



Dramaturgical analysis of organizational change and conflict

Dramaturgical
analysis

Donald W. McCormick

California State University, Northridge, California, USA

685

Abstract

Purpose – To better understand the process of organizational change by broadening Goffman's dramaturgical analysis to apply to the organizational level.

Design/methodology/approach – It is a case study of a failed organizational change effort focused on racial and gender harassment and intimidation in a federal organization. The data came from interviews and observation.

Findings – Goffman's dramaturgical analysis is expanded from the interpersonal to the organizational level. This study argues that organizations, too, have performances, a front stage, a back stage, and an audience. Conflict in the organization is seen as the management team exerting expressive control to maintain the organization's line, while activist teams (a feminist group and the Equal Employment Opportunity office) create scenes that disrupt it. The researcher/consultants who were called into study the situation were thrust into meta-complementary position. Dramaturgical analysis is posited as a separate perspective for organizational analysis.

Research limitations/implications – The ability to generalize from this to other organizations is limited by the case study method used to generate the theory.

Practical implications – The dramaturgical approach presented in this paper can be used to analyze organizational change and help identify sources of resistance to change that other frameworks do not.

Originality/value – Goffman's dramaturgical analysis is a new frame for understanding organizational change.

Keywords Gender, Conflict management, Organizational change

Paper type Case study

Goffman (1959) uses the metaphor of theatre to explain individual, two person, and team behavior. Here, that dramaturgical analysis expands to analyze organizational behavior in a case study. Dramaturgy is "the craft or the techniques of dramatic composition considered collectively" (Random House, 1972). First, relevant literature is discussed, then the case and the elements of the analysis are presented. The elements of dramaturgy are used to clarify conflict, the role of research, and planned change within the organization studied. Consequences of this analytic framework are discussed.

In terms of the literature on dramaturgy this study extends the metaphor of theatre to cover non-artistic, non-stage events and processes, including organizational change processes. Goffman is the major exponent of the dramaturgical approach (Meltzer *et al.*, 1975). Dramaturgical analysis is part of symbolic interactionism (Stryker, 1981) and is usually traced back to Kenneth Burke's work (Brisset and Edgley, 1975). Gouldner (1970) criticized this approach for focusing on microanalyses of brief encounters and ignoring the institutional frame in which they occur.

The US Office of Personnel Management provided partial support for this study. The views expressed herein do not necessarily reflect official Office of Personnel Management policy.



However, Thompson (1977) used dramaturgy to look at promotion, specialization, authority, management team loyalty and other processes in organizational hierarchies. Young and Massey (1978) refer to corporate public relations practices as dramaturgical (and bad). Snow (1979) describes social movements (one form of organization) that use theatrical techniques to gain the favor of society. The organizational perspective in this paper extends the metaphor to a new level. Goffman (1959) says there are four perspectives that are traditionally used to analyze social establishments: technical, political, structural and cultural. He poses dramaturgy as a fifth perspective that stands beside these. The four traditional perspectives have been used to analyze planned change. Examples of this are the technical (Crowfoot and Chesler, 1976), political (Pfeffer, 1978), structural (Lawrence and Lorsch, 1967) and cultural (Handy, 1976). This paper looks at planned change from the fifth perspective – dramaturgy.

Narrative of events

This study focuses on the National Research Institute[1], a federal organization of 13,000 devoted to scientific research.

In 1971 and 1972 some women who had filed affirmative action complaints at the National Research Institute said they were being harassed and intimidated by their supervisors. Learning of these complaints, the Equal Rights Group* a feminist group at the National Research Institute, offered support to the women and wrote of the incidents in its newsletter.

In October 1973, members of the Equal Rights Group and the top management of the National Research Institute met to discuss delays, harassment and intimidation in the complaints process. The National Research Institute management and the Equal Rights Group met for 2 1/2 years.

They discussed what the Equal Rights Group considered to be the unresponsiveness of the National Research Institute's Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO)* office to the problems of women. Although the National Research Institute said it would respond to the Equal Rights Group's concerns, little was done. For example, the Equal Rights Group asked for a director's memo condemning harassment and even submitted a draft, but nothing was ever sent out. Two months later the National Research Institute turned this harassment issue over to EEO, even though the Equal Rights Group had complained that Equal Employment Opportunity staff was doing some of the harassment and intimidation. During this time the Equal Rights Group catalogued the types of abuse reported to them and distributed it throughout the National Research Institute. In February 1976, EEO, the Equal Rights Group and top management met again. The Equal Rights Group presented their list of abuses and a file of their newsletters; 18 out of the last 24 issues contained reports of harassment. Management appointed a task force to, as one interviewee put it, "look into whether it is a real problem or just rare cases." The task force contained two African-American men from the Equal Employment Opportunity office (whose staff the Equal Rights Group saw as unsympathetic to the problems of white women), the assistant director for administration (a white man) and one white woman from the Equal Rights Group.

