

**MANAGEMENT GURUS AND MANAGEMENT FASHIONS:  
A DRAMATISTIC INQUIRY**

**A thesis in support of the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.)**

**By**

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## ABSTRACT

Since the 1980s, popular management thinkers, or management gurus, have promoted a number of performance improvement programs or management fashions that have greatly influenced both the pre-occupations of academic researchers and the everyday conduct of organizational life. This thesis provides a rhetorical critique of the management guru and management fashion phenomenon with a view to building on the important theoretical progress that has recently been made by a small, but growing, band of management researchers. Fantasy theme analysis, a dramatically-based method of rhetorical criticism, is conducted on three of the most important management fashions to have emerged during the 1990s: the reengineering movement promoted by Michael Hammer and James Champy; the effectiveness movement led by Stephen Covey; and the learning organization movement inspired by Peter Senge and his colleagues.

The study discovers that the rhetorical visions for all three movements possess strong dramatic qualities. It suggests that managers and other followers find these visions compelling because they can readily relate to the gurus' organizational dramas which contain a familiar cast of characters, a clear and well-developed plot line and a meaningful setting. While they share strong dramatic qualities, the underlying rhetorical appeal of each vision is rooted in three quite distinctive master analogues or deep structures: pragmatic (reengineering), righteous (effectiveness) and social (learning organization). In addition to its theoretical and empirical contributions, it is hoped that this study will help to stimulate a critical dialogue between practitioners and academics about the sources of the underlying appeal of management gurus and management fashions and their effect upon the quality of management and organizational learning.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	i
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS	v
LIST OF TABLES	vi
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	vii
CHAPTER ONE INTRODUCTION	
Personal Significance of the Study	1
General Significance of the Study	4
Purposes of the Study	7
The Structure of the Study	8
CHAPTER TWO LITERATURE REVIEW: THE MANAGEMENT GURU AND MANAGEMENT FASHION PHENOMENON	
Introduction	11
Describing the Management Guru and Fashion Phenomenon	12
The Rise and Rise of the Management Guru	12
Guru Origins	12
Defining Management Gurus	15
“Surfing” Management Fashions	20
The Management Guru and Management Fashion Backlash	24
Explanations for the Management Gurus and Fashions	34
The Rational Approach	36
The Structural Approach	39
The Institutional/Distancing Approach	43
The Charismatic Approach	50
Towards a Rhetorical Critique	58
Summary	68
CHAPTER THREE LITERATURE REVIEW: DRAMATISTIC RHETORICAL CRITICISM	
Introduction	70
The Fantasy Theme Method of Rhetorical Criticism	72
Origins	72
Key Assumptions and Concepts	75
Empirical Applications of SCT and FTA	81
The Critique and Defence of Symbolic Convergence Theory	91
The Appropriateness of FTA for the Research Problem	101
Summary	106

## CHAPTER FOUR RESEARCH DESIGN

Introduction	108
Selecting the Case Studies	109
Data Collection	116
Data Analysis	119
The Pilot Study	125
Summary	127

## CHAPTER FIVE MICHAEL HAMMER, JAMES CHAMPY AND THE REENGINEERING MOVEMENT

Introduction	129
The Reengineering Movement	131
The Rise and Fall of Reengineering	131
Michael Hammer and James Champy's Leadership Role	135
The Rhetorical Vision of Reengineering	140
Character Theme One: Preservation of Self	142
Character Theme Two: Redemption of Self	144
Character Theme Three: Representation of Self	147
The Performance of Reengineering	149
Rethinking Reengineering	149
The Guru as Rhetorical Performer	151
The Guru as Organizational Playwright	154
Summary	162

## CHAPTER SIX STEPHEN COVEY AND THE EFFECTIVENESS MOVEMENT

Introduction	164
The Seven Highly Effective Habits of Stephen Covey	165
Defining the Rhetorical Community of the Effectiveness Movement	172
The Rhetorical Vision of the Effectiveness Movement	175
Setting Theme: Heading Back to the Farm	176
Action Theme: Working from the "Inside Out"	179
Character Theme: Finding "True North"	184
Managing Spiritual Movements in a Secular Age	188
Stephen Covey's Mormon Heritage	188
Comparing the Effectiveness Movement with Mormonism	191
Mormonism Goes Mainline	196
Summary	199

## CHAPTER SEVEN PETER SENGE AND THE LEARNING ORGANIZATION

Introduction	201
Forerunners and Variants of the Learning Organization Vision	203
Organizing the Learning Organization Vision	207
Background	207
Guru of the New	210
Peter Senge's Anti-Guru Persona	211
A Collaborative Approach to Organizing	212
Where East Meets West	216
Connecting the Private and Public Sectors	219
The Link with the Quality Movement	220
The Rhetorical Community of the Learning Organization	222
Senior Executives	223
Trainers and Human Resource Professionals	226
The Rhetorical Vision of the Learning Organization	229
Setting Theme: Living in an Unsustainable World	229
Action Theme: Getting Control, but not Controlling	232
Character Theme: The Manager's "New Work"	236
Setting Theme: Working it out within the Microworld	240
Sustaining the Vision of the Learning Organization	243
The Critique	243
Senge's Response	251
Summary	257
CHAPTER EIGHT DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION	
Introduction	259
Expanding the Empirical Account	260
Contributions	260
Limitations and Future Directions	269
Theorizing Management Gurus and Management Fashions	272
Contributions	272
Limitations	273
Future Directions	277
Fostering Dialogue Between Academics and Practitioners	279
Contributions and Limitations	279
Curtain Call	281
BIBLIOGRAPHY	284

**LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS**

<u>Fig.</u>	<u>Heading</u>	<u>Page</u>
1.	The Rise of Three Prominent Management Gurus during the 1990s	107

## LIST OF TABLES

<u>Table</u>	<u>Heading</u>	<u>Page</u>
1	The “Guru Texts” and the Academic Critiques of Some Recent Management Fashions	27
2	The Four Approaches to Explaining Management Gurus and Management Fashions	35
3	The Key Concepts of Symbolic Convergence Theory and Exemplars from Popular Management Theory	76
4	Illustrative Empirical Studies Grounded in Symbolic Convergence Theory	82
5	The Three Management Fashion Case Studies	116
6	The Types and Number of Data Sources Utilized in the Study	118
7	Number and Monthly Rate of Citations of the Terms ‘Reengineering’ and ‘Re-engineering’ in the ABI/Inform Database	134
8	Key Fantasy Themes within the Rhetorical Vision of the Reengineering Movement	141
9	Stephen Covey’s Seven Habits of Highly Effective People	168
10	Key Fantasy Themes within the Rhetorical Vision of the Effectiveness Movement	176
11	Defining the Learning Organization and its Variants	206
12	The Five Disciplines of Peter Senge’s Learning Organization	209
13	Key Fantasy Themes within the Rhetorical Vision of the Learning Organization	229
14	The Key Rhetorical Elements of Three Major Management Fashions of the 1990s	262



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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

“Does it matter what church you go to as long as you do the right thing? If you lock in with Crosby’s techniques, you’ll get improvement; if you lock in with Deming, you’ll get improvement. Which one is better than the other? I don’t know. I don’t think it makes much difference as long as you’re trying something.”

Comment made by a district manager of quality and data management at AT&T (Oberle, 1990, p. 52).

“We’re the only society in the world that believes it can keep on getting better and better. So we keep on getting suckered by people like Ben Franklin, Emerson and Drucker and me”.

Tom Peters quoted in *Fortune* (1996, p. 33)

#### Personal Significance of the Study

Management gurus and management fashions have had an important impact upon my thinking and practice in all three of the roles--manager, educator and researcher--that I have performed in my professional life. My initial reading of management guru texts was prompted by a desire as a manager to better understand what I was supposed to be doing. Being relatively new to the role and feeling more than a little insecure about whether or not I was the right person for it, I turned to the likes of Peter Drucker, Tom Peters and Kenneth Blanchard for guidance and gleaned more from my reading of them than I had originally anticipated. In contrast to the stuffy, formulaic introductory management texts, these writers made me feel emotionally good about what I was doing,

firing me up with enthusiasm to “get out there and do something”. I remember being particularly excited by the “excellence” movement inspired by Tom Peters with his urgent appeal for direct and spontaneous action, the breaking down of bureaucratic walls and the general sense of destiny that it instilled in me. As writers like Peters portrayed it, management was not only the right thing to be doing but it could also be tremendous fun.

Subsequently, as I began to develop my role as an educator, my feelings towards management gurus and the fashions they spawned became more mixed. Working as a program director, I was charged with developing what I thought to be an impressive roster of management seminars that were based on sound adult education principles. In this role, I was struck by the seeming lack of effort with which a management guru would come to town and, in one day, attract as many people as it took a whole semester for our merry band of local facilitator-consultants to attract. Not wanting to miss out on this action, I organized a series of videoconferences that featured a total of ten management gurus delivered live via satellite that, sure enough, generated considerable interest from the local business community. Sitting in the audience at these videoconferences, I found myself quietly railing against the gurus’ platitudes, the clichés and the blatant authoritarianism of the event. While I was not entirely comfortable with my involvement in this initiative as an educator, I could not help but be impressed by the power and accessibility of the gurus’ language, a power which, if properly handled, might be used to provide a useful starting point to communicate with managers about alternative ways of managing and organizing. We had attempted to start such discussions at the local level by incorporating into the videoconference event a critical local panel comprised of an academic, a consultant and a practitioner. The fact that this intervention proved to be not

entirely successful gave me a healthy respect for the complex learning dynamics within the guru-follower relationship.

More recently, as I have begun to develop my role as a researcher, my attitude towards management gurus and management fashions has transformed yet again. First, as I read more of the academic literature that had addressed management and organizational issues, I realized that many of the management gurus ideas' were derived from earlier academic research that was considerably more thoughtful and realistic in its claims than what was being presented by the gurus. Second, in becoming familiar with the debates regarding the existence and consequences of "late" or "high" or "post" modernity, I began to appreciate that the guru phenomenon was not something that was necessarily confined to the field of management but was indeed symptomatic of much wider social, cultural and political changes and, as such, could be examined more profitably within that context. Third, with this recognition came a desire to develop an effective critique that could de-mystify much of the hype surrounding management gurus and, in the process, perhaps enable managers to break the cycle of dependency on the higher authority of the management guru and to begin to privilege the learning that they, and their immediate colleagues, generated from their own lived experience.

The starting point of this thesis, therefore, was a fundamental and a deep curiosity on my part about the reasons behind the dramatic growth in popularity of management gurus and management fashions as evidenced by expanding business book sections, packed convention halls and grossly inflated speaker and consultancy fees. In my attempts to answer the thesis' initial question, a whole host of important subsidiary questions emerged. For example, what makes a management guru? How many gurus are

there? Why do some management ideas become immensely fashionable while others remain largely ignored? Is it more a function of the idea itself or the persuasiveness of the management guru who is promoting it? Do management gurus consciously set out to become gurus or is it something that is beyond their control? Who are the people who read, watch or listen to them? What are their motives? How do management gurus help them? Is it by providing cognitive understanding, encouragement or reassurance? What is it about the time and place that has created such an extraordinary demand for management gurus and fashions? It is these and related questions which I hope to shed some light upon during the course of this study.

#### General Significance of the Study

The corporate community's predilection for finding, implementing and then disposing of the latest and greatest organizational improvement programs such as Excellence, Total Quality Management, Organizational Culture, Business Process Reengineering and the Learning Organization, has been widely documented in the business media and commented upon in typically ambivalent terms. On the one hand, journalists continue to play a key role in celebrating and promoting the latest management innovations and the gurus who are their primary champions (Byrne, 1992; Crainer, 1997; Stewart, 1993). On the other, they make a habit of lampooning the management gurus and castigating the executives for their transient flings with "fads", "quick fixes", and "silver bullets" as well as their insensitivity to the financial and human costs that follow in their wake (Bell, 1995; Farnham, 1996; Thackray, 1993).

The academic community's reaction to this phenomenon has typically ranged from general indifference to outright hostility (Burrell, 1989; Hitt & Ireland, 1987; Thomas, 1989). More recently, however, a number of writers have begun to recognize that the phenomenon itself warrants serious attention from management researchers for several reasons. First, there is the basic fact that, with the widespread adoption of management fashions across all sectors, management gurus have had a tangible impact upon the working lives of employees at all levels within the organization in both material and symbolic terms (Clark & Salaman, 1996; Huczynski, 1993b; Watson, 1994). With a well-honed package of knowledge and judicious use of communication technologies, a few individuals have been able to exert a dramatic impact upon what is talked about in the workplace, what organizational problems are deemed to be the most significant and what managerial solutions are the most appropriate to address these. We only have to think of the pervasiveness of the TQM movement throughout North America and elsewhere to get an appreciation for the sheer scale of influence its three "founders"--Edwards Deming, Joseph Juran and Philip Crosby--have had upon many lives.

A second reason for researching this phenomenon is that, although the management consulting industry within which management gurus ply their trade is one of the fastest growing industries, it remains relatively under-explored compared to the other major industries that it claims to serve. For example, there is no general consensus about how large this industry actually is. The Garner Group has estimated that total fees generated in 1994 were \$11.4 billion and that this figure is projected to reach \$21 billion by 1999 (Micklethwait & Wooldridge, 1996) Alternatively, Nohria and Berkley (1994) estimated that the "management industry" generated \$15.2 billion in revenue and employed 81,000

individuals in 1992 while O'Shea and Madigan (1997) pegged it at \$25 billion for the U.S. and double that for the entire world. There is a certain irony that we know so little about an industry that purports to know so much about other industries.

Third, academics are beginning to recognize that the conventional wisdom that held that significant new management knowledge was created exclusively within academe and then disseminated to the larger public through management gurus and consultants is no longer an accurate reflection of reality and may need to be turned on its head (Aldag, 1997; Barley, Meyer, & Gash, 1988; Clark & Salaman, 1996). In providing an alternative source for the acquisition of managerial knowledge that is presented in a direct and more easily consumable form, management gurus could indeed be seen as a threat to the academic's traditional hold on what and what does not constitute managerial knowledge. While there is no doubt that most popular management ideas can ultimately be traced back to the academic literature, since the 1980s an increasing proportion of the academic agenda is now being driven by a "new wave" of management theory (Wood, 1989) which Huczynski (1993a) has labeled "guru" theory. This knowledge not only takes on a different form and function but the traditional academic "guarantors" of validity, generalizability and replicability are replaced by the presentation style, credibility and persona of the author. It is, therefore, in the basic interests of management researchers to become better acquainted with the workings of the management fashion industry and to actively engage with it.

## Purposes of the Study

The main purpose of this thesis is to build on and add to the emergent theoretical debate about “guru” theory by developing and then applying a rhetorical critique to an empirical study of management gurus and management fashions. The fantasy theme analysis method of rhetorical criticism is used in this study because it is an established method that provides both a descriptive and an explanatory framework for critically examining the main elements of the management fashion setting process--i.e. gurus, consultants, managers, program, context etc.--within an integrated rhetorical frame. Fantasy theme analysis is a dramatically based method of rhetorical criticism rooted in Ernest Bormann’s symbolic convergence theory (Bormann, 1972; 1976; 1982a; 1983). This method of rhetorical criticism provides some important insights because it captures the underlying dramatic appeal of the management fashion to the individual manager as well as the role of the management guru in its articulation, legitimation and dissemination.

There is general acceptance within the literature that there is a dearth of detailed and systematic empirical studies of individual management gurus and the fashions that they have helped to foster. Abrahamson and Fairchild (1997) have claimed that their study of Quality Circles is perhaps the first carefully documented study of a management fashion. In the absence of these accounts, academic and media commentators tend to treat both management gurus and management fashions as an undifferentiated collectivity, stressing the similarities between them at the expense of their differences. This thesis has been written to provide more empirical material, which can hopefully inform the emergent theoretical debate. The subjects of this thesis are three management



guru-inspired fashions that have come into prominence in North America during the 1990s: the Reengineering movement led by Michael Hammer and James Champy; the “Effectiveness” movement spearheaded by Stephen Covey; and the “Learning Organization” concept that has been popularized by Peter Senge and his colleagues. Each of these fashions and gurus have received considerable media attention, yet they have not been subjected to any form of sustained and systematic academic analysis.

The third major purpose of this thesis is to develop a rhetorical critique that might engage both practitioners and academics in a critical dialogue about the sources of the underlying appeal of these and other management guru-inspired management fashions and to reflect on the quality of managerial and organizational learning that they have been responsible, either directly or indirectly, for generating. In this respect, I am standing behind Abrahamson’s (1996) plea for scholars not only to devote more energy towards studying the management fashion-setting process and explaining when and how it fails, but also to actively intervene in the process to make it a more technically useful, collective learning process.

### The Structure of the Study

The thesis is comprised of eight chapters. In Chapter Two, the literature that has been written about the management guru and fashion phenomenon by both media and academic commentators is reviewed. The first part of the review examines the recent emergence of management gurus as key figures in corporate life and business discourse and the concurrent growth in the management fashion industry within which, it is argued, the guru occupies a central role. This is followed by an assessment of the functions,

validity and general efficacy of management fashions for organizational and management effectiveness. The third part of this chapter reviews four different approaches that have recently emerged in the academic literature to explain the management guru and management fashion phenomenon. Chapter Two closes with a consideration of the relative strengths and weaknesses of these explanatory accounts and lays out some key elements of an approach that could usefully build upon our current knowledge of this phenomenon by focusing on the rhetorical qualities of the gurus' work and the management fashions that they help to conceive.

Chapter Three builds upon this rhetorically-oriented theoretical direction by reviewing a method of rhetorical criticism literature that actively incorporates the key elements of the new approach that were identified in the previous chapter.

Dramatistically-based fantasy theme analysis is singled out as a method that holds some potential for yielding additional new insights into the management guru and management fashion phenomenon. The remainder of the chapter is given over to a consideration of this method's intellectual origins, its empirical applications and the major criticisms that have been leveled at it. Chapter Four describes how the method has been applied in this study, explaining the rationale for selecting the cases, the processes by which the data were collected, and the procedures that were used to analyse them.

In Chapters Five, Six and Seven, fantasy theme analyses of each of these three cases are presented. Each of these empirical chapters begins with a discussion of the distinguishing features of the management guru's background and public persona. This is followed by a description of the composition, scale and level of commitment demonstrated by the "rhetorical community" (Bormann, 1972) that has developed around

the guru and his vision. Next are presented the main fantasy themes that constitute the unique rhetorical vision that each guru has skillfully developed through a number of media. Each of these chapters closes by highlighting a particular feature of the guru's work that was deemed to be well worth investigating at further length.

The thesis concludes in Chapter Eight with an assessment of the contributions that a dramatically-based rhetorical critique offers for our understanding of the management guru and management fashion phenomenon. This is followed by a comparison of the similarities and differences between each of the case studies presented. The chapter closes with a consideration of what can be done to foster a constructive dialogue between academics and practitioners that can help us better understand what drives the management guru and management fashion phenomenon and how we might make it more useful in advancing management learning.

## CHAPTER TWO

### LITERATURE REVIEW:

#### THE MANAGEMENT GURU AND MANAGEMENT FASHION PHENOMENON

“On this rainy Monday morning, the quality movement is very much alive and well in Mahwah, N.J. Eighty-eight year-old Joseph M. Juran has arrived for the latest stop in his ‘Last Word’ speaking tour, and the hotel conference room is packed. Fans are eagerly pulling out their credit cards to buy the \$25 framed autographed picture, the \$50 lucite bow-tie paperweight memento and the \$20 canvas tote bag. Others queue up for autographs.”

(Byrne, 1993, p. 43)

“Sharing time with Peter Drucker really beats the book reading. It’s the human contact feeling to share time with a famous person--like a conversation, not possible before.”

Comment made by a participant in a satellite videoconference (May 3, 1994)

### Introduction

The management guru and fashion phenomenon has only recently begun to receive serious attention from the academic community. What attention it had received in the past had largely taken a dismissive tack, discrediting the gurus and the lack of rigour they brought to their research, taking relatively little interest in the phenomenon itself (Carroll, 1983; Hitt and Ireland, 1987; Thomas, 1989). The media, by contrast, have always provided a rich source of commentary. Prominent business magazines such as *Business Week*, *Fortune*, *The Economist*, *Success* and *Inc.* have all regularly run cover stories or

features profiling a particular management guru or describing the latest management fashion or explaining the reasons behind the enormous appeal of the gurus and their business.

This chapter will draw upon both academic and media sources, primarily from North America and the UK, to provide a comprehensive picture of what we know to date about the management guru and management fashion phenomenon. The account is divided into four parts. The first part is primarily descriptive, providing information about the origins, definitions and scope of the phenomenon. This is followed by an assessment of what management gurus and management fashions have and have not achieved. The third part of the chapter examines four different approaches that have been developed in an attempt to explain the phenomenon. The chapter closes with a consideration of the relative merits and limitations of each of these explanatory approaches and, in light of these, lays out a some parameters for a study that can make a constructive and novel contribution to this rapidly expanding literature.

## Describing the Management Guru and Management Fashion Phenomenon

### The Rise and Rise of the Management Guru

#### Guru Origins

According to *The Oxford English Dictionary*, the word "guru" originated in Sanskrit as an adjective meaning "weighty, grave, dignified" (1989, p. 964). An etymological link has also been made between guru and the Latin "gravis". This is remarkable because its derivative, "gravitas," was frequently used in connection with the nouns "actor" and "auctoritas". The Latin expression "gravis auctor" (the important or true authority) also

carries the same general sense of a guru as a person of influence who takes the initiative, in other words, a person who can “do” and have an effect on others. The word guru was used for the first time in the sense of teacher or spiritual guide in the Upanishads, a series of Hindu ancient commentaries on the sacred scriptures. The idea of a spiritual preceptor to guide one's study of religion and philosophy has been a constant theme in the religion of India since the most ancient times (The Encyclopaedia of Religion, 1987). Spiritual preceptors have appeared in many forms including the rshi ("seer"), the muni ("sage" or "silent one"), and later as acarya, brahmana and swami. However, the figure of the guru has most dramatically captured the attention of the West.

The term “guru” has undertaken an intriguing status passage as it has entered the English language (Jackson, 1996a). *The Oxford English Dictionary* notes that it is in general and trivial use to describe an "influential teacher", "mentor" and "pundit" (another Hindu word which refers to someone who is learned in Sanskrit and in philosophy, religion and jurisprudence). The dictionary cites numerous yet isolated references to the usage of the word guru since the British first made contact with the Indian subcontinent in the early seventeenth century. It was, in the 1960s, however, with the counterculture's widespread engagement with Eastern mysticism led by the likes of Allen Ginsberg, Gary Snyder and Alan Watts, that the word entered popular everyday discourse (Roszak, 1969). Indeed, the dictionary cites a reference in 1967 from *The New Scientist* to Marshall McLuhan as one who "is (or is about to be turned into) one of those gurus whom the United States hungers for more than most nations." (1967, p. 1). The irony of this appellation would not, according to his son, Eric, have been lost on McLuhan nor would he have been very comfortable with it (E. McLuhan, personal communication, June 28, 1999).

In contemporary "mediaspeak", the title guru is accorded to anyone who has become recognised as having developed a distinctive level of expertise in one of a number of ever-expanding spheres of human endeavour. On a daily basis we are exposed through the mass media to "fitness gurus", "literary gurus", "investment gurus", "diet gurus", "computer gurus", and "personal growth gurus". We should not be surprised to find that the term appears to be applied indiscriminately and broadly because it has considerable appeal for journalistic discourse. For example, in acknowledging that gurudom has become a "crowded profession", the *Economist* (1994a) has provided a somewhat tongue-in-cheek "Good Guru Guide" which features an unlikely collection of luminaries including George Soros, Jacques Derrida and Octavia Paz. The word's oral simplicity and internal rhyme further enhance its attractiveness. Peter Drucker has sourly observed, "I ascribe the popularity of this hideous word to its fitting more easily into a headline than its older synonym - charlatan" (Clutterbuck & Crainer, 1990, p. 235). Moreover, compared to the drab scientism imbued in the term "expert", the word guru connotes a mystical dimension which implies that the expertise has been gained by other than conventional means and is, therefore, infinitely more interesting. Its links to the underground world of religious cults also lends the term a certain sinister power.

The ambiguous nature of the term guru enables the journalists who choose to use it to "sit on the fence" and suspend judgement. They can demonstrate that they are aware that this person deserves attention but should not necessarily be treated seriously. The term can also be applied to considerable derogatory effect when the journalist wishes to put the aspiring experts firmly in their place. Huczynski (1993a) notes that the term tends to be used pejoratively in the British press whereas in North America it is invariably good for

consultants' business to be given "guru" status. The extrinsic ambivalence of the term guru makes the media as keen to apply the term, as the gurus they anoint are overtly, yet perhaps not entirely, reluctant to take on the guru mantle. Gurus are, therefore, to a certain extent, both beneficiaries and victims of the "media machine" that helps to create them.

The term "management guru" has only recently enjoyed common currency. The earliest references that I have come across in business journals occur in the mid-1980s. The *Financial Times* ran a series of articles under the title "The guru factor", which showcased a number of prominent American management thinkers (Dodsworth, 1986a; Lorenz, 1986; Dixon, 1986a; 1986b). Since then the term has become the label of choice when journalists discuss particularly influential management commentators be they academics, consultants or practitioners. Perhaps mindful of the ambiguous and value-laden nature of the term, most academics have chosen to use alternative phrases like "popular management writer" or have focused on the "popular business best-sellers", however, a few writers (e.g. Abrahamson, 1996a; Clark & Salaman, 1996; Huczynski, 1993a; Jackson, 1996a) have recognized the significance of the popular term "guru" and, in doing so, are making it acceptable within academic discourse. In doing this we have acknowledged that the term has considerable resonance in the popular realm and therefore warrants some attention.

### Defining Management Gurus

The first full-scale academic study to look exclusively into the phenomenon of management gurus was conducted by Huczynski (1993a) as part of his doctoral research. In the study, Huczynski observes that management guruship has largely been a North American phenomenon that emerged during the 1980s. Kennedy (1991) has somewhat



wryly observed that, despite its Eastern origins, the guru phenomenon is virtually absent in the managerial thought of Japan and the prospering Pacific Rim economies. In the West, management gurus have not been nearly as successful in Europe as they have been in North America. On the continent, language has been an obvious barrier. However, Huczynski (1993a) argues that, in the United Kingdom, British managers have a strong tradition of learning from experience, which makes them less receptive to the "quick fix" solutions offered by outsiders. In addition, the UK lacks the same business media infrastructure that has been used to such powerful effect to promote gurus within the U.S. It is, therefore, not surprising that the only three internationally renowned gurus to have emerged from the UK--Edward de Bono, Charles Handy and Reg Revans --have all focused on encouraging managers to learn and think more creatively for themselves.

Huczynski (1993a) argues that "Guru Theory" is the latest in a series of management idea families that have worked their way through the western management literature during the twentieth century. The earlier families of ideas include Bureaucracy, Scientific Management, Administrative Management, Human Relations and Neo-Human Relations. Huczynski argues that the "guru theory" label he uses to describe this most recent family of management ideas is useful, "since each guru idea relies for its authorization upon the individual who developed and popularized it" (1993a, p. 38). He also believes that the term "guru theory" aptly captures the desire, on the part of the gurus' followers, to find hidden or tacit knowledge and their willingness to uncritically carry out the guru's prescriptions.

Huczynski (1993a) distinguishes among three different types of gurus: "academic gurus", "consultant gurus" and "hero managers". The academic gurus are those who have

a formal affiliation with an educational institution, invariably a business school, as exemplified by Henry Mintzberg, Rosabeth Moss Kantner, William Ouchi and Michael Porter. The consultant gurus are independent writers and advisers such as John Naisbitt, Tom Peters and Gifford Pinchot. Hero managers are those who are, or have been, practicing corporate leaders and are passing on the benefit of their experience. Some notable examples of these are Bill Gates, John Harvey-Jones, Lee Iacocca, and Jack Welch.

The most common technique used to define gurus is to distinguish them from two other archetypes--the consultant and the academic. For example, Kennedy suggests that what separates management gurus from mere consultants is their "timing; originality; forcefulness; a gift for self-promotion and perhaps above all else, the ability to encapsulate memorably what others immediately recognize as true" (1991, p. xviii). On the grounds that it takes one to know one, the British guru John Humble lists the following six essential qualities of a guru: "integrative power, an extraordinary and intuitive sense of timing; longevity; international influence; missionary zeal; and an ability to listen" (Clutterbuck & Crainer, 1990, pp. 236-237).

The academic, typified as the bumbling, out-of-touch, unhelpful figure, is frequently used by gurus to demonstrate what they are not. Frederick Herzberg, for example, with thinly disguised venom, suggests that "you can tell whether someone is a guru by the degree of academic jealousy and hostility he engenders" (Clutterbuck & Crainer, 1990, p. 235). Similarly, Kenneth Blanchard, who brought the *One-Minute Manager* into everyday managerial parlance, points out that "academics tend to write for their own satisfaction which does not necessarily mean that managers will be prepared to

listen” (Dodsworth, 1986b, p.14). In a somewhat kindlier vein, Kennedy explains that “today's harsh demands of media and marketing combine to make it very difficult for the quiet thinker or teacher to achieve gurunom” (1991, p. xii).

While most gurus are always quick to distance themselves from being considered consultants and academics, they are, in true contemporary, Hollywood shrinking violet-style, usually reluctant to embrace guruhood. Robert Blake, co-creator with Jane Mouton of the managerial Grid, remarks, “I detest the word guru and feel that it puts an unprofessional stamp on things” (Clutterbuck & Crainer, 1990, p. 235). Despite their reticence, gurus are handsomely paid for their troubles. While it is difficult to obtain hard data, best estimates suggest that a management guru can expect anywhere from \$20,000 to \$40,000 per appearance and some 40 to 60 engagements per year (Bell, 1995). Those at the top of the heap command even more for an appearance--Peter Drucker (\$50,000), Tom Peters (\$60,000)--while Stephen Covey, taking his cue from Frank Sinatra and Liza Minelli, “four walls the room”, collecting 60% of the event’s gross sales (McConville, 1994). Only retired public figures such as Margaret Thatcher, George Bush and Colin Powell plus a few select rock stars can expect to be better compensated for their efforts.

During the 1990s a new genre has emerged which seeks to summarize and translate the key ideas of the management gurus for an increasingly time-conscious and over-taxed yet curious workforce. The first of this genre was the *Makers of Management* in which the lives and contributions of 29 “men and women who changed the business world” are reviewed (Clutterbuck & Crainer, 1990). In the closing chapter, the authors attempt to answer the question, “What makes a management guru?” by drawing on miscellaneous

observations of consultants, academics and gurus themselves. They conclude somewhat wistfully that, “for the true management guru, his or her work transcends geographical or business sector barriers; it’s a lifetime’s devotion, a long-term fascination with the nature of business problems and with helping people within businesses overcome them” (1990, p. 343). In the *Guide to the Management Gurus*, Carol Kennedy (1991) identifies 33 “real” gurus who have generated original, durable management thinking. Rowan Gibson selects 16 gurus in his book *Rethinking the Future* (1996). By contrast, in *The Guru Guide*, Boyett and Boyett (1998) identify 79 gurus from the 1980s and 1990s by reviewing best-seller lists and asking “friends, clients and associates to recommend people whom they thought had unique insights” (p. viii). In the somewhat ludicrously titled book *Understanding Management Gurus in a Week*, Norton and Smith identify 56 gurus who were selected by “monitoring inquiries received by the Institute of Management’s Information Centre, by trawling the views of Internet Surfers and by surveying some of the principal business and management schools in the UK to discover the major influences on current management teaching” (1998, p. 6).

In summary, there appears to be no hard and fast rule about what it takes to be a management guru nor is there any real agreement as to how many management gurus there really are. We can conclude that guru status is a social creation. It is ordained in large part by media attention and implies current or, at least, relatively recent wide-ranging popularity and, by extension, influence among practitioners, consultants and academic audiences. Once achieved, however, there is no guarantee that guru status can be sustained. Ultimately, the most definitive we can be is to say that guruship is in the eyes of the follower.

### “Surfing” Management Fashions

The corporate community’s predilection for finding, adopting and then abruptly dropping the “latest and greatest” organizational improvement programs is a phenomenon that is widely recognized and frequently lambasted in everyday discourse at work and in the business media (Business Week, 1997; Fortune, 1995; The Economist, 1997). New programs and initiatives which seize the corporate imagination on a wide-scale basis are regularly derided as “fads”, “buzzwords”, “flavours-of-the-month”, “quick fixes” and “silver bullets”. This tendency has perhaps been most succinctly captured in the term “fad surfing” or “the practice of riding the crest of the latest management panacea and then paddling out again just in time to ride the next one, always absorbing for managers and lucrative for consultants; frequently disastrous for organizations” (Shapiro, 1995, p. xiii). In its wake, fad surfing has left an extensive and impressive business lexicon which the media attempts to keep track of through the sporadic publication of glossaries (e.g. *Across the Board*, 1993; *Training*, 1996) and dictionaries, most notably, *Business Speak* which contains “4,000 business terms, buzzwords, acronyms and technical words: all you need to get ahead in Corporate America” (Shaaf & Kater, 1994).

Pascale (1990) estimated that over two dozen managerial techniques have waxed and waned between the 1950s and 1980s. Using the frequency of citations in *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal* and *The Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature*, Pascale depicts the explosion in business fads to very good heuristic effect in a graph that, ironically, has been used by consultants as a selling piece to demonstrate that they are au courant with current organizational programs. Pascale identifies the following business fads, listed chronologically: Decision Trees; Managerial Grid;

Satisficers/Dissatisficers; Theory X and Theory Y; Brainstorming; T-Group Training; Conglomeration; Theory Z; Management by Objectives; Diversification; Experience Curve; Strategic Business Units; Zero-Based Budgeting; Value Chain; Decentralization; Wellness; Quality Circles; Excellence; Restructuring; Portfolio Management; MBWA; Matrix; Kaiban; Intrapreneuring; Corporate Culture and One-Minute Managing. What is most remarkable about Pascale's analysis is that approximately half of these fashions have been spawned in the latter half of the 1980s. Business journalist John Byrne observes, "business fads are something of a necessary evil and have always been with us. What's different--and alarming--today is the sudden rise and fall of so many conflicting fads and how they influence the modern manager" (1986, p. 53).

The Institute of Personnel and Development, the UK's largest HR/Personnel professional body, has listed "fads and fashions" over the period 1969 and 1994 and has noted a significant increase after 1990 especially (1994, p. 31). Grint (1997) has plotted an exponential rise in the number of articles (listed in *Business Periodicals on Disk*) regarding eight management fashions that have come to prominence between 1986-95: Culture; Leadership; Business Process Reengineering; Outsourcing; Downsizing; Empowerment; TQM and Competencies. Plotting the rise and fall of five management fashions cited in the Wiso database between 1982 to 1995 (quality circles, lean production, business process reengineering, total quality management and organizational culture), Kieser (1997) has concluded that the cycles of management fashions are becoming not only shorter but their peaks are getting higher. Finally, Brickley, Smith and Zimmerman (1997) have noted a similar bell-shaped curve when plotting the percentage of published business articles mentioning eight management fashions between 1970 and

1996 (TQM, Benchmarking, JIT, Outsourcing, Reengineering, Activity Based Costing, Quality Circles and Economic Value Added). While it is clear that a direct link cannot be made between the number of citations of a particular program and its take-up by organizations and managers, these studies, even when we allow for the inflationary growth of media outlets, do give us some sense of the potential trajectory of influence that these techniques might have had on organizational thinking and practice.

There is a surprising paucity of data regarding the actual use of these management fashions. The primary source of data has come from Bain and Company, a “global strategy” consulting firm, who, in 1993, launched a multi-year research project to gather data about the usage and performance of management tools. Each year they interview senior managers and conduct literature searches to identify the 25 most “popular and pertinent” management tools. The 1994 survey found that the top ten most commonly used tools were: Mission Statements (94%); Customer Surveys (90%); Total Quality Management (76%); Benchmarking (72%); Reengineering (69%); Strategic Alliances (67%); Self-directed teams (59%); Value Chain Analysis (27%); and Mass customization (21%) (Harrar, 1994). The survey noted that there was a wide variety in the degrees of satisfaction that were ascribed to the tools by the executives that were surveyed. For example, while 31% were “extremely satisfied” with Mission Statements, 11% were “dissatisfied”. Similarly, 22% were “extremely satisfied” while 13% were “dissatisfied”. In terms of the performance of the tools (defined by improved product development time, higher employee skills and morale, and expanded capacity for future growth), the following five were given the highest performance indexes on a five-point scale: Cycle time reduction (3.88), Reengineering (3.87); Self-directed teams (3.84), Total quality

management (3.81) and Strategic Alliances (3.79). Subsequent surveys have shown that companies are tending to take on more techniques. The average company used 12.7 of these tools in 1994 compared to 11.8 in 1993 (Micklethwait & Wooldridge, 1996, pp. 17-18). The survey has also noted variation between the national averages in take-up of management tools, with Britain leading the way with average of 13.7 tools compared to the US (12.8), Japan (11.5) and France (13.7).

The rapid growth and turnover of management fashions has been supported and actively promoted by an extensive network of global and local consultants. As Caulkin has observed the economic model of consulting “dovetails effortlessly in the larger management fashion production line which ties together consultancy, business schools and the business press in an eye-wateringly productive chain” (1997, p. 33). In 1993, *Consulting News* estimated that some 80,000 consultants ranging from large and single operator businesses sold \$17 billion in advice which was 10 per cent more than the previous year (Byrne, 1994). The world’s largest consulting firm, Andersen Consulting, was growing annually at a rate of 20 per cent during the 1990s and in 1995 alone, added 8,000 new staff worldwide (Kennedy, 1996). Byrne has likened this spectacular growth to a “self-inflating bubble: consultants beget more consulting as they fuel the marketplace with new ideas and management fads. The incantations of these necromancers can make managers worry that their rivals have gotten hold of something more powerfully new--so they had better buy a little corporate juju of their own” (Byrne, 1994, p. 61).



## The Management Guru and Management Fashion Backlash

In evaluating the contribution that management gurus and the fashions they spawn have made to managerial practice, commentators from both the academic and journalistic communities have invariably been negative in their judgments. The most vitriolic critics have given the gurus' work a number of singularly unflattering labels such as "intellectual wallpaper", "business pornography", "shameless narcissism", "behavioural fast food" and "commonsensical in the extreme". The critical offensive has tended to focus on three main concerns: the intellectually impoverished quality of the gurus' thinking, the gap between the promise and practice when the gurus' ideas are implemented and the relatively poor manner in which organizations have used these ideas.

Many critics have pointed to the tendency of the gurus to oversimplify what, in their minds, is an increasingly complex business reality. In particular, there is a predisposition for each new approach to provide one single answer. For example, in a searing attack on the "one-minute book" genre, Zilbergeld remarks, "given the American desire for simple solutions to complex problems, it should come as no surprise that there is a receptive audience for books claiming that difficult goals can be reached in one minute" (1984, p. 6). He adds, "these books make the same mistake that some behavioural psychologists do in assuming that all rats, or all people, are the same and that nothing much goes on inside their heads" (1984, p. 9). In a similar vein, Pascale laments that an unintended consequence of the mass marketing of management techniques has been that it has fostered superficiality to the point that "it has become professionally legitimate in the United States to accept and utilize ideas without an in-depth grasp of their underlying foundation, and without the commitment necessary to sustain them" (1990, pp. 19-20).

Critics from the academic realm have been particularly critical of the rigour and quality of the research upon which the gurus base their findings. Much of the information contained in gurus' texts stems from the direct experiences and observations of the writer-- the best sellers are unapologetically subjective and anecdotal in their approach. As Pierce and Newstrom observe, "the authors . . . are able to proclaim as sound management principles virtually anything that is intuitively acceptable to their publisher and readers" (1990, p. 6). In their review of *Megatrends*, Neal and Groat observed that "solid facts as Naisbitt presents them may more appropriately be viewed as a personal exercise in the 'social construction of reality'. The result is a strange but intriguing mixture of objectivity and advocacy" (1984, p. 121). Similarly, Maidique describes *In Search of Excellence* as a "potpourri of loosely interconnected, and often redundant, vignettes in search of a framework" (1983, p. 156). Cummings concludes that, overall, "these books offer very little, if anything in the way of generalizable knowledge about successful organizational practice" (Pierce & Newstrom, 1990, p. 338).

Researchers writing from an explicitly critical management perspective have also joined the swelling ranks of critics. Most pointedly, Burrell has attacked what he ingeniously calls "Heathrow Organization Theory" (i.e. that which is derived from popular management books) for its "crude pragmatism" and "philosophical vacuity" (1989, p. 307). It is in these books that one finds the most glaring examples of what Burrell describes as the "absent centre" in management theory. That is, "a neglect of philosophically informed thinking about one's own beliefs" (1989, p. 307). Burrell suggests that, because most mid-Atlantic management theorists tend to think with their beliefs rather than about their beliefs, they are offering only a basic pragmatism that is

essentially pre-modernist. Ironically, however, he predicts that the gurus will move contemporary management theory rapidly from its pre-modernist phase to a post-modernist phase because "consultants like Rosabeth Kantner and Tom Peters have recognized the new zeitgeist and its emphasis on appearance, image and superficiality" (1989, p. 310).

