read and cited in other articles. The weights used here are from Starbuck's (1997) list of journals and estimates of impact ratings. This list was chosen because it is comprehensive and includes a weight for all of the journals included in Table 1.

For each of the management fashions, counts were made of the number of instances the fashions were cited from one of the journals from the list in Table 1

(using the same database as above). Each instance was weighted by the weight for that journal given in the Starbuck (1997) impact rating. Starbuck adjusted the ratings for area norms in relative number of citations per journal article in subfields of management.

In addition to the article counts of the fashions studied, I wanted to know something about the process behind the timing of articles on management fashions in the popular business press compared with academic journals. Because one of the distinguishing characteristics of academic articles is the peer review process, data were collected on two variables that describe that process: acceptance rates and review times. *Cabell's Directory of Management Publishing* (Cabell, 1997) was used to collect review times and acceptance rates for both the list of academic journals used here and sample publications from the business press. *Cabell's* lists these data for both types of publications. Review time and acceptance rate data for the business press publications were collected of all periodicals listed by *Cabell's* as intended for a business readership. For many of the publications listed in *Cabell's*, readership is noted as both academic and read by a wider audience of business practitioners. Data for such publications were included in the set of popular business journals if readership was listed as primarily business practitioners; in many cases, *Cabell's* lists the percentage of readership for each journal of business people and academic communities. If the percentage of readership was above 50% business people, these data were included in the set of popular business press.

Average values of review time and acceptance rates were calculated for both academic and business press publications. Usually, these figures are reported as a range. The midpoint of the range was recorded in these cases. So if review time was listed as 2 to 3 months, 2.5 months was recorded as average review time. The sample of business press journals included 192 publications, and *Cabell's* had data on 31 of the leading academic journals used in Table 1.

### Fashion Emergence in Specialized Versus General Business Publications

A qualitative approach was necessary to identify any subfields of the management literature that first popularized management fashions. Benchmarking and pay for performance were arbitrarily selected to examine in this way. The counts of articles from ABI/Inform were inspected for any patterns in the early

period in which the fashion was receiving exposure. For instance, cases where many articles about a fashion appeared in one journal were noted, as well as periodicals that were devoted to a particular industry or occupation. Then, counts were repeated with the bibliographic search limited to citations in journals within that industry or sector to see if the pattern within that group of periodicals preceded an increase in the wider set of business periodicals.

The approach for the benchmarking label required a closer examination. It became apparent that the term *benchmarks* has been used to refer to different practices over the years. For example, benchmarking has been used within the computer industry to refer to performance standards that software and hardware are tested against. For this article, benchmarking refers to organizations looking to other companies to learn about business processes.

To identify whether business benchmarking arose from publications within certain industries, abstracts of each article on benchmarks listed in ABI/Inform were examined to determine if the article referred to business benchmarks or another use for that label. In rare cases, the full text of the article was reviewed, where available, if the definition of benchmarks in the article was unclear. After deleting all the nonbusiness benchmarking articles, the journal titles were then examined to see if publication in a particular industry or industries dominated.

## RESULTS

Figure 1 shows the article counts where the management fashions were included as the subject in management periodicals during the years 1971 to 1998. All the fashions were shown on the same scale to compare the normalized article counts.

As expected, some of the management fashions appear to be increasing in popularity within the time frame, some decreasing, and others relatively stable. Clearly, benchmarking has enjoyed the widest dissemination in the business press of the five fashions examined. Since 1991, there have been more counts of articles with benchmarks as a subject than the other fashions. The number of articles about benchmarks in the 1990s was more than all the other fashions combined.

The pattern for articles about pay for performance is similar in some respects to that of benchmarks, except in amplitude. As with benchmarks, we have

witnessed only the first part of the life cycle for pay for performance under the assumption that interest in a fashion will decline. There were very few articles about this fashion in the databases examined until the early 1990s, so the life span of this particular fashion is much briefer than the rest.

The counts for articles with quality circles suggest a declining slope indicative of an older fashion. From a high of more than 150 articles (normalized) in 1982, the slope for quality circles can be seen to be steadily declining to very few articles by 1996. This suggests that if life cycles for management fashions are roughly bell shaped, it would appear we are witnessing the last half of the cycle—the slow decline of quality circles as a management fashion since at least the mid-1980s.

Finally, MBO was examined as a practice that has a longer history, with origins as a management philosophy extending to the 1950s (McGregor, 1957). The counts for MBO indicate, as expected, a relatively high level of interest early in the study period, indicative of a management fashion that was written about more in the past but still maintains some amount of attention in the business press. It was not possible to determine if the counts for MBO at the beginning of the study period were at their peak or already on a decline as the data were left-censored at 1971.

## Relabeling of Management Fashions

The results for the different labels for each fashion are shown in Figures 2, 3, and 4. Performance standards, world-class companies, and best practices were labels associated with benchmarks. Figure 2 shows the counts for these as well as the focal fashion of benchmarks.

The number of articles on the alternate labels has dropped as the articles on benchmarks have increased. Interestingly, articles on labels that have appeared in the literature since the beginning of the study period (performance standards), as well as more recent vintage terms like *world-class companies*, initially increased at the same time as articles on benchmarks increased, before their counts dropped off in the mid-1990s.

The labels total quality and participatory management were used to illustrate a set of terms associated with quality circles. Quality circles have been seen by many as a precursor to the fashion of total quality (Dean & Bowen, 1994). The counts for these labels are shown in Figure 3, along with counts for the focal fashion of quality circles.

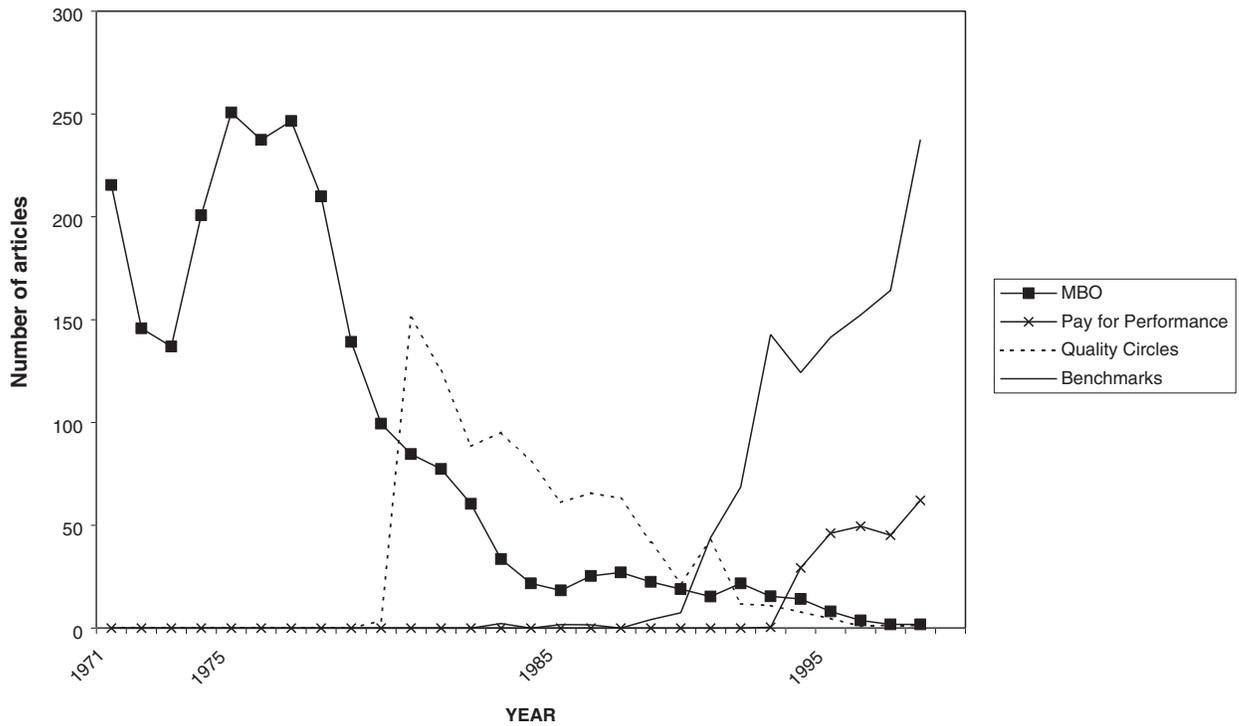


Figure 1: Normed counts of articles, 1971-1998  
 Note: MBO = management by objectives.

