

The Discursive Formation of Strategic Change

Steve Jaynes^{*}

In this paper it is argued that discursive processes are central to the formation of strategic change in organizations. This argument is applied to a study of 'Transform', a Bank's strategic change program. The findings show that Transform was constructed from 'grand discourses' drawn on by Bank management and a 'local discourse' of the self formed at the nexus of these grand discourses. Bank management attempted to govern employee identity and practices through the construction of Transform. In this sense Transform can be understood as a discourse of strategic change that worked by constructing a Bank 'reality' and idealized identities for employees.

Field of research: Management

1. Introduction

Poststructuralist studies examining organisational discourse now represent an important approach to the study of organizations (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2000; Heracleous and Hendry, 2000; Oswick, Keenoy, and Grant, 2000; Putnam and Fairhurst, 2000; Vaara and Tienari, 2002; Fairclough, 2005). In this paper organisational discourse theory is drawn on to view language as central to the process of constructing – not reflecting – a version of an organisational reality predisposed to certain possibilities for change. This paper presents some of the findings from a three year study of a strategic change program - referred to in this paper as 'Transform - in a large Australasian Bank, herein referred to as the 'Bank'.

In recent times the language and techniques of strategy have become integral to the way in which many organisations are managed and talked about (Mintzberg, 1994; Knights and Morgan, 1995; Whipp, 1996; Barry and Elmes, 1997; Palmer and Hardy, 2000). Strategy is often employed to manage and describe the task of organisational change. Much of the management literature

^{*}Steve Jaynes, Deakin Business School, Deakin University. Email jaynes@deakin.edu.au

presents strategy and change as a natural and inevitable aspect of organisational life. In contrast, there is a small but growing body of empirical literature that studies the discursive elements involved in the strategic change process in organisations (see for example Knights and Morgan, 1991; du Gay, 1996; Barry and Elmes, 1997; Morgan and Sturdy, 2000).

This paper seeks to add to these studies by examining strategic change as a discourse that constitutes or makes up, rather than reflects, the organisation. A discursive model of strategic change was designed and applied to the Bank to investigate how discourses were drawn on to construct an organisational 'reality'. The contribution that this approach promises lies in its study of language to explore how discourses pervade and inform the experiences of people in organisations, in ways that are often taken for granted. This approach makes accessible a study of the formative power of language in transforming ways of thinking and acting in organisations. In this way a discourse approach opens up a study of processes that are central to strategic change in organisations.

This paper is organised into three parts. In the first part the methods used in carrying out this study are set out. In the second part the findings from the first stage of the model are presented. These findings demonstrate how grand discourses of business and science were drawn on and invoked in Bank texts to provide the context and rationale for the Transform strategic change program, showing how in a discourse bodies of knowledge and laws of truth are produced that define a particular type of organisation and environment and frame the possibilities for performing in the organisation. The third part of this paper presents the findings from the second stage of the model. These findings demonstrate how a local discourse of the self was constructed from weaving together elements of the grand discourses. This local discourse was made up of a set of concepts and techniques for understanding and managing the self in a particular way.

2. Methods

The organisation investigated in this study is an international banking and financial services group based in Australia. The Bank was an established and major competitor in the Australian banking industry, competing in particular with three other nation-wide banks and with the expanding operations of regional banks. As with a number of industries, the banking and financial services industry was characterised as competitive and subject to the challenges of deregulation and developments in information and communication technologies. Data for this study was collected from a range of Bank documents, participant observation of a two day Transform workshop held for employees, and the conduct of 28 semi-structured interviews with managers and employees. These interviews were recorded and transcribed. Qualitative research methods were used to capture the nuances, the context, the

ambiguities and the richness of phenomena. The methods for data analysis were developed in part by translating the discursive model of strategic change into a series of research tasks. These tasks were designed to frame and develop this study's discourse model for application to an organisation's strategic change program and, in this respect, to guide the data analysis.

This study focused on a range of Bank texts to investigate their part in constituting a strategic change program. The first stage of data analysis was the identification of grand discourses evoked in the texts produced by management in relation to the Transform. Grand discourses were defined as broad systems of knowledge that were presented as natural and inevitable and were used to state truths or imperatives about the Bank and its environment. The second stage of analysis was to investigate how these grand discourses translated into a local discourse that was specific to the program. A range of Bank texts were searched for references to grand discourses. These texts were produced by either senior management or the Transform Group and included internal management reports, Transform Group documents, Transform workshop documents, CEO and analysts power point presentations, videos, and media texts. The identification of grand discourses entailed a search of these texts for references to broader systems of knowledge, presented as natural and inevitable and used to state truths or imperatives about the Bank. Once these grand discourses were identified they were then labelled and categorised within tables. References to grand discourses of science and business and a local discourse of the self were consistent and thematic throughout the range of Bank texts listed above. An examination was made of how these texts described the outcomes of each of the elements of these grand discourses for the Bank, in terms of the 'reality' that these grand discourses implied.