In addition to charging gurus with a philosophical vacuity, a number of academic commentators have accused of the gurus of working within a political vacuum. Wood observes that "perhaps the biggest divide between the academic and the 'consultancy' books over recent decades is the former's explicit concern with power and authority and the latter's relative neglect of them and/or tendency to take them for granted" (1989, p. 380). Ray (1986) and Wilmott (1993) have illuminated the darker side of the corporate culture movement promoted by many management gurus. They note that, by appealing to the sentiments and emotions of their employees, executives have been able to exert a more subtle and potentially more debilitating form of control by ensnaring their employees in a hegemonic system which espouses autonomy or empowerment but discourages multiple values and active dissent. A thriving cottage industry of politically-informed critiques has been developed in reaction to specific organizational improvement programs. Some of these are listed in Table 1 together with the key "guru" texts upon which their critiques are based.

A number of critics have also focused their attention upon the performance gap between what is promised by the management guru and what actually happens when the management fashion that he or she is proposing is implemented. Perhaps

Table 1

The "Guru Texts" and the Academic Critiques of Some Recent Management Fashions

<b>Management Fashion</b>	<b>'Guru' Text</b>	<b>Academic Critique</b>
MBO	Drucker (1954) Humble, J.W. (1971)	Wickens (1968) Gill & Whittle (1992)
OD	French & Bell (1995)	Stephenson (1975) Krell (1982) Gill & Whittle (1992)
Human Resource Management	Lawler (1992)	Guest (1990) Legge (1995) Townley (1995)
Organizational Culture	Peters & Waterman (1982) Deal & Kennedy (1982)	Lundberg (1985) Ray (1986) Alvesson (1990) Wilmott (1993)
TQM	Deming (1988) Juran (1988) Crosby (1984)	Gill & Whittle (1992) Rippin (1994) Wilkinson & Wilmott (1995)
Business Process Reengineering	Hammer & Champy (1993) Hammer & Stanton (1995) Champy (1995)	Grint (1994) Wilmott (1994) Case (1995) Fincham (1995) Grey & Mitev (1995) Jackson (1996b)
Core Competencies	Boyatzis (1982)	du Gay, Salaman & Rees (1996) Brewis (1996)

the most well known instance of this gap was the subsequent performance of many of companies that were singled out by Peters and Waterman for their "excellence". Five years after the publication of *In Search of Excellence*, two-thirds of the forty-three companies that had demonstrated superiority for at least twenty years prior had slipped, expired or were in serious difficulty (Pascale, 1990). A number of academic studies have added fuel to the fire by discrediting the empirical data that were used in the book. For example, Johnson, Natarajan, and Rappaport (1985) have expressed concern that the six

performance indices used by Peters and Waterman measure only a firm's financial performance whereas the return to shareholders is a much truer measure of "excellence". The accuracy and relevance of Peters and Waterman's eight precepts for excellence were questioned in a study comparing firms that were included in the "excellence" sample with similar firms that were excluded (Hitt & Ireland, 1987).

While Peters and Waterman's work clearly attracted considerable academic scrutiny, there is a remarkable dearth of studies that have tried to assess to what extent various management fashions have actually been able to deliver on their economic promises. Several consultant-sponsored studies have concluded that, in the majority of instances, they do not deliver at all. For example, a 1992 survey conducted by Arthur D. Little found that, of five hundred American companies studied, only one-third believed that programs such as Total Quality Management had had any significant impact on their organizations' bottom line (Furlong, 1994). A 1993 survey administered by A.T. Kearney revealed that only 20% of 100 British firms claimed that their adoption of an organizational improvement program had yielded any tangible financial results (Furlong, 1994). In their 1995 survey of 787 companies around the world, Bain and Company found that, while 72% of managers believed that companies who use the right tools are more likely to succeed, 70% of them said that the tools promise more than they deliver (Micklethwait & Wooldridge, 1996). Nohria and Berkley (1994) polled managers at nearly 100 companies on more than 21 different programs and found 75% of them to be unhappy with the results they had generated in their organizations.

These surveys are by no means conclusive but they appear to confirm the conventional wisdom that management fashions generally fail to live up to their

expectations. While many critics cheerfully place the blame for this failure at the gurus' feet, a number of others are more inclined to explain the failure by pointing to how organizations have implemented these ideas. For example, Byrne observes that "there is nothing inherently wrong with any of these ideas. What's wrong is that too many companies use them as gimmicks to evade the basic challenges they face" (1986, p. 53). Likewise, Pascale writes, "overwhelmingly, companies apply them in a piecemeal fashion and shift from one to the another too frequently" (1990, p. 18).

The tendency to embrace each new best-selling theory wholesale is fittingly described by McGill (1988) as the product of a "Management-Club-of-the-Month" mentality which he believes is widespread among America's corporate elite. Tom Peters, himself, is critical of the organizations that have followed him. In an interview he is quoted to have said, "the difference today is that middle management and even the rank-and-file have read the books. They're committed and enthusiastic about the programs, but they have come to the realization that the senior level really hasn't bought into it and doesn't want to give up control" (Stuller, 1992, p. 21). Kilmann has likened the search by companies for the organizational "quick fix" to the quest for the Holy Grail. He argues that "single approaches are discarded because they have not been given a fair test", concluding, "it's time to stop perpetuating the myth of simplicity" (1984, p. 24).

Not only are companies shifting too quickly from one idea to another but also, in many cases, their strategy has been to hedge their bets by taking on several innovations simultaneously. Edward Lawler, a venerable management guru in his own right, graphically likens this approach to a "gigantic buffet at Sunday brunch" from which the organizations take enormous helpings and end up with "a bad case of indigestion"

(Stuller, 1992, p. 22). When companies pursue this eclectic approach to organizational change, the effectiveness of the individual techniques is undermined because of the organization's inability to get its employees to remain focused over a sufficiently long period. In some instances, these techniques may be incompatible or even contradictory. For example, employees in many organizations have been challenged with reconciling their organization's "customer service" and "downsizing" strategies.

Rigby (1993) has not only expressed concerns about the effectiveness of business fads to meet their stated objectives but has also voiced some strong objections based on the harm that they can cause in organizations. First, he argues that they create unrealistic expectations that inevitably lead to disappointment and the lowering of morale. Second, he says, fads create dangerous shortages of some strategic elements and toxic overdoses of others. Third, they can be internally divisive. In selecting one approach over another, certain departments, by virtue of their function within the organization, will be deemed winners and others losers. Fourth, because fads tend to be programmatic and imposed externally and top-down within the organization, they have an in-built tendency to rob employees of their own initiative. Finally, and worst of all, in Rigby's estimation, is that fads undermine a basic tenet of strategy--by simply copying what other organizations are doing, organizations lose a basic source of distinction and, therefore, weaken their competitive advantage within their marketplace.

While the assessment of the management guru and fashion phenomenon has been largely negative, a few commentators have been more positive in their evaluation of its contribution to managerial thought and practice. For example, while critical of the scientific validity of the gurus' work, Maidique (1983) argues that academics have a lot to

learn from writers such as Peters and Waterman. Unlike many academics, they demonstrate the importance of being in touch with business realities and priorities. Moreover, they write in such a way that they "engage the reader in the same way they were engaged by their subjects" (1983, p.156). Cunningham (1989), in his attack on Thomas' scathing critique of popular management theory or "One-Minute Education" (Thomas, 1989), castigates academics in general for imposing a false and unhelpful dichotomy between academic and popular texts. By lumping work into one of these two categories, the "59-Second Academics" automatically prejudge the merit of the work and deny the possibility that any work that is popular is worthy of consideration. This, in Cunningham's mind is a serious abrogation of their duty as management researchers.

Maidique (1983) argues that the message of organizational and managerial revival heralded by these new management thinkers should not be ignored by academia but synthesized into a revitalized academic thrust. Pierce and Newstrom (1989) credit the gurus with the excitement and enthusiasm for organizational change that their best sellers have generated. They are particularly interested in the role gurus can play as "catalysts" in the further development of sound management philosophies and practices. To ensure that this role is properly served, they advocate that managers read widely from both the traditional academic and the nontraditional management literature. They encourage "cautious consumption" of the popular books, urging readers to be critical of the authors' objectivity, validity and reliability. Pierce and Newstrom argue that, if the gurus are read properly, they can make important contributions to a manager's education.

A few business media commentators have also pointed to the positive contributions that have been made by gurus. Byrne, for example, suggests that "a little faddishness



may be helpful because it makes managers think about new ways to do their jobs better" (1986, p.61). Certainly, the number of letters that appeared in the weeks following both of his *Business Week* cover stories from managers who were indignantly defending the gurus and fads that he had attacked would lend support to this view. *The Economist* has defended the gurus' work on the grounds that it encourages managers to think about change and to look at what other companies are doing, surmising that "the only thing worse than slavishly following management theory is ignoring it completely" (1994b, p. 18). Micklethwait and Wooldridge take an "it could be worse" line in their defence of management gurus by pointing out that management theory is still a young discipline and that, "rather than fretting about management theory's excesses, we should be grateful that its adolescence has not been more harmful" (1996, p. 369).

Camerer and Knez (1996) argue that academics have misunderstood the real function that management fashions play for organizations. Taking TQM as their example, they propose that it "solves a coordination problem, moving a firm stuck at a marginally profitable equilibrium to a better equilibrium" (p. 108). The features of ideas like TQM that are so offensive to academics (i.e. too simple, attention-getting) are the very qualities that executives prize in their quest to get as many of their employees working together on a common cause. According to Camerer and Knez, the fact that management fashions like TQM are used only temporarily and abandoned after a few years need not prove that they are worthless, because, "if the job of TQM is coordinating change then, once the job is done the terminology becomes useless and should make way for a new 'fad'" (1996, p. 110).

While management fashions have come and gone with reasonably monotonous regularity, there has, since the mid-1990s, been a growing backlash against the management guru and fashion phenomenon. Ironically, this backlash is starting to resemble another management fashion creating a substantial niche market for a number of anti-guru bestsellers such as *The Witch Doctors* (Micklethwait & Wooldridge, 1996), *Fad Surfing in the Boardroom* (Shapiro, 1995), *Dangerous Company* (O’Shea & Madigan, 1997), *Management Redeemed: Debunking the Fads that Undermine our Corporations* (Hilmer & Donaldson, 1996) and the intriguingly titled, yet ultimately disappointing lampoon, *The Book That’s Sweeping America* authored by the “world’s #1 business guru” Stephen Michael Peter Thomas (Butman, 1997). The “Consultant Debunking Unit” established by the magazine *Fast Company*, vividly captures and reflects the anti-guru tenor of a new breed of self-sufficient executives (Fast Company, 1997). Perhaps most telling of all is Tom Peters’ well-publicized capitulation to Dilbert, the satirical cartoon character created by Scott Adams as America’s number one management guru (Fisher, 1997).

How do we make sense of this apparent paradox between the continued expansion and success of management gurus and management fashions in the face of a substantial and escalating wave of criticism? Characterizing this conundrum as “The great consultancy cop-out”, Caulkin observes that, “of all the paradoxes of the modern business world, perhaps the most remarkable and least satisfactorily explained is the rise and rise of the management consultant” (1997, p. 32). Burgoyne and Reynolds have probably come closest to advancing a satisfactory explanation. Referring to the management learning industry in general, they argue that

It is a problem-based area of activity, rather than a solution-based one.

Some activities, such as AIDS research and treatment, exist because there is a problem. Others, perhaps like the mobile phone and fax machine industries and markets, exist because there is a solution. There is much to be said for the argument that management learning is a problem-generated (rather than a solution-generated) area of activity. This makes sense not only of the coexistence of growth and criticism in the field, but also of the great variety of approaches and methods used in management education and development. (1997, p. 7)

This intriguing explanation is certainly worth developing and exploring further. For the purposes of the current study, however, it helpfully re-orientates our attention away from a general pre-occupation with assessing whether or not management gurus and management fashions actually work to a much more compelling question which dwells on problem rather than solution generation. Namely, why do we need them? This is the question to which we now turn.

### Explanations for the Management Guru and Fashion Phenomenon

Paralleling the popular media backlash has been a remarkable surge in interest on the part of academic researchers in the management guru and fashion phenomenon. A growing number of researchers from North America, Europe and Australasia have begun to look at the phenomenon as an important area of inquiry that deserves serious and sustained attention (Abrahamson, 1996a; Clark and Salaman, 1996; Furusten, 1999;

Grint, 1997; Jackson, 1996b; Kieser, 1997; Ramsay, 1996; Spell, 1998;). As yet, the research effort is somewhat at an exploratory and fragmented stage in its evolution but it has moved beyond basic description to the beginnings of attempts to advance broad explanations for the management guru and fashion phenomenon. Grint (1997) has helpfully identified five types of explanation that have been developed to explain the management fashion phenomenon: The Rational Approach, the Structural Approach; the Distancing Approach, the Institutional Approach and the Charismatic Approach. These he places on a grid that is formed by two sets of axes. The first axis is divided into two sections based on whether the main emphasis of the explanatory account lies with the logic of the approach or with its emotional foundations. The second axis is divided into

Table 2

The Four Approaches to Explaining Management Gurus and Management Fashions

	<b>INTERNALIST</b>	<b>EXTERNALIST</b>
<b>LOGIC</b>	Rational	Structural
<b>EMOTION</b>	Charismatic	Institutional/Distancing

Note. Adapted from Grint (1997)

two sections based on whether the accounts are rooted in an internalist approach, which focuses upon the importance of internal forces--either ideas or forces within the individual--or in an externalist approach, which focuses upon the significance of exogenous or structural forces. Grint places the Institutional Approach in the center of this grid. However, I would contend that, because it is difficult to separate out work that is conducted using the Institutional Approach from work that uses the Distancing Approach, it makes sense to combine this body of work and to place it in the externalist/emotional quadrant as depicted in Table 2.

### The Rational Approach

The Rational approach suggests that the primary reason why there are management fashions is precisely because they work. In a highly competitive and turbulent environment, organizations will seek out new ideas in order to survive. Those that select the right ideas, survive; those that don't, fall by the way. For example, Brickley et al (1997) observe,

As a growing number of large, once-successful companies began to lose opportunities to more flexible and, in some case, overseas competitors, the opportunity costs of having unresponsive organizations began to show up in declining shareholder returns. This in turn created a broad-based demand for management prescriptions that would enable companies to respond more effectively to the new environment. (1997, p. 29)

Along the same lines, Huczynski (1993a) argues that the major reason why gurus have been so successful is that they have closely matched their ideas with the needs of

individual managers. Gurus have acknowledged and responded to the manager's need for a measure of predictability in an increasingly uncertain world. The gurus provide this by helping the manager to make sense of his or her business environment.

The primary reason attributed by the media for the surge in interest in management gurus and fashions is America's economic context at the end of the 1970s. At that time, Americans were becoming conscious of the threat posed to their well-established position of economic dominance by their international competitors, particularly Japan. The Japanese threat was well documented in Richard Pascale's *The Art of Japanese Management* (1982) and William Ouchi's *Theory Z* (1981). Both authors spoke reverentially of the Japanese approach to management and urged American managers to learn from their competitors. Increased exposure to international competition put tremendous pressure upon American corporations and their managers to respond constructively and quickly. This pressure spurred not only a demand for new and readily implementable management approaches but also a hunger for American success stories. Two consultants, Tom Peters and Robert Waterman, responded accordingly with their book *In Search of Excellence*. The book became America's best seller in 1982, selling 1.2 million books. Despite being largely reviled by the academic community, it provided a series of entertaining and inspiring case studies of American companies that had thrived in the face of foreign competition. As Freeman observed,

After the anti-business era of the late 1960's and early 1970's, after the recession-shocked later 1970's, after being bullied by Japanophiles, after a decade of finger-pointing by management experts -- managers were dead

ready for a positive message and simple answers. They were primed to soak up the gospel of made-in-America excellence. (1985, p. 348)

The enormous scale of the sales of *In Search of Excellence* and Lee Iaccoca's (1984) autobiography indicates that they were not just required reading for senior executives but also for the general public. As William Shinker, publisher of Harper and Row's trade division comments, "whenever in book publishing you can tap into anxiety, the chances are you will have a book that sells very well and could be a best-seller" (Knowlton, 1989, p.102). It is this anxiety that was in large part responsible for the tremendous success of Howard Ruff's *How To Prosper During The Coming Bad Years* (1979), Douglas Casey's *Crisis in Investing* (1983), and Ravi Batra's *Surviving The Great Depression of 1990* (1988), all worthy protagonists in what John Kenneth Galbraith has described as the publishing industry's "cottage industry in predicting disaster" (Huczynski, 1993a, p. 40).

The changing demographic profile of the American population has also served to inflate the market for business and management media. The well-educated professional segment of society has expanded in recent years. In particular, an increasing proportion of formally educated individuals come from the management discipline. More than 75,000 students are awarded MBAs every year in America, which is 15 times the total awarded in 1960 (Micklethwait & Wooldridge, 1996). Their book-based training has ensured their continued reliance on and enthusiasm for management and business books long after they graduate.

### The Structural Approach

A number of commentators have highlighted the importance of the socioeconomic, political and cultural contexts within which management theories and ideas emerge and become widely adopted. In this respect, the success of a new idea or theory is determined, in large part, by how well it meshes with the material needs of managers and their organizations at a particular point in time and the prevailing political environment, cultural norms and expectations. This approach endeavours to explain the adoption of management fashions as a cumulative process by which management alters its control strategies to suit the conditions.

With respect to the influence of the socioeconomic context, Barley and Kunda's (1992) paper stands out as a landmark study. Their extensive historical analysis suggests that, since the 1870s, American managerial discourse has been elaborated in waves or "surges" that have alternated between "rational rhetorics", which state that work processes can be formalized and rationalized to optimize labour productivity and "normative rhetorics", which state that employees can be rendered more productive by shaping their thoughts and capitalizing on their emotions. They propose that these surges of innovative discourse are rooted in cultural antinomies that are fundamental to all Western industrial societies, namely, the oppositions between mechanistic and organic solidarity and between communalism and individualism. This pattern challenges the prevailing assumption that American managerial discourse has moved progressively from coercive to rational and, ultimately, to normative rhetorics of control (Bendix, 1956; Jacoby, 1991; Wren, 1972). Barley and Kunda show that the timing of each new wave



roughly parallels the broad cycles of economic expansion and contraction circumscribed by the students of long waves (Kondratieff, 1935; Rostow, 1978).

Building on this work, Abrahamson (1997) identifies five different types of “employee-management rhetorics” that have swept through U.S. managerial discourse over the last century: Welfare Work, Scientific Management, Human Relations/Personnel Management, Systems Rationalism, and Culture/Quality rhetorics. Using a similar historical time frame, he examined two competing theses which, when tested empirically, were found to be complementary. The “performance-gap” thesis, which Barley and Kunda (1992) rejected in their study, states that the popularity of rhetorics that promise to narrow performance gaps fluctuates with the magnitude of these gaps across organizations. The “pendulum thesis” advanced by Barley and Kunda, on the other hand, predicts that the popularity of rhetorics relates to the upswings and downswings in long waves of macro-economic activity.

In addition to the socioeconomic context, the changing political context has also been seen as an important determinant in shaping what management fashions become popular at a certain time. Closely associated with the threat of international competition in the 1980s was a marked change in America's political and cultural mood. The Reagan Era was characterized by a renewed commitment to the entrepreneurial values that had supposedly built the nation and a considerably more positive interest in business and the world of commerce. The “business decade” of the 1980s stood in stark contrast to earlier decades. As Erwin A. Glikes, the president and publisher of *The Free Press*, suggests, “the role of the corporation in American life was underestimated and undervalued for more than fifty years. It played the villain in the melodrama that American social

analysts promulgated to describe what they thought was social and economic reality in America" (Knowlton, 1989, p.102). He adds, "best-sellers may never be the most thoughtful books on a subject, but when it comes to business, they offer convincing evidence that the American dream still casts a spell over the reading public" (1989, p.103).

A similar change in mood developed in Britain during the Thatcher era in a nation where the manager had always been attributed an even lower, non-professional status (Watson, 1986). Guest (1990) has suggested that the growth of the human resource management (HRM) fashion in the United Kingdom during the 1980s had much to do with the changing political, economic and political climate that saw a tendency for policy-makers and corporate captains to look to the United States as a model of good practice. Ironically, because HRM derives much of its fundamental appeal from its alignment with core American values such as individualism, optimism, leadership and the American dream, Guest suggests it would, inevitably, only ever enjoy limited success in the UK. While the appeal of HRM may have waned, a number of writers have shown how guru theory, in general, with its clarion call for new, entrepreneurial, anti-bureaucratic forms of organizational administration resonates powerfully with the enterprise culture fostered during the Reagan and Thatcher eras and continues to be the dominant ethos of the Clinton and Blair administrations (du Gay and Salaman, 1992; Rose, 1991; New Statesman, 1996).

Thrift (1997) has described how major structural changes in the world economy such as the de-regulation of financial markets; the exponential growth of information; the growth of a more differentiated production-consumption nexus; and a general speed-up in

transportation and communications have all contributed to the rise of a new era of capitalism which he dubs “soft capitalism”. A critical element in this transition has been the development and dissemination of a new hegemonic managerial discourse which is “changing the world economy as much as the changing shape of the world economy is changing itself” (1997, p. 36). Broadly, the new managerial discourse stresses the following themes: the fast-paced changes and uncertainty of the external environment; the need for organizations to continually learn to adapt by being constantly flexible and always in action; challenges to existing knowledge forms; and the creation of organizations that are made up of willing and willed subjects. According to Thrift, the propagation of this discourse has been made possible by the explosive growth in “agents” responsible for its spread across the globe, including management gurus, consultants, business schools, and the business media which form an increasingly powerful “circuit of capital” that has only been existence since the 1960s. “This circuit, which is now self-organizing, is responsible for the production and distribution of managerial knowledge to managers. As it has grown, so have its appetites. It now has a constant and voracious need for new knowledge” (1997, p. 40). In the same vein, Gee, Hull and Lankshear (1996) have collectively described the works of gurus as “fast capitalist texts” which “seek to attend as textual midwives at the birth of the new work order” (p. 24) which is characterized by heavy competition, privatization, deregulation and customization.

Kleiner (1992) has elaborated on the relationship between the cultural context of the 1980s and the rise of the management gurus. He contends that gurus have actively promoted a "culture of intervention", which is a predominant theme in the contemporary corporate culture of America's large corporations. Those who promote the "culture of

intervention" advocate that organizations, like people, can be transformed and perfected through managed social change. Many gurus trace their roots back to the counter-culture movement of the 1960s. The unit of social change may have changed (i.e. from the community to the corporation), but the processes are essentially the same. From his numerous interviews, Kleiner notes:

A large number of change agents, at one time or another, have dabbled in performance -- usually acting or music. And nearly all, including the quality people, have countercultural roots: time spent at an underground newspaper, a Peace Corps outpost, a community organizing office, an EST training centre, or an ashram. Most keep their past hidden from clients, but credit that same past as the source of insights on which they base their livelihood today. (1992, p. 40)

#### The Institutional/Distancing Approach

The Institutional approach draws on theory that is concerned with the forces of institutionalization found outside the organization and the internal processes of institutionalization (Burgoyne & Jackson, 1997; Meyer & Rowan, 1983; Powell & DiMaggio, 1991). It suggests that organizational decision-makers, especially under conditions of uncertainty and information overload, are forced into taking action that resembles the lead by others in the field. Researchers adopting this approach are, therefore, primarily concerned with "bandwagons" which are diffusion processes "whereby organizations adopt an innovation, not because of their individual assessments of the innovation's efficiency or returns, but because of a bandwagon pressure caused by

the sheer number of organizations that have already adopted this innovation (Abrahamson & Rosenkopf, 1993, p. 488). Bandwagon pressures take one of two forms: “Institutional” pressures which occur because non-adopters fear appearing different from many adopters; and “Competitive” pressures that occur because non-adopters fear below-average performance if many competitors profit from adopting. Both pressures can prove to be highly persuasive, generating strong mimetic behaviour and creating isomorphic tendencies within and across specific institutional fields. At the micro-level, bandwagon pressures are played out through the agency of individual managers who strive, in order to bolster or protect their career positions, to be the first to adopt and introduce a seemingly new idea into the organization safe in the knowledge that many others are following that particular route (Huczynski, 1993b).

Researchers who have chosen to make institutionalization a key motive in explaining the creation, dissemination and adoption of new management programs have tended to utilize the metaphor of the market to organize their accounts. Viewed through the lens of the market, the process is conceptualized as a relatively simple supply and demand model by which management ideas, theories and techniques are developed by groups of suppliers and then consumed by a largely undifferentiated group of manager consumers (Alvesson, 1990; Beaumont, 1985; Huczynski, 1993b; Jackson, 1994a; Krell, 1981). In fusing this market metaphor with the equally powerful metaphor of fashion, Abrahamson (1996a) has presented the most comprehensive, and arguably most influential attempt, to conceptualize the business fad phenomenon to date. His model is presented to help scholars better understand the dynamics of “management fashion” which he defines as “a relatively transitory collective belief, disseminated by

management fashion setters, that a management technique leads to rational management progress” (1996, p. 257). These management fashion setters, identified as consulting firms, management gurus, business mass-media publications and business schools, are characterised as being in a “race” to sense managers’ emergent collective preferences for new techniques, develop rhetorics that describe these techniques and disseminate these rhetorics back to managers and organizational stakeholders. Rhetorics, according to Abrahamson, “must not only create the belief that the techniques they champion are rational, but also that they are at the forefront of management progress” (1996a, p. 268).

Empirical research inspired by the institutional approach has tended to take one of three thrusts. First, it has attempted to track and model the diffusion of selected management fashions. For example, Alvarez (1991) has, with an analytical framework that combines neo-institutional theory and the sociology of knowledge, examined the diffusion and reception of the idea of entrepreneurship in the 1980s in three countries: Britain, Mexico, and Spain. In their research into three consultant-driven approaches to organizational improvement--management by objectives, organization development and total quality management--Gill and Whittle (1993) have identified an “organizational life-cycle” for management ideas. Using a 40-year “panacea cycle”, they plotted the relative progress of each of these approaches along a bell-shaped curve that commences with a “birth” stage in which the guru writes a seminal book; then moves to “adolescence” in which consultants and senior managers promote a packaged intervention; to “maturity” during which the approach becomes routinized/bureaucratized by consultants and internal human resources staff; and then, finally, to “decline” at which point the costs exceed apparent benefits and a new approach is adopted. In their extensive study of the Quality

Circle fashion, Abrahamson and Fairchild (1997) found that it had a low-popularity latency period that was followed by a wave-like, ephemeral, popularity curve. In addition they noted that “emotionally charged, enthusiastic, and unreasoned discourse characterized the upswing of the Quality Circle wave, whereas more reasoned, unemotional, and qualified discourse characterized its downswing, evidencing a pattern of superstitious collective learning” (p.2).

A second thrust of the institutional research has attempted to shed some light on the dynamics and relationships between various management fashion-setter groups.

Diffusion theorists have traditionally assumed that knowledge flows from the academy to the field (Corwin and Louis, 1982; Dunbar, 1983). However, a study of academic- and practitioner-oriented discourse around the topic of organizational culture revealed that, while the discourses were initially quite distinct, over time, the academics appear to have moved toward the practitioners’ point of view (Barley, Meyer & Gash, 1988). Similarly, Huczynski (1994) has highlighted the “gatekeeping role” that business school faculty play in selecting which popular ideas the students should be exposed to, tentatively suggesting that the ease of teaching and the readily apparent possession of a valuable truth were the two most important considerations.

A number of writers have highlighted the popular press as another key management fashion setting group. For example, Chen and Meindl (1991) have examined the business media’s role in the social construction of the public image of hero managers like Donald Burr of the People Express airline. Specifically, they allude to the role the media play in determining what issues are important, setting the agenda for what the public thinks about and reinforcing or changing existing beliefs and cultivating perceptions of the nature of

social reality. Alvarez and Mazza (1997) have argued that the popular press is a primary factor in diffusing and legitimizing management fads. Their empirical study of the diffusion of the Human Resource Management movement in several Italian newspapers in the last decade has lent some support for their argument that the popular press not only provides management theories and practices with social legitimacy, but also performs some tasks associated with the production of management fads. They conclude that, “while the academic press diffuses management theories and practices as haute couture, the popular press works the pret-a-porter side” (1997, p. 3). Evidence provided by Spell (1998) suggests that for some management fashions (i.e. benchmarks and pay-for-performance plans) the popular business press may have led the way while for others (i.e. quality circles or peer review), the reverse was true. He does acknowledge that the relatively longer production cycles associated with academic publishing may have an important bearing on this lag phenomenon.

The book publishers’ intermediary role in the diffusion of ideas (Coser, Kadushin, & Powell, 1982) has also been singled out as important management fashion setter (Byrne, 1986; Clark and Greatbatch, 1999; Freeman, 1985; Furusten, 1999; Pierce & Newstrom, 1990; Tirbutt, 1989). In accounting for the rapid explosion in the business book market, they have noted several characteristics that distinguish contemporary from older business books. The current crop of books are not only more optimistic in their outlook than their predecessors, but they describe things in non-theoretical language, providing managers with what appears to be an easy cure for their organizational woes and a clearly marked pathway towards personal success. Furthermore, the new books are considerably easier to read. Freeman singles out Blanchard and Johnson's enormously



popular book *The One Minute Manager* (1983) as a prime specimen of high readability using a scoring system developed by Flesch (1974). The book is full of short sentences, words with few syllables, personal pronouns, and simulated dialogue that enable the typical manager to read it in less than an hour. Told in the form of a fable, the book was a refreshing change from the relatively sterile format of the traditional management texts. Today's business best sellers are also not fundamentally critical of management or business. Earlier management best-sellers such as *The Organization Man* (Whyte, 1957), *The Peter Principle* (Peter & Hull, 1969) and *Parkinson's Law* (Parkinson, 1957) were satirical in tone, scathingly critical of the corporate status quo and very much in keeping with the predominantly anti-business rhetorical tone of their time. The 1980s best sellers, by contrast, were more celebratory, stressing the central role that business and industry have to play in maintaining the nation's wealth and global standing and the important contribution that managers make in sustaining this. While business books have been an important component of the management fashion industry, their influence should not be over-exaggerated. As Thomas (1989) has noted, it would be naive to equate the widespread purchase of any popular management text such as *In Search of Excellence* or *The One Minute Manager* with either widespread reading, common interpretation, or indeed any influence on the reader's beliefs or behaviour. Research by the Management Training Partnership in the UK found that 75 per cent of the personnel directors that they surveyed bought at least four management books a year. However, only one in five actually read them (Crainer, 1996, p xiv).

A third and considerably less well-developed thrust in institutional research has attempted to examine the processes of idea diffusion within the organization.

Specifically, the kinds of questions that are asked in this vein include the following. Who is responsible for introducing new performance improvement programs into the organization? How are the concepts disseminated? Is there a similar cycle of pioneering acceptance, mass application and gradual decline within organizations as there is among organizations? What are the patterns of acceptance of and resistance to new programs? Three studies illustrate potentially useful lines of inquiry for the comparatively underdeveloped intra-organizational diffusion research. In his study of the internal mobilization processes within the 62 “excellent” companies identified by Peters and Waterman (1982), Soeters discovered some strong similarities with the mobilization of “social movements” which he defines as “groups of people who unite or at least interact with one another on the basis of some kind of dissatisfaction or strain” (1986, 303). Repenning (1996) has attempted to model the adoption and use of a program using an explicit disequilibrium perspective that encompasses interactions between many organization levels within the firm. The resulting model, when simulated, suggested that the introduction of an improvement program in an environment of decentralized decision making may result in unexpected outcomes which, if misinterpreted, may induce actions that result in the demise of an otherwise successful improvement program. Finally, Knights and McCabe (1998) have observed from their study of bank employees working under a business process reengineering (BPR) work regime, that BPR was neither as simple to implement nor as ‘rational’ in its content as the gurus claim. Moreover, it did not prove to be as coercive in its control over labour as many critics fear. They concluded that “staff are not simply victims of management control, but are often active participants

in the conditions that maintain and reproduce control and the stress and resistance that may follow as a result” (1998b, p. 188).

### The Charismatic Approach

The Charismatic approach places the figure of the guru squarely at the centre of the analysis. Briefly stated, this explanation suggests that, in the face of increased uncertainty and spiraling competition, executives and managers may turn to the charismatic figure of a guru for guidance largely as an act of faith. To whom they turn is dependent on the quality of the gurus’ “performance” and how effectively they appeal and speak to the executives’ needs.

The most successful management gurus have proven themselves to be consummate self-promoters who know how, and are willing, to work effectively with the requisite promotional infrastructure of book publishers, agents, journalists and seminar promoters. It is this ability and willingness that not only creates their initial popularity but also sustains it. Huczynski suggests that gurus and consultants ensure that management ideas are constantly upgraded or replaced through what he describes as a process of “planned obsolescence”. This enables them to “enter the management idea market with the confidence that a particular product which is selling well today will be displaced at a future time” (1993, p. 285). In conveniently and appealingly packaging their ideas, vendors provide managers with much needed relief from the need to search extensively for new solutions. Harvey MacKay, the author of *Swim with the Sharks* (1988), is very much in tune with the need for easy access to new management ideas. He believes that “differentiators” such as celebrity endorsements and a money-back guarantee were

important to the sales of his book (Barrier, 1990). The book and spin-off products such as tapes, videocassette, train-the-trainer programs and survey instruments have become powerful tools not only for making consultants visible in an increasingly crowded marketplace but also for legitimizing the consultant in the eyes of their customers. The book has, in effect, become an "oversized business card for management consultants" (Brimelow, 1989, p. 42). As Pierce and Newstrom comment, "through the printed word they hope to provide a unique take-home product for their clients, communicate their management philosophies, gain wide exposure for themselves or their firms, and occasionally profit handsomely" (1990, p. 3). The importance of having a best-seller was obviously not lost on a pair of ambitious consultants who spent \$250,000 buying more than 10,000 copies of their own book, *The Discipline of Market Leaders* (Treacy & Wiersema, 1995; Stern, 1995). Many commentators would argue, therefore, that gurus' marketing strategies, however questionable they may be, are frequently a more critical determinant of success than the ideas and concepts they develop.

Clark and Salaman have taken this "marketing strategy" argument and done much to extend and deepen it significantly. They have suggested that the key to understanding the power and impact of gurus is to see what they do as "performance" (Clark, 1995; Clark and Salaman, 1998). They have shown that the dramaturgical metaphor (Burke, 1945; Goffman, 1960; Mangham and Overington, 1983, 1987; Mangham, 1996) provides a useful framework within which to illuminate the activities of management consultants. Given that the key task of management consultants is to convince clients of their quality and value, impression management is a core feature of consultancy work. While gurus share the same concern with performance and impression management as consultants, the

guru's work is distinctive because it is primarily concerned with transforming consciousness and the guru relies heavily on one-way communication in large public arenas to get his or her message across. To properly illuminate the distinctive quality of the guru's work, they argue that a powerful metaphor is required.

Clark and Salaman propose that the guru's performance should be viewed as the functional equivalent of that of the "witch doctor" in tribal societies. Witch doctors and gurus serve to assist their clients with pressing problems, anxieties and stresses but do this from marginal positions, being both *in* and *out* of their respective societies. Following Cleverley (1971), they suggest that the knowledge that gurus and witchdoctors use and trade in share properties with magical knowledge--it is developed in order to control the critical uncertainties of the world and is developed through the manipulation of supernatural agencies. By juxtaposing the typical live performance of a witchdoctor with that of a management guru, they convincingly portray the similarities in the ways they work. Specifically, they note a "common focus upon the emotional, the generation of threat and risk for all parties, the destabilizing of identities, allied to the repetitive emphasis on simplified, action-focused ritualistic nostrums" (1996, p.104). They conjecture that successful gurus have always known that their success is largely dependent upon the magic and mystery of their performance and have found new and creative ways in which to exploit it.

This dependency was well recognized by the gurus' forebears. In his book, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, Thomas (1973) has noted the tendency of businessmen in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries in England to contact wizards and cunning men on such matters as an insurance policy, the purchase of commodities and the advisability of loans.

Returning to the contemporary world of commerce, the quasi-religious and magical aspects of the gurus' work have also been noted by numerous writers (Huczynski, 1993a; Jackson, 1996b; Fincham, 1996; Sharpe, 1984). In his investigation of prominent British management guru, Eli Goldratt, author of *The Goal* (Goldratt & Cox, 1984) and *The Race* (Goldratt & Cox, 1986), Jones (1997) notes that Goldratt's guru-philosophy depends upon both reason and belief for its success. He argues that "the former supplies the logic and rationale for action; the latter generates the faith and commitment required to make fundamental change" (1997, p. 29).

Shifting attention away from the guru's performance to the manager's needs, it is apparent from the literature that executives will adopt a new idea into their organization for a number of reasons. They may perceive that the idea can solve a specific problem that they believe to be critical to their company. A new idea may also be adopted to act as a motivational device within the organization. Similarly, it can serve as a vehicle to assist organizational change. The gurus not only motivate employees with their fresh ideas and perspectives but also draw on their personality to legitimize organizational change. As Stuller suggests, "associating the ideas with people serves not only as an identifying or mnemonic device for a corporation's employees, but it also gives the change personality" (1992, p. 21). Management guru Robert Waterman acknowledges that "consultants are a way around the issues that companies usually put into their 'too hard' basket" (Stuller, 1992, p. 21). Critical to their success in this role is the new language they bring to the organization through their books, seminars and speeches that can enable employees to look at entrenched problems in a new light. It is, therefore, not surprising to find that a large percentage of business best-seller sales units comes from

block orders placed by companies for distribution throughout their organizations (Freeman, 1985).

Huczynski argues that, in addition to fulfilling cognitive and material needs, gurus have appealed to managers' social or externally directed esteem needs by legitimizing their role in society and providing positive role models to follow. In the process, the gurus have served to reassure managers and reduce the feeling of insecurity that is an inevitable fact of managerial life. Huczynski, therefore, proposes that "the growth in the popularity of management guru books and seminars, far from being linked with an upturn in managers' confidence, in fact represents a response to widespread self-doubt among executives, even those at the top" (1993a, p. 196). Huczynski also discusses how management gurus have been able to address the personal or internal needs of individual managers. In particular, he emphasizes the spiritual or charismatic quality of the gurus' work in motivating and inspiring their managerial audiences (Bass, 1986; Bryman, 1992; Pauchant, 1991). Gill and Whittle (1993) have speculated that the rise and fall of management fashions may be attributed in part to the effect of covert psychoanalytic processes upon organizational behaviour (Kets de Vries & Miller, 1984). They sketch out how three common group "phantasies" identified by Bion (1961) and others at the Tavistock Institute--"flight/fight" culture, "dependency" culture and "pairing" or "utopian" culture--all encourage in some way either a dependency on a new management guru or a new management fashion.

While academics have shed considerable light on to the charismatic qualities of the management gurus' work, a major weakness of the Charismatic Approach is the lack of empirical investigation that has been conducted into how executives and managers

actually perceive and use gurus' ideas. The major reason for this paucity of research is the fundamental methodological and practical challenges that such research questions pose. One example of this type of research was conducted as part of Huczynski's doctoral study (Huczynski, 1991, pp. 473-481). Interviews were conducted with eight managers from the local plant of an American multinational company concerning what managerial ideas they found valuable and why. He found that, with the exception of management control, they mentioned all of the elements that he had identified in his review of secondary sources (i.e. management legitimation, applicability, steps or principles, communicability, unitary perspective, universal application, individualistic perspective, human nature model, contribution/ownership, leadership). Some of the managers interviewed valued new managerial ideas because they were "challenging" (i.e. they were forced to look at things in a different light), while others valued the link or "correspondence" the idea had with their own thoughts and beliefs. Some of those interviewed also appreciated the way in which an idea could "integrate" several seemingly disparate insights, feelings and experiences. However, Huczynski admits that these studies were not sufficiently thorough to warrant serious attention and that much more needs to be done in this area (Huczynski, personal communication, January 18, 1994).

In an ethnographic study of managers in a plant in the English midlands, Watson observed that the buzzwords, fads and flavours of the month spawned by management gurus play a significant part in the "double-control aspect" of the manager's life because

Managers who embrace these notions (whether they be rhetorical devices to persuade people to act in certain ways or are actual practices and techniques)



are trying to exert control simultaneously on behalf of the employing organization and over their own lives by using these ideas and actions to *make sense of their own lives and their place in the scheme of things*". (1994, p. 896)

While the managers in the organization that Watson observed were generally critical of the flavour-of-the-month techniques, they felt obliged to pursue them because they were not certain that they would not work. Watson found that, although the managers he worked with appeared to remember little from popular business books, they did help them to "engage in a brief standing back from their everyday pressures and encourage them to reflect on what they are doing" (1994b, p. 216). Similarly, a survey conducted by Ezzamel, Lilley & Wilmott (1994) that examined managers' attitudes about recent changes in UK management practices, found that managers applied only piecemeal aspects of the gurus' prescriptions to support incremental changes. Their selections were based on an intimate knowledge of the cultural and political conditions of change within their respective organizations. It is in the context of managers attempting to make sense of themselves and their frequently turbulent situations that the gurus have a brief, but potentially powerful, opportunity to question and shape managers' self-concept.

