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ABSTRACT   *This article reports on an exploratory inquiry into the beliefs and perspectives that shape business executives as an occupational culture. The findings and theory were derived from the analysis of components (e.g. heros, villains, turning points) of subject-generated stories of work place experiences. Data were collected from chief executive officers or their direct reports in* Fortune *500 companies. The results suggest that top executives informally influence the work assumptions and education of their own profession. Results additionally indicate that executive managers constitute an action-oriented, somewhat insular, and highly influential cultural entity. They control subtly by creating organisational templates that promote assertion, risk-taking, creativity, flexibility, financial acumen and team play to operationalise their organisational visions. It is argued that students of management need to understand executives' values, biases, and expectations in order to succeed in managerial roles. Additional implications for management education are discussed.*

The study of subcultures in work organisations has increased in popularity and credibility over the last decade. In this study, we focused on the belief system of top executives. Executives greatly influence formal and informal codes of organisational behaviour. Knowledge of what executives value and expect can help management students effectively anticipate the unwritten rules that will influence their work. Likewise, such data can help new managers understand the often unconscious and illogical rationales that drive decision-making and reward systems. Management trainers and other change agents also need to understand what executives value to effectively influence them and to ensure their support. It is also important to note that top management influences the nature of educational and developmental interventions not only for themselves but also for their employees (Raghuram, 1994).

These concerns are based on the premise that cultural norms are socially learned and reinforced. Thus, executives learn from one another and influence the grooming of their successors. Stories about work frequently act as informal and often unconscious scripts for transmitting and teaching these cultural norms (Martin, 1982; Wilkins, 1984). This study was conducted with these issues in mind.

For the purpose of this study, we define executive affiliation as managers who direct organisational operations within their company's top three reporting tiers. Moreover, we deliberately collected data in organisations with a minimum of 10,000 local employees because executive managers in such organisations have broader functional responsibilities than those in smaller enterprises. These operational definitions acknowledge the complexity of establishing comparable parameters that mark the boundaries of a given group (Spradely, 1979; Trice & Beyer, 1993). Our definitions are theoretically framed by research in occupational subcultures (van Maanen & Barley, 1984; Trice, 1993). However, we do acknowledge the ability of organisational factors such as turnover, size, industry, etc. to influence these definitions (Harrison, 1972).

Attempts to describe shared belief systems within organisations have traditionally focused on the role of the company's founding father (Schein, 1985, 1990). However, little research has explored the possibility that executive-level management constitutes a culture of its own with shared perspectives that transcend organisational boundaries. When beliefs are shared by members of the same culture or subculture, they become a kind of code for organisational 'meaning-making'—a means to decipher and distinguish the acceptable from the unacceptable and the effective from the ineffective. Examples include perceptual differences about the ways to resolve conflict effectively, the information needed for sound decision making, the criteria for promotion, and the appropriate level of assertiveness.

Key to our research design was the analysis of informant stories of work-place experiences. Informants were asked to create a story which illustrated deeply held and often unconscious beliefs. A unique aspect of our story analysis was the examination of the stories' individual components and informants' attributions for them. Story elements included heros, villains, main and supporting characters, plot development, turning points, and morals. Informants' attributions for individual story components can indicate their expectations for interpersonal behaviours. For example, informants' perceptions of what constitutes a hero and villain have been shown to provide clues to their underlying beliefs about positive and negative conflict resolution methods (Hansen & Kahnweiler, 1993). Story line components can thus serve as vehicles to bring the storyteller's value systems and expectations for interpersonal behaviour to the surface.

The remainder of this article begins with a delineation of the study's theoretical framework. Then, descriptions of the methodology and key findings are presented. A discussion of emergent themes and implications for management educators and other human resource professionals follow.

Theoretical Frame

Occupational Cultures

The most extensive form of subcultural patterning is linked to the kind of work people do. Our investigation was based on the premise that executives constitute an occupational culture because of the relative uniqueness of their position and responsibilities.

Occupational cultures form around the belief that members have the exclusive right to perform a given set of interrelated tasks. Member-controlled training and professional associations help systematise the work and foster bonding through technical and emotional support. Occupational cultures can thus be 'imported' since their ideas and ideals typically originate outside the organisation (Haralambos & Holborn, 1991; Trice & Beyer, 1993). Studies also indicate that members develop a similar world view and act as reference groups through self-definitions, common and unusual emotional demands, a failure to socially distinguish work from non-work, and a belief that their self-image is enhanced by their work (Salaman, 1974; Trice & Beyer, 1993; Van Maanen & Barley, 1984).

In all but the smallest organisations, management do interact with each other and form a dominant elite (Trice & Beyer, 1993). They tend to be both physically and socially separated from employees and lower levels of management (Kanter, 1977). Executive managers are often surrounded by people who willingly flatter them, which advances their self-serving biases and 'unrealistically self-approving subculture' (Trice & Beyer, 1993, p. 236). Furthermore, top managers tend to come from similar educational and socio-economic backgrounds. Chandy (1991) reports that CEOs in *Fortune* 500 companies are typically males in their mid-50s with MBAs and backgrounds in finance and accounting. Finally, social clubs, religious and community service groups, and trade associations tend to cause a kind of cultural reproduction.