One of the first things the task force did was change the name of the study to the "Employee Conflict Study." As the Assistant Director said, "I decided it wasn't going to

be 'Harassment and Intimidation at the National Research Institute.'" But an EEO officer resisted this:

Conflict is a term I reluctantly agreed to use. The issue is harassment and intimidation and it should be focused on. The need is to examine the extent of harassment and intimidation at the National Research Institute and design strategies to modify it . . . If there is a fungus and all the signs are there, we would not study how to show it was there, we should study how to get rid of it.

The title change obscured the focus on harassment. Also, the task force added other issues to the study (such as employees in jobs with no promotion potential).

Next the task force created a 14 member review panel to assure input from diverse segments of the National Research Institute community. At the first joint review panel-task force meeting one review panel member arrived late; his supervisor delayed him, saying, "These meetings aren't the kind of things that will help you get a promotion." Another member indicated that she would have to work late that day to make up the time spent at the meeting. Still another used vacation time to attend. The review panel met regularly and advised the task force.

Before the conflict study, the Equal Rights Group had done a promotion rate study and proposal. After studying it carefully, management dismissed it as lacking merit. The task force did not want this to happen again. So in April 1976 the task force decided to contract with an outside group to insure a credible, objective and professional study. Concern was expressed that an in-house study would not be easily believed. They sent out a request for a proposal that did not mention harassment or intimidation but asked for a study of employee conflict at the National Research Institute and effective ways to resolve it. Management's appointment of a task force, the task force's creation of a review panel, and the issue of the RFP for researchers is (as one anonymous reviewer put it) a "pre-dramatic process of casting of agencies and groups in various roles for the upcoming spectacle of dealing with harassment in complaints." This casting ensures that "this particular spectacle will break out of the ritual window-dressing management wanted it to be."

It was frustrating for the Equal Rights Group to meet for three years and see nothing happen but the creation of a task force. Some feared that the study was just another that would wind up as a dust farm in a drawer or that it was just management trying to buy time. One person feared that whenever management was presented with a problem, they studied it and created a task force that would buy at least six months time.

Historically, change efforts at the National Research Institute have taken a long time to resolve. So the Equal Rights Group was somewhat justified in their suspicions. One interviewee said some African-American groundskeepers fought 18 years before they won their discrimination complaint in court. He said some suffered harassment, constant monitoring, surveillance, threats of dismissal and more. During the 18 years, many of the original complainants died or retired. The National Research Institute never admitted it was wrong, and the justice department, who defended the National Research Institute, wound up paying the back pay to the complainants.

Another discrimination case took ten years of effort and a court trial. The female PhD who was pressing the case beat the National Research Institute on appeal. In her first trial, the judge made disparaging remarks about her and women in general. In yet another case, the Equal Rights Group woman on the conflict task force spent ten years

on a sex discrimination complaint that she finally won in court. One Equal Rights Group member commented on the frustration involved in fighting discrimination at the National Research Institute:

There is tremendous anguish. You need a support system. You can't go to EEO or the personnel office. People in EEO cases get possessed . . . EEO lawyers say women from the Equal Rights Group have not had to go to psychiatrists because they get support. Many others have to go to a psychiatrist. You lose husbands. Papers stack up in your living room. You become possessed with it, working on it on weekends. Many families are broken up. Horrible relations with people in the office. You're constantly harassed.

She went on to say why it is bad at the National Research Institute:

In private industry they generally settle out of court. They don't want to spend too much time or money. The federal government had lawyers on the payroll.

The comment about lawyers already on payroll means that it is likely to be less expensive for a government agency to refuse to settle a case than it would be for a corporation[2]. The anguish, frustration and suspicion behind these incidents awaited the researchers who secured the National Research Institute conflict study contract.

The organizational research branch of a different federal agency responded to the request for a proposal. It was a unique opportunity to expand their survey of organizational climate and to intervene in a large system. In September of 1978 the National Research Institute chose this group to do the study. This group will hereafter be referred to as the study team.

This study team made sure all the different groups at the National Research Institute knew about the study and could participate in it. The National Research Institute wanted the study team to be sexually and racially balanced to make it easier for the team to relate to the diverse groups in the National Research Institute, so the study team borrowed an African-American female organizational psychology PhD student from the CIA.

The study team met with various groups and held open meetings for other employees to discuss the study. These meetings brought a diverse crowd. The African-American female doctoral student on the study team (who in 1968 had participated in a takeover of a building at Cornell University that involved the use of guns) said, "One meeting reminded me of 67-68. I go into the meeting and there are guys lined up in the back of the hall with shades and leather jackets."

The study team suggested the survey include cooperation as well as conflict. They interviewed every employee who wanted to talk about conflict, cooperation, intimidation or harassment at the National Research Institute. They also interviewed a random sample of 107 employees. Interview data were content analyzed and used to create a questionnaire. The questionnaire was pre-tested and shown to the task force and review panel for comments and approval. Finally, the study team administered the questionnaire – in groups and by mail.