Drawing on the little empirical work that has been done examining the relationship between the guru and his or her manager-followers, I have contended that the management guru is playing an increasingly important role in influencing both the development and the structure of the manager's self-concept (Gergen, 1971; Jackson, 1996a). Drawing on the book *The Saturated Self* (Gergen, 1991) in which are sketched out some of the profound patterns of social change and their impact on self-definition especially in North America, I

have suggested that management gurus are both a product and producer of the saturated self. Gergen's central thesis is that the "technologies of social saturation", such as the automobile, telephone, electronic mail, popular magazines and television, have immersed individuals even more deeply in the social world and exposed them to many more opinions, values and lifestyles than they would have experienced in industrial and pre-industrial societies. This process of "social saturation" is propelling individuals toward a new self-consciousness that he suggests is a postmodern consciousness. A critical prelude to this consciousness is the "populating of the self" or "the acquisition of multiple and disparate potentials for being" (1991, p. 69). As individuals become more exposed to other individuals they become aware of a much wider range of "possible selves", that is, "the multiple conceptions people harbour of what they might become, would like to become, or are afraid to become" (1991, p.74). He highlights three repercussions of this "multiphrenia syndrome" that have important implications for our understanding of the management guru-manager relationship. First, as managers become aware of the myriad possibilities of who they could be and how good they should be, then self-doubt starts to seep into their everyday consciousness. Second, in their quest to become better managers, managers are rapidly confronted with what Wurman (1989) has neatly coined "information anxiety", a state that he argues is produced "by the ever-widening gap between what we understand and what we think we should understand" (1989, p. 34). Third, Gergen suggests that multiphrenia has precipitated an emerging crisis in the common conception of human understanding which he describes as "rationality in recession". He argues that, "as the range of our relationships is expanded, the validity of each localized rationality is questionable or absurd from the standpoint of another" (1991, p.78). Consequently, individuals' faith in either finding or

accepting the existence of one “right” way has become severely undermined, so that they turn instead to celebrity-endorsed “infotainment” that is most visibly manifested in the news media (Mitroff & Bennis, 1989; Postman, 1990; Schickel, 1985). In the management field, this shift has been manifested as managers turning their backs on the efficacy of rational scientific solutions that have been the traditional realm of academe, in favour of the simpler, more motivational solutions that are peddled to great effect by the management gurus. The management gurus have, in the process, become the new “guarantors” of management knowledge for the practising manager so that whatever they say should be heard and given serious attention (Burgoyne, 1995a; Jackson, 1994; Mitroff & Bennis, 1989). This shift has forced the intellectuals to relinquish their traditional role as “legislators” in favour of a newer, somewhat reduced role as “interpreters” (Bauman, 1997). It is to this role that we now turn.

### Towards a Rhetorical Critique

It is clear from the above review that in a relatively short period of time, a considerable amount of progress has been made by academic researchers in developing and advancing explanatory accounts of the management guru and fashion phenomenon. While we have been in “catch-up” mode, my sense is that we are gaining on this phenomenon. What then must be done to ensure that we at least draw level with it? From the perspective of a researcher wishing to contribute to this enterprise, the irony is certainly not lost on me that the dilemmas that researchers face are not dissimilar from the dilemmas that managers must find themselves in when deciding what stand to take

regarding the adoption or rejection of a new management fashion. Grint (1997) has amusingly summarized this dilemma by likening it to the purchase of a pair of flared trousers, as follows:

Should we discard our flared trousers immediately on the grounds that they are no longer legitimate attire and we all want to look trendy and progressive (institutional approach); or because they do not align themselves with the long waves of managerial trousers--that is, they smack of touchy-feely hippies and we are now into a hard-nosed expansionary phase where only pin-stripes will do (structural account); or because the guru doesn't wear them (charismatic account); or because the supervisors are wearing them we need to (re)demonstrate who is in charge (distancing approach); or because, after all, you simply cannot iron them properly and they keep getting caught in the lift doors so that they are completely irrational (rational account)? Or perhaps all five explanations seem equally viable. (1997, pp. 56-57)

Seeing the similarities between the plights faced by both academic researchers and managers in making decisions about selecting the best approach to follow from an ever-increasing array of new and innovative approaches is, I think, an important step forward for us to make. Such has been our enthusiasm for exposing and ridiculing (albeit politely) the manager's susceptibility to gurus and management fashions, that we may have lost sight of our own susceptibilities and weaknesses. As Lilley (1997) has poignantly questioned: "are we simply using 'our' gurus to critique 'theirs'"; and can an

accelerating dance upon the stepping stones of new ‘heroes’, (re)instigated by our reading/writing of their texts, prevent us, any more than managers, from a rapid descent into epistemological quicksand?” (1997, p. 52).

Bearing this warning in mind and heeding Ramsay’s (1996) call for a “level-headed” explanation, I would suggest that all four explanatory approaches discussed above have contributed in some measure to our understanding of the management guru and management fashion phenomenon. Clearly, not one of the approaches has distinguished itself as gaining supremacy over the others either in term of its explanatory power or the degree of enthusiasm and the size of following that it has generated among the academic community. The Rational approach serves to remind us that management fashions are developed explicitly to improve managerial and organizational performance and that, in some instances, they do contribute, either directly or indirectly, to the company’s bottom line. For example, Brickley et al note “for all their fad-like behaviour, the persistence of management innovations suggests they serve some useful purpose; the benefits of such innovations, at least on average, must exceed the costs” (1997, p. 38). We need to be mindful, therefore, of the economic implications of management fashions. However, as Abrahamson (1991) has pointed out, an “efficient-choice” perspective provides only limited assistance in addressing the question of when, and by what processes, technically inefficient innovations are diffused or efficient innovations rejected.

The Structuralist approach, on the other hand, has served to place the management guru and fashion phenomenon in a much broader socio-political and cultural context. The critiques that have been inspired by this approach have, by and large, done a good job of

unmasking the internal contradictions and the “real” interests that might be served by management fashions. Ramsay (1996) has acknowledged that structural explanations of management fashions make an important contribution in defining external constraint and influence but, “without elaboration, risk reducing the immediate context to a matter of detail or of homogenizing organizational settings, thus formularizing developments with little recognition of the importance of agency or process” (1996, p. 162).

The Institutional Approach has given due recognition to the importance of process (although it has downplayed agency), in explaining the management guru and management fashion phenomenon. Writers who have adopted this approach have helpfully identified the role of various agents and their institutional linkages within the management fashion industry and have highlighted the significance of competitive and bandwagon pressures that act upon organizations. Abrahamson, who has given this approach its fullest expression, has highlighted the importance of rhetorics in the promotion and dissemination of new management fashions. However, Kieser (1997) has pointed to several flaws within Abrahamson’s theory of management fashions. First, he notes that “linking the hypothesis that managers have to adhere to norms of progress with neo-institutional theory smacks of an attempt to create the impression that the explanation of the dynamics of management fashion does not rest on just one single hypothesis but on a highly reputed theory” (1997, p. 53). Second, Abrahamson’s conception of rhetoric as being something that is applied once the fashion has been produced to “oil the wheels” between the suppliers and consumers is too limiting and serves only to reinforce the conventional scholarly and public wisdom about how the management fashion industry functions.

Abrahamson's explanatory framework is further hindered by his insistence that a management fashion should be considered as an essentially "technical fashion". That is, "a social process that repeatedly redefines technicians' collective perceptions of what constitutes rational progress" (1996b, p. 117) as distinct from the relatively trivial and cosmetic realm of "aesthetic fashion". I would support Kieser's argument that rhetoric in its aesthetic form is "the main fabric of management fashions . . . [and] therefore, theories of fashion in aesthetic forms are generally applicable to explanations of management fashions" (1997, p. 49). Consequently, we need to be as concerned about the aesthetic qualities of management fashions and their ability to gratify our senses and serve our emotional well being as we are about their technical qualities.

Finally, the preoccupation that Abrahamson and others working within this explanatory frame have with broad macro-historical rhetorical categories limits room for a more finely tuned rhetorical analysis of individual management fashions. While the broader economic and political forces are undoubtedly important in providing the general context for the relative receptivity of a rationally- versus a normatively-oriented management fashion, we still have to account for the emergence and predominance of just a few particular fashions over many others that are competing for the managers' attention in any given period of time. Academics have tended to aggregate popular management ideas too coarsely. As Huczynski observes, "they address the business publishing explosion as a generalized phenomenon and fail to make any distinctions between the contents of these different books or the backgrounds of their authors" (1993a, p. 39). Treating popular management ideas as a single, relatively uniform and isolated body of knowledge does little to help our understanding of the effect it has had

upon management practice. Similarly, there is a tendency in the literature to treat all management gurus as one and to over-generalize the ways and means of how they have become constructed. The data that we have to draw on about management gurus tends to be anecdotal, impressionistic and limited. Tom Peters emerges as a justifiably attractive if somewhat well-worn exemplar but we need to find out more about other gurus to fill out our repertoire.

There has been a similar tendency to generalize about the readers or "consumers" of these popular management ideas. On a very basic level no one appears to be sure who reads these books, let alone understands why they read them and what they do differently as a result of reading them. It is implicitly assumed in the literature that managers are the primary readership group. However, there is little explicit evidence to confirm this assumption. If managers are the primary consumers, we need to explore further what kinds of managers (in terms of personal characteristics, level, function etc.) are particularly interested in these new ideas and why. We should also probe more deeply into the plights of the books. Are they read cover-to-cover and pondered thoroughly? Or, as common wisdom would have it, are they merely flicked through in one momentary sitting? Or are they used as display items placed strategically on coffee tables or on bookshelves to demonstrate that the reader is 'up to date' and 'in the know'? Or are they confined to briefcases and carried to and from work on the off chance that the reader might find time to read but never quite manages it?

These criticisms have been echoed by Clark and Salaman (1998a) in their excellent and wide-ranging review of the work that has been done to date to understand the guru's role in the management fashion-setting process. They are particularly critical of the



prevailing assumption that the relationship between the guru-client relationship is a simple one-way affair. In many accounts, they argue, the guru is portrayed as the omnipotent, initiating partner while managers are “conceived largely as passive, docile consumers of gurus’ ideas and recommendations, inherently vulnerable to gurus’ blandishments, anxiously searching for reassurances and support, looking desperately for new ideas” (1998a, p. 146). While the guru-manager relationship is one that is predicated on a power differential in terms of knowledge, experience, talent etc., the guru is also dependent on the manager in order to create and then sustain a mass following of managers. This is a task that is made particularly challenging because, unlike the CEO who can rely on “legal-rational authority” by virtue of his or her position within the organization, the guru’s authority in this relationship, working outside of any formal organizational context, is derived entirely from “charismatic authority” which rests, according to Weber, on the “devotion to the exceptional sanctity, heroism or exemplary character of an individual person, and the normative patterns or order revealed or ordained by him” (1925, p. 215).

Clark and Salaman propose an alternative, three-facet approach to better understanding the guru-manager relationship. First, they suggest a more interactive and more balanced conception of the guru-manager relationship, “one where both parties derive benefit from the relationship; where there are no winners and losers but rather a collusion in mutual winning” (1998a, p. 146). Second, their approach recognizes that the key to the management gurus’ influence lies not in their expert knowledge, but in the symbolic quality of their work. Specifically, it is their ability to convey the sense of being knowledgeable or their rhetorical power that is central to their work. Applying this

argument to the analysis of management texts, Monin and Monin suggest that, “closer reading of these texts would reveal that reader-response may be based not only on *what* is said but often on *how* it is said. . . rhetorical analysis of [gurus’] texts would lead to more informed assessments of the value of the theory presented” (1998, p. 2). Similarly, Nohria and Berkley have observed that the new managerialist discourse must be “understood primarily as a form of rhetoric . . . spoken by managerial professionals not to mention professors of management--in ways that are not necessarily coterminous with organizational practice itself” (1994, pp. 125-126). The third element of this approach acknowledges that gurus manage meaning for managers through their use of language (Gowler & Legge, 1983), concluding “it is possible, therefore, that the gurus’ success with their clients lies in their capacity, in partnership with the client, to address and manipulate through myths and stories, symbolic issues of great pertinence and salience to senior managers: managers’ own roles and identities within the ‘new’ organization” (Clark & Salaman, 1998a, p. 149).

In a more recent paper, Clark and Salaman (1998b) have taken these arguments further by conceptualizing management fashions as a form of discourse about organization which constitutes the speakers/performers (gurus) and hearers/audience (managers) through a series of distinct guru narratives. Acknowledging the influence of the recent “narrative turn” in organizational studies (Barry & Elmes, 1997; Boje, 1995; Czarniawski, 1997; O’Connor, 1995), they outline four features of their approach to narrative which are particularly relevant to their analysis of guru theory. First, they declare an ontological commitment that organizational ‘reality’ is constituted in the use of language. Second, they argue that “organizational reality is not something which can

never be known as something-in-itself; knowledge of organizational reality is only available through the representations of various spokespersons” (1998b, pp. 14-15). Management gurus are particularly significant and influential spokespersons. Third, their approach assumes that gurus influence executives by using a limited number of coherent accounts or narratives. In their study, three such “Ur-narratives” are identified--the organization as community, the organization as market and the organization as adaptive individual. Finally, their approach posits that it is within these narratives that executives seek to “position” (Davies & Harre, 1991) themselves and their employees.

In this study, I build on the important progress that has been made by such writers as Abrahamson and Clark and Salaman in furthering our understanding of management gurus and management fashions. I do this by offering detailed rhetorical critiques of three popular fashions that have been instigated by management gurus during the 1990s. These critiques not only provide much needed empirical material about management gurus and management fashions but also demonstrate an approach that has hitherto not been applied to this phenomenon but has the potential to shed some new light upon it. Before proceeding with these critiques, however, we need to develop our thinking along three interrelated fronts. First, we need a broader and deeper appreciation of the forms and functions of rhetoric in creating the social order. In other words, rhetoric needs to be moved from the margins to the core of our concerns as academic researchers. As Czarniawska-Joerges has observed, while there has been an increasing awareness of rhetoric in the discipline of management and organizational research, there is as yet, “no consolidated effort at rhetorical analysis” (1995, p. 148).

Second, we should apply sophisticated and proven methods of rhetorical criticism that can provide us with a richer and more complete understanding of the rhetorical content and dynamics of the management fashion- setting process. Along these lines, Monin and Monin (1998) have contended that, “a rhetorically aware reader is an empowered reader; and that an organizational theorist is empowered if she recognizes, as she writes and reads, both the root metaphors in the texts of her theory and also the rhetorical skills with which they have been crafted” (1998, p. 1).

Third, if, as Abrahamson (1996a) has urged, we wish to actively intervene in the management fashion-setting process to make it a more technically useful, collective learning process, we need to become more conscious of the rhetorical qualities of our own work as scholars. In particular, we need to consider how to make our critiques as compelling to our colleagues and to managers as those accounts that have been created by the management gurus and their consultant followers. As Aldag concludes, “we need to pay more attention to *telling* and *selling* our research results and relevance” (1997, p.14; his italics).

The next chapter is devoted to developing these three fronts. In this chapter I will focus my attention upon an established method of rhetorical criticism that I argue holds some promise for providing new and important insights into the management guru and management fashion phenomenon and for developing rhetorically compelling critiques of it, for managers and academics alike.

## Summary

This chapter has reviewed the substantial and burgeoning literature that has examined various aspects of the management guru and management fashion phenomenon. The review revealed that this phenomenon took off during the 1980s in North America and continues to court the corporate imagination attention both there and increasingly throughout the rest of the world. During the mid-1990s a backlash against the management guru and fashion phenomenon has gathered momentum from both academic and media communities but it is difficult to assess the scale and long-term effect of this movement. The paradox of a rapidly growing management fashion industry in the face of disappointing material results looks set to be a feature of the business world for some time to come.

The review also revealed a recent, somewhat belated yet nonetheless impressive, effort on the part of academic researchers to explain the management guru and management fashion phenomenon. Explanatory accounts were distinguished, on the one hand, by the extent to which they stressed internalist versus externalist forces and, on the other, by the relative emphasis they placed upon logic or emotion. It was concluded that all four approaches (i.e. rational (efficient-choice); structural (forced-selection); charismatic (fashion); and institutional/distancing (fad)) had, in varying ways, made some contribution to our overall understanding of the phenomenon. In an effort to move forward with this explanatory project, a line of inquiry was drawn out from the most recent literature that, it was argued, might further enrich our theoretical and empirical understanding of the management guru and management fashion phenomenon. This line

of inquiry essentially involves systematically probing the relationship and symbolic exchange between the management guru and the manager through the careful rhetorical critique of the narratives underlying individual management fashions.

## CHAPTER THREE

### LITERATURE REVIEW:

#### DRAMATISTIC RHETORICAL CRITICISM

“Children, only animals live entirely in the Here and Now. Only nature knows neither memory nor history. But man - let me offer you a definition - is the story-telling animal. Wherever he goes he wants to leave behind not a chaotic wake, not an empty space, but the comforting marker-buoys and trail-signs of stories. He has to go on telling stories. He has to keep making them up. As long as there’s a story, it’s all right”.

Graham Swift in *Waterland* (1983, p. 57).

“Ideas, must be strongly linked must follow one another without interruption.... When you have thus formed the chain of ideas in the heads of your citizens, you then will be able to pride yourselves on guiding them and being their masters. A stupid despot may constrain his slaves with iron chains; but a true politician binds them even more strongly by the chain of their own ideas; it is at the stable point of reason that he secures the end of the chain; this link is all the stronger in that we do not know of what it is made and we believe it to be our own work.”

The French reformer J.M. Servan, cited in *Discipline and Punish* (Foucault, 1977, pp. 102-103).

#### Introduction

The preceding review of the management guru and management fashion literature led to the conclusion that one potentially profitable line of inquiry for researchers might be to subject individual management fashions to the scrutiny of a sophisticated method of rhetorical criticism. In this chapter I describe a method of rhetorical criticism which I think might be particularly suitable for studying this phenomenon. Fantasy Theme

Analysis (FTA) is a peculiarly dramatic method of rhetorical criticism developed in the 1970s by Ernest Bormann and his colleagues at the “Minnesota School” of communications to better understand how and why certain types of messages excite widespread public attention on sporadic and cyclical bases. The method they developed to do this is founded on a general communication theory known as Symbolic Convergence Theory (SCT), which attempts to provide an explanatory framework for the analysis of group and mass communication processes. While FTA has become well established within the realm of rhetorical criticism, it has been used only fleetingly within organizational research. It is, however, a method that deserves greater attention as a means to better understand not just the management guru and fashion phenomenon, but potentially a number of other management and organizational questions.

I have several reasons for suggesting that FTA might be a particularly effective method for analyzing management gurus and management fashions. First, this technique is rooted in a powerful explanatory metaphor--the theatre--which, in addition to its noble and distinguished tradition within the social sciences, has already been used to good effect to illuminate and explicate the performative aspects of the management guru-manager relationship (Clark, 1995; Clark and Salaman, 1998a; 1998b). Second, this method is embedded in a general and dynamic theoretical framework (i.e. SCT) which can help us better understand the linkage between small group and mass-mediated communication processes that are critical in the creation, dissemination and take-up of management fashions. Third, FTA has shown itself to be attuned to both the aesthetic and technical qualities of rhetoric that I have argued are critical to understanding the management guru and fashion phenomenon. Fourth, the method combines the capacity



for generalization with a finely tuned sensitivity to the unique experiences and insights of the critic as well as the distinct features of each management fashion. Fifth, FTA has a proven track record of providing theoretical insights into communication phenomena in diverse empirical settings analogous to the domain of management fashions. Finally, the method can take into account all of the components associated with management fashions without privileging any one component over another. These components include the gurus who originate management fashions, the consulting firms and business schools that endorse them, the mass media that disseminate them, and the managers and organizations that, ultimately, consume them within a very distinctive socio-cultural context.

The chapter begins with a discussion of the origins, underlying assumptions and main concepts of SCT and FTA. To give the reader a sense of the reach and depth of this approach, a review of its various empirical applications is then presented. This is followed by a review of this critique that has mobilized in reaction to FTA and SCT as well as the response to this by the chief proponents of the theory. The chapter closes by summarizing the features of this method that might make it a potentially effective method for shedding fresh insight into the management guru and management fashion phenomenon.

## The Fantasy Theme Method of Rhetorical Criticism

### Origins

Symbolic Convergence Theory (SCT) emerged from the collective efforts of the Minnesota Group that has been centred at the Department of Speech Communication at the University of Minnesota since the early 1960s. The primary focus of this group has

been studying the decision-making and communication processes that occur within group discussion. Specifically, the Minnesota Group has been most interested in how groups of people come to share a new consciousness. Symbolic Convergence Theory attempts to provide an explanation that accounts for the creation, raising and maintenance of group consciousness through communication. The process of symbolic convergence is “symbolic” because “it deals with the human tendency to interpret signs and objects by giving them meaning” (Bormann, 1983, p. 102). “Convergence” refers to the way “two or more private symbolic worlds incline toward each other, come more closely together, or even overlap during certain processes of communication” (Bormann, 1983, p. 102).

In addition to trying to better understand group communication processes, the intellectual leader of the Minnesota Group, Ernest Bormann, has a broader ambition in mind with SCT. He views it as one means to help to bridge the wide gap that had opened up during the 1950s and 1960s between two diverse scholarly traditions within the communications field. The “humanistic” and “social science” traditions were separated by different research methods and terminologies with, perhaps ironically given the nature of the field, little communication taking place between them. Bormann distinguishes between the “special” theories of communication that have largely been the preoccupation of the humanists and the “general” theories of communication that have been the major priority for communication scholars with a social sciences inclination (Bormann, 1980). “Special theories” are artistic formulations that specify the nature of conventional forms and usage of communication and provide advice on how to use and criticize such forms. They are therefore, bounded by time and culture. “General” theories, by contrast, relate to communication practices that cut across these conventional

forms on a recurring basis. Bormann offers the concept of cognitive dissonance as an example of a general theory of communication. He claims that his scientifically oriented SCT combined with his humanistic method of rhetorical criticism, which he has christened “Fantasy Theme Analysis” (FTA) may be able to provide a valuable way of unifying the historic divide between the humanistic and social scientific studies of rhetoric and communication.

An important turning point in the work of Bormann and the Minnesota Group came with the publication in 1970 of Robert Bales’ book, *Personality and Interpersonal Behaviour*. In common with the Minnesota Group, Bales was studying small group interaction under laboratory conditions at Harvard from which he identified twelve content analysis categories. One of these categories--“shows tension release”--he later changed to “dramatizes”. The common element of acts within this category was that they presented images or potential emotional symbols to the listener, to which she or he may respond without explicit attention or conscious knowledge. Within this category, Bales discovered “group fantasy events” which would “chain out” through the group. When this occurred, the tempo and volume of the conversation would pick up, people became more excited, they would interrupt one another and become more agitated. Bales noted that “a chain reaction of fantasy in the group is set up when one, or some of the participants, presents in his communication symbols which have unconscious meanings for one or some of the other participants” (1970, p. 138). Drawing upon the Freudian-inspired psychoanalytical literature on the analysis and interpretation of dreams, Bales suggested that a group fantasy chain was motivated by multiple factors and was a product of the psychological overlap between three symbolic and emotional domains. First, there

is “manifest content”, which is the situation and persons being talked about, usually “outside the group” (e.g. a news item, a piece of gossip, or a joke). The second domain is the “here-and now”, which is the interacting group with its present members, their relations to each other, the problems of the group and their hidden attitudes. Bales identifies an important link between these two domains when he suggests that “the chain of fantasy starts to build, usually, because the manifest topic of the conversation somehow mirrors or sets into resonant vibration the problems of the group here-and-now” (1970, p. 141). The third domain is that of the past experience of the members, particularly their common childhood experience in relation to families in which their personalities were formed. Bales also identifies another point of resonance between the here-and-now of the group and this latter domain. In his studies, Bales showed how groups with no previous history would, through time, use group fantasy chains in order to forge a common culture.

### Key Assumptions and Concepts

Ernest Bormann took Bales’ concept of group fantasy chain, which had merely been an interesting side street, and from this developed a comprehensive method of rhetorical criticism called Fantasy Theme Analysis, which was peculiarly dramatic in form. Definitions of the key concepts of this method are provided in Table 3 as well as some exemplars that I have drawn from popular management discourse. In his seminal paper, Bormann (1972) argues that dramatizing moments can not only chain within small face-to-face groups but, through the technologies of mass media, to large groups which, in turn, can be chained back into small face-to-face group contexts. A dramatizing message

Table 3

The Key Concepts of Symbolic Convergence Theory and Exemplars from Popular Management Theory

Technical Term	Definition	Exemplar
Fantasy theme	A dramatizing message in which characters enact an incident or a series of incidents other than the here-and-now of the people involved in the communication episode	The Inverted Organizational Pyramid
Symbolic cue	A code word, phrase, slogan, gesture that triggers previously shared fantasies and emotions	Theory Z, The One-Minute Manager, Open-Book Management
Fantasy type	A repeated fantasy theme within a single rhetorical vision and across diverse rhetorical visions	Restoration (Excellence, Reengineering & TQM)
Saga	Oft-repeated telling of the achievement in the life of a person, group, community, organization or nation	Lee Iacocca, Jack Welch, Microsoft, Saturn, Southwest Airlines, Post-War Japan
Rhetorical vision	A composite drama that catches up large groups of people into a common symbolic reality	Excellence, Total Quality Management, Core Competencies
Dramatis personae	The characters depicted in messages that give life to a rhetorical vision	Executives, middle managers, front-line employees, competitors, consultants, customers etc.
Plot line	A narrative that provides the action for the rhetorical vision	The 14 Points of The Deming Management Method
Scene	The location of the action within the rhetorical vision	Corporate North America, The Global Economy
Rhetorical Community	Individuals who share a common symbolic ground by participating in a rhetorical vision	American Society for Quality, Constraints Management SIG, APICS, System Thinker Conference Delegates
Sanctioning Agent	The individual, person, concept or thing that legitimizes the symbolic reality portrayed by a rhetorical vision	The Management Guru: Peter Drucker, Tom Peters, Kenneth Blanchard

can take the form of a pun or other wordplay, a double entendre, a figure of speech, an analogy, an anecdote, an allegory, a fable, or a narrative. During each of my trips back to England I have noted an ubiquitous TV-inspired catchphrase such as “Gizza Job”, “Loads-a-money” and “Sorted” that, once learned, quickly enabled me to demonstrate

that I had never really left the old country. The composite dramas that catch large groups of people up in a symbolic reality are called “rhetorical visions” by Bormann. As people seek to make sense out of their environment and events around them, they come into contact with fantasies that have been chained out from other small groups. If sufficiently compelling, that is if they speak convincingly to the individual’s “here-and-now” problems in a dramatic form, these rhetorical visions can be consolidated into a credible interpretation of reality.

A rhetorical vision is constructed from “fantasy themes”, which are the means through which interpretation is accomplished in communication. A fantasy theme is manifested in the form of a word, a phrase, or a statement that interprets events in the past, envisions events in the future, or depicts current events that are removed in time and/or space from the actual activities of the group. Nobody would actually claim they worked in an organization that was truly shaped like an inverted pyramid but most of us can grasp what that might be like and, many of us might like to work in one. In contrast to normal human experience, fantasy themes are organized and artistic. They have their own internal logic and are aesthetically pleasing. Bormann distinguishes between “setting themes”, which depict where the action is taking place or the place where the characters act out their roles; “character themes”, which describe the agents or actors in the drama, ascribe qualities to them, assign motives to them, and portray them as having certain characteristics; and “action themes”, also called plotlines, which deal with the action of the drama.

Rhetorical visions often compete with each other to explain the same phenomena. From empirical experience, Bormann and his colleagues have observed that rhetorical

visions will generally reflect a deep structure that is embedded in one of three “master analogues”--the righteous, social or pragmatic:

A rhetorical vision based on a righteous master analogue emphasizes the correct way of doing things with its concerns about right and wrong, proper and improper, superior and inferior, moral and immoral, just and unjust. A rhetorical vision with a social master analogue reflects primary human relations, as it keys on friendship, trust, caring, comradeship, compatibility, family ties, brotherhood, sisterhood, and humanness. A vision with a pragmatic master analogue stresses expediency, utility, efficiency, parsimony, simplicity, practicality, cost effectiveness, and minimal involvement. (Cragan & Shields, 1992, p. 202)

It is disappointing to find that Bormann and his colleagues have not elaborated to any significant extent upon this concept of master analogue in their writings other than to refer to them as “archetypal deep structures”. They do note a tendency for all of the rhetorical visions they have studied to reflect at least one of these three types of master analogues, but they never delve into a theoretical explanation as to why this might be. They do, however, provide some exemplars of each of them. Looking at American foreign policy in the period immediately after the Second World War, Bormann, Cragan and Shields identify three “amorphous”, if transitory, rhetorical visions that emerged to replace the “monolithic rhetoric of the hot war” which were each based on the three different master analogues (1990, p. 5). The rhetorical vision of the Cold War was based on the righteous master analogue as it emphasized the right way of doing things. The One World rhetorical vision, by contrast, exemplifies a vision that was based on a social master analogue as it is linked to

primary human relations. The remaining rhetorical vision, Power Politics, exemplifies a vision based on a pragmatic master analogue because it emphasizes expediency, practicality, utility and whatever it takes to get the job done. Bormann (1972) indicates that a drama that is close to life for those members of a particular rhetorical community constitutes a symbolic reality that competes or “goes to war” with the symbolic reality of others about the same issues such as how best to manage an organization or bring about organizational change. That is, participants in different and competing rhetorical visions interpret the same phenomena in different ways. These “warring” views reflect the three master analogues. In selecting the three management fashions that were the focus of this study, I deliberately sought out from the many competing management fashions that I was familiar with those that could serve as illustrative or, in Bormann’s terms, “paradigm” cases for each of these master analogues (Bormann et al., 1990). The rationale for case selection will be more fully discussed in Chapter Four.

Bormann is at pains to ensure that his use of the term *fantasy* as a “technical term” is not confused with its general usage as something that connotes something imaginary, like a children’s tale or sexual desire that is not grounded in reality. *Fantasy* in its technical sense is “the creative and imaginative interpretation of events that fulfils a psychological need” (1985, p. 5) and serves as “the way communities of people make sense out of their experience and create their social reality” (1982, pp. 107-108). It is in this sense very similar to the Greek root of the term, “*phantastikos*”, which means to be able to present or show to the mind, to make visible. A *fantasy* theme is, therefore, a way for people to present or show to the group mind a common experience and invest it with an emotional tone.



The sanctioning agent of the rhetorical vision is a source that justifies its acceptance; it can take the form of an abstract concept such as God, democracy, or justice, or it can be an individual who has a particularly charismatic presence. In his study of pre-Civil War America, Bormann discusses the central role that the evangelist played in almost all of the evangelical rhetorical visions (Bormann, 1985). As was observed in the previous chapter, management gurus have come to serve as the equivalent authoritative voice or “guarantor” for management knowledge in contemporary corporate North America (Burgoyne, 1995a; Jackson, 1994b; Mitroff & Bennis, 1989). I would argue that they have shown themselves to be particularly skilled at crafting rhetorical visions that are compelling to managerial mass audiences. When a rhetorical vision emerges, the participants in the vision come to form a “rhetorical community”. They share a common symbolic ground and respond to the message in ways that are in tune with the rhetorical vision. As such, the vision serves to “sustain the members’ sense of community, to impel them strongly to action and to provide them with a social reality with heroes, villains, emotions and attitudes” (Bormann, 1972, p. 398). Some communities are more strongly defined than others are and some are more susceptible to new fantasy chains. Based on the rapid turnover of management “panacea” (Gill & Whittle, 1993), the corporate community of North America would seem to be a particularly fertile ground for fantasy chains or fashions which Bormann suggests are “the physical evidence of the symbolic outbursts in which members of the rhetorical community get caught up in fantasies that do not modify their firmly established vision” (1976, p. 440).

In a later paper, Bormann, Cragan & Shields (1996) have laid out a dynamic framework for analysing the “life cycle” of rhetorical visions. Using the Cold War as their paradigm case, they identified four continua (creation, development, maturity and decline) at

which a number of distinct rhetorical principles operate. Communication that is aimed at consciousness-creating will tend to predominate in the first phase while consciousness-raising and consciousness-sustaining communication will tend to predominate in the second and third phases respectively. There are some clear and obvious parallels between these continua and the life cycle stages that have been identified by various researchers of management fashions (Abrahamson, 1996a; Barley & Kunda, 1992; Gill & Whittle, 1993). The particular contribution that Bormann and his colleagues' work could make to that analysis is to encourage researchers to examine the processes by which the management guru, acting as sanctioning agent, changes his or her rhetorical strategy and tactics to adapt to each stage in the management fashion life cycle. The following review of empirical work that has been inspired by FTA provides some useful pointers as to how this might be accomplished.

### Empirical Applications of SCT and FTA

Symbolic Convergence Theory and its attendant Fantasy Theme Analysis method have become well established within the field of communication studies. A bibliography provided by Ernest Bormann (1996) lists 61 periodical articles and 94 theses and dissertations that have utilized this theory and method. Almost all of these studies have focused on North American phenomena, particularly in the United States. A cursory glance at the bibliography reveals that, while the approach continues to be theoretically refined and actively used in empirical research, it no longer generates either the intensity of intellectual debate in the literature or the volume of empirical studies that was evident in the late-1970s and early-1980s. However, in a written communication, Bormann

indicated to me that he had noticed a recent upsurge in interest in Symbolic Convergence Theory from a new generation of researchers who had become somewhat disenchanted with postmodernism and post-structuralism (E.G. Bormann, personal communication, November 24, 1996).

Cragan and Shields (1995) identify more than 50 studies published between 1972 and 1992 that draw upon SCT to study communication phenomena. They categorize these studies into six communication contexts: political, social movement,

Table 4

Illustrative Empirical Studies Grounded in Symbolic Convergence Theory

Communication Context	Number of Studies	Exemplars
Political Communication	10	Bormann (1973) - Senator Eagleton's electric shock therapy in the McGovern 1972 presidential campaign Campbell (1979) - Carter's 1976 presidential campaign
Social Movements	13	Hensley (1975) - The Disciples of Christ religious movement in the 19th century Cragan (1981) - The Cold War
Organizational Communication	9	Koester (1982) - Self-help books for women managers Kendall (1993) - The chairman's 'boiler plate' in corporate Annual Reports
Mass Communication	10	Foss & Littlejohn (1986) - Impact of the film, The Day After Kidd (1975) - Potrayal of women in popular magazines
Interpersonal & Small Group Communication	10	Porter (1976) - Richard Nixon and The White House Transcripts Ford (1989) - Alcoholics Anonymous
Public Relations	2	Shields (1981) - Fire Department PR Campaign Barton & O'Leary (1974) - Attracting physicians to rural communities

Note: Adapted from Cragan & Shields, 1995.

organizational, mass, interpersonal and small group, and public relations communication (refer to Table 4). These categories are by no means airtight. For example, a study by Kidd (1975) of the portrayal of women in interpersonal relationships in American popular magazines during the 1950s and 1960s could fit in both the mass communication and social movement categories and the small group and interpersonal communication in which it is placed. In reading these empirical studies, I have been struck on numerous occasions by the similarities in the shape and form of the management guru and fashion phenomenon and many of the communication phenomena that have been subjected to fantasy theme analyses. Because the studies that have been conducted within the social movement, political and organizational communication contexts tend to provide insights that are most transferable to our attempts to understand the growth, diffusion and decline of management fashions, I will confine my review to these three empirical contexts.

A dominant theme of the research that has addressed the formation of social movements has been the rhetorical power of religious imagery in forging both social and political movements in the United States. In FTA's inceptive paper, Bormann drew upon his research into the preaching of Puritan ministers in the early years of the Massachusetts Bay Colony to illustrate the utility of his approach. In his analysis, he concluded that, in marked contrast to the day-to-day routine of backbreaking drudgery, the Puritans

Led an internal fantasy life of mighty grandeur and complexity. They participated in a rhetorical vision that saw the migration to the New World as a holy exodus of God's chosen people. The Biblical drama that

supported their vision was that of the journey of the Jews from Egypt into Canaan. (1972, p. 402)

Bormann identifies two common fantasy themes expressed in the Puritan rhetorical vision that continue to have a powerful and enduring effect on the history of the United States. The first theme depicts the pilgrim making his slow, painful, and holy way, beset by many troubles and temptations. It emphasizes the abasement, sacrifice, and dedication of the Puritans to the other world. The second theme is that of the Christian soldier fighting God's battles and overcoming all adversaries (including an inimical aboriginal population) in an effort to establish the true church. This latter theme Bormann has argued is a significant and recurring fantasy type in the history of American public address which he dubs "fetching good out of evil". This fantasy type provides a complete and compelling explanation of evil, according to which, God afflicts his chosen people with trouble because they are not living up to the covenant that he has struck with them. Bormann is particularly interested in understanding how the rhetorical power of this fantasy type can build a sense of national unity during a time of war. He traces the utility of this fantasy type in building a sense of colonial community in the fight against the French and the Indians and later on in building a sense of community for a new nation in the fight against the British in the War of Independence. Most critically, he points to Lincoln's masterful use of the "fetching good out of evil" fantasy type in his second inaugural address in helping to rebuild and restore a sense of national community in the wake of the destruction of the Civil War.

Bormann has traced the progress of another enduring fantasy type, that of "restoration", from its origins in the Puritan settlements through the early nineteenth-

century Disciples of Christ restoration movement led by Alexander Campbell (Hensley, 1975) to Andrew Jackson's bid to restore America's political system to the "real people" and, most recently, to Ronald Reagan's inaugural address which directed the nation to return to its original righteous state. In his speech, Reagan re-dramatized this fantasy type by using brief encomiums of Washington, Jefferson and Lincoln who all symbolized "the fantasy of a golden age when a group of founders possessing the wisdom of demi-gods laid down a perfect (or most perfect to date) system for society" (Bormann, 1982a, p. 143). Bormann argues that the dramatically charged intertwined TV coverage of the return of the American hostages from Iran and the Reagan inaugural served to add considerable rhetorical weight to Reagan's conservative message at the subliminal level. In tracing how the threads of pre-modernist ideas, particularly those with religious underpinnings, persist and endure in modernist discourse, Bormann's work parallels Gergen's tracing of the influence of romanticist discourse in modernist organizational theory (Gergen, 1992) and anticipates the recent emerging interest in pre-modernism and retro-organizational theory (Burrell, 1997; Cummings, 1999).

The contemporary political arena (particularly from the 1970s onwards) has proven to be a particularly fertile territory for FTA. A number of studies have focused their attention upon the heroic personae of political figures. For example, Campbell (1979) has argued that Carter's emphasis on his heroic persona provided his most effective strategy in 1976. Conversely, Bormann (1973) found that a negative fantasy theme that stemmed from the disclosure that Senator Eagleton had previously used electric shock therapy chained out in the media and eventually harmed the heroic personae of both Eagleton and McGovern in their unsuccessful 1972 Presidential campaign. Other studies

have analyzed dramatic plot lines in political communication. Goodnight and Poulakos (1981) have explicated “conspiracy” fantasy-type plot lines that chained through the mass media in the coverage of the Watergate scandal. From an entirely different perspective, Porter (1976) analyzed the discourse of the White House transcripts dealing with Watergate and discovered fantasies concerning the belief of Nixon’s inner circle that they could control the mass media. This belief is clearly encapsulated in the recurring fantasy type, “the best defence is a good offence”.

In addition to these humanistically-oriented text-based studies, several research projects have used social science validation techniques, most notably Q-methodology, “in order to ground symbolic convergence theory to observable communication behaviours” (Cragan & Shields, 1995, p. 182). Q-methodology allows participants to sort and rank various Q-items on a continuum from those they accept to those they reject (Stephenson, 1953). Sorting these items in similar ways provides some evidence of that the participants share the same fantasies and thus a common rhetorical vision. (Bormann, Koester & Bennet, 1978). Cragan & Shields (1977) conducted community-based research using Q-methodology to ascertain the degree of participation by residents of the town of Peoria in America’s three dominant and long-standing foreign policy rhetorical visions: “Power Politics”, “Cold War” and “Neo-Isolationism”. Similarly, Bormann et al. (1978) conducted interviews with 29 voting-age adults and found that political cartoons functioned as the mass media equivalent of a symbolic cue or inside joke. They ascertained that their subjects participated in three competing visions of the 1976 election as triggered by cartoons, voting in a manner that was consistent with their vision participation.