Cultural Development and Communication

All cultures operate from cognitive models by creating belief systems to filter expectations for appropriate and inappropriate behaviour—that is, a kind of meaning-making. The term 'schemata' has been used to describe cultural differences in perception and suggests the existence of a framework that filters how and what we learn (Geertz, 1973; Rice, 1980; Dougherty, 1985; Hamill, 1990; James *et al.*, 1990; Hansen, 1993).

Both anthropologists and educators have long believed that learning and communication were culturally connected. This premise is supported by adult learning theory, which considers the learner's prior experience as a key axiom (Knowles, 1980). The interaction among learning, culture, communication and personal experience has also been advanced by cognitive theorists (Ausubel, 1962; Brunner, 1990). Rogers (1973) confirmed the importance of addressing cultural assumptions in educational situations. He found that information communicated in a manner that is considered culturally different results in learning that is delayed or distorted. In many cases, such information is completely ignored.

Our perceptions colour how we communicate with others (Sillars, 1980). They influence how we approach and resolve interpersonal conflicts. They also influence how we think about people, especially in performance situations. Attributional biases are thus a combination of both rational and non-rational processes. For example, experience can cause people to imagine the existence of relationship problems when none are actually present while ignoring those conflicts that do exist. Clearly, preconceptions affect the selective encoding and memory of one's behaviour.

Research in cross-cultural negotiation reveals that people tend to rationalise differently with members of their own culture than they do with foreigners (Adler & Graham, 1989). In fact, research suggests that crosscultural differences reinforce and even enhance one's initial beliefs (Adler, 1986). Likewise, it is the differences between individuals that dominate relationships as people attempt to explain and defend their beliefs. While this process may reinforce professional identity, it may also be counterproductive to organisational effectiveness.

Qualitative Data from Stories About Work

Stories are derived from shared norms, values and belief systems. In corporate contexts, they help employees make sense of their work-place and their reasons for working (O'Reilly, 1989). Deal & Kennedy (1982) refer to this shared perspective as 'the way we do things around here'. The analysis of stories has gained increasing credibility among researchers of organisational culture (Wilkins, 1978; Wilkins & Martin, 1979; Martin, 1982; Martin *et al.*, 1983; Schein, 1985).

Stories are seldom factual. Instead, stories reflect what people believe should be true. For example, contradiction and exaggeration in employee accounts of a founder's stroke in provoking organisational discord and chaos were uncovered by Feldman (1990). The 'colouring' of actual events reflected a deeper belief that emphasised the founder's role and responsibility for company problems and corresponding control of the officer group. The underlying themes of stories are quite interesting when one considers what we unconsciously choose to remember and tell (Schrank, 1990). Thus, story elements such as heros can act as cultural models, revealing much of what employees believe should be organisationally true.

These illustrations emphasise the importance of understanding informants' cultural norms *as they convey them* rather than imposing an external standard to understand or analyze them. More than most other data collection methods, stories allow researchers to examine perceptions that are often filtered, denied, or not in informants' consciousness (Martin, 1982). This view of science comes from the 'emic' or 'insider' view of informant expression typically found in ethnographic research (Pike, 1967).

Finally, we note that the study of leadership and management has been dominated by the positivistic use of questionnaires. However, these instruments are static and do not capture contextual variance. Nor are self-report measures able to penetrate unconscious or protective filters. Researchers have noted that the results of such studies are conflicting and conclusions of causality are dubious. Furthermore, qualitative data suggest much less rationality, goal orientation, and orderliness than found in quantitative analysis (Mintzberg, 1973; Marsick, 1990).

Methodology

Setting and Informants

Our theory-driven sample (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990) consisted of 24 top executives employed in 15 large organisations.

'Theoretical samples are driven by the inquiry's purpose and are judged on the basis of how widely and diversely the analyst chose his groups for saturating categories he wished to develop' (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 62). Theoretically, we wanted to study the nature of belief systems and assess consistency within each group across industry lines. The following companies allowed us to reveal their participation in our study in order to illustrate size, technology, market position, reputation, and contextual variety. They are Delta Airlines, Coca-Cola Inc., Marriott Corporation, Equifax, and Xerox.

We additionally wanted to look at gender. However, we were only able to include two females in our study. In terms of positioning, two informants were chief executive officers and the remainder were within two reporting levels of the CEO. Half the informants had been in their position for five years or less. One informant had held his post for more than ten years and the remainder had been in top management for five to ten years. Half of the informants came from general management. The remaining half had diverse business backgrounds: marketing (4), finance (2), sales (2), human resources (3), and journalism (1).

Focus Questions

Much research has studied the causes and impact of managerial perspectives in the form of attributional biases (Daft & Weick, 1984; Moussavi & Evans, 1993), decision-making and impression management (Giacalone & Rosenfeld, 1991) and managers' attributions of their subordinates' behaviour (Mitchell, *et al.*, 1981). General managers as subcultures have also been studied (Knudsen, 1982; Gustafson, 1984; Jackall, 1988). Few empirical studies have focused on executive management as a distinct cultural entity (Sims & Lorenzi, 1992; Trice & Beyer, 1993). This gap in the literature highlighted the need to examine the following focus questions.

