THE ENGINEERING OF EXECUTIVE CULTURE
AND ITS IMPACT ON ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION

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The present article deals with the engineering of executive culture and its importance for organizational change. By engineering, we mean the values, the semantic resources that the executives rely upon in performing their duties and their particular way of combining these resources.

In the past years the author had the opportunity to study in depth the sub-culture of senior executives working as assessors in the Career Assignment Program. I have been working with ten women and 41 men (Boily, 1986). These executives play a strategic role as a target group for corporate culture in the public and para-public sectors as a whole. In fact, they select the potential executives for the administrative take over. Because of the fundamental role of this group as catalysts in the changes conditioned by the social and technological environment, I decided to study the culture of its members in relation to strategic communication perspective.

Methodology

In this research I have been using on a comparative and complementary basis, sociological methodology and semiography. Semiography is a "technique of description of meaning and its production process" (Maranda, 1981: 71). One of its outputs is to provide the researcher with 'semantic maps'. These maps or cultural charts give access to the mental template of individuals and groups.

The sociological methodology allows me to conduct interviews with the senior executive. Open and direct questions lead me to explore with them the nature of their work. The synthesis of these interviews stand as formal discourse. On the other hand, semiography provides the ground for better understanding of their sub-discourse. Through associative, narrative tests and discourse analysis I look at their engineering, their deep semantic structures.

In terms of methodological contribution, this research helps in the development and application of a study model on organizational culture. Combining anthropological theory of culture and semiography, I came to draw the cultural profile of the respondents in relation with the predominant cultural values of the society. From there, I could understand how the senior executives articulate their external cultural background (Thévenet, 1986) into the life of organization.

Theoretical approach

Moving apart from organizational functionalist theories, I explore the interpretative perspective and move into the strategic one. With the interpretative theory, organizational reality is a constructed reality. It is the product of people's construct. Individuals are active agents in the building process. This theoretical perspective is relevant to my research because the senior executives are "meaning producers" within their own organizations. Moreover, the knowledge of their specific culture allows me to develop pattern for strategic communication. The strategic perspective perceives challenges and opportunities as being the drive for action and focuses on the strength of the individual as well as on their metacommunication skills. The strategic perspective helps in relating the particular profile of the executive with their style of management and their ability for effective communication. This project draws a broader perspective on organizational culture studies.

Organizational culture is a key concept and it represents a potential means for intervention in enterprises. Executives exert a strong and pervasive influences on the organization. Knowledge of executive culture engineering is fundamental. Their cultural profile strongly influences the development of adaptation mechanisms that promote the equilibrium of the corporation in relation to its environment. This challenge requires dynamic values from the executives involved. To understand their cultural profile in terms of cultural inertia or cultural dynamism, I developed this particular study methodology.

Study methodology

Inspired by this sociological approach, in-depth interviews were conducted in order to understand clearly the nature of their work as senior executives. This first analysis gave access to what Colette Moreux (1978) call secondary ideology. Then, withdrawing from anthropology and semiotics, I explored the sub-discourse through associative and narrative tests. The discourse analysis revealed what Moreux calls the primary ideology. This latter methodology gave access to the deeper semantic structures.[1]

The goal of my research was to develop a model for the study of organizational culture. For years, researchers have relied upon sociological approaches designed to elicit normative and quantitative information on organizations. However such information quite often reflects official discourse, and may represent a trap for the researcher, in the sense that it reproduces almost exactly what Colette Moreux calls "secondary" social ideology.

According to Moreux, "official" discourse consists of idealized values defined by society which all individuals strive to obtain; together they make up secondary ideology. "Actual" discourse comprises a kind of infra-discourse—the semantic resources acquired unconsciously through enculturation, or what Moreux calls primary ideology. The results of my research reveal a contradiction between formal "official" discourse (the ideal) and the "actual" discourse denoted by sub-discourse among executives. During an interview, people tend to project the image of themselves that they believe in, thus in interviews I was presented with the portrait of the ideal executive, i.e., the secondary ideology that supports the need for social acceptance at the senior management level. Free-association and narrative tests, on the other hand, probe the semantic resources of the deeper self, i.e., the primary ideology.

The semiography provided experimental protocols developed by Pierre Maranda (1977). I used words as stimuli and the respondents provided words and narratives as answers. The selected stimuli were Snake, Woman and Man. The stimuli were given to the subjects and they had to write what is called "free-association tests"; then with the same stimuli they had to write a narrative where the main characters were Snake, Woman and Man. By analyzing their responses to free-association and narrative tests, I was able to ascertain their degree of inertia or dynamism. When I speak of cultural inertia, I mean simply a degree of conformity or fidelity to the established social order, while cultural dynamism refers to a capacity for innovation, creativity and change.

This methodology led into the symbolic, mythical universe of the respondents. We are well aware that the distinguishing characteristics of individuals in society are based on their ability to symbolize and represent things, and it is this ability that leads them to construct narratives and myths that reduce the experience of existence and its various components to an intelligible structure. As is well known, myths symbolically manifest through people the forces of the unknown (the unexplored) as well as the familiar (culture). Myths establish a close relationship between individuals and their society, defining socially acceptable concepts and attitudes. Their scripts, their protagonists, and their semantic structures suggest a model for social action. Myths establish categories upon which the foundations of culture, as well as the basis of meaning and communication, are laid. The dynamic elements of semantic systems are manifested in stylistically definable discourse, allowing individuals to function in society and to interpret the randomness of the world.

We construct myths, we use them, and when necessary we alter them. Tradition provides their foundations and historical figures adapt them to their purposes. Myths have a penetrating and lasting influence and they are reinforced by language and speech.

