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Silenced by a Mission Statement: An Organization's Cloak of Ambiguity

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Abstract

This paper, seeks to add to existing conversation on silencing communication by examining the embedded social process of a rhetorically designed mission statement, and the consequences silenced “voices” have on identity; I consider how the ideology of a mission statement in an organization becomes the dominant discourse by explicitly guiding values to control member identity, and constraining those not at “upper level management” to express their views. Mission statements are typically institutional, and can occasionally also be individual (Swales & Rogers, 1995, p.225), particularly when identity is negotiated in an organizational context. But what communicative purpose or rhetorical message is interpreted by its discourse? The notion that a mission statement can silence and place constraints on how or whether employees communicate, is rhetorically problematic since, as we shall see, its text in this case study assumes a “team-based organization” (Eisenberg et al., 2007) and not individual participation. It is in this context, that a mission statement should be considered a powerful discursive practice that encourages the voice of its members to guide and shape its communicative activity in the organization.

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Swales and Rogers (1995) refer to mission statements as a selected class of genres that primarily act as carriers of ideologies and institutional culture (p.230). They analyzed a corpus of mission statements collected from organizations associated with the University of Michigan School of Business Administration and observed the samples as pithy and upbeat, but also tended to deal with abstractions possessing 'a strategic level of generality and ambiguity' (Fairhurst, 1993, p. 336). For purposes of this essay, I discuss the linguistic and rhetorical features of one mission statement, which stress its values and attempts to foster affiliation and identification. Moreover, its text is an example of ambiguous language and a strategic objective by the organization to seek a "team-based structure" while insisting its members perform as "interdependent professionals." In other words, this ideal constructs a discourse of community among its members. However, contrary to its social façade the team-based approach is not realized because members struggle to find voice and a creative place in which to contribute. As Eisenberg et al. (2007) points out, the definition of what constitutes team is ambiguous in and of itself. It is here, that I juxtapose how context fosters organizational identification while silencing individual voice, and aims to facilitate employee 'buy-in' (Swales & Rogers, 1995).

Inherent to the mission statement I discuss, is a social system that emphasizes communication and collaboration among its organizational members. However, in this particular case study, the organization strives to create allegiance to ideology and its culture through consensus; but, while doing so, it also constructs a social reality of silence due to conflict among its members. Putnam and Poole (as cited in Eisenberg et al., 2007) define conflict as the "interaction of interdependent people who perceive opposition of goals, aims, and values (p248). And, in this case, those in position of power differ in opinion and interests on a variety of projects and constrain contributions from other "team" members; thus, productivity is compromised. For instance, some people lack the communication skills needed to collaborate to be effective as member of a team and tensions between them result. In other words, organizational communication creates and naturalizes rules and taken-for granted ways of doing and being (Alvesson and Wilmott as cited in Eisenberg et al., 2007, p.202); and often, the mission explicitly regulates identity by guiding individual values. But what's at stake and negotiated for an individual's identity? By resisting organizational ideology, is there a cost to speaking up or staying silent? Bullis (1993) states, "'The' individual and 'the' organization are constructed as individual actors managing dialectic tensions" (p.13). Moreover, discursive practices in an organization that employ overt symbolic expressions elucidated in a mission statement legitimize ideology, reify dominant interests in the hierarchy, and manifest implicit rules of communicating. Yet organized strategic control attempts to control individuals in their environment thus, suppresses and silences diversity of meanings (Eisenberg, 2007); and, critical examination of organizational communication reveals silencing of subordinates is non-conducive to organizational effectiveness.

