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The Message is the Medium: A Case Study in ‘Cultural Change’

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Abstract

In attempts to secure competitive advantage in an ever more competitive, and globalised market place, the trend in management thinking has been to introduce a number of initiatives aimed at developing a ‘corporate’ culture supportive of the organisation’s strategic objectives. The logic of such initiatives is that an organisation's culture can be transformed from a culture embedded within a bureaucratic system of employee behavioral compliance, to a culture based on an organic system of organisation, dependent upon employee commitment. However, much of the literature has tended to overstate the effectiveness of these strategies. ‘Corporate’ culture, if it exists at all, only exists at the level of senior management; that in reality many sub-cultures exist within an organisation that may resist, and even reject, attempts to impose a corporate culture. This paper, based on an ongoing, two year long, case study, argues that attempts to develop ‘corporate’ culture are contingent on the influences of the existing ‘organisational’ culture, contingencies that can be defined as ‘structure’ and ‘agency’. Significantly, the paper will argue that these contingencies are as influential on the actions and reactions of management as they are on those of the work-force, with the consequence that attempts to redefine ‘corporate’ culture are significantly affected.

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Introduction

In attempts to secure an advantage in ever more competitive and globalised markets, the trend in management thinking has been to introduce a number of initiatives aimed at developing a 'corporate culture' supportive of the organisation's strategic objectives (Gallie *et al.* 1998; Legge 1995). The logic of these 'culturalist' initiatives (Parker 2000) is that 'corporate culture', defined as the shared meanings and taken-for-granted assumptions within an organisation, can be transformed from a bureaucratic system based on employee behavioral compliance, to a more organic system dependent upon employee commitment (Storey 1989). It is argued that if cultural change of this kind can be achieved, employees will discard the fixed priorities of the pluralist workplace, to become increasingly flexible, innovative and committed to accepting the continuous change required to habitually increase organisational performance. The available literature abounds with strategies and examples of how this can, and has been achieved. (Ogbonna & Wilkinson 1990; Hendry & Pettigrew 1990; Argyris 1998)

However, much of that literature has tended to overstate the effectiveness of such strategies. Critics of this 'culturalist' perspective argue that 'corporate culture', if it exists at all, does so only at the level of senior management. In reality many sub-cultures exist within an organisation, comprising an 'organisational' culture that may resist, and even reject, attempts to impose a 'corporate' culture (Legge 1995; Parker 2000). What is clear from a review of this literature is that culture, either 'corporate' or 'organisational', is a term whose definition is both vague and ambiguous and usually defined in terms that are sympathetic to the needs of the user. To paraphrase Humpty Dumpty, 'culture is whatever I say it is', and to fully understand attempts at achieving cultural change, the limitations of such definitions must be acknowledged. It has been recognised that the management of change, cultural or otherwise, is contingent on factors that are both internal and external to the organisation, and that the process of change can not be fully understood unless these contingencies are acknowledged, and the extent of their influence identified (Hyman 1987; Thompson & McHugh 1995; Kelly 1998; Mabey *et al.* 1998; Blyton & Turnbull 1998). These contingencies can be categorised as historical; structural; cultural; and that of 'human

agency'. Evidence from this case study will reinforce the view that organisational change is contingent to the dialectic processes between 'structure' (historical, organisational and cultural) and 'agency', dialectic processes both within and external to the organisation. It will go on to demonstrate that the success or failure of such change initiatives will be influenced most by 'agency' as all individuals within an organisation are active participants in the construction and reconstruction of organisational reality.

The paper draws on data collected over a two-year period of an ongoing research project. Both participative and non-participative research methods were used and access was granted to all personnel within the organisation, in all sections of the organisation, up to and including the Managing Director.

Case Study: Turnhay Engineering

Background.

Turnhay Engineering is a branch plant of a European based multi-national corporation, located in the north of England. Placed within the 'light engineering' sector, producing a specific finished product range for a small, though powerful, customer base. During recent years it has undergone several changes of ownership, and was acquired by the Multi-national Corporation 5 years ago. Subsequent to the acquisition, a new management team was brought in, whose first step was a programme of redundancy which reduced the workforce from 230 down to 180. With three main competitors in what is an extremely competitive market place, great demands in terms of price and quality are imposed and very short 'lead times' for some product is the norm. The product sector is also seasonal with demand fluctuating greatly, depending on the time of year. This seasonal product market, exacerbated by the problems of specificity and dependency, are the primary causal factors behind the attempts to change the organisational culture at Turnhay Engineering.