The studies that have the most obviously direct link with the research problem at hand are in the realm of organizational communication. John Cragan and Donald Shields have been the most actively engaged in research in this area. Their book *Applied Communication Research* (1981) assembles research that has used SCT and FTA to investigate organizational communication and conduct market research. A good example of the former type of research would be Shields' (1981) study which established concurrent and construct validity for the claim that the firefighters of St. Paul in Minnesota participated in the same heroic fantasies as those in the fire service professional literature. The firefighters' small group communication depicted a heroic self-persona of a courageous, trained professional working in an extremely hazardous scene that competed with a projected-persona which dramatized a loafing, moonlighting, reckless character in the minds of the wider public.

With respect to market research, a focus group study with hog producers of a new sow and silt gestation conditioning feed additive demonstrates how FTA can be applied to a very practical end (Doane Agricultural Service, Inc. & Shields, 1981). More recently, Shields and Cragan (1992) have been particularly concerned with applying symbolic convergence theory to guide strategic planning interventions in a corporate environment. They have worked with a manufacturer of nationally marketed agricultural feeds to try to bring unity of focus to corporate positioning, market segmentation and sales story and advertising creation in the wake of its transition from a public to a privately held company. One of the major findings of the study (apart from the fact that their intervention was fraught with pitfalls) was that, even though new corporate sagas could be identified with relative ease, when they lost their reality-links, it



became increasingly difficult for the organization to create new sagas in a timely fashion. When the company was able to gather primary data from the customer and dealer, rather than merely brainstorming and attempting to disseminate a symbolic reality from headquarters, it was able to “link to here and now phenomena so that the new saga would not be a symbol without substance, as was the case with remnants of the earlier sagas recalled by corporate managers” (1992, p. 215).

While Cragan and Shields have focused their attention on developing pragmatic, intervention-oriented applications for SCT, a few other researchers have sought to extend Bormann’s conceptualization to basic research in organizational and management studies. Two studies are particularly noteworthy in this regard. Kendall (1993) has used SCT to discover and interpret corporate dramas inherent in the language of the “boiler plates” of the annual reports of the 30 companies which comprised the Dow Jones Industrials. “Boiler plates” are the chairman’s message that begins each annual report. Kendall’s analysis revealed remarkable congruence in the form and style of these boiler plates which reflect strong institutional pressures (Meyer & Rowan, 1983; Powell & DiMaggio, 1991). The U.S. economy of the 1970s provided the dramatic setting, with the company as hero, the government serving as villain and public interest groups acting as minor players whom she describes as “a thorn in the hero’s side” (1993, p. 589). Kendall discovered that the overarching corporate drama manifested in these reports was one of “pure competition” (1993, p. 589). Following Bormann’s tactic of locating rhetorical resonances with the past, she shows how these rhetorical visions were a vestige of a much larger, economically based drama that, while it had its origins in Adam Smith’s *Wealth of Nations* (Smith, 1977), seized the American public imagination after the Civil War. The

primary rhetorical function of the boilerplate is to promote unity among corporate shareholders, management and employees. Kendall selected fantasy theme analysis as her critical method because it provided her with a way to examine multiple levels of drama that were being used to unify the corporation and its many constituents in a shared rhetorical vision: as she put it, “this study allows us to break away from the erroneous assumption that corporate dramas only play out economic themes, and instead involve the reader in analyzing the multiple rhetorical visions of corporations within their own contexts” (1993, p. 573).

The second study worth noting is more analogous to the present study in that it focuses on popular self-help books that give advice to women on achieving success as managers. Koester (1982) conducted a fantasy theme analysis of 28 of these books published between 1970 and 1979. Her analysis revealed one dominant social reality that she dubbed the “Female Manager Vision”. This vision emphasizes individual action in the male business game, but made gender the determining factor that gives meaning to events. Koester concludes that successful women managers operate as “Machiavellian princesses controlling the impact of their gender in an organizational setting filled with intrigue and innuendo. Success requires a woman to maintain a balance between the negative stereotypes of women, yet retaining femininity” (1982, p. 165). None of the books advocate any changes to the organization, the legal system or the social structure. It is up to the woman to work, or more correctly, to “act”, within the existing male-dominated system. In providing a rationale for selecting fantasy theme analysis to interpret these books, Koester explains that:

(It) is particularly appropriate because of the writers' consistent utilization of dramas to convey and elaborate their ideas. As authors they are not content simply to present their descriptions of organizational life for women in discursive and abstract language, nor do they simply report suggestions to ease the female manager on the road to success. Instead, they typically dramatize fantasy themes to illustrate their argument. A rhetorical vision, because it depends on drama, has a particular power that argument and evidence does not. (1982, p. 166)

The preceding review demonstrates that the FTA method of rhetorical criticism has generated a rich, provocative and diverse body of empirical research that has looked at a wide range of communication processes and settings. I have found that it is only by reading these empirical studies that one can gain a true appreciation for the value and limitations of this method. It has also become clear to me from this reading that, while the method has not been explicitly applied to the management guru and management fashion phenomenon, it has looked at communication phenomena that have important parallels to it. Before proceeding with the application of this method to the current study, it is important to become aware of the criticisms that have been leveled at the approach so that the appropriate level of care and caution is exercised in its use and claims made. It is to this task that I now turn.

## The Critique and Defence of Symbolic Convergence Theory

In the twenty-five years since its inception, SCT has become an established method of rhetorical criticism that continues to be refined and applied in empirical studies. Most textbooks of rhetorical criticism devote significant space to explanations of SCT and FTA (e.g. Foss, 1989; Griffin, 1997; Hart, 1990) and Bormann has continued to actively publish updates of SCT development and refutations of critics (Bormann, 1982b, 1983, 1985, 1986, 1989). In 1994, Bormann, Cragan and Shields provided a summative defence of SCT in which they reviewed the collective critique of the theory and how they had responded to it. In this paper they distinguish between “constructive criticism”, which they have found to be useful in helping to improve their theory-building efforts and “reactive criticism”, which they feel has not been helpful in this regard. In the former camp they point, for example, to a concern raised by Eadie (1982) about the need for a large sample data gathering to provide assurance that “public chaining” processes had indeed occurred. A study by Bormann, Kroll, Watters and McFarlane (1984) responded to this concern directly. The latter, “reactive” camp was most vocal in the literature between 1978 and 1982, triggered by what appears from various accounts to have been a particularly lively debate at the Minneapolis Convention of the Speech Communication Association in 1978. Bormann, Cragan and Shields (1994) bundle the most frequently cited criticisms into one of the following four “negative indictments”, to which I have added a fifth.

Indictment 1: SCT’s proponents have not clarified the basic presuppositions that undergird the theory.

Farrell (1980), Gronbeck (1980) and Mohrmann (1982a, 1982b) have all criticized SCT for overly concentrating on the theory itself and the research required at the expense of an exposition of its basic underlying ontological and epistemological assumptions. Bormann, Cragan and Shields reply by spelling out four basic presuppositions of SCT that they argue have already been articulated by Bormann (1982b) and, in greater detail, in the book *Communication Theory* (Bormann, 1980). The first presupposition is that a “grounded approach” to theory building can result in a good general communication theory. They argue forcefully that SCT scholars “did not posit fantasy types, inside-cues, rhetorical visions and sagas, and then go out looking for them” but instead, the concepts emerged from their empirical studies over time (1994, p. 263).

Their second presupposition is that an empirically based study of the sharing of imagination could provide a viable account of the rhetorical relationship between the rational and irrational. SCT has evolved as part of a wider movement in communication studies that has endeavoured to recover and stress the importance of imaginative language (and the imagination) in non-verbal and verbal transactions but has been forced to face the “barrier of rationality”. According to Bormann, Cragan and Shields, SCT has been successful in surmounting this wall because, “the force of fantasy accounts not only for the irrational and non-rational aspects of persuasion but it creates the ground for the rational elements as well” (1994, p. 265).

The third basic presupposition of SCT is that it encourages a return to the traditions of Classical rhetoric and neo-Aristotelianism in which the audience once again becomes an important part of the rhetorical paradigm. During the 1960s, Black (1965) led an attack on the audience-connection because he felt that a concern with the immediate

audience for a piece of rhetoric would be an intrusion that would trivialize the analysis. In its concern with the rhetorical community and the process of consciousness-creating, -raising and -sustaining, FTA has done much to bring the audience back into the analytical equation.

The fourth and final presupposition of SCT put forward by Bormann, Cragan and Shields is that it is possible and indeed important to make generalizations based on the results of previous studies. As noted earlier, one of the underlying agendas of the research program of Bormann and his colleagues has been to attempt to provide a framework and language that might unify or at least provide some common ground for the disparate camps within the fragmented field of rhetorical criticism.

Indictment 2: SCT is Freudian-based and therefore applies only to small group communication.

In the May 1982 issue of the *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, Mohrman and Bormann engaged in an intellectual dog-fight verging on open hostility. A major plank of Mohrman's argument was based on the assumption that, because Bales (1970), a Freudian, had provided an important starting point for FTA and SCT, the subsequent rhetorical work had to be essentially Freudian. It was, therefore, open to all of the criticisms that have been leveled at the Freudian canon. While acknowledging that he is indebted to Bales for highlighting the dynamic process of sharing group fantasies, Bormann flatly denied the Freudian influence, arguing that SCT emphasizes the rhetorical dimension which includes the conscious and not the unconscious adaptation by audiences. With the inadvertent exception of "manifest content" (which has subsequently

been dropped from the SCT lexicon), Freudian terms have studiously not been used in SCT studies.

Mohrman's other major concern is that a Freudian would not attempt to generalize the sharing of fantasies beyond the small group context because at each stage, as the drama moves from context to context it becomes different not only in degree but also in kind. The critics allege that there is something uniquely powerful in the chaining of small group fantasy that does not take place in other communication settings. In response, Bormann, Cragan and Shields point to the work of psychohistorians who have extended their studies to historical group fantasies (e.g. de Mause, 1977). They also refer to Bales' own concern that Mohrman was being too restrictive in terms of communication settings when he suggested that Freudians and other psychiatrists had not shown the usefulness of fantasy sharing in a wide variety of communication contexts. They affirm that FTA studies have provided a strong non-Freudian-inspired case for extending SCT from small group communication to larger group contexts.

Indictment 3: SCT's insights are researcher-dependent and not theory-dependent.

Several critics have suggested that the insights that have been generated through the use of SCT and FTA studies were perhaps due more to the unique skills and discernment of the individual researcher and not to the application of SCT and its attendant methods per se. In reviews of Bormann's *Force of Fantasy*, for example, Ivie felt that it was "a study that is indebted to the critic's acumen more than his method" (1987, p. 102). Similarly, Osborn observed that "it is not always convincing that the critical insights derive from and depend upon the theory" (1986, p. 205). In defence, Bormann, Cragan and Shields suggest that the perspective and the vocabulary used by the researcher

automatically shape the selection of material for study and the interpretation of the discourse. Fantasy theme analysis, they say, “points the scholar to imaginative language, and SCT stresses not a unique reading of myth, metaphor, narrative, or story but provides a clear technical vocabulary for the general analysis of imaginative language and a way to make a coherent analysis of a community’s public consciousness” (1994, p. 276). While they acknowledge that individualized literary approaches can occasionally lead to unusual and insightful analyses, they are concerned that these studies do not result in cumulative findings about the nature of communication and human symbol use. They are particularly scornful of the practice among many rhetorical critics of the partial extraction and eclectic mixing of concepts that have been derived from such fashionable authorities as Burke, Derrida, Foucault and Barthes. Moreover, Cragan and Shields (1995) have lashed out at the “form of censorship” that a number of SCT-based studies have been subjected to on the part of a few strategically-based editors of communication publications who have forced some writers to remove references to SCT theory and terminology from their articles before they have been accepted.

Indictment 4: SCT is a re-labeling of old concepts with trivial jargon that lacks precision and clarity.

A number of critics have characterized SCT as jargonistic, ambiguous, and somewhat slippery. For example, Osborn has noted the “often cloudy jargon of FTA” (1986, p. 204) and Gronbeck has stressed “its lack of systematic development of primary vocabulary (especially the theme/type/vision trilogy)” (1980, p. 324). In response, Bormann, Cragan and Shields argue that their technical concepts are not merely heuristic or discrete, but in fact, through their research investigations, these concepts have become



grounded in rhetoric and increasingly refined so that they have considerably more analytical power than a mere taxonomic structure. In their quest for clarity, they have been guided by Durkheim's argument about the need for social scientists to develop a specialized language so that they can strip away the multiplicity of meanings from words used in everyday language (Durkheim, 1938).

Black (1980) has described SCT as a "categorical scheme" that, "sometimes has yielded criticism that seems formulatory and predictable" (p. 335). Similarly, commenting on a collection of SCT studies, Farrell (1982), asks the reader to consider the question, "is there not some danger of a sedimented 'cookie-cutter' mentality developing?" (p. 96). In this way he is implying that those who use SCT use it because it is simple and guarantees neat and tidy but superficial results every time. Cragan and Shields acknowledge that, for those who are interested in developing scholarship that is a one-time only introspective intervention between the scholar and communication phenomenon, this view may hold some weight. However, from the perspective of those who are trying to build theories to explain phenomena and provide applied research solutions,

The better the quality of the cookie cutter (theory), the more assurance we have of imprinting the same design on the dough we call communication, and the more likely we can investigate systematically, generalize across cases, and replicate findings. What seems to the critics as predictable, formulaic, cookie cutter, and method-as-template is the desired end-state of theory building, as opposed to justification for discouraging words.

(1995, p. 193)

While Bormann and his colleagues have done a generally good job of defending and, in some instances, clarifying their theory and method in the face of critical scrutiny, I have identified another indictment that I think may be well worth considering and responding to.

An Additional Indictment: While SCT presents a developed epistemology it is ontologically under-developed.

Bormann has presented us with an essentially “epistemic” rhetoric which suggests that rhetoric actively creates knowledge which, in turn, creates reality and truth (Scott, 1967). While this “rhetorical perspective” has tended to hold sway among most communication and rhetorical theorists, a number of scholars including Bormann have conveyed a sense of unease about the pitfalls of skepticism and relativism that are associated with this philosophical position saying “the question remains about the best philosophical position to account for the relativism and still provide a foundation for scholarship that is based upon what is the case” (Bormann, Cragan and Shields, 1994, p. 284). Bormann (1980) has attempted, in a way that is only mildly successful, to develop an empirical and logical philosophical analysis to try to sort out this issue by following Gregory Bateson’s (1972) lead and applying Bertrand Russell’s theory of types. Using Russell’s schema, Bormann suggests that natural phenomena occur at Level I, the lowest level of philosophical analysis. By contrast, human communication occurs at Level II and is theorized by FTA and SCT at Levels III and IV of philosophical analysis respectively.

Cheseboro (1988) has located in Kenneth Burke’s later writings an intriguing possibility for bridging the philosophical gap graphically illustrated by the Bormann-

Mohrman exchange: through Burke's "ontological-epistemic dialectic". For Burke, "a dialectical relationship - an epistemic and ontic interaction - defines and determines the functions of rhetoric, fostering creative human responses to environments but also responding to the nature of environments" (Cheseboro, 1988, p. 176). Given Burke and Bormann's mutual investment in and passion for the dramatic metaphor, it seems reasonable to see if some of Burke's work might help to further enrich SCT and FTA. One of the obvious contributions that Burke could make towards enriching SCT and FTA is in explicating some of the human motives from which language derives its rhetorical potency. According to Bormann, each rhetorical vision contains as part of its substance the motive that will impel the participants. He explains, "motives do not exist to be expressed in communication but arise in the expression itself and come to be embedded in the drama of the fantasy themes that generated and served to sustain them" (1972, p. 406). Beyond this, he is not as clear or as expansive as we might have preferred in defining and identifying what these motives might be.

In his extensive canon, Burke identifies a number of critical human motives that can be exploited by rhetoric. For the purposes of this study, I want to highlight three of these motives--Identification, Hierarchy and Transcendence--as I believe them to be particularly pertinent to our understanding of the management fashion setting process, especially when we focus on the management guru-manager relationship that lies at the heart of it. Burke considered Identification to be the key differentiator between his new rhetoric and the old rhetoric with its emphasis upon persuasion and the implicit deliberation by which rhetoric was designed and brought about by the rhetor (Corbett, 1990). According to Burke (1962), human beings communicate in order to eliminate the "division" or "alienation" or

“disassociation” that arises from being inevitably isolated and divided from each other as a result of their separate physical bodies. In our communication, we form selves or identities through various properties or “substances”, including physical objects, occupations, friends, activities, beliefs, and values. As we ally ourselves with these properties or substances, we share substance with whatever or whomever we associate and, in the process, become “consubstantial” or “identified” with it or them (Cheney, 1983). With identification comes the possibility of persuasion for, as Burke argues, “you persuade a man only insofar as you can talk his language by speech, gesture, tonality, order, image, attitude, idea, identifying your ways with his” (Foss, Foss & Trapp, 1985, p. 158). For Burke, then, “rhetoric occurs when individuals examine their identities to determine who they are and how they fit into groups with others who share those identities” (Heath, 1986, p. 202).

Another key motive within Burke’s rhetorical system is “hierarchy”. Burke suggests that people are “goaded by hierarchy” to do more and have more. Hierarchy is fundamentally and inevitably entrenched in all human activity. In their quest for more money, more knowledge, more beauty, humans become gluttons for the “rhetoric of perfection” (Burke, 1962). Rhetoric is filled with overstatements because it so often focuses on the end-points of the hierarchy, inspiring us with the highest highs and frightening us with the lowest lows. The general principle is that persuasion profits directly from the “hierarchical energy” contained within an audience.

In addition to hierarchy, Burke identifies a “transcendental” motive which stems from humans’ need to feel that they are doing something important with their lives, that they are rising above the ordinary. In meeting these needs, rhetoric acts as a “secular prayer” which can have tremendous motivational power over individuals. Hart has neatly summarized and

distinguished the motivational potency of hierarchy and transcendence as conceptualized by Burke

If hierarchy gives rhetoric a quantitative dimension (how much, how often, how high), transcendence gives it a qualitative dimension (how good, how grand, how noble). Hierarchy argues that people can get more; transcendence argues that they can become better. Hierarchy suggests how people can improve; transcendence tells them why they should. (1989, p. 351)

Kenneth Burke's elaborate, inventive and frequently perplexing system of rhetoric is appealing because of its concern with the rhetor-audience relationship and its desire to look beyond a text to try to understand how that relationship serves the audience's needs and expectations. A distinguishing feature of Burke's system is that the self can act as the audience for rhetoric, in the manner of Mead's "I" addressing its "Me" (Burke, 1962). It is these concerns that make Burke a manifestly "psychological" critic (Hart, 1989). Burke finds rhetoric in places that are well beyond the traditional concern of rhetoricians in such novel realms as sales promotion, courtship, social etiquette, education, hysteria and witchcraft. Wherever he looks he continually asserts through his pentadic structure of act, agent, agency, purpose and scene, the importance of all of the various elements of the dramatic context of discourse, showing that any piece of discourse must be judged against the situational and cultural contexts in which it was produced and in which it is being interpreted (Horner, 1990). Burke defines rhetoric as "the use of words by human agents to form attitudes or to induce actions in other human agents" (1962, p. 565). It is "rooted in an essential function of language itself, a function that is wholly realistic, and is continually

born anew; the use of language as a symbolic means of inducing co-operation in beings that by nature respond to symbols” (1962, p. 567).

Burke believes that drama is present whenever people congregate but that the essential drama of a situation is not revealed until rhetoric exploits it. Rhetoric not only provides a name for that situation but also presents a creative strategy for dealing with it or for solving problems inherent in that situation. Rhetoric helps the rhetor manoeuvre through life, directs the operations of life and provides ways of feeling more at home in the chaos of the modern world. A piece of rhetorical work provides assistance to the rhetor and the audience by providing them with a vocabulary of thoughts, actions, emotions, and attitudes for codifying and thus interpreting the situation (Burke, 1931). The job of the rhetorical critic is, therefore, to inspect the discourse of the rhetorical work to locate its model of motivation and to explain the rhetor’s dramatic actions parsimoniously (Hart, 1989). In the last part of this chapter I summarize why I believe that the fantasy theme method of rhetorical criticism, especially when it is informed by Burke’s rhetorical system, can provide an effective means for inspecting the rhetorical work of the management guru.

### The Appropriateness of FTA for the Research Problem

In returning to the desired qualities of the research methodology that were discussed in the introduction, it is clear from the preceding review that the combined SCT/FTA methodology holds some measure of promise. With its focus upon how and why groups come to share a common consciousness, SCT does indeed provide a general and dynamic theoretical framework for understanding and explaining, at least in part, the creation,

dissemination and adoption of management fashions. In his review of group communication theories, Poole (1990) has identified it as one of the most useful because it is grounded in a powerful metaphor (i.e. dramatism) and is situated in a “theory-method complex ” that is an interdependent whole in which the method shapes the theory and vice versa. Moreover, Griffin has applauded Bormann’s efforts to create a “joint venture between the arts and sciences that encourages rhetoricians and empiricists to work in harmony” (1997, p. 43).

Within this theory-method complex, FTA allows the critic to systematically, yet sensitively, examine the unique as well as the common rhetorical features of each management fashion. The method enables the critic to strike an important balance between the individual perspective that the researcher brings to the critique by virtue of her or his background and experience with these management fashions and the need to learn from and share with other critics who have pursued this method with different experiences in different empirical contexts. As Black has observed in his landmark essay on rhetorical criticism, “because only the critic is the instrument of criticism, the critic’s relationship to other instruments will profoundly affect the value of critical inquiry. And in criticism, every instrument has to be assimilated by the critic, to have become an integral part of the critic’s mode of perception” (1965, p. xii).

As we have seen from the review of SCT/FTA-informed empirical studies, the method has a proven track record in a wide variety of communication contexts, including organizational communication. In reading these empirical studies I have detected some striking similarities between the shape and form of rhetorical visions that have emanated from within religious, social and political rhetorical communities and the more

contemporary visions that have seized the popular imagination within the corporate community. As we saw in the previous chapter, a number of commentators have pointed to the quasi-religious function that is at least implicitly being performed by the management guru within the corporate community (Clark & Salaman, 1996; Huczynski, 1993a; Jackson, 1996a; Wooldridge & Micklethwait, 1996). Politicians have also recognized the political capital that can be gained by associating themselves with prominent management gurus as witnessed by Bill Clinton and Newt Gingrich's well-publicized private consulting sessions with Stephen Covey, Anthony Robbins and Marianne Williamson (Quinn, 1995). Canada has willingly parted with the \$30 million required to join the ranks of nations who have had a competitive audit conducted by Harvard luminary Michael Porter (The Globe and Mail, 1994). This alliance has worked both ways, of course. Kenichi Ohmae's efforts to create a grassroots political movement called Reform of Heisei aimed at promoting the fundamental reform of Japan's political and administrative systems (Independent, 1995) is another indication that there may be a continued blurring and cross-fertilization between popular management and political and religious discourses. In his book *The Force of Fantasy*, Bormann (1985) has characterized this transition as a move from the sacred to the secular in rhetoric.

With its inter-disciplinary and historical orientation, SCT/FTA is well positioned to monitor and assess the hybridization of rhetorical visions within popular discourse. An area of weakness, however, is the fact that studies using this method have been confined to analyzing communication phenomena within the United States. Bormann's claim for a truly general theory of communication has to be tempered with the knowledge that the SCT/FTA method has apparently not been embraced by researchers outside of North



America. This could be because it lacks rhetorical appeal for scholars beyond that continent or because it is a method that is culturally and temporally-bound. In the latter case, using Bormann's terminology, it is merely a higher level of specific theory rather than a truly general theory of communication. Because the management guru and fashion phenomenon has found its most complete expression in North America, the prospect of using a method that is well attuned to North American culture is less problematic than it might otherwise be. However, the method's cross-cultural applicability is an important question to which I return at the end of the study.

The starting point of the FTA method of rhetorical criticism is neither the speaker, nor the audience, nor the channel, nor the situation but the message. As Golden, Berquist and Coleman observe, "a special insight which Bormann brings to his analyses is his contention that meaning and motives are not embedded in the minds of people alone but are also found in the message itself" (1976, p. 432). In privileging the message over these other components, Bormann has found an effective way to transcend the question about which point the critic should enter into his or her analysis. With regards to the study of management gurus and fashions, should we be most concerned about the guru, or about the content of the management fashion itself, or about the manager who follows the fashion, or the community within which the guru formed his or her ideas? According to Bormann, we need to look to the rhetoric alone for its understanding.

Finally, the benefits associated with a philosophical rapprochement between SCT/FTA and Burke's dramatism might very well prove to be a two-way proposition. Young (1990) has observed that the dramaturgical model of social life has generated a large number of interesting and important studies of face-to-face behaviour and

interaction, much of which have been inspired by the two key figures in dramaturgy-- Erving Goffman and Kenneth Burke. The special issue of *Studies in Cultures, Organizations and Societies* (1996, Volume 2, Number 1) entitled "Organization and theatre: Play and performance in the round" bears witness to the range and quality of work that has been conducted using this perspective within organizational research.

However, I would support Young's claim that dramaturgy could be utilized to understand broader levels of social reality than mere face-to-face interactions. In particular, we should shift and broaden our attention to encompass the "dramaturgical society" which he defines as "one in which the technologies of social science, mass communication, theatre, and the arts are used to manage attitudes, behaviours, and feelings of the population in modern mass society" (Young, 1990, p. 71).

With its concern with the "chaining" of fantasies between small groups and large groups through the technologies of mass communication, the SCT/FTA method would seem to be well placed to investigate and elucidate the dynamics of communication processes within the dramaturgical society. Bormann and his colleagues have been an important force in ensuring that rhetorical criticism recognizes that "the capacities of the different media present rhetorical opportunities and choices, some unique to themselves, and some shared with public speech and other media" (Medhurst & Benson, 1984, p. vii). Accordingly, I have argued that the SCT/FTA method could provide an important bridge for dramaturgically-oriented researchers to mesh and integrate their traditional preoccupation with the "immediate theatre" (Brooke, 1968) of organization with the broader yet by no means less influential mass-mediated theatre that includes the management gurus and their management fashions (Jackson, 1997). The following

empirical study is aimed, at least in part, to demonstrate the potential value of making such a connection.

### Summary

A connection between the dramatistic method of rhetorical criticism as outlined in this chapter and the celebrated showmanship and theatricality of the management gurus' performances does not require a large stretch of the imagination. Further reflection has revealed, however, that symbolic convergence theory and its attendant method, fantasy theme analysis, possess an analytical value that is well beyond this immediate and intuitive appeal. First, the dramatistic method of rhetorical criticism provides a useful theoretical framework for analysing the symbolic exchange between the manager and management guru that was identified in Chapter Two as being a critical analytical element for current research efforts. Second, the method's preoccupation with scripts, roles and settings provides a powerful window for the researcher to observe the process of identity construction for both the guru and his or her followers. Third, the dramatistic method provides a framework for interpreting a wide range of situations, events, and texts, while allowing for the unique qualities of each account to emerge. As Mangham and Overington observe, "it provides possibilities for demystifying the conditions of organizational life, as these are directly or indirectly experienced, while it resists being turned into a literal myth" (1987, p. 2). Fourth, its preoccupation with the persuasive properties of language or rhetoric means that the dramatistic method is ideally suited to an analysis of actors who derive their authority charismatically. Having described in

detail in this chapter the origins, concepts, applications, strengths and weaknesses of this dramatisic methodology, I will turn, in Chapter Four, to how I have applied this method to the present study.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### RESEARCH DESIGN

“It may be that much research fails to be of practical use because of the tendency for researchers to prefer methodologically elegant research on trivial problems to crude research on important problems that nevertheless give a better basis for practical decisions.”

John Burgoyne and Roger Stuart in *Management Development: Context and Strategies* (1978, pp. 98-99).

“At the end of the day, perhaps the most useful thing researchers can do is to take their eyes off the intended positive impact of their work, at least initially, and do work because it is intrinsically interesting and important to themselves and their vision of the field.”

Peter Frost and Ralph Stablein in *Doing Exemplary Research* (1992, p. 269).

#### Introduction

The literature reviewed in the previous two chapters led to two broad conclusions. First, the extant literature on management gurus and management fashions might be enriched by the addition of some detailed and sensitive rhetorical critiques of individual management fashions. Second, examination of the fantasy theme method of rhetorical analysis showed that it might be particularly appropriate for analysing management fashions. In this chapter I discuss how the fantasy theme analysis method was applied to the present empirical study. The chapter begins by explaining why a multiple case study approach was elected for this study and why the three specific cases were chosen. This is

followed by a step-by-step description of how the fantasy theme analysis was conducted including the processes by which the data were collected and analysed. The chapter concludes with a description of a pilot study that was conducted in order to assess the method's viability and to gain valuable firsthand experience using it.

### Selecting the Case Studies

Eisenhardt has identified the case study as a research strategy which focuses on “understanding the dynamics present within single settings” (1989, p. 534). She suggests that it can be used to accomplish several aims: provide description, test theory, or generate theory. In this study I examine three separate case studies, each of which focuses on a particular management fashion as a rhetorical vision that has been created by a single or pair of management gurus. The case studies provide both a deeper description of the discourse related to management fashions and the beginnings of an explanatory framework, informed by symbolic convergence theory, within which to better understand the management fashion and guru phenomenon. In this respect, the case studies will be used “as a small step toward grand generalization” (Stake, 1993, p. 238) by uncovering “the interplay of significant factors that is characteristic of the phenomenon” (Merriam, 1995, p. 108).

Yin has presented a composite definition of “case study” which suggests that it is an “empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context; when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident; and in which multiple sources of evidence are used” (1989, p. 23). It is a particularly

appropriate research strategy when researchers are trying to ask “how” or “why” questions about a contemporary set of events over which they have little or no control. Given its all-pervasive and up-to-the-minute nature, the management guru and fashion phenomenon clearly fits these criteria.

Stake (1993) distinguishes among three types of case study: “intrinsic”, “instrumental” and “collective”. Intrinsic case studies are undertaken because one seeks a better understanding of a particular case, not because it illustrates a particular problem or trait but because the case itself is of interest. Instrumental case studies, by contrast, are examined to provide insight into an issue or to refine a theory. The case is of secondary interest; it plays a supportive role, facilitating and advancing our understanding of something else.

The third type of case study, the “collective” or, as Yin describes it, “multiple” case study, is the approach that will be used in the present study. It involves the study of a number of cases jointly in order to inquire into the phenomenon, population or general condition. It is not the study of a collective but an instrumental study extended to several cases. The cases are chosen on the assumption that analysing them will lead to better understanding, perhaps even theorizing about a still larger collection of cases. As Guba and Lincoln put it, “the content of the case study is determined chiefly by its purpose, which typically is to reveal the properties of the class to which the instance being studied belongs” (1981, p. 371).

Yin suggests that the main advantage of multiple case studies versus a single case study is that the evidence generated from such studies is often considered to be more compelling and the overall study’s findings, more robust. As Miles and Huberman

(1994) observe, “multiple-case sampling adds *confidence* to findings... By looking at a range of similar and contrasting cases, we can understand a single-case finding, grounding it by specifying how and where and, if possible, why it carries on as it does” (1994, p. 29). The primary disadvantage associated with the multiple case method is that it requires considerably more resources and time to conduct and is not appropriate when considering a critical or unique case.

In order to maximize the utility of the multiple case study, Yin encourages the researcher to ensure that each case selected should serve a specific purpose within the overall scope of inquiry. Specifically, he advises that multiple cases should be considered as one would consider multiple experiments by following a “replication logic”. Following this logic, each case “must be carefully selected so that it either (a) predicts similar results (*a literal replication*) or (b) produces contrary results but for predictable reasons (*a theoretical replication*)” (1989, p. 53). Selecting cases this way gives us confidence that “our emerging theory is generic because we have seen it work--and not work out--in predictable ways” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 29). Yin distinguishes this underlying logic from a “sampling logic” that is commonly used in surveys. According to the logic of sampling, a number of subjects are assumed to “represent” a larger pool of subjects, so that data from a smaller number of subjects are assumed to represent the data that might have been collected from the entire pool. With respect to the present study, the case studies have been selected, not with the aim of being definitive about all management fashions, but with the object of refining theory and suggesting complexities for further investigation. The choice of case is made on conceptual grounds, not on representative grounds (Miles & Huberman, 1994).



Stake (1993) has helpfully alerted researchers to the notion that a case study is both the process of learning and the product of our learning. Along these lines, he suggests that, ultimately, the choice of case study should be informed by what we feel we can most learn from. Cresswell (1998) strongly advises that the researcher conduct no more than four cases within a single study. I have taken this advice to heart in selecting the three cases for this study. Each case in this study encompasses a field of discourse about an individual management fashion. In this sense, the cases reflect Yin's (1989) definition of case study in that "the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident" (p. 23). However, each case or "unit of analysis" is "a phenomenon . . . occurring in a bounded context" (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 25). I have chosen three management fashions that have provided competing explanations and prescriptions for managerial and organizational success and have generated considerable followings during the 1990s. All three have questioned established managerial identities and provided compelling alternative models. Each rhetorical vision is at a mature or "consciousness-sustaining" stage in its evolution (Bormann, Cragan & Shields, 1996). Because interest has peaked in them, the challenge currently facing the management guru is to sustain and prolong interest in them.

The three case studies were selected not because they attempt to be exhaustive but because they highlight three quite different rhetorical strategies by which the gurus have established themselves. The process by which they were selected was a lengthy, indirect and iterative process. When I commenced the study, I was not sure which management gurus or which management fashions I was going to study. I, therefore, initiated a scanning process which enabled me to monitor many different gurus. At one point I had

assembled files on over 30 different management gurus. I found UMI's ProQuest Direct CD-Rom and on-line information service ([www.umi.com/proquest](http://www.umi.com/proquest)) to be a particularly useful means for locating insightful articles and for ascertaining the degree of attention that individual management gurus were receiving from the business and academic media. This reasonably routinized activity was supplemented by reading several books which provided overviews of popular management thinkers such as Carol Kennedy's *Guide to the Management Gurus* (1991) and Pugh and Hickson's (1989) *Writers on Organizations*. I also developed an informal network of individuals who sent me articles about various management gurus because they knew of my interest in the topic. My involvement in the satellite videoconferences at the University of Calgary which featured in total 11 different management gurus also provided me with an excellent vantage point to observe a range of gurus and to gauge audience reaction in terms of turn-out and informal and formalised feedback. After just over two years of monitoring, I realized that, to move to a deeper level of understanding I would have to focus my attention on just one or a few management gurus and the fashions they had been instrumental in creating. I also saw there was some merit, for comparative purposes, in studying management gurus that had gained ascendancy during approximately the same period. From the perspective of someone working in management development in North America in the mid-1990s, there were several obvious candidates: Business Process Reengineering, Total Quality Management, the Learning Organization, the Effectiveness Movement, Self-Directed Teams, Empowerment, Corporate Culture, Shareholder Value and Core Competencies.

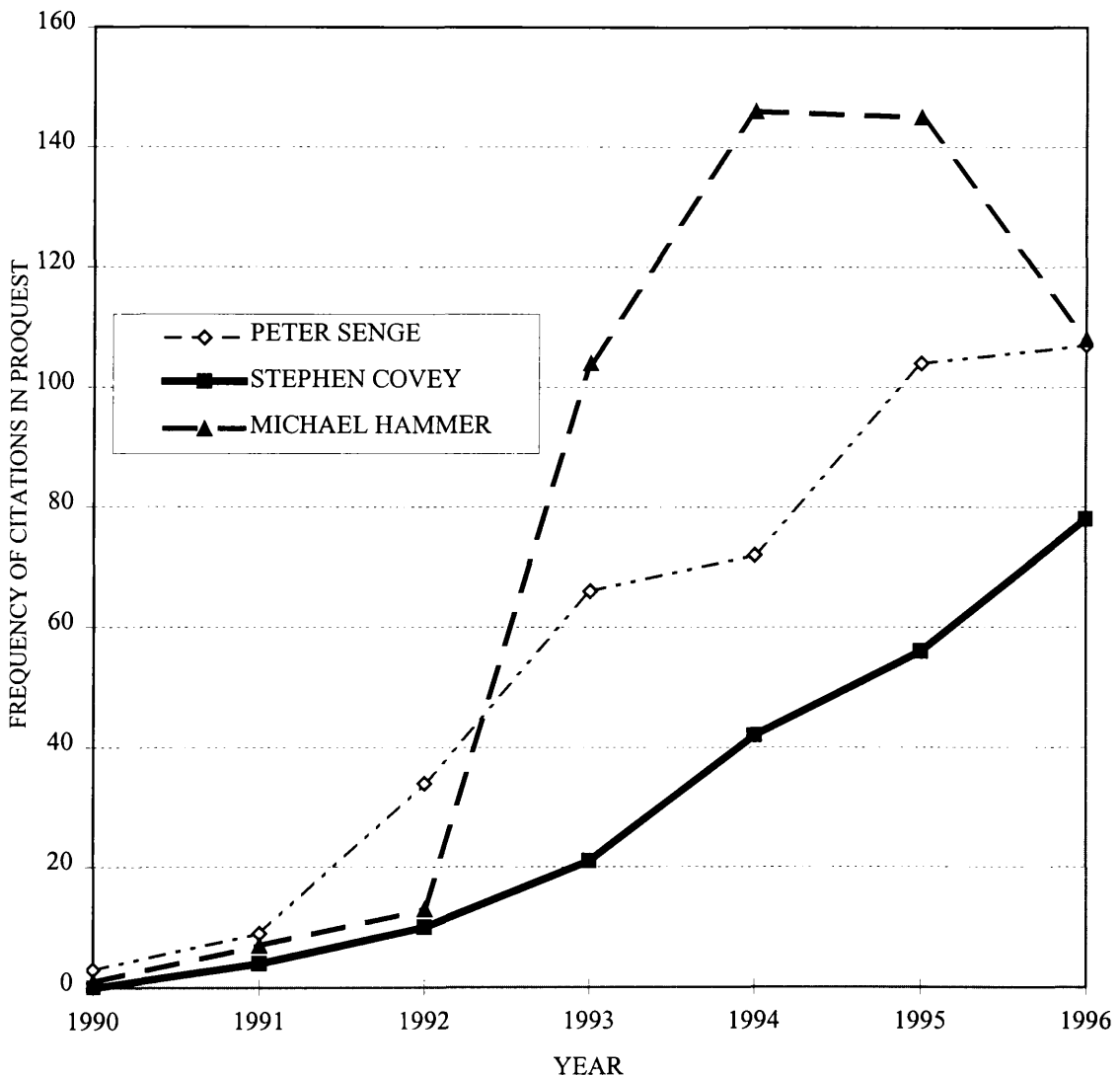
At about the same time I was starting to take a real interest in fantasy theme analysis as a potentially viable research methodology for the study. I was particularly

struck by the observation that Bormann and his colleagues had made that all of the rhetorical visions that they had studied had been underpinned by one of three master analogues – pragmatic, righteous and social (Cragan & Shields, 1992). As I reflected on the list of potential candidates for analysis, I saw that primary master analogues could be readily identified for each of these management fashions. For example, Deming’s “Fourteen Points” and “Seven Deadly Diseases” clearly pointed to the existence of a righteous master analogue that underpinned the Total Quality Management movement (Walton, 1986). Likewise, I could make a good case for arguing that the Empowerment movement was rooted primarily in a social master analogue. When it came to finalizing the three case studies, however, I chose the three case studies that I thought best exemplified each of the three master analogues.

The first case study examines the rhetorical vision of Michael Hammer and James Champy’s reengineering movement, which is undergirded by an essentially pragmatic analogue that tells managers, “you have to do this because it is your *only* choice”. The second case study looks at the effectiveness movement led by Stephen Covey, which is based on a righteous master analogue that could be neatly encapsulated in the phrase “you should do this because it is the *right* thing to do”. The final case study examines the social master analogue of the learning organization popularized by Peter Senge that can be summarized as “think about doing this because it is a *good* thing to do”. Table 5 provides a brief overview of each case.

While it is difficult, and perhaps impossible, to gauge the true scale and sphere of influence of a particular management fashion, indirect indicators of influence can be used as surrogates. In Figure 1, I have plotted the frequency with which each of the management

gurus studied was cited in UMI's ProQuest Direct on-line information service (<http://www.umi.com/proquest>). The graph clearly shows the rapid and parallel rise of the reengineering, effectiveness and learning organization management fashions to prominence in the business media from 1990 to 1996. It also indicates that these rhetorical visions are mature, having passed their peaks in terms of media interest.



**Figure 1** The rise of three prominent management gurus during the 1990s

Table 5

The Three Management Fashion Cases

	Chapter Four	Chapter Five	Chapter Six
Symbolic Cue	Reengineering	The Seven Habits	The Learning Organization
Sanctioning agent(s)	Michael Hammer James Champy	Stephen Covey	Peter Senge
Master Analogue	Pragmatic	Righteous	Social

## Data Collection

In accordance with Bormann's strongly asserted view that a single text is insufficient to conduct a proper fantasy theme critique (1972), the data sources used in each of the case studies here are "multi-textual". They encompass a wide range of media including not only the books, videos, cassette tapes and articles that have been produced by the guru but also the media accounts of them that have appeared in the mainstream and business press. Because I am primarily interested in the analysing the collective "message" that the guru has been responsible for generating, my focus was not exclusively confined to the original texts written by the gurus. Apart from the fact that many of these texts are, in fact, ghost-written (Crainer, 1998), it is the active dissemination of the message in the realm of popular managerial discourse that is critical to analyse because it is here that the managerial audience is exposed to these ideas. Similarly, it is not assumed that managers will slavishly read every word of the original texts. My discussions with a number of management book readers from Canada, New Zealand and the U.K. suggest that, despite their best intentions, they invariably find time

to read only the introductory chapter and browse through the remainder of the book relying more on media accounts to summarize the key ideas.