After the results came in, the study team fed back and discussed them with interested management and employee groups. The meetings provided another source of data for a final report and helped the groups think about the implications for change. The final report included data analyses and recommendations for change. Here are some of the results:

... employees in the crafts and trades, plant operations, and maintenance staff ... experienced the most conflict, particularly minority females ... Employees in this category were most aware of harassment. Minority females had the most problems with coworker conflicts, which occur most frequently in the form of criticism, insults, and demeaning comments ... [A]dministrative, secretarial, and clerical staff and nonminority females felt most locked into jobs with no promotion potential. Females in general were less likely to feel that they could transfer jobs than males ... Four formal conflict resolution mechanisms ... were examined. They included the EEO discrimination complaints process, the grievance process, personnel guidance and counseling, and the employee assistance program. The findings showed that over one-half of the users found that the Equal Employment Opportunity complaints process and the grievance process increased conflict ... Lack of staff sensitivity to the welfare of employees was a concern for many users of the grievance process and personnel guidance and counseling, while many users of EEO felt that it did not have the power to enforce its decisions and that its staff was a tool of management. One-half of the users of the grievance process felt that it took too long ...

Approximately, 1/3 of the employees were aware of physical or sexual harassment through experience or observation. In addition, 1/3 of the National Research Institute employees also said they would not address a conflict complaint because they were afraid of harassment or reprisal.

The task force and review panel incorporated the findings into their own report and recommendations. The study team report, task force report and review panel report were submitted to the National Research Institute director and deputy director. Both executives committed themselves to respond in writing to the recommendations.

The task force and review panel submitted reports that were that were so different that the director created yet another group to put together the two sets of recommendations. EEO withdrew its support from the recommendations because they did not stress combating racial discrimination enough, nor did they support its bid for more resources. In 1982, a new director, who had no stake in the results, came in. The new group never put together the recommendations from the task force and review panel, so nothing came of it. Some subunits made some changes in the area of training and blue collar conflict resolution, but the director never made a National Research Institute-wide commitment to change. This was nine years after the first Equal Rights Group meeting with management. The coming of a new director resulted in the end of this drama, or if you wish, it going from a drama to something resembling an increasingly unpopular sitcom.

The events surrounding this study can be understood more fully through dramaturgical analysis. This analysis follows a short section on methods.

Method

The author conducted semi-structured interviews with members of the review panel, task force and study team, since they were the people most involved in the planned change. He participated in, observed, and facilitated some meetings of the review panel. Relevant documents and files were also used as data. Data were coded and analyzed in accordance with the methods suggested by Schatzman and Strauss (1973) and Bogdan and Taylor (1975).

Elements of dramaturgical analysis

Primary elements of dramaturgical analysis include the performance, back stage, teams, audience, and stagehands. These elements center on the performance. A performance is all the activity of an individual or team “on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants” (Goffman, 1959, p. 15). A visual representation of dramaturgical analysis of organizational conflict is in Figure 1.

It must be noted that when an individual level analysis is expanded to the group and organization, it may be confusing because the individual processes are still going on. Confusion results if the level of the performance is unclear. Here, when a