Historically, the response to seasonal fluctuations in the demand for product has been to recruit agency workers (temps) during times of high demand, when all shop-floor personnel (permanent and agency) work high levels of overtime. The new

management team recognised that this solution was inappropriate as the excessively high labour costs involved significantly affected profit margins.

The individuals attempting to bring more efficient solutions to this perennial problem were the Operations Manager and the Human Resource Manager. In common with most people seeking any form of radical change, they were aware that they were not starting from a clean sheet, and that overcoming the historical baggage associated with the firm would be a huge obstacle on the road to securing that change. The solution was seen to lie in a change of culture, from an 'organisational' culture based on 'ad-hocracy', 'fire-fighting' and blame, to a 'corporate' culture based on commitment, empowerment and continuous improvement. 'Turnhay 2000' was the name given to the strategic plan, implemented at the beginning of 1998, with the ambition of securing this change in culture by January 2000.

Developing the message.

The single most important defining factor of the organisational culture of Turnhay Engineering is the seasonal nature of the product market. Demand for product begins to build from the end of August, reaching a peak by the end of December. During this period the factory *resembles a mad house*. From January until July demand barely keeps the factory ticking over. The influence of this seasonal demand on the firm, both organisationally and financially, cannot be overstated as it is the root cause of all tensions and conflicts within the firm, as well as the source of all ambiguities and inconsistencies apparent in the actions and activities within, and between, all levels of management.

The past history of the firm is one of continual change, not simply in ownership, but also in organisational structures and working practices. This historical baggage had not created a climate conducive to feelings of trust, nor did it foster a willingness to accept yet more change. The redundancy programme initiated following the most recent change in ownership exacerbated this situation, and these internal tensions were magnified by the social, political and economic uncertainties present in the local labour market. The influences that external cultures, gestated in geographical traditions and historical experiences, exert on attempts to introduce change have been

documented elsewhere (Roberts1997; Wray1996) and were recognised by senior management at the beginning of the project.

Some of the cultural problems with the workforce I think are geographical. Our workers don't like change - nor responsibility. 'Us and them' is very strong here and it may have to do with the old industries - the mines and the steelworks. The workers in this area have a long experience of redundancy and high levels of unemployment. This doesn't create a climate conducive to trust. (HR Manager).

Tactically, the strategic objectives of 'Turnhay 2000' were to be achieved through the introduction of Total Quality Management (TQM) systems, designed to improve quality through continuous improvement, and new organisational structures which would increase efficiency by *working smarter not harder*. If successful, these initiatives would bring to end production systems based, to a great extent, on ad-hoc methods and eliminate the need for 'fire-fighting' and the apportioning of blame when things went wrong. This strategy appears to be based on the belief that attitudinal changes in the workforce (and presumably a cultural change) can be generated by changes in the patterns and structures of work organisation, a belief that is supported by the 'culturalist' literature. (Peters & Waterman 1982; Boje & Winsor 1993; Argyris 1998) The ambition was to create a 'corporate' culture based on a multi-skilled, flexible, empowered workforce, fully committed to the firm and inculcated with the philosophy of total quality production methods and the need for continuous improvement.

All initiatives were developed internally, and with no external funding made available by the parent company, the resources necessary for the implementation of the project had to be generated internally. While it would appear that significant resources, both in terms of time and finance have been available, this fact may have impacted on the outcome of the project to date. It should also be understood that the initiatives introduced were not intended to stand alone as each one represented an interlocking part of the overarching and comprehensive project that is 'Turnhay 2000'.

Transmitting the message.

The customised package of initiatives that can be broadly categorised as TQM systems, included initiatives that can be differentiated between 'hard' and 'soft'

(Wilkinson *et al.* 1998). The 'hard' aspects of 'Turnhay 2000' involved systems of data collection, including the quantity and quality of production down to individual worker performance levels; and delivery times and cost. A measured system of continuous improvement was also introduced based on procedures for 'Kaizen' improvements. To maximise the effect of the surveillance aspect of these 'hard' initiatives, notice boards were introduced into every work area.

Basically, the 'visuals' are so that everyone is made aware of how they stand in relation to what they do. (Production Manager)

'Soft' initiatives involved improving consultation systems with the workforce, including the re-launch of a Works Committee; worker briefings; monthly company briefings; and the introduction of a monthly 'newsletter'. The firm started to move towards 'single status' by improving the sick pay scheme available to hourly paid staff towards the levels enjoyed by salaried staff, and by introducing common work-wear for all employees. Social events were organised, including golf and snooker competitions, trips for 'go-kart' racing, and a £1,000 grant was provided towards the creation of a self-financing Social Club. These 'social' initiatives were a deliberate attempt to foster a high trust climate and to build team spirit within the workforce.