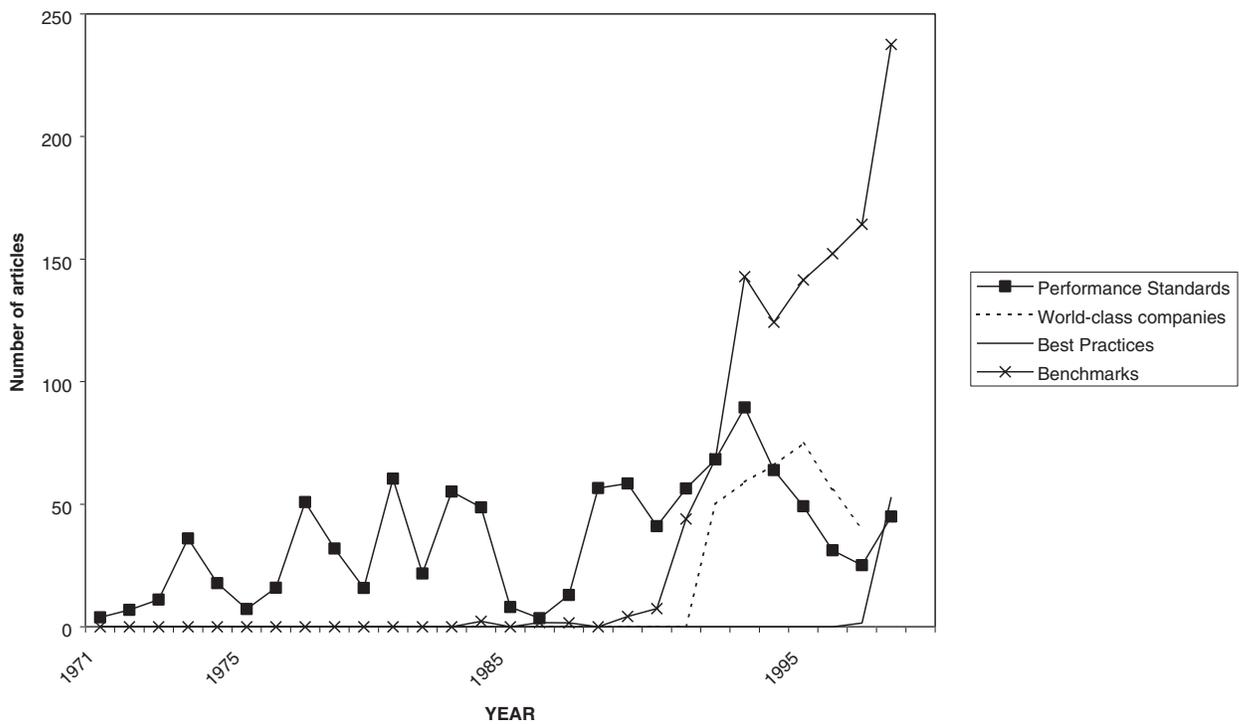


Figure 2: Normed article counts, benchmarks, and associated labels, 1971-1998

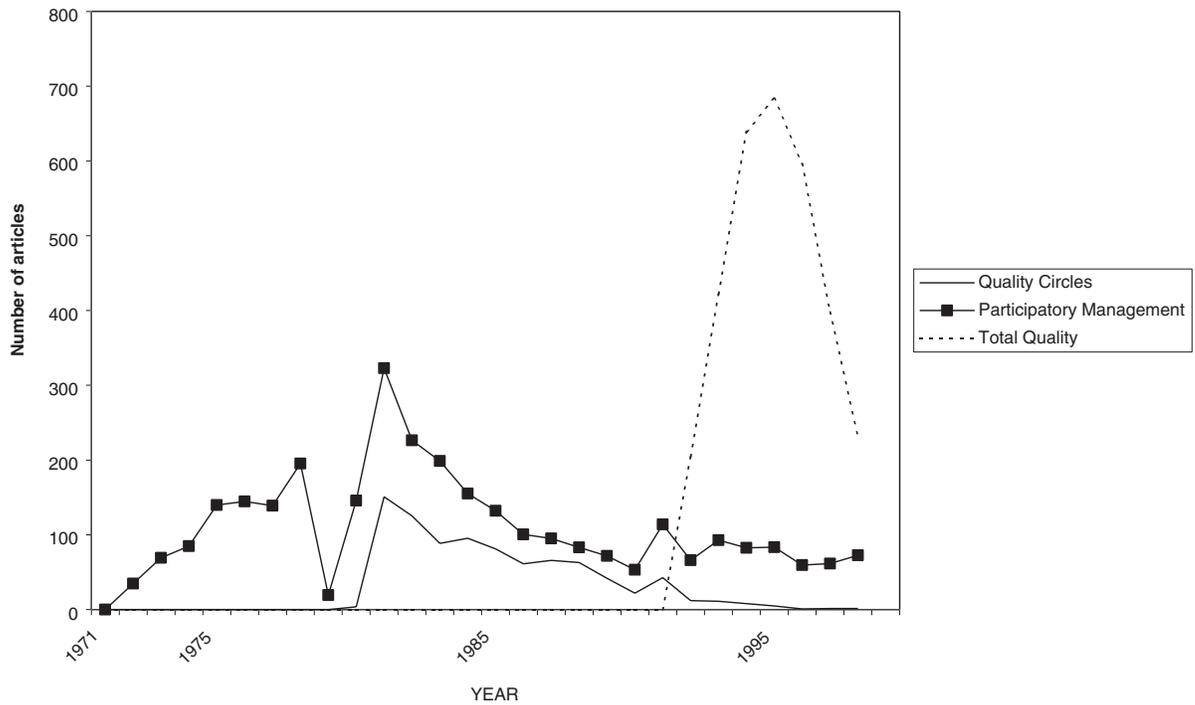


Figure 3: Normed article counts for quality circles and associated labels, 1971-1998

It was expected that *participatory management*, as a broader and older term, might appear as the subject of more articles than the other terms. However, although this term predates the first appearance of quality articles as a subject in the business press, the number of articles about participatory management remained about the same throughout the study period. In contrast, articles about total quality, although not found before the 1990s, increased rapidly to peak in 1994 and have since declined.

Although *quality circles* and *total quality* are considered here as labels associated with quality, they are clearly not synonymous terms. The label *total quality* refers to a set of practices and is thus a more encompassing fashion that is associated with the practice of quality circles. Thus, although *total quality* may be associated with quality circles, the sharp increase in attention suggests this term is not related to any decrease or increase in attention given to quality circles specifically but indicates a resurgence in beliefs about the more encompassing concept of quality as a management fashion.

Three labels were studied as terms associated with pay for performance that were listed together in the ABI/Inform thesaurus. The counts of articles listing *incentive plans*, *merit pay*, and *productivity incentives* as

subjects are shown in Figure 4, along with the counts previously shown for pay for performance.

The intent here, as with the other fashions, was to present the terms as conceptually related. It could be argued that *pay for performance* could be considered a more general or "umbrella" term within which the other terms are subtypes. However, in this study, *pay for performance* was examined before the related fashions only because it is currently a relatively popular fashion in the business literature. In fact, Figure 4 suggests that *pay for performance* has a more recent vintage than the associated terms.

In contrast, there have been several undulations in the level of attention given to incentive plans and productivity incentives in the literature. The rising and falling attention in productivity incentives generally paralleled that of incentive plans, except the number of articles was a little lower. This pattern continued until the 1990s, when the number of articles about productivity incentives fell and the number of articles with *pay for performance* began to rise. Also note that articles on merit pay, which were more stable throughout the study period, also fell when attention to *pay for performance* rose.

So, the counts for older fashions such as productivity incentives show little trend, though it appears that

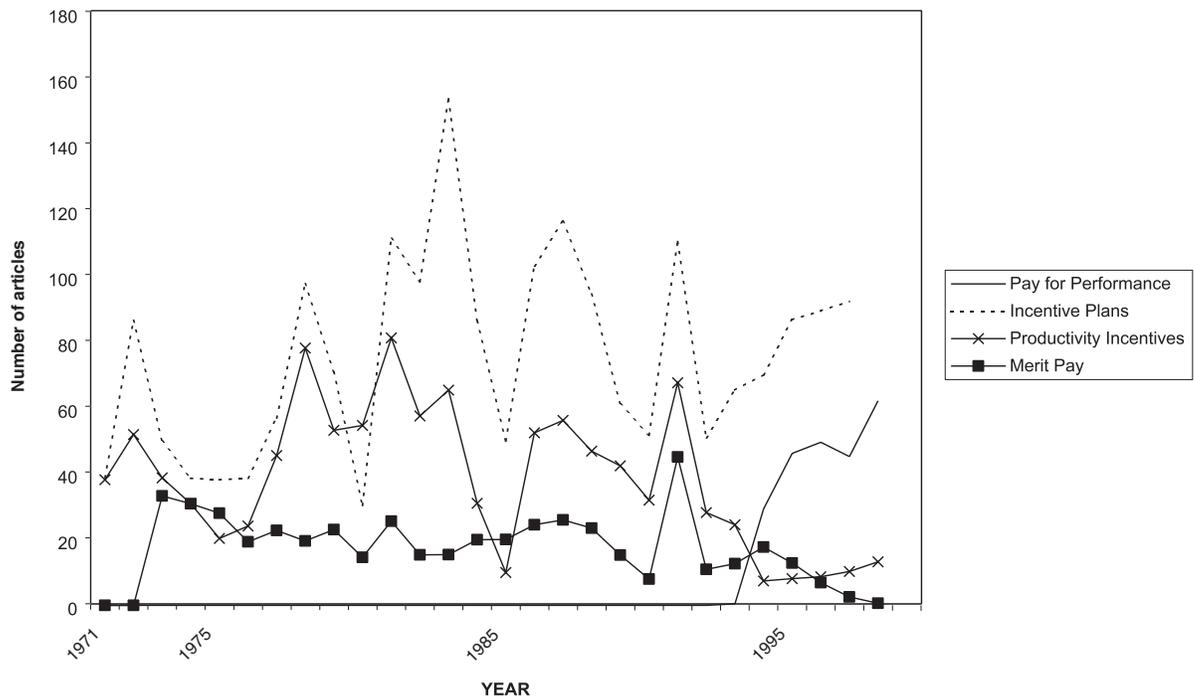


Figure 4: Normed article counts, pay for performance, and associated labels, 1971-1998

this fashion and merit pay have been gradually losing popularity since the early 1990s. In contrast, although pay for performance itself has arisen only recently, the number of articles each year on incentive plans has undulated.

#### Weighted Counts

The next set of results compared weighted-for-impact counts of articles in the set of leading journals in the field of management to the counts shown in Figure 1. It will be apparent that the weighted counts are much lower than the others because there are relatively few journals selected as leading management journals (and many tend to publish fewer articles in total than other business periodicals). The key for Hypothesis 2, however, is when articles on a fashion first appear in the leading management journals as compared with the emergence of the fashion in other journals. Thus, the results are in terms of when the fashions first appeared in the general business press compared with when they first appeared in the academic journals. This information for each of the fashions is shown in Table 2, along with the year with the highest number of weighted counts the fashion had in management journals as well as in the general business press.

Significant numbers of articles on business benchmarking didn't occur in leading management journals until after 1990. The emergence of benchmarks in the leading journals tended to lag that in the wider business press. This is reflected in the highest weighted count, which occurred in 1996. Peak attention in the wider business publications didn't occur until the end of the study period, 1998.

Table 2 also shows the first occurrence of the alternative labels for benchmarks. Both performance standards and world-class companies appear first in the wider business press before the academic journals. The peak weighted counts for these labels occur in 1992 and 1994 for performance standards and in 1996 and 1998 for world-class companies. The peak of attention in the business press occurred at around the same time or slightly before that of the academic journals for both of these labels.

The comparison of weighted counts of articles on pay for performance is also shown in Table 2. For this fashion and the associated labels, the first occurrence in the academic journals was, in each case, a year or two later than that in the business press (except for merit pay, which was in the same year). The weighted counts for pay for performance and merit pay reflect a peak in the academic journals in the mid-1990s. Incentive plans had two peaks, the first in 1973 and then

Table 2  
 First Appearance and Year of Highest Counts of Fashions in Academic and Business Literature<sup>a</sup>

Fashion	Year of First Appearance in Business Press	Year of First Appearance in Academic Literature	Year of Highest Count in Business Press	Year of High Count in Academic Literature (and count) <sup>b</sup>
Benchmarks	1984	1987	1998	1996 (15.3)
Performance standards	1971	1974	1993	1992 (39.6), 1994 (39.0)
World-class companies	1992	1994	1995	1996 (6.3), 1998 (6.1)
Pay for performance	1993	1994	1998	1995 (5.0)
Incentive plans	1971	1972	1983	1973 (10.7), 1993 (15.7)
Productivity incentives	1972	1974	1978	1979 (6.5), 1988 (8.3)
Merit pay	1974	1974	1991	1993 (5.1)
Quality circles	1980	1981	1981	1985 (16.0)
Total quality	1990	1990	1995	1994 (50.5)
Participatory management	1971	1974	1981	1985 (32.4), 1994 (18.4)

a. Because the time period for the study was 1971 to 1998, the listing of 1971 as a date of first appearance implies that articles on the fashion had already appeared by the beginning of the study time.

b. The counts shown here are weighted impact counts that reflect the number of times the fashion was the subject of articles in leading management journals, weighted for impact of the journal. The figures in the rightmost column include the highest weighted count and the year in which the count occurred. When there were 2 years that had high counts relative to the other years (representing separate peaks), the counts for both years are shown.

again in 1993. Productivity incentives received greatest attention in the late 1970s and again in the late 1980s. Except for pay for performance, the peak of attention in the business press occurred at or before that in the academic journals; the counts for pay for performance were still increasing at the end of the study period.

Weighted counts on quality circles, total quality, and participatory management are also shown in Table 2. It appears that the weighted counts generally parallel the counts in the rest of the business press; both trend downwards, with almost no articles on the topic by 1998. The peak for the academic literature was in 1985. The peak for the wider business press was in 1981.

Total quality appeared in both academic and business press around 1990. The peak interest in the academic literature is reflected in a highest weighted count occurring in 1994. The peak in the business press was actually a year later. Participatory management, however, appears as an older label: first as appearing in the wider business press near the beginning of the study period and peaking in 1981; then first appearing in academic literature shortly afterward and having two peaks, in 1985 and 1994.

It was expected that the later appearance of fashions as topics in academic literature would be associated with longer review times in such periodicals. It was also predicted that acceptance rates for submissions to academic journals would be lower as well, also contributing to a lag between the time original papers are submitted to journals and their eventual

publication. It was found that the average time for review in the sample of 192 general business journals was 2.32 months compared with an average review time for the academic journals of 3.27 months. A *t* test showed this difference was statistically significant ( $p < .001$ ). The average acceptance rate for the periodicals read by a primarily business audience was 30.6% compared with 13.2% for the set of 31 leading academic journals. This difference was also statistically significant ( $p < .001$ ).