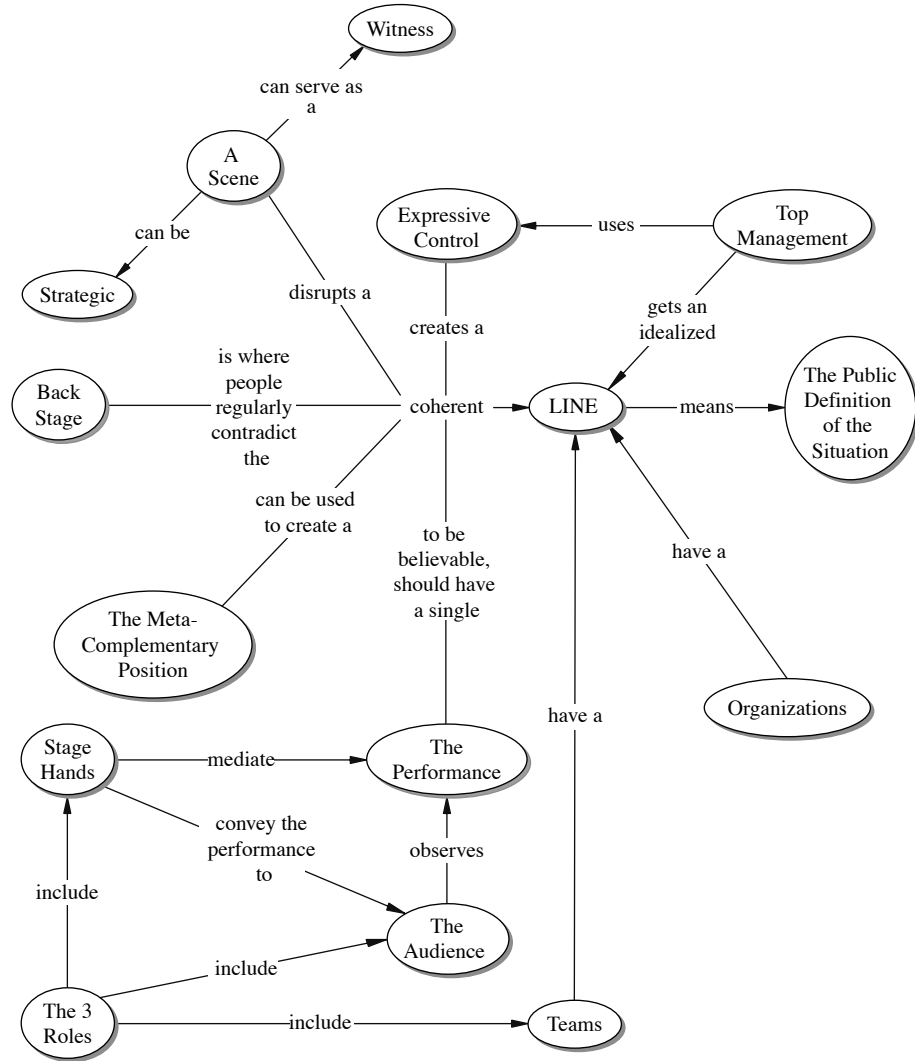


Figure 1.
Organizational conflict
over a coherent public
definition of the situation

performing individual or group is regarded as representative of a team, it is considered a team performance. When an individual or group is regarded as representative of the organization, it is an organizational performance, not an individual performance. This paper is concerned with the performance of teams and organizations, not with individuals *per se*.

The backstage is:

... a place relative to a given performance, where the impression fostered by a performance is knowingly contradicted as a matter of course; it is a place where the performer can reliably expect that no member will intrude (Goffman, 1959, p. 112).

The Equal Rights Group's newsletter and meetings, where the National Research Institute employees freely discuss their dissatisfaction with the organization, are in the National Research Institute's backstage. All aspects of day-to-day managing regarded as unfit for public consumption fit backstage. The organization's backstage is made up of the activities and communications of the teams. Each team also has a backstage distinct from the organization's.

The roles in this analysis are that of team, audience and stagehands. A team is any set of individuals who cooperate in staging a pre-established pattern of action (Goffman, 1959). The women of the Equal Rights Group, the minorities of the Equal Employment Opportunity office and the top management of the National Research Institute are all teams.

The audience consists of observers of a particular performance (Goffman, 1959). The audience of the National Research Institute consists of Congress, the Department of the Interior* of which it is a part, the taxpaying constituents of Congress and others. The primary audience of a team such as the Equal Rights Group is members of the National Research Institute who are not participating in but observing the drama. People outside the organization may also be part of their audience (for example, people in other agencies who hear that the National Research Institute is not a good place for women to work).

This paper introduces the concept of stagehands, who help convey the performance to the audience. The newspapers, local radio and TV are examples from the National Research Institute. Corporations often hire stagehands (such as public relations firms and advertising agencies) to present idealized images to their audiences (Young and Massey, 1978). Stagehands mediate the performances of an organization. Just as a lighting technician may shine a spotlight on a certain performer or a sound technician may amplify selected portions of the performance, so do the media select, conceal, accent and downplay parts of an organization's performance. One example of this would be the leaking of information on the conflict study to the *Washington Post** which ran an article on the conflict study. Public agencies and officials are subject to more intense scrutiny by stagehands such as the press (Hochschild, 1981). This intensifies dramaturgical dynamics in public organizations.

The organization's line

We shall expand Goffman's (1967) definition of an individual's line it to teams and organizations. A team or organization's line is its public definition of the situation, and management promotes the organization's line. The top manager who said he did not want a study on "harassment and intimidation at the National Research

Institute” reflected a concern that the study did not publicly define the organization as a place where harassment and intimidation occur. Top management identifies with the organization’s line. This is understandable since the audience holds an organization’s top management responsible for the organization, including the impression it gives. Organizations and the officials who speak for them tend to offer an idealized line that emphasizes “the officially accredited values of the society” (Goffman, 1959, p. 35). Top management rarely sees harassment, and we assume that middle managers who are aware of it do not want to call attention to it in their departments. If the National Research Institute does not maintain the belief that its house is in order, it invites outside intrusion and control. Management is unlikely to see the benefit in such intrusion (Petee, 1981; Arndt and Bigelow, 2000). Top management’s place in the structure supports its getting an idealized line. The problem of middle managers and employees only passing on positive information to executives who wind up out of touch has even been given a name – CEO’s disease (Byrne *et al.*, 1991; Goleman *et al.*, 2002). The idealization of the organization’s line makes it suspect. Kihn (2005, p. 32) write that his experience writing for the business press (*Forbes*) led him to realize that “there is nothing less truthful than the public face of management. Except, perhaps, the public utterances of management consultants.”