Before 'Turnhay 2000' was initiated, two preparative measures were undertaken. Firstly, the organisation of the shop-floor was restructured in an attempt to rationalise a.....*very ad-hoc system of work organisation and terms and conditions that had been created by a continuous series of changes in ownership. (HR Manager)*

This rationalisation flattened out a grading structure that had previously included 9 different grades to leave 2 production grades and two supervisory grades. The shop-floor was also differentiated functionally with the creation of five production 'Cells' each with a 'Cell Leader', accountable for the performance of their 'Cell', including production levels; quality standards; and discipline. The Cell Leaders were to be assisted by a 'Shift Leader' on each of the two production shifts. A Production Manager was also brought in at this time to oversee all shop-floor production and the position of Continuous Improvement Facilitator was created. The role of this individual was to introduce and oversee the constant improvement requirements

identified by the Continuous Improvement Steering Committee made up of the HR Manager, the Operations Manager and the Financial Director.

The Cell Leaders were identified as the main conduit through which change was to be introduced; the messengers bringing the new 'corporate culture' to the shop-floor. The first concern for Senior Management was to convert the Cell Leaders to the necessity for a new culture; to get them 'on message'. If the current overall situation of the firm was not a good starting point for initiating change, some of the individual Cell Leaders were not the preferred messengers. Of the five Cell Leaders, the three at the front end of the productive process (the Cells most susceptible to last minute demands for product) were all promoted internally, immediately prior to the arrival of HR Manager to the firm.

One of the things I was hired to do was to recruit suitable personnel for these pivotal Cell Leader roles, but when I got here I found 3 of them already in place. I wouldn't have picked these three individuals, and the results of subsequent psychometric testing supported my original views. However, getting kit out the door and on time requires high levels of product knowledge as well as the ability to firefight. That is why they were promoted, and I was stuck with them. (HR Manager)

The remaining two Cell Leaders were brought in from the outside, and a training programme, provided by a firm of Management Consultants, was introduced to prepare them to implement the intended changes. In order to motivate these individuals a £6,000 salary increase was promised if 'Turnhay 2000' was successfully delivered on time. They were also made aware that if it were not, they would be replaced.

The second preparative initiative was directed towards the main organisational problem: the seasonal nature of product demand. It was recognised that solving this problem would provide a less volatile working environment, more conducive to the introduction of change. The solution took the form of a system of 'banked hours' where all employees would be re-paid for 100 hours of work over the year. These hours 'in the bank' would be drawn upon by management in times of high demand, when a maximum of 8 hours per week could be 'withdrawn' from the balance before overtime rates were triggered. Those workers finding themselves laid-off during the

slack period had the choice of taking holidays or continuing to receive wages and increase the balance in their 'account'. The intention was to smooth out the demand for labour across the year, thus reducing the need for temps. The introduction of this initiative would have serious and unforeseen repercussions for 'Turnhay 2000', as will be discussed later.

Training was also implemented during the 'slack' period at the beginning of 1998 for the entire core workforce, undertaken by the same firm of management consultants involved in the training of the Cell Leaders. This involved introducing all employees to the need for continuous improvement in the productive process, hopefully creating the ambition to 'work smarter'. The ability of these systems to reduce the need for labour was not lost on some of those taking part, and some identified the process as an attempt to reduce the need for 'temps'. A few, perhaps the more perceptive of them, recognised the potential of these working systems to increase their workloads.

The problems in gaining significant and, more importantly, lasting change in the workplace, is that it can not be accomplished overnight. Hogarth (1993) identifies the most successful attempts as those where a long-term approach has been used. When failure does occur they are usually explained away by 'culturalists' as a failure to implement the initiatives in a comprehensive way, exacerbated by a failure to adopt the HRM initiatives that are complimentary, not to say crucial to the process (Godard 1998: Parker 2000). Godard (1998) tells us that such explanations are an oversimplification of what is an extremely complicated process. He argues that the conflict inherent in the employment relationship limits both the effectiveness and sustainability of initiatives for change. A situation exacerbated by the inner contradictions present in all such attempts (Argyris 1998)

The 'Turnhay 2000' project, while specifically designed for the long term was not exempt, either from the tensions involved in the employment relationship, nor from the internal contradictions described by Argyris. Again it has to be stated that the seasonal nature of product demand was a serious causal factor in the tensions between management and worker, and of the contradictions subsequently identified within the project.

The project was launched in January 1998, with all initial training taking place, and all initiatives introduced to the workforce, prior to onset of the busy period. The determination of the management team to succeed, and the difficulties the project would have to surmount can be seen from the following statement.