### Subsets of the Management Literature

It appeared from the initial search of benchmarking articles that a majority in the mid-1980s involved benchmarking in the computer industry. Such publications as *Infoworld* and *Data Processing* had many articles on benchmarks in this period. The results do indicate that a majority of the articles published on benchmarks until 1988 were about benchmarking in the context of the computer industry. However, as noted in the analysis section, these articles generally defined benchmarking as testing software or hardware against a standard (e.g., speed of processing). Benchmarking has also been defined in the financial literature as performance goals for financial portfolios. Articles in publications such as the *Journal of Financial Research* (Wei & Stansell 1991) illustrate this usage of benchmarks. Benchmarking was defined along similar lines in other industries as well. In the journal *Business and Health*, Shaller and Gunderson

(1986) defined benchmarking as a reference point in terms of hospitalization utilization and costs. Thus, benchmarking in its more narrow definition as performance standards first appeared in industry-specific publications such as computers or the financial industry. This is not surprising given that the term refers to specific performance measures within those industries.

The story is different when benchmarks refer to business processes. As indicated in Figure 1, benchmarking first appeared as a term referring to business processes in the ABI/Inform database in the 1980s. The first articles that defined benchmarks in terms of business processes appeared in general management publications. One of the first articles described a benchmarking program at Xerox (Glavine, 1984). This article was published in *Review of Business* and described how Xerox began what was called a competitive benchmarking program, which was a "continuous, in depth study of its best competition" (Glavine, 1984, p. 9). Another article in *Training and Development* (Guilmette & Reinhart, 1984) also described competitive benchmarking at Xerox.

Tucker, Zivan, and Camp (1987) further described business benchmarking in a *Harvard Business Review* article. This article continued examining benchmarking from a case study approach, using Xerox and L. L. Bean as examples. Among the other appearances of business benchmarking articles in the mid-1980s, all appeared in general business publications. For instance, two of the early articles on business benchmarking listed in ABI/Inform were in *Planning Review* (Furey, 1987; Schmid, 1987).

An additional search was done for trends and patterns in the article count of pay for performance. At first no clear pattern was evident, possibly because fashion emerged later in the study period. However, a search for earlier articles using terms related to performance-based pay indicated earlier articles with merit pay as a subject preceded the increase in articles on pay for performance in the 1990s. The most common theme of articles on merit pay was in conjunction with merit pay for teachers. A search using merit pay as a subject limited to articles on teachers revealed 16 such articles in 1985 and 12 more from 1986 to 1991. Thus, there is some indication that merit pay in the teaching and educational area became a fashion in the years before pay-for-performance articles appeared, perhaps indicating an early impetus for the fashion.

## DISCUSSION

As Strang and Meyer (1994) observed, everything seems to diffuse, including "rumors, prescription practices, boiling drinking water, totems, hybrid corn, job classification systems, organizational structures, church attendance, national sovereignty" (p. 100). The same is true of beliefs of what constitutes good management.

An answer to the question posed in the title, "Where do management fashions come from?" might be put "from other management fashions." Certainly, Huczynski (1993) and other writers have asserted as much in describing how many fashions are derived from older ideas and beliefs. Although this study has a narrow focus in that it considered only periodicals as a channel for fashion transmission, this channel is clearly a significant one in understanding how management fashions emerge and spread.

### Hypothesis 1: Relabeling of Management Fashions

The first hypothesis predicted that declines in number of articles about certain fashions would happen at the same time as increases in attention given to terms or labels associated with the same fashion. The results suggest that the interaction of different labels associated with management fashions is more complex than first thought. For the labels shown in Figure 2 (associated with benchmarks), it is apparent that articles about benchmarks, performance standards, and world-class companies increased at about the same time. However, the latter two labels seemed to be shorter lived fashions as interest in these dropped. Although these counts eventually diminished, articles listing benchmarks as a topic continued to grow. It also appears that performance standards is an older label that lost favor in the literature as benchmarking continued to diffuse throughout business literature. This suggests that readers were encountering more articles listing the newer term of *benchmarks* as articles about the older term, *performance standards*, became more rare. The figure suggests that not only did attention given to this area increase, but also the labels used to denote the topic changed.

Whether the articles are classified as about benchmarks, world-class companies, or other topics, it seems that in the early 1990s there was an increase in

attention given to the topic of benchmarks and comparing management practices to competitors. We can view these results with respect to the diffusion of knowledge and management fashions. There was more information on this topic available to managers, at least being transmitted via the channel of periodicals, in the past 10 years. Of course, whether this increase leads managers to adopt such practices cannot be answered by the data here.

The articles on quality circles and total quality, shown in Figure 3, show that after a slow decline in number of articles on quality circles beginning in the late 1980s, the number of articles on total quality dramatically rose but then decreased. As such, it would appear that if the decline in attention given to total quality is being replaced by other labels, it is not evident from the labels examined here. The consistent pattern for counts for *participatory management* suggests it is a broader term and not as closely related to the other labels, regardless of its inclusion in the thesaurus as a related term.

The diffusion of the quality-circle method into the periodical literature occurred chiefly in the late 1970s and early to mid-1980s. Although diffusion of this label since that time has diminished, the diffusion of participatory management as a label has stabilized, unlike the more ephemeral nature of the term *total quality* in the 1990s. The data indicate that *participatory management* is a more enduring fashion and perhaps a more generic term in the literature, as it refers to a broader range of practices than quality circles or total quality programs.

The pattern of counts in Figure 4 (practices related to pay plans) shows waves of increasing and declining attention given to incentive plans and productivity incentives. Each of these waves lasted 3 to 5 years through the 1980s. As the number of articles about productivity incentives and merit pay declined, articles about incentive plans increased, along with the emergence of pay for performance as a popular subject. Thus, some support for the replacement hypothesis is also seen when examining this set of terms.

The message of Figure 4 is that two fashions—pay for performance and incentive plans—are now dominant, and the other two fashions—merit pay and productivity incentives—have gradually received less attention, particularly as articles on pay for performance have increased. The pattern here is thus not a simple one and implies that the substitution of one fashion for another is not necessarily a one-for-one

process. Whereas the labels of merit pay and productivity incentives have been less common recently, the diffusion of pay for performance and incentive plans, as labels, has increased. But, as the relative attention to different terms has changed over time, the general attention and information available about the general topic of linking employee pay to something they do have continued, only under different labels.

### **Hypothesis 2: Emergence in Academic Versus Popular Press**

The second hypothesis held that management fashions would appear in leading management journals after they begin to appear in the wider, less academically oriented business press. Such a finding would question the notion that knowledge, as contained in academic research, diffuses through time into the popular business press where it is widely read by managers and ultimately applied to organizations. For two of the fashions studied here, Hypothesis 2 was supported. The first articles on both benchmarks and pay-for-performance plans appeared in the leading management journals after they first received attention in the business press. This effect was not evident for quality circles.

The evidence that some management fashions appear in the broader business press before academic journals has multiple interpretations. Although one may make the somewhat troubling contention that the academic literature is simply following the prevailing management rhetoric and fashions of the time, this conclusion is not the only one. The review process, as well as the time it takes for articles to come to press in academic journals after acceptance, suggests that the reason for the lags observed may be a more mechanical one than an indictment of the way new ideas emerge out of management journals. The results comparing review times and acceptance rates for the sample of academic- versus practitioner-read periodicals suggest that indeed, there is a difference in time to press between the categories of publications.

It is useful to view these results in light of Mazza's (1998) contention that business discourse has become less formal in the past couple of decades. The point is that popular media, due to its very nature, enhances wide social acceptance of different management practices. So, an indicator of legitimization of business knowledge is through its appearance in popular media, where practices become part of the way to do

business as perceived by readers (managers). Mazza also observed that popular newspapers, both in Europe and the United States, have expanded their coverage of business issues, trends, and economic indicators. Newspapers have increasingly published special guides on how to manage.

If it was true that business knowledge has become more accessible to wider audiences, then it would be expected that new labels for management techniques would emerge in the popular literature at the same time or before its appearance in academic journals, where such beliefs are later scrutinized. The original concepts (e.g., productivity, quality, and participation) may have already been examined in academic circles, but the diffusion is essentially done through transmission in popular media.

### **Hypothesis 3: Emergence of Fashions in Subfields**

The third hypothesis contended that management fashions emerge from literature connected with a particular industry or subfield of management and disseminate throughout the broader business press. The qualitative analysis of the abstracts associated with the articles suggested that the term *benchmarks* received a great deal of early attention within the computer industry. However, two things became apparent in this analysis. The first was that different definitions of benchmarks have been used in the literature over the years. It was necessary to uncover, for each article, which meaning of benchmarks applied. The term *benchmarking* first referred to specific performance standards used in the computer industry or financial performance. So, the term itself first emerged in industry-specific journals, but not as the management fashion of business process benchmarks. Benchmarks began to appear as a way to compare business processes of other companies during the 1980s. Interestingly, by the early 1990s, industry publications such as *Datamation* and *Computerworld* that used benchmarking in its earlier definition were publishing articles in which benchmarks referred to business processes. In fact, an article in *Computerworld* (Betts, 1992) distinguished the two definitions as “quality benchmarking” and hardware performance testing.

In terms of Hypothesis 3, what do these trends mean? The term *benchmarking* itself may have first appeared in specialized publications, but the term as

defined for this article, business process benchmarking, began, in contradiction to the hypothesis, in general business publications. Weak evidence was obtained that pay-for-performance articles were preceded by a number of articles related to merit pay in education some years earlier. Although these areas are not necessarily the only points of origin, they suggest that the attention given within these areas played a role in the later increase in popularity. The qualitative approaches to both benchmarks and pay for performance lend texture to what is known about the development of these fashions even as the hypothesis was not supported.

### **Limitations**

Although this study focused on five management fashions, the findings may not be generalizable to others. As Abrahamson (1996) has noted, very few management fashions have been investigated, so the extent to which an individual study of a few management fashions can be extended to others is unknown.

The study was also limited in the type of media that was investigated. ABI/Inform currently lists more than 1,500 periodicals, but clearly, other forms of media such as newspapers, television, and radio programs could affect the dissemination of management fashions. It is hoped that future studies will undertake the labor-intensive process of examining a wide variety of media because very few studies have been done on the effect of other media on management fashions.

Perhaps a more serious limitation was in the way the associated terms for each fashion were generated. Whereas the listing from an online thesaurus may give some indication of similar terms, by no means should the labels used for each set of fashions be considered exhaustive. Obviously, other terms may exist, and examining the attention of these terms may shed more light on the potential for one label to replace another.

The methodology used to construct the set of leading management journals was grounded in the results of previously published work on prestige, reputation, and citation potential of largely academic journals (Coe & Weinstock, 1984; Extejt & Smith, 1990; Gomez-Mejia & Balkin, 1992; Johnson & Podsakoff, 1994). To the extent that these studies had arbitrary lists of what constituted leading journals in the management field, this study does also. However, to the extent that these journals form a core of publications that appear in

such lists repeatedly, the list is representative of management journals with influence that is widely recognized.

Other than the analysis of subfields (Hypothesis 3), this study did not content analyze the articles. It is not known how many of the articles viewed each fashion favorably or critically. Such information may shed light on the process behind the rise and decline of each fashion.

### Conclusion

The findings of this study can be interpreted in light of other literature on management fashions. It does appear that in two of the fashions examined, older labels were being replaced by newer labels for similar beliefs. Huczynski (1993) argued that this phenomenon was common because ideas must seem new yet nonthreatening to gain popularity. Thus, new beliefs about management are created from a set of known older, and thus nonthreatening, beliefs. Interestingly, Huczynski's illustrative example of attention given to quality circles did not appear to be replaced by newer beliefs. This is perhaps because quality circles is an older label that is associated with labels not considered in the analysis here.

The study also concludes that fashions may emerge in the popular press before academic literature. Such a finding agrees with Barley et al.'s (1988) conclusion that corporate culture developed as a topic first in the popular business press and suggests this pattern may be true of management beliefs generally. The sheer increase in amount of business knowledge transmitted through popular press that Mazza (1998) noted might contribute to this pattern. Although very preliminary in nature, the study also found evidence that one of the fashions, business process benchmarking, appeared in general business publications before more specialized journals.

