

HANDBOOK OF

ORGANIZATIONAL

CULTURE &

CLIMATE

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Editors



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Symbols in Organizational Culture

-- Anat Rafaeli and Monica Worline

If you will, imagine yourself walking through the front door of a glass office building on the corner of a bustling downtown city block. People are swinging leather bags full of documents and wearing Armani suits and Ferragamo shoes as they walk past flower stands where vendors sell loose roses and fresh-cut sunflowers. As you push open the heavy, darkened door, you see a reception desk across the wide marble floor. Inset in the marble is a replica of a compass surrounding the logo of the organization, and above it a set of clocks reports the time in different parts of the world. A woman wearing a suit, matching lipstick, and a cordless headset directs calls over a vast switchboard that becomes visible as you approach the uniformed security agent who gives you directions. You enter the elevator and ascend, and when the brass-trimmed elevator doors open, you find yourself in a glassed-in entryway that allows a sweeping view of a long conference table and the city 30 stories below.

Humor us with another imaginary voyage. It's been a long day at work, and you realize there's nothing in the house for dinner. You decide to go out for some quick food. You cross a wide parking lot leading into a small entryway with automatic doors that open into a waiting area where other people are standing. Resting your hand on the metal posts that direct you into your place in line, you look up to see a menu that is posted on the wall along with pictures of food. Looking around, you see a sticky linoleum floor and a colorful play area. When you finally get to the front of the line, the young person working at the cash register cannot seem to get your order correct. She calls a manager, who appears holding a heavy bundle of keys to correct her mistake.

So, where have we been? There are many ways to answer that question. We could name specific businesses, but we haven't been quite detailed enough to do that. We could give the most general answer: "two organiza-

tions." But we feel we know more than that. It would not be surprising to learn that the first is called Morgan Stanley or Barclay's. Nor would it be a shock to find the second called McDonald's or Happi House. How do we understand so much from very brief descriptions of imaginary travels? The answer is symbol, which is a powerful, physical indicator of organizational life. We know that these are different places by the things we find there. We know a lot about each place through our associations and inferences from objects such as switchboards, elevators, conference tables, cash registers, linoleum floors, and plastic trays.

The people in the two places are also symbolic. We are not surprised to find a young person in a polyester uniform working in the fast-food environment. Nor are we surprised to find that she makes mistakes. We match our expectations of behavior to the surroundings in which that behavior occurs. In a fast-food environment, the symbols tell us that the young worker has a limited set of responsibilities and that her job requires a limited amount of knowledge. We know this from the pictures on the buttons of her cash register and the manager's keys, which appear when the young cashier makes a mistake. The symbols in the reception area of a corporate office—including a person wearing a red suit—impress upon us a receptionist with more responsibilities and competence. The smooth technology symbolized in her cordless headset and the size and visibility of the switchboard she controls are symbols of the size and buzz of the corporation, and of the corporate attributions to this receptionist.

That a few symbols can convey such powerful meanings and what those symbols accomplish in and for organizations constitute the subject of this chapter. We first define *symbol*. We then detail four functions of symbol in organizational culture that add up to our assertion that physical cues in organizations integrate feeling, thought, and action into shared codes of meaning. The first function of symbol is to reflect basic and shared

values or assumptions. Building on work in anthropology, we argue that symbols represent underlying values, assumptions, philosophies, and expectations of organizational life. The second function of symbol is to influence behavior by eliciting internalized values and norms. Extending work in social psychology, we argue that people act out the roles in which they are placed. Awareness of those roles is influenced by symbol. The third function of symbol is to facilitate member communication about organizational life. Sociological frame analysis shows that symbols act as frames of reference that facilitate conversation about abstract concepts. Symbol's final function is integration. Drawing on semiotic analysis, we argue that organizational symbols capture the systems of meaning that integrate emotion, cognition, and behavior into shared codes. It is these shared codes that undergird organizational culture and, indeed, organization.

SYMBOL: A DEFINITION

Students of organizational culture seek to reveal the shared systems of meaning that construct organizational life and provide its structure and vitality. To understand the cultural system of an organization is to understand the reactions, interpretations, and actions of organizational members, as well as how those actions, thoughts, and feelings are shaped by the collectivity. In this chapter, we make the case that such understanding is impossible without careful attention to organizational symbols. Symbols are integral to organizational life. They are not simply by-products of organization; rather, they are elements that structure members' active construction of sense, knowledge, and behavior (Rafaeli & Kluger, 1998).