Methodology

The data for this essay will draw from a previous work experience, which is presented as a case study of a particular organization. I apply a reflexive ethnographic method approach, using personal narratives to illustrate the dynamics of conversation and interaction with a previous employer; while elucidating silencing as a phenomenon in

meetings and the work culture in general. Ellis (2004) states, “Reflexive ethnographies focus on a culture or subculture and authors use their life story in that culture to look more deeply at self-other interaction” (p.46). Moreover, I examine the role of creativity and constraint (Eisenberg et al., 2007) in a monthly staff meeting where a ritual of reciting the mission statement out loud was a typical and espoused organizational ideology. The meetings were always conducted by the President and employee non-confrontation was taken for granted. Voice in this context was not manifest and employees saw the meeting as non equitable; and, in particular, impinging on their ability to participate in organizational dialogue. As a situated individual (Eisenberg et al., 2007) within the organization, I felt stripped of a past work identity and exposed to the unmediated power of community (Baum, 1990) by the discursive practice. Eisenberg (2007) describes “dialogue as real meeting” as a communion that takes place between people and transcends differences in role or perspective (p.50); however, a dialogic process did not occur in the monthly staff meeting because behavior or views that challenged practice was considered deviant because it moved away from the corporate message.

Organizational members have an intrinsic need to contribute, feel accepted and personally valued. And often times, when this is not realized or acknowledged by the organizations we serve, we leave. Tannen and Saville-Troike (1985) state, “There is much attention and theoretical perspectives given in the study of communication on talk to the relative exclusion of silence.” In fact, there are a plethora of theorists who, in different ways, have argued that “exploring silence as a fundamental part of communication, culture, and conflict may illuminate the complex nature of social relations” (Clair, 1998). In this context, an ideology that suggests “that’s just the way it is” which further implies that “the way it is” is immutable (Mumby, 1987) has important implications for interpreting meanings in organizations and socially constrains interactions with others.

Dilbert’s Conundrum and the Phenomenon of Silence

An example of silencing is illustrated in a Dilbert cartoon. Dilbert recognizes that a senior executive is making a poor decision. He asks his boss, “Shouldn’t we tell her?” The boss responds, “Yes, let’s end our careers by challenging a decision that won’t change. That’s a great idea” (Creelman, 2000, para.3). There is truth to that. There can be costs to speaking up. However there is another variable, which is the cost of staying silent. It is here that the examination of a corporation’s discourse is problematic and underlines the exclusion of human agency and the dynamic tension inherent in the conflicting levels of power and authority.

Some scholars have recognized the issue of power as a fundamental part of the process by which an organization reconstitutes its social reality (Mumby,1998). This is often demonstrated in situations where subordinates silence their differences with the boss. However, frequently bosses too silence themselves in speaking to a subordinate. In fact, Perlow (2003) reinforces this notion and says that silencing self can take place in both directions in the hierarchy. Understandably, this situation can influence an organization’s performance and productivity in the long run. Communicating to employees that they are needed and valued would empower them to speak up and all superiors to appreciate their point of view. As argued by Kant (in Becker, 1968; Eisenberg 1984), “Maximum individuality within maximum community” is a goal

organizations should aspire to have, which could help facilitate a more open work culture.

Research has shown that not only is silence ubiquitous and expected in organizations, but also it generates feelings of humiliation, resentment, and if unexpressed, contaminates every interaction, shutting down creativity and undermining productivity. More often, an employee will “save face”—albeit a conscious or unconscious choice— to not fully express his perspective for the sake of making a good showing for his profession (Goffman, 1967), or simply not to lose status. This position juxtaposes the notion that people are taught to be loyal employees and accept corporate values, policies and decisions without ever challenging or questioning them.

Let’s Meet to Have a Meeting

Silencing as a phenomenon is often demonstrated in meetings and in the workplace in general. Meetings are perceived as a necessary and pervasive characteristic of organizational life where people are required to engage if decisions are to be made or goals achieved. In addition, and as we shall see, meetings can function as one of the most important sites of organizational power. They serve as an example of symbolic structuring of power, and a place organizational hierarchy reaffirms its status. In this context, issues may be avoided if no one discusses differences as Dilbert did; this way, everyone seems pleased to arrive at a consensus. Eisenberg (1984), however, takes issue with consensus in organizations particularly when ambiguous legitimations represent the opinions of a group and amplifies privileged positions. Employees can walk away from a meeting and say, “What a waste of time. We didn’t deal with any of our issues.” Each time this situation occurs and we silence conflict; we create an environment in which we’re all the more likely to be silent next time (Perlow, 2003). In fact, the perception is to preserve the relationships in the work culture and silence conflict rather than confront differences. Like Dilbert’s boss, the safest way of dealing with differences and avoid the threat of losing his job was simply to not say anything. Perlow (2003) states, “When we are eager to protect important relationships and ensure that our work gets done as efficiently as possible, we often silence conflict on core issues” (p.5). In this case, the most important relationship for Dilbert and his boss was to protect their jobs.