What are executives' preconceptions for causality (cause and effect expectations)? This guiding focus question was framed by an important premise that is unique to cultural studies. This axiom assumes that causality is a form of socially constructed meaning (Spradely, 1979). Moreover, members of a given culture attribute and explain the cause and impact of given phenomena according to the internalised rules of their shared and belief systems. Additional questions explored the perceived roles that executives attribute to themselves and others? What resources are required to carry out these roles? What are the perceived positive and negative forces (people and/or situations) in relation to important goals? What are acceptable conflict resolution methods? What underlying organisational lessons or morals are implied in stories told by executive managers? As an occupational culture, are executives' expectations for organisational behaviour internally consistent? Are some beliefs stronger than others? Does diversity in executives' background (i.e., gender, formal training, organisational rank, industry type, etc.) parallel a difference in belief systems?

Data Collection and Analysis

Informants were asked to tell a story about any event portraying any cast of characters that could have occurred in their organisation within the last six

months. Stories were recorded verbatim. In addition, a semi-structured interview protocol was used to elicit detail about main and supporting characters, plot, turning points, endings and morals.

The topics of the informants' stories were left up to them because we wanted to study the kinds of problems that they would choose to share. Informants were encouraged to describe a problem-solving type of schemata that exemplifies two essential characteristics of stories: '(1) An event causes a person to want a goal, and (2) A person tries to get a goal until the person gets the goal or until the person gives up' (Rumelhart & Ortony, 1977, p. 113).

Furthermore, in the emic tradition, each informant was asked to analyze their story by identifying and defining their own concept of each story element. For example, informants were asked to name the main character by identifying the person who most drove the story's action. Moreover, informants were asked to explain why they considered this character influential. The lead author additionally probed to elicit specific attributional data about causal antecedents, intervening conditions, and the dimensional properties of each story element. Interviews averaged an hour and a half to two hours in length and were conducted in informants' offices. The interview protocol was first piloted with representative members of the informant group and then refined based on the results of the pilot study. McCracken (1988) and Levy & Heisley (1991) have used similar self-analysis techniques.

An additional feature of our methodology was the elective use of imagery to assist informants in creating stories (Hansen & Kahnweiler, 1993). We assume that individuals tend to visualise when they recount past experience. In turn, the choice and sequence of images are symbolic, rule-governed, and visually represent cultural requirements for meaning and order (Worth & Adair, 1972; Edgerton, 1977; Howell, 1978; Salomon, 1979). There is some precedent for using visuals in studying organisations. For example, organisational psychologists have used the Thematic Apperception Test (TAT) to study motivational patterns (Kolb *et al.*, 1983). The TAT asks informants to tell a story for one visual at a time. Our approach differed as visuals were an optional tool to facilitate the storytelling. That is, informants decided if they used the visuals to facilitate the storytelling process. The interview procedures were pretested both with and without the visuals. All of the informants who participated in the pilot and 90% of the informants who participated in the actual study indicated that the visuals greatly aided their ability to conceive a story.

To facilitate such visualisations, 12 randomly ordered line drawings depicting typical corporate work scenes were presented as part of the interview protocol. Displayed were portraits of people working together, alone, and in meetings with and without leaders. Also included were individual images of an older and a younger person in different emotional states—such as neutral, happy, and sad. Informants were asked to select and sequence any number of sketches that best supported the visual flow of their story, informants linked the plot to what they saw occurring in each image chosen.

Efforts to ensure internal validity involved the triangulation of data through multiple sources and methods (Tammivaara & Enright, 1986). All transcripts, tapes, and field notes were independently reviewed and coded by the research team comprised of the authors and three graduate

students who were schooled in the study's methodology and theoretical framework (Guba & Lincoln, 1981; Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Our initial analysis of the data entailed the examination of stories for psychological characteristics. Second, we triangulated the data by sorting and analyzing the stories' content themes. Lastly, we triangulated the data by testing whether informants demographic variables were significantly related to the story elements. The findings from each of these methods of analysis are presented separately in the following section.

Key Findings

We developed a classification system to code and examine stories for psychological characteristics and content themes (Spradely, 1979; Marshall & Rossman, 1989). The findings were also sorted by demographic variables for gender, status and years in current position, type of business background position and type of industry.

Psychological Characteristics

We first looked for shared psychological characteristics by linking our analysis to dimensions of intra- and interpersonal dynamics as depicted by Sillars (1980). This aspect of story analysis is unique. Our examination of story components allowed us to develop a kind of psychological profile for an occupational culture. Likewise, we believe that an understanding of shared psychological expectations for the following intra- and interpersonal issues can shed much light on the causes of relationship problems.

Sense of ego.   Empowerment was characterised by the ability to 'make things happen'. The informants played their own main characters in half of the stories. Their colleagues held the primary role in another 21% of the stories. Thus, top management dominated as the driving force behind their plots' development. One informant said:

> Another vice-president and myself influenced the story's outcome the most. We set the guidelines for controlling the company's environment.