This initiative will be seen through. There is a determination here now. People are waiting for it to fail, or stop, or go away. However, there is too much invested in it, both in terms of resource and credibility. (HR Manager)

Inherent in this statement is the realisation that the workforce would be watching the development of the project, looking for critical case incidents that would indicate the level of managerial determination. Despite this realisation, evidence shows that immediately the demand for product started to rise the project became only of secondary importance to getting product out of the door, on time, in sufficient quantity, and to the required quality. Evidence of this could be seen throughout the organisation. Following the first two meetings of the Continuous Improvement Steering Committee, it met only intermittently during the busy period. Briefings did not take place, training came to an end, especially the 'cross-training' designed to create a more flexible workforce. Continuous improvement initiatives were *left to drift*, evidence of which could be seen in the tables kept by the CI Facilitator. Fire-fighting became the norm for all concerned in production, including Senior Managers.

The Senior Management team justified this 'drift' as a period of consolidation, following which the project would move forward with increased vigour. During the busy period of 1998 the HR Manager reported that...

...the initiatives to date have been to get people interested and involved. We are in a period of consolidation now and the main focus of Turnhay 2000 will take place in the slack period next year.

Following similar problems in the busy period of 1999, the deadline for the completion 'Turnhay 2000' was talked of as coming at the end of the year 2000, and that the project would be...

...kick started, because we've lost some momentum recently. The workforce need a clear message that this isn't going to go away - especially the Cell leaders. Turnhay 2000 is now built on sand, and we have to put it on a firmer footing. (HR Manager)

The result of all of this ambiguity and inconsistency was that the message, at best, had been delivered intermittently, with each individual involved in the process left to draw their own conclusions. That intermittence was due, at least in part, to the reception that the message has had from the workforce.

Receiving the message.

To achieve any form of organisational change, not least a cultural change, management must gain the support, or at least the acquiescence of the workforce. (Hogarth 1993) When 'Turnhay 2000' was initiated the climate of workforce opinion was such that change would be difficult to realise.

The workers here are suffering from 'initiative overload'. The firm has a long history of starting things, but not seeing them through, and they see these new initiatives as more of the same. They're keeping their heads down and waiting for them to go away. (CI Facilitator)

These feelings of suspicion were not allayed by the introduction of the 'banked hours' system as it was met with great hostility, and interpreted by the workforce as a system advantageous to the firm, but at their expense. This hostility was increased by the disparity of effect across the shop floor. Depending on demand for particular product, and the skills of the individual worker, some found themselves 'laid off' and increasing their 'banked hours', while others were working high levels of overtime. Also, workers were often 'laid off' from one Cell while 'temp's' were employed in another. This hostility has had serious repercussions for management in terms of moral and commitment to the 'Turnhay 2000' project, but perhaps most seriously on the performance levels of some workers. The workforce are well aware of the cyclical nature of product demand, and when they perceived that demand was beginning to slacken off, individual performance often dropped below the levels achieved during busy periods. The workers seeing themselves to be in danger of being 'laid off' engaged in 'quota restriction' (Roy 1952) in attempts to forestall the inevitable result of a lack of work.

When the slack period comes, everyone just lets go. The pace of work on the shop-floor slacks off and nobody seems to be able to stop it. Certainly not the Cell Leaders or the Shift Leaders, and the reason is the 'banked hours' system. When I told the

Opps Manager that the production figures when we're busy are higher than when we're slack he thought I was lying, but the figures are there on the system and speak for themselves. (Production Manager)

A second unforeseen effect of this initiative has brought an increase in product classified as 'non-conformant' (faulty) which has to be returned to the section producing it. During busy periods, individuals tend to rework any faults themselves if they are able, as they are required to do. During slack periods, however, 'non-conformant' product is more likely to be sent back for rework, keeping up the levels work 'in progress'. This is also a tactic engaged in when individual workers are in conflict with their supervisors, especially over performance levels.

*He can go and f***k off. He's raised the work rate again and nobody can achieve it. He'll get stuff back as 'non conformance' because we won't have time re-work it. That'll show the b*****d.*

A third unforeseen consequence of 'banked hours' has been calls from significant numbers of the workforce for trade union representation. The outcome of these calls is to be the focus of another paper and will not be discussed here.