Symbol is important even for organizational "members" who may not be considered to be "insiders." Mills and Morris (1986) have argued that even as a visitor to or a cus-

tomers of an organization, an individual is a partial employee. Rafaeli (1997) argues that the concept of membership is complex, with overlapping and competing dimensions. Rafaeli's analysis illustrates how membership may be characterized by physical or temporal relationships, contractual relationships, production relationships, or cultural relationships. For the purposes of this chapter, we maintain this broad definition of membership. We will argue that members who make meaning from organizational symbols are not simply employees, but also visitors, vendors, suppliers, managers, and customers.

What do we mean by the term *organizational symbol*? A dictionary definition of *symbol* refers to a thing that stands for an idea, as a dove stands for peace (Chevalier & Cheerbrant, 1994). However, this definition gives the impression that the pairing of symbols with contents is random or malleable. We disagree with this impression. We use *organizational symbol* to refer to things that stand for the ideas that compose the organization, but we move away from the assumption of randomness. Artificial intelligence research has focused on symbols but has regarded the relationship between symbol and meaning as essentially arbitrary. We do not share this view.

We consider organizational symbols to be visible, physical manifestations of organizations and indicators of organizational life. Symbols take on important meanings in organizations, meanings that are defined by cultural and social conventions and interactions. In our definition, symbols are things that can be experienced with the senses and used by organization members to make meaning. Symbols are noticed through sight, sound, touch, and smell. Symbols are experienced as real, and their impact has significant organizational consequences. Things such as organizational layout, organizational landscape, or organizational dress are examples. Although some research has implied that symbols are easily manipulated, we will show that symbols are powerful indicators of organizational dynamics that are not necessarily

easily changed. Thus symbol as discussed here comprises both the physical setting of an organization and the objects within that physical setting, and stands for the meanings, experiences, and ideas that people have in and about symbols in the context of the organization.

In general, people have a keen sense of the consistent connotations of symbols: where we find one symbol, we expect to find others that confirm or reinforce the connotations of that symbol (Kluckhohn, 1942; Pettigrew, 1979; Trice & Beyer, 1984). Simply switching between the description of a "wide marble floor" in the first paragraph of this chapter and the "sticky linoleum floor" in the second creates an incredible destabilization of the images found there. The same happens if we switch "brass-trimmed elevator" with "play area." Where one expects to find food or play areas, one does not expect a wide marble floor, and vice versa. To understand objects in a scene, people rely on both local and global contextual features and the consistency between them (deGraef, deTroy, & D'Ydewalle, 1992). The basic dynamics of the motivation to preserve consistency in situations, including consistency between internal and external cues, guide cognitive efforts to understand a scene (Festinger, 1957; Rogers, Lee, & Fisk, 1995; Siddiqi, Tressness, & Kinia, 1996). Making meaning in a scene is a product of both internal associations and the matching of internal and external cues (Kaplan & Kaplan, 1983). The ability to recognize objects and use them as guides to action has been central to human evolution and survival; this ability draws upon both affective and cognitive processes (Kaplan & Kaplan, 1983).

One of the potential flaws of studying organizational culture through symbol, however, is that the meanings given to a symbol by a researcher are not necessarily the meanings inferred by organization members (Schein, 1990). People encountering symbols read these symbols through their own individual eyes, and the symbols acquire meaning in the organization through recurring experi-

ences. Importantly, only a connection between symbols and underlying organizational values provides a full understanding of both symbols and culture (Pondy, Frost, Morgan, & Dandridge, 1983; Schein, 1990). People's interpretations of symbols may differ, and, as with most communication, it is the interpretation rather than the intention that wins the day (Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Collins, 1994).

As we have demonstrated in the opening paragraphs of this chapter, however, even occasional visitors are sensitive to the connotations of symbol and engage in their meaning-making activities. Thus the connections between symbol and meaning are not random. To uncover consistency and connections between symbols and organizational values, the researcher's responsibility is threefold: to recognize the symbols in a specific context, to unravel members' interpretations in this context, and to verify the reliability of these interpretations across multiple members. Traditional tools of interjudge reliability and reliability over time need to be incorporated into the study of symbols (Epstein, 1986; Guion, 1976). We argue that a careful researcher can obtain a wealth of knowledge about organizations by exercising these responsibilities. We also note below some methodologies that can be useful in research on organizational symbols.