Another informant said:

> I am the main character because I had to make the main decision.

Through their characters, the informants saw themselves as action-oriented. They took calculated risks, made decisions, creatively solved problems, and took initiative. Informants uniformly described business and organisational life as dynamic. Overall, empowerment was characterised as the ability to frame and carry forth organisational agendas. Furthermore, success and failure were reflected in the stories' turning points and were determined by informants' own actions. In fact, numerous informants told of the need to *maintain* control. The following quote is representative of this view:

> I am the one who is ultimately responsible for steering the boat.

A clear sense of ego strength was also revealed by the large number of happy endings in which the constructive actions of the informants or their peers led to a positive story resolution. One informant explained the following:

> The story had a happy ending since I was able to satisfy the customer. I acted as the mediator. I got people to listen to the irate customer. I had to resolve the situation as lower level management had not been able to do so successfully.

Another informant said:

> The president looked satisfied because his personal vision for the organization had been achieved.

Another informant described his story's ending as positive because:

> The two executives agreed to grant additional support and personnel for the department in need.

Conflict.   Stories described personal and organisational dilemmas. Almost half of the conflicts were associated with interpersonal relationships. Plot development revolved around gaining the consensus and buy-in needed to 'get the job done without harming others'. One informant described this conflict:

> My problem was how to inform the employee that he could not have the job as it was originally offered.

An informant's story concerned downsizing:

> The decision was based on financial issues. However, this company places great value on people issues and attempted to do so in this case.

Another informant describes this concern:

> We tried to eliminate employees' fears about the need for change.

Secondary sources of conflict concerned business challenges and competition. Concerns were focused on organisational cultures that were not team-oriented nor committed to change.
   An informant voiced this concern:

> The structure of the business is changing. This creates small units driven by their own profit objectives to the point of exclusion of teamwork at times.

An informant also said:

> We are in a changing world. People need to be team players by expanding their skill bases as the business environment changes.

The smallest group of stories (12%) illustrated the need to enhance customer knowledge and service.

Impressions of others.   This section reports informants' perceptions of who or what was a positive (hero) or negative (villain) force in reconciling the story's

dilemma. One third of the heros were identified as top managers. The remaining heros came from all organisational strata. Overall, heroic actions were perceived in general terms and described as attributes which would be virtuous for all employees to possess.

Like main characters, heros were energetic; they welcomed new challenges and were flexible and open to change. Heros were also characterised as courageous and likened to a 'white knight' because they were willing to go 'out on a limb' by accepting the sometimes perilous responsibility for new venture decision-making. Informants thus valued risk takers who were not afraid to question present goals and strategies. One informant said:

> The hero in my story is an employee who looks for creative ways to get around barriers and obstacles so that progress can occur.

Another informant said:

> We need people who have the courage to remember and speak up about the things that made the company great, yet who have a vision that can help the company transform and go forward. My hero has the courage to challenge old, dysfunctional ways; he is a risk taker.

Attributional data emphasised behaviours over attitudes and knowledge. For example, when probed to answer why certain individuals were deemed heroic, executive storytellers emphasised that their heros' actions overcame adversity and resolved conflict through personal and positional influence.

Moreover, assertion, risk-taking, and the willingness to support employee efforts through personal commitment and resource accessibility were valued. An informant said:

> Our company does not reinforce and validate people enough. We would be a better company if we did.

Heros were clearly cognisant of business objectives. It is also important to note that business and organisational/political acumen was deemed more important than technical expertise for people who occupied senior management positions. An informant said:

> Whether you have the right or the wrong people, leadership is the key. The right leader's immense knowledge of the business, his understanding and participation in the organizational dynamics and mechanics and his willingness to go to the front lines are critical.

Similar to heros, almost all informants identified more than one villain in their story. Informants emphasised attitudes for this story component. Whereas heros displayed appropriate behaviours, villains conveyed 'the wrong attitude'. Seventy-nine per cent of the villains were depicted as a person as opposed to a negative situation. Top managers were not named as villains. Rather, villains were subordinates or other employees. 'Doubting Thomases' and personnel driven by personal and technical agendas overwhelmingly emerged as the most popular villains. One informant described villains as the following:

> Villains use the organization only for their own self-aggrandizement.

Another informant said:

> My villain looks back to the good ole days. He believes that the company owes him something. An entitlement mentality blocks change.

One informant implied that villains resisted change:

> Our people will have to embrace change if we are to be competitive; that is a willingness to increase their intellectual capital. Some people will experience change as uncomfortable and not want to do this.

Another informant voiced a similar concern:

> Villains refuse to open their minds and look at new ways of doing things, new approaches, or to use creativity in finishing a project. These 'sticks in the mud' let natural obstacles or even perceived obstacles stop them.

These players were seen as task and not relationship-oriented, short-term focused, poor communicators, emotional, and ineffective leaders overall.