A Position of Power and Strategic Discourse

A pervasive construction of this behavior—protecting your job—among employees in various organizations suggests, that discourse is controlled by a dominant group; and as a result, silences the interests, issues and identities of marginalized people. As Clair (1998) points out, “Communication as discursive action is not neutral, but creates, enacts, and reproduces power structures that privilege and oppress” (p.60). Literature on this subject suggests that within organizational cultures, persons in positions of power typically control the discourse. This fuels the construction ideology that silencing voices is a normative and acceptable practice by those who maintain a position of power. These positions dictate the rules on how behavior is conducted and issues and interests are communicated or not. In fact, privileged positions, which can be captured by the term patriarchy (Clair, 1998), use coercion as a hegemonic device to subjugate the subordinate group’s unwitting compliance in the workplace. In addition, Mumby (1998) examined the legitimate exercising of power in an organization. He states that power functions in a hegemonic fashion to structure a system of interests in an organization.

But do cultural elements found in mission statements also function to support and reproduce power structure that privileges the interests of dominant organizational groups over others?

Linguistically mission statements can have rhetorical significance. For instance, a classic rhetorical device is the use of the first-person-plural pronoun (Rounds, in Swales & Rogers, 1995). Cheney (1983) states as follows:

The assumed 'we' is both a subtle and powerful identification strategy because it often goes unnoticed. Uses of this strategy allow a corporation to present similarity and commonality among organization members as a taken-for-granted assumption. To the extent that employees accept this assumption and its corollaries unquestioningly, they identify with their corporate employer (p.154).

There exists an interdependent relationship between discourse, power, and ideology in organizations. In fact, much has been written about using language strategically to express values at a level of abstraction at which agreement can occur. Perlow (2003) describes this as a "silent spiral" that happen without our even realizing it. She says that when we silence a difference, we manage our appearance to make it seem as if we agree (p.35). As a result of masking our emotions and silencing ourselves, we are keeping a part of ourselves out of the relationships in which we interact.

Ideological Isolation

From an interpretive perspective, mission statements socially construct an organization's culture through performative storytelling. However, as Eisenberg et al. (2007) point out, "organizational stories represent the interests and values of the storytellers" (p.142); and, simultaneously prevent a dialogic process that includes diverse interests. From this perspective, Mumby (1987) says, "Narratives not only evolve as a product of certain power structures, but also function ideologically to produce, maintain, and reproduce those power structures" (p.68). In an organizational context, a mission statement promotes ideology and provides a portrait whereby members make sense of their experience within its contextual structure. In one experience with an organization, a ritual of reciting out loud the mission statement on a laminated card was performed at the monthly staff meetings. Before the meeting commenced, we were instructed to "take out" our cards, which contained the vague metaphorical language. Geertz (1964) postulates that ideologies must not be handled as entities in themselves, but as relationships mediating social and psychological context, however, as we spoke in unity the words sounded misleading. Its symbolic expression held multiple interpretations diluting its intended goal to foster affiliation and identification. And its rhetorical significance made me question its authenticity of meaning, for example, it removed human agency from its context and substituted social control. The organization made use of cultural elements that embodied metaphors, story, values, and performance to define its culture. I felt ideologically isolated and silenced by the metaphors that seemed plucked from an all-purpose list of virtues (Welch, 2005), that espoused abstract complicity. The mission statement's chant began:

We are an elite team of inter-dependent professionals, who are experts at creating upscale living environments. We cultivate situational awareness and act with professionalism and integrity. We are proud. We are a team.