The findings here indicate that at least some management fashions are derived from previously popular beliefs and that they may first appear in general business publications before appearing in more narrowly focused periodicals and academic journals. Specifying where management fashions come from is an important step in understanding the process by which certain beliefs about management become popular.

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NONTRADITIONAL  
RESEARCH

D'Oh  
*The Simpsons*, Popular Culture,  
and the Organizational Carnival

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I'll keep it short and sweet. Family, religion, friendship: These are the three demons you must slay if you want to succeed in business. When opportunity knocks, you don't want to be driving to the maternity hospital or sitting in some phoney baloney church. Or synagogue. Questions?

—C. Montgomery Burns, rich and ancient owner of the Springfield Nuclear Power Plant

Where can we look when we seek to study organizations? It appears that the common answer to this question would be to go to organizations themselves and see what is happening. To enter into the offices and the factories, the boardrooms and the lunch rooms, this is the place where organizations seem to exist in their material forms. Looking more broadly, though, organizations also exist outside of their physical locations. They exist, too, as representations—cultural images created as people work to understand and make sense of the institutions that saturate their lives. Television is one medium where such representations can be found. It is a medium that, in contemporary times, has become a platform for the development of cultural representations of organizations ranging from the oil fields of *Dallas* to the law firm in

*L.A. Law* to Al Bundy's shoe shop in *Married . . . With Children*. Organizations are everywhere in television: Hospitals, police stations, law courts, coffee shops, factories, and offices, for example, are frequently the settings in which television develops its narratives. Television, therefore, is also a place to which the study of organizations might look in order to develop ways of understanding organizational life. In looking toward television, it is relevant, as Hassard and Holliday (1998) have pointed out, that "popular culture offers more dramatic, more intense and more dynamic representations of organizations than management texts" (p. 1).

One such organization is the Springfield Nuclear Power Plant (SNPP) in the prime-time animated television series *The Simpsons*. The SNPP is the major industry and the chief employer in the town of Springfield where *The Simpsons* is set and is frequently both the subject and the context of the stories. *The Simpsons* started out as a series of short cartoons that were included in the adult comedy program *The Tracy Ullman Show* in 1987. From there, *The Simpsons* was developed into a show of its own and premiered as a prime-time weekly series in the United States in January 1990. Today, *The Simpsons* is in its 12th season and

is America's longest running television situation comedy. The show currently airs in more than 60 countries, and in 1999 it was proclaimed by *Time* magazine as the best TV show of the century. Importantly, *The Simpsons* was the first cartoon series since the 1960s to be placed in a prime-time slot (8:00 p.m. in the United States) and has gained significant popularity both with adults and with children. As Kafner (1997) has argued, although cartoons might seem on the surface to be without much substance or importance, on close examination they can be seen to provide an important reflection on the society of our time. *The Simpsons* is an arena in which such reflections have been particularly highlighted on account of the wide-ranging subject matter that the show has addressed. As Cohen (1998) pointed out, since its beginning, *The Simpsons* has broken the established rules and experimented with subjects traditionally seen as taboo for an animated series. These have included marital problems, adultery, sexual fantasies, drinking, swearing, gambling, suicide, and the ridiculing of religion. Significantly, added to this list is a questioning of various organizational practices. Marc (1998) has claimed that *The Simpsons* is perhaps the most "morally exacting critique of American society that has yet appeared on television" (p. 193). This critique offers an array of texts for examining how organizations operate in contemporary Western culture. This covers material ranging from a questioning of consumerism to the role of media organizations in society.

My aim in this article is to provide a cultural reading of how organizational life is represented in *The Simpsons*. In providing this reading, I propose that television offers an arena for understanding the cultural logic of organizations and for providing the opportunity for a compelling critique of that logic. Particularly, I will examine the relationship between Homer Simpson, the star of the show and a bumbling, doughnut-eating, beer-drinking buffoon, and his employer Montgomery C. Burns, the sole owner of the SNPP, industrialist, and Yale graduate. My intention here is to examine how organizations are represented in this form of popular culture and how popular culture can provide the opportunity for compelling critiques of organizational life. Furthermore, it is my argument that in providing both a parody and a critique of organizations, *The Simpsons* also provides its viewers with the possibility to interrogate alternatives to existing and potentially oppressive social relationships at work. As Weinstein (1998) put it,

The show's narratives celebrate the way individuals and corporations in positions of power—ranging from Homer to Mr. Burns . . . can never entirely control their environment. Indeed, instruments and technologies that enable the exercise of power (money, video, nuclear energy) are rendered useless in the face of human unpredictability. Furthermore, a host of formal devices—non-linear narrative, verbal and visual puns, non-sequiturs, parody, animation, montage—suggest that not only television, but life itself, may be endlessly remade. (p. 71)

To explore how *The Simpsons* provides such alternatives, I will review how the program represents organizations and organizational life in a way consistent with Bakhtin's notion of the carnivalesque. For Bakhtin, the carnival embodies a subversive culture of folk humor that mocks, satirizes, and undermines official institutions. Extending beyond the actual event of the carnival, carnivalization is presented by Bakhtin as having a subversive and liberating effect in literature. I will argue that this carnivalesque spirit is alive and well in *The Simpsons* and that this provides a wealth of knowledge about contemporary understandings of work—knowledge whose laughter and parody provide the opportunity for a compelling critique of modern organizations.

## BAKHTIN'S CARNIVAL

In *Rabelais and His World*, the Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin (1984b) studied the popular sources used in the literary work of the 16th-century author Rabelais. Bakhtin traced Rabelais's inspiration to the folk humor of the Middle Ages as manifested in the social practice of the carnival. Bakhtin identified that the carnival had an important role in the life of medieval people and that in large medieval cities an average of 3 months of each year was devoted to carnival. He discussed the rituals of the carnival, which existed in all countries in medieval Europe, that offered a form of life that was nonofficial and outside of the feudal, ecclesiastical, and political forms that dominated medieval life. This carnival life freed people from ecclesiastical dogma and operated outside of the religious sphere—carnival was subject only to its own freedom and was organized on the basis of laughter. As Bakhtin put it himself, "Carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms and prohibi-

tions" (p. 10). A characteristic logic of the carnival is that of the "inside-out," which constructs a second world of folk culture—this is a parody of noncarnival life through travesties, humiliations, profanity, and the comic crowning and uncrowning of kings. The result is carnival laughter, which is not so much a reaction to a comic event but rather a laughter of all of the people, including the participants in the carnival themselves. Such laughter is ambivalent in that it is both triumphant and mocking but does not place itself above the object of its mockery. As Bakhtin (1984a) put it,

It could be said (with certain reservations of course) that a person of the middle ages lived, as it were, two lives: one as that of official life, monolithically serious and gloomy, subjugated to a strict hierarchical order, full of terror, dogmatism, reverence and piety; the other was the life of the carnival square, free and unrestricted, full of ambivalent laughter, blasphemy, the profanation of everything sacred, full of debasing and obscenities, familiar contact with everything and everyone. (p. 129)

Bakhtin suggested that the style of the carnival, the carnivalesque, is represented in the novels of Rabelais (1494-1553). This representation comes in the form of "grotesque realism" in which the material human body, including eating, defecation, and sex, is represented in grandiose and exaggerated imagery. This is not the biological individual or the "economic man," but rather a festive and abundant body. It is the body at a material level—a degradation of the higher principles of human existence, down to earth rather than up to heaven. This style has the attributes of exaggeration, hyperbolism, and excessiveness, where opposites are invested and norms are transgressed. Such a carnival works to

liberate from the prevailing point of view of the world, from conventions and established truths, from clichés, from all that is humdrum and universally accepted. The carnival spirit offers the chance to have a new outlook on the world, to realise the relative nature of all that exists, and to enter a completely new order of things. (Bakhtin, 1984a, p. 34)

The carnival, then, is a practice that both opposes and destabilizes official views of reality. In doing so, it creates itself in opposition to official culture on a series of planes, for example, from seriousness to laughter, from the dogmatic to the open, from the immutable to the contingent, and from control to identity (Storey,

1998). As Jung (1998) discussed, these oppositions question hierarchy by creating an ambivalent space between the high and the low in which hierarchical distinctions are not respected: "Carnival breaks up and 'reverses' the colourless and prosaic monopoly of the established order of power" (p. 104). Jung went on to argue that carnival does this in a way that is "jesterly"—it distrusts and aims to deconstruct attempts at stabilizing social systems by being playfully and nonviolently subversive. It is a form of clowning that dethrones established hierarchies and transgresses and transforms official orders of reality.

In examining Bakhtin's carnival, Stallybrass and White (1986) have noted that by the late 19th century, the middle classes had rejected the carnival tradition both culturally and through acts of legislation that attempted to eliminate carnival as a feature of European life. What had happened was that modernization, the movement toward urban, industrialized society and the growth of the middle classes, had removed carnival as a festive form. Despite this removal of popular rituals in the form of the carnival, Stallybrass and White also pointed out that without the carnival, the carnivalesque spirit had been sublimated. Although the carnival proper had largely been removed, carnival as a social practice reemerged in an altered and broken-down fashion through new formations of popular culture. Through its sublimation, the gratification of the desire for carnival was achieved through socially accepted behaviors instead of through the prohibited original. As Docker (1987) described it, the carnivalesque became a repressed desire that in conscious terms was regarded merely as entertainment and sensationalism rather than as knowledge; despite this, the carnivalesque sphere of popular culture still refuses to lie down or to be regulated and remains "outrageously omnipresent" in popular culture.

#### TELEVISION, CARNIVAL, AND *THE SIMPSONS*

Where, then, is carnival to be found today? Docker (1994) has argued that carnival as a "cultural mode" remains a strong influence on contemporary popular culture such as television. He suggested that this is a culture that is creative, vigorous, exuberant, and importantly, excessive. Such a culture, he proposed, supplements, challenges, destabilizes, relativizes, and pluralizes official versions. Here, television has significant continuities with premodern carnivalesque

forms. As Eco (1984) described, carnival exists as an authorized transgression that is limited and set aside from the official, in this way: "Modern mass-carnival is limited in space: it is reserved for certain places, certain streets, or framed by the television screen" (p. 6). As well as being a potential site for the carnivalesque, television is also an important medium in terms of its relationship with organizations. Like many other forms of popular culture, television did not emerge until the post-Second World War period when new consumer products were designed and manufactured for new consumer markets (Davies, 1995). Television, as a mode of cultural (re)production, is itself the product of big business. Interestingly, this does not seem to have stopped television programs from biting the hand that feeds them and offering critical views on organizations. Fiske (1987) explained this apparent irony when he wrote that

television's economics, which demand that it can be made popular by a wide variety of social groups, works against its apparent ability to exert ideological control over the passive viewer . . . it is the audiences which make a program popular, not the producers. (p. 93)

The implication here is that capitalist cultural industries do not necessarily make products that promote capitalist ideology; instead, they make products that will sell. The result is that there is not just one ideological position that is forced on industrially produced texts—the products of the cultural industry, therefore, might contain more than just the seeds of resistance (Benshoff, 1992). Furthermore, as Hassard and Holliday (1998) have noted, television representations of organizations are frequently different from more conventional understandings of work—in particular, they represent workplaces as embodied, personal, and emotional and explore everyday work settings and interactions that can contain implicit critiques of capitalist frameworks. *The Simpsons* is a good example of this in that "it satirises the diverse social, political, equal norms defining American culture" (Korte, 1997) in a self-reflexive way. The series' executive producer, James L. Brooks, has described the show as "the normal American family in all its beauty and all its horror" (cited in Steiger, 1999). In being open both to this "beauty" and "horror,"

Unlike many shows on TV, *The Simpsons* works to encourage critique, demanding that viewers be active in their consumption. Without hesitation or apology, it

ridicules the advertisements, slated news stories, and inane talk shows that appear on their beloved TV set . . . very little is sacred on *The Simpsons*. (Korte, 1997)

This critique shares the dynamism of the carnival spirit, and as Lindvall and Melton (1997) pointed out,

Bakhtin's notion of the carnival provides an inspired model for analysis of comic genres like the animated film, genres often overshadowed by more "significant" cinemas. Where the clown once ruled or misruled in medieval comedy, it is now the turn of the animator to show his motley. (p. 203)

This carnivalization is made possible particularly in animation because cartoons "do not need the consistency or internal logic of a realist film. New codes can emerge where a reader encounters the unpredictable articulations of the cartoon" (Lindvall & Melton, 1997, p. 209). It is in this way that *The Simpsons* plays with our views of both organizational reality and reality in general. As Hodge (1996) discussed, *The Simpsons* is set up to recreate a "realist" setting of American suburban life; the realism, however, is not intended to reproduce reality itself but rather to reproduce the dominant social view of reality and hence to enable the audience to identify with the characters and to enable those social views to be questioned. The Simpson family is not represented as social leaders but is rather shown as working-class people and their experiences of subordination. What Hodge argued is that the mixture of this realism with the animated production allows for greater creativity because the viewer knows that anything can happen. Combined with the satirical nature of the program's story lines, this enables *The Simpsons* to question and problematize different aspects of everyday life by both representing a form of social reality and being open to playing with the possibilities of that reality in a variety of ways. In doing so, *The Simpsons* addresses questions of the domination of powerful institutions such as the family, schools, police, and particular to this article, work organizations.

