THE DISCURSIVE CONSTRUCTION OF A GREEN ORGANIZATIONAL IDENTITY

Ann-Charlotte Stenberg
Chalmers University of Technology, Göteborg, Sweden
ann-charlotte.stenberg@chalmers.se

Christine Räisänen
Chalmers University of Technology, Göteborg, Sweden
christine.raisanen@chalmers.se

Contributing to the development of a sustainable society is currently on the agenda of most organizations and has become an important feature of their internal identity and their external image. The everyday life of these organizations are highly influenced and constrained by the wider context and discourses in which the organizations are embedded and the power structures that prevail. This paper examines how multiple and conflicting notions of 'green' compete and are made sense of within organizational processes and discourses, shaping that organization's identity and image. Based on empirical data from a longitudinal, qualitative case study, we show how, over time, the environmental discourse in the organization has been technologized. Through this process, alliances are created, subordinate groups are mobilized and a common representation of sustainability as well as a consensual green praxis is generated in talk.

KEYWORDS: identity construction, sensemaking, green, environmental discourse

INTRODUCTION

In the last few decades, environmental commitment has become a powerful discursive means of mobilizing actors, of competing for points on the good-will barometer and of creating organizational identity. However, the concept of 'green' carries widely differing values depending on the context of culture (institutions, social structures and ideologies) and the context of situation (place, time and participants) of the actors. For example, members of an organization may operationalise 'green' in ways that make sense to them within the specific ontology, epistemology and ideology of their local work contexts rather than in accordance with the management's interpretation of 'green' (e.g., Weick 1995; 2001; Guy and Farmer, 2001; Starkey and Crane, 2003; Stenberg and Räisänen, 2006). Thus when dealing with specific events or issues, "people engage in double identity-building and sensemaking acts" that is, "they need to make sense of the question at hand both in terms of its implications for the organization and for themselves" (Vaara and Magakian, 2005).

Socially shared meanings facilitate the transfer of different ideological elements from one person to another, and from one setting to the next. From a social constructivist perspective, notions like 'green,' 'sustainable development,' and 'ecological sustainability' are viewed as empty signifiers (Füssel, 2005). According to Füssel, these signifiers are contested terrain where actors make claims and try to influence the discourse. That is, the sensemaking of the ambiguities and contradictions on different organizational levels result in different sets of identities that the actors or groups may enact. As emphasized by Alvesson (1998) the way

people within the same organization, or working context, make sense of tasks, for example environmental tasks, is crucial for collective action. Drawing on the organizational identity and the management literature, this paper recounts the story of how the members of a Swedish municipal housing company (Alpha), in interaction with its social environment, made sense of environmental issues over time, and thus created a corporate 'green' identity.

SENSE-MAKING AND IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

In the frequently used quote "How can I know what I think until I see what I say?" Weick (1995, p.18) views identity construction as a property of sensemaking. So, the link between sensemaking processes and identity construction is that the construction of organizational identity is a precondition for sensemaking while, at the same time, organizational identity is constructed through the process of sensemaking. Sensemaking of ambiguities and contradictions on different organizational levels may result in different sets of identities that the actors may enact. Organizational identity formation is a complex process influenced by both internally and externally informed views (Hatch and Schultz, 2000).

Czarniawska-Joerges (1994) describes identity construction as a two-way process where not only actors perform actions, but also the actions create the actors, or rather, their identities. Applying a post-modern view, identity is viewed as illusions created and maintained by processes of social construction (Hatch and Schulz, 2000). The identity concept is understood as relational and constructed and re-constructed in an on-going negotiation with others, hence opening up for change and multiplicity (e.g., Czarniawska-Joerges, 1994; Sahlin-Andersson, 1996). The fact that "identities are constructed out of the process of interaction" is also stressed by Weick (1995, p.20), who further argues that "to shift among interactions is to shift among definitions of self". Consequently, interpersonal interaction, along with the interplay between an organization and its social environment are crucial factors in organizational identity construction.