The idealization of the organization’s line happens by accenting some facts and concealing others. For example, the mere fact that harassment and intimidation are studied at the National Research Institute presumes that it exists. Management can partially conceal this by renaming the study to a “conflict and cooperation” study. Euphemism, inflated words, cloudy vagueness and ambiguity make a statement harder to attack and give management more freedom to act (Mintz and Cohen, 1976). Merelman (1969) points out that this idealized impression can also be helped by dramaturgical techniques such as personification, identification appeals, symbolism, catharsis and suspense. These techniques “are employed to make an effective political ideology” (p. 220) and political ideology is the seminal example of line (think of “the party line”). Unlike management, the activists of EEO and the Equal Rights Group are cynical about and do not identify with the organization’s line.

Conflict

Maintaining a single line (public definition of the situation) is crucial in order to create a believable performance. Conflict in the organization can be seen as the management team using expressive control to maintain the organization’s line and activists creating scenes to disrupt the line. Expressive control is the attempt by performers to make sure that as many as possible of the minor events in a performance will occur in such a way as to convey either no impression or an impression that is compatible with the overall definition of the situation (Goffman, 1959).

Management exerts expressive control to promote the official line (Futrell, 1999). The management team can train subordinates to respond appropriately to their superiors, hopefully assuring a good performance. The well trained subordinate takes the superiors’ cues at face value, shows proper appreciation for their performances, keeps his or her place, exercises tact, and keeps information secret that is inconsistent with the impression management wishes to foster (Thompson, 1977). These are all minor events that support a performance.

Goffman (1967) points out that those who learn, from subtle hints, their place in a society's order are allowed to furnish their place as pleasantly as they wish. This is more than a metaphor. While waiting to interview the head of EEO, I sat in a reception room with his secretary. The walls were entirely covered with curtains. I peeked behind one and saw that the curtains concealed walls of green tile. Upon questioning, the secretary revealed that his office was a converted restroom. If allocation of office space indicates place in the society of the National Research Institute, the Equal Employment Opportunity office location may reveal something about how EEO is regarded by the management.

Support for the idea of management expressive control comes from work done on social control. Gamson (1968) points out that the authorities in a system view it from the perspective of control – since potential partisans may disrupt the system. The concept of expressive control covers the micro, seemingly unimportant events in everyday interaction. This is part of the way Goffman, unlike most other power scholars, accounts for the “day to day routine conformity which generally corresponds to the preferences of the more powerful, influential members of a social system” (Rogers, 1977). Gramsci emphasizes that a key part of social dominance involves accepting this hegemonic view (what we call “line”) as “normal reality” or “common sense” (Williams, 1976).

While management uses expressive control to support the organization's line, activists do not always support it. They may even create a scene. A scene is a situation in which an individual or team intentionally destroys or seriously threatens the polite appearance of consensus (Goffman, 1959). One EEO official described an African-American activist who excelled at organizational scenes. This activist was the spokesman for a militant group at the National Research Institute, and according to the Equal Employment Opportunity official he:

... got news attention on problems. He had an afternoon radio show. He would raise an issue and they would come out with TV cameras ... He would get a group of employees to sit in the Secretary of [the Department of the Interior's*] office ... There were two issues he surfaced and got done. One, they were going to downgrade wage grade employees. He brought it to the attention of the news media. Two, they were going to contract out the laundry. This was a traditional place of entry into the federal sector for low-skilled blacks with little experience or education. (The Director) decided not to contract the laundry out. He made the laundry into a model working place – air conditioning, upgraded workers, put in a new guy who was a great supervisor. It got a [DOI] award. Attitude, time and attendance improved. Some people didn't want to leave the laundry.

This militant used the stagehands of local radio and TV to create successful scenes. Activists' mainly derive power from their ability to create a scene. Although it has been noted that impression management is an important technique in the struggle for organizational power and authority (Thompson, 1977) and others have explored the use of impression management in protest (Elsbach and Sutton, 1992; Miles, 1989), the scene as such has not been fully explored as a source of organizational power.

In explaining the scene as a source of organizational power it is useful to distinguish between two types of scenes – the strategic scene and the witness scene. A strategic scene is part of a specific strategy for change. The African-American militant exemplified the use of the strategic scene.

The idea of the witness scene comes from the tactic of the *Old Testament* prophetic witness, who is primarily concerned with focusing the spotlight of public opinion on what he considers to be evil practices to show that someone opposes this evil (Schaller, 1972). The Equal Rights Group's newsletter does this by publicizing what it considers to be unjust actions against women, even though publication may not be a direct part of a strategy for change. The witness scene is often marked by provocative language, which may increase discontent among sympathizers but is not likely to gain the support of opposing or neutral teams who find the language offensive. It may lead to polarization and a decline in communication. This is appropriate with revolutionary teams who see polarization as a step towards change (Schaller, 1972).