I have drawn on both “rhetorical acts” performed by the management gurus in the form of live and satellite videoconferences and numerous “rhetorical artifacts”--texts by and about the management gurus and the rhetorical visions that they have helped to foster (Foss, 1989). This range of sources allows for the tracking of fantasy themes across discourse situations, that is essential for genuine thematizing according to Bormann (Hart, 1989). Reliance on media accounts also reflects my conviction that, as management gurus are socially constructed through many media (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Chen & Meindl, 1991), they are best understood by endeavouring to build a composite picture from texts produced by the gurus themselves as well as from media accounts of them. These data sources for this study are summarized in Table 6.

The gurus’ presentations varied in length (from three hours to a full day) and format (one was live and the remainder were delivered “live” via satellite). Most of the presentations featured the guru lecturing at length with some time left at the end of the presentation devoted to audience questions. In observing the presentations, I was able to get a good appreciation of the performative aspects of each guru’s rhetorical message. In particular, I focused my attention on the guru’s body movement, eye contact, verbal emphases, clothing, staging and use of audio-visual aids. By taping the videoconferences, I was able to replay the presentations to analyse certain sections of the performance. I was particularly interested in the parts of the presentation in which the management guru appeared to give the most emphasis in terms of time and energy devoted to it. My role as the local organizer of these presentations also afforded me a

Table 6

The Types and Number of Data Sources Utilized in the Study

	“Reengineering” Michael Hammer & James Champy	“Effectiveness” Stephen Covey	“The Learning Organization” Peter Senge
Number of live presentations/satellite video-conference performances	3	3	3
Number of books authored by the management guru	4	3	2
Number of articles authored by the management guru	15	47	12
Number of articles about the management guru and the management fashion	112	41	54

good opportunity to interact with various members of the audience to get a sense of how they were responding to the guru’s message. Through this interaction and subsequent analysis of the presentation’s evaluation forms that were completed by audience members, I derived a sound, albeit anecdotal, appreciation for what parts of the message the audience members found particularly stimulating and worthy of comment.

The media accounts were obtained directly from the UMI’s ProQuest Direct on-line bibliographic service. This service provides search and retrieval access to summaries and complete articles from over 5,000 business and business-oriented publications and is particularly suitable for researching organizational communication phenomena (Rubin, Rubin & Peale, 1993). The articles were identified by using either the gurus’ name or the

symbolic cue (i.e. “reengineering”, “seven habits” and “learning organization”) as the search criteria. Articles were included if they were either authored by the guru or made mention of his name in the body of the article.

The business media comprise journalistic products such as newspapers, magazines, trade journals, television programs and radio broadcast segments that are designed to be consumed primarily by the business community. As texts, the products of the business media provide a potentially rich and insightful data source because of the passive and active roles they play in the social construction of everyday management knowledge. The media, in order to be successful, strive to reflect the principal concerns and pre-occupations of their readership. As such, in this passive role, they provide an unobtrusive window onto the everyday lifeworld of the business community (Webb, Campbell, Schwartz & Sechrest, 1966). On the other hand, the business media also work to actively shape the agenda of the everyday business lifeworld by making decisions about what accounts they present and how they shape these accounts. As such, the business media are a critical element in the management guru industry. They are instrumental in first identifying gurus to the broader business public, in actively promoting them and, most critically, by virtue of their privileged status, in legitimating the management gurus to the consumer population of practising managers who read them.

### Data Analysis

Before describing step by step, the method used to analyse the data, it is useful to distinguish fantasy theme analysis from content analysis. While both methods take the written word as their starting point and both examine written texts for insights into the



subject at hand, FTA differs in three significant ways. First, FTA is an explicitly subjective technique. As was indicated in the previous chapter, it “owns up to the fact that the value of what critics find in a text depends on who they are, what they know and how they use their knowledge to identify and interpret dramas” (Kendall, 1993, p. 577). Second, FTA takes a systemic as opposed to a systematic viewpoint to data analysis. Because the critic is concerned with the whole of the rhetoric within which the drama unfolds, “rather than systematically deconstructing a text by counting words, phrases and structures, the dramatic critic attempts to discern dramas that compose an overall rhetorical vision, experiencing the text to arrive at an interpretation of the system in its entirety” (Kendall, 1993, p. 577). Finally, unlike the quantitatively-based content analysis, FTA is a qualitative research method. Van Maanen defines qualitative methods as “an array of interpretative techniques which seek to describe, decode, translate and otherwise come to terms with the meaning, not the frequency, of certain more or less naturally occurring phenomena in the social world” (1983, p. 9). In this study I have, as Burgoyne has advised, “counted the countable” (Cassell and Symon, 1995, p.4) such as considering book sales and citation frequencies. I have not, however, attempted to impose restrictive a priori classifications on either the collection or the analysis of the data. I have been more concerned with emergent themes and idiographic descriptions.

Cressell acknowledges that qualitative research is a form of social and human research that does not have firm guidelines or specific procedures and is evolving and changing constantly. It, therefore, “complicates telling others how one plans to conduct a study and how others might judge when the study is done” (1998, p. 17).

True to form, Bormann and his immediate colleagues do not spell out in any detail the nuts and bolts of conducting fantasy theme analyses. However, Foss (1989) has helpfully identified and described five steps in conducting fantasy-theme criticism. These are (1) finding evidence of the sharing of fantasy themes or a rhetorical vision; (2) coding the rhetorical artifacts for setting, character and action themes; (3) constructing the rhetorical vision(s) on the basis of the fantasy themes; (4) naming the motive for the visions identified; and (5) assessing the group's rhetorical vision. This framework guided the conduct of the present study.

In searching out evidence of the sharing of the rhetorical vision within a rhetorical community, I sifted through the various newspaper, professional and trade journal articles, seeking out the use of symbolic cues such as catch phrases and slogans that had been coined by the management guru and had now fallen into regular currency. For example, Stephen Covey's phrase "putting first things first" cropped up in a wide range of articles and is one that I have heard colleagues and students allude to on numerous occasions in the course of everyday conversation. As Foss observes, "when people have shared a fantasy theme, they have charged that theme with meanings and emotions that can be set off by an agreed-upon cryptic symbolic cue" (1989, p. 294).

Having confirmed that a particular rhetorical vision was widely shared, I then coded the rhetorical artifacts in order to isolate the recurrent fantasy themes within that vision. This involved a careful reading of the artifact, sentence by sentence to pick out references to settings, characters and actions that might form the basis for major fantasy themes. Setting, character and action themes were colour coded to make it easier to distinguish between them. In reading the texts I was mindful of Hodder's concern that "different

types of text have to be understood in the contexts of production and meaning” (1993, p.394). Therefore, I was primarily concerned with what these different texts said about the manager’s role, behaviours and identity within the organization. Using the coding procedures developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and refined by Miles and Huberman (1994), I was able to generate a set of initial codes from reading and re-reading the texts through a process of “simultaneous collection and analysis of data” (Merriam, 1995, p. 116). The coding continued until I reached a point of “saturation” at which “no additional data are being found” and I could “develop properties of a category” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 61).

I moved on to the third step, which involved looking for patterns from which I could isolate major from minor themes. Those that appeared most frequently and seemed to subsume a number of lesser themes were identified as the major fantasy themes that became the subject of the analysis. These were given labels, often derived from the guru’s own text, which I thought would best convey the essence of the individual theme to the reader. So, for example, when it became clear that the agrarian motif and, specifically, a nostalgic view of rural life, continually cropped up in Covey’s writing, his presentations and his interviews, I thought that the label “Back to the Farm” could most potently communicate this theme to the reader. The theme’s labels, of course, are by no means the end of the story. It is in the elaboration of this theme under the label that its rhetorical potency can be understood. The rhetorical vision was then constructed by linking the setting themes that I had identified with the characters depicted in those settings as well as with the actions those characters were shown to be performing.

Having laid out the rhetorical vision, I began to explore the motives for the participants in the rhetorical vision, drawing on Burke's schema of motives (Burke, 1962; Hart, 1989).

The final stage involved an evaluation of the management fashion with reference to the rhetorical visions that have been offered by competing management fashions. In making this assessment, I asked the following questions, suggested by Foss (1980): How well did the rhetoric deal with the problem of creating and celebrating a sense of community? Did the rhetoric help generate a group and individual self-image that was strong, confident and resilient? How did the rhetoric aid or hinder the community in its adaptation to its environment? How did the rhetoric deal with the problem of creating a social reality that provides a norm for community behaviour in terms of the level of violence, exploitation, dominance and injustice?

The most critical, and certainly the most challenging, stage in conducting fantasy theme analysis, as arguably with all forms of qualitative research, is writing up the critique. Marshall and Rossman (1989) have observed that

Writing about qualitative data cannot be separated from the analytic process. In fact, it is central to that process, for in the choice of particular words to summarize and reflect the complexity of the data, the researcher is engaging in the interpretive act, lending shape and form --meaning--to massive amounts of raw data. (1989, p. 119)

In making the numerous decisions that had to be made about what words to include and what words not to, I was guided by Wolcott's instructive advice:

The critical task in qualitative research is not to accumulate all the data you can, but to "can" (i.e. get rid of) most of the data you accumulate.

This requires constant winnowing. The trick is to discover essences and then reveal those essences with sufficient text, yet not becoming mired to include everything that might possibly be described. (1990, p. 35)

In writing my accounts of each rhetorical vision and its underlying fantasy themes, I attempted to provide the reader with a reasonably cogent picture of the rhetorical vision even though she or he might not have had access to any of the data sources (i.e. guru texts, presentations or media accounts). Moreover, I tried to ensure that the accounts contained a sufficient number of quotations from the texts to enable the reader to derive some measure of confidence that the data were interpreted in a consistent and insightful way (Creswell, 1998).

Each of the case studies presented in this study in Chapters Five, Six and Seven follows a similar format but by no means identical format. This variance reflects both the distinctiveness of each rhetorical vision plus an improved facility and comfort with this approach as each case study was conducted. The case commences with an examination of the person and persona of the sanctioning agent for the rhetorical vision. The guru's background and formative experiences are summarized and the various rhetorical strategies that he has developed to articulate, disseminate and legitimate his rhetorical vision are highlighted. This is followed by an examination of the rhetorical community that has developed around the rhetorical vision. This provides the reader a sense of the types of individuals and groups who have been the most vocal in their endorsement of the vision and of the particular aspects of the vision that the followers have most heavily emphasized. The rhetorical vision of the management fashion is then presented by providing a description of each of the fantasy themes that were identified in the analysis.

This description lays out the key properties of the theme, provides illuminating quotations from the data and ascribes the underlying motive that gives the theme its rhetorical potency. Following Merriam's observation that "there is not a standard format for reporting case study research" but the "overall intent of the case study undoubtedly shapes the larger structure of the written narrative" (cited in Cresswell, 1998, p. 186), each case closes with a different line of inquiry that the fantasy theme analysis triggered for the author. As Foss (1989) observes, "once a rhetorical vision has been identified, the critic is free to evaluate it according to whatever social and theoretical goals interest the critic and are suggested by the artifacts" (1989, p. 297).

### The Pilot Study

In order to gain comfort with, and confidence in, the fantasy theme method, I conducted a pilot study which focused upon the management guru Tom Peters (Jackson, 1995). Tom Peters was selected as a fitting case for a pilot study because he has received more attention from the business media and has been subjected to considerably more scrutiny by academic researchers than any other management guru (Crainer, 1996). Given that Peters has the distinction of being probably the most widely studied (and vilified!) management guru, I thought it would be a good test of the method to see if it was capable of yielding any new perspectives or insights into the management guru and management fashion phenomenon. The specific aim of the study was to examine the various rhetorical strategies that Tom Peters had employed in order to sustain his guru status over a comparatively lengthy 15-year period and to popularize the "excellence

movement”. For this study I selected 20 articles from popular business publications from the United States, Canada and Britain that featured Tom Peters.

From the pilot study I observed that Tom Peters himself had, over the years, become a rhetorical vision. Early on in his career as a guru, he had helped to launch the extremely influential excellence movement along with his colleague, Robert Waterman. However, over the years, it has become increasingly apparent that Peters is neither articulating nor advocating a specific management fashion but instead is promoting himself as a commentator and pundit on the changing corporate scene. Within the rhetorical vision of Tom Peters I identified four different pairs of seemingly contradictory character themes that had been constructed in the business media. These I labelled the ‘Success Story/Regular Guy’ theme; the ‘Great Thinker/Lucky Fool’ theme; the ‘Radical Revolutionary/Evangelical Preacher’ theme and the ‘Irreverent Outsider/Empathetic Insider’ theme. Each of these themes provided a powerful dialectical device for capturing and sustaining attention. It was very difficult, if not impossible, to pin the Peters persona down. From the study I concluded that Tom Peters had essentially been presented essentially as a “paradox” as defined by the *Concise Oxford Dictionary* as a “person, thing, conflicting with preconceived notions of what is reasonable or possible.” It is Peters’ ability to continue to remain a paradox that has kept him in the forefront of the business media’s and practising manager’s attention. He appeals to managers’ deep-seated wish to step outside of the constraints of their existing, frequently helpless situations and go out on a limb without any expectation that they actually do so. Tom Peters, in effect, does it for them. In order to do this he has to be simultaneously “with them” and “against them”, hence, the functionality of his contradictory roles.

The experience with the pilot study did much to boost my confidence with the fantasy theme method of rhetorical criticism. With regards to my data collection strategy, I decided to expand the range of media sources to include the gurus' presentations, primary texts and articles written for magazines and newspapers. As I was interested in the composite message, I felt that these sources also needed to be included in the textual analysis. The pilot also served to convince me of the importance of developing sound coding and note-taking procedures in order to maintain control of the data analysis process.

Further confidence that I was developing a facility with the fantasy theme method was obtained by asking Ernest Bormann to review papers that featured early versions of the first two full case studies that I conducted of reengineering (Jackson, 1996b) and effectiveness (Jackson, 1996c). In his response to me, Professor Bormann reported, "I have read your articles and find them to be insightful; your grasp of the theory and fantasy theme analysis is excellent. Like all methods of scholarship some studies using fantasy theme analysis are better than others and yours are very good indeed" (personal communication, November 24, 1996).

## Summary

In this chapter I have described the rationale for the present study and details of the research design that guided the empirical portion of the thesis. A case study approach was chosen because it is well suited to the complex, contemporary and relatively under-theorized nature of the management guru and management fashion phenomenon. Three



cases studies were selected in an effort to help the research effort move towards generalization and to illustrate ideal types of the three master analogues that Bormann and his colleagues have found to underpin all of the rhetorical visions that they have studied. The cases--reengineering, effectiveness and the learning organization--encompass management fashions that have captured the corporate imagination of North America in a substantial way during the 1990s. Data collected for these case studies were drawn from a wide array of media sources including the guru's products (i.e. live and taped presentations, books and articles) and the media's accounts of the guru and the management fashion that he was proposing. A five-step process for conducting the data analysis was presented along with the results and lessons learned from conducting a pilot study of Tom Peters that used fantasy theme analysis.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### MICHAEL HAMMER, JAMES CHAMPY AND THE REENGINEERING MOVEMENT

“Reengineering ...will require a personality transplant... a lobotomy”  
Michael Hammer quoted in a *Computerworld* interview (Maglitta, 1994)

“Management has joined the ranks of the dangerous professions”  
James Champy in *Reengineering Management* (1995, p. 7).

#### Introduction

The empirical section of this study begins with an analysis of the work of James Champy and Michael Hammer, the leading luminaries of the reengineering movement, and, two of the most influential management gurus in recent years. The reengineering movement has had a massive and far-reaching impact on the way work is done in organizations throughout the world. While the attention it has garnered reached its peak in the mid-1990s, projects continue to be launched in the name of reengineering on a daily basis in all sectors of the economy and spheres of business. In its wake reengineering has, by virtue of its close association with downsizing and the accompanying loss of jobs, generated considerable controversy. Consequently, it is perhaps the most publicly debated and hotly contested management fashion to have emerged in the last thirty years.

The chapter begins with a discussion of the origins of the reengineering movement and the role that Michael Hammer and James Champy have played in its creation, promotion

and dissemination. This is followed by a description of Hammer and Champy's rhetorical vision of reengineering, which I argue is underpinned by an essentially "pragmatic" master analogue. The vision derives its rhetorical power by stressing the practical reasons for engaging in reengineering and emphasizing its appeal to common sense. Reengineering is not necessarily a good thing to do. Nor is it necessarily the right thing to do. But it is the *only* thing that managers can do in the face of a business environment that is so wrought with risk and uncertainty. As Fincham (1996) asserts in his critique, "like magic, re-engineering is part of a self-perpetuating total discourse that excludes alternatives and neutralizes dissent" (1996, p. 15).

In the second part of the chapter I identify and describe three main fantasy themes that I argue act as the building blocks of Hammer and Champy's rhetorical vision of reengineering. All three are character themes that dwell and endeavour to shape and influence the self-concept of the manager (Gergen, 1971; 1991).

The third and final part of the chapter shows how a dramatisitic analysis recasts the reengineering movement as a 'performance' that is enacted in two different analytical realms. The first realm encompasses the broad arena of managerial discourse. It focuses on how Hammer and Champy successfully persuade managers to become interested in reengineering and, ultimately, pursue a reengineering project within their own organization. The second realm encompasses reengineering as a drama as it is 'played out' within the organization. The chapter closes by describing several empirical studies that have revealed a significant and problematic disjuncture between the rhetorical vision of reengineering and how individuals within organizations have in fact, experienced it.

## The Reengineering Movement

### The Rise and Fall of Reengineering

In the mid-1990s, reengineering or business process reengineering (BPR) eclipsed total quality management (TQM) as the most widely recognized, if not practised, organizational improvement initiative (Burdett, 1994). Despite its popularity, considerable confusion remains about its content and character so that “the concept remains surprisingly ill-defined” (Jones, 1994, p. 358) and “there is not even an agreed name for this ill-defined idea” (Edwards and Peppard, 1994, p. 252). For the purposes of this study, I shall be referring to it as reengineering.

Knights and McCabe (1998a) distinguish between two main variants of reengineering. On the one hand, there are the “dream-like exhortations” of Hammer and Champy’s who define it as the “the fundamental rethinking and radical design of business processes to achieve dramatic improvements in critical, contemporary measures of performance, such as cost, quality, service and speed” (Hammer and Champy, 1993, p. 32). On the other hand there is the “hard-headed, pragmatic but nonetheless somewhat mechanistic incitements” of Davenport’s “process innovation” that “encompasses the envisioning of new work strategies, the actual process design activity, and the implementation of change in all its complex technological, human, and organizational dimensions” (Davenport, 1993, p.2).

Grint (1994) has identified several features that are common to all conceptions of reengineering. These include the switch from functional departments to process teams; the shift from simple to multi-tasked work; a reversal of power relations from superordinate to subordinate; the empowerment of employees; changes in employees’ focus away from a hierarchical concern with one’s superior towards customers; changes in management’s

behaviour from that of supervising to coaching; and the flattening of hierarchies. Knights and McAbe (1998) argue that the essence of reengineering is its emphasis upon a process-based, rather than a functional, approach to the organization of work which is facilitated by the increased and intensive use of information technology. While Hammer and Champy have cast it as a novel approach, several commentators have firmly identified reengineering with the traditions of Taylorism, arguing that it merely a form of warmed up Scientific Management (e.g. Cummings, 1999; Grint & Willcocks, 1995; Taylor, 1995).

A telephone survey conducted in 1994 by Mercer Management Consulting of 180 U.S. and 100 European companies found that 75 per cent of these companies had engaged in “significant” reengineering efforts in the last three years and that the results had either “met or exceeded” their expectations in 80% of these cases (Kini, 1994). Studies conducted by CSC Index in early 1994 (Champy, 1995) and Pitney Bowes Management Services in late 1994 (Verespej, 1995) respectively found that 69 per cent of 497 companies surveyed and 83 per cent of 100 companies surveyed had already engaged in one or more reengineering projects. It is not surprising, therefore, to learn that the reengineering movement spawned a significant consulting boom that was estimated by one market research firm to be worth more than \$7 billion in reengineering projects during 1994 (Hammer and Stanton, 1995). Andersen Consulting has taken the lion’s share of the consulting spoils and, in the process, has been able to quadruple its world-wide revenues in five years to \$4.2 billion in 1995 (Economist, 1996b).

Drawing on the results from a multi-year survey of the usage and satisfaction levels with organizational improvement tools that was conducted by Bain and Company, Rigby notes that

Reengineering's five-year survey scores reveal the vagaries of a tool's results over time. In 1993 and 1994, reengineering was the rage. Early adopters gave it impressive ratings, and its usage climbed from 67 per cent to 71 per cent. But in 1995 reengineering's satisfaction scores plummeted. Early users started to complain about unexpected long-term side effects such as declining morale, loss of innovation, an erosion of trust, and weakened teamwork. (Rigby, 1998, p. 162)

The survey, which included 4,137 responses and 224 personal interviews with senior managers in 15 countries, revealed that the use of reengineering peaked at 78 per cent in 1995 and declined to 64 per cent in 1997 as satisfaction levels fell to the lowest of all organizational improvement tools identified. Similarly, Holland and Kumar (1995) found that between 60 and 87 per cent of reengineering projects had ended unsuccessfully.

The business media have also played a major role in promoting this movement to the broad business constituency. This is poignantly illustrated in the number of citations of the term "reengineering" and "re-engineering" that were traced in the ABI/Inform database. Table 7 shows that, prior to 1985, only seven citations were detected. These referred exclusively to computer software applications. Between January 1986 and December 1991, when the reengineering movement was in its very early stages, the term appeared 84 times. The peak period for citations occurred between 1994 and 1995. While it obviously remains a major issue for the business media, interest has gradually fallen off as indicated by the progressively lower monthly rates of citations from 1996 onwards. The falling in and out of favour of the reengineering movement with the media can alternatively portrayed in a selection of headlines that appeared in popular business journals between 1993 and 1996.

Table 7

Number and Monthly Rate of Citations of the Terms ‘Reengineering’ and ‘Re-engineering’ in the ABI/Inform Database

Period	Number of Citations During Period	Monthly Rate of Citations
January 1971 – December 1985	7	0.04
January 1986 – December 1991	123	1.71
January 1992 – December 1993	873	36.38
January 1994 – December 1995	2667	111.13
January 1996 – December 1996	975	81.25
January 1997 – November 1998	1195	49.79
TOTAL	5,840	18.08

**PHASE ONE: THE UNIVERSAL ELIXIR**

- “The Age of Reengineering”, *Across the Board*, June 1993
- “Reengineering, the hot new management tool”, *Fortune*, August, 1993
- “The Reengineeering Rage”, *Industry Week*, February, 1994
- “Reengineering Europe”, *Economist*, February, 1994

**PHASE TWO: THE DOUBTS CREEP IN**

- “Reengineering is *not* hocus pocus”, *Across the Board*, September 1994
- “Hammer Defends Re-engineering”, *Economist*, November 1994
- “Reengineering: What Happened?”, *Business Week*, January 1995
- “Reengineering: a light that failed?”, *Across the Board*, March, 1995

**PHASE III: WHAT’S NEXT?**

- “The Antidote for Reengineering”, *Industry Week*, April 1996
- “Business Process Re-engineering RIP”, *People Management*, May 1996
- “Re-examining Reengineering: Down to Microsurgery”, *Chemical Week*, June 1996
- “Reengineering Recycled”, *Business Week*, August 1996

### Michael Hammer and James Champy's Leadership Role

While many have been involved in the reengineering movement, Michael Hammer and, to a slightly lesser extent, James Champy, have played a pivotal role in distilling and disseminating the principles of the approach to a mass business audience. As a managing partner from Andersen Consulting remarked, "God Bless Michael Hammer - because he really popularised and legitimated the concept" (Thackray, 1993, p. 40). Hammer, who has copyrighted the reengineering term, is not reticent about taking the credit for being the "father" of the movement. He acknowledges that, "I don't have to be the mother, the sister and the great-uncle as well...there's room for a lot people to make contributions" (Maglitta, 1994, p. 85). The foundation for the movement was prepared in Michael Hammer's stinging polemic entitled 'Reengineering Work: Don't Automate, Obliterate' that appeared in the *Harvard Business Review* in 1990 (Hammer, 1990). This article stimulated considerable reaction and primed the business community for a more substantial work, *Reengineering the Corporation*, which was published in 1993 and went on to sell two million copies world-wide in 15 different languages in under two years (Hammer and Champy, 1993). For this book, Hammer teamed up with James Champy, who, at the time, was chairman of CSC Index Inc., a consulting firm based in Cambridge, Massachusetts, specializing in implementing reengineering projects.

Hammer and Champy have capitalized on their popularity in two different ways. Michael Hammer has a particular flair for performance. His "barking, rottweiler delivery" (Kennedy, 1994b) keeps the audience on its toes in a way that is eerily reminiscent of the actor Richard Dreyfuss in the movie *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* (Kotcheff, 1974). His larger than life presence and outlandish remarks have made him something of a



media darling and scourge in the mould of Tom Peters. In 1992, *Business Week* named him as one of the “four pre-eminent management thinkers of the 1990s” (Byrne, 1992). He was also named by *Time* in 1986 as one of America’s 25 “most influential individuals” (Time, 1986). Hammer was formerly a professor of Computer Science at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He left the academy in 1990 to form Hammer and Company, a “management education and research firm that focuses on cutting edge issues in operations, organizations, and technology utilization” (www.hammerandco.com). Based in Cambridge, Massachusetts, the company offers a variety of public seminars, conferences and videos in various countries around the world. Michael Hammer personally delivers seminars to over 5,000 executives annually and gives numerous keynote speeches, receiving up to \$30,000 per day for the privilege (McConville, 1994). Through its Phoenix program, Hammer and Company also serves a blue-chip consortium of 27 “leading-edge companies committed to the process revolution”. In addition, Hammer has set up a number of spin-off companies that focus on reengineering projects in niche industries. For example, recognizing the obvious opportunities that the health care field presents for reengineering, Hammer has formed Praxis, a consulting company that specializes in studying the flow of work in health care (Grayson, 1997).

Adopting a relatively lower public profile, Champy comes across as being a considerably kinder, gentler and generally more humane individual than his pugnacious partner does. He is a clear and thoughtful presenter who has polished his calm and understated style to persuasive effect. Through direct consulting work with reengineering projects he, was during the reengineering boom, able to significantly expand the revenues of his practice from \$30 million in 1988 to \$150 million in 1993 (McConville, 1994). A lawyer,

who also holds a Master of Science in Engineering from MIT, Champy founded his management consulting company in 1969. This was to be later absorbed by the multinational giant, Computer Sciences Corporation, and renamed CSC Index. Champy has subsequently left CSC Index and holds directorships with SYSTOR, an IT service provider for the financial services industry based in Zurich, and Perot Systems Corporation where he is also chairman of its systems consulting practice. He continues to write a number of newspaper columns that are syndicated by Tribune Media. From this platform, he has been able to maintain his profile and keep the reengineering movement on the public agenda.

Given these different styles and strategies, it is perhaps not surprising that Hammer and Champy elected not to co-author the inevitable sequel to *Reengineering the Corporation* which, adapting a metaphor from the not-too distant world of popular music, presented them with the “difficult second album syndrome”. First out of the chute was James Champy with his book, *Reengineering Management* (Champy, 1995) which was released in early 1995. It was quickly followed by Hammer’s book, *The Reengineering Revolution: A Handbook*, co-authored with Steven Stanton (Hammer and Stanton, 1995). Both books were pitched as responses to the criticisms that had started to build up against the reengineering movement. However, the authors chose to take two different tacks with their defence.

Champy decided to lead his assault on senior managers whom he argued had been primarily responsible for the failure of many reengineering efforts. He opens the book with the comment

This partial revolution is not the one that I intended. If I’ve learned anything in the last 18 months, it is that the revolution we started has gone, at best,

only halfway. I have also learned that half a revolution is not better than none. It may, in fact, be worse. (1995, p. 3)

Champy suggests that the “other half” of the reengineering revolution should focus on reengineering the management function. Drawing on the testimony of 150 managers, he urges that management processes must be reengineered so that managers will now focus upon mobilizing, enabling, defining, measuring and communicating in order to achieve a business culture that enables a continuous process of reengineering.

Hammer, on the other hand, argues that the reason why so many reengineering efforts failed was, not because reengineering itself was wrong, but that organizations had not properly followed the procedures that he obligingly lays out in his no-nonsense, softcover “handbook”. While he acknowledges the significant reengineering failures, he points out that these “reflect a fundamental fact of reengineering: it is very, very difficult to do” (Hammer and Stanton, 1995, p. xiv). The handbook is offered to the reader to give them the benefit of “the experiences of a great many companies without having to endure those experiences yourselves.” (1995, p. xv).

Perhaps anticipating that interest in the reengineering movement was beginning to wane and that the backlash was now in full swing, Hammer followed up the handbook with the predictably-titled *Beyond Reengineering* (Hammer, 1996). He opens the book in full capitulation mode, by stating that “this book is not about reengineering; it is about its aftermath, and its abiding legacy” (1996, p. xi). Billing the book as a “first draft of a business guide for the twentieth-first century”, Hammer argues that the business systems that were specifically targeted for reengineering (e.g. new product development, order fulfilment and customer management) should “become the permanent armature on which

work is hung, not just the focus of one-shot improvements” (Stewart, 1996, p. 197).

Twenty-first century organizations should in his mind, therefore, no longer be centered around function but on “process”. That is, a “complete end-to-end set of activities that together create value for a customer” (1996a, p. xii). Perhaps endeavouring to present a kindlier, gentler outlook on the world, Hammer confesses that, “I have come to realize that I was wrong, that the radical character of reengineering, however important and exciting, is not its most significant aspect. The key word in the definition of reengineering is “process” (1996a, p. xii). The process-centred organization is characterized by “responsibility, autonomy, risk, and uncertainty. It may not be a gentle environment, but it is a very human one. Gone are the artificial rigidities of the conventional corporation. In its place is a world full of messiness, challenges, and disappointments, that characterize the real world of real human beings” (1996b, p. 14).

While the reengineering movement reached its zenith in the mid-1990s, Michael Hammer has recently pointed to a “second wave” of popularity for the concept that has been prompted by the rising use of the Internet. He argues that, by linking companies together, Internet technologies can create savings and improve productivity by co-ordinating efforts across corporate boundaries. The net result, according to Hammer, is that “whole industries start working like one company (and) the barriers between customer and supplier, between companies, start to fall.” (Church, 1999, p. B23). Following suit, Champy has recently argued that the reengineering movement is far from over. He states, “the hard work still lies ahead. Why? Principally, because we have yet to experience the full effect that the ubiquity of information technology will have on the way we operate” (Champy, 1998a, p. 26).

There is also evidence that reengineering is still very much on the agenda of a number of professions. For example, reengineering was selected as one of the “top ten technologies” that will affect Certified Public Accountants in the coming year (Accountancy, 1999). Reengineering also continues to be a major force for health care management (Grayson, 1997) human resources (Wilkerson, 1997), internal auditing (Chapman, 1998), purchasing (Morgan, 1997) and sales (Prince, 1998).

### The Rhetorical Vision of Reengineering

In analysing the rhetorical vision that Michael Hammer and James Champy have constructed, I identified three very strong and inter-related character themes that build progressively upon one another. These are summarized in Table 8 along with metaphors that most strongly illuminated the theme. A Burkean motive is ascribed to each theme. While the gurus allude to various settings, no one theme emerged as being important to the rhetorical power of the reengineering vision. Similarly, no major action themes came to the fore during the analysis.

All three character themes speak directly to individual managers’ sense of themselves-- who they are and what they should be doing as managers. As Stewart has observed, Hammer and Champy are “superb at describing what’s in it—and not in it—for people” (1996, p. 198). The first character theme, which I describe as “Preservation of Self”, reflects the gurus’ powerful use of fear as motivation for managers to re-examine their roles. They skilfully grab the manager’s attention by placing him or her squarely at the centre of the drama. By describing the ultimately untenable fate of managers who are just like them, they

encourage the manager to closely *identify* with the characters they are describing. The second theme, “Redemption of Self”, stresses to managers that all is not lost as they have the ability to change themselves. Should they choose to not just support but actively pursue a reengineering project within their own organization, they have the means to *transcend* their current precarious situation. The third theme, “Representation of Self”, captures the new roles that the gurus suggest managers must play in the new “reengineered” organizational reality. It lays out a clear path to help managers to progress and to continue to make their way upwards, through a transformed *hierarchy*. There is a still way to advance better oneself within this new kind of organization.

Table 8

Key Fantasy Themes within the Rhetorical Vision of the Reengineering Movement

<b>Fantasy Theme</b>	<b>Type</b>	<b>Metaphors</b>	<b>Motive</b>
Preservation of Self	Character Theme	The Death Zone Marching into battle Painful therapy	Identification
Redemption of Self	Character Theme	Test of faith Adam Smith Sixties Revolutionary	Transcendence
Representation of Self	Character Theme	Process Owner Coach Leader	Hierarchy

### Character Theme One: Preservation of Self

Using fear to grab people's attention is one of the world's oldest and most persuasive strategies. It is a device that has been used to powerful effect by tele-evangelists and many prominent management gurus, most notably Tom Peters. Michael Hammer and James Champy demonstrate that they have learned well from their predecessors. They use fear on three levels. First, fear is used to convince managers that they have no option but to reengineer. The tenor of their argument is simply yet powerfully stated at the top of the cover of their first book in the solemn pronouncement by Peter Drucker, the elder statesman of management gurus, that "Reengineering is new, and it must be done". Hammer reinforces this argument in his seminars with the chilling observation that, "the choice is survival: it's between redundancies of 50 per cent or 100 per cent" (Kennedy, 1994b, p.14). In particular, they single out middle management, ironically perhaps, their prime readership group, as the prime target for downsizing, or the "death zone" of reengineering (Hammer, 1995, p. 35). Along these lines, Hammer typically remarks, "the true losers turn out to be those folks in the middle, because we need far fewer of them. And what they need to do is very different from what they're accustomed to, and many of them are hopelessly unqualified" (The Wall Street Journal, 1995, p. B1). The most frequent estimate that they give for the number of middle management positions that will be removed by reengineering is a very eye-catching 75%. In view of the fact that they have most to lose in terms of authority, status, rewards and, more fundamentally, their jobs, Hammer warns that, "the instinctual reaction of most middle managers is to attempt to forestall or freeze any reengineering effort" (1995, p. 35).

Second, Hammer and Champy also suggest that fear is the major reason why reengineering is either ignored or sabotaged by senior managers. For example, Hammer claims that, “a lot of people embark on reengineering but don’t go anywhere because of failures of intellect or courage”. Resorting to his favourite military metaphor, he taunts his readers with the observation that, “companies that unfurl the banner and march into battle without collapsing job titles, changing the compensation policy and instilling new attitudes and values get lost in the swamp” (1995, p. 30).

Third, Hammer and Champy suggest that managers themselves should use fear as an important element in their plans to implement reengineering within their organizations. Hammer, for example, suggests that, “you must play on the two basic emotions: fear and greed. You must frighten them by demonstrating the serious shortcomings of the current processes, spelling out how drastically these defective processes are hurting the organization” (1995, p. 52). More philosophically, Champy states

The history lesson produces a good scare - that past success does not guarantee future success - but there’s nothing wrong with that. For another thing, capitalism is a system that quite literally works on fear. For another thing, the only way to persuade many folks to undertake painful therapy like reengineering, followed by a permanent state of mobilization, is to persuade them that the alternative will be more painful. (1995, p. 49)

There are indications, however, that Champy may be softening his hard line to reengineering. When pressed in an interview about his parting of ways with Hammer, Champy mentions that Hammer should be more careful about his use of violent images, concluding that, “this language of violence is now acting against the corporate interest



because employees are already in such a condition of fear. Deep, deep fear. Managers, too. This has to change if reengineering is to realize its full potential” (Across the Board, 1995, p. 31).

### Character Theme Two: Redemption of Self

The reengineering movement poses an interesting paradox for middle managers. On the one hand, it quite clearly poses a serious threat to their very existence within the organization. On the other hand, if they dig in against it, they will lose even their remote chance of survival within the organization. As Hammer rather matter-of-factly observes, “these downsized middle managers will have two options. A great many of them will go back to doing ‘real work’, because for most middle managers I know it was excellence at real work that got them on the middle management track in the first place” (Hogarty, 1993, p. 52). While few middle managers would, in all honesty, share the same relish, their chances for rehabilitation are relatively good. According to Champy, “we estimate that 20 per cent will be unable to make the transition. I think those people will be lost - they are not going to find other middle management jobs” (Hogarty, 1993, p. 52).

Against this gloomy backdrop, Hammer and Champy set about laying out the path to salvation for middle managers to ensure they survive the transition and remain a vibrant part of the “permanent mobilization”. To do this they use four very powerful persuasive techniques. First, they empathize with their readers, demonstrating that they know what it’s like to be in their position and offering hope that there is a way out of it. For example, in his introductory chapter, Champy states

This book is not about operational processes. It is about managing, written for managers, and (it may be reassuring to note) by a manager. It is about us, about changing our managerial work, the way we think, organize, inspire, deploy, enable, measure, and reward the value-adding operational work. It is about changing managerial work itself. (1995, p. 3)

A second technique is to provide the readers with numerous role models or ‘heroes’ of reengineering who have shown that they can make the transition. A frequently cited case is the “test of faith” for a manager who has created self-managed work teams in a supermarket chain warehouse. He is confronted with the challenge of letting the team members decide on their own whether or not they would send a new shipment after working hours to replace one that had been damaged in a truck accident. This manager is held up as being someone who “has felt the whole nine yards of fear that reengineering often brings to managers...the fear of letting go, the fear of losing control, the fear of misplaced trust, of betrayal, the fear of losing popularity (or of not being “tough”), and always, of course, the fear of failure. (Champy, 1995, p. 24). A great deal of both of their texts are given over to descriptions of case studies like this one --70 pages in *Reengineering Management* and 126 pages in *The Reengineering Revolution*.

The third persuasive technique is to appeal to the manager’s patriotism. Reengineering is seen as being an essentially American process that fits well with the culture of the country and, as such, is considerably easier to implement there. In the opening chapter of their first book, Hammer and Champy state that

Reengineering capitalizes on the same characteristics that have traditionally made Americans such great business innovators: individualism, self-reliance,

a willingness to accept risk, and a propensity for change. Business reengineering, unlike management philosophies that would have ‘us’ become more like ‘them’, doesn’t try to change the behaviour of American workers and managers. Instead, it takes advantage of American talents and unleashes American ingenuity. (1993, p. 3)

Similarly, Champy argues that, “Americans are good at moving on into a changing, contingent, turbulent, adverse, and largely unpredictable universe. That’s the universe we’re used to, and we’re good at meeting the challenge, (re)making, (re)discovering, (re)presenting - in a word, reengineering - everything, including ourselves” (1995, p. 33). The argument proceeds that, in view of its privileged situation, America has an obligation to spread the word about reengineering to the four-corners of the world. However, Hammer and Champy frequently mention that they have encountered real resistance to the technique in Europe, especially in Germany and France, but praise the faster growing East Asian and Latin American countries for making “a better fist of reengineering” (Economist, 1994c, p. 64).

The final technique that Hammer and Champy have used to particularly dramatic effect is to stress the historical significance of the reengineering movement. Their argument is that reengineering by no means constitutes another fad or buzzword like so many that have passed through before. This time it is for real and they, as managers, have a very important part to play in making history. A recurrent theme that Hammer and Champy like to play on is that they are, in fact, reversing the industrial revolution and undoing the work of Adam Smith’s *Wealth of Nations* (Campbell and Skinner, 1976). Typical of the scale and scope (and audacity) of their vision is the statement that, “just as the Industrial Revolution

drew peasants into the urban factories and created the new social classes of workers and managers, so will the Reengineering Revolution profoundly rearrange the way people conceive of themselves, their work, their place in society” (Hammer, 1995, p. 321).

Champy takes this revolutionary theme one step further by arguing that

We are in the grip of the second managerial revolution, one that’s very different from the first. The first was about a transfer of power. This one is about an access of freedom. Slowly, or suddenly, corporate managers all over the world are learning that free enterprise these days really is free.