As 'Turnhay 2000' progressed, Senior Managers quickly identified what, for them, were unforeseen consequences of the 'banked hours' scheme, with the consequence that the system was modified. In 1999 the level of pre-banked hours was reduced to 40, and for 2000 all workers started with no pre-paid hours 'in the bank'. This has gone a long way to alleviate the hostility to the scheme, as the workers now see it as beneficial as it provides protection from being 'laid off' with no prior cost to themselves. However these workers will presumably continue to attempt to 'make out' (Burawoy 1979) in order to avoid accruing 'banked hours'

The continuous improvement systems were structured around *kaizen* improvements, and in an initial attempt to indoctrinate the workforce in the concept of continuous improvement, any and all suggestions for *kaizen* improvements were accepted, at times taking on the form of theatre. For example, a welder requested that a clock be placed in the welding section, claiming that this would save 5 minutes per day, per welder, as they would no longer have to leave their workstations to find out the time

for breaks etc. This *kaizen* went through the ‘feasibility’ process, which compared cost against projected savings. Using a proscribed formula that set the cost of time (at a rate including all manufacturing overheads) it was discovered that a clock in each of the welding sections would make an annual saving of £9,480 set against a cost of £20 for the clocks. This should only be seen as an attempt to get workers involved in the idea submitting suggested improvements, and not as any real attempt to evaluate the savings of such suggestions. If this example is to be taken seriously we must assume that all welders work non-stop, do not collectively possess a watch, and do not communicate with each other. Once the system was established, more realistic cost/benefit analyses were introduced, using a formula that calculated the cost in time only at the hourly rate of the worker concerned.

To maintain the impetus of continuous improvement a requirement of 2 *kaizen's* per month was established for each employee, with prizes for the ‘best’ and ‘most completed’ *kaizen's*. This dual approach is indicative of way ambiguity can exist in many managerial initiatives. The setting of targets suggests they are simply trying to force compliance, while the reward system suggests they are seeking to encourage commitment. The setting of targets may even prove to be counterproductive as...
...the setting of targets is an attempt to force compliance but will act as a deterrent. If someone thinks of more than their monthly quota they'll keep it to themselves for the following month.

(CI Facilitator)

The responses from the workforce to this quota/reward system also exhibit ambiguity. Some workers fully engaged with process, offering more than the required quota, while others have been less than enthused, seeking to ‘make out’. In doing so some workers have ‘paired up’, jointly developing *kaizen* suggestions, but submitting them under one name. During that particular month, one partner has a chance of winning a prize, while the other is willing to *chance a bollocking for not putting any in*. The following month they change roles, with any prize shared.

Others work the system in different ways; for example it was quickly recognised on the shop-floor that if a *kaizen* required the involvement of the maintenance

department it would be put on hold, reducing the need to come up with other kaizen's. Still others are 'making out' by...

...working smarter, but for themselves. They've taken on board the idea of thinking about how they can make their jobs easier but don't make the changes official. This is for two reasons, one they don't want to make targets higher for themselves and two they would only get grief from their mates if they raised targets generally.

(CI Facilitator)

This is an example of the strength of the sub-cultures that exist in all organisations. Within any given culture there will be different codes to which individuals have to adhere. There are the rules and regulations that all individuals within an organisation must obey, and there are the unwritten, though nonetheless binding, codes of the shop floor that no worker can ignore. (Garfinkle 1967)

Almost all concerned have recognised the danger that continuously improving production could lead to reductions in personnel. Typically:

These ideas are straight out of some book and some of the people sprouting them have no idea of the possible consequences. Constant improvement could get a lot of people finished. (Shop-floor worker)

Boje and Winsor (1993) describe TQM as a form of *self-Taylorisation*; a situation recognised by at least one of the workforce.

*Management are just picking our brains because they don't know how to do the job themselves. It's always more, more, more, faster, faster, faster. I mean, think about it, what the f**k has culture got to do with welding.* (Welder)

If the seasonal nature of product demand is the driving force behind these initiatives, it has also been influential on the way the message has been received. Worker reactions and attitudes have fluctuated, as have those of senior managers, all synchronous with product demand. During periods of high demand, the initiatives become secondary to production, a fact not lost on the workforce. Blyton & Turnbull (1992) suggest that postponement of new managerial initiatives during busy periods may be indicative of a temporary susceptibility to worker resistance. At Turnhay Engineering, these postponements are not due to any real susceptibility to workers

resistance, but to the susceptibility of senior managers to the prevailing organisational culture. During the busy period fire-fighting and the need to *get 'kit' out* becomes all important, not least to the senior managers responsible for the shop-floor, and as a result the 'Turnhay 2000' project tends to lapse, a fact recognised by the HR Manager.

Our main problem remains the seasonal nature of the product. Between January and July we can do things, but the rest of the time it's a mad house. Everything but productions comes to a halt. We seem to take two steps forward and one step back.