Primarily, the identity concept has been applied to individuals (Sahlin-Andersson, 1996); the transfer of the concept to groups or organizations follows from the notion that not only individuals in our modern society, but also collectives, such as organizations, are perceived and presented as actors. Organizations are shaped by heterogeneous and dynamic groupings of people with varied backgrounds, education, beliefs and ambitions. These groups are bound together by organizational activities and processes governed by organizational discourses through which goals, strategies and day-to-day tensions are negotiated in the creation of a sense of self in the organization. Thus, organizations may metaphorically be treated as actors who think, reason and behave, and are able to conceive of themselves and others as having identities (Brunsson, 1989; Sevón, 1996). Identity construction is a discursive process of identification, which involves naming, labeling, classifying and associating of both artifacts and social actors, and it takes place both on organizational and individual levels. These two levels of identities are closely dependent on each other.

Marziliano (1998) makes a distinction between internal identity construction and external image creation, reputation and profile. Identity refers to how actors make sense of previous experiences and create internal personality. Image, reputation and profile, on the other hand, refer to the organization and its enacted environment, that is, they focus on the outsiders and what *they think about us*. Identity and ensuing actions are not solely shaped by the internal activities and discursive practices of an organization; they are also strongly influenced and

constrained by the wider context in which the organization is embedded (e.g., DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Scott, 1995). Thus, the interplay between an organization and its social environment has an important role to play in the organization's identity construction, which in turn may have implications for how different issues, e.g., environmental issues, are framed and acted upon individually and collectively. Furthermore, organizational identity has implications for corporate branding. Therefore, for the organizational members it is important to follow through on the images that are communicated to the outside, which means that the behavior "needs deep roots, it needs to rest in the organization's identity" (Hatch and Schultz, 2004).

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

The story of how Alpha is based on a longitudinal qualitative study from 2001-2004 using a three-phase iterative multi-mode method consisting of (1) an exploratory phase consisting of document analysis and 6 initial in-depth interviews, (2) a focused phase consisting of 10 in-depth interviews lasting one to two hours each, and (3) a feedback phase where all participants were invited to a seminar where we presented and discussed preliminary results and our inferences.

The following is the story of Alpha's quest for an green identity interspersed with our theoretical interpretations of what is going on. We believe that Alpha's story will shed light on the complexity of employees' attitudes, beliefs and assumptions in an organization's process of creating an green profile.

THE STORY OF ALPHA

Alpha is a commercially run subsidiary housing company to a Mother Company, which is owned by the City. Alpha had full responsibility over its own operational activities. The Mother Company had managerial responsibility for strategic development, financing, quality analyses, reporting systems, and accounting rules.

The strongest voice in this story is that of the Coordinator (CO), who perceived himself metaphorically as the 'spider in the web.' The CO is a member of the Environmental Unit (EU) and the Business Management (BM), and had been involved in the company's environmental change process from the beginning.

Environmental issues enter the scene

In 1996, as a result of society's increased attention on environmental issues and a re-organization in the company, the BM raised the status of 'the environment' to strategic level. Consequently, the EU, a collective protagonist consisting of representatives from different levels in the company, was founded. By bracketing environmental concerns as a strategic issue and forming an EU, rather than appointing a Manager, the BM signaled that the environment was henceforth an issue that involved everyone in the company, not only environmental specialists.

When Alpha initiated their environmental change process, management worked at mobilizing a collective sensemaking process to rally all the employees. Since environmental concerns for some time had been in the political and media limelight, and since it was by its very nature a concern with which everyman could identify, it already functioned as an ideological space or boundary object in the organization (Bowker and Leigh Star, 1999). Such boundary objects, according to Bloomfield and Vurdubakis (1997, p.95), are parts of the "rhetoric of specialist language games." It is these ideologically loaded spaces that make it difficult for employees to question the visions and goals to which they are asked to commit themselves (Gee et al., 1996). For the employees at Alpha it was thus difficult to question the management's new visions concerning the environment. The next step for Alpha's management was to forge their particular environmental meanings and actions.

As a way of further legitimizing the new strategic turn, a two-day off-site meeting was organized for all the managers in order to collectively discuss visions and goals for the handling of environmental concerns. For example, it was decided to introduce a new function at district level in the company, the Environmental Coach. The role of these Coaches is comparable to that of knowledge brokers (Wenger, 2003); they were expected to be driving forces and local experts ensuring that environmental information was translated and filtered down to their colleagues in the districts. In addition, the first Coordinator of Environmental Work (CEW), an internal expert on environmental issues, was employed as a result of this meeting. Moreover, at the meeting, a strategically important decision was made to strive toward earning an Environmental Diploma by the end of the same year. This Diploma, issued by the City's Environmental Administration, was agreed upon as a feasible first step to integrate environmental issues in the everyday life of the company.