SYMBOL: A REVIEW

Most available scholarly attention to the physical settings of organizations has focused on ergonomics. The Hawthorne studies, and others like them, examined the influence of physical factors (e.g., temperature, noise, space) on productivity and employee well-being. Some researchers examining the spatial configurations of organizations have found them to influence social interactions, arousal levels, affective reactions, morale, and perceived control as well as such work

outcomes as performance and satisfaction (Baron, 1994; Davis, 1984; Goodrich, 1982; Marans & Spreckelmeyer, 1982; Oldham, Cummings, & Zhou, 1995). This line of research provides a foundation for our discussion in this chapter.

Specific findings support the assertion that physical layout is not only a practical influence but also a critical set of symbols. Office visitors, for example, have been found to form impressions of their own comfort and welcomeness in an organization, and about the personality of the person who works in the office, from physical items such as desk placement, tidiness, and decoration (Campbell, 1979; Morrow & McElroy, 1981). Some aspects of physical layout have been found to reflect similar meanings across a variety of contexts (Campbell, 1979; Morrow & McElroy, 1981; Ornstein, 1986). For example, Ornstein (1986) has shown that office space occupied by a large, polished desk placed in the back of a spacious office is seen as identifying a distant and powerful executive, no matter the industry. Ornstein further found that people viewing pictures of a reception area made attributions about the organizational climate based on different clusters of symbols.

Other physical qualities have symbolic power as well. In retail environments, store design has been shown to have the power to alter shoppers' emotions and buying behaviors (Babin & Darden, 1995; Donovan & Rossiter, 1982; Rafaeli & Kluger, 1998). Organizational dress has been argued to affect both individual- and organizational-level outcomes, such as compliance with occupational role requirements, communication of organizational values, and identification of organizational members by nonmembers (Rafaeli & Pratt, 1993). And it has been argued that organizational obstacles have impacts on both employees' interactions with customers and customers' perceptions of service, because employees who overcome obstacles in the organizational environment are seen as symbols of high-quality service (Brown & Mitchell, 1993).

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Researchers from the architecture tradition have called the interaction of activity and setting "place" (Canter, 1997). In this view the idea of symbol is not merely a backdrop against which organizational action happens. Rather, place is a system of environmental experience that incorporates the personal, social, and cultural aspects of activity within an environment. Our analysis of symbol in organizations draws on the theory of place, because we hold that the location and objects that make up the environment are central to the personal, social, and cultural aspects of experience in that environment. We thus take an environmental approach to symbol and the information that it conveys. Objects and organizational landscapes are powerful indicators of social and cultural meaning rather than simply arbitrary signs.

An understanding of symbol can also draw from theory about aesthetics. Environmental psychology makes a case for the influence of aesthetic experiences on behavior and also posits a complex relationship between the actor and the environment (Kaplan, 1992). Gagliardi (1990a) proposes that the tangible, sensory aspects of the organization make up its aesthetic experience, which is the basis for all other types of experiences. In this view, the organization is experienced as the things, machines, products, and places that make it up. The things people create and use on a regular basis are concrete extensions of the self, and individuals invest psychological energy in these things (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981). In aggregate, this can be argued to be true of organizations: physical objects are concrete manifestations of the psychological dynamics of organizational life.

Our analysis does *not* address all aspects that have been previously argued to be symbolic. We do not discuss the symbolism of managerial action (Peters, 1978; Pfeffer, 1981) or the ways in which actions are interpreted to have symbolic meanings within an organization. Also beyond our scope are symbolic messages or symbolic scripts within organizations (Gioia, 1986) and symbolic

events in the histories of organizations and their effects on organizational image and reputation (see Bromley, 1993; Fombrun, 1996; Sutton & Callahan, 1988). Such symbolic meanings within organizations encompass different dynamics. This distinction can be blurry, as in the case of organizational storytelling, which comprises both symbolic actions and sensual objects (Jones, 1993; Martin, Feldman, Hatch, & Sitkin, 1983). Yet the distinction serves the important purpose of separating the dynamics of symbolic action from the dynamics of symbolic representation. It is the latter with which we are concerned here.

FUNCTION 1: SYMBOL AS REFLECTION OF ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE

Organizational culture has been construed as a network of meanings or shared experiences and interpretations that provides members with a shared and accepted reality (Pettigrew, 1979; Schein, 1990; Trice & Beyer, 1993). In their first function, symbols provide a tangible expression of this shared reality (Dandridge, Mitroff, & Joyce, 1980).