It is also a situation recognised by the workforce.

They started things off, then things got busy so they stopped. They pick up pace again when things get slack. People here have seen a lot of promises made before, and have seen them come to nothing. There is a feeling on the shop-floor of 'here we go again.' (Shift Leader)

Even those workers who appear to be sympathetic to the new initiatives have recognised the paradox apparent in management actions.

I can see the sense in the new system - if they're allowed to work – but they all seem to go out the window when the pressure is on. (shop-floor worker)

These statements would suggest that human agency has little influence over this process, the main problem being structural. However, other views are held.

The most difficult thing facing management is to change attitudes, not procedures. A lot of people are simply going through the motions. Some are dead against the new initiatives – these people can be dealt with. The main problem is dealing with the people who're only paying lip service to them. These people are difficult to identify but who can derail everything.

(CI Facilitator)

At least one individual places the blame for lack of progress firmly on senior management.

The senior managers are to blame for the stop/start situation. They don't have the bottle to force things through. One of the major blockages is 'maintenance', but they

won't take them on. Some of the other Cell Leaders are only paying lip service to the whole thing, they're not really committed, and Senior Management know it.

(Cell Leader)

Whatever the truth of these allegations, the power to apportion blame for the lack of progress lies with Senior Management, a power they were not unwilling to use.

Shooting the messengers.

The first casualty of the project was the Production Manager, brought in due to her extensive experience of the auto-motive industry, was the victim of a self-inflicted wound, leaving the organisation by choice...

...because of the failure to implement change. Fire-fighting is the excuse they all hide behind, but the truth is they don't try. When I came here, I tried to show them (the Cell Leaders) how improvements could be made, gave them examples, but nothing happened so I stopped trying. Despite what they say I don't think they're totally committed to change, they don't seem to be able to set disciplines and consequently the shop-floor runs in a disorganised manner... basically the Cell Leaders are not up to the job.

This frustration was generated by an inability to cope with uncertainty and a lack of product knowledge. The comfort zone for this individual was within the orderliness of procedural disciplines. The perceived lack of ability of the Cell Leaders, identified by the HR Manager on his arrival at the firm, was exacerbated by an apparent loyalty to, and identification with, the shop-floor. Senior Management felt that this downward identification was making it difficult to persuade these individuals to take ownership of 'Turnhay 2000', as the project could have serious consequences for the people for whom they were responsible, and with whom they identified. Delbridge & Lowe (1997) identify the contradictory relationships supervisors have with the workers they are responsible for, and the Senior Managers to whom they are themselves responsible. They conclude that the role of the supervisor is often to act as a 'buffer' to offset the worst aspects of uncertainty in the labour process. In the case of Turnhay Engineering, this uncertainty is caused by the seasonal nature of the product demand and the stop/start nature of 'Turnhay 2000'. The ambiguity of this position is

exacerbated by a marked lack of belief in the project by the majority of Cell Leaders.

Typical of these views:

I don't know what all the fuss is about. The sooner they (Senior Management) realise that we're not making airplanes here the better. We're a 'jobbing shop' and a bloody good one as well. We should be building on that strength, not wasting time on trying to become something we're not.

One of the prime objectives of Senior Management, at the beginning of 'Turnhay 2000', was to get the Cell Leaders working as a team to instill the structures and ethos of the project within themselves and the workforce. Teamwork is evident between the Cell Leaders in the area of production, as very difficult situations are 'managed' on an informal and 'ad hoc' basis in order to meet tight production deadlines, but little evidence is apparent of a collective commitment to the 'Turnhay 2000'. It should be recognised that these individuals are an occupational group in their own right, and consequently no less impelled to 'make out' at work than any other worker. Being 'on the same side' as the workers they are responsible for may be contradictory to the role expected of them by their managers, but given the uncertain nature of the labour process at Turnhay Engineering, that alignment may be the only way they can achieve their own production targets. Personal loyalty downwards being rewarded by extra effort from their workers, when required. Delbridge & Lowe (1997) provide evidence of this phenomenon, and this case study would appear to support their findings.

Notwithstanding the above point, Senior Management feel that the prevailing organisational culture is the main reason why the Cell Leaders were unable to move 'Turnhay 2000' forward in any appreciable and consistent way. The HR Manager believed that the new initiatives represented a challenge to the comfortable position of the Cell Leaders, requiring them to *leave the comfort zone* to assume new roles and responsibilities. A challenge they were unwilling to accept either collectively, or individually. This represents a limited view of the actions of the Cell Leaders. Their ability to fire-fight successfully generated considerable pride and a sense of achievement within the group, and attempts to change their operational methods represented a threat to their organisational identities. The Cell Leaders are what they do, their 'place' and status within the organisation comes from their product

knowledge and the ability to fire-fight. The greater the demand for product, the greater the autonomy they have, as in essence they are empowered by uncertainty.