The way that this is done has many features of Bakhtin's carnival. One such feature of *The Simpsons* is the use of "grotesque realism" to portray its characters. Bakhtin (1984b) highlighted carnival's preoccupation with the body and its "lower strata," focusing on the materiality of the body in contrast with the "purity" of reason and higher cultural pursuits. Ani-

mation, in general, is an ideal medium for the representation of grotesque realism because it freely allows the human form to be represented in exaggerated ways. In *The Simpsons*, the characters are frequently seen to be drawing attention to such bodily functions through, for example, the town drunk, Barney's belching; Homer's overeating and obesity; or Bart, Homer's son, "mooning." An episode that makes particularly good use of such grotesque realism is "Brush With Burns" (Production Code 7F18, original air date April 11, 1991). In this episode, Homer's wife, Marge, decides to go back to study art at Springfield Community College after having given up painting as a schoolchild. Her first success is a painting of a fat Homer asleep on the couch in his underwear that wins first prize at the Springfield Art Fair; the painting is mockingly called *Bald Adonis*. Based on this success, Mr. Burns commissions her to paint his portrait. Marge struggles with the portrait and finds the challenge of painting Burns's "inner beauty" too difficult. During one of the sittings, Marge accidentally sees Burns naked and, armed with this new imagery, decides to paint his portrait this way. This is a warts-and-all (literally) painting that depicts Burns as an emaciated, scowling, cowering old man—stripped of his business suit and of the pretence of either power or inner beauty. His body, ancient, weak, ugly, and powerless, is portrayed in opposition to his public persona as the powerful owner of the SNPP. His body is also in contrast to the portrait of Homer—obese and lazy. Each of the portraits has its own grotesqueness, and the nudity of the characters in each demonstrates a bodily preoccupation and a desire to strip away social pretensions (represented by clothes) that might hide the material, bodily reality beneath. In the case of Burns, this opens up an ironic space where he is alternatively frail and powerful, depending on which of his representations is looked at. This brings into question the stability of his social power as an industrialist by suggesting the possibility of alternative ways of representing him. These paintings also serve as a good introduction to the dominant characterizations of both Homer and Burns. Burns is the evil, mean, self-serving capitalist whose social power is contrasted with his physical weakness. Homer, as the middle-American dad, is fat and lazy, yet asleep, as if he is unaware of his own predicament. Burns and Homer represent, respectively, the capitalist and the worker, but neither is heroized—there is no story here of the easy, just, or idealistic resolution of good versus evil;

instead, we are presented with a humanity that is more complex and less subject to narrative closure. What this highlights is the ambivalence of the carnivalesque. Instead of offering ideological answers that close down possibilities and options, the carnivalesque form is successful in opening up an arena for critique that does not seek ultimate resolutions. This creates a critical space without finalizing the critique—a space within which change can be explored and critique can be made without the closure of dogma.

### HOMER, BURNS, AND THE SNPP

A number of different workplaces are present in *The Simpsons*, for example, there is the Kwik-E-Mart convenience store or the Krusty Burger fast-food chain (with all its subtle similarities to McDonalds); by far the most dominant organization, however, is the SNPP. The SNPP is the place where, in most episodes, Homer is employed, and at 36 years old, he holds the dubious honor of being recognized as the record holder for "the most years worked at an entry-level position." The power plant as a place of work is staffed by largely unskilled workers and is an occupational health and safety nightmare (in the opening sequence to all the episodes, a piece of glowing green nuclear material finds its way out of the plant into the town).

The way the power plant is portrayed can be read as a television carnival, mocking and parodying the culture of organizations just as the carnival of the middle ages did of religious and feudal culture. This parody is one, for example, where in the episode "Last Exit to Springfield" (Production Code 9F15, original air date March 11, 1993) Burns implements a cost-reduction scheme that sees him replacing the employee dental plan with free beer for employees. Homer, when realizing the costs this will mean to get braces for his daughter Lisa, uncharacteristically opposes the free beer. As events unfold, Homer, who is a member of the Brotherhood of Jazz Dancers, Pastry Chefs, and Nuclear Technicians Union, is elected the plant's union representative. Following a strike at the plant and Burns's turning off all of the power in Springfield, the usually inept and apathetic Homer wins the battle with Burns, and the dental plan is restored. It is here that the normal power relations between Homer and Burns are turned upside down. Homer, however, is not mythologized as a hero of the worker. In the industrial negotiations, Homer rejects Burns's attempt to

bribe him as a way to settle the dispute because he misreads Burns's offer as a sexual advance. The scene is played out as follows:

Burns: We don't have to be adversaries, Homer. We both want a fair union contract.  
 Homer's brain: Why is Mr. Burns being so nice to me?  
 Burns: And if you scratch my back, I'll scratch yours.  
 Homer's brain: Wait a minute, is he coming on to me?  
 Burns: I mean, if I should slip something into your pocket, what's the harm?  
 Homer's brain: Oh my god! He is coming on to me!  
 Burns: After all, negotiations make strange bedfellows.  
 [Burns chuckles and winks at Homer.]  
 [Homer's brain screams.]  
 Homer: Sorry, Mr. Burns, but I don't go in for these backdoor shenanigans. Sure, I'm flattered, maybe even a little curious, but the answer is no! (cited in Richmond & Coffman, 1997, p. 110)

Despite Homer's surprise transformation into the powerful union boss, the audience is left at the end not knowing what Homer might have done if he really had known that money was on the table. The inversion of Homer's and Burns's power is never complete, and the heroization of the working man is left in an open and ambivalent state. What this achieves is a critique of managerialism, in the form of the erosion of employee benefits for profit gain, while still not relying on an idealized or (left) ideological view of employment relations. Because Homer's potential behavior in response to the bribe is left unresolved (due to his ignorance), the episode resists the temptation to finalize the characterization of Homer as the honest worker and Burns as the evil capitalist. Such simplistic logic is eschewed in favor of a more open and complex critique.

Inversion is played out in other episodes in ways that transcend the more realistic setting of industrial relations disputes. Homer's normal persona as the dumb proletarian is very much presented both as a stereotype and as a starting point that is frequently inverted to explore what might happen if the stereotype was otherwise. The program plays with the stereotype by enabling Homer to adopt various alternatives that see him become, for example, a prize fighter in the heavyweight championship of the world or a pop music star in the one-hit-wonder barbershop quartet, the B-Sharps. The stereotype is presented but never taken for granted. A good example of this is "Homer The Great" (Production Code 2F09, original air date January 8, 1995), which is set in the secret organization of the Stonecutters (a less-than-subtle refer-

ence to the Freemasons). Despite initial rejection, Homer cajoles his way into acceptance as a member of the Stonecutters. After almost being expelled, it is revealed that Homer has a birthmark on his back that identifies him as the true leader of the Stonecutters—"The Chosen One." Here again is an inversion in which the normally unpopular Homer becomes the leader. Burns is also a member of this organization, who, in the inverted order of the Stonecutters, gets his nose tweaked hard by one of the SNPP workers and has to reply, "Thank you, sir, may I have another?" This inversion, however, is not portrayed as heroic progress but rather just as a different system of difference. The Stonecutters is another form of hierarchical organization in which the reason for the power differences between its members is as arbitrary as the shape of a birthmark. Eventually, Homer is rejected and the Stonecutters disband after they rebel against his suggestion (based on advice from his daughter Lisa) that the Stonecutters focus their efforts on helping others in the community. The inversion presented in this episode highlights how organizational power is not a characteristic of a superior self but rather is a condition that is based on highly contextualized social relations—relations that are always open to change. This is reinforced in the episode "Burns Verkaufen Der Kraftwerk" (Production Code 8F09, original air date December 5, 1991), where Burns decides to sell the SNPP to a German company for \$100 million. Soon after the takeover is complete, Burns goes for a drink at Moe's Tavern and is mocked and abused by the townspeople who are there. Realizing that because he no longer controls the plant he is no longer in a position of power, Burns says, "What good is money if it can't inspire terror in your fellow man?" This implication is, of course, that it is managerial control that can truly inspire such terror. Burns then buys the plant back.

In each of these episodes, Burns's power is questioned, and in so doing, the dominance of organizational power itself is also symbolically brought into question. What occurs here, however, is not a simple narrative of the triumph of good over evil but rather a demonstration of the embeddedness of power in social relations. In the industrial dispute, it is the power of organized labor that is balanced against Burns's managerial power to eventually maintain the status quo. In contrast, in both the Stonecutters episode and following his sale of the power plant, the same character of Burns loses his power because he

finds himself in a different context and he exists in different social relations. This carnivalesque treatment recognizes that organizational power is a dominant social force but simultaneously highlights that the power is a result of a particular set of relations at a particular point in time—it is not immutable or inevitable.

Another demonstration of upside-down nature carnivalization is seen in the episode "Simpson and Delilah" (Production Code 7F02, original air date October 18, 1990), which takes the subject of corporate meritocracy and equality in career opportunities and turns it on its head. In the episode, the normally bald Homer discovers a miracle hair-growth formula, which he fraudulently buys for \$1,000 through the nuclear power plant's health insurance plan. Overnight, Homer grows a full head of hair. Meanwhile, Burns is faced with the dilemma of having to promote one of his workers as a result of a clause in his contract with the union. His initial reaction is that "none of these cretins deserves a promotion!" When he sees the newly hirsute Homer Simpson through his security monitor, however, he announces to his assistant, Smithers, "Wait, who's that young go-getter?" Smithers replies, "Well, it sort of looks like Homer Simpson . . . only more dynamic and resourceful." Burns immediately decides to promote Homer, and an announcement comes over the plant's public address system: "Attention, Homer Simpson. You have been promoted. You are now an executive. Take 3 minutes to say goodbye to your former friends and report to Room 503 for reassignment to a better life." With the help of an assistant named Karl, Homer impresses Mr. Burns. Particularly, his scheme to reduce industrial accidents by adding tartar sauce to the fish sticks served in the cafeteria appears to be a great success. When accidents do fall, Burns is so impressed that he even gives Homer the keys to the executive wash-room—a symbolic parody of managerial privilege where even the act of going to the toilet exists in a privileged form for those in power. Of course, the real reason that accidents have fallen is because Homer, now no longer on the shop floor, is not causing them any more. Eventually, Homer's son, Bart, accidentally breaks the bottle of hair potion, and Homer again returns to being bald. Without hair, no one takes him seriously anymore and he is demoted back to his former position.