At the level of the psyche, Freud (1989) identified the symbols in his patients' dreams as reflections of their underlying fears and psychoses, arguing that these are important cues for psychotherapy. The idea is that symbols reflect underlying values or realities. It is commonplace in disciplines such as anthropology to study cultures through their symbols (Geertz, 1973). This idea has also been applied to organizational culture (Schein, 1983; Trice & Beyer, 1984). Schein (1990) specifically identifies symbol as the first layer of culture, comprising the observable artifacts that make up the sensory experience of the organization. Gagliardi (1996) concludes that symbols "enable us to take aim directly at the heart of culture" (p. 568) because they represent and reveal what is tacitly known and yet unable to be communicated by an or-

with respect to organizational smocks and name tags. She found that organizational norms were practiced more frequently when organizational attire was present. Thus our assertion of the second function of symbol in organizational culture: to elicit internalized values and norms that guide action in a given situation.

Social learning theory suggests that people learn through association (Bandura, 1977). Behavior therefore comes to be associated with symbols that act as cues in the environment. Berkowitz (1993) and his colleagues demonstrated that angry people exposed to a weapon were willing to administer more punishment than were those who did not see a weapon. When symbols are associated with internal states or feelings, their physical presence can evoke the associated states and feelings. In organizational contexts, a symbol that prompts internalized feelings provides a way to understand and act upon those feelings. Thus symbol serves to link feeling, interpretation, and action in organizations.

Some theorists, such as Gagliardi (1996), have proposed that our unconscious reading of symbols is a way of thinking and a form of communication that is more basic than conscious cognition. Lurie (1981) writes:

Long before I am near enough to talk to you on the street, in a meeting, or at a party, you announce your sex, age, and class to me . . . and possibly give me important information (or misinformation) as to your occupation, origin, personality, opinions, tastes, sexual desires, and current mood. I may not be able to put what I observe into words, but I register the information unconsciously. . . . By the time we meet and converse we have already spoken to each other in an older and more universal tongue. (p. 3)

Basic psychological research supports the idea of symbol as an unconscious form of communication. Work by Bargh and his colleagues suggests that a person's motivations and

goals may be triggered directly by the environment (see, e.g., Bargh, 1990; Chen & Bargh, 1997; Wegner & Bargh, 1988). In one intriguing study, people were unconsciously primed with a stimulus for rudeness, a neutral stimulus, or a stimulus for politeness. Subjects were asked to unscramble 30 sentences, half of which contained words related to rudeness (or politeness), and then ask the experimenter for the next task. The experimenter was talking to another person when the subject needed to ask for the next task. People who were unconsciously primed for rudeness interrupted the experimenter sooner than those who were neutrally primed, and people who were unconsciously primed for politeness waited longer to interrupt than those who were neutrally primed. In another study, people who were unconsciously primed with stereotypical descriptors of elderly people in a sentence-unscrambling task walked more slowly down the hall as they left the experiment than did other people (Bargh, Chen, & Burrows, 1996). This idea that unconscious affective and cognitive processes guide our behavior is also supported in environmental psychology (Kaplan, 1992). Thus the experience of symbols is a form of communication without verbal or conscious intervention.

Organizational examples of this function of symbol are ubiquitous. In the medical profession the symbol of the white coat is explicitly used to elicit appropriate and desired behavior. Becker, Geer, Hughes, and Strauss (1961) describe a ceremony in many medical schools that requires graduating medical students to put on white coats as part of their acceptance of a commitment to patients and to medicine. Feinberg (1986) found that students were willing to spend more on products when credit cards were left on a table in front of them. And McCall and Belmont (1996) demonstrated that the presence of a credit card company insignia on a restaurant bill tray resulted in significantly higher tips than when no insignia was present. Store layout and retail environments have been shown to

affect buyers' actions through their emotions (Babin & Darden, 1995; Dawson, Bloch, & Ridgway, 1990; Donovan & Rossiter, 1982). In general, environments that are experienced as pleasant prompt spending beyond what the individual had intended, and store environments that are pleasant and also arousing increase the time customers spend there and their willingness to interact with employees (Donovan & Rossiter, 1982).

Symbol in service organizations is especially important because service is an intangible quality, leading customers in service environments to rely on tangible cues or physical evidence to evaluate both the service and their satisfaction with the service (Zeithaml & Bitner, 1996). Bitner (1992) describes the physical environment in which services are delivered as a "servicescape," as in "service landscape," to capture the dynamics by which symbols influence customer feelings, behaviors, and choices. As Rafaeli and Kluger (1998) argue, the facade of a restaurant evokes in customers a particular pattern of emotions and behaviors with respect to that restaurant.