After reciting the mission statement, its announcement said nothing of where the future of the organization was going. Each time the President spoke of the mission; it asks the

question “What did he want us to specifically accomplish and what did he expect from me?” Welch (2005) states, “Setting the mission is top management’s responsibility. A mission cannot be delegated to anyone except the people ultimately held accountable for it” (p.17). However, accountability was unclear because the mission was directed to the entire organization and the lack of candor obscured who was in fact accountable. Could he not communicate straightforwardly or was there no room for dialogue on clarity? I did not fully understand the relational dynamic within the organization, and questioned if everyone’s everyday reality allowed him or her to be as inter-dependent as the President kept insisting that we be with each other. This social behavior before the commencement of a company meeting was my first experience at an organization-wide consensus for a shared symbolic system. It was not psychologically appealing. However, I did see it as an opportunity to observe the President’s rhetoric in its social context and how it affected others and me in the organization, even though I did not share in its meaning.

Gergen (1999) says it’s reasonable to view psychological discourse as performative. In this mission statement, the organization’s symbol of solidarity, psychological language gained entry into the subjective world of the individual (p. 133). Team ‘inter-dependency’ was the metaphorical structure that permeated the organization’s culture, and the most fundamental concept the President instilled into the social group, which left little room for alternative discourse.

The Chant

Weick (in Eisenberg et al., 2007) calls “equivocality reduction” the process of identifying meaning of a given situation (p.113), and, in retrospect, I needed to make sense of the ambiguity of the mission statement’s language. The text was not specific or concrete, and contained more than a few imperatives such as “cultivate situational awareness and act with professionalism and integrity.” Even the platitudes “elite” and “proud” ascribed a banality that didn’t provide much direction toward describing any real behavior. Isn’t any company that takes the time to formulate its values collectively, proud? What values exactly was the President endorsing? Of course, some of these behaviors required further explanation and interpretation. Hence, while employed at the organization, I arranged to meet with the President and asked him to explain his interpretation of the word “inter-dependency”, and what he wanted our organization to understand by its meaning. The President’s reply was unwavering, “a cultivation of trust” he implored, which was our obligation to incorporate into daily business practice. Then he uttered another equally vague comment to help explain the credo-like incantation and stated, “It’s about quality by association.” This metaphor confused me further, but implied—I assumed—that one must align one’s self with the right people to accomplish goals and challenge the norms in the process. But did that mean we should challenge the norms imposed on us only with those we trusted? Choo (1998) states, “When ambiguity is high, people are confused and anxious because they lack an understandable frame of reference to interpret their work and actions for the organization (p.247). I left the meeting wondering if the President was committed to the values he espoused because the sheer loftiness of the text lacked clarity and a vision for profitable growth; and, that in itself was disconcerting.

The utterances of the mission statement carried with it significance derived from its context and its form of intonation (Gergen, 1993). Internalizing the metaphorical framework required members to have an active participation as team and a particular way

of looking at organization; although, its communication imbued affiliation, trust, and an interdependence that was difficult to define. The question that lingered was the metaphor 'inter-dependency,' a "metonymic concept" (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) that provided balance for the individual and the organization together. But increasingly it was a struggle to find this balance. Its tacit interpretation revealed another aspect of the culture that promulgated the President's espoused values and not necessarily actual practice. In practice, tensions arose because there were multiple senior managers that were reported to; and perhaps, most important, no one was given empowerment for their level of expertise. The conflicting dialectic tensions between spoken language and practice culminated into a climate of suspicion and mistrust that ultimately pervaded the organization. For instance, the social reality was that most employees, including myself had partial inclusion (Weick, 1979) to strategy planning in the organization. Although I understood the discourse to hold a salient place in the context of how things should be constructed; the organization did not function as a system. In fact, outside of the monthly staff meeting many did not practice a shared vision of the interdependent spirit. Weick (1979) states, "There is good reason to question the accuracy and reliability of enacted environments, that one should be suspicious of any private version of the world" (p.105). Moreover, an organization that uses a rhetorical device that imbues competing values implies a culture where there exists a dangerous propensity for visionary mission statements to produce 'more poetry than product' (Swales and Rogers, 1995, p.237). The chant's narrative attempted to link everyone together, but team participation was viewed by many members as unnecessary micromanagement and created tension members at different levels of management.