(1995, p. 204)

Their work is an uncanny evocation of the counter-culture movement of the 1960’s. It is chock-full of the language of revolution, urging managers to liberate themselves and become as radical as they possibly can. As Champy says, “radical change through radical goal definition holds out a secret satisfaction to the manager who pulls it off. If you can learn to do what other managers in your industry thought to be impossible, you will not only thrive, you will literally redefine the industry”. (1995, p. 122)

### Character Theme Three: Representation of Self

In a lecture entitled ‘Beyond Reengineering’ that was beamed via satellite throughout North America in May 1995, Michael Hammer told his audience that one of the critical elements of a “sniff test” to determine whether genuine reengineering work was actually being done within an organization, was whether or not the people in that organization had been “reinvented”. He elaborated by saying that reengineered organizations required “new folks”, not necessarily from outside the organization but existing employees who had

developed new skills, new perspectives and new attitudes. For those employees who think this is impossible, he quoted W. Edwards Deming's popular saying, "if you can't change the people, change the people". The hierarchically-based organization structure that now predominates must, through reengineering, be "smashed" according to Hammer, so that there will be no more "workers" and "managers". Instead, the new team-based organization will be staffed by "professionals" and "entrepreneurs". Those managers that remain will cease to act as supervisors but will instead become "coaches". Similarly, the role of the executive will change from one of being a "scorekeeper" to a true "leader". With typically revolutionary zeal, reengineering is conceived by Hammer and Champy as a way of fast-tracking the democratization of American corporations that has been progressing for some time. As Champy observes, "America's great achievement in the last fifty years or so - and reengineering's achievement more recently - has been to open up managerial status, rewards, and responsibilities to everyone" (1995, p. 163). This kind of statement has a profound significance for the manager's self-concept. Those middle managers who are neither let go nor reassigned as "professionals" have a choice of several options for the future. In an interview about the future of jobs, Hammer predicts

When we get through with reengineering, the few managerial jobs that will remain will have three flavours - none of which has much of anything to do with a traditional manager. One I call a process owner. It's really a work engineer, who's concerned about how to go about filling work orders, designing products. The second is a coach - teaching, developing people. The third kind is the leader, who primarily motivates - creates an environment where people get it done. Hardly any existing managers have

the ability to do any of those things, or the inclination. (The Wall Street Journal, 1995, p. B1)

Hammer and Champy have used this casting technique before but for a more specialized audience. In an earlier collaboration in which they exhorted information system (IS) organizations to radically change their skill mix and management methods, they identified three emerging roles for IS professionals which included “Witch Doctors”, who are independent thinkers and leaders in the efforts to revitalize the business; “magicians”, who actually build the new types of systems; and “Wizards’ who are characterized by genuine technical expertise and a wide-ranging toolkit (Hammer and Champy, 1989). This earlier article which appeared in a relatively obscure journal provided a kind of a dress rehearsal for the main performance which was to take place four years later.

## The Performance of Reengineering

### Rethinking Reengineering

In an inquiry into the popularity of the reengineering movement, Grint rightfully concludes that few of the principles contained within the reengineering movement are actually innovations, let alone radical innovations. Instead, he suggests that we look for an “externalist account” of the movement’s popularity which addresses the ways in which “the purveyors of reengineering manage, in and through their accounts, to construct a series of sympathetic ‘resonances’ or ‘compatibilities’” (1994, p. 179). Grint identifies three such resonances: cultural and symbolic; economic and spatial; and political and temporal. While Grint’s analysis does an admirable job of situating the reengineering movement in a macro-historical context, this chapter has examined the appeal or ‘resonances’ of the reengineering

movement from the perspective of the individual manager as a consumer of management ideas. I am, therefore, suggesting that an “internalist account” of the popularity of reengineering is, in fact, still valid, if we examine the process from a rhetorical standpoint and not purely the inherent rationality of its ideas.

My encounter with the reengineering movement stems from two imperatives. First, as a manager, I and several of my colleagues were intrigued by the potential that the concept had for getting our own organization out of its immediate financial difficulties and breaking down some of the institutional barriers that had impeded our progress to date. Since implementing a reengineering project, the Faculty of Continuing Education at the University of Calgary has been able to reverse three years of successive financial deficits with two years of generating healthy surpluses (Taylor and Jackson, 1996). The sense of excitement, risk and adventure that accompanies reengineering is a tempting combination for individuals like myself who tend to be frustrated with inaction and want to make something happen immediately within their organization. Case has pointed to the “masculine idealism” that is self-consciously embodied in reengineering and which invites men to “indulge wilfully their desire to obliterate - to blast through unrepentant obstacles” (1995, p. 17). Grint and Case (1998) speculate that the “violent managerial rhetoric” of reengineering is itself “part of a backlash against the construction of some forms of gender equality; a throwback to the time when ‘men were men’” (1998, p. 573). What is critical to reengineering’s appeal, therefore, is not that it is a call to action, but that it is a call to a particular kind of action-- dramatic action. Restating Hammer and Champy’s definition, reengineering is “the fundamental rethinking and radical redesign of business processes to achieve *dramatic* improvements in

critical measures of performance, such as cost, quality, service and speed.” (1993, p. 33, my italics).

The second imperative for analysing the reengineering movement derives from my role as researcher. From this more distant and critical vantagepoint, I have gained an admittedly grudging appreciation for how the gurus’ weave dramatic qualities into their work. Of all of the contemporary management gurus, Hammer and Champy, in particular, have demonstrated an acute sensibility towards the rhetorical power that dramatising their organizational change strategies holds for their audience (Boje, Rosile and Dennehy, 1997). In this respect, we can look at reengineering essentially as a performance that takes place in two distinct realms - in the broad arena of general management discourse and as a drama that unfolds within the organization.

### The Guru as Rhetorical Performer

In the first realm, which might somewhat melodramatically be described as the realm of “seduction”, the management guru performs through a variety of media in order to capture the manager’s attention and then persuade him or her that reengineering is the appropriate course of action to take within his or her organization. If managing is essentially a performance, as Mangham (1990) has so eloquently argued, then being a management guru demands a performance par excellence if it is to convince an audience of performers.

The account presented in this chapter shows how Hammer and Champy have appealed directly to the manager’s self-concept and have taken that self-concept through three acts of a drama - “preservation of self”, “redemption of self” and “representation of self”. This is



not a particularly novel approach. It has an impressive track record as a rhetorical strategy. In his study of the communication practices of a number of pre-Civil War evangelical religious movements in the United States, Bormann identifies three remarkably similar stages in consciousness-raising communication episodes. In the first stage, referred to by nineteenth-century evangelicals as “breaking up the old foundations”, converts feel a combination of revulsion and attraction as

Among the more important targets for attack are their definitions of self, the fantasies in which they create their own self-consciousness. Being social creatures people tend to define themselves in terms of group consciousness in which they participate, so the attacks on self-definition are often attacks on the core fantasies of old visions. (1985, pp. 13-14)

At the second stage, “pouring the truth”, the evangelist encourages the neophyte to share the positive fantasies that form the core of the new consciousness. Once the individual experiences conversion, which is usually portrayed as a sharp and sudden experience, he or she is expected to demonstrate commitment publicly by taking action.

Bormann’ study reveals the central role that the evangelist has played in almost all evangelical rhetorical visions. There are some intriguing parallels between the new rhetorical style that was brought to the new world by the likes of Whitefield which emphasized drama, passion and power and the kind of oratory that has been exemplified by Michael Hammer. This religious parallel has not gone unnoticed by the business press. For example, *Fortune* magazine described Hammer as “reengineering’s John the Baptist, a tub-thumping preacher who doesn’t perform miracles himself but, through speeches and writings, prepares the way for consultants and companies that do” (Stewart, 1993). The

parallel is made all the more intriguing when we note that this kind of speaking, which measured its success purely in terms of the numbers of souls that were saved, eventually superseded the puritanical preaching style that, in common with today's contemporary academic scene, strove to find a balance between intellect and emotion and found the evangelical style to be crude, unlearned and repulsive (Bormann, 1985).

Bormann has described a rhetorical tradition that is one of the most strongly rooted in North America as being "protestant", "popular", "pragmatic" (i.e. it emphasizes everyday practicality) and "romantic" (i.e. where content is subordinated by form). A recurring theme of all of the rhetorical visions that have emerged from within this tradition is one of "restoration", of returning an essentially good society to its former glory. As Bormann observes, "many American reformers began their journey forward into a better society by moving backwards towards the true foundations, by a restoration of the original dream of the founding fathers" (1985, p. 17). Contemporary reformers like Hammer and Champy have obviously not lost sight of the rhetorical potency of an appeal to the past.

Critics of reengineering have observed that the restoration theme is integral to its persuasive appeal. Grint has described it as a "radical return to tradition" (1995, p. 197) which is "an essentially mechanistic, almost seventeenth century view of how organizations function and can be changed" (Grint and Willcocks, 1995, p. 86). Grey and Mitev characterize it as an attempt to go "back to the future" (1995, p. 7), that, despite its promise of a return to a glorious pre-bureaucratic past, "(as its name suggests) remains firmly embedded within the 'engineering' tradition of management thinking" (1995, p. 8). Grint and Case (1998) suggest that reengineering can be read as a form of "inverse colonization" in which U.S. managerial discourse assimilated and revolted against the growing

domination of Japanese thinking and practice. This argument is given further weight by an article by Champy in which he credits America's pre-eminence over Japan as being the result of three things: "an embrace of new information technologies; the redesign of business processes, resulting in fewer people producing more output; and a willingness to make big, painful decisions involving change" (1998b, p. 63). The primacy of American business is further underlined in his assertion that "the idea of radical change caught on in the U.S. faster than in any other parts of the world probably because of our tradition of not standing on tradition" (Champy, 1998a, p. 26).

### The Guru as Organizational Playwright

The second realm of performance --"consummation"-- takes place when reengineering is brought into the organization and actively implemented. The theatrical metaphor, which can be briefly represented with the phrases "life as theatre" and "theatre as life", has proven to be a remarkably insightful and durable one for social theorists. Lyman and Scott (1975), for example, show how the metaphor has been used by Freud, George Herbert Mead and Erving Goffman. In a series of stimulating works, Mangham and Overington have introduced this metaphor to good effect into their studies and intervention work with organizations, finding that it "provides possibilities for demystifying the conditions of organizational life, as these are directly or indirectly experienced, while it resists being turned into a literal myth" (1987, p. 25).

When an organization decides to introduce such a wide-ranging organizational improvement initiative as reengineering, it has chosen to participate in a highly theatricalized organizational drama in that it has been comprehensively scripted. It is this

scripted quality, after all, that is a major element in the appeal of an improvement initiative that is imported by the organization and has been tried and trusted. Hare and Blumberg (1988) have suggested that any performance starts out with an idea about a situation and the action that may unfold from it. The idea may be a single image or it may be as fully developed as the detailed script of a play, with parts for each member of the cast and stage directions to guide the performance. Many of the ideas that management gurus put forward to managers come in a prescriptive form. That is, they describe your problem, tell you what to do, how to do it, who should do it, when and where. In this regard the management guru acts as “playwright” to the organization that chooses to participate in his or her “play” (Mangham, 1979).

Applying the theatrical analogy to a performance of reengineering, Hammer and Champy and lesser guru figures have acted as the playwrights. The “producers” of the drama (i.e. those who sponsor the reengineering process) are the organization’s senior executive group. The “director” of the process is, in Hammer’s terminology, a “reengineering czar” whose role is “to ensure that all these efforts are co-ordinated, facilitated, and supported” (1995, p.13). In the “on-stage” area, Hare and Blumberg identify a “protagonist” to whom we could equate the “process owner” and whom Hammer defines as “a senior individual designated by the leader to have end-to-end responsibility for the process and its performance” (1995, p. 13). The protagonist assembles a team or “chorus” to support him or herself. He or she may also bring in from outside the organization some “auxiliary players” or consultants to whom Hammer devotes a whole chapter. In this chapter he assiduously distinguishes between his role and the role of the consultant, saying

“we’re not in the consulting business - although one of us used to be - and have no allegiance to any consulting firm” (Hammer and Stanton, 1995, p. 68).

Earlier in the chapter, I suggested that Michael Hammer and James Champy had cast the beleaguered middle manager to play the all-important “antagonist” in the drama, that is, someone with a measure of influence within the organization as it stands who is unwilling to accept reengineering as it threatens his or her present privileged status. Through dramatism, Burke (1968) has identified the “scapegoat principle” as a perennially vital motive. In the antagonist role, middle managers prove to be a worthy choice of scapegoats that have to be sacrificed in the name of reengineering. While middle managers are a major component of the audience for management gurus, they prove to be an excellent choice because the title “middle manager” is not something that they identify strongly with. They would prefer to be seen either as “senior” or “front-line” managers in their organization. The “middle managers” that Hammer and Champy refer to are the “other” middle managers who have ignored the guru and have not changed their ways. As such, they will face their day of reckoning when reengineering commences.

Once the protagonists in the reengineering drama begin to see their role reduced to one of a ‘bit part’, or worse, a ‘has been’, they may be willing to take on the antagonist’s role to ensure they are still an important member of the company. However, this role reversal is something that should not be taken for granted. As Wilmott observes

BPR goes beyond declaring war upon supervisory and middle levels of management to attack head-on the very functional structures that have traditionally provided an identity and a career path for the managers that have formed an integral part of the collective worker. For this reason,

among others, BPR is likely to encounter difficulties of implementation even where employees overtly espouse its objectives. It is not just that the ‘process’ thinking advocated by BPR is often foreign to those who are being required to apply it. It also poses an immediate or deferred threat to job security and conditions of work. (1994, p. 44)

Harrington, McLoughlin and Riddell (1998) highlight two logical inconsistencies that they argue run through the reengineering vision. These are the underlying problem of “commitment” and “empowerment”. The problem of securing commitment from employees to reengineering projects has been characterised as the “Catch-22” of reengineering (Tomasko, 1996) and has been rather succinctly posed by Wilmott (1995) in the question “Will the turkeys vote for Christmas?” Reengineering requires the active participation of employees who have intimate knowledge of the existing processes in order to guarantee its success. However, knowing that past experience strongly intimates that they may well be out of work at the end of the reengineering project, why would any one actively support the project, let alone resist the temptation to derail it? As Grey and Mitev (1995) observe, “resistance to change should be understood not as an irrational, psychological attachment to the ‘old days’ but a rational response to the brutal and... futile managerialism of BPR” (1995, p. 12).”. Expanding on this, Beugre (1998) has suggested that reengineering frequently fails because it is fundamentally unjust. It asks employees to put their own jobs on the line. She shows how reengineering violates “organizational justice” at four levels: distributive, procedural, interactional, and systemic.

Another central tenet of reengineering is that employees should be empowered so that managerial decisions are made at lower levels of the organization where information is

richer and the impact of the decision more immediate. However, reengineering is an approach that Hammer and Champy have stressed needs to be imposed from above so that, although hierarchical layers of management may be removed, hierarchical principles are, in practice, actually reinforced. In an interview Hammer states “to put it bluntly, it’s not consensual. Radical change is always led from the top, but a leader doesn’t just tell people that they must do it. A leader makes people recognize *why* they must do it” (Performance, 1995, p. 26). Argyris has, however, noted that, “although the rhetoric of reengineering is consistent with empowerment, in reality it is anything but ...it has not produced the number of highly motivated employees needed to ensure consistently high-performing organizations” (1998, p. 98). Similarly, Taffe and Scott have observed from their studies of a dozen large reengineering engagements “a common disjunction between the assumptions the organizations make about change and the nature of the changes they want. They approach change using the mind-sets and techniques of the command-and-control workplace, and it does not work” (1998, p. 251).

In discussing the unique quality of drama compared to other art forms, Fowler notes that, while the playwright is the instigator in the organizational drama, “performances even of the same production, will vary, sometimes radically, from night to night, and the variation will primarily depend on the different audiences, and the actors’ response to them” (1987, p. 53). Knights and McCabe (1998b) have suggested that critics of reengineering may have become too focused on the script of reengineering at the expense of its actual performance. They observe that “while providing a welcome counter to guru evangelism, attention needs to be given to the particular circumstances of the development of BPR and, in particular, the ‘experiences’ of those who are involved in its practical implementation and adaptation”

(1998b, p. 165). Their detailed case study of two back offices of a U.K. clearing bank, reveal that reengineering led to more of the intensive work experience predicted by its critics than the satisfying experience promised by the advocates of reengineering. The employees, however, were not the powerless dupes that many critics have tended to portray them as. The employees in this case study “were able to retain control over some areas of the work whether by management design or default, and this provided an important channel through which staff stress levels were contained if not diminished” (1998b, p. 186).

Clemons has observed from his experience as a consultant that, despite the dramatic performance improvement promises made by the “high priests of reengineering... many, even most, reengineering efforts ultimately fail” (1995, p. 62). Pointing out that reengineering is an inherently risky endeavour, he states that the two greatest risks associated with reengineering are “functionality risk” and “political risk”. Functionality risk is created either by making the wrong changes to systems and processes or making inadequate changes that do not accommodate changes in the competitive environment. Political risk is engendered when the organization will not complete the project “either because of serious internal resistance to the proposed changes or because of a more gradual loss of will to continue the project” (Clemons, 1995, p. 63).

The “functionality risk” is powerfully described by Sennet (1998) in his critical essay on the consequences of new capitalism. He argues that reengineering is an irreversible and highly chaotic process, concluding that, “while disruption may not be justifiable in terms of productivity, the short-term returns to stockholders provide a strong incentive to the powers of chaos disguised by that seemingly reassured term ‘reengineering’” (1998, p. 51). Two case studies of reengineering projects provide strong support for this argument. They reveal



that the substantive and frequently damaging change reengineering wreaks on organizations that embark upon it sets it apart from other consultant-driven organizational improvement programs (Levernment, Ackers & Preston, 1998; Blair, Taylor and Randle, 1998).

The “political risks” associated with reengineering are clearly portrayed in Knights and McAbe’s bank case study. Based on their analysis they take to task the claim made by the gurus and their supporters that reengineering could be de-contextualized and de-coupled from organizational politics and that it can be managed instantaneously and unproblematically. They argue instead that BPR “is likely to be constituted by and through political relations, and that BPR in turn will reconstitute organizational forms and norms in a highly political fashion” (1998a, p. 761). They also argue that managers cannot ameliorate or even overcome employee resistance to reengineering projects merely by providing more and improved communication and information provision which several authors (Mariotti, 1998; Wall and McKinney, 1998). Politics, in their mind, are an essential component of the fabric of organizational life which, inevitably makes the outcomes of reengineering projects uncertain and contested.

My own experience working on a reengineering project within the university faculty I was associated with at the time bears witness to how politicized reengineering projects can be (Taylor and Jackson, 1996). The technical complexities associated with analysing and streamlining business processes proved to be minor compared to the political processes that were required in order to move the project forward. My colleague and I totally underestimated the hostility that the project generated from our colleagues and various staff members. In fact, on several occasions we questioned our decision to initiate the project in light of the negative effect it had upon morale within the faculty and, more pointedly, our

new low standing within the faculty! Four years on, relations are still strained despite the fact that the Faculty is widely acknowledged to be operating considerably more efficiently and effectively than it was previously.

When the performance of a play fails to live up to the advance billing, the playwright, in a classic rhetorical ploy, is quick to put the blame firmly in the camp of the actors and the audience. This is a tactic that Hammer and Champy have readily availed themselves of with regards to the reengineering movement. For example, Hammer says, “it is terrible that some people are hurt in the process. But to be blunt, that’s not my fault—its the fault of the people who got those companies into their problems in the first place” (Performance, 1995, p. 28). Showing typically more restraint, Champy notes that “some managers, misled by wishful thinking, believe that merely repeating the key words in *Reengineering the Corporation* is enough to bring the transformation, like the newsboy in the comic strip who yelled “Shazam”! And became powerful Captain Marvel. . . . Reengineering prescribes actions, not words, and difficult, long-term actions at that, not just one-shot expedients like downsizing or outsourcing. Reengineering involves a voyage that will last years, possibly our entire management lifetime” (1995, p. 6).

Conversely, the actors and audience can blame the script and proceed to find another playwright. It is apparent that, in the latter half of the 1990s, many managers have taken this route, having become disillusioned with the reengineering movement and the gurus who forged it (Blackburn, 1996; Lowrekovich, 1996). The increasing doubts about reengineering are reflected in the question posed by *Business Week* in its cover story “Has Outsourcing Gone Too Far?” (Byrne, 1996). All this has left Davies to reflect

It would be easy, but facile, to have fun at the expense of a man so short on humility. And Hammer deserves no less. But there is a bigger mystery here. Why do business gurus feel the need to make such absurdly extravagant claims to attract attention? Why can they not explain simply that they have developed a technique, or a way of thinking, that may allow some businesses to accelerate their rate of productivity growth? Why, in other words, do they have such obvious contempt for the managers they hope to influence? (1997, p. 45).

In light of this observation, there is a certain delicious irony that Hammer, himself, has argued that “open-minded humility, and a recognition that we have to reinvent ourselves for the customer, will be the difference between those who survive and thrive in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and those who become footnotes in history” (1997, p. 6).

### Summary

In this chapter I have described how Michael Hammer and James Champy have forged a rhetorical vision of reengineering that speaks directly to, and shapes the manager’s self-concept. The vision is undergirded by a pragmatic master analogue that argues that reengineering must be done because there is essentially no other choice, it is a simple matter of personal survival. This argument is given rhetorical weight by three fantasy themes that focus on the character of the manager and build logically on one another to build a compelling drama. The ‘preservation of self’ character theme threatens head-on the manager’s self-concept by questioning his or her very existence within the organization. The second theme, ‘The redemption of self’ shows managers a way out of their plight by

extolling the merits and inevitability of reengineering and encouraging them to not only support but actively promote it within their organizations. The final theme, 'representation of self', provides the managers with new roles and role models that the gurus argue they should be playing in order to survive but also fully realize their selves within the newly reengineered organization.

This chapter has argued that the rhetorical power of reengineering is derived more from its dramatic qualities than its innovative or instrumental qualities. That is, its ability to capture the manager's attention and stir him or her into dramatic action. This vision is a compelling one because it speaks to the here-and-now problems facing many managers and it resonates with a rhetorical tradition of "restoration" that is strongly rooted in American society. Moreover, it provides the manager with a comprehensive script that has been written by authoritative dramaturgs and a familiar cast of characters with whom he or she can act, in a leading role of course, to create a historically significant organizational drama. Performing reengineering in practice has, however, proven to be neither as compelling nor as simple as was implied. Managers have encountered considerable problems and obstacles in translating the rhetorical vision into a day-to-day reality. The play has alas, not always been the thing.

## CHAPTER SIX

### STEPHEN COVEY AND THE EFFECTIVENESS MOVEMENT

“As we examine our scripting carefully, many of us will also begin to see beautiful scripts, positive scripts that have been passed down to us, which we have blindly taken for granted. Real self-awareness helps us appreciate those scripts and to appreciate those who have gone before us and nurtured us in principle-based living, mirroring back to us not only what we are, but what we can become.”

Stephen Covey in *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* (1989, p.315)

“When Stephen Covey Speaks, Executives Listen”

Billboard outside the 1994 World Congress and Exhibition on Personnel Management in San Francisco.

#### Introduction

The subject of this chapter is Stephen Covey, arguably North America’s preeminent management guru who has been instrumental in forging a management fashion which focuses on personal rather than organizational responsibility, accountability and effectiveness. The chapter begins with a discussion of the distinguishing features of Stephen Covey’s management guru persona and the movement or rhetorical community that he has helped to foster. While there are clear similarities between the management fashion that Covey has spawned and preceding and competing improvement programs, there are also some important differences in how this movement has been rhetorically

constructed, the manner in which it has been organized and the ideological roots from which it draws.

In the body of this chapter, three main fantasy themes are identified as the building blocks of the rhetorical vision of effectiveness that Covey has skillfully constructed through a number of media. This vision is undergirded by a righteous master analogue (Cragan & Shields, 1992). The fundamental argument put forward by Covey in favour of following his vision is that it is based on a few timeless principles that, because they are unequivocally and inviolably right, cannot be ignored.

The chapter concludes by exploring the contribution that Stephen Covey's Mormon background may have had upon the success of the ostensibly secular effectiveness movement. Both Mormonism in general, and Covey's secular work in particular, resonate powerfully with the existential and spiritual needs of many individuals in the late modern age.

### The Seven Highly Effective Habits of Stephen Covey

Stephen Covey began his professional life with a twenty-five year stint at Brigham Young University, initially as an administrator before becoming a professor of Organization Behaviour. Even at this proto-guru stage, Covey commanded large audiences, with his classes reputedly attracting between 600 and 1,000 students (Smith, 1994). In 1984 he left academe to found the Covey Leadership Center (CLC), the mission of which was to

Serve the worldwide community by empowering people and organizations to significantly increase their performance capability in order to achieve worthwhile

purposes through understanding and living principle-centered leadership. In carrying out this mission, we continually strive to practice what we teach (<http://www.imall.covey>).

The CLC clearly took its mission to heart. Within ten years, it had grown from two to 750 employees, and was generating annual revenues of \$90 million, a feat that made it the 404th fastest growing company on the Inc. 500 list in 1994 (Inc., 1994). Today, the CLC, now known as the Franklin Covey Company, has a 10,000-plus client list, which includes 82 of the Fortune 100 and over two-thirds of the Fortune 500 companies (Wolfe, 1998).

The foundational text for the effectiveness movement, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, was first published in 1989. It has sold over 12 million copies, been translated into 28 languages and has spent over 270 weeks on *The New York Times* bestseller list (Chambers, 1997). According to Covey, this book emerged from a combination of his consulting work with IBM's Executive Development Program and his doctoral research which examined the "success literature" that had been published in the United States since 1776. In his research, Covey found that in the first 150 years, this literature, best exemplified by Benjamin Franklin's autobiography, argued that the foundation of success was the "character ethic" which included "integrity, humility, fidelity, temperance, courage, justice, patience, industry, simplicity, modesty and The Golden Rule" (1989, p. 18). In the last fifty years, however, Covey noted that the basic view of success had shifted from the character ethic to the "personality ethic" which emphasized "quick-fix", "outside-in" solutions through human and public relations techniques and a positive mental attitude.

Covey's book is pitched as an attempt to return to the character ethic, which is based on the fundamental idea that "there are principles that govern human effectiveness--natural laws in the human dimension that are just as real, just as unchanging and unarguably 'there' as laws such as gravity are in the physical dimension" (1989, p. 32). Covey locates seven "habits" which lie at the intersection of knowledge, skills and desire. These habits are "effective" because they are based on principles that are timeless and universal. Table 9 lists the seven habits and provides brief definitions of each. Covey advocates that they should become the basis of a person's character, "creating an empowering center of correct maps from which an individual can effectively solve problems, maximize opportunities, and continually learn and integrate other principles in an upward spiral of growth" (1989, p. 52).

Covey followed up the *Seven Habits* with two books that, while they have not generated the same level of sales, have been effective in keeping Covey's profile high. Most significantly, they helped to consolidate the remarkable interest that had been shown by the corporate sector in the *Seven Habits*. These books employ Covey's approach to revitalize two of the major pre-occupations of the executive and management development market--leadership and time management. The first book, *Principle-Centered Leadership* (Covey, 1990a), was a loose collection of essays written primarily for an executive audience to demonstrate how Covey's work could be brought into the corporation to bring about organizational change. In 1994, Covey co-authored *First Things First*, a book that presented a new "fourth-generation" of time management based on the "importance paradigm" that stressed "knowing and doing what's important rather than simply responding to what's urgent" (p. 32).



Table 9

Stephen Covey's Seven Habits of Highly Effective People

Habit	Principles	Brief Synopsis
1. Be Proactive	Personal Vision	Between stimulus and response lies the power to respond. Proactivity implies that you are responsible for what happens in your life.
2. Begin with the End in Mind	Personal Leadership	Imagine your funeral and listen to what you would like the eulogy to say about you. Use this frame of reference to make all day-to-day decisions, and work towards your most meaningful goals.
3. Put First Things First	Personal Management	Keep your mission in mind, understand what's important as well as urgent and maintain balance between what you produce today and your ability to produce in the future.
4. Think Win/Win	Interpersonal Leadership	Agreements or solutions among people can be mutually beneficial if all parties cooperate and begin with a belief in the "third alternative"
5. Seek First to Understand, Then to be Understood	Empathic Communication	You'll be more effective in your relationships with people if you sincerely try to understand them fully before you try to make them understand your point of view.
6. Synergize	Creative Cooperation	The whole is greater than the sum of the parts. Value differences because it is often the clash between them that leads to creative solutions.
7. Sharpen the Saw	Balanced Self-Renewal	Four dimensions: Physical (Exercise, Nutrition, and Stress Management); Spiritual (value clarification & commitment, study and meditation); Mental (reading, visualization, planning, and writing); Social/emotional (service, empathy, synergy, and intrinsic security).

Note: Adapted from Covey (1989).

In common with other management gurus, Covey combines a keen marketing sense with a seemingly innate gift for self-promotion. However, he has done a number of things that distinguish him from his peers. First, he has been able to successfully straddle both the business and the personal growth markets which, while they have significant overlap in terms of audience and content, have traditionally been treated as quite separate markets by publishers. Originally, the *Seven Habits* was positioned as a self-help book. However, it, and its more explicitly business-focused successors, have now become business book staples. With the publication of *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective Families* (Covey, 1997), which draws heavily on his own family for its inspiration, Covey has further bolstered his standing as a guru with a message that transcends all spheres of human endeavour (Ferguson, 1997).

Second, Covey, a devout Mormon, has been able to unashamedly adapt his essentially spiritual message to a corporate world that has traditionally preferred to keep its gurus strictly secular and to leave spirituality behind at home (Fort, 1997). As a reviewer in *The Wall Street Journal* remarked, “his work is busy with buzzwords, charts and grids, Mr. Covey has a knack of dressing up spiritual principles in pinstripes to suit a business audience” (Shellenbarger, 1995, p. 13). Wooldridge and Kennedy have similarly observed, “Covey has a genius for mixing three great American themes-- religion, self-help and management. The implication is that if you subscribe to his ideas, you get the whole American dream in one go” (1996, p. 56). This is a theme that I think is Covey’s critical distinguishing feature and is one that I will return to in some depth in the final section of the chapter.

Third, in addition to targeting a very wide potential market, Covey has created a significantly broader array of products than his predecessors, who have tended to focus on speaking engagements, books and tapes. Franklin Covey's on-line catalogue reveals a seemingly exhaustive array of products and programs, including workshops, audio and video cassettes, organizers, calculator/rulers, desk calendars and watches that enable you to "start each day with an excerpt from the Seven Habits" (<http://www.franklincovey.com>). As one commentator observes, "the Covey teachings are pyramidal: buy the book, crave a one-day lecture, attend for a day, desire a three-day seminar" (Wells, 1995, p.14). Covey's market reach is broad; his company organizes workshops in over 300 cities in North America and 40 countries worldwide (Wolfe, 1998). When questioned if he considers himself to be a salesman, Covey replies "in one sense, yes. My presentations are attempting to influence behaviour. But I have a total disdain for talking products. I never mention my book when I speak to a group" (Lawlor, 1997, p. 71).

Fourth, the organization that Covey has created around him is considerably larger and more centralized than the ones that other gurus have created. For example, The Tom Peters Group (TPG) has approximately 25 employees while Peter Drucker still reportedly relies quite heavily on his wife to do the administrative work (personal communication with John Kouzes, CEO, TPG, October 24, 1996). CLC maintains a substantial network of consultants, which has enabled Stephen Covey to maintain effective control of a considerable amount of the consulting activity that is generated in the wake of his book sales and speaking engagements. In North America alone, there are over 5,100 individuals who have paid the \$1,995 fee for certification by CLC (Gubernick, 1995).

This control has been further strengthened by Covey's continued ability to position himself as central to the movement he has spawned. In the case of the Excellence, TQM and Reengineering movements, there was a sense that the gurus, although undoubtedly important, were not as big as the movements they helped to spawn. It was, therefore, acceptable for executives to go to one of the "Big Five" consulting firms or even to a local independent consulting firm to get their brand of reengineering or TQM. By contrast, the effectiveness movement is still very much seen as Covey's movement. Facsimiles thereof would be seen as entirely insufficient. With the merger in 1997 of CLC with Franklin Quest, a rival day-timer company led by Hyrum Smith, a fellow Mormon, Covey has further extended the reach of his products and his share of the personal and professional growth market. The publicly held Franklin Covey Co. employs 4,000 and operates more than 120 retail stores throughout the world (Calgary Herald, 1998). Two years into the merger, several embarrassing cracks are starting to appear. Operating earnings have plummeted, layoffs are imminent and Covey and Smith have been forced to assume non-executive vice-chairmen roles to make way for a turnaround specialist who has been appointed chairman (Grover, 1999). Stories of internal bickering between Covey and Smith factions within the organization in addition to well-publicised arguments about sales compensation cast doubt about the wisdom of turning CLC into a public company (Marchetti, 1999).

A final distinguishing feature of Covey is that he has proven himself to be remarkably adept at reinforcing his credibility by associating with other management gurus and major public figures. The monthly magazine *Executive Excellence*, published by Covey's non-profit Institute for Principle-Centered Leadership, typically features a

keynote article by Covey and numerous short articles by other management gurus such as Kenneth Blanchard, Peter Senge and Warren Bennis as well as prominent CEOs. This guru's digest graphically demonstrates the "quality" of the company that Covey keeps. In September 1996, Covey joined fellow gurus Tom Peters and Peter Senge in true 'three tenors' fashion, for the first "Worldwide Lesson in Leadership Series" that was beamed via satellite to over 221,000 individuals in 40 different countries (Mahoney, 1997). This conference was followed up by three half-day sessions featuring Covey solo. CLC has also collaborated with Microsoft, a pacesetter guru company, to incorporate the Seven Habits into its *Microsoft Schedule+* software (Smith, 1995a). On the wider public stage, Covey has been positioned in the media, along with fellow motivational speakers Anthony Robbins and Marianne Williamson, as an advisor to both Bill Clinton and Newt Gingrich (Quinn, 1995). Covey's media prowess has been recognized by *Time* magazine, which included him in its 1996 list of the "25 Most Influential Americans" along with other such luminaries as Jerry Seinfeld, Oprah Winfrey and fellow management guru Michael Hammer. According to *Time*, "being influential" is "the reward for successful salesmanship, the validation of personal passion, the visible sign of individual merit. It is power without coercion, celebrity with substance" (1996, p. 15).

### Defining the Rhetorical Community of the Effectiveness Movement

Ascertaining the scale and scope of the rhetorical community that Stephen Covey has helped to create would be an extremely difficult, if not an impossible, exercise. While many have purchased the books, listened to the tapes and attended the seminars, it would be unwise to equate this high degree of market penetration with widespread

acceptance of and commitment to Covey's rhetorical vision. In truth, we would probably see a full spectrum of commitment ranging from cynical disgust through to casual interest to manic devotion. In looking at the relationship between stars and their audiences, Tudor (1974) has identified four levels of involvement: emotional affinity, self-identification, imitation and projection. My own interaction with Covey followers suggest that most of them would probably fall into the first and weakest category, in which "the audience feels a loose attachment to a particular protagonist deriving jointly from the star, the narrative and the individual personality of the audience member" (1974, p. 80). Some of Covey's followers, however, may also experience some "self-identification", whereby they place themselves in the same situation and persona of Covey, and this identification may spill over into a certain amount of imitation and, occasionally, "projection" in which part of their identity is lived through this persona.

Evidence of the kind of intensity that Covey can foster in his audience can be found in comments made by participants who attended a one-day seminar delivered in Calgary via satellite. In responding to a question in the evaluation regarding what they most liked about the seminar, one participant said "the opportunity to hear from Covey in the flesh and see his commitment and believability to [sic] the material he presents". Another participant mentioned, "Having Stephen Covey here, bigger than life" while another answered, "All Stephen Covey himself". The following extract from an account of a Covey seminar, which appeared in *Sales and Marketing Management*, provides further insight into what motivates Covey's followers:

Why, I ask Elaine are you here? "I really like his message," she says.

"it's the basic truths. It gets you back to the Ten Commandments." Next

to her, Sharyn agrees with me that a lot of Covey's message is common sense, "But you tend to forget it". "Plus", she says, "there's an aura about him". "He must know what he's talking about if so many people keep going to him". (Butler, 1997, p. 21)

Business media accounts of Covey are chock full of these kinds of testimonials which, in turn, further serve to widen the boundaries of and to strengthen his rhetorical community. For example, *Business Week* quotes a manager with the U.S. Federal Aviation Administration and self-described "Covey disciple" who brought fifteen employees with him to a Covey seminar: "Covey is able to identify and put a handle on so many of the things I've thought and felt" (Bongiorno, 1993, p. 52). In *Fortune* magazine, the president of Ritz-Carlton credits Covey's organization-wide training program with his company's dramatically low turnover rate because "people feel they are part of the organization. People have a purpose going to work" (Smith, 1995b, p. 126). *Inc.* (1995) magazine also ran an article that featured three different success stories of companies whose managers had attended Covey's seminars and where sales had risen dramatically shortly thereafter. In a subsequent volume, *Inc.* profiled three individuals whose lives had been radically changed by following Covey. In the article, an operations manager at an industrial laundry remarks "reading Covey and writing a mission statement—making my goals and deciding what was important to me—really made me see things differently in my life. My life has changed." (Whitford, 1996, p. 77)

In the trade journals, I came across a number of articles extolling the virtues of Covey's work to a wide range of professions including risk managers (National Underwriter, 1995), bankers (Bank Marketing, 1988), meeting planners (Successful

Meetings, 1993), and security managers (Security Management, 1992). The latter was especially intriguing with its completely unironic account of how Covey's principles had been incorporated by rangers working at Texas Fiesta, a brand new family-oriented theme park set in an abandoned rock quarry sponsored, in part, by Opryland USA Inc.. Covey's work has also proven to be particularly popular among the training and organizational development community. In a survey conducted by *Training* magazine, *The Seven Habits* garnered the most votes (nine per cent of respondents) as the book that had been most helpful to them in their jobs (1992). Among the MBA students across seven US business schools who were surveyed by publishers Booz, Allen, and Hamilton, six per cent picked *The Seven Habits* as the book that had most influenced their lives (Director, 1997). Only *The Bible* was picked by more students (12 per cent). Finally, Stephen Covey was selected as sixth of the 25 "power brokers" who are the "most influential in getting product sold in today's marketplace" by *Sales and Marketing Management* (Conlon, 1996).

### The Rhetorical Vision of the Effectiveness Movement

Thus far, I have described how Stephen Covey has developed, articulated and organized his rhetorical vision of effectiveness and have shown some evidence of the sharing of that vision by an extensive, if loosely organized, rhetorical community from a wide range of sectors within North America. The chapter will now turn to a discussion of the three fantasy themes that emerged from the analysis of the rhetorical acts and artifacts. Covey's rhetorical vision is based on a combination of strong setting, action and character themes that are summarized in Table 10.



Table 10

Key Fantasy Themes within the Rhetorical Vision of the Effectiveness Movement

<b>Fantasy Theme</b>	<b>Type</b>	<b>Metaphors</b>	<b>Motive</b>
Back to The Farm	Setting Theme	Law of the Farm; The Golden Goose; Transforming the Swamp; Fishing the Stream	Identification
Working From the “Inside-Out”	Action Theme	Ladder Against the Wrong Wall; The Emotional Bank Account	Hierarchy
Finding “True North”	Character Theme	Compass, Clock, Map; The Living Tree; Charles Dickens; Victor Frankl	Transcendence

Bormann provides little in the way of guidance in selecting names for fantasy themes. Past analyses have found inspiration in both the rhetor’s and others’ language to name fantasy themes. For the purposes of this study, I chose to use Covey’s own phrases to represent the action and character themes as they best captured the essence of their subject matter. In elaborating each theme, the recurrent symbolic cues employed by Covey to illuminate and add rhetorical weight to his vision are identified. Finally, for each theme, one of Burke’s motives is ascribed as the basis for the fundamental human appeal that this theme has for the audience.

Setting Theme: Heading Back to the Farm

Early on in the seminar I attended, Covey asked how many of the audience had “crammed” while they were at school. Having established almost universal assent, Covey

then went into confessional mode explaining that he had crammed as an undergraduate but found that this strategy failed miserably when he got into graduate work and paid for years of cramming by winding up in hospital with ulcerated colitis. The sombre lesson he divines from this experience is that

Cramming doesn't work in a natural system, like a farm. That's the fundamental difference between a social and a natural system. A social system is based on values; a natural system is based on principles. In the short term, cramming may appear to work in a social system. You can work for the "quick fixes" and techniques with apparent success. But, in the long run, the Law of the Farm governs in all arenas of life. (Covey, Merrill & Merrill, 1994, p. 55)

Covey suggests that we can learn a lot from agriculture because "we can easily see and agree that natural laws and principles govern the work and determine the harvest" (1994, p. 54). He reinforced this point in his seminar with an idyllic short video film of a potato farmer earnestly discussing his respect for "unforgiving Mother Nature", which drew nods of recognition from some members of the audience. Covey suggests that, in social and corporate cultures, because natural processes are less obvious, the "law of the school", based on quick fixes and cheating the system, predominates in the short term but, in the long term, the "law of the farm" predominates.

In situating his rhetorical vision firmly in a pre-modern agricultural context, Covey has built a setting theme which provides a compelling basis for universal identification among his audience, many of whom, while now firmly based in the modern corporate culture, fondly recall their distant roots in an honourable, if by and large mythical, agricultural past.