Methodology from a line of study called *dramaturgy*—the study of human interaction as performance—can support an understanding of how symbols guide the actions of organizational life. Dramaturgy draws on Goffman's (1959) notion that everyday behavior is a form of self-presentation. The goal of dramaturgy is to uncover how humans accomplish meaning in their lives, with social interaction proposed as the key source of meaning (Brissett & Edgley, 1990). One idea largely unexplored by dramaturgy is that humans also interact with the physical environment. Just as with social interaction, interaction with symbols offers people meaning. One illustration of such interaction is provided by Scheiberg (1990), who found that employees use personal decoration of their work spaces to manage their own emotions on the job—for instance, through focusing on a poster of the ocean hanging over the desk to calm down. Similarly, Suchman (1983) found that employees in an account-

ing office interacted with office records in dramaturgical fashion; they used the symbol of orderly records and tidy record keeping as guides to their work routines, even though the organizational reality did not allow such routines.

Rafaeli and Pratt (1993) and Van Maanen (1978) have illustrated how a police uniform makes people outside of the police organization accept orders or instructions unquestioningly, even if they have never engaged in social interaction with the particular police officer. Using the notion of dramaturgical interaction with symbol, Rafaeli, Dutton, Harquail, and Mackie-Lewis (1997) examined the everyday decisions that administrative employees made about how to dress at work. Using individual decisions about what to wear to work as interactions with organizational symbol, they found that people in administrative positions navigated their way through the organization using dress. This navigation included placing themselves within and distinguishing between hierarchical levels, distinguishing functional areas, and interpreting relevant organizational events by learning about and complying with appropriate organizational dress codes.

In sum, the second function of symbol builds on the first. In reflecting an organizational culture, its first function, symbol acts as a bridge between feeling and thought. In its second function—as an influence—symbol is a bridge from feeling and thought to action. This bridge relies on the feelings and thoughts with which symbols are associated to elicit the behaviors appropriate for the situation.

FUNCTION 3: SYMBOL AS A FRAME FOR CONVERSATIONS ABOUT EXPERIENCE

There is no looking without a frame through which to see. Studies of everyday experience suggest that simply perceiving the world in-

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involves the activity of forming conjectures about what came before and expectations about what will come next (Goffman, 1974; Weick, 1979). We construct what we see largely through expectations built upon what we have seen before (Kaplan & Kaplan, 1983). As observers of everyday events, we actively project our frames of reference onto the world and expect what we find to match what we are looking for. When our frames of reference match our circumstances, the frameworks of our experience are largely invisible to us. When the circumstances do not match our frameworks, we are jarred and feel that something is wrong or out of place. And we want to talk about it.

The third function of symbol is to make these frameworks outwardly visible and available for discussion by organizational members. Symbols help people communicate and share their frames of thought. The frameworks of a particular social group constitute a central element of its culture and require a mode of communication (Goffman, 1974).

Money is a classic example of symbol functioning as frame. Presumably the most important thing about a budgeting process is the allocation of money. However, the result of a budget may be less about the spending of money than it is about the expression of organizational values and the quest for legitimacy (Feldman & March, 1981). Olsen (1970) describes how in the budget-making process, community members in Norway use money to express their values and beliefs. The budget in this case provides a vehicle for conversation about priorities. Feldman (1997) describes a similar process among university housing administrators in the United States. In both cases, the budget has become a symbol that both frames members' experiences and facilitates conversations. Money functions as a symbol to allow conversation about such abstract notions as organizational identity, values, priorities, and beliefs.

Symbol as a means of communication can also occur at the organizational level, wherein, for example, an organizational identity in the minds of the public is established

through symbolic or aesthetic means (Schmitt & Simonson, 1997). Consistency in symbolic aspects of product design and advertising considers these organizational-level actions to be organizational communication with potential customers (Aaker & Meyers, 1987; Ogilvy, 1985; Schmitt & Simonson, 1997). For example, the design of the Coca-Cola logo maintains an identical physical appearance in multiple nations around the world. This remains true even though the script used in different languages is different, as illustrated in Figure 4.1. The Coca-Cola symbol is a method of consistent organizational-level communication to customers around the world.

Organizational-level communication through symbols is also important to members employed by the organization (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991). Employment ads, annual reports, and other formal means of organizational communication rely on symbols to communicate to both insiders and outsiders. Instances of transition call up eloquent examples of the use of symbols. Schmitt and Simonson (1997) describe the splitting off of Lucent Technologies from AT&T. The new company wanted to establish an identity for itself and for the public through a new name, logo, and advertising campaign. All employees received a brochure that announced the new name, Lucent, and suggested that the name represented light and clarity. Along with the new name was a picture of the bright red, hand-drawn "Innovation Ring" logo, which was said to symbolize knowledge and "the creativity of our people" (quoted in Schmitt & Simonson, 1997, p. 28). Although symbols such as logos may seem arbitrary, they are not. Discussions of a new name, a new logo, and other organizational symbols provide a way for organizational members to understand the identities and values that come along with a major organizational change.