Looking at this episode, we see that armed with his new hair, Homer has been able to climb the corporate ladder. His success, then, is not based on his skills or experience as an executive, but managerial success is

positioned as being a matter of "look." My reading of this is that it offers a resistance to managerial power by suggesting that hierarchical seniority in an organization is not the result of any inherent superiority but is a question of appearance and grooming. Homer got the job because he looked the part; however, when his baldness returned, the normal power relations were restored. Another interesting observation here is that Burns himself is also bald but retains his position of power in the power plant. The commentary here is perhaps that true power, that which is beyond appearance, is that of capital and tradition, whereas managerial power is fleeting. What comes through, though, is the carnivalesque overturning of the official recruitment and selection processes and policies in place in large organizations. These processes suggest that people are hired and promoted based on merit and that people are offered equal employment opportunities without discrimination based on factors such as appearance. What happens in *The Simpsons*, however, is quite the opposite, where, in fact, the least suitable candidate for the job (Homer) is successful merely because his appearance becomes that expected of a "young go-getter."

Homer's grotesque body is the source of inspiration for the episode "King-Size Homer" (Production Code 3F05, original air date November 5, 1995). Here, Homer's obesity and unhealthy eating habits are used to depict a carnivalesque grotesque realism in terms of Homer and the SNPP. Homer discovers that if he can increase his body weight to more than 300 pounds, he will be classified as hyperobese and will be officially declared disabled and will be eligible to work from home. He pursues this goal by focusing on the "neglected food groups" such as "the whipped group, the congealed group, and the choc-o-tastic," as well as switching from chewing gum to chewing bacon. After gorging himself on every food possible, he achieves his goal, and a computer workstation is installed in his home for him to work from. He proudly announces that "the slim, lazy Homer you knew is dead. Now I'm a big fat dynamo." Meanwhile, his proud son, Bart, fantasizes about being a "lardo on workman's comp, just like dad." In an effort to find new ways to escape from work, Homer fits a bobbing bird head in front of his computer to press the keys while he goes out. As a result of the bird's "work" in Homer's role as safety inspector, the nuclear reactor core at the plant is about to explode. Realizing what has happened, Homer hijacks an ice cream truck to race to the plant, and on getting there, he attempts to climb up to reach the

manual shutdown switch. His enormous weight breaks the ladder on which he is climbing, and he falls into the gap in the reactor and seals the leak. In comic grotesque flourish, Bart announces, "For once Dad's butt prevented the release of toxic gas." Burns responds with the statement, "Homer, your bravery and quick thinking have turned a potential Chernobyl into a mere Three Mile Island. Bravo!" Here we see the grotesque humor of Homer's body used to parody both the worker and the capitalist. Homer is fat and lazy, and he takes advantage of his employer by finding a creative way to still get paid while not having to go to work, a task to which he employs himself assiduously. The SNPP is highlighted, on the other hand, as being an organization on the constant brink of creating an environmental disaster—irrespective of its "progressive" practices of using computer technology to enable Homer to work from home. The episode demonstrates again an ambivalent humor in which overturning (making obesity desirable) and hyperbolization are used to draw attention to aspects of workplace relations—the unwilling worker and the environmentally corrupt organization.

In the end, though, it is the organization that comes off the worse. Burns, as the character representing organization ownership, is represented as a hyperbolized figure of evil. In commenting on the episode "King-Size Homer," Hodge (1996) wrote,

The representation of Burns through the angle of the camera (or at least that which was conceptualised on the storyboard page) also informs the viewer of his villainy. He is always seen above his workers, showing his precedence over them—whether outside doing the callisthenic exercises on his purposely constructed podium (resembling various authoritarian regimes: Nazi speeches at Nuremburg, Communist China's morning fitness rituals, or the Japanese business fitness plants, Japan being America's new economic "enemy"), or in his office where, even though sitting down, the throne like chair rises (thus making his position) above whoever dares enter (in a reverse of the "halo effect", the chair's armrests also rise up to appear as horns above his bald head).

### IMPLICATIONS FOR MANAGEMENT

What I have tried to demonstrate in this article is that the animated television series *The Simpsons* shares many of the features of the medieval carnival discussed in the work of Mikhail Bakhtin. These similarities can be seen in the way that *The Simpsons* employs

grotesque realism in its portrayal of its characters not only as "personalities" but also as partaking in the "real" life of the body. Furthermore, *The Simpsons* carnivalesque features the regular transgression of the norms of organizational life. Where the medieval culture focused on questioning and parodying the premodern dominant social institutions of the church and feudal society, *The Simpsons* parodies the more contemporary dominant social institution of the organization. As in carnival, this parody is enacted by playing with the rules of what is expected in more conventional or official representations of organization. Furthermore, and perhaps most markedly, *The Simpsons* employs the carnivalesque practice of inversion and overturning in which normal social relations are turned upside down—where boss becomes subordinate, where the powerful become weak, and where failures become successful. Through its carnival, *The Simpsons* is an example of how popular culture has produced representations that reflect both a critique and ambivalence toward organizations. This is not the celebration of American free enterprise; nor, however, is it the fetishization of working people as subjugated, powerless, suppressed, ineffectual, and in need of emancipation. Instead, the carnival is more ambivalent, more complex, and less binary—it shows that existing patterns of social relations are not immutable but at the same time does not portray an idealistic or utopian vision of change. This is a critique of organization that does not claim to know it all and does not claim solutions to problems; rather, it plays out issues of power in a dramatic, comic, and irreverent way.

Eco (1984) stated that comedy is achieved through the breaking of frames where normal expectations are transgressed, yet where the broken frame is assumed rather than articulated.

Carnival, in order to be enjoyed, requires that rules and rituals be parodied, and that these rules and rituals already be recognized and respected. One must know to what degree certain behaviors are forbidden, and must feel the majesty of the forbidding norm, to appreciate their transgression. Without a valid law to break, carnival is impossible. (p. 6)

In this way, much of the humor in *The Simpsons* is derived from transgressing the cultural rules of working life and, in doing so, makes these rules both more clear and less taken for granted. Through the dramatization and frequent inversion of the relationships between Homer (worker) and Burns (boss), *The Simp-*

*Simpsons* dramatically examines what might happen if the relations of power in organizations were different. The rules of organizational life are therefore made more transparent by the use of comedy to invert expected relations within organizations. Homer and Burns are presented on one plane as hyperbolized stereotypes of their social roles; yet subsequently, these social roles are transgressed to reveal both their unnaturalness and arbitrariness.

What then are the implications of the carnivalesque for management and organization? Ten Bos (2000) questioned the approach to management in which "the popular is often suspect. It can't be intelligent and it is linked to vulgarity, tastelessness, gaudiness, even to a certain laziness" (p. xii). In line with Ten Bos's observation about management fashion, on face value popular culture seems like an inappropriate location to look for insight into management and organization. My argument here, however, is that this is not the case and that popular culture serves as an important site for developing new understandings of organization life; understandings that are rooted in an experience of organizations that is unencumbered by the self-imposed limitations of conventional theory. In terms of such theory, Burrell (1997) has commented that organization studies

ignores or, worse still, consciously hides that which is thought to be unacceptable in polite company. There is little mention of sex, yet organizations are redolent with it; little mention of violence, yet organizations are stinking with it; little mention of pain, yet organizations rely upon it; little mention of the will to power, yet organizations would not exist without it. (p. 52)

In popular culture such as *The Simpsons*, however, the sex, violence, pain, and power that permeate organizational life are permitted air time through the carnivalesque representation of organizations. The implication is that popular culture offers arenas for the complex representation of organizational life not available in conventional academic forms. As I have tried to show in this article, these representations draw attention to the embodied and contradictory power relations that are a feature of organizations. Moreover, what this provides is a critique of organization through an exploration that transgresses organizational norms and overturns "normal" social relations. Furthermore, it offers this critique in a way that does not provide predigested solutions and leaves a space in which the viewer can be active in making sense of the situations that are presented.

In suggesting such critical implications, an important consideration is whether carnivalesque representations of organizational life such as that in *The Simpsons* are indeed critical, subversive, and liberating or whether, by encouraging viewers to laugh at their own employment situations, they provide its viewers with a safety valve that actually buttresses organizations from a more thoroughgoing critique. The question, then, is whether *The Simpsons* provides opportunities to destabilize existing organizational relations or whether it reinforces them by providing a safety valve through which organizational members can let off steam before returning to the unchanged status quo of their employment conditions. Whereas a Bakhtinian reading of the carnivalesque suggests that the carnival and its manifestations are profoundly subversive of official institutions, a safety-valve argument suggests just the opposite. Indeed, the word *carnival* itself derives from the Latin *carne(m) levare*, meaning "to put away flesh." The original medieval carnival was positioned as the last occasion before Lent that people were permitted to eat meat. The implication was that the desire to eat meat would be extinguished through the ritual of the carnival before the official institution of the church forbade it altogether. Arguably, what this achieved was a reinforcement of the official Lenten fast through the authorized transgression of the carnival. In tracing the ancestry of such a safety-valve theory, Docker (1994) referred to the 1931 speech of the Russian intellectual (and Soviet commissioner of enlightenment) Lunacharsky to the Academy of Sciences. In this speech Lunacharsky argued that "carnival is a safety valve for passions that otherwise might erupt in revolution; the lower orders would let off steam in a harmless, temporary event" (p. 171).

At issue with such a view, however, is that it ignores the ambivalence of the critique that the carnival provides. It suggests that carnival can be considered either as a form of subversion or as a safety valve. Furthermore, what is argued is that after such a consideration, it is revealed that carnival is indeed a safety valve. This is an argument that first constructs and then resolves the binary opposition between change and order. My suggestion here is that the carnival offers neither of these two; instead, it provides a space for organizational critique without finalizing the critique fully for the viewers. As I have tried to demonstrate in my reading of *The Simpsons*, the carnivalesque breaks the rules to make them more visible; in so doing, it opens up a space where these rules can be

interrogated and questioned. By creating a representation of organization that is embodied and that plays out what might happen when norms are transgressed and social relations overturned, *The Simpsons* does not promise a new organizational utopia but rather creates the opportunity for critique. It is here, I believe, that reading popular culture such as *The Simpsons* might be important to management. It explores new behavioral and structural options for organizations and the people within them that reserve a right to critique and mock existing options. It does not limit itself to the status quo, yet at the same time it does not propose a new one—instead, it explores the possibilities of what might happen if things were different. This is a critique that is not rooted in ideology but is based on the exploration and exposition of possibilities. As Docker (1994) put it, the carnival enables “both social stability and social protest and change” (p. 197).

Bernard-Donals (1998) has commented that “it is the possibility of a radical transformation of the ways that a culture sees and understands the relations amongst its subjects that is the central contribution of a Bakhtinian notion of carnival to cultural studies” (p. 113). The realization of such a possibility is inevitably a question of how *The Simpsons* is read. Here, I have attempted to offer a particular cultural reading of organizations in *The Simpsons*—one that shows that in popular culture lie the opportunities to question dominant and oppressive forms of organizations and to explore alternatives in a way that is not dogmatic, evangelical, or revolutionary. In *The Simpsons*, we can laugh at organizations and see that no part of working life is immutable or to be taken for granted. It offers a mockery of organizations and provides a compelling arena for the critique of organizational life, one that plays out the complex and contradictory relations that people have with the organizations in which they work.

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## MEET THE PERSON

# Editors' Introduction

CHARLES M. VANCE  
GRETCHEN M. SPREITZER

There is one thing stronger than all the kings and queens and all the armies of the world combined, and that is the power of an idea whose time has come. An invasion of armies can be resisted, but not an idea whose time has come.