3. Grand discourses

This section presents the findings from the analysis of the elements of two grand discourses – business and science - that were referenced in Bank texts.

A grand discourse of business

References to the grand discourse of business in Bank texts were found in descriptions of three related themes of business - a changing environment, bureaucracy, and organisational culture.

A changing environment

The constitution of Transform drew heavily on texts from a group of consultants that were commissioned by senior management to perform a six month diagnostic of the Bank. This diagnostic and its associated *Achieve and Develop* program was based on a 'Performance Ethic' model derived from the consultants research into Fortune 500 companies that had performed consistently well over a number of years. *Achieve and Develop* was based on

themes of a changing business environment, which was argued to be driven by three forces that would shape the corporations of the future. These forces were: (1) increasing liberalisation and deregulation; (2) the increasing scale and mobility of capital markets; and (3) developments in digital technology.

Bureaucracy

Bureaucracy, the second theme of a grand discourse of business, was invoked in a negative sense as an impedance to change. In a survey of the Bank's culture it was reported that there was a: "... prevalence of political games, mistrust, a revisiting of decisions, a lack of clarity as to the specialised businesses model, and perceptions of bureaucracy" (*The Journey*). Bureaucracy was imbued with a range of dysfunctions, which were drawn on to provide a context and an imperative for Transform. In establishing the 'shackles' of bureaucracy, Transform was presented as necessary to break these shackles, which were described as political bureaucracy, controlling information, silo mentality, preoccupation with costs and efficiency, and cost cutting. According to the CEO, The Bank had to shift its centre of gravity toward a values based culture and away from the constraints of rules: "That centre of gravity stands at the heart of what we want rather than a rulebook of one thousand pages that no one can understand" (*The Journey*).

Bank culture

A strong causal link between the possession of talented people and the achievement of strong financial performance was presented as the rationale for a Transform culture: "One important implication of this change is the significance of having a culture that attracts and brings the best out of talented people... Having outstanding talent is the key to creating intangible assets, which is the key to creating wealth in the globalised economy" (*Towards a Transform Culture for the Bank*). These points were presented as taken for granted assumptions about the changing landscape of business, as defined in the changing environment theme above. Intangible assets were noted to be talented people, demonstrated 'smarts' in ways of working, knowledge management, brand and reputation. The need for a different culture was described as a consequence of a changing strategic direction. Three dynamics were argued to shape the Bank's ideal performance culture. These were the business environment, the desires of the Bank's people, and the Bank's strategy. The Bank's current culture was shown to be an outcome of formal systems, mindsets, and behaviours. The 'Bank with a human face' described a view of how managers wanted stakeholders to characterise the Bank. The intention was that employees would live the Transform aspiration and values, transforming themselves and the way they work. Transform was designed to shift the Bank culture as follows:

From:	To:
I don't care about the Bank's values	I have to know and live the core values
People are a resource	People are valued
I am a boss, not a counsellor	Coaching is core to being a leader
Win-lose mindset	Win-win mindset
Power is key	Trust is key
Who is to blame?	Why isn't it working?

Source: *Achieve Develop and Transform card.*

Implications

The combination of the three forces changing the business environment, described above, was argued to have made the Bank's environment more global and more competitive. As a result the way wealth was created had changed to a more intangible form than that of controlling capital assets. The implication of these changes in the 'globalised business environment' was that organisations had to work smarter rather than harder, and to do so required a depth of talented people. The second theme of bureaucracy was invoked to describe a range of 'dysfunctions' in the Bank. These included an over-reliance on rules and a hierarchy which led to competition and a lack of information sharing among employees. Both the changing environment and bureaucracy themes of a grand discourse of business constructed particular problems and challenges that faced the Bank. In this reality a particular type of organisational culture and quality of talented people was presented as an imperative. Hence, the problems and challenges defined in the changing environment and bureaucracy themes provided the rationale for drawing on the business theme of culture. The values statement and the culture shift described above produced new modes of description for how to perform in the Bank, and were directly linked to actions sanctioned in Transform. A translation of these values and cultural attributes into more performative language was evident in the definition of '*The Bank Way – Achieve, Develop, and Transform*', in which employees were asked to be: "Performing, accountable, e. transformed, in control, lean, agile, low risk" (*Transform Workshop Folder*).