Many difficult and abstract issues in organizations are shrouded in discussions of dress codes, employment and product advertising, annual reports, logos, titles, and other orga-

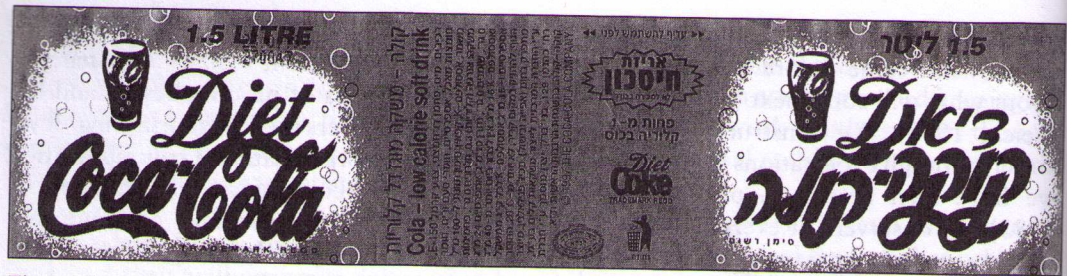


Figure 4.1.

nizational symbols. This is not limited to what Dandridge et al. (1980) refer to as “verbal symbols,” such as myth and legend. It is the case that members’ stories themselves are symbols that can prove invaluable in organizational analysis (Jones, 1993; Martin et al., 1983), but we refer here to a simpler and more experiential function of symbol. Simply put, organizational symbols offer a language for organizational discussion. Schneider (1998) reports on the responses of an academic hiring committee to a job candidate who showed up for an interview in green polyester pants. After the interview, “for 10 minutes [the committee members] ranted about the cut, the color, the cloth. Then and only then did they move on to weightier matters. He did not get the job” (p. A12). This discussion was ostensibly about green pants. But the discussion of color, cloth, and style was also a discussion about important organizational questions, such as, Who is this person? Will we enjoy working with him? Will he fit here? In this vein, one scholar justified the importance of the discussion by saying, “If you don’t know how to dress, then what else don’t you know? Do you know how to advise students or grade papers?” (quoted in Schneider, 1998, p. A12). Even in the seemingly appearance-neutral academic world, Schneider (1998) argues, “clothes . . . help determine if someone will fit into a particular institution” (p. A12). The symbol of dress provided the hiring committee with an avenue for discussion of their goals, fit within

their environment, their identity, and the identity of the ideal candidate.

In a case study of nurses on a hospital rehabilitation unit who had requested a change in dress code, Pratt and Rafaeli (1997) discovered that the nurses’ social identities were at the heart of the discussion. When nurses were talking about street clothes versus medical scrubs, they were actually talking about underlying philosophies related to their patients, their work, and their professional identities. The nurses used the symbol of organizational dress to represent and talk about the conflicting identities. The bulk of the issues represented by the two values of organizational dress in this case are summarized in Table 4.1. In essence, through their conversations about dress, the nurses were attempting to answer the question: Who are we as nurses on this unit? To resolve the question about the organizational dress code was also to resolve deeper conflicts about the purpose and identity of the organization and its members.

In short, the third function of symbol is to provide a vehicle for conversation and communication among organizational members. A careful cultural researcher can uncover meaning by exploring the uses of symbols in everyday conversation (Spradley, 1979). As a frame for organizational experiences, symbol provides a currency for discussion of otherwise abstract or ambiguous notions that are critical to the organization. Researchers can gain some understanding of an organiza-

TABLE 4.1 Conflicting Cultural Assumptions in a Rehabilitation Unit as Apparent in a Conversation About Organization Dress

<i>Nurses should wear street clothes.</i>	<i>Nurses should wear scrubs.</i>
Rehabilitation Assumptions	Acute-Care Assumptions
Patients wear street clothes.	Patients wear pajamas.
Patients walk around.	Patients stay in bed.
Patients are disabled, but able to care for themselves.	Patients are sick, dependent on medical staff.
Patients stay in the unit 1-4 months.	Patients stay in the unit less than 1 month.
Patients learn to function in regular, nonhospital environments.	Patients' treatments require special equipment, such as Ivs and ventilators.
Nurses teach patients.	Nurses take care of patients.
A team of professionals develops a treatment plan for each patient.	Each individual professional applies his or her expertise individually to patients.
Families participate in the care of patients.	Families visit patients; medical treatment is left to professionals.