In these stories ego-strength was described in villainous terms and linked to functional experts whose need for technical perfection countered realistic business goals and timeliness. These villains were valued in individual project terms but, not necessarily connected to the organisation's vision and projected growth. Their functional egos also negated their managerial credibility as well as promotional opportunities. One informant shared this perspective about villains:

> I would much rather hire someone with average intelligence who understands our business objectives and culture than an egghead with outstanding skills. I can always go to a university and buy a technical expert. This story's villain is a techie. He interfered with our way of doing things and offended our employees. Moreover, he continually requested additional time to perfect his work. It is harder to find a person who will fit in, get things done, and share your vision.

Negative or villainous organisational forces were also described as a lack of leadership, communication, or structure. An informant said the following:

> It is important for individuals and projects to be given direction by a central figure and for one person to have a thorough situation at hand.

Another informant echoed the connection between clear leadership and clear communication:

> Meetings without a purpose or clear leadership create a false sense of communication and frustration for employees.

An informant summed up his view on communication problems:

> Communication problems occurred because of geographical sepa-
> rateness and 'cultural' differences such as the development of sub-
> cultures which lead to turf-building and distrust. Also the impact of
> self-interested persons counters an organizational need for team
> work.

Two informants were concerned that their organisation's culture was not
customer focused. Only two external villains were described as situational
concerns about the market place.

Decision making. Stories indicated concern for the process for how decisions
were reached as well as their outcomes. Conflict resolution was positively
settled though the use of adroit interpersonal skills that permitted mutual
information exchange, the development of group synergy, and the effective
delegation of tasks. An informant described the following:

> It is critical to have good communication and coordination.

An informant said:

> New management styles lead to positive implementation by
> involving employees in all processes.

An informant made this observation about the company in his story:

> The ability to coordinate things and work with people to resolve
> problems in a positive manner is valued here.

Aberrant behaviour. Unconventional or deviant behaviour was depicted both
positively and negatively. That is, when managers in a story challenged the
status quo in a hierarchical and bureaucratic organisation driven by short-
term results, they were seen as heros; on the other hand, managers who
resisted efforts to transform their companies into more dynamic, team-
oriented enterprises were identified as villainous non-team-players. Further-
more, employees who were functionally or personally driven were seen
as negative and nonsupportive. Thus, the value attributed to aberrant
behaviour was contingent upon the degree that 'the dynamic nature of
organizational agendas' was recognised and appreciated.

Story morals also supported these virtues by paralleling the large number
of interpersonal dilemmas that drove plot development. The story lessons
indicated that managers and their employees should possess energetic and
innovative problem-solving and people skills, a team orientation, and
customer sensitivity. An informant summarised this view by saying:

> A person's mindset must not clash with the culture. He must be
> flexible and willing to change for the good of the company.

Another informant said:

> We have communication problems because of geographical sepa-
> rateness, but more importantly because of cultural differences. That
> is, subcultures develop that lead to turf-building and distrust. Also,
> the impact of self-interested persons counters an organizational need
> for team work.

Reoccurring Stories

The analysis of content themes provided further insight into the cultural patterns of organisational leadership. Data in each story were examined for consistencies across stories and filtered through each story component (Polkinghorne, 1988). Individual story themes merged into two major and one smaller genre: organisational change stories, personnel stories, and customer focus stories.

Organisational change stories.   Eleven of the 24 analyzed stories fell into this category. Organisational change stories incorporated both a macro and micro perspective. These stories are typically concerned with the growing effects of a changing world economy and demographics as they are reflected within their own organisational culture. As one informant said:

> Victory is a moving target.

Frequently identified concerns of empowerment, organisational flexibility, and managerial responsiveness were touted as the means to accomplish the primary goals of bottom-line effectiveness and market share increase. Storytellers in this genre consistently mentioned the team approach as a method of achieving greater organisational cohesiveness. The team agenda was defined by the leader and coveted employees were those who were considered to be team players with social and political savvy. One informant summarised this view by saying:

> The most important element in success is the team concept. Better teamwork leads to higher business profits.

Another informant said:

> A good leader is measured by the accomplishments of his team.

One informant described the nature of teamwork as the following:

> Shared decision-making occurs only at the highest levels. It is shared ideas at lower levels; shared decision making is not necessarily a goal.

Heros in organisational change stories were described most often as risk takers with courageous attributes. Villains lacked 'people' and communication skills, resisted change and progress, and viewed their own personal needs as more important than the needs of the organisation. The essential message these stories communicated was that taking the risk to change and grow within the organisational context was personally and professionally crucial.

Personnel stories.   Personnel stories were the second largest genre, including ten of the 24 stories. These stories concerned the ability to recognise, acquire, groom, and terminate employees. One informant said:

> Knowing people and recruiting good people is probably the most important thing a leader does.

In many cases, the storyteller portrayed themselves and the organisation as caring, supportive, and willing to accommodate the demands and individual problems of each employee. An informant said simply:

> Good managers listen to their employees. In turn, they are willing to act on what they hear—when appropriate.

Another informant said the following:

> During the 80's, the way to succeed was to focus on financial issues, but in the 90's, focusing on human issues is the way to succeed because of the competition that is so pervasive in the industry.