Despite the interpretations made by Senior Managers of the attitudes and responses of the Cell Leaders to 'Turnhay 2000' they were never challenged in any significant way. The imperatives of production within extremely tight deadlines acted as a shield behind which the Cell Leaders could shelter from the increasing demands made upon them to change. However, once the busy period of 1999 was over the circumstances providing this protective shield were removed, and their reluctance to engage meaningfully with 'Turnhay 2000' had serious consequences for the group. The relationship between the Senior Managers and the Cell Leaders had deteriorated to the point that the implementation of 'Turnhay 2000' had become a contest. Following the failure to give pre-arranged presentations on the position of the project within their individual cells, due to the demands of the shop-floor, the HR Manager stated that *they have won again*. If the avoidance of the presentations was a victory for the Cell Leaders, it was of a pyrrhic nature.

Late in December 1999 (toward the end of the busy period) the firm announced a program of redundancies, in which the workforce would be reduced by 30. In the process, three of the Cell Leaders were made redundant and the remaining two were moved 'sideways' into 'planing' roles. These two were retained, primarily because of product knowledge and technical skills.

Over the last year it had become apparent that the Cell Leaders weren't up to the job, they were in fact obstacles to change and had to go.

(Operations Manager)

Production within the cells became the responsibility of the Shift Leaders, who would...

...have to become different animals. They've hidden behind the Cell Leaders, and now they'll be exposed as managers, they'll have to get off the fence and they'll have to deliver.

(Operations Manager)

The example of the Cell Leaders was not lost on the Shift Leaders.

We know where we stand now. If we don't deliver we'll be out as well. I see it as an opportunity for myself, but it's a threat as well.

(Shift Leader)

Management viewed this redundancy program as a vehicle to kick-start the change process.

We've come a long way in the last couple of years, we've made advances in all the areas we wanted to, and recently we've been through a period of consolidation. Now is the time to move on, and the people who're left are not stupid, they know we've got rid of the bad eggs. It'll be a relief to everyone when we start to move forward again, the pressures on people will increase, but they'll increase for everyone, us included. Everyone must be focused in on what they do, must be more receptive to change.

(Operations Manager)

Conclusion

The 'culturalists' would argue that the limited success of the 'Turnhay 2000' project to date, results from the failure to implement the initiatives properly, backed up by appropriate HR policies. (Goddard 1990). More critical industrial/employee relations analyses would suggest that worker resistance has limited the success of the project. While there may be merit in these arguments, especially the second, they are an oversimplification of an extremely complex reality, a reality that is full of ambiguity and contradiction, with actions often eliciting unforeseen consequences. Parker (2000) captures this organisational complexity by describing organisations as *fragmented unities*, as individuals within an organisation identify themselves as collective in some circumstances and at some times, and divided in other circumstances and at other times.

The evidence could be interpreted as a Senior Management team using the rhetoric of cultural change; of empowerment; of commitment; to gain the behavioral compliance of the workforce to a new set of bureaucratic requirements; requirements designed simply to increase productivity through the intensification of work. By using the language of TQM and 'culture' in ways that Webb (1996) describes as a *new*

vocabulary of motive to legitimate organisational change, they are seeking to achieve greater control over the workforce, rather than a commitment to organisational goals. This is the view held by one of the management consultants used by Turnhay. *Culture is a term that is used as a smokescreen for increased control over the shop floor. You have an objective and you set targets to be achieved through effective measures. If people's attitudes are changed in the process then this is an advantageous byproduct of the process. Welcome, but not necessary. It's very difficult to change attitudes, it's much easier to change behavior.*

The above statement may reflect a recognition that a cultural change is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to achieve, and that behavioral compliance is an achievable, and therefore acceptable alternative. The evidence from this case study would suggest that even a behavioral change is contingent to the discourses between structure and agency. Evidence would suggest that for the individuals behind the project, 'Turnhay 2000' represents a genuine attempt to create a better climate within the firm; a genuine attempt to improve relations between management and worker. The resources, both financial and personal, invested in the initiatives by these individuals, designed to get people playing together as well as working together, is evidence of this.