This form of scene appeared in an anonymous pamphlet on African-Americans' position at the National Research Institute. The pamphlet was filled with inflammatory language and imagery. For example, it described an anti-discrimination program that was:

... allowed to fade away ... And the way it was done was very sick indeed. This operation (not so co-incidentally) was headed by an African-American manager who, to paraphrase an infamous statement, was left by white management to hang by his b – twisting slowly in the climate, until he got out.

Both the witness and strategic scenes disrupt the organization's line. The minorities of EEO kept exposing the National Research Institute's backstage. A report on EEO was made by a task force regarded by many as dominated by EEO interests. It was discussed in the nationally distributed National Research Institute newspaper:

... the task force concluded that EEO personnel had been denied necessary support in commitment and resources from the National Research Institute top management, and that the division had been allowed to deteriorate. The task force reported that it encountered expressions of a deep sense of frustration, resentment and anger by the National Research Institute-EEO community, and the perception that that the National Research Institute management, viewing EEO as a "social program," makes no serious commitment to the spirit or letter of the laws, regulations and policies concerned with EEO.

This report caused a stir in the National Research Institute. The report was released in summer, 1980. The Equal Employment Opportunity's team line could be seen in the EEO report. The Equal Rights Group, however, exposed the backstage of EEO and the report. The Equal Rights Group newsletter said the EEO task force recommendations centered on promotions, more offices and more staff for Equal Employment Opportunity, while downgrading the Women's Advisory Committee and Hispanic committee. It portrayed the task force as dominated by "EEO coordinators and some others," and excluding any nonminority women or representatives of women's groups. The Equal Rights Group also questioned how representative the EEO staff was:

The EEO staff should be representative of the National Research Institute work force. The latest EEO photographic roster shows 20 people – 12 minority men (ten black, one oriental, one Hispanic), six African-American women, one non-minority man and one non-minority woman. The approximate workforce composition is 12 percent black men, 12 percent black women, 40 percent white men and 35 percent white women, with only a handful of Orientals and Hispanics. Not only does this composition emphasize the separate and ghettoized nature of the EEO effort, but also the largest single protected group – non-minority women, is

almost totally unrepresented. This has resulted in utter neglect of the problem of sex discrimination.

A scene disrupts the organization or team's line. Implicit within the concept of the scene is a different line – the line of the disrupters. As is seen in this exposure, the Equal Employment Opportunity team and the Equal Rights Group both have lines. EEO's line goes something like this: "Blacks are oppressed at the National Research Institute. EEO is starved for resources. Management doesn't care about us." EEO tries to present its line whenever possible and embed it in the organization. Certainly if EEO could get this line accepted as the organization's, EEO would receive more resources. EEO presented its line in the EEO report and the implications of this line were clearly spelled out in the report's recommendations. It recommended that EEO be given more resources, upgraded and promoted.

Thomas and Thomas (1929) said, "If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences." If the organization accepts Equal Employment Opportunity's line as real, the consequences are more power, prestige and money. The Equal Rights Group also has a line and an investment in destroying the other team lines. The Equal Rights Group defines the National Research Institute situation as one where too many women are discriminated against and harassed; where not enough is done by management to change this; and where EEO does not adequately represent women even though they represent the greatest number of people deserving of EEO protection. The Equal Rights Group sees the EEO recommendations as removing women from contact with top management and forcing them under an unsympathetic Equal Employment Opportunity bureaucracy. If the organization adopts Equal Rights Group's line, EEO's recommendations would not be accepted. Each team has a line it is attempting to promote. Some theorists (Pfeffer, 1978; Cyert and March, 1963) argue that organizations are made up of coalitions of vying interests. Dramaturgical devices such as expressive control and scenes are two ways in which they vie. Conflict in the organization can, in the dramaturgical light, be seen as conflict between teams. Next we examine the structure of this conflict.

The structure of conflict

The key factor in the structure of social encounters "is the maintenance of a single definition of the situation, this definition having to be expressed and this expression sustained in the face of a multitude of potential disruptions" (Goffman, 1959, p. 254).

The definition of the relationship in this analysis is crucial. The conflict between teams in the National Research Institute centered on their attempts to make their line the single definition of the situation. This battle thrust the study team researchers into the meta-complementary position. A meta-complementary relationship exists where "A lets or forces B to be in charge of him" (Watzlawick *et al.*, 1967 p. 69). The National Research Institute, including both teams, asked the study team research group define the situation regarding conflict (or harassment and intimidation) at the National Research Institute. Everyone on the task force agreed that an outside group would have more credibility. Both management and the activists expected their side to be justified by the study.