In summary, the changing environment theme of the grand discourse of business framed a current and future 'reality' of the marketplace in which the Bank had to operate. This reality, together with the need to dismantle the shackles of bureaucracy, was then translated into a range of imperatives for the Bank's culture. Drawing on these assumptions and assertions concerning the environment, bureaucracy, and culture, Transform was developed by the Board of Directors and the CEO as a key strategy to 'move the Bank forward'.

A grand discourse of science

References to a grand discourse of science in Bank texts were found in descriptions of a range of scientific concepts and related practices. These scientific concepts were introduced as a set of natural world truths that underpin beliefs about the nature of reality.

Physics

Concepts from physics were introduced to: "...ensure that our worldview is consistent with the current state of what has been proven about the nature of reality" (*Individual Mastery*). It was noted that matter can be affected by a non-local cause, and that physicists have observed a level of connectedness among seemingly separate particles – these particles are affected by connections that exist invisibly across time and space. The science of physics, in particular quantum physics, was drawn on to characterise the nature of interactions among people in the Bank in a fluid way that opened up the possibility for change.

Morphic fields

The premise of this concept is that morphic fields are the underlying substance of influence. This concept draws on laws of chemistry, stating that open systems (fields) display the capacity for self-organisation and all life takes form as dissipative structures – they are adaptive and resilient rather than rigid and stable (*Individual Mastery*). Dissipative structures are described as having two characteristics: They reach a bifurcation point at which new energy causes the structure to reorganise itself, and they are open to their environment so that a new system of order can be created out of chaos. This system of order or shape is described as a 'strange attractor', or a field of energy that attracts like things to themselves.

Psychology

Religious, psychological and behavioural disciplines, including Maslow's hierarchy of needs, were drawn on to depict levels of consciousness, starting from an existence and survival level and moving up to a self-actualisation, societal and 'love of all life' everywhere level (*Individual Mastery*). These levels or stages were described as life themes that are: "... inherent to the human condition...[they] represent the genetic code of human consciousness" (*Individual Mastery*). The stages, from 1 to 7, are survival, belonging, self-esteem, adaptation, cohesion, inclusion, unity. This thinking is drawn from the work of Richard Barrett (*Individual Mastery*).

Neurology

Neurological communication from the heart to the brain, described in *Individual Mastery* and the *Transform Workshop folder*, illustrated the patterns of information flow between the amygdala, medulla, cerebral cortex, frontal lobes, vagus nerve, and the heart brain. An understanding of how individuals' process information and react to situations, couched in neurology, was provided as a

basis for prescribing how stressful feelings can be recognised and managed. Brainwave patterns (beta, alpha, theta, and delta) were related to the states of consciousness described above. It was argued that our state of consciousness is made up of a combination of the four types of brainwaves, and at different times some combinations are more 'appropriate' than others.

Implications

The scientific concepts described above were translated into a set of practices for the self. An important practice related to the concepts of physics was that of creative cause, defined as accepting responsibility for all actions and creations around us, and as the ability to facilitate the development of colleagues. The science of physics was drawn on to demonstrate the role of consciousness in the physical world, and provided the 'scientifically proven truth' that is the premise for creative cause. The implication of the creative cause practice was that employees would assume greater responsibility in the performance of their work, both individually and through their interactions to help develop others. The morphic field concept was drawn on to describe and prescribe an ideal culture for the Bank. The practice of open-hearted connection with others is prescribed on the basis that the more we are connected with others the greater the flow of information and the more 'potent' the forces for transformation. A repertoire of techniques and practices were drawn from the concept of psychology, in particular the levels of consciousness described above. Employees in general were asked to develop an awareness of the impact of small actions. The main practice for the self related to the science of neurology was described as developing a high performance mind. A high performance mind was defined as a mind "... that can enter at will the state of consciousness that is most beneficial and most desirable for any given circumstance" (*Transform in the Business*). To achieve such a mind requires the mastering of brainwaves. Another practice was 'managing withholds'. Withholds were defined as that which we keep from doing, hold back from, defer, or refrain from giving or allowing. Withholds should be released by "... simply making the choice to let go, by writing a letter, talking it through, or changing our behaviour (*Transform in the Business*).