These stories presented the organisation as a flexible culture which was willing to be modified for a reasonable cause. At the same time, storytellers noted that achievement of financial goals was the yardstick against which people were judged and the basis for how resources were cautiously meted out. An informant explained this premise:

> Competition can be constructive rather than destructive when quantifiable results can be measured, such as in the sales department. In this case competition becomes a positive incentive to perform and reward.

Additionally, the importance of understanding broad company issues, aspirations, and politics as well as the intricacies of individual departments and specialties were considered crucial. An informant said:

> Experience and potential is more important than credentials.

In all cases, executive management was clearly portrayed as having the answers and knowledge to determine the best course of action, whether it be the most appropriate person for an available position or the granting of additional workers to assist with a particular task.

Heros in personnel stories had three main qualities: they were people who easily identified problems and worked towards solutions; they had strong communication and relationship skills; and, as we found in organisational change stories, they took risks. One informant described heroic characteristics in his company as the following:

> In most cases top management comes from sales, not production. Most production people are administrators. They are bean counters and are very meticulous and conservative. While the sales folks understand people and they are the innovators and the entrepreneurs. They are on commission and they are motivated by income.

Villains, as in organisational change stories, were people who worked to maintain the status quo, lacked communication skills, and employed political manipulation for personal gain. It is interesting to note that two of the ten stories provided no villain and that two others named human resource development departments as villains. From these references, it appears that the HRD function was seen as villainous because it was deficient in creative problem solving and risk taking. An informant said:

> It is important for HRD people to speak in the same language as business people and to work the same goals and strategic objectives as the business people and to not just be process people.

Another informant said:

> HRD practitioners need to be creative problem-solvers; as a rule they are too procedural.

The motivating difficulty presented in personnel stories revolved around achieving business/financial goals and the mission of selecting the 'right' people. The morals involved the importance of selecting forward-thinking people with sufficient experience, potential, and social (not technical) skills. This was seen as the primary focus of building a resilient and growth-oriented organisation.

Customer focus stories.   A final genre is made up of only three stories that had a slightly different concentration from the other two types. Customer focus stories directly linked the success of the organisation with the satisfaction of the customer. These stories tended to be concise, linear, and somewhat simplistic when compared to stories in the other two genres.

Heros in customer focus stories were those employees who understood the connection between customer service and company success. Also, an ability to effectively understand customers' needs was indicated. One informant summarised this perspective:

> The heros are those employees who are committed to establishing customer service measures and a sense of where the company is in providing service. Society is tired of bad service. If a company does not become more customer focused, the competition will take over.

Villains lacked an understanding of customer needs and were unable to coordinate projects with a grand perspective in mind. The turning points of these stories all involved a successful experience with a customer and the morals were based on the effect of the customer's satisfaction on business goals.

Looking across the genres, it is interesting to note the similarities among the component descriptions. Both organisational change and personnel stories identified heros as being risk takers. Successful leaders were people who not only adapted to change but challenged the status quo and invented the change. These stories suggest that this is accomplished by solidifying a vision of the business and by hiring the appropriate people to assume the task of carrying out the vision.

Villains in the first two genres were also very similar, with communication and human relations skills the primary concern. Taken together, these two genres appear to reinforce the concept that social adeptness is considered of greater importance than technical expertise.

Finally, it seems significant to emphasise that whether these stories concerned organisational change, personnel, or customer satisfaction, the bottom line effectiveness of the organisation is the ultimate motive. All other concerns are in service to the primary goal of organisational continuance and long-term prosperity.

Background Variance

Results were also sorted by demographic variables for gender, years in business and position, exact responsibilities, and type of industry. Statistical analyses using likelihood ratios of association and Cramer's V test of correlation were used to assess the link between story line components and informants' background variables. For example, informants' type of industry and years in top management were correlated with such story components as hero, plot, and turning points. Over 30 of the various combinations of component and subject variables were subjected to statistical analyses.

All relationships between the story components and the informants' demographic information which were examined were statistically insignificant ($p > 0.05$). In other words, there was not sufficient statistical evidence to support the notion that attributes of villains, heros, main characters, and the like were linked to the storytellers' professional or personal characteristics.

These findings, taken collectively, suggest that executive managers represent an occupational culture—one in which members' values, norms, and beliefs are driven more by their professional orientation (i.e., general management theory and practice) than by specific aspects of one's personal and organisational circumstances. This issue is explored more fully in the following section.

Discussion

The research design employed in this study precludes drawing cause–effect inferences. Nevertheless, the major outcomes of our qualitative and quantitative analyses of psychological characteristics, reoccurring stories, and background variance do tend to converge on three major themes.

Empowerment

Executives recognise that organisations have become too complex for one person to manage all aspects and generate new and relevant ideas. The informants consistently described group synergy and teamwork as critical resources. This perspective suggests the need to empower employees to take greater responsibility for decision-making and management. Furthermore, the informants stressed that the human issues that foster positive working relationships were key to maintaining the business' competitive edge in the 1990s. The power of discussion, debate, and information exchange was a part of the informants' story lines. However, the story components did not reveal the specific behaviours needed to facilitate empowerment. Teams did not dominate as main characters or heros. Thus, they did not carry their stories' action, set ideals, or significantly influence the turning point. These parts were mostly played by the informants themselves. In fact, the informants' perception of their own role may represent a kind of self-serving bias. This finding supports those of Ross (1977) who found that managers tend to over attribute their ability to 'make things happen'.