Social scientists are good candidates for the meta-complementary position because they have some unique power to define situations. By emphasizing rigorous methods, the social scientist can remove the focus on the political conflict of values and

“focus contention on questions of fact” (Gouldner, 1970). “Science becomes that magic word which allows the transformation of value-laden knowledge into a value free one” (Navarro, 1980). Compromise is easier when issues are framed as technical and involving measurable quantities than when they are framed as moral or ethical in nature (Merelman, 1969).

The behavioral scientist who is an outside consultant may have even more magic and is no stranger to impression management, as “the core feature of consultancy work [is] the creation and maintenance of a compelling illusion which persuades clients of their quality and value” (Clark and Salaman, 1998, p. 19). Pfeffer (1978) described the consultant as a hit man and noted the utility of hiring “a prestigious, well paid and impressive looking consultant” to obtain the appearance of objectivity when interested in suggesting an organizational restructuring that would increase one’s influence. Certainly the study team did more to define the organization’s line more than the group that did the promotion rate study. The study team was more credible, that is it had more power to define a situation.

Another dramaturgical device in the social scientist’s repertoire is the ability to “snow” another team with large amounts of near incomprehensible data. A prominent researcher in the natural sciences at the National Research Institute said about the study:

Most of our scientists don’t deal with data like that. I couldn’t handle that data. I had trouble reading the study . . . Most everyone was overwhelmed by the problem of digesting it – despairing of ever digesting it. We are stuck in the realization that if Jon [of the study team] were dishonest and presented the data in such a way, no one would catch it.

Although the study team did not pull a “snow job” (they came up with the most comprehensive and objective data on the subject so far), they did alter the definition of the situation. Often consultants create situations where a client (the National Research Institute, in this case) is unable to judge the quality of the services rendered or the conclusions of a report (Starbuck, 1992), and this makes stagecraft all the more important for defining a situation.

One manager discussed how his definition of the situation changed:

I came from the traditional management view that there was nothing going on. EEO and the Equal Rights Group were convinced there was a problem. They were interested in establishing facts to support what they already knew. I was interested in establishing this was not the case, but open-minded enough to accept the facts if they proved otherwise.

The study moved this manager from a line that conflicted with the activists towards a common definition of the situation.

In summary, the battle to define the situation led the conflicting teams to recruit the researchers into the meta-complementary position of determining the organization’s line.

Consequences of dramaturgy

One consequence of a dramaturgical frame is that it provides a clearer picture of such situations than would more traditional methods of analysis. It allows one to examine the more irrational patterns of organizational behavior, unlike most traditional methods which are based on assumptions of rationality. Dramaturgy’s strength lays in

its closeness to the experience of day-to-day behaviors and motivations, as well as its understandability to people who are not social scientists.

Another consequence of a dramaturgical perspective for a person managing an organizational change is that it suggests the use of change strategies that deal with the line. For example, it implies that conflict reduction techniques such as the one where two teams discuss how they see themselves, how they see each other, and how they think the other sees them, are appropriate because they deal directly with the lines in conflict. A practitioner using the dramaturgical frame is more likely to use such interventions.

The final consequence concerns the researcher and interventionist. The dramaturgical model and its concept of the backstage explain some organizations' resistance to inquiry. As any inquirer knows, there is often tremendous resistance to sharing backstage knowledge with those not considered to be team members. Team members often fear this knowledge will be exposed to their audience.

Conclusion

In situations of organizational change or conflict, dramaturgical analysis directs our attention to the struggle to define the situation. Much is explained when we see this as central. It explains resistance to organizational learning, which often calls for giving everyone involved access to the backstage. It explains why management becomes so disturbed by scenes, and it explains why seemingly small things like the title of a report become organizational battlegrounds.

Dramaturgical analysis can be expanded to analyze organizational dynamics such as planned change and conflict. An organization can be said to have back stages, audiences and stagehands. Management attempts to present an idealized line during its performances, using expressive control. Organizational conflict can be seen as activists creating scenes to disrupt the organization's line and presenting their own competing line. This conflict over line often leads the battling teams to recruit an organizational researcher who takes the meta-complementary position, becoming something like Gramsci's (1971, p. 3) "organic intellectual", i.e. both aloof and distant with an "objectifying" gaze credible to managerial minds and (ideally) at the same time close in solidarity with the underdogs which would make him (or her) credible to them as well.

Notes

1. An asterisk appears by all names that have been changed in order to protect confidentiality.
2. Thanks go to an anonymous reviewer for pointing out this implication.

References

- Arndt, M. and Bigelow, B. (2000), "Presenting structural innovation in an institutional environment: hospitals' use of impression management", *Administrative Science Quarterly*, Vol. 45 No. 3, pp. 494-522.
- Bogdan, R. and Taylor, S. (1975), *Introduction to Qualitative Research Methods*, Wiley, New York, NY.
- Brisset, D. and Edgley, C. (1975), *Life as Theatre: A Dramaturgical Sourcebook*, Aldine Publications, Somerset, NJ.