4. A local discourse of the self

A local discourse of the self is a discourse directed at the level of the individual in a particular context and set of circumstances, such as the Bank in this study. In Bank texts the grand discourses of business and science were drawn on in constructing a local discourse. This construction of a local discourse at the intersection of two grand discourses accords with the argument that "... the production of discourse is not contained 'within' a setting, but is shaped by intersecting (con)texts...the locale of organizational operations can be reframed as providing Discourse(s) to practice"...(Kuhn, 2006: 1342). In this local discourse the possibilities for acting in the Bank were prescribed, and presented as imperative to the Bank's survival and success. The local

discourse of the self was invoked in a range of Bank texts on the assertion that organisational transformation is generated by individuals making personal transformations, and that changes in individual mindsets are prerequisite to changes in the organisation. Following are the elements that made up the local discourse of the self.

Emotional intelligence

The concept of emotional intelligence, concerned with developing an ability to understand and manage one's emotions, made up an important part of the local discourse of the self that was constructed in the Transform program. This was evident in the frequent references to emotional intelligence that were found in Bank texts. The ideas and practices associated with emotional intelligence drew on the grand discourse of science, in particular the concepts of morphic fields, psychology, and neurology described above. Emotional intelligence was defined as being made up of personal and social competencies (*Transform Performance Leadership*). In the *Transform* document, four elements that determine an individual's level of personal competence were described in performative terms. These were: (1) Self-awareness; (2) Self-management; (3) Motivation; (4) Empathy. The second dimension of emotional intelligence was described as that of social competence, which was defined as the ability to manage interactions with others. Social competence was made up of social awareness and relationship management, expressed in performative terms.

Employees were expected to develop their emotional intelligence through the practice of 'personal mastery'. This practice was set out in references to the self that were concerned with developing personal awareness so that employees would be able to better understand and manage themselves and their interactions with others. The intention was for employees to have: "The confidence to draw on and trust their intuitive knowingness in decisions and actions that support the *Achieve, Develop, and Transform* program" (*Individual Mastery*). References to the grand discourse of science, in psychological and spiritual terms, authenticated and naturalised this practice, particularly in respect of relationships.

Talented and values-driven

References to the need for talented people comprised another element in the local discourse of the self. Drawing on the culture theme in the grand discourse of business, the environment in which the Bank operated was described as one that competed on intangible assets, requiring talented people and the management of knowledge. As noted above, employing and retaining skilled people was characterised as significant in its implication that organisations had to work smarter rather than harder, and to do so required a depth of talented people. It was argued that having 'great people' was necessary to generating and exploiting the types of intangible assets needed in a changing business environment. The implication of this need for talented people was that the Bank had to invest in developing its people and their leadership skills. Having defined

an environment in which the need for talent was imperative, and having defined a particular organisational culture as necessary to attracting talented people, the Transform program was presented in this context as natural and inevitable for the Bank to succeed.

As well as being talented, Bank employees were also to be 'values-driven'. This requirement also drew on references to the culture theme in the grand discourse of business. The implications of the values-driven element of the local discourse of the self was that employees were asked to embrace the key role that values play in achieving personal and organisational performance, and to recognise and take personal responsibility for living the values (*Transform Workshop Folder*).

High performance mind

The local discourse of the self included the concept and practices of a 'high performance mind', which drew on the discussion of neurology in the grand discourse of science. A high performance mind was defined as an ability to manage 'your mind' as appropriate to the situation in order to optimise performance. Employees were urged to learn how to achieve an 'awakened mind', in which all four types of brainwaves are combined - alpha, beta, theta, and delta. In this state of consciousness: '...you experience that sense of Ah ha!' Things fall into place; you experience creative insights into problems or possibilities' (*Transform in the Business*).

Leadership

Leadership qualities made up another element of the local discourse of the self. The concept and practices of leadership were drawn from both of the grand discourses – from the environment and culture themes in the grand discourse of business, and from the emotional intelligence concept in the grand discourse of business. In respect of the business environment it was stated that the challenge for companies was the market's demand for the achievement of strong performance and strong growth. This 'dual' challenge was argued to require a 'special' organisation: "What it requires from its people is a new model of leadership. We've labelled this the 'and' model of leadership – as it is one where you need to think about perform and grow" (*Towards a Transform culture for the Bank*). Leaders were required to foster an environment in which people are creative, motivated, and passionate about work.