SOURCE: Adapted from Pratt and Rafaeli (1997).

Organizational culture by listening carefully to conversations about symbols.

FUNCTION 4: SYMBOL AS AN INTEGRATOR OF ORGANIZATIONAL SYSTEMS OF MEANING

Dandridge et al. (1980) propose that symbols have a consensual function that allows people to make sense of the organization and to find their place within it. Weick (1979) notes that managers work primarily with myth and symbol in the amorphous role of management. We extend this idea to argue that, in its fourth function, symbol integrates multiple, competing, and potentially even conflicting systems of meaning in an organization. A 1998 television commercial for a U.S. hotel chain provides an illustration of an elegant use of symbol to accomplish an acute sense of integration:

Mr. Richardson dashes into the hotel lobby and tells the desk clerk, who hands him a card key, that he must be at a multi-million-dollar business presentation in 10 minutes, but his shoes are soaked because he has just had to run through the rain. With a glance from the desk clerk, a bell-boy steps up, takes off his own shoes, and scoops up Mr. Richardson's dripping bags, leaving dry shoes at the guest's feet and getting him swiftly on his way.

Many of us would love to stay at this hotel, or are at least impressed by the quality of service it provides. How do we know? There are many symbols, but we would probably really like to stay at the hotel because of the shoes. Symbolically, the staff of the hotel will give you the clothes off of their backs (or feet, as the case may be). Metaphorically, the shoes are a small but important piece of the hotel's servicescape and dress patterns (Bitner, 1992; Rafaeli & Pratt, 1993). The

shoes are drawn in the commercial to symbolize the total quality service one can expect to receive at this hotel. More subtly, the shoes are also a symbol of the prestige of the hotel. Note that the bellboy wears the same type of shoes as an important and high-powered corporate executive. A hotel where the people at the lowest levels share a dress code with highly prestigious clients must be an elegant hotel. Hence the shoes symbolize not just service, but also status. Together, they symbolize the organization.

What we have shown is how one symbol in an advertisement—a pair of shoes—suggests two themes or codes that are key to the operation of a hotel: service and status. We propose that additional symbols in this organization—the card keys, the luggage carts, the lobby, the elevators, the letterhead, receipts, annual reports to shareholders, and images in employment advertising—will also evoke the same two themes of service and status. In the imaginary conversation between the hotel and its audience, the important themes in the life of the hotel are communicated through its consistent use of symbol.

More broadly, symbols—as the physical manifestations of organizational life—help organizational members and observers integrate their experiences into coherent systems of meaning. The physical environment helps people encountering an organization make sense of it as a coherent idea. The fourth function of symbol ties together the first three functions. In the first two functions, the physical objects that are experienced by organizational members elicit emotional reactions and guide member interpretations and actions. In the third function, symbol allows communication about these reactions or actions. In the fourth function, as integrator, symbol reveals codes that undergird the organization. These codes are patterns of interpretation and understanding that are shared by organizational members. Thus the fourth function of symbol in organizational culture is to act as integrator.

The methods of semiotic analysis are useful for understanding how symbols provide

an integration of an interpretative frame (Manning, 1987). Semiotics considers the world of organizations to be a system of signs. A sign is defined as the relationship between a symbol and the content conveyed by the symbol. The assumption in semiotics is that the link between expression and content is determined by the conventions of the individuals involved, which are called codes (Barley, 1983; Manning, 1987). A code consists of a set of symbols, a set of contents conveyed by the symbols, and rules for combining them (Barley, 1983; Eco, 1976). Codes thus specify meanings of a set of symbols within a culture. In using semiotic methods for studying organizational culture, the coders are the members of the organization and the codes are the systems of meanings that are shared in the organization. Semiotic analysis suggests that in order to study an organization's culture fully, one must uncover the relevant symbols, the content conveyed by the symbols, and the rules that bind them.