- Byrne, J.A., Symonds, W.C. and Siler, J.F. (1991), "CEO disease", *Business Week*, No. 3206, p. 52.
- Clark, T. (1998), "Creating the 'right' impression: towards a dramaturgy of management consultancy", *The Service Industries Journal*, Vol. 18 No. 1, pp. 18-39.
- Crowfoot, J. and Chesler, M. (1976), "Contemporary perspectives on planned social change: a comparison", in Bennis, W.G., Benne, K.D. and Chin, R. (Eds), *The Planning of Change*, Holt, Rhinehart & Winston, New York, NY.
- Cyert, R. and March, J.G. (1963), *A Behavioral Theory of the Firm*, Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, NJ.
- Elsbach, K.D. and Sutton, R.I. (1992), "Acquiring organizational legitimacy through illegitimate actions: a marriage of institutional and impression management theories", *Academy of Management Journal*, Vol. 35 No. 4, pp. 699-738.
- Futrell, R. (1999), "Performance governance: impression management, teamwork, and conflict containment in city commission proceedings", *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, Vol. 27 No. 4, pp. 494-529.
- Gamson, W. (1968), *Power and Discontent*, Dorsey, Homewood IL.
- Goffman, E. (1959), *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Doubleday & Co., New York, NY.
- Goffman, E. (1967), *Interaction Ritual*, Doubleday & Co., New York, NY.
- Goleman, D., Boyatzis, R. and McKee, A. (2002), *Primal Leadership*, Harvard Business School Press, Cambridge, NY.
- Gouldner, A. (1970), *The Coming Crisis in Western Sociology*, Avon, New York, NY.
- Gramsci, A. (1971), "The intellectuals", *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, Translated and Edited by Q. Hoare and G.N. Smith, International Publishers, New York, NY, pp. 3-23.
- Handy, C. (1976), *Understanding Organizations*, Penguin, New York, NY.
- Hochschild, A. (1981), "Reporting on the naked truth", *Mother Jones*, August.
- Kihn, M. (2005), *House of Lies: How Management Consultants Steal Your Watch and then Tell You the Time*, Warner Business Books, New York, NY.
- Lawrence, P. and Lorsch, J. (1967), *Organization and Environment*, Harvard, Boston, MA.
- Meltzer, V., Petras, J. and Reynolds, L. (1975), *Symbolic Interactionism*, Kegan Paul, Boston, MA.
- Merelman, R. (1969), "The dramaturgy of politics", *The Sociological Quarterly*, Vol. 1, pp. 216-43.
- Miles, W. (1989), "The rally as ritual: dramaturgical politics in Nigerian Hausaland", *Comparative Politics*, Vol. 21 No. 3, p. 323.
- Mintz, M. and Cohen, J. (1976), *Power Inc.*, Bantam Books, New York, NY.
- Navarro, V. (1980), "Work, ideology and science: the case of medicine", *International Journal of Health Services*, Vol. 10 No. 4.
- Petee, J. (1981), Personal Communication. March.
- Pfeffer, J. (1978), *Organizational Design*, AHM, Arlington Heights, IL.
- Rogers, M. (1977), "Goffman on power", *The American Sociologist*, Vol. 12, p. 88.
- Schaller, L. (1972), *The Change Agent*, Abingdon, Nashville, TN.
- Schatzman, L. and Strauss, A. (1973), *Field Research*, Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, NJ.
- Snow, D.A. (1979), "A dramaturgical analysis of movement accommodation: building idiosyncrasy credit as a movement mobilization strategy", *Symbolic Interaction*, Vol. 2 No. 2, pp. 23-44.
- Starbuck, W.H. (1992), "Learning by knowledge-intensive firms", *Journal of Management Studies*, Vol. 29 No. 6, pp. 713-40.

- Stryker, S. (1981), "Symbolic interactionism: themes and variations", in Rosenberg, M. and Turner, R.H. (Eds), *Social Psychology: Sociological Perspectives*, Basic Books, New York, NY.
- The Random House Dictionary of the English Language (1972), *A Behavioral Theory of the Firm*, Random House, New York.
- Thomas, W.I. and Thomas, W.I. (1929), *The Child in America*, Alfred Knopf, New York, NY, p. 572.
- Thompson, V. (1977), *Modern Organization*, Knopf, New York, NY.
- Watzlawick, P., Beavin, J. and Jackson, D. (1967), *The Pragmatics of Human Communication*, Norton & Co., New York, NY.
- Williams, R. (1976), *Keywords*, Fontana, London.
- Young, T. and Massey, G. (1978), "The dramaturgical society: a macro analytic approach to dramaturgical analysis", *Qualitative Sociology*, Vol. 1 No. 2, p. 78.

Further reading

- Chaffee, L. (1993), "Dramaturgical politics: the culture and ritual of demonstrations in Argentina", *Media, Culture & Society*, Vol. 15 No. 1, p. 113.

Corresponding author

Donald W. McCormick can be contacted at: dwm2@cwru.edu