The narratives of my respondents constitute scenarios with varying degrees of action in which the actors—Snake, Woman and Man—find themselves in situations of conjunction and disjunction. These two states serve as indices for measuring inertia (disjunction) and dynamisms (conjunction).

These narratives are semantic maps giving access to the mindset of their author. Furthermore, the narratives serve to understand on a cognitive level, the process of how constructed realities are being built. This research involved testing the degree of conformity of senior executives to our prevailing cultural stereotypes and from there identifying those individuals willing to go further and initiate new orientation.

Results of the Tests

It is very interesting to note that the results of the free-association and of the narrative tests revealed the same characteristic throughout the whole analytical process: the paradigmatic structure is similar in content to the syntagmatic one.

For the free-association tests which correspond to the paradigmatic structure, I used distributional analysis to classify the responses to the stimuli into categories. The analysis of these shows clearly the redundancy of their discourse in relation with our cultural paradigm (i.e., to stereotypes). The respondents appear to have assimilated quite well the prevailing values of the cultural systems. The Snake, which stands for the unknown, is disjunctive, evoking the physical and descriptive aspects of the cosmos. The other stimuli Woman and Man, who stand for the known, emphasize cultural constructs with their elements of force and tension. There is little tendency towards conjunction between nature and culture. In terms of communication theory, the semantic universe of the senior executives is consolidated through redundancy.

Bremond, Greimas, Levi-Strauss and Propp provided the methodology for analyzing the narratives. The identification of "mythèmes", lead to understanding the mythical universe of the respondents, which appears as a continuum. The two general metafunctions of disjunction and conjunction prevail. The grid for the discourse is composed of paradigmatic sets that reveal those two main oppositions. A majority of the executives adopt the semantic position of the disjunctive Snake, with only a few individuals revealing a semantic orientation towards the conjunctive Snake.

I undertook a general analysis of the corpus and identified the distinguishing characteristics of sample members according to a series of sociographic variables provided by the sociographic questionnaire: cultural membership, sex, age, education, religion, time spent in Europe or North America, and organizational experience. A few trends could be distinguished on the basis of these variables, but the overall sample was quite homogeneous. The group of executives studied reflects, in the main, a model of "social conformity". Both female and male executives utilized vertical advancement strategies.

The free-association and narrative tests revealed a symbolic structure that reflects our society. The semantic universe of these senior executives is characterized by cultural inertia.

This study explores the symbolic universe that underlying social structure and social action, and the analysis confirms that, in accordance with the general system, managers propagate the values that they themselves have drawn from a common pool.

The results recall the work of Bourdieu and Passeron (1975) on reproduction. They are compatible with Mills's theories on seekers of power, as well as with the theories of Crozier. In fact, the profile drawn by Mills, as well as his strategy for success in power structures, fits easily with the results of my research. With him, I can state that seekers of power must, above all, "fit in" with those already at the top. It is their value models that must be adopted (Mills, 1969: 144). There are winning strategies in all corners of the system and an individual has limited freedom within a very rational and hard-fought game (Crozier & Friedberg, 1977).

The process by which administrations renew their ranks also leads me to examine the applicability of the research of Rosabeth Moss Kanter. She studied the impact on organizations of the individuals who work in them. She examined the concept of "homogeneity" in the management of these organizations and decided that "social conformity" was one of the prerequisites to a management career. In accordance with her theories, one can attempt to explain the phenomenon of cultural redundancy observed in my study as stemming from the nature of the bureaucracy itself and its demand for conformity.

Conclusion

The methodological procedure in this research helps in identifying a contradiction between what the top executives are saying officially about the profile of an executive and who they really are. Whereas the executives participating in the study had stressed the portrait of the idealized manager, an assessment of their semantic resources revealed that not all of them in fact matched this portrait. Maybe we can link this contradiction with the pressure imposed on managers by the functionalistic theory of organization.

The methodology used illustrates how the cultural profile of individuals and group could be outlined. This methodology has been very efficient and useful for the researcher. Its application to managerial culture is very relevant, because organizations are going through changes. To face this challenge, organizations need dynamic, strategic managers. All the changes taking place in our society with the computerization, the globalization, the open market and the new perspectives on management require creative leaders who can inspire an organization's employees. As stated by Bennis (1984) and Gahmberg (1989), the perception and attitudes of business leaders are critical to the equilibrium and adaptation of systems.

The executives are major actors in the creation of a good and viable corporate culture. They instill their values, their visions through innovative approaches and effective communication. A dynamic manager is a strategic one, he is a "meaning producer" who uses challenges as a drive for action, who metacommunicates constantly on arising complex situations in order to extend the potential, the intelligence of his employees, and of his enterprise.

This research, by its results, helps in creating scenarios for intergrating cultural profiles of managers with the theoretical strategic perspective. According to this perspective, it becomes clear that our changing organizations need more and more of the *dynamic* manager type because the mindset of executives determines the strategic organization of the institutions they serve. In addition to the mastery of semantic competence that society demands of all individuals, it is essential that executives be open to new possibilities. Dynamic managers metacommunicate more easily, support efficiently the re-empowerment of the employees, manage change more subtly, cope with risk-taking positions with less stress and feel more at ease with participatory management than do managers who are not dynamic.

The methodology that supports this research has been very valuable and needs further application in the field of organizational culture. A comparative analysis of official and real discourse of an organization's members could lead to better strategic management.

ENDNOTES

1. For a detailed presentation of the theoretical discussion and methodology, see Boily, 1986.

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