We surmise that executives think of teams as facilitative players. Their role is to generate ideas that operationalise top managements' agenda. Story analysis did not indicate an executive tendency to relinquish control of

strategic planning and visioning. This approach parallels current commentary on the evolutionary state of management. Sims & Lorenzi (1992) describe the vast majority of American managers as top/down visionary heros. They influence through inspiration and vision. Furthermore, their beliefs shape the organisational culture (Schein, 1985, 1990). Visionary leaders tend to develop organisations that are overly dependent on the leader and that tend to flounder when the leader departs.

Trust

To qualify as a team player, one must be trusted by executives. Sims & Lorenzi (1992) surmise that creating a vision is similar to creating a schemata. Thus, executives look to create self-schemata in followers that are consistent with their own cognitive models and expectations for organisational behaviour. It is, thus, not surprising the informants' stories were highly concerned with selecting the 'right people'. Desired virtues were illustrated in the stories' heroes. While two-thirds of the informants' heros did not come from top management, those at lower levels possessed similar qualities.

This template-making process results in a kind of ideological cloning. Furthermore, clones filter information which preserves the group's insularity and the development of self-serving biases. In fact, the need for trusted clones may be even more pronounced with executives than any other group because so much of their work is uncertain and unpredictable. Indeed, McCall & Lombardo (1983) found that the betrayal of trust was the one 'unforgivable sin' that would exclude entry to the ranks of top management. We speculate that the issue of trust will remain increasingly critical to executive decision makers as they struggle with the unknowns and changes required to effectively compete in a volatile, highly competitive global business environment.

Organisational Change

The informants viewed change as positive and essential to continue the organisation's forward momentum. Informants continually remarked that resource availability, market demand, and economic cycles were not static. Therefore, organisations needed to promote flexibility and innovation in order to remain competitive.

Conversely, informants expressed great irritation and aversion to employees who resisted change through fear or personal agendas. They also showed great disdain for those employees who exhibited an entitlement mentality through their unwillingness to encounter the exertion and discomfort that accompany change efforts.

Conclusions

We found that the data tended to cluster around certain 'macro-themes' which executives link with the nature of their work (e.g. selecting the right people) and the perspective of their elevated position. This section will describe these themes and how they suggest that executive management is an occupational culture. Practical implications are also included.

Toward a Cultural Theory of Management Education

As a cultural entity, executives perform similar tasks with a similar need to control the business. In turn, there exists a common need to entrust and empower others who possess enough of the executive's own qualities to operationalise organisational plans and visions. We believe that top management develops bonds and judges others based on their actions. However, cultural entry also requires that subordinates exhibit certain attitudes that complement their actions. This suggests that political savvy is required for organisational success. Subordinates must prove to their bosses that they can be trusted successors by demonstrating their psychological and cultural similarity.

Executives' beliefs in their organisational vision and agendas is confirmed by their need to reproduce their own, and perhaps self-serving, cognitive schemata. Thus, they create a template that results in a kind of ideological cloning. Furthermore, their clones filter information which preserves the executives' insularity. These forces strengthen executives' professional identities. However, since the relationship between the number of years in an executive position and story attributes was statistically insignificant, further empirical research is needed to determine whether top management's cognitive schemata is developed before or after one enters 'the club'.

Each organisation is uniquely framed by many cultural referents that represent differences in values, meanings, and expectations. However, our conclusions appear to support Schein's (1985, 1990) belief that top management dominates organisational culture and subsequently exerts profound influence to preserve its influence. Furthermore, Schein suggests that employees are basically passive. This premise permits and supports the leverage of executive cultures.

Implications

Cultural beliefs about work were emphasised in this study. Likewise, we note that work beliefs and organisational practices are not necessarily synonymous. Beliefs refer to what employees deem to be appropriate and inappropriate work behaviours and attitudes. Conversely, practices signify procedures and protocols required by a given organisation. Beliefs tend to be more powerful motivators of behaviour than formally stated organisational requirements, such as those found in employee handbooks or company policy and procedure manuals. Research by Hofstede *et al.* (1989) supports this notion. They found that general convictions about work are formed during childhood. During professional training, one's specific career creeds develop and then are reinforced by professional experiences and affiliations that typically occur outside the organisation.

Diversity in work beliefs can lead to healthy questioning and often promote creativity. However, it seems plausible that conflict can occur when employees' beliefs clash with those held by organisational heads. Friction between occupational groups can greatly affect the role, scope, and impact of the less dominant group's efforts. Tension can be reduced and productively channeled by identifying and building on similarities between occupational groups.