In common with the reengineering rhetorical vision described in the previous chapter, Covey's "law of the farm" theme draws on the "restoration" fantasy type for its rhetorical potency. It encourages the audience to help America create the good society by returning it to its former glory

Throughout his presentation, Covey frequently refers to the "law of the farm", as a seemingly all-encompassing universal explanation for all that is wrong with contemporary society without ever attempting to elaborate in any great detail. The rhetorical potency of his argument is reinforced by a number of stock metaphors rooted in an agricultural heritage. Perhaps the most notable (in light of the fact that Covey grew up on an egg farm!), is his use of Aesop's fable of the goose and the golden egg (Covey, 1989, pp. 52-54). The goose, according to Covey, represents the "performance capability" (PC) of an organization while the egg represents the "production" (P) of desired results. He suggests that the wise executive should learn from Aesop's farmer that he or she needs to detect and correct any "P/PC imbalances" before it is too late. In typically heavy-handed fashion, this metaphor is symbolically reinforced with the presentation of golden eggs to successful Covey training program participants.

Another powerful fantasy that Covey presents that has real resonance with the pioneering days of the expanding frontier is the transformation of an individual or an organizational "swamp culture" based on adversarialism, legalism, protectionism, and politics into a "garden oasis culture" which is created by the application of "natural laws" and "principles" (Covey, 1990a, pp. 278-287). Similarly, Covey quite skilfully exploits to sound rhetorical effect, the parallels he sees between fishing and managing. Covey presents senior executives, and those aspiring to be, with a drama that positions them as proactive

anglers who have to constantly read and adapt to the “stream” of business trends and “currents of cultural megatrends”; it is a fantasy which many senior executives with their penchant for getting away from it all would have great difficulty resisting. The rhetorical effect is effectively sealed when Covey cleverly intersects this fantasy with the well-worn but surprisingly resilient axiom that has become a Covey motif: “give a man fish and you feed him for a day; teach him how to fish and you feed him for a lifetime”.

### Action Theme: Working from the “Inside Out”

Covey distinguishes between his “inside-out” approach and the prevalent approaches that are “outside-in” in that they look for problems and solutions “out there”. His approach begins with the self, in particular, “the most inside part of self--your paradigms, your character, and your motives” (1990b, p. 3). In Covey’s schema, the “Seven Habits” are positioned along a “maturity continuum” that moves the individual progressively from “dependence” to “independence” to “interdependence” (refer to Table 9). The first three habits deal with self-mastery and are designed to enable the individual to move from a state of dependence to a state of independence which Covey calls the “paradigm of the *I--I can do it; I am responsible; I am self-reliant; I can choose*” (1989, p. 49). Two aspects are particularly remarkable about Covey’s approach to self-mastery. First, he encourages his followers to be “proactive” by focusing their efforts within their “Circle of Influence” and not their “Circle of Concern” as “the nature of their energy is positive, enlarging and magnifying, causing their Circle of Influence to increase” (1989, p. 83). Second, Covey cautions his followers not to assume that they are in control as “this mindset leads to arrogance--the sort of pride that comes before the fall” (1996,

p.17). Instead he advocates “humility” which means saying, “I am not in control; principles ultimately govern in control” (1996, p. 17). In this way, Covey establishes clear boundaries and prescribed limits to the process of self-actualization; such a move is significantly at odds with the main thrust of humanism but well in line with his religious beliefs.

Within the organization, the inside-out approach works at four progressively higher levels at which different principles operate. At the “personal” level, the principle of “trustworthiness” prevails. Trustworthiness is based on the executive’s character and competence. With trustworthiness, the executive can establish “trust” at the second, “interpersonal” level. The next level is the “managerial level” at which the principle of “empowerment” operates. Finally, at the “organizational level”, the executive can create “alignment” by ensuring that all structures reinforce the empowerment principle. Covey argues that the reason so many organizational change efforts have failed is because executives have ignored the fact that they cannot secure their “public victories” before they secure their “private victories”:

Until individual managers have done inside-out work, they won’t solve the fundamental problems of the organization, nor will they empower others, even though they might use the language of empowerment. Their personality and character will manifest itself eventually. We must work on character and competence to solve structural and systematic problems.  
(1990b, p. 4)

The “Public Victory” for executives is achieved through Habits 4, 5 and 6, which take the individual from a state of independence to a higher level of interdependence.

This level is dominated by what Covey dubs the paradigm of “we--*we* can do it; *we* can cooperate; *we* can combine our talents and abilities and create something greater together” (1989, p. 49). This stage is another feature that Covey feels distinguishes his work. According to Covey, other approaches dwell entirely on helping people become independent but ultimately fail because they encourage “running way” from a problem that is, in fact, internally--not externally--rooted.

The central organizing metaphor within the paradigm of interdependence is the “emotional bank account”. Covey explains

In the area of human relationships, unlike normal bank accounts, we must make daily deposits to maintain the balance and to build equity. Deposits are made through courtesy, honesty, and keeping commitments. Withdrawals are made through discourtesy, disrespect, threats and over-reactions. (1988, p. 3)

He urges executives, whom he recognizes as being astute financially but generally not emotionally, to make “daily deposits” into their employees’ emotional bank accounts by doing such things as “remembering the little things”, “sincerely apologizing” and not “bad-mouthing” them in their absence. In this way they can build up sufficient reserves of trust that can be drawn upon when they need to without becoming “overdrawn”. This essentially transactional approach to human relationships is blended skillfully into the well-worn and hackneyed human relations concepts of “win-win” and “synergy” which, like an old pair of slippers, provide the audience with a feeling of comfort and security based on years of familiarity.

In developing this schema, Covey has elaborated a conceptual framework that actively plays upon and addresses the hierarchical motive highlighted within Burke’s

rhetorical system. Covey himself recognizes the inherent hierarchical appeal of his schema with the promise that “inside-out is a continuing process of renewal, an upward spiral of growth that leads to progressively higher forms of responsible independence and effective interdependence” (1990b, p. 4). This motif is visually reinforced with his “ladder against the wall” metaphor which captures the essence of hierarchical progress but is used by Covey to caution his followers to ensure that they aren’t pursuing the wrong goals. The audience is presented with a clear sense of where they are now, where they need to be, and how to get there. In Bormann’s terminology, Covey has created a powerful action theme that is rooted in the desire of individuals to try to obtain something that they don’t currently have but should have.

In this vein, the “Seven Habits” could be seen as a personal drama written in three “acts” and seven “scenes” that provide the central protagonist (e.g. the individual manager) with a carefully scripted plotline that, against all odds, will guide him or her safely to a personal Holy Grail. In Act 1, the individual is cast out into the wilderness to struggle with own personal demons, forge his or her character base and gain clarity about whom he or she is and what he or she wants to achieve. Having successfully negotiated this trial, the individual is then ready to return to “civilization” to work through the three scenes of Act 2 with a comprehensive cast of characters from his or her family, community, church and workplace. In the final Act, subtitled “Sharpening the Saw”, the protagonists can bask in the glory of their “private” and “public” victories, reap the rewards of their “harvest”, yet take care by continuing to practice the habit of renewal and continuous improvement not to slip down the spiral from this higher plane.

With his “inside-out approach”, Covey has successfully exploited a niche that has been left vacant by other management gurus who have tended to focus their attention on providing grandiose organization-wide improvement programs. From the perspective of executives who are looking to sponsor programs that show that they are “doing something constructive about their employees”, Covey’s program is attractive for a number of reasons. First, the onus for change is placed firmly upon the employee and not the organization. Employees are encouraged to focus on themselves and their immediate work teams and to ignore the wider structural conditions over which they have no control. Second, within Covey’s framework, the individual employee is urged to deflect the blame for things that are happening around him or her such as downsizing, reorganization and reengineering away from the senior executives onto him- or herself. In the process, Covey has presented a more subtle and an infinitely more palatable alternative to another contender in the “personal accountability” vanguard codified in a book called *The Oz Principle*. Through a shamefully brutal reconstruction of *The Wizard of Oz*, the book promises a “step-by-step plan to overcome corporate America’s obsession with the ‘blame game’ and achieve new levels of performance and competitiveness” (Connors et al., 1994). Third, many find Covey’s program attractive because, while promising fundamental change, it is a comprehensive recipe for conservatism. As an English professor in *Fortune* magazine dryly observes, “one of the ways that you know that you are dealing with an idea that is bound to become a huge success in America is to get an assurance that it is not going to be about a substantive difference in society. It’s the American dream of life as barn raising” (Smith, 1994, p. 126).



From the perspective of the individual employees, the Covey program presents, on the surface at least, some clear attractions. First, the Covey program gives them ample opportunity to pursue, on the company's time and money, one of America's fastest growing leisure pursuits, that is, the exploration of self and identity. It has been estimated that in 1998, self-improvement books alone generated \$581 million in sales in North America (Gordon, 1999). Second, Covey doesn't just talk about work, but also about their situations at home, with their marriages and families and, again, these are discussed on the company time and money. Third, Covey's program is designed for all employees within the organization regardless of rank or function. While the executive may have the opportunity to attend the Covey Leadership Week at Robert Redford's verdant Sundance Resort in Utah, and regular employees may have to settle for the video facilitated in-house program, everyone can take comfort in the knowledge that they will all receive essentially the same message. Indeed, the whole program depends on the universal involvement of the organization to ensure that everyone is properly aligned with Covey's principles. Finally, Covey presents employees with a visible and concrete means by which they can "transcend" the daily grind of stress, over-work and insecurity and finally have the opportunity to "put first things, first" all with the blessing and magnanimous support of their organization.

#### Character Theme: Finding "True North"

In the final chapter of *First Things First*, invitingly entitled the "Peace of the Results", Covey and his co-writers sketch out a list of the characteristics of "principle-centered people" that would invite the envy of all but the beatified (Covey, Merrill & Merrill, 1994). These range from having richer, more rewarding relationships with other

people to producing extraordinary results to developing their own healthy psychological immune system. To add rhetorical weight to this seductive picture, Covey's texts contain numerous stories of individuals who were having difficulties and were generally unsatisfied with their lives until they became more principle-centered. For example, in the one-day seminar I attended, Covey showed a video depicting an obviously distressed and impecunious Charles Dickens wandering aimlessly around London until he realizes, in a typically Hollywood-inspired moment, that he can make a difference to the misery all around him by promptly writing *A Christmas Carol*. Another frequently used exemplar is Victor Frankl, the Austrian psychologist who survived the death camps of Nazi Germany because he had a sense of future vision that included the mission that he had yet to perform. Throughout the text, Covey and his colleagues dovetail numerous commentaries on their own experiences with the principles they are discussing, showing that they too had weak moments that they resolved by following the "habits".

This process of finding direction after being lost in the wilderness is captured metaphorically in Covey's frequent reference to the "compass". According to Covey, the dominant metaphor of our lives is still the "clock" as it symbolizes our preoccupation with speed and efficiency. Instead, we should be focused on our effectiveness that comes from a sense of direction, purpose, and balance. Our values can offer only limited help to us, as, like "maps", they are only subjective attempts to represent the territory. When the territory is constantly changing, as it is in today's highly competitive world, any map soon becomes obsolete. Covey suggests that what we need to find our way is to locate our own internal "moral compass" as

A compass has a true north that is objective and external, which reflects natural laws or principles, as opposed to values that are subjective and internal. Because the compass represents the eternal verities of life, we must develop our value system with deep respect for ‘true north’ principles. (1990a, p. 94)

One of the critical “true north” principles is the need to find balance between all of the roles we play in our lives. Covey criticizes the “personality ethic” literature for suggesting that we find “success” in some roles by putting on a different personality. This creates fragmentation and duplicity as “whatever we are we bring to every role in our life” (Covey, Merrill & Merrill, 1994, p.122). Instead, Covey suggests that we need to replace our “scarcity chronos mentality” with an “abundance mentality” that thinks “win-win” with all of the roles and sees them as part of a highly integrated whole. Covey’s argument is, once again, seemingly sealed with yet another organic metaphor. This time it is a “tree” in which the individual’s roles or “branches” grow naturally out of the “common trunk” of our personal mission and “common roots” which are the principles that give sustenance and life. Covey also provides a touching vignette of an executive who becomes a better “husband” by taking his wife out to lunch in the same way he honours the business relationships that matter to him. In a classically smooth and untroubled conceptual leap, Covey suggests that the same principles that apply to individuals also apply to organizations and even nation states, especially the United States. In typically stirring style, he promises that

With moral compassing, we can beat Japan. My view is that the Japanese subordinate the individual to the group to the extent that they don’t tap into the

creative and resourceful capacities of people--one indication being that they have had only four Nobel Prize winners compared with 186 in the U.S. (1990a, p. 99)

In establishing the quest to find “true north” by rising above the day-to-day pre-occupations and frustrations, Covey directly addresses the transcendental motive identified by Burke. Relating back to Hart’s (1989) distinction, the “moral compass” and its related imagery adds a qualitative dimension to Covey’s argument which provides individuals and organizations with a sense of higher purpose by answering the all-important “why?” question. In promoting the “principle-centered” life, Covey adopts a classic rhetorical ploy of setting up and destroying a number of alternative foci upon which individuals could base their lives. Systematically, he dismisses becoming work- or money-centered, possession- or pleasure-centered, friend- or enemy-centered, church- or family-centered, and self- or spouse-centered. Moreover, he rejects the compromising appeal of a “combination-centered” life because “it offers no consistent sense of direction, no persistent wisdom, no steady power supply or sense of personal, intrinsic worth and identity” (1988, p. 5). He writes

My experience leads me to believe that when a person centers his life on correct principles, he becomes more balanced, unified, organized, anchored, rooted. He finds a foundation and cornerstone of all his activities, relationships, and decisions. Such a person will have a sense of stewardship about everything in his life, including money, possessions, relationships, his family, his body, and so forth. He recognizes the need to use them for good purposes and, as a steward, to be accountable for their use. (1988, pp. 5-6)

With descriptions such as these, Covey creates a fantasy theme that is based on the character of the protagonists within his rhetorical vision. He presents his followers with an ideal person, someone whom we can admire and try to measure up to. These characters include famous historical figures as well as ordinary, middle class American folk like the readers themselves. Covey, therefore, supplies us with not only a script of what we need to do to become more effective but also numerous positive and negative role models, including himself, from which we can take our cues and base our own lives. He has taken this winning formula to its next logical step in his most recent book, *Living the Seven Habits* (Covey, 1999). This book consists almost entirely of stories from his readers who reveal how the habits have changed their lives. The Franklin Covey web site invites individuals to “share your own story” for possible inclusion in a future volume of *Living the Seven Habits* (<http://www.franklin.covey.com/communities/share.html>). Reflecting on this strategy, Seglin observes “Covey has used a brilliant method to prolong the life of his franchise: he lets his readers do it for him” (1999, p. 97).

### Managing Spiritual Movements in a Secular Age

#### Stephen Covey’s Mormon Heritage

Stephen Covey is an active member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (LDS), the official church of the Mormon faith. He served his two-year mission in England, has been a regional representative and bishop of the church and, as President of the Irish Mission, was credited with making remarkable in-roads into a territory that had been traditionally inimical to Mormonism. Whenever he makes a presentation for a business audience in a city, he regularly offers to speak at the local LDS church or

temple. While Covey does nothing to hide his Mormon roots, he recoils at the suggestion that his management training work is a recycled and secularized version of Mormonism. For example, in an interview with *Fortune*, he responded somewhat defensively to such a suggestion, with the following comment: “I say nothing that is unique to my own religion. You’d hit a volcano there. I don’t want to go the next step and get into a person’s relationship with God” (Smith, 1994, p. 119). Micklethwait and Wooldridge write, “Covey’s own Mormonism has been lifelong and unflinching” but add, “he bristles at the thought that his ideas are particularly American, let alone Mormon” (1996, pp. 349-350).

By contrast, Covey is willing to acknowledge, if not actively promote, the spiritual quality of his message. In reacting to an interviewer’s suggestion that characterized his approach to management development as “almost spiritual”, Covey responded that this was true if the term was being applied in its “universal sense”, adding, “I would think these principles are principles that lie deep in the consciousness of everybody, so if you want to define that as spiritual then I would agree” (Training, 1992, p. 42). When pressed on this issue, Covey will talk about his extensive study of other religions as well as his experiences with individuals from a number of different faiths. He frequently quotes Ghandi to add weight to his polytheist argument. What emerges is an essentially pragmatic stance to a potentially thorny theological problem. The general thrust of his position is that it is okay either to follow or not to follow a particular God, but you ignore at your peril the self-evident, universal and non-discriminatory principles that Covey identifies. Ultimately, these principles emanate from some source and Covey is not

ambivalent in his own mind what that source might be. In the Epilogue of *First Things First*, Covey and his co-authors close with the following statement:

Above all, we feel a sense of reverence for God, whom we believe to be the source of both principles and conscience. It's our own conviction that it is the spark of divinity within each of us that draws us toward principle-centered lives of service and contribution. But we also recognize--and reverence--the diversity of belief manifest in our own organization and throughout the world by people of conscience and contribution. (1994, p. 305)

Before the *Seven Habits* brought Covey to the attention of a mass audience, he had already authored a number of books intended primarily for Mormon readers, including *Spiritual Roots of Human Relations*, *Marriage and Family Insights* and *The Divine Center*. Much of the latter book (Covey, 1982) appears in secularized form in a number of Covey's articles and books written later for a mainstream audience. Perhaps the most blatant example of adaptation comes in a diagram that displays a ring of potential "centers" upon which to base one's life. In the Mormon version, the diagram depicts the "Divine Center" as the correct center, whereas in the secular version, this is replaced by "Principles". A local LDS bookseller told me that, since Covey's success, he has sold a considerable number of Covey's Mormon books to non-Mormon or gentile clientele interested in finding out more.

Covey is not the only management guru to have emerged from the Mormon faith. Hyrum Smith, author of the *The 10 Successful Laws of Time and Life Management* (Smith, 1994) and creator of the "Franklin Day Planner", has developed a time

management system that was a close competitor of Covey's system until the Covey Leadership Center and Smith's Franklin Quest merged in 1997 (Workforce, 1997). Margaret Wheatley, also a former professor at Brigham Young University and author of the best-seller *Leadership and the New Science*, has established a consulting practice in Provo, Utah, that is "committed to self-organizing processes that involve the whole system of an organization in planning its desired form and function" (1992, p. 166). Historically a relatively poor area of America, Utah has recently emerged as a Mecca for progressive, high-tech companies and as a hub for numerous new management consulting firms promising an alternative vision of organizational transformation to their blue chip customers.

#### Comparing the Effectiveness Movement with Mormonism

While Mormonism is a religious movement with a considerably longer history, it shares a number of intriguing features with the effectiveness movement led by Stephen Covey. Both movements are explicitly expansionary and driven to grow well beyond their American origins. Stark (1994) has calculated that between 1980 and 1990 the worldwide population of Mormons increased by 67% to 7,762,000 to make it one of the world's fastest growing religions. Most of this growth came from conversions that took place outside of the United States, with the fastest growth recorded in Latin America, the West Indies and Asia. Similarly, the Covey Leadership Center has experienced spectacular growth in a relatively short period of time on a global scale. Covey is quoted in *The Economist* as saying that "he will be disappointed if the business is not ten times bigger in ten years" (1996a, p. 74).



The growth in both movements has been fueled by extremely well-organized proselytizing strategies. With its non-professionalized lay hierarchy, the Mormon faith provides ample opportunity for individuals from all walks of life to develop the rhetorical prowess and oratorical skill for which Covey, with his distinctively hushed and calm delivery, is widely celebrated. In his most popular Mormon text, *Spiritual Roots of Human Relations*, Covey (1993) shares his “ten principles of effective missionary work”, the first of which is to encourage aspiring missionaries to act as “gospel teachers” not “gospel salesmen”. At the one-day seminar that I attended, Covey demonstrated the effectiveness of this approach. At regular intervals during his presentation, he asked each member of the groups sitting around the small tables, to take a turn at “teaching” the others the main points that he had covered. My group took their task very seriously, doing their utmost to recall exactly what Covey had said. He also urged us to “teach”, within 48 hours of the seminar, at least two others who were unfortunate enough to miss the seminar. Interestingly, when guiding the audience, Covey did not suggest that the small groups discuss the validity of what he was saying. When I attempted to introduce this element into our discussion, I was politely reminded by the group that that was not what we had been asked to do.

There are also some similarities in the way in which Mormonism and the Effectiveness Movement are organized, with both exhibiting strong centralizing and hierarchical tendencies. The Church of the LDS is headed by a President who is considered by his followers to be a living prophet and is authorized to proclaim God’s will through direct revelation. Immediately below him are a small group of men known as General Authorities who are believed to be divinely chosen and inspired of God. The

greatest rhetorical exposure of Mormon General Authorities is provided through the General Conference, held biannually in Salt Lake City. The President's Address at these conferences is the single most important source for rulings on key social issues and guidance about where the church is heading in the future. Similarly, the Covey Leadership Center remains very much a "prophet-centered" organization. Covey leaves most of the running of the business to his "inner circle" which includes three of his nine children, one of whom has assumed control of the operations of the CLC (Smith, 1995b). However, he and his "words" are central to the organization's success and continued mobilization.

Alan Wolfe has found some strong similarities in the ways that Stephen Covey and Joseph Smith, the religious founder of the Mormon faith, have promoted their ideas. Both, in his mind, are practitioners who offered "a doctrine for the pragmatic, non-nonsense kind of person who practiced a kind of white magic on the material world, demanding that it yield its secrets for the cause of human betterment" (Wolfe, 1998, p. 29). In persuading followers to pursue their respective visions, both Covey and Smith divined what their followers wanted and offered it to them through a relationship between leader and audience characterized by Brooke in *The Refiner's Fire* as "interactive performance or theatre". Most critical to their success, however, has been their ability to persuade people that things that are perfectly obvious, even completely known to them, can nonetheless be revealed to them. In this regard, the secrets that they reveal are "this-worldly" rather than "other-worldly", bound up in a "weightless spirituality" that provides all of the benefits of a religion without having to suffer through the denial, sacrifice and endurance that religious asceticism demands. Wolfe argues that, by offering

a non-judgmental religion linked to a hierarchical and authoritarian structure, Smith and Covey have created a religion that is incapable of judging its supreme leader. Following the Seven Habits, he suggests, produces “obedient automatons” who will willingly absorb Covey’s habits unconsciously but not question their fundamental intellectual basis. Wolfe concludes, therefore, that, “in Covey’s system, you gain control over your life by giving up control over your destiny” (1998, p. 32).

Harold Bloom has identified Mormons, along with Southern Baptists, as the quintessential representatives of what he labels the “American Religion” in that they see themselves as not bring created because they are coexistent with God and they are Gnostic or experiential in focus and embrace freedom. However, Bloom points out that

Freedom for an American . . . means two things: being free of the Creation, and being free of the presence of other humans. The Mormons rejoice in the first freedom, while fleeing the solitude of the second...[Mormons see themselves as] each progressing from human to divine on the basis of hard work and obedience to the laws of the universe, which turn out to be the maxim of the Latter-day Saints Church.

Organization, replacing creation, becomes a sacred idea, and every good Mormon indeed remains an organization man or woman. (1992, pp. 114-116)

Hansen (1981) describes how Mormonism underwent a dramatic paradigm shift at the turn of this century. Prior to the admission of Utah into the United States in 1896, the Utah Saints had been profoundly isolationist, communitarian, and anti-American in outlook. They engendered tremendous suspicion and hostility from a mainstream

America that, having vanquished slavery, was committed to eradicating the surviving “twin” of the “relics of barbarism”--polygamy. In a remarkably short period the Mormons were able to turn about face both ideologically and politically to become one of the foremost champions of America and its capitalist glory. As Hansen remarks

While building their anti-modern kingdom of God, (they) developed those modern habits of initiative and self-discipline that helped dig the grave of the kingdom and ushered in a new breed of Mormon thoroughly at home in the corporate economy of America, and its corollaries, political pluralism and the bourgeois family. (1981, p. 206)

Today Mormons are actively encouraged to channel their work ethic and conformist outlook towards occupying the senior ranks of corporations. Through Mormon-run high-tech companies like Word Perfect, Novell and Dayna Corporation as well as the LDS church’s own formidable business arms, Zion Securities and Zion’s Co-operation and Mercantile Institution, they have been able to make an impressive mark upon the corporate landscape of America and beyond (De Pillis, 1991). Traditionally, the separation between religion, state and commerce has been an important and enduring touchstone of American society. In the past, Covey’s Mormon roots may have significantly hindered him from taking his message to a wider audience. By contrast in the contemporary setting, Covey’s Mormon-influenced message is given added credence by a mass audience that may still harbour some vague lingering suspicions about Mormonism but recognizes the unqualified success and celebrated loyalty and work ethic of the movement’s followers.

### Mormonism Goes Mainline

Secularization is one of the central yet most widely disputed concepts in the sociology of religion. Originating in the writings of Comte and further elaborated by Marx, Durkheim and Weber, the “secularization thesis” suggests that secularization is a process that is strongly linked to industrialization and urban life and leads to the rise of rationalism and the declining influence and gradual disappearance of religion in modern society. According to Berger (1967), the single most important consequence of secularization is the creation of a pluralistic situation where, in times past, religious monopolies were the rule. A pluralistic situation undermines the taken-for-granted character of religious traditions and results in religious institutions becoming subject to the logic of market economics. Consequently, religious organizations tend to become increasingly bureaucratized, results-oriented and more sensitive to the problems of public relations.

In their analysis of the changing official rhetoric of Mormon leaders, Shepherd and Shepherd (1984) show how the LDS church has been able to not only survive but thrive at a time when membership in its mainstream Protestant rivals has fallen dramatically. The emergence of modern Mormonism has been accompanied by a relative increase in the rhetoric of family unity and personal morality. At the same time, in the rhetoric of the leaders, public emphasis on supernatural beliefs and uniquely Mormon doctrines has declined. This rhetorical maneuver is particularly remarkable in light of Mormonism’s reputation for scriptural literalism and adherence to prophetic dogma. Stark (1994) suggests that the more conservative religious bodies have tended to profit from secularization because they attract individuals seeking to “take flight from modernity”

and have become disillusioned by the excessive accommodation of the more liberal denominations. In the case of Mormonism, the prospect of becoming a “mainline religion” has become an issue that is hotly debated among Mormon scholars. It has opened up an the age old dilemma of reconciling the desire on the part of many Mormons to become accepted by the wider society while maintaining the distinctive identity which is the faith’s primary socio-psychological attraction (Mauss, 1994).

Thomas Luckmann attacks the proponents of the “secularization thesis” for mistakenly equating declining church membership and attendance with an increasingly irreligious society. He argues that, while church-oriented religion has undoubtedly declined in the face of modernity, it has been replaced by a new form of religion that he calls “invisible religion”. This new form of religion is an inevitable product of the postindustrial society where religion becomes an increasingly private affair that can be experienced individualistically and expressed in isolation. The “invisible religion” is mediated socially not through the traditional “primary institutions” of churches, sects and cults but through a wide array of “secondary institutions” which

Expressly cater to the “private” needs of “autonomous” consumers. These institutions attempt to articulate the themes arising in the “private sphere” and retransmit the packaged results to potential customers. Syndicated advice columns, “inspirational” literature ranging from tracts on Positive Thinking to *Playboy* magazine, *Reader’s Digest* versions of popular psychology, the lyrics of popular hits, and so forth, articulate what are, in effect, elements of models of “ultimate” significance. The models are, of course, non-obligatory and must compete on what is, basically, an open

market. The manufacture, the packaging and the sale of models of “ultimate significance” are, therefore, determined by consumer preference, and the manufacturer must remain sensitive to the needs and requirements of “autonomous” individuals and their existence in the “private sphere”.

(1967, p. 104)

Following Luckmann’s line of argument we could suggest that, through the effectiveness movement, Covey has been able to create an “invisible religion” of his own. We have seen from the preceding rhetorical critique that he has shown himself to be extremely sensitive to the needs and requirements of “autonomous” individuals and that he has cast his ideas well within their “private sphere”. He has created an ostensibly secular and rational rhetorical vision that speaks to, and appeals to, the spiritual needs of a wide range of individuals, many of whom have removed themselves from the traditional primary institutions of religion. This vision has been constructed through the creative and well-organized use of such secondary institutions as the general and business media, publishers and Covey’s own consulting organization. The authority for this vision is derived neither from a deity or divine doctrine or sacred law, but from the charismatic leadership that Covey has exhibited to powerful effect (Jackson, 1996a). Importantly, the models are non-obligatory. Within Covey’s rhetorical community, the consumer is given full sovereignty. He or she is free to move in and out of the “cafeteria”, selecting the attractive elements of the vision and adding them to the highly individualized pastiche of spiritual, religious and quasi-religious beliefs and tenets that form the basis for defining self and identity in late modernity (Creedon, 1998; Heelas, 1996). In the elaboration of his rhetorical vision, Covey has been able to adapt some of the doctrine of an essentially

pre-modern theology and disseminate these ideas in a seemingly new model of “ultimate significance” to a much wider (and largely unsuspecting) audience than even his most zealous forebears would have ever dreamt possible.

### Summary

In this chapter I have described the content, style and processes by which Stephen Covey has created an enormous following within North America and throughout the world for his vision of personal and professional effectiveness. Covey has distinguished himself from other gurus and consultants by his highly centralized and hierarchical organizational modus operandi and by the scale and ambition of the marketing apparatus he has assembled. He has successfully bridged the business and personal growth markets by disseminating a pragmatic, seemingly universal, relativist message that promises something for everybody but fundamentally does little to change the status quo. By placing the responsibility firmly on the shoulders of the individual, Covey has absolved corporations, government and other institutions of their responsibilities and obligations. While Covey is clearly no master of the English language, the rhetorical vision he has skillfully articulated comprised of three compelling fantasy themes—‘Back to the farm’, ‘Working from the inside-out’ and ‘Finding true north’--provides a powerful dramatizing message for individuals struggling to define and assert themselves through activities which may, to them, seem increasingly purposeless and over which they feel increasingly powerless. The absolutist conviction that Covey invests in his seven habits provides his vision with the impressive moral authority that can be derived from an analogue that is fundamentally righteous. Other visions may come and go, but Covey’s vision will



endure because it is timeless, universal and unassailably “right”. Followers are free to look and even pursue alternatives but Covey conveys to his audience worldly insight and unwavering confidence in the fact that they will eventually see the light and return. Backed by the righteous analogue, Covey’s rhetorical skill has placed him at the vanguard of the growing hybridization of managerial, political and religious rhetoric in popular business discourse (Conlin, 1999).

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### PETER SENGE AND THE LEARNING ORGANIZATION

“We are taking a stand for a vision, for creating a type of organization we would truly like to work within and which can thrive in a world of increasing interdependency and change. It is not what the vision is, but what the vision does that matters.”

Peter Senge and Fred Kofman (1993, p. 16).

“The fundamental purpose of any organization is not to make a profit. A social mission is the essence of a successful business; doing something that makes a difference to somebody. Organizations need to begin thinking of leaders as designers, stewards, and teachers, and not as the key decision-makers. Business is about making a better world. Everyone needs to live their lives in the service of their highest aspirations.”

Peter Senge writing in *Executive Excellence* (1995, p. 18).

#### Introduction

The third and final management guru and fashion case will be examined in this chapter. The subject of this chapter is Peter Senge, a professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology who, with the publication of his book *The Fifth Discipline* in 1990, emerged from the relative obscurity of academia to full-blown guru status in a very short time. Since the publication of this and a subsequent book, *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook* (Senge, Roberts, Ross, Smith, Kleiner, 1994), he has continued to be prominently featured in the business media and is widely cited in practitioner publications and the academic literature. The symbolic cue for the rhetorical vision that he has helped to construct is the “learning organization”. While Senge was by no means

the first author to coin this term, he has been primarily instrumental in popularizing it to the point that it has become a staple of everyday business discourse. As Pedler, Burgoyne and Boydell have observed, “Senge’s best-selling *The Fifth Discipline* has been largely responsible for bringing the learning organization idea into the mainstream of business thinking” (1997, p.196).

The chapter is organized into five parts. In the first part I briefly review the evolution of the idea of the learning organization, with particular attention paid to how other writers have contributed to the development of this concept. The second part of the chapter examines the processes by which the rhetorical vision of the learning organization has been assembled, organized and disseminated by Peter Senge and his colleagues. I highlight the characteristics that distinguish Peter Senge from other management gurus and suggest why these characteristics have helped to make the learning organization vision such a compelling one for corporate North America and beyond. In the third part of the chapter, the rhetorical community that has developed around the learning organization is described with specific reference to two sub-communities that have shown themselves to be most strongly associated with it: senior executives and human resource development/training professionals.

The rhetorical vision of the learning organization is described and analyzed in the fourth part. In contrast to the two preceding rhetorical visions that have been examined in chapters five and six, Senge’s vision is undergirded by an essentially “social” master analogue. That is, it emphasizes the primacy of human relations, focusing on trust, caring, comradeship and humanity (Cragan & Shields, 1995). In this vision, the individual can realize his or her full self only through social interaction with other

individuals who are working towards a common cause. In this respect, Senge offers a collectivist vision that stands in stark contrast to the individualistic visions developed by Hammer and Champy and Covey. I will describe five inter-related fantasy themes that run through the rhetorical vision of the learning organization and identify the more common metaphors that Senge uses to illuminate each theme. In the final part of the chapter, I examine the critique that has developed on several fronts to the learning organization concept and discuss how Senge and his colleagues have responded to this critique in order to sustain their rhetorical vision.

### Forerunners and Variants of the Learning Organization Vision

While the term “learning organization” has in the last decade become a widely used and, as many would argue, abused term in the business lexicon, it is by no means a new concept. Garratt (1995) suggests that, although the desire to create organizations that can consciously cope with change by learning continuously can be traced back to antiquity, “all the necessary conditions to create both the intellectual and practical basis of a learning organization were in place by 1947” (p. 25). Specifically, he points to the creation of the intelligence unit by Sir Geoffrey Vickers at the newly nationalized Coal Board which contained the radical triumvirate of thinkers, Reg Revans, Fritz Schumacher and Jacob Bronowski. Garratt identifies Revans as being a particularly influential figure in the evolution of the learning organization concept. Drawing on his experience in fostering learning within the Coal Board, Revans (1980) likened the organization to an organism which has to increase its capacity to learn if it is to function successfully in an

environment characterized by continual change. Transplanting a formula from ecology, he noted that, in order to survive, an organization, like an organism, must be able to learn at a rate that equals or exceeds the changes that are occurring in its environment.

Pedler et al. (1997) have similarly acknowledged the contribution of Reg Revans whom they value for his distrust of experts and his passionate commitment to promoting the learning of the individual-within-the-company. They also point to the contribution made by six other writers in shaping the idea of the learning organization, organizational learning and their own construct, “The Learning Company”. In terms of intellectual contributions, they single out the work of Argyris and Schon (1978) in translating Gregory Bateson’s (1973) groundbreaking three “levels of learning” into the organizational setting with their concepts of “single-loop”, “double-loop” and “deutero-learning”. They also credit Roger Harrison for his insights in highlighting the positive role that “defensive behaviours” and “organizational healing” can play in creating a learning organization (1995) as well as the work of Nancy Dixon in trying to put ideas of organizational learning into practice (1994). In terms of promoting the concept to a broader audience they recognize the contribution of Peters and Waterman’s book, *In Search of Excellence*, in paving the way for mass acceptance of the learning organization by stressing the importance of adaptability and responsiveness and stating that “the excellent companies are learning organizations” (1982, p. 110). Similarly, W. Edwards Deming’s widely accepted fourteen principles of quality are credited with laying the foundation for widespread acceptance of the idea of the learning organization (1986). These contributions notwithstanding, it is Peter Senge’s best-selling book, *The Fifth Discipline* (1990a), which has, in their minds, “been largely responsible for bringing the

learning organization into the mainstream of business thinking” (Pedler et al., 1997, p. 196).

In the last ten years, a number of competing visions circles of what a learning organization should look like and how to get to it have gained varying degrees of acceptance within academic and practitioner communities. The word “competing” is used quite loosely in this instance because most of the writers in this area are at pains to acknowledge the related work of others and to stress the need for a collective effort to move toward their overarching goal. A case in point is Bob Garratt, a British consultant and author of the first book to include the term “learning organization” in its title (Garratt, 1990), who uses the definition of the Learning Company developed by Pedler et al. (1997) to define his sense of what a learning organization is and should be.

The most significant visions of the learning organization are presented in Table 11 along with a brief definition. Not all of these writers have chosen to label their vision specifically as a “learning organization” but there is considerable overlap between them in what they are trying to articulate and promote. For example, Pedler et al. (1991) prefer to use the term “learning company” rather than “learning organization” because it is less mechanical and focuses on the idea of any group of people being “in company” with others as they seek to explore collectively how best people may live and work together. They have produced a model of the learning company which depicts four interlocking circles of Policy, Operations, Ideas and Action and have isolated eleven characteristics which they argue characterize a learning company. These have formed the basis for diagnostic instruments that are used to look at company-wide learning processes under the umbrella of the Learning Company Project which works with a number of prominent

companies in the United Kingdom and other countries but has yet to make major in-roads into North America.

Table 11

Defining the Learning Organization and its Variants

Author(s)	Symbolic Cue	Definition
Senge (1990a)	The Learning Organization	Organizations where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning how to learn together. (p. 3)
Pedler, Burgoyne & Boydell (1991)	The Learning Company	A Learning Company is an organization that facilitates the learning of all its members and consciously transforms itself and its context. (p. 3)
Nonaka (1991)	The Knowledge-Creating Company	When markets shift, technologies proliferate, competitors multiply, and products become obsolete almost overnight, successful companies are those that consistently create new knowledge, disseminate it widely throughout the organization, and quickly embody it in new technologies and products. (p. 96)
Garvin (1993)	The Learning Organization	An organization skilled at creating, acquiring, and transferring knowledge, and at modifying its behaviour to reflect new knowledge and insights. (p. 80)
Watkins & Marsick (1994)	The Learning Organization	The learning organization is one that learns continuously and transforms itself. (p. 8)
Kilman (1997)	The Learning Organization	A learning organization describes, controls and improves the processes by which knowledge is created, acquired, distributed, interpreted, stored, retrieved, and used for the purpose of achieving long-term organizational success. (p. 208)
de Geus (1997)	The Living Company	Living Companies have a personality that allows them to evolve harmoniously. They know who they are, understand how they fit in the world, value new ideas and new people, and husband their money in a way that allows them govern their future. (p. 52)

It is clear from this brief review that, when it was first articulated in the early 1990s, Peter Senge's vision of the learning organization was neither novel nor original. Moreover, he was by no means the only writer working on the development of the concept. In fact he was in extremely good company along with numerous high profile academics and consultants on both sides of the Atlantic. Knowing this raises the question of what it was about Senge's vision that enabled it to catch on and be assimilated in such a substantial way, attracting so much attention over such a short period of time. Was it the manner in which he constructed his particular vision? Or was it more to do with the way in which he went about communicating this vision? Or was it more a function of how he and his colleagues organized themselves? These three questions will be the primary concern for the remainder of this chapter.

## Organizing the Learning Organization Vision

### Background

Raised in Los Angeles as the son of a Kodak salesman, Peter Senge pursued undergraduate studies in Engineering at Stanford during which he developed a strong interest in population growth and environmental degradation (Dumaine, 1994a). This interest led him to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), where he completed a M.Sc. in systems modeling and a Ph.D. in management before becoming a member of the faculty at MIT's Sloan School of Management. The turning point for Peter Senge came with the publication in 1990 of his book, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*. The book was published by Doubleday under the "Currency" imprint, which specializes in books that set out to find meaning in the workplace; in



explaining the reasons for targeting this new segment of the business book market, Harriet Rubin, Doubleday's influential executive editor, observes, "meaning is hot, and it's getting hotter. This is the age of enchantment, and people are looking for an antidote to the masochism of work" (Dumaine, 1994b, p. 197). Senge has acknowledged the importance of Rubin's role in getting the book to market, particularly in introducing him to Art Kleiner, a former contributing editor to the *Whole Earth Catalogue* and *Garbage Magazine*, who coached Senge and urged him to express the essential message of the book in just one sentence.

In keeping with Currency's efforts to stake out a new territory for business books, the book was strikingly packaged with a solemn mat black dust-jacket with a muted gold "V" emblazoned on the front cover signaling the primacy of the "fifth discipline"--systems thinking. At the top of the cover were the prophetic words from *Fortune* magazine, "forget your old, tired ideas about leadership. The most successful corporation of the 1990s will be something called a learning organization" (Dumaine, 1989, p. 48). Intriguingly, neither the article from which this quotation was taken, nor a subsequent article devoted to learning organizations that appeared a year later (Kiechel, 1990), makes a reference to Peter Senge. It is a testament to the impact of *The Fifth Discipline* that almost every article regarding learning organizations that I have come across since its publication makes some reference to Peter Senge. Indeed it would appear to the casual reader of the business media that the learning organization has become inseparable from Peter Senge.