There have been two main obstacles to these attempts, neither of which are mutually exclusive. Firstly, the attempts have been permeated with ambiguity and contradiction, and secondly, a more critical analysis would highlight the extent to which the attempts to accomplish a 'cultural change' have been frustrated by pre-existing patterns of organisational culture. One of the contradictions was identified by the HR Manager when he recognised that the Cell Leaders were...
...stuck in the middle - very good at the wrong things as far as 'Turnhay 2000' is concerned.

The Cell Leaders were measured by what they did: on getting product out, and by implementing the requirements of 'Turnhay 2000'. The pressures from above to implement the required changes were offset by pressure from the same people to continually meet very tight production targets. These individuals were caught firmly in the middle of a process they had little control over. With Senior Managers calling

simultaneously for product and for change, the Cell Leaders believed they could deliver only one or the other, and not both. When they responded to the most immediate of these demands (for product) they were accused of refusing to come out of their *comfort zone*. As a result of their individual and collective abilities, they were able to function and, to a point, resist the demands of Senior Management.

The reality of this ambiguous and contradictory situation is that the Senior Managers are part of the same organisational culture as the Cell Leaders, and their actions are conditioned by that pre-existing culture, and in the same way. That the *periods of consolidation* talked of by Senior Managers coincided with periods of high product demand, was not lost on the Cell Leaders, and suggests that Senior Managers have a *comfort zone* of their own which they are also reluctant to leave. If the need to firefight is the shield behind which the Cell Leaders sheltered to avoid engaging fully in 'Turnhay 2000', Senior Managers appear to have been sheltering behind the same shield. The intensity of the calls from Senior Management to implement change fluctuated inversely to the demands for product, resulting in ambiguous messages being received, leading to conflicting responses from the Cell Leaders.

The ambiguous messages transmitted by the Senior Management team have had a similar impact on the shop floor. The stop-start nature of the project has reinforced the cynicism generally felt within the workforce towards 'Turnhay 2000'. At this stage in the project, many of the shop floor workforce continue to believe it will eventually go away, and if these circumstances continue the very best that Senior Management will achieve will be the behavioral compliance of the workforce to a new set of bureaucratic requirements.

The strength of an existent organisational culture, made up of all the...
...socially constructed realities that rest as much in the heads and minds of their members as they do in the concrete sets of rules and regulations... (Morgan 1986: 131) ...is difficult to overcome, a fact recognised by the Production Manager who left the organisation, defeated in her attempts to influence, if not change, the prevailing culture at Turnhay.

90% of the problems that have to be addressed through firefighting are caused in-house. The idea that all the problems are caused by trying to meet unrealistic

customer demands is a fallacy. There are too many people here at all levels, but especially management with 'can't do' attitudes.

The external culture of the local labour market has also had a negative impact on the attempts to change the internal culture of the organisation. The historical context of the local labour market within which the firm is located, is one inculcated with 'us and them' attitudes. The area has strong traditions of collectivism and opposition to management. More recently, this mistrust of management has broadened to include a mistrust of trade unions as a consequence of the successive failures of the trade union movement to secure jobs in the area devastated by plant closures. If workers distrust the organisations that are there to support them in their relationship with management, it is unlikely they will accommodate a management offering high trust strategies that are designed to bring an end to 'us and them' attitudes.

Despite being designed as a comprehensive, and proactive, attempt to achieve cultural change within the organisation, the reality of 'Turnhay 2000' has been, to a large extent, incremental and reactive. Again there are two reasons for this. Firstly, the lack of support from the parent company has limited the resources available to invest in areas that would have increased the chances of success. As a result the incremental and reactive nature of the project has done nothing to reduce the cynicism of the workforce. Secondly, and most importantly, is the conflictual nature of the employment relationship. Notwithstanding all of the arguments put forward about the difficulties involved in achieving any form of fundamental change within an organisation (Hogarth 1993; Argyris 1998; White 1998) the nature of the employment relationship itself can not be ignored as source of obstruction to change.

Goddard (1998) suggests that the conflicts embedded in the employment relationship *limit the effectiveness and sustainability of reforms*, and the willingness to engage with 'Turnhay 2000' has been tempered by the strategies the workforce have employed to maintain control over their day to day experiences as employees. Some individuals have committed to the project, but these have been identified as *a few key people, the future Cell/Shift leaders*. For those in key positions, who may ultimately be able to define their own roles and responsibilities (however partially), and with the status and rewards that go with employment at this level, it is easy for individuals to

identify with, and commit to, an organisation. Of the remainder, because of the type of job they do; the level of wages they receive; with little effective autonomy over their jobs, few will commit to the new regime. For these individuals, the employment relationship will remain conflictual and, individually and collectively, they will continue to use both overt and covert strategies of resistance that management will find difficult to overcome.

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