Multiple symbols in an organization can be easily coherent or well fitting. Fluid and coordinated relationships among organizational symbols are likely to lead to good aesthetic experience or "beauty," as in the hotel example above. Aaker's (1994) analysis of General Motors' experiment with Saturn reveals how organizational symbol can help in the construction of a successful and well-integrated organization. The Saturn Corporation began with a new name that did not tie it to its parent company, General Motors, and that company's associated image and reputation (Fombrun & Shanley, 1990). It also began with a clear mission statement, a new manufacturing site, new advertising, and new sales policies that set it apart from GM. The integrated message that Saturn sought to communicate is represented in the slogan "A different kind of company, a different kind of car" (Aaker, 1994, p. 115). As Aaker explains: "The slogan provides a core meaning while allowing a host of specific features and programs to be introduced without becoming lost or creating confusion" (p. 124). Core organizational symbols in this case inte-

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As is evident in the Saturn case, it is not one symbol that accomplishes integration. Understanding the Saturn organization involves looking at everything from the manufacturing plant to the product design to the showroom to the advertising. Yet, because change in the pattern of symbols is inevitable, given forces toward organizational change, integration of symbols may be lost over time. Aaker (1994) aptly notes that the early Saturn experience is marked by a synthesis of organizational symbol that gives the organization strong aesthetic relationships. However, later Saturn experience may not be so clear-cut. Uncovering the symbols and systems of meaning that have changed or developed in conflict with the original integration may be important to understanding the change in organizational culture.

Thus understanding organizational cultures involves the examination of complete systems of signification and meaning located in historical fields. Understanding organizational culture change involves tracing these meaning systems through time. The organization as a cultural system is created through the integration of socially shared interpretations of symbols, and its study precludes a simple focus on a specific symbol or a timeless individual.

At any point in time, multiple symbols may not be well integrated. This is likely to occur when there are cultural clashes within organizations and dissimilar codes are in operation. According to semiotics, an analysis of these symbols would reveal the internal conflicts (Meyerson, 1990) or the lack of cohesion of the organizational culture (Martin, 1992). The nurses described by Pratt and Rafaeli (1997) are a case in point. As summarized in Table 4.1, there were two cultures envisioned for the rehabilitation unit, and members were divided between them. The clash of cultures was manifest in arguments about organizational dress. The alternative values assigned by the nurses to the symbol of

dress reveal the two systems of meaning or the two codes that operated in the organization. One code (street clothes) was the official interpretation of the organization as a rehabilitation unit. The other code (medical scrubs) was an unofficial view of the organization as a medical unit. As Pratt and Rafaeli illustrate, when cultural researchers turn their attention to understanding the codes that are generated by organizational symbols, an integrated perspective of the organization is revealed.

In short, a semiotic analysis of symbols is not independent of an analysis of the first three functions of symbol. Rather, it extends these functions and yields a more comprehensive analysis. The fourth function of symbol, that of integrator, unravels deeper codes of meaning that underlie organizational actions, reveals how members link symbol and content, locates the organization in specific historical fields, and brings us closer to an understanding of behavior within organizations.

SOME CONCLUSIONS

Our broad message is that an important part of understanding organizational culture is the careful reading and analysis of organizational symbols. Such an analysis needs to examine the emotions, thoughts, and actions that symbols may engender and the integrated systems of meaning that they convey. This analysis continues previous assertions that when management wishes to create versatile and culturally rich organizations, it must attend to organizational symbols (Dandridge, 1983; Dandridge et al., 1980; Peters, 1978).

Our analysis suggests that symbols serve four functions in organizations. They reflect underlying aspects of culture, generating emotional responses from organizational members and representing organizational values and assumptions. They elicit internal-

ized norms of behavior, linking members' emotional responses and interpretations to organizational action. They frame experience, allowing organizational members to communicate about vague, controversial, or uncomfortable organizational issues. And they integrate the entire organization in one system of signification.

Simple lip service to organizational culture through manipulation of a few symbols cannot suffice, however. We have only briefly noted how each of the four functions can be explored. A serious examination requires both depth and breadth of attention to the multiple symbols that abound in organizations. Our analysis supports the argument that organizational symbols have the power to facilitate or hinder smooth organizational functioning. Inattention to the multiple aspects of organizational symbols may lead to the possibility of a lack of shared interpretative codes among organizational members. This is perhaps easiest to see when a product does not match the quality symbolized by its

advertising or brand name and therefore loses out in the market (Aaker, 1994; Schmitt & Simonson, 1997). We argue that this is also the case in relation to symbols such as organizational dress and office layout.

The process we propose is dynamic rather than static. A study of symbols in an organization is never completed, because symbols and the meanings people make of them change and adapt, both to one another and to the external environment. Organizational members, from customers to competitors to employees to managers, continuously read and respond to the organizational landscape. Without careful monitoring, the study of symbols can become misleading and antiproduative. However, with careful attention to symbol and the conversations, thoughts, emotions, and actions of organization members, the study of symbols can provide a deep, rich, and worthwhile understanding of organizational cultures.

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