To generate commitment to the environmental endeavor, Alpha gathered all employees in round-table discussions to collectively 'make sense of the environment' and identify success factors that related to their cultural and situational contexts. There was a focus on the individual level and how each single employee might contribute to 'improve the natural environment.' Alpha adopted a bottom-up approach in their work of formulating environmental goals, starting with local goals formulated by the employees in local units and districts. Not until one year later did they finalize their Environmental Policy. Thus, the management at Alpha did not practice sensegiving (e.g., Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991) by coercing employees into acceptance, but rather taped into individual environmental knowledge, using it as a base for creating new collective knowledge to which the employees would be committed. These meetings and ensuing collective discussions were crucial in creating an Alpha-specific environmental discourse.

Seen in retrospect, several respondents considered Alpha's initial approach to environmental issues as very successful, facilitating the understanding and engagement in the environmental work. Also, bringing together all categories of actors created an arena in which green ideas could be translated and made concrete. Winning the Environmental Diploma reinforced the vision and became a first milestone. Several years later, many respondents witnessed that green issues had become a natural part of work, and a frequently used metaphor by the respondents was that environmental commitment was "bred into their backbone." As Fairclough (2003, p. 160) describes it, Alpha, through this process, became an organization "whose members have learnt to inculcate within their own way of being the 'new' discourse of the organization, especially as a vision (mission) of the organization."

Grappling with the environment on a day-to-day basis

Alpha's efforts in 1996 resulted in spin-offs, both internally and externally. The company started to make an inventory of their use of chemicals, and in 1998 their Chemical List (List) became official. Thus, from the ongoing 'background noise' consisting of several 'latent objects' (Ericson, 1998), Alpha picked up on the use of chemicals and staked it out as its territory of environmental concern. In contrast to being part of the background noise, as soon as the object had been singled out, it was possible to give it meaning. Subsequently, the use of chemicals, and more specifically, the List, took on symbolic value for Alpha, gaining currency outside the company as well. Respondents at Alpha talked about the List as a living document which for them seemed to embody the company's environmental commitment. Thus, this non-human document had become an actor in its own right in the environmental work.

Generally speaking, sensemaking is about giving structure and meaning to a confused reality. One way of doing this is to implement a system, e.g., EU Eco-Management and Audit Scheme (EMAS), to create a uniform practice and common language for the management of environmental work that would minimize the interpretative flexibility of meanings of green. In 1997, the BM decided to initiate a process aiming at registration according to EMAS in three pilot districts. Together with selected employees from each district, the CO and Alpha's formerly CEW carried out internal environmental audits, formulated environmental plans, instructions and routines. The path toward EMAS registration was paved with much confusion and frustration until the goal was finally reached in 1999.

With mainly positive experiences from the pilot runs for EMAS registration, Alpha decided to continue the registration process for the whole company. To develop a broad-based commitment among the employees, a new role, EMAS-engines, was created. These engines focused on starting up and facilitating the EMAS-registration process and as such may be compared to Fairclough's (1992; 2001) discourse technologists, whose role it is to redesign organizational discourses and work processes turning them into representations of consensual praxis (see also Räisänen and Linde, 2004). Implementing an environmental management system is one method used by discourse technologists to create a uniform language and practice for the company's day-to-day work with environmental issues. They must also ensure that staff is committed to the use of the system. Also, by the EMAS registration, Alpha made sure that the focus on environmental work was maintained over time.

However, some critical voices explicitly expressed the opinion that there might have been too much focus on environmental issues during the late 90s. For example, as one District Manager stated, not all employees were actually paying attention to environmental issues on a daily basis. The environmental management system, EMAS, was also considered to be too labor-intensive. Interestingly, two of the most critical voices belonged to employees within the same geographical district, which gives an indication of how important it is for notions and ideas to be coincident in an organization. When they are not, the tension caused by differences in interpretations can prove destructive for the whole idea (Gray et al., 1985). Contesting voices, if sufficiently powerful, may quickly mobilize counter-action or non-action. These differences could be traced to the individual's history at Alpha, and also to sub-identities within the organization. The following section will therefore offer an example of how a sub-identity was developed in one of Alpha's geographical districts.