—Victor Hugo

Victor Hugo's idea, which he vehemently believed had come into its time, centered on his republican political beliefs in France in the mid-1800s, the reaction to which drove him into exile in 1851, first to Brussels and then to the Channel Islands, where he continued to write bitter denunciations of the French government, along with literary treasures. He returned to Paris in 1870 after the fall of the Second Empire to find himself a national hero. What seems a bit ironic is how Hugo had to remain in exile for about two decades, actively promoting his political positions and waiting for an idea whose time had come to actually arrive. Hugo's major challenge was one of adoption and diffusion of innovation.

For organizations today, we more likely find ourselves perplexed by a cynic's version of Hugo's line: No amount of organizational or industry-wide promotional efforts and expense can secure the acceptance of a good idea whose time has not come. What likely complex set of interrelated factors combines to turn the tide toward the acceptance, adoption, and diffusion of a new idea or practice? Despite the considerable past work on organizational change and paradigm shifts within and across industries, we need more light to help take us beyond the mere generation of a good idea.

In this issue of "Meet the Person," Cathleen McGrath and Deone Zell treat us to a conversation with Everett Rogers, guru of the interdisciplinary

field of the adoption and diffusion of innovations. His insights on his experiences and work across many disciplines direct us to consider the vital and intriguing role of human factors and social networks, within a new Web-based high tech environment, in the effective adoption and diffusion of innovation for organizations and other social systems today. His work is particularly pertinent to our continuing focus on organizational learning and knowledge management within organizations, as well as our collective efforts to share and promote best practices for the advancement of the state of the art within and across industries and economic systems.



## MEET THE PERSON

# The Future of Innovation Diffusion Research and Its Implications for Management

## A Conversation With Everett Rogers

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Everett M. Rogers has had a profound impact on the field of innovation study. From his early work exploring farmers' decisions to adopt agricultural innovations based on the influence of neighboring farmers to his own recent adoption of a Palm Pilot based on a colleague's recommendation, he has been shaping and participating in the study of the diffusion of innovation. Widely recognized for his book, *Diffusion of Innovations* (now in its fourth edition) (Rogers, 1995), which was designated as a Citation Classic in 1990 by the Institute of Scientific Communication based on the number of citations it received (3,114 as of December 1997), Rogers is considered by many to be the father of diffusion of innovation research. His unending enthusiasm about the topic is no doubt behind his recent decision to embark on a fifth and final version of *Diffusion of Innovations*, which will bring this farsighted book into the 22nd century. With a full head of white hair and beard to match, Rogers is as passionate about his field now as

he was when studying the diffusion of farm innovations in the 1960s. Consistent with his research interests, his one "big hobby" is gardening—on which he spends about an hour a day. Also, he is very happy to have returned to his agricultural roots by recently becoming the owner of the Iowa farm that was his father's and which has been in his family for four generations.

Rogers's career began at Iowa State University, where he received his Ph.D. in sociology in 1957. After earning his doctorate, he served on the faculties of Ohio State University, the National University of Colombia, Michigan State University, and the University of Michigan. From 1975 to 1985, he was the Janet M. Peck Professor of International Communication at Stanford University, and from 1985 to 1993, he was the Walter H. Annenberg Professor of Communication at the University of Southern California. In 1993, he accepted an appointment as Regents' Professor in the Department of Communication and Journalism at the

University of New Mexico, where he poured his energy into establishing a new doctoral program specializing in intercultural communication.

Rogers's clear focus on the diffusion of innovations has allowed him to contribute to fields within the social sciences as diverse as sociology, intercultural communication, economic development, public health, and management. In addition to the *Diffusion of Innovations*, Rogers has authored or coauthored books on topics such as the history of communication study, intercultural communication, technology transfer, and organizational aspects of health communication. He is the recipient of a number of prestigious awards, including the International Communication Association's Division 5 Intercultural/Development Communication First Lifetime Achievement Award. His interests have also led him to teach and conduct research around the world. He has taught in Germany, France, Mexico, Ecuador, Singapore, and Colombia and has undertaken research projects on various aspects of diffusion of innovation in Colombia, India, Korea, Indonesia, Thailand, Brazil, Nigeria, and Tanzania as well as in Iowa, Ohio, and Kentucky.

In this interview, we introduce the reader to Everett Rogers—the man, his background, and his research interests. The conversation provides a glimpse into Rogers's perspective on “unresolved issues” in the field, the future of innovation diffusion research, diffusion research in the Internet age, and the intersection between diffusion research and management. From his vantage point, Rogers is able to provide unique insights on the diffusion of innovations such as the Internet and communication technologies, quirks and conundrums of diffusion, and the role of diffusion research in the burgeoning field of knowledge management. Both interviewers had admired and been influenced by Rogers's work for several years and welcomed the opportunity to discuss these topics with the man himself. Dr. Rogers was interviewed by telephone from his home in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

Zell: How did you become interested in diffusion research?

Rogers: It came about in this way. I had grown up on an Iowa farm, when many of the technologies that had come out of WWII were becoming available to farmers. This was just after WWII and I was learning—first in high school and then at Iowa State University, where I was an undergraduate in agriculture—about these new technologies and understanding that they could be profitable for farmers. But my father and many of our neighboring farmers did not adopt these innovations. So initially I was interested in diffusion out of frustration: Why *didn't* farmers

adopt agricultural innovations that could be profitable? And certainly there was something more there than just economics. I could see that a very important influence was what neighboring farmers did. So, from the beginning I got an idea of the importance of people talking to other people.

Then to skip forward a few years, after being in military service during the Korean War, I returned and had the G.I. Bill to do graduate work. I still had this very big interest in understanding why farmers did not adopt agricultural innovations. This was at Iowa State University, which was then a center for studying diffusion. This is where the hybrid seed corn study had been done a few years earlier. There was a professor with an interest in this topic, and he became my dissertation advisor. My Ph.D. dissertation, as you might suspect, was a study of the diffusion of agricultural innovations in an Iowa rural community. In the process of doing the review of the literature in my dissertation, I encountered diffusion studies in other fields. There were a few already done at this time—in education, for instance, and there was also a very excellent study of the diffusion of a new medical drug among doctors. So I could see that the diffusion process was not limited to farmers and to agricultural technologies—that it was a general process. Strangely, no one seemed to have grasped that idea at the time. It was a rather contentious idea, and eventually led me to write the first edition of *Diffusion of Innovations*, which was published in 1962. The main point of the book was to argue that there was a general framework to the diffusion of innovations, and it did not matter if they were farmers or doctors or businessmen or whether they were in one culture or another culture—many of the same things happened in the diffusion process. So that is the origin of the diffusion model.

Zell: So you were drawn to the multidisciplinary perspective because you saw this problem occurring in several different fields?

Rogers: Yes. Although I started my doctoral work in sociology, at the time I was really interested in the diffusion process. It never mattered to me very much whether those studies were public health innovations or computer-related innovations in a company or whatever, the discipline never mattered to me. Indeed, diffusion studies were, and still are, being done by many different disciplines, so that is really the reason for the multidisciplinary perspective.

McGrath: What was your most surprising research experience?

Rogers: That would be a mission that I was sent on by the U.S. government to the People's Republic of China in 1978. This was just a year or two after the death of Mao Tse Tung. China was still in quite a traditional form. The changes that have happened since, the rise of a market economy (some people call it the Coca-Colaization of China), had not happened yet. So it was an ideal time to go. Here is a vast country with at that time about a billion people and with a constant series of campaigns to diffuse innovations—family planning, agricultural innovation campaigns, every kind of campaign underway, including political campaigns. During the 5 or 6 weeks that I was in China with a small group of other U.S. experts I was able to get a pretty good idea of how diffusion happened. It was rather different than in the U.S. Certainly, this was the most surprising experience. The Chinese knew nothing about diffusion research because relations between the U.S. and China had been cut off for the previous 25

years. They didn't know what had been done, didn't know or use the word. But they had worked out their own means of diffusion, which were quite effective. And they have changed since, along with many other parts of the culture of China. But certainly, that was my most surprising experience. I'll just relate one specific example. This mission that I was on traveled by train and a couple of times by plane within China while we made observations and visited communes, small cities and towns, and so on.

The area that we were in, in general, was the part of China that is heavily populated, but it was not on the sea-coast, and many of the places to which we went no outsider had visited for the previous 20 years. Well, one day we were in an airport and it was raining, so the plane wouldn't fly. In China it is the custom that if there is any bad weather at all the plane is grounded, and you just wait until the weather passes. So we are sitting in this airport all day waiting for the plane to take off, which it eventually did. During the day I happened to be having tea and seated talking informally to one of the Chinese hosts who had been showing us his county for a week. I didn't think this Chinese official knew much. I hadn't really talked with him. I started asking him about diffusion. He talked all day about how they diffuse innovations in this country. It was very eye opening for me, very exciting. I took extensive notes and then published some things later about the role of interpersonal communication on the decision to adopt family planning strategies and the importance of barefoot doctors in diffusing family planning practices. It all happened because of the accident of a rainy day in China.

Zell: Do you see any areas that are especially in need of diffusion research presently?

Rogers: Yes. To answer that more broadly we might ask, Why are there so many diffusion studies? One reason is because there are so many diffusion problems. Typically, the problem is an innovation that appears to be beneficial, appears to have benefits to its users, but it doesn't have very many users. So often the goal is to speed up the diffusion process. With rare exceptions, that is the definition of the problem.

Now then, let's look at where there are the greatest problems of diffusion. Generally, where the innovation has a commercial potential—where profit motives are involved—it diffuses more rapidly, although sometimes it doesn't. All profitable innovations don't diffuse rapidly. But generally, innovations that have no profit motive—for instance, health innovations—diffuse slowly, even though there is no doubt about the benefits of the innovation if it were adopted. So innovations in the nonprofit sector often have greater diffusion difficulties. Furthermore, innovations that are preventive—that is, innovations one has to adopt now in order to avoid some future problem—these generally diffuse much more slowly. So there is this large class of innovations that would have benefits if they were adopted, but they are either preventive and/or nonprofit or noncommercial and they generally diffuse slowly. So to answer your question, one of the challenges for future diffusion research is to study innovations that would contribute to the public good but that diffuse slowly. That is one reason why I presently work on the idea of diffusing the idea of AIDS prevention. At regular intervals the world faces new problems. Usually there is a solution, but it usually

doesn't diffuse very rapidly, and so it seems that the need for diffusion research never stops.

Zell: That is good for diffusion researchers, I guess.

Rogers: Very good for diffusion research workers and good for the sales for a book about diffusion. The diffusion of innovations offers at least a partial solution to some of the world's problems, and they keep happening with relentless regularity. And the diffusion model keeps being applied to them.

McGrath: Can you discuss the path of diffusion and "undiffusion" of products, such as infant formula, that are originally considered beneficial but turn out to be harmful to the adopters?

Rogers: Some innovations diffuse rapidly because they are part of a very well planned, funded, and very profitable diffusion campaign, especially in Third World countries. But there was a much slower diffusion process of switching back to earlier practices when this reversal was promoted, generally without a profit motive and mainly by public health campaigns. The example of infant formula is a fascinating example of an innovation that diffused rapidly. But when we began to see its ill consequences on infant mortality, we tried to diffuse a return to the original behavior of breast-feeding. There are other examples. Another that involves the Third World began in the 1960s and early 1970s. There were extensive activities to diffuse new high-yielding varieties of wheat and rice in many countries. Along with the new varieties, one had to use fertilizers and pesticides. It wasn't until some years later, in the early 1980s, that the world realized that there were some ill consequences of these heavy chemical applications, especially pesticides. Then there was a new set of diffusion campaigns to try to convince farmers to use much less pesticide—usually only about 5% of what they were using before, which was economically wiser for them and also avoided many of the human problems that come with pesticide use. That could be done if farmers closely monitored their fields for the pests in their rice and wheat and only sprayed when there was a heavy enough infestation of pests to pay for the cost of the spray. But the low-chemical innovation was very slow to diffuse. So the diffusion of organic farming and gardening has been much slower than the earlier diffusion of chemical farming. Sometimes diffusion has helped to cause the problems, which leads to another round of problems where it's usually more difficult trying to get people to undo what they earlier were told to do.