The results of this study have implications for management educators in several different areas. Take, for example, those who have career and succession planning responsibilities. Lower unwanted turnover, more effective selection decisions, better person-job fits, and greater long-term commitment to the profession can occur if individuals are screened and selected based in part on the compatibility of their belief systems with those which drive top management. Likewise, career development counselors also need to recognise that cognitive dissonance can occur when individual beliefs clash with those which underlie occupational assumptions. Such conflicts can negatively affect retention, performance, and morale. Those who design and/or conduct management training need to appreciate the deeply rooted nature of belief systems. This is because 'one shot' workshops will not likely have much, if any, impact on these beliefs. For example, to expect that a course on autonomous work teams will substantially change actual work approaches is unrealistic.

Successful change agents know that voluntary behaviour change requires the altering of fundamental beliefs. If the underlying beliefs of desired change interventions fail to take into account the potency of prevailing executives' occupational scripts, then those interventions will take longer to succeed or will be less likely to have any measurable and sustained effects. In other words, if there is no compatibility in values between change interventions (training and non-training) and the existing systems they are attempting to change, those interventions will either take longer to work, fail to be incorporated into participants' on-the job behaviour, or will not be accepted by participants at all. This is a needless waste of the organisation's precious time and money. It also reinforces the unfortunate but real image held by some executives that developmental and educational interventions are 'nice-to-have luxuries' that are the first to go when cost containment becomes a top priority.

Furthermore, occupational beliefs can lead to a kind of functional myopia which ignores the cultural power wielded by executives. Promotional and career development opportunities are limited when lower ranking occupational groups fail to embrace the broader business perspectives valued by executives. Likewise, executives possess an occupational script of their own. This template is subtly reproduced through careful attention to the selection of lieutenants and succession planning. The beliefs and biases of executives not only influence who joins their club; they determine the information executives attend to and the likelihood of their accepting new ideas.

Finally, management educators and other human resource professionals must gain top management's trust in order to obtain resources, have autonomy, and be influential. More importantly, earning top management's trust is key to educators' impact on critical, strategic decisions that will affect the entire organisation over the long term. Ulrich and his colleagues (Ulrich & Yeung, 1989; Ulrich & Lake, 1990; Ulrich et al., 1993) call for the development of a 'shared mindset' as the competitive edge that will lead to organisational prosperity. They advocate the sharing of beliefs about the means and ends of work and urge educators to assist managers in improving management practices. These improved management practices will nourish a shared mind set and enhance organisational competitiveness.

The above implications have obvious relevance for professors of

management education and related disciplines. Academic programs in these areas need to insure that future professionals acquire at least a rudimentary understanding of the beliefs and biases of those who run and so profoundly affect organisations. Moreover, these programs should help students begin to formulate strategies for how they will influence top executives once they secure positions after graduation. In addition, this study highlights the importance of giving those who have little or no prior management education experience a realistic job preview as part of the curriculum. Part of this process can utilise discussions, role plays, and simulations to help students become more aware of what they will be facing when dealing with their future colleagues and constituents.

Managers can also become better teachers and mentors by enhancing their storytelling abilities. Boje (1991) found that some individuals are better storytellers than others. Our own observations confirm that finding. Yet, we often underestimate the importance of storytelling as a skill. As Boje noted, storytelling skills are generally taught only to those who work with children. Clearly there is value in developing our ability to tell tales. Martin's (1982) work reminds us of the power of stories. She found that people tend to pay attention to and remember stories longer than any other form of organisational communication. She suggested that a story's underlying influence is in its moral or lesson. Management educators can clearly help executives and other managers recognise the power of their own tales by teaching them how stories convey meaning and cultural assumptions. Likewise, managers can become better listeners and develop greater insight into their employees' perspectives by analyzing the stories their subordinates tell. While managers learn through a variety of vehicles (Akin, 1987), storytelling may provide an additional method to enhance their education and development.

Limitations

Qualitative methods such as storytelling yield a rich emic data base for the study of organisational behaviour. This study was exploratory and non-positivistic. Its purpose was to raise theoretical consciousness about occupational scripts of managers. Inferences are not generalisable and the number of informants interviewed was relatively small. Yet, this approach permits researchers a phenomenological opportunity to first uncover theory, as earlier presented, that merits more extensive study.

In addition, it is useful to note to whom the story is being told (Boje, 1991). It is possible that the informants' stories in this study may have been influenced by the lead interviewer's professional identity. Since she has been a human resource development manager in the past and is currently a professor of HRD, some subjects may have wished to convey a positive image by emphasizing the human element in their stories. Furthermore, informants were prompted to employ a problem-centered story model which could have biased the development of their stories.

Summary

The data suggest that executives constitute an action-oriented cultural entity that values assertion, risk-taking, financial acumen, flexibility, and team

players who operationalise executives' vision for the organisation. Clearly, executives are concerned with trust, control, and change issues. Furthermore, they have the power to reproduce and maintain their own cultural schemata.

Our work is exploratory and constitutes a unique analysis of management behaviour. Our preliminary findings can hopefully contribute to the study of occupational and organisational culture. Moreover, we believe that the cultural analysis of work-place experiences can yield much insight into the often subconscious expectations that profoundly influence the quality and impact of management education.

Acknowledgments

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