Internal organizational boundaries

The boundary concept often refers to specific organizational units that are well-defined, conveying limitations and lack of access (Wenger, 2003). Boundaries are therefore usually seen as constraining. Boundaries may also be more fluid, held together by boundary objects that may be used to mobilize actors to pool together in the fulfillment of organizational visions or goals. At Alpha, one geographical district, Epsilon, held a prominent position regarding environmental work and functioned as an internal example of best practice on the one hand and as a competitor on the other.

District Epsilon was part of the Swedish 'mass housing areas' of the 60s and 70s, often referred to as The Million Program. In order to raise the status or Epsilon, which was grappling with the problem of vacant apartments, and also to strengthen the districts position inside the company Alpha formulated a vision for the district: "District Epsilon: With the Environment as a Vision." The BM expected Epsilon to become a 'green' role model within the company. In order to live up to expectations the employees had to learn more about environmental issues. Thus, a green community of practice was formed and nurtured by the district. The Gardening Manager (GM) described how environmental issues subsequently had become an integrated part of the staff's and the district's identity. Several 'green' projects have contributed to put Epsilon in top position with regard to environmental work at Alpha. For example, together with the City's Environmental Administration, the district took the initiative to develop the Environmental Diploma to be adapted to the business of property owners. It also developed its own Chemical List, which allowed the use of fewer products than did Alpha's corresponding list. Due to all the green initiatives and support from the BM, the staff had experienced some enviousness from other districts within the company. As environmental work became prevalent in the company, this difference evened out.

We could discern a change over time regarding the environmental engagement at Epsilon. In 2004 the key enthusiast had left his post and respondents mentioned a backlash in the focus on environmental issues. Small, but not insignificant changes were also noted. For example, as expressed by one Building Supervisor, during the pioneer time when the GM was still placed at the district, the CEW came more often on personal visits, and she even joined their parties.

Expanding organizational boundaries

Drawing on DiMaggio and Powell (1983) and Scott (1985), the interplay between an organization and its social environment has an important role to play in the organization's identity construction. Marziliano (1998) makes a distinction between internal identity construction and external image creation, reputation and profile. Identity refers to how actors make sense of previous experiences and create internal personality. The identity defines the 'self,' that is, a shared and collective sense of 'who we are' (Albert and Whetten, 1985). Image, reputation and profile, on the other hand, all refer to the organization and its enacted environment, that is, they focus on the outsiders and what they 'think about us.'

Concerning Alpha's quest for a new green profile, the BM were aware of the importance of communicating their mission, both internally to the employees and externally to, for example, the tenants, the Mother and Sister companies, and to municipal politicians. Already in 1997, only one year after the initiation of their environmental strategic program, Alpha availed

themselves of the media to inform the public about their environmental approach. As the CO expressed it, media coverage was an external acknowledgement of their internal work. "We can emphasize the importance of environmental commitment to the staff over and over again. But if they can read about it in the newspaper, even if we have written the text ourselves, it becomes important. It is a confirmation" (Coordinator). The CO makes an important point here concerning the power of the media to reinforce organizational or political decisions and actions, or, as the case may be, sow suspicion and cause disruption. Another important point he makes concerns the social effects of texts. Texts, of which a news item in the press is an example, have causal effects on people that may contribute to a change in their beliefs, attitudes and their actions (e.g., Fairclough, 2003; Räisänen and Linde, 2004; Gluch and Stenberg, 2006). By extension texts contribute to changes in social relations and the material world. In the case of Alpha, the internal spoken or written texts (meetings, informal talk, memos, directives, mission statements, items in the company newsletters) have all been mediating tools to effectuate changes in the employees, their social relations to each other and to the material world of the company. Observe that these changes are not the effects of one text or type of text, but of an aggregate of texts reinforcing the message. However, over time, these internal texts become formulaic; they lose their meaning, timeliness and power to engage. At this point, an outside text, with a different focus and perspective seen through the eyes of a different agent can be viewed as a mediating tool to give the endeavor new strength, or confirmation as the CO put it. The outside text mediates subtle changes in employees attitudes and actions in that it turns their attention outwards, to view the company in the light of other companies and society at large. In this respect the media itself is an important mediating tool for the company, not only to project a positive image outward, but also to reinforce the image inwards.