Zell: What do you think are the most pressing unsolved problems in the field?

Rogers: Personally, I have a very strong interest in and I am very encouraging of people who are trying to trace communication networks through which innovations diffuse. We have known for a long time that person-to-person communication is crucial in the diffusion process among all kinds of adopters. It is people sharing their experiences with an innovation with others who haven't yet adopted that ultimately is what convinces most people to adopt a new idea. Now, we don't yet know very much about the specifics of exactly who talks to whom. And then there is this crucial issue of when are there enough adopters so that the rate of diffusion takes off under its own steam, becomes self-sustaining—the so-called critical mass point. The answer to that question certainly lies in the nature of interpersonal communica-

tion networks. This is a difficult area to study and gather data about, but I think it's a key area for future research.

Zell: Are there any particular events or projects that have been useful to the development of the field?

Rogers: Several studies were particularly crucial. One was the study that really set off the whole field of diffusion, a study of hybrid seed corn diffusion in Iowa [Ryan & Gross, 1943]. The drug study that was carried out by a team of sociologists at Columbia University in the late 1950s [Coleman, Katz, & Menzel, 1957; Menzel & Katz, 1955]. Those are probably the two most influential studies. In each discipline there have been key breakthrough studies that set off the study of diffusion in that discipline. For instance, Professor Jack Walker, a political scientist at the University of Michigan, undertook a very important study of the process through which new laws or new programs spread from state to state in the United States [Walker, 1966]. This study was published in the 1960s and it set off a tremendous number of studies, which still continue in political science. In geography, a Swedish geographer named Torsten Hägerstrand [1967] did early research on the role of space in diffusion, the fact that most people talk to other people who live or reside immediately next to them. This research set off a set of studies in geography. In each field, one can identify certain key studies that then lead to many other people in that discipline studying diffusion.

The most recent event to influence the development of the field is the Internet. It has given a new burst of life to diffusion studies—partly because the Internet has spread so rapidly, at least in certain nations. The latest studies show that something more than 50% of all U.S. adults now use the Internet, and that most of those people use it daily and often for more than several hours. So the Internet has become a very rapidly diffusing innovation. Perhaps it has also changed the nature of diffusion. Now, with the ability to message other people across vast distance, maybe the spatial factors in diffusion are less important. Maybe also the fact that half of all adults in the U.S. are connected electronically creates a potential for very rapid diffusion of an innovation (that can spread through the Internet). So the Internet is changing the nature of diffusion in certain important respects. That is why I have recently agreed to write a fifth and final edition (I've said that before, remember!) of *Diffusion of Innovations*. It is scheduled to appear in 2003. I am just starting to write it now, and it will go to press in September 2002. It will feature many examples from the Internet in addition to presenting the main diffusion framework.

Zell: We are intrigued with the notion that information technology can be both a means for diffusion and also an innovation that is being diffused. Do you see it as such? Does information technology stand apart for any reason in that it is more or less easier to diffuse than other innovations?

Rogers: I think the unique aspect of communication innovations like the Internet and cell phones and the fax (in a somewhat earlier era) is that because they are means, what the innovation represents is a new way to contact other people. Of course, the other person has to also have adopted the technology, and that creates a special built-in momentum to the diffusion process once it gets underway. It also makes it difficult for it to get underway. Why would anyone be the first person to have a telephone? Why would anyone be the first person to have a fax machine? Obviously, it was useless until there was a sec-

ond person and a third person and so on. I think this example helps identify the key difference in the diffusion of communication innovations. They diffuse very slowly at first, but then once there is a critical mass of users—once people perceive that most people have, for instance, an Internet address, then we use the Internet to contact them. As we perceive that more and more people are adopters of an innovation, that adds a powerful impetus or momentum for us to adopt. With each further adopter, let's say of the Internet, the Internet becomes more valuable not just to the next adopter, but to everyone who has already adopted. These are "backward benefits," or "reverse-flowing benefits." That process helps pile up the advantages of a communication innovation as it diffuses. With each further adopter it becomes more valuable, not just to all future adopters, but to all past adopters as well. Most other innovations, other than communication innovations, are not of this type.

McGrath: In fact, most are the opposite.

Rogers: Most are the opposite, that is right. Indeed, one of the great puzzles of diffusion—I've puzzled about this ever since I started observing and studying innovation diffusion among farmers—is why someone who adopts an innovation is willing and often very eager to tell other people about it. In competitive environments, one is losing a competitive advantage when a competitor adopts an innovation that one has previously adopted. So again, we see that in some cases, people don't act just economically when it comes to the diffusion process. For instance, with each additional farmer who adopted hybrid seed corn—the typical farmer got a 20% increase in yield—in the aggregate this means a larger supply of corn and lower prices. Eventually, that is exactly what happened. Nevertheless, and fully understanding that, most Midwestern farmers were eager to tell their neighbor about this new seed that would increase corn yields and eventually lower the price they paid for their increased yields. Hybrid corn was a very profitable innovation, so there were all kinds of economic reasons why a farmer should adopt it and why its diffusion process took place. I guess the main point is that economic factors are important to diffusion but they are not the sole explanation. There are kinds of behavior that actually work to the disadvantage of the individual, yet most individuals go ahead and take those actions, such as telling other people about a good idea.

For certain innovations, one can imagine various motives about why people are eager to tell other people about them. Let's say you tell your friends about a good movie you've seen. This act reflects well on you. You are enthused about the new movie so you want to tell other people. There are all kinds of reasons why people are motivated to tell other people about innovations. Sometimes there are reasons for them not to do so, but they still go ahead and tell other people about them.

Zell: It is fascinating.

Rogers: It *is* fascinating. You can see why over the last 50 years I have maintained my interest in diffusion. Some people ask me, "Doesn't this ever get boring?" While the model remains more or less the same, I think we find new aspects that improve it as the years go by. There is always a new crop of innovations, and they are usually diffusing in a slightly different way—sometimes in the case of the Internet, it is in an entirely different way. That is what keeps the diffusion of innovation so interesting.

Zell: What is your perspective on the emergence of knowledge management? Do you see any ways that companies can do a better job of diffusing knowledge?

Rogers: Yes. I think that the societal trend toward being more and more an information society, with globalization and privatization throughout the world, has a direct impact on the management of innovation in organizations. It means that for many companies, the main product or service they provide is an information product enabling people to gain, exchange, or build knowledge in new ways. Sometimes, knowledge is a key part of a product or service that the organization creates or sells. In many cases, knowledge and its management in an organization becomes—often through the use of computer-related technologies—a crucial aspect of management. In the last year, I have become interested in virtuality—companies that have virtual employees. Many high-tech start-up companies locate here in Albuquerque because it is such a nice place to live, but their markets are elsewhere, in other countries or, in many cases, at least on the East Coast or West Coast. Often, they hire virtual employees to serve a marketing function. They live and work in remote locations from the company headquarters here in Albuquerque and stay in contact mainly over the Internet. One company has a headquarters office with a president and a one-sixteenth-time secretary, but all of the company's employees are at scattered locations, several in Europe. This company is able to operate effectively as a virtual organization. I think the diffusion of virtual employees and the management challenges that they impose are a very important issue for future study.

McGrath: I would like to discuss the relationship between management as a field and the field of diffusion research. Is there anything that management can bring to the field of diffusion research?

Rogers: One of the big changes in diffusion as it has progressed—until the late 1960s, and it was a minor revolution of the 1970s—is that most diffusion studies were studies of individuals. So if they were educational innovations, they were studies of teachers. Well, teachers work in schools, and there is an organizational structure that affects their innovation decisions and their actions. But those were largely ignored until the late 1960s when several different sets of scholars started to study the diffusion of innovation where organization structures are very strong and where the unit of adoption was the organization—a company, for instance, not an employee in a company. At this time, organizational scholars and management scholars began to get interested in diffusion and to make a somewhat hybrid version of diffusion—applying it, bringing in organizational variables that affected the diffusion of innovation where the organization was the unit of adoption.

So, for instance, whether or not an organization had slack resources became a factor in whether or not an organization adopted innovation. Also, questions emerged regarding how the manager or management team perceived change, the need for change, and what they did to encourage it. The management policies of the company then became important variables. This represented a reconceptualization of the diffusion problem, which took into account the fact that a great deal of innovation diffusion happens in the context of organizations. I think this change marked the beginning of very important contributions to diffusion scholarship being made by management scholars. Andrew Van de Ven [Van de Ven, Angle, &

Poole, 1989], with a variety of colleagues at the University of Minnesota, conducted a large and integrative set of studies on the management of innovation. This series of studies was done in the late 1980s and was a landmark in the management field. In recent years, many studies concern computer-related innovations in an organizations.

The word *implemented* is very crucial because until the late 1960s and early 1970s, there wasn't so much emphasis put on *implementation*. The focus was really on the *decision* to adopt an innovation. When an organization is involved, the implementation stage often becomes crucial. Much often goes wrong after the decision to adopt is made, prior to the actual full-scale use of the innovation. So this change led to a much greater focus in all diffusion studies on implementation.

McGrath: On a final note, can you tell us what innovation you have adopted most recently?

Rogers: Well, I have reason to believe that perhaps I am going to get a Palm Pilot for my birthday. I haven't yet adopted it, but I think it is going to happen within a few days. I was influenced heavily by a colleague who recently got a Palm Pilot for Christmas, and he finds it very useful. He invited me to use his and now I am convinced.

McGrath: Thanks so much for your time.

Rogers: My pleasure. I've enjoyed talking with you and I have gotten a lot of good ideas, which will be useful to me in writing the fifth edition.

## POSTINTERVIEW REFLECTION

At the conclusion of our conversation with Everett Rogers, we were first struck by his willingness to engage in such an interdisciplinary discussion of diffusion of innovation and its perspectives for management and organizations. His steadfast focus on issues of the adoption and diffusion of innovation has resulted in the enrichment of several fields. Next, of course, we were very excited to hear that a new version of *Diffusion of Innovations* is forthcoming. Finally, our attention turned to the areas of intersection between the study of diffusion of innovation and organization theory, organization behavior, and formal models of social systems. These are some of the areas in which management theory can both benefit diffusion of innovation and be enriched by a good understanding of the diffusion of innovation literature.

First, as Dr. Rogers discussed in the interview, it is critical to take into account the influence of organizations as a whole as well as individual decision making when explaining how innovations diffuse. This includes broadening diffusion theory to encompass implementation as well as discrete adoption decisions. Second, we can see rich overlap between the study of diffusion and organization behavior. Some of

the areas of particular relevance are understanding human factors relating to individuals' acceptance of change (Kanter, 1983; Lewin, 1951), and individuals' decisions to share information. In contrast to economic theories of rationality, management perspectives provide more complete models of decision making to explain how information might be shared among individuals and organizations. Management perspectives may prove to be especially useful for explaining diffusion behaviors—for example, the fact that farmers shared information about new hybrid seeds with their neighbors even though this might eventually drive down the price of their crops.

Finally, formal models of social structures that are provided by complexity theory, social network analysis, and other formal models of social interaction have developed in tandem with diffusion research. For instance, Rogers observes that it is more difficult to reverse an innovation such as pesticide use once it has been adopted. This might be explained by evolutionary theories that predict that individuals are more likely to seek new methods than go back to the old way of doing things. Social network analysis contributes to the understanding of diffusion of innovation

by providing a means of formalizing patterns of communication among adopters and potential adopters.

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