Relinquishing My Work Identity?

Mumby (1988) points out that organizational discourse functions to articulate contexts of meaning through which members are able to perceive and make sense out of their organization. Without understanding, it is difficult to generate meaning that is actionable. As an organization we strived to meet the expectations of our customers, but failed to act "inter-dependently as professionals." For example, I became increasingly frustrated that my own cognitive negotiations such as getting support for individual contributions, and my role as facilitator went ignored by upper management who hired me for the position. The organizational ideology was constantly negotiated and ultimately espoused under false pretense. The President kept an arm's length relationship with those he led; and it was as if I encountered narrative politics daily.

After many routine assemblies, I became part of the collective body that shared, if not enacted the "inter-dependent" spirit. 'I' was removed from my vocabulary with each personal contribution I spoke of. The implicit rule for communicating meant modifying the pronoun from 'I' to 'we'. At times, emails were sent back to me from the President stating there was no 'I' in team and I reluctantly shifted into the collective and became locked together with colleagues in the generation of meaning (Gergen, 1999). As Le Bon (in Sampson, 1993) describes, individuals in a crowd lose all that defines their individuality (p.46). It was clear to me that the subjective reality of the organization stood in a dialectical relationship (Berger & Luckmann, 1967) with the social structure in which I was immersed. My instinct was not to let my identity be shaped by the social process and to remain autonomous among the group.

Conclusion

Fox and Fox (2004) point out that the most visible sign of corporate public discourse is found in mission statements that are pervaded by hyperbolic language, created through combinations of superlatives (e.g., elite, expert), determiners (e.g., we), and verbs marking productive discourse processes (e.g., create, awareness) as illustrated in my former organization's mission statement (p.171). The symbolic expression during monthly meetings was a predictable ritual that managers conformed to, insiders shared interpretations of their significance, and members attempted to discern personal implications from its meaning. However, Welch (2005) suggests, "one of the most common problems in organizations is that leaders communicate the vision of the mission to their closet colleagues and its implications never filter down to people in frontline positions" (p.68). "We are team" was not the enacted environment; in fact, it soon emerged into a site of conflict where different positions of power were pursuing different interests. Putnam and Poole (as cited in Eisenberg et al., 2007) define conflict as "the interaction of interdependent people who perceive opposition of goals, aims, and values, and who see the other parties as potentially interfering with the realization of these goals" (p.248). I discovered that exchanging information as a team member was seen as threatening and challenging the belief system. I felt silenced by the mission statement and its ambiguous metaphors that represented a value that clearly did not align with my own.

It soon became clear to me that I would have to give up an old identity for the new role I was given if I were to stay with the organization and surrender to concertive control. Equifinality was not an option; therefore, I had to find a new way to act assertively, make sense of my responsibilities, and get tasks done within the boundaries assigned to me. Baum (1990) states, "Workers measure an organization from their very first contacts with it, to see whether it will satisfy or frustrate them." I had experienced jealousy from coworkers, and my own supervisor guarded her department as project manager as if I threatened it. My growing frustration over time would ultimately culminate in my eventual departure. The organizational culture created a dialectic tension between members, upper management, and me that allowed ambiguous communication to reveal and conceal, and express and protect to save face (Eisenberg, 1984); and this practice complicated matters further. I surmised this could only continue for a short while before I would ultimately leave and seek more meaningful employment.

Mumby (1988) states, "an organizational member does not arrive at a completely subjective, arbitrary interpretation of organizational practices. Rather, the process by which an event becomes meaningful is rooted in and framed by the intersubjectively shared patterns of discursive and behavioral practices (p.10). Thus, a mission statement frames an organization's culture and practices by the language it constructs to represent it. If the corporate discourse enacts a different interpretation then, most likely, it has used its vision as a guise to socially control those most likely to give voice and challenge its meaning.

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