Quite recently, the Marketing and Information Manager was co-opted into the EU as a means of strengthening Alpha's external communication. He stated that previously, there had been too little focus on external stakeholders. Furthermore, the CO described the environmental work as a balancing act between factual matters and image building. That is, besides the focus on minimizing the environmental impacts, it was also important that Alpha's tenants appreciated the company for its environmental efforts. Consequently, the tenants needed to be informed about Alpha's environmental work. Still, much work remained before Alpha's environmental approach had influenced the individual behavior of the tenants. Also, it would probably be unrealistic to embrace all tenants by the expanded boundary since not all tenants were receptive to this influence.

GENERAL DISCUSSION AND CONCLUDING REMARKS

Riding on the wave of the growing environmental consciousness of the late 80s and early 90s, Alpha re-created itself as a 'greening' organization by initiating a change project to transform the organization into a green workspace with environmental care as a salient theme. The management's most important role during a change process is to influence sensemaking in the organization (Weick, 1995; 2001) by defining organizational reality and ensuring that there is consensual acceptance of the meanings it shapes. Alpha's management adopted a bottom-up approach in their work to formulate new environmental policies, starting with local goals generated by the employees in local units and districts. The management tapped into the individual's personal environmental knowledge and beliefs, using these as a basis for creating new collective knowledge and practices to which the employees could commit.

Moreover, the collective brainstorming meetings generated an Alpha-specific environmental discourse, which the employees could easily appropriate.

Being a subsidiary implies that Alpha had to relate to at least two different organizational boundaries. First, by defining the 'self,' Alpha automatically constructed its organizational boundary. Second, Alpha was also embraced by the organizational boundary of the Mother. Another complicating factor was that Alpha's environmental impacts to a high degree were dependent on the behavior of their tenants. Therefore, when addressing some particular issues, Alpha expanded its boundary to include the tenants. However, in these cases the boundary was more vaguely defined. Therefore, to form a shared and collective sense of 'us' became difficult. Not only were there different boundaries to relate to, there were also multiple environmental identities to consider. As the perspective changes, depending on what level of the organization is in focus, both individual and collective identities may become objects for negotiation. Obviously, even if the company strove to create a collective sense of 'who we are' (Albert and Whetten, 1985), still there were discrepancies in how the employees perceived their internal environmental identity. Moreover, which is important to emphasize, the green identity in focus here was just part of the company identity. For example, neither the business concept nor the business vision statements mentioned any environmental issues. Instead Alpha's focus was on being "...the leading housing company in the city, developing the housing for the future and modernizing the public housing sector in Sweden" (quote from Alpha's Business Vision).

We have seen how Alpha developed a distinctive green profile by defining their preferred environmental area of key concern. Alpha's environmental profile was constructed through a sensemaking process where 'green' was constituted through interaction in the organization, and in turn, the interaction constituted the meaning of green (for the organization). Alpha's concrete area of environmental endeavor, which became a symbol of the company's environmental identity, can be seen as an instrument by which the organization successively develops a rationale for its environmental activities, e.g., the organization makes sense of its relationship to 'the environment.' This sensemaking (Weick, 2001) was clearly manifested in the language used by the respondents (Stenberg, 2007). The areas of specialization provided employees with a collective rationale that they could rally around and simultaneously gave the organization an edge that differentiated it from the other organizations.

It could be argued that the story presented here is just a single example of how a housing company created an green profile for itself as a competitive edge. More, in the light of the sensemaking story of Alpha, it should be emphasized that, as researchers, we may very well interpret the respondents' different actions and stories. However, it is not possible to reflect any genuine empirical representation, the only thing researchers may achieve is a comprehension of other people's understandings. For that reason, this paper does not claim to tell 'the true story' of how Alpha made sense of the environment, if there even exist such a thing, but to tell the story as we made sense of it.

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