Manager of resistance and conflict

An ability to manage resistance and conflict constituted another element in the local discourse of the self, drawing on the concepts of physics and neurology in the grand discourse of science. According to *Transform Performance Leadership*, resistance is usually expressed by employees in the form of anger, made up variously of criticism, hostility, threats, rejection, and defiance. The cause of resistance was described as: "...experiencing a problem or an upset in response to our ability to control our lives" (*Transform Performance*

Leadership). Anger was linked to physics in its description as the suppression of life energy. The implications of this understanding of resistance and conflict were set out in the form of recommended practices. A three step process was prescribed for the task of managing resistance (*Transform in the Business*). The 'I' message was described as a method whereby the words 'I think, I feel, I believe, I experience', are used to be assertive in communication with others.

Trust

The trust element in the local discourse of the self was presented as something which can be practiced and built-up in a relationship. This element can be linked to both grand discourses. The culture theme in the grand discourse of business prescribed a shift from power to trust in the Bank's culture, and the concept of morphic fields, described in the grand discourse of science, stressed the importance of 'open hearted connection with others', which is related to the third dimension of trust described below. Trust was categorised in four dimensions (*Transform Workshop Folder*). These were: (1) Reliability; (2) Acceptance; (3) Openness; (4) Congruence. Employees were asked to make sure that: "...what you say is on track with what you believe, what you know to be true and what you do. The practices of congruence were described as: "Walk your talk, straight talking, no game playing/hidden agenda, be sincere, don't be too kind – no sugar coating" (*Transform in the Business*). Employees were asked to apply the four dimensions of trust in their workplace relationships.

Creative mindset

The final element of the local discourse of the self was that of developing a creative mindset. This element links back to the concept of physics and creative cause described in the grand discourse of science. By employing reflective action, and the idea of balcony dance (being involved in the day to day activities, while also seeing and understanding the big picture), it was argued that employees could move from a reactive mindset of victim, survival, upset, mistrust, judgement, fight/flight/freeze, fear; to a creative mindset of mastery, aliveness, set-up, trust, non-judgement, flow, love. It was argued that having and developing a creative mindset was about experiencing yourself as cause, and would enable employees to meet the obligations for which they were accountable.

5. Conclusion

Bank texts, in drawing on and referencing the grand discourses of business and science, invoked a range of conditions and 'natural laws'. The effect of the grand discourse of business was to describe 'the way things are' or 'reality' in terms of the nature of the Bank and its current and future environment. From this reality a set of strategic imperatives were defined that, in turn, determined the type of employee and employee performance that was required. Hence the grand discourse of business justified the need for a strategic change program

and for a certain type of employee. The effect of the grand discourse of science was to set out how people think and act as individuals and how people interact with each other. Individual shortcomings in terms of behaviour and relationships with others were identified, and it was assumed that an understanding and application of scientific knowledge could establish ways for individuals to perform and interact more effectively. Hence, the grand discourse of science was drawn on to set out a particular way of understanding and managing the self.

The weaving together of elements of both grand discourses constructed a reality that the Bank would have to respond to in order to survive and grow, while at the same time it produced a solution to the challenges of this reality in terms of how employees could better understand and manage themselves in order to improve their performance. In short, the two grand discourses were interwoven in the sense that the science discourse was drawn on to set out how the self can be, and the business discourse was drawn on to set out a reality in which this particular self became an imperative. In other words, the grand discourse of business defined the problems and opportunities facing the Bank, and the grand discourse of science defined the knowledge about individual performance necessary to solve those problems and exploit those opportunities.

In relation to the Transform program, these findings show how this referencing of grand discourses constructed a Bank with particular problems and opportunities that made transform a natural and inevitable strategy for the Bank's survival and growth. More specifically, these findings demonstrated how the grand discourses were drawn on in texts to frame 'the' conditions in which the Bank 'must' operate and to construct a particular type of Bank and employee that these conditions made imperative. The local discourse of the self was constituted at the nexus of both of these grand discourses as 'the' imperative for strategic change. In this discourse of the self employees were required to understand and manage themselves in particular ways as described above. In relation to this study's discursive model of strategic change, this local discourse of the self provided the framework for a new subject position that was constructed to engage employees in Transform thinking and practices.

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Bank documents

Achieve Develop and Transform card

Achieve Develop and Transform Strategy Map

Individual Mastery

The Journey

Towards a Transform Culture for the Bank.

Transform in the Business

Transform Performance Leadership

Transform Workshop Folder