Senge defines learning organizations as "organizations where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people

are continually learning how to learn together” (1990a, p. 3). In the book, Senge identifies the following five “learning disciplines”, or lifelong programs of study and practice, upon which the learning organization is based: personal mastery, mental models, shared vision, team learning and systems thinking. Each of these is briefly described in Table 12 below. The fifth discipline privileged in the book’s title is that of systems thinking, which Senge argues is the most important because it integrates the disciplines, fusing them into a coherent body of theory and practice. Intriguingly, he ascribes this discipline a kind of a “mother hen” role to the other disciplines by suggesting that “it keeps them from being separate gimmicks or the latest organizational fads” (1990a, p. 12).

Table 12

The Five Disciplines of Peter Senge’s Learning Organization

Discipline	Definition
Personal Mastery	Learning to expand our personal capacity to create the results we most desire, and creating an organizational environment which encourages all its members to develop themselves toward the goals and purposes they choose.
Mental Models	Reflecting upon, continually clarifying, and improving our internal pictures of the world, and seeing how they shape our actions and desires.
Shared Vision	Building a sense of commitment in a group, by developing shared images of the future we seek to create, and the principles and guiding practices by which we hope to get there.
Team Learning	Transforming conversational and collective thinking skills, so that groups of people can reliably develop intelligence and ability greater than the sum of individual members’ talents.
Systems Thinking	A way of thinking about, and language for describing and understanding, the forces and interrelationships that shape the behaviours of systems. This discipline helps us to see how to change systems more effectively, and to act more in tune with the larger processes of the natural and economic world.

Note: Senge et al. (1994, pp. 6-7)

Senge's next book, *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook*, was written with four other authors who have worked with him over a long period. These were Charlotte Roberts, a principal at Innovation Associates who had co-led numerous "Leadership and Mastery" seminars with Senge; Rick Ross, an organizational consultant based in San Diego, California; Bryan Smith, president of Innovation Associates of Canada, who played the role of "team diplomat" according to Senge; and Art Kleiner, who, with this book, now received equal billing with Senge. At the beginning of the book, Senge explains that it was written in response to the widespread question provoked by its predecessor: "this is great...but what do we do Monday morning?" (Senge et al., 1994, p. 5). Positioned as the first in an ongoing series, the book contained 172 pieces of writing by 67 authors. In contrast to the muted presentation of *The Fifth Discipline*, Doubleday Currency by-passed the conventional hard-cover package, presenting a bright red, blue and yellow-covered paperback that was studiously devoid of solemn pronouncements and brimful of practical how-to advice.

### Guru of the New

In 1992, Peter Senge was singled out in a *Business Week* cover story as one of a highly influential group of management's "new gurus", alongside Michael Hammer, Edward Lawler III, David Nadler, C.K. Prahalad, and George Stalk Jr.. The article's author, John Byrne, argued that this group differed from the previous generation of management gurus such as Peter Drucker, Kenneth Blanchard and Tom Peters in several important ways. First, their message was considerably more revolutionary in tone, urging managers to think in radically different ways and to dramatically overhaul their

operations. Second, this group were convinced that management should stop organizing itself around functions such as marketing and manufacturing as had traditionally been the case, and begin to focus on processes, such as order fulfillment and distribution. Third, Byrne observes that this new group of gurus “cast unusually wide conceptual nets, basing their ideas on theories and experiences borrowed from the non-business world” (1992, p. 42). This shift beyond the sphere of management theory signals a turn towards intellectual liberalism and a new willingness on the part of managers who, having been steeped in a management education, are more receptive to the insights and theories developed in other disciplines in a bid to find new and innovative solutions to their pressing business problems. Finally, many of these new gurus play down the significance of strong heroic leadership and the strong corporate cultures that were championed by the likes of Tom Peters and Kenneth Blanchard in favour of an approach that encourages managers to get out of the way and let the employees assume fluid leadership roles according to their skills and situations.

#### Peter Senge’s Anti-Guru Persona

Peter Senge certainly shares the distinguishing characteristics of the “new gurus” identified by Byrne but he has also demonstrated qualities and developed a message that sets himself apart from this illustrious group. In watching Senge speak to a large audience, the first thing that strikes one is the ordinary, unassuming boy-next-door persona he projects through his soft-spoken, high-pitched voice and casual dress. Senge’s comparatively muted persona stands in striking contrast to the strident, larger-than-life figures of Hammer and Covey. While most management gurus tend to distance

themselves from the rarified concerns of the academic milieu, Senge is unapologetic about his intellectual predisposition, making his professorial image a critical component of his persona even though he is still only a senior lecturer at MIT. He also makes an effort to maintain his academic profile. For example, Senge participated in a number of sessions at the 1999 Academy of Management Meeting in Chicago.

Senge's anti-guru image is further reinforced by the reverence that he conveys in his speaking and writing for the contributions that his mentors have made to his thinking. In responding to questions about the origins of the learning organization concept, Senge states that "the idea of approaching them as disciplines was mine, but the theories themselves are the work of some leading thinkers. My contribution was to put the pieces together in a way that people can understand" (Training & Development, 1991, p. 39). In particular, he singles out Jay Forrester, his doctoral advisor at MIT, for his work on systems theory; quantum physicist, David Bohm, for his contribution to dialogue and team learning; Chris Argyris and Donald Schon, for their group dynamics research; Robert Fritz, the musician and composer, for the discipline of personal mastery; and Charlie Kiefer, from Innovation Associates, for the theories of shared vision. Senge has admitted that the book was supposed to have been a collaborative venture with these and other writers but "one by one the others dropped out and I found myself standing alone on the playing field. It was a matter of going ahead alone or quitting" (Galaghan, 1991, p. 39).

#### A Collaborative Approach to Organizing

Senge distinguishes himself with his markedly collaborative and collegial approach to his work. In contrast to Michael Hammer and Stephen Covey, who are unquestionably

the dominant figures in their respective movements, Senge appears to be quite comfortable to letting his associates take their share of the limelight, hence, his willingness to co-author the *Fieldbook* with so many colleagues. As he reflects in the materials that accompanied the '1996 Worldwide Series in Leadership' videoconference, "Alone I would have never been unable to realize the vision. Fortunately, a group of longtime collaborators shared the vision of the *Fieldbook*. It was delightful to watch how we quickly became a coherent team, with each of us bringing his or her distinctive sensibility to the project". Senge's collaborative approach was also graphically demonstrated at a videoconference that I was involved in delivering to a local business audience. The videoconference purported to feature Peter Senge, but Senge happily gave most of the air time to his partner Rick Ross and the guest learning organization practitioners--a high school principal and a newspaper publisher. Interestingly, a number of attendees at the videoconference complained of feeling somewhat short-changed by Senge's subsidiary role. A colleague of mine has made a wry parallel between Senge's organizational approach and the "disciple" model adopted by Jesus, while another has likened it to George Sand's "salon" of eminent artists and thinkers.

Whereas Covey, Hammer and Peters are all closely associated with one organization that bears their name (Franklin Covey, The Tom Peters Group and Hammer and Company respectively), Peter Senge appears to prefer to be loosely linked with numerous organizations. Senge is a faculty member and was, until recently, director of the Center for Organizational Learning at MIT's Sloan School of Management. The purpose of the center is to "discover, develop and integrate multiple theories and practices of leading, learning and working together" (<http://learning.mit.edu>). Founded in

1990, the Center has 18 blue chip corporate sponsors, including AT&T, Ford, Motorola and Federal Express, who each contribute a minimum of \$80,000 per year (with some contributing over one million dollars per year) to create learning organization “pilot programs” with members of the center’s MIT faculty. Membership entitles organizations to participate in a five-day course, semi-annual meetings, seminars, advanced courses, dialogue courses and to access collaborative networking arrangements with researchers and other sponsors. According to Senge, “the Center is designed to spread ideas and to create a few successful models of the learning organization that can’t be ignored” (Dumaine, 1994a, p.148). Moreover, the Center has been designed as a conscious experiment in building a learning organization that can act as a model itself to clients interested in putting the disciplines into practice. Reflecting on his association with the Center as a visiting scholar in 1993/94, Robert Fulmer observes with undisguised relish:

I was impressed by the extent to which staff members at the Center attempted to practice the principles associated with the “five disciplines”. Regular staff meetings utilized the dialogue process. Support staff, as well as researchers, are highly conversant with the tools of systems dynamics and practice systems thinking. There is a general agreement as to the vision of how the learning centre can make a difference in the world. This not simply a grandiose statement. People at the learning centre are committed to a vision of organizational life as better than most of them have known in any other setting. Each person at the center seems committed to improving his/her “personal mastery”. (1995, pp. 12-13)

In addition to his work at the Center for Organizational Learning, Senge was a founding partner of the management consulting and training firm, Innovation Associates Inc., which has enabled him to reach a much broader corporate audience. Senge participates in several other influential communication vehicles that are dedicated to fostering and broadening the rhetorical community of the learning organization. He is a frequent contributor to a monthly newsletter, *The Systems Thinker*, which “provides managers with the systems thinking knowledge and tools they need to meet the challenges of a rapidly changing business environment”. Pegasus Communications, the newsletter’s publishers, also organize an annual “Systems Thinker” conference which headlines Senge, showcases his associates and attracts thousands of individuals from around the world. They also produce an extensive glossy catalogue of “organizational learning resources”, which include tapes, videos, software and books designed to “create and sustain a responsible and harmonious global learning community” (<http://www.pegasuscom.com>). Senge is also an active participant in The Learning Circle, one of numerous electronic discussion groups on the internet that are dedicated to moving the vision of the learning organization forward (Clauson, 1996). Senge’s public presentations to large-scale audiences are handled by WYNCOM Inc., a firm based in Lexington, Kentucky that specializes in organizing management guru or “thought leader” seminars and also handles Stephen Covey, Tom Peters and Michael Hammer (<http://www.wyncom.com>).



### Where East Meets West

While the new breed of management gurus tends to stretch well beyond the conventional boundaries of management thought for inspiration and illustration, Senge distinguishes himself by his liberal and rhetorically powerful use of philosophies and metaphors from both and Eastern and Western, modern and pre-modern cultures. For example, the *Fieldbook* opens with an account of the common greeting of the tribes of northern Natal in South Africa, in which the greeter says the Zulu equivalent to “I see you” and the person being greeted says “I am here”. This apparently reflects the spirit of ubuntu, which acknowledges that you are a person only because other people around you respect and acknowledge you as a person. This leads Senge and his colleagues into offering a formal acknowledgment and welcome to their readers that sets a distinctively “new age” tone for the remainder of the book.

In trying to explain what takes place within a learning organization, Senge has resurrected the Greek term “metanoia” to describe a shift in mind. Senge points out that in the early (Gnostic) Christian tradition, this term took on a special meaning of awakening as a direct knowing of the highest, God (1990a, p. 61). Metanoia, to him, captures a “deeper meaning of learning” which must be understood if we are to understand the learning organization. However, Senge is vague about the sense in which he wants to use this term.

In his discussion of the discipline of “Personal Mastery”, Senge makes the case that the

Power of truth, seeing reality more and more as it is, cleansing the lens of perception, awakening from self-imposed distortions of reality are

different expressions of a common principle that is found in almost all of the world's great philosophic and religious systems. (1990a, p. 161)

He illustrates this claim with a litany of examples drawn from the Buddhist, Hindu, Islamic and Christian faiths. This polyglot approach mirrors Covey's universality argument discussed in Chapter Six. In Senge's hands, however, it appears to be somewhat more convincing. Perhaps Senge's Buddhist faith helps to give him a more authentic air when he is discussing multiple faiths. Certainly, of all of the management gurus, Senge is the most sympathetic to Eastern philosophies, believing that the west has much to learn from them. For example, he has observed,

In general, Westerners are deeply influenced by the philosophy of reductionism--of reducing things to a finite answer. Underlying Eastern philosophies state that one never truly understands anything, that life is a continual process of learning. You cannot say the word "learning" in Chinese without saying both "study" and "practise" constantly. You could not say, "I learned something" in Chinese. It is literally, because all you can do is practise constantly. Now that is a learning orientation! (Journal of European Industrial Training, 1995, p. 26)

Similarly, Senge recounts his reaction to reading an extract from Hermann Hesse's book *A Journey to the East* (Hesse, 1972) included in Robert Greenleaf's book, *Servant Leadership* (1977): "as I read that passage on the airplane that evening, I cried. I knew that this man understood something that we have lost in our 'transactional society', where 'what's in it for me?' is the assumed bedrock of all actions. We have lost the joy of "creating", of working for something just because it needs to be done. In our frenzy to

get something for ourselves, we have lost ourselves” (1995, p. 220). Hesse’s book is the story of a party of “seekers” searching for enlightenment in the form of a particular secret spiritual order. Despite references to Eastern religions, Senge, unlike Covey, is not necessarily claiming to be advancing an essentially spiritual cause. When pressed, however, about his movement’s “new age” status, Senge replies

The term carries a lot of baggage, but yes, Deming always talked about a new economic age. That was his term, and he said that the principles by which success is going to be determined in this new economy will be different. So it’s New Age. (Dumaine, 1994a, p. 154)

Allying himself in this way to a decidedly un-new age figure like Deming puts Senge back into the mainstream of corporate discourse.

Not all commentators appear to be convinced, however. For example, in discussing the new breed of spiritually-oriented management thinkers, *The Economist* has asserted in typically acerbic terms, “not only is their case not novel; some of the current knowledge theorists fail to argue convincingly. The best-known is Peter Senge who is a dedicated follower of new-age fashion. To help managers make the leap to the knowledge era, Mr. Senge encourages them to meditate (particularly during meetings), and to go on retreats (where they test their physical skills, before relaxing to the bongo drums” (1995, p. 63). Similarly, in a scathing review of the *Fieldbook*, Jack Gordon warns of the “awful collision” that will result in trying to wed spirituality and commerce, observing, “the dream is nothing less than to stage a post-modern wedding of God and mammon - to reconcile the poetic and spiritual aspirations of the human-potential movement with the stubbornly prosaic realities of the corporate world.” (1995, p. 119).

### Connecting the Private and Public Sectors

Another distinguishing feature of Senge's message is the attention he gives to the public sector. Most management gurus focus their efforts and draw their examples from large corporations within the private sector. This strategy makes sense given that this is by far the most lucrative sector and it is the one sector to which government and not-for-profit organizations increasingly look towards for organizational cures and management solutions. Senge, however, has taken a wider view of the marketplace. While there is no doubt in the reader's mind that he is concerned and comfortable with the challenges facing managers within the corporate milieu, he makes frequent reference to individuals and organizations from other sectors, most particularly from the realm of public education,-- a particularly important area of concern for him. Indeed, he argues that the problems afflicting the latter sector may have more than a little to do with the problems afflicting the former, saying

I am becoming more and more convinced that we cannot implement systems thinking by looking at business alone--we have to start earlier in people's lives...What we really need is a partnership between business and education to build learning organizations. (*Journal of European Industrial Training*, 1995, p. 28)

Senge cites Thomas Jefferson's statement that "a democracy is only as strong as its public education" in his frequent attacks on the current state of the American public education system which Senge says is producing people who do not have the capacity to understand issues such as the causes of the budget and trade deficits and are, therefore, ripe for easy manipulation by politicians and mass media. Senge's stance and sentiments

on the public sector have been recognized by Al Gore who invited him to participate in the Vice-President's 'Reinventing Government' summit in the summer of 1993 (Abramson, 1994). Senge's broader appeal was reflected by the fact that at the March 1994 videoconference at which he was featured, a considerably higher proportion of public sector managers and educational administrators attended compared to the proportion who attended videoconferences featuring other management gurus.

### The Link with the Quality Movement

In common with Hammer and Covey and other management gurus, Senge goes to great lengths to point out that his concept, the learning organization, is different from, and superior to, the management fashions that have preceded it. Taking the moral high ground, he argues that the learning organization is too important to be characterized as just another management fashion that will inevitably be forsaken for the next great management idea. Regardless of the foibles of fashion, the learning organization, in some form or other, will endure. One means by which he sets out to ensure this is to attempt to strategically align the learning organization concept with the quality movement.

Senge has made the case that the learning organization is the logical successor to the Total Quality Management movement spawned by one of his key mentors, W. Edwards Deming, stating prophetically that "we're where the quality movement was in the 1940s" (Dumaine, 1994a, p. 148). Elsewhere, Senge has proposed that the quality movement, with its preoccupation with learning, was the "first wave" in building learning organizations. In the first wave, the primary focus of change was on front-line workers.

Management's job was to champion continual improvement, remove impediments that disempowered employees and support initiatives such as benchmarking and quality training. In the second wave, the organization shifts its attention away from employees and improving work processes to management and fostering ways of thinking and interacting that are conducive to continual learning. According to Senge, these two waves will gradually merge into a third wave, in which "learning becomes institutionalized as an inescapable way of life for managers and workers (even if we bother maintaining that distinction)" (1992, p. 32). Senge argues that, with a few exceptions, American industry primarily operates within the first wave, adding that most American managers still lack the understanding of what is required for even the first wave of quality management practices to take root. By contrast, the second wave is well under way in Japan, driven by the introduction of the "seven new tools of management" introduced in 1979 by the Society for QC Technique Development and symbolized by the creation of Mazda's Miata sports car which took the American car market by storm (Schlossberg, 1991). These new tools supplanted the "seven quality tools" that helped to drive the first wave in Japan in the 1960s and which American managers are still coming to grips with according to Senge. Senge characterizes the Japanese threat as follows:

The Japanese mastered the two per cent about 30 to 40 years ago.

Japanese kids learn basic quality tools in junior and senior high school.

We are playing a catch-up game and they are off in a new territory. For the past 10 to 15 years, the "new tools for management" in Japan have been about how people think and interact. What that means is in Japan the work of management is the work of ideas. (Galagahan, 1991, p. 44)

Senge positions the five disciplines of the learning organization as the means by which American managers can move into the second wave and ultimately, surpass Japanese management. The concept can act as a unifying framework for galvanizing the quality movement which, in Senge's mind, risks being fragmented into isolated initiatives and slogans and is hamstrung by the authoritarian, command and control hierarchy that still predominates in the United States. Senge makes the observation that Deming's management philosophy was essentially about creating learning organizations even though he may not have used this term. He substantiates this claim by pointing to Deming's preoccupation with intrinsic versus extrinsic rewards and by tracing Deming's "Plan, Do, Check, Act" cycle back to John Dewey, the American philosopher and educator. In making this claim, Senge attempts to build an illustrious hereditary line that stretches back to Dewey through Deming to himself as the "heir apparent" to the quality movement. To add further rhetorical weight to this claim, Senge makes frequent asides to the numerous conversations he has had with Deming.

### The Rhetorical Community of the Learning Organization

An examination of evidence in the mass media that a rhetorical community has developed around Senge's rhetorical vision of the learning organization reveals that two distinctive sub-communities have been particularly vocal in their support and articulation of the vision: senior executives and corporate trainers and human resource developers.

### Senior Executives

Senge is clearly aware of the rhetorical weight that a senior executive can bring to legitimating the rhetorical vision of the learning organization. Recognizing that his lack of direct industry experience could undermine the credibility of this argument, Senge makes ample and effective use of senior executives and their experiences creating and working with learning organizations. Most notably, Senge makes frequent references in his books and interviews to Bill O'Brien, the former CEO of Hanover Insurance, using him almost as a mouthpiece for the voice of direct experience and as a counterweight to Senge's academic orientation. Facing near-bankruptcy in 1969, O'Brien set out to "find out what would give the necessary organization and discipline to have work be more congruent with human nature. We gradually identified a set of core values that are actually principles that overcome the basic disease of the hierarchy" (quoted in Senge, 1990a, p. 181). During the 1980s, Senge joined a cadre of academically-based consultants such as Chris Argyris and Lee Bolman from the Harvard Business School who were brought into Hanover Insurance by O'Brien to help turn it into one of the top financially performing companies in the insurance industry, with core values including "merit", "openness", "localness" and "leanness" (Welter, 1991, p. 20). Many of the real world examples used in *The Fifth Discipline* emanate from Senge's experience as a consultant with Hanover Insurance during the 1980s and O'Brien is quoted liberally throughout the book.

In the numerous articles that have appeared about Senge and the learning organization, stirring testimonials about the potency of the learning organization concept provide additional rhetorical weight to the vision. *The Fifth Discipline* has, and continues



to be, frequently cited by senior executives in magazine articles as a book that has made a big impression on them. For example, the president of Web Industries Inc., a \$20-million contract manufacturer with 210 employees, has used a number of popular management books to play a major role in the company's "change-of-thinking" process. His rationale is that

Books can help encourage change because books can be non-threatening.

Its not like a new program that we want everybody to buy into; if you just start spreading books around so people have something to talk bout, those books can change how we perceive things and how we do things.

(Brokaw, 1991, p. 33)

The company devoted a three-day meeting to a discussion of Senge's book. During the first day, the principles of leverage, shared vision and teamwork were discussed. The second day was used to address how people learn, and how leaders ought to lead. Only on the third day of the meeting did the meeting move into the "typical discussions" about increasing sales and improving conditions. Reflecting on the meeting, the vice-president of sales observes , "that book in particular has created a vocabulary around here"

(Brokaw, 1991, p. 31). However, the president notes that Senge's esoteric language tends to limit the appeal of the book to the senior executive group. Similarly, a CEO of a Denver-based construction company has been inspired by *The Fifth Discipline* to become a "teacher" for his organization because it articulated his objective of "keeping our souls and making money with dignity" (Filipczak, 1996, p. 60). Every Monday morning, he meets with about 60 of his employees in a session that usually evolves into a "learning event".

A particularly valuable source of these testimonials has been the CEOs of companies who are corporate members of MIT's Center for Organizational Learning. The Center runs a CEO leadership project, which provides a forum for inquiry into the evolving nature of leadership required to build and sustain learning organizations and to address the particular issues faced by top management, such as the evolution of corporate governance and the moral foundation of senior managers. Among the participants in this project have been CEOs or president-level executives from Harley Davidson, Philips Display Components, Shell Oil, Analog Devices and Hermann Miller (Fulmer, 1995). The President and Chief Executive of the latter company which manufactures conservative office furniture has publicly stated

Our profits have improved rather markedly but is there a cause-and-effect relationship? The attitudes and behaviours of our people have changed, and that leads not only to improved profits but improved performance in the long run. There's a more mature, accepting relationship among our people. You can't measure that in the short term, but it's terribly powerful in the long run. (Driben, 1995, p. 62)

While most of the media testimonials for Senge's work focus on what went right in organizations when the concept is implemented, I detected a few instances in which the risks of following this path were also discussed. Most notably, a widely cited *Fortune* magazine article provided a cautionary tale for those who become too enamoured with the learning organization concept. One case, which was also featured in a short video used by Senge in a videoconference presentation, told of a steel company, GS Technologies which, desperate for ideas as to how to turn the company around from

imminent collapse, joined MIT's Center for Organizational Learning. As the company's CEO explained, "we had run out of ideas. It don't get no worse" (Dumaine, 1994a, p. 154). The article goes on to describe, in dramatic fashion, how William Isaacs, a senior researcher associated with the Center, introduced the "container", a tool developed by the Center for surfacing and processing conflict, at a meeting between the senior management and union leaders of the company. After a particularly hostile encounter, Isaacs recounts how he was able to get the two sides working together to solve some important productivity problems. As a result of this work, the company has been able to turn things around, staving off bankruptcy and rapidly increasing sales. Subsequently, however, the labour leader who had been spearheading learning organization ideas at GST has been voted out by "workers left out of the dialogue" and replaced by another labour leader who promptly passed a motion banning Senge's dialogue from the shop floor on the grounds that it enabled the company to take advantage of workers no longer speaking with one unified voice. The moral of this fable was that "management says it made the mistake of not spreading the program fast and deep enough" (Dumaine, 1994a, p. 154).

### Trainers and Human Resource Professionals

With its novel emphasis on learning and development, it is perhaps not surprising that the learning organization concept has been greeted with great enthusiasm by members of the training and development community. In addition to helping to make the word "learning" not only acceptable but also fashionable within the business lexicon, Senge is alone among management gurus in at least acknowledging the role of the

training and development specialist in organizational transformation efforts. Other gurus have generally been quite disparaging about this role. We should, therefore, not be surprised to learn that the learning organization has received considerable attention from human resource and organization development professionals.

For example, the 1995 National HRD Executive Survey, conducted by the American Society for Training and Development, found that 94 per cent of the respondents said that it was important to build a learning organization (Gephart, Marsick, Van Buren, Spiro & Senge, 1996, p. 34). Similarly, a 1996 survey of almost 200 German companies, conducted by DEJRA Akademie with the Maisberger and Partner consulting firm, found that 90 per cent consider themselves to be a learning organization, or in the process of becoming one (Gephart et al., 1996, p. 34). However, many members are beginning to recognize that the learning organization concept can act as a double-edged sword. The increased scrutiny on the human resource development function that the learning organization promotes could result in more rewards and recognition but with these would come high performance expectations and radical changes in the way that function is carried out. For example, at the 1996 conference of the American Society of Training and Development, a participant observed that he

Listened to numerous speakers warning trainers and developers that they had no option but to reinvent themselves. High-performance work systems, underpinned by a learning organization, may hold the key to future competitive success. But these measures will, we were told, come to nothing if the training function itself does not undergo a radical shift towards performance improvement consultancy. (Harrison, 1996, p. 47)

Senge argues that training and development specialists have two important roles to play in building learning organizations. First, they can help managers to design and facilitate learning processes. Second, they can guide the “diffusion of new learnings” throughout the organization. To fulfill both of these roles, Senge suggests that they will have to strike partnerships with line managers and senior managers because they lack the credibility and accountability to make learning happen themselves (Galaghan, 1994). Trainers and developers continue to grapple with what they should be doing about implementing the powerful yet elusive rhetorical vision of the learning organization. An article in *Training & Development* summarizes the discussions that took place within a focus group made up of just under 50 human resource development professionals and line managers from across the United States. The objective of the focus group was to try to collectively address the following questions: Which definitions of learning organizations made sense? What distinguishes organizational learning from individual learning? What does a learning organization look like and how can it be measured?, and, Would training and development specialists play different roles inside a learning organization? Of the 20 definitions of learning organization presented to the group, Senge’s definition was the one that most consistently captured the hearts and minds of the participants. It is evident from the article that Senge’s influence is never too far away from the discussion. The authors note that when the facilitators posed the question, “if you take away from us our security-blanket copies of *The Fifth Discipline* or any book by Chris Argyris, what do we actually know about learning organizations or organizational learning?” Participants responded with silence, a blank flip chart, and several top-of-the-the-head responses which “showed they know a lot about learning organization theory, but far less about

how to apply it--which they readily admitted” (Calvert, Mobley & Marshall, 1994, p. 40).

### The Rhetorical Vision of the Learning Organization

In analyzing Senge’s rhetorical vision of the learning organization, I identified four major fantasy themes; these are summarized in Table 13 below. Two of the themes identified are setting themes while the others are action and character themes. Each of these will be discussed in turn.

Table 13

#### Key Fantasy Themes within the Rhetorical Vision of the Learning Organization

<b>Fantasy Theme</b>	<b>Type</b>	<b>Metaphors</b>	<b>Motive</b>
Living in an Unsustainable World	Setting theme	Tragedy of the Commons, Dances with Wolves	Identification
Getting Control but not Controlling	Action theme	Dr. Karl-Henrik Robert	Transcendence
The Manager’s New Work	Character Theme	The Designer of the Ship	Hierarchy
Working within the Microworld	Setting Theme	The Beer Game	Transcendence

#### Setting Theme One: Living in an Unsustainable World

In a vein similar to Covey, Senge situates organizational woes in a broader societal context. He suggests that “organizations are microcosms of the larger society. Thus, as

the heart of any serious effort to alter how organizations operate lies a concern with addressing the basic dysfunctions of our larger culture” (Kofman & Senge, 1993, p. 7). Three fundamental dysfunctions within the culture’s dominant paradigm are identified: “fragmentation”, which has resulted in a society that has become increasingly ungovernable and at the mercy of special interest groups and political lobbies; “competition”, which they argue has become the only model for change and learning, and “reactiveness”, whereby the evolutionarily-ingrained penchant for dealing with dramatic problems rather than slow, gradual processes has made humans poorly prepared to face a “new class of systemic threats” (p. 10). According to Kofman and Senge, these problems are rooted in a reductionist philosophy and mechanical thinking that has provided the basis for many of America’s successes in the past. Paradoxically, they observe

The very same skills of separation, analysis, and control that gave us the power to shape our environment are producing ecological and social crises in our outer worlds, and psychological and spiritual crises in our inner world. When we begin to understand the origins of our problems, we begin to see that the “existential crisis” of early 20<sup>th</sup> century philosophy and the “environmental crisis” of late 20<sup>th</sup> century ecology are inseparable - caused by the co-evolution of fragmentary world views, social structures, lifestyles, and technology. (1993, pp. 10-11)

Senge illustrates this paradox by pointing to the popularity of the movie *Dances with Wolves* (Costner, 1990), which, with its depiction of the destruction of an indigenous culture, has resonated with Americans’ sense that “they have lost a particular sensibility of what it means to live together as part of a larger natural order” (Senge, 1995b, p. 227).

Pulled between the new and old world orders, Senge suggests that Kevin Costner's heroic lonely outsider is a character to whom an audience similarly riddled with existential and environmental doubt can well relate.

In discussing the systemic problems being faced by American organizations, Senge makes frequent reference to a system archetype called "The Tragedy of the Commons" which was first identified by ecologist Garrett Hardin. This archetype is seen by Senge as being especially useful for dealing directly with problems where apparently logical local decision-making can become completely illogical for the larger system. By illustration, he describes the desertification of the Sahel region in sub-Saharan Africa engendered by rampant overgrazing encouraged by unusually high rainfalls and international aid assistance. In a neat rhetorical move, Senge makes the claim that the "tragedy of the commons" is confined not only to ecological disasters but also to organizations. Corporations, he suggests, have many depletable "commons" to share, including financial capital, productive capital, technology, community reputation, customer good will and the morale and competence of employees. When a company decentralizes, local divisions compete with each other for these limited resources.

In referring to the broader environmental concerns, Senge not only succeeds in grabbing the attention of readers already pre-occupied with impending global ecological doom and disaster but he also succeeds in distinguishing his message from those of other management gurus who, by and large, studiously ignore this milieu. Generally, the broader setting utilized by management gurus encompasses the competitive pressures of globalization and international trade but not environmental system dynamics. By making this connection, Senge develops a setting theme with its own built-in, mass-



media fuelled sense of significance and urgency. It provides an impressive and readily identifiable backdrop against which his own special brand of organizational drama can unfold. No one, therefore, can argue that the stakes are not high when creating a learning organization. This work might ultimately lead to saving the earth, let alone the organization. In his mind, there is no doubt from which sector the men with the white hats will come riding in from to deal with global environmental problems. As he states,

My deepest belief is that the way we operate the world as a whole is not sustainable. We're basically living off our capital and compromising the future well being of generations to come. It's ironic that business is the most likely institution (to master change), but it has the greatest capacity to reinvent itself. (Driben, 1995, p. 62)

#### Action Theme: Getting Control, but not Controlling

While Senge believes that it will ultimately be the private sector, and large-scale corporations, in particular, that will have to develop the ability to deal with and address many of the societal woes that we are currently facing, he is quite clear that they will have to take on quite different organizational forms and be led in quite different ways in order to meet these challenges. For example, in an interview, Senge makes the following claim

The leadership challenges in building learning organizations represent a microcosm of the leadership challenges of our times: how do communities, be they multinational corporations or societies, productively confront complex systemic issues where hierarchical authority is inadequate for change? None of today's most pressing issues will be

resolved through hierarchical authority. In all these issues, there are no simple causes, no simple “fixes”. There is no one villain to blame. There will be no magic pill. Significant change will require imagination, perseverance, dialogue, deep caring, and a willingness to change on the part of millions of people. The challenges of systemic change where hierarchy is inadequate will, I believe, push us to new views of leadership based on new principles. These challenges cannot be met by isolated heroic leaders. They will require a unique mix of different people, in different positions, who lead in different ways. Changes will be required in our traditional models. (Senge, 1996b, p. 11)

In Senge’s vision, organizations will increasingly have to become “localized” in that they will have to seek to extend the maximum degree of authority and power as far away from the “top” or centre as possible. “Localness”, a cornerstone of the learning organization, gives individuals the freedom to act, to try out their own ideas and be responsible for producing their own results. It also enables organizations to respond appropriately and in a timely fashion to rapid changes within the marketplace. Despite its obvious advantages, Senge warns that unenlightened senior managers may be unwilling to give up control of the decision-making process for fear of losing the thing they most cherish (i.e. “power”) and make themselves obsolete. Moreover, they are concerned that, by pursuing localness, the organization may lose its capacity for control.

To these concerns, Senge responds, “just because no one ‘is control’ does not mean that there is no ‘control’” (1990a, p. 292). By investing in the five disciplines of the learning organization, Senge suggests that organizations can maintain control at the local

level through a process of “control by learning”. The improved quality of thinking and the new capacity for reflection and team learning combined with an ability to develop shared visions and understandings of complex business issues will allow learning organizations to be controlled and co-ordinated more effectively than their hierarchical predecessors. He adds rhetorical weight to his argument for local control by suggesting that the traditional perception that someone “up there” is in control is based on an illusion that it would be possible for anyone to master the dynamic and detailed complexity of an organization from the top. Taking on two icons of American business, he stridently observes:

The days when a Watson or Henry Ford or Alfred B. Sloan “fought for the organization” have long passed. The world is simply too complex to figure out from the top, and too rapidly changing to abide with the slow bureaucratic decision-making processes that come with the top-down decision making in complex organizations. The breakdown of the authoritarian structures is universal, not only in business but in the world of public affairs as well, as can be seen only too well from the demise of the Eastern bloc governments. (1992, p. 72)

While Senge’s argument for local control is by no means unique among management gurus, the non-threatening and generally inoffensive way in which it is presented, makes it a reasonably palatable action theme which promises some form of transcendence for both sides of the labour-management divide. Workers are presented an essentially emancipatory vision within which they can take independent action and realize their full potential through learning, unencumbered by formal management

controls imposed from above. Managers, on the other hand, can take comfort from the fact that the world is so complicated now that they cannot be expected to be held accountable. They can also rest assured that within a learning organization control will be maintained in a constructive and tolerably orderly manner. Besides, as we shall see in the next section, Senge has some very important new work for these managers to be doing within the learning organization which is considerably more meaningful than the work that they have traditionally done within hierarchically-based organizations.

While Senge is comparably sparing in his use of heroic role models, he has pointed on a number of occasions to the example set by Dr. Karl-Henrik Robert, a cancer researcher from Sweden, to indicate what can be achieved when one individual acts within the local frame of reference. Dr. Robert found himself increasingly frustrated by public debated that seemed to immobilize people from acting on environmental issues. Senge describes how, in desperation, the doctor wrote a letter stating his understanding of how natural systems worked and sent it to 20 scientists, asking for their advice and contributions. One year and 21 iterations later, he produced a pamphlet, called *The Natural Step*, which outlined the basic precepts for sustainability upon which all of the scientists agreed. The scientists then sent his letter to the 10 largest companies in Sweden as well as the King of Sweden. With their support, four million copies of the pamphlet were sent to Swedish households from which over 10,000 people are now organized into networks of professionals who are actively supporting this cause. Senge concludes

This may be how infrastructures for learning and communities of commitment will come together - a whole country or company catalyzed by a simple picture of the system to which they are a part. Perhaps this is

the answer to the core leadership dilemma of our times: how can we create coordinated efforts around those systematic issues where mandated solutions from the top can never be implemented? (1995, p. 8)

It is significant that the hero in Senge's parable should hail from a nation-state that is widely recognized for its collectivist culture. Moreover, the real hero of this heuristic drama is not Dr. Robert but the "system" which has developed as a result of his initial initiative.

#### Character Theme: The Manager's "New Work"

A year prior to the publication of *The Fifth Discipline*, Senge published a paper in MIT's in-house publication, the *Sloan Management Review*, entitled "The leader's new work" (Senge, 1990b). In the paper, Senge laid out many of the key ideas contained within the book as well as a discussion of three new "roles" that leaders would have to play in order to build a learning organization, namely, those of "designer", "teacher" and "steward". While these roles have antecedents with the ways leaders have contributed to building organizations in the past, Senge notes that they take on new meaning within the learning organization and demand new skills and tools. Likening the organization to an "ocean liner", Senge observes that most senior executives readily relate their role to the "captain", "navigator", "helmsman", "engineer" or "social director". However, they rarely identify their role as "designer" of the ship. In this role, Senge charges senior executives with three main tasks. First, the leader must build a foundation of purpose and core values for the organization. Second, he or she must develop the policies, strategies and structures that translate these guiding ideas into business directions. Third, executives must create effective learning processes through

which the policies, strategies and structures can be continually improved. To illustrate the importance of this last task, Senge makes frequent reference in his writing to the use of scenario analysis by Shell's Group Planning during the 1970s led by Arie de Geus, another influential figure in Senge's writing (de Geus, 1988). The process of "planning as learning" is dramatically portrayed as having enabled that company to anticipate and respond successfully to the emergence of the OPEC cartel while the other of the "seven sisters" were left scrambling.

In their role as "teachers", Senge urges executives to stop trying to be the authoritarian experts whose job is to teach the "correct" view of reality and begin to "help people restructure their views of reality to see beyond the superficial conditions and events into the underlying causes of problems - and therefore to see the new possibilities for shaping the future" (1990a, p. 12). Max de Pree, the retired CEO of Hermann Miller and author of the popular business book *Leadership is an Art* (1989), is frequently held up by Senge as an exemplar of an executive who was particularly effective in this role.

The third and final new role of the leader, "leader as steward", is, according to Senge, the subtlest role and is almost solely a matter of attitude. The leader's sense of stewardship operates on two levels: stewardship for the people they lead and stewardship for the larger purpose or mission that underlies the enterprise. Senge quotes Robert Greenleaf, whom he acknowledges as being another major influence and who argues that

The servant leader *is* servant first...It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve *first*. This conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. That person is sharply different from one who is leader

first, perhaps because of the need to assuage an unusual power drive or to acquire material possessions. (Greenleaf, 1977)

In his earlier writing, Senge clearly identifies and scripts the roles that he believes senior executives should play in the drama of their quest to build a learning organization. In his more recent writing, he has begun to lay out roles that must be played by individuals at other levels within the learning organization. Specifically, he identifies two other leadership roles--the "local line leaders" and the "internal networkers". The former are heads of organizational units that are microcosms of the larger organization who have enough autonomy to be able to undertake meaningful change independent of the larger organization. The key role played by the local line leaders is to "sanction significant practical experiments and to lead through active participation in those experiments" (1996a, p. 3). In addition to playing a key role in the design and implementation of learning processes, local line leaders often become teachers once these learning processes become established. While Senge argues that there is much to be gained by taking on this role, he also warns potential local line leaders of the risks they run, saying, "improved results are often threatening to others, and the more dramatic the improvement, the greater the threat. Large organizations have complex forces that maintain the status quo and inhibit the spread of new ideas" (1996a, p. 4). Senge offers the cautionary tale of Fred Simon, a project manager on the new Lincoln Continental at Ford Motor Company and a champion of the learning organization. Through the use of such tools as Chris Argyris' "ladder of inference", Senge describes how Simon's team of engineers was able to break every internal product development record at Ford. Despite this impressive achievement, Simon was passed over for promotion and was asked to

retire early. He believes that his enthusiasm for the learning organization was a factor in his early retirement. The moral that Senge draws from this story was that Simon “should have taken the time to explain the benefits of the learning organization to key people in the top ranks” (Dumaine, 1994a, p. 155).

The other key leadership role identified by Senge is that of the “internal networker”, otherwise referred to as “internal community builder” or “seed carrier”. Typically, this role is played by internal consultants, trainers, human resources staff or front-line workers like engineers, sales representatives, or shop stewards. Of critical importance is their ability to move freely around the organization and their high accessibility to many parts of the organization. According to Senge, their primary asset is their lack of power. Because they do not have any positional authority, they do not pose an obvious threat to management, but they are able to exploit the informal networks “through which information and stories flow and innovative practices naturally diffuse within organizations” (Senge, 1996a, p. 6). The first function of the internal networkers is to identify local line managers who have the power to take action and are predisposed to developing new learning capabilities. They then connect people of “like minds” to each other’s learning efforts. Senge illustrates how this is done with the example of an informal “leaders of learning” group that was formed at Ford Motor Co. by local line leaders and internal networkers who wanted to share learnings and serve as a strategic leadership body. The individuals participating in this group saw their work as supporting continuing experiments, connecting these experiments with the interests of top management, and wrestling with organization-wide capacity building and learning.



In addition to providing a powerful action theme of getting control, but not controlling, Senge also develops a complete and well-integrated character theme that will enable individuals at various levels and within varying functions within the organization to transcend their current roles. Within this character theme, clear and inviting roles are clearly scripted and described. Each is accompanied by a few successful role models who repeatedly appear in his accounts and provide added confidence that this role is not only practicable but also well worth aspiring to.

### Setting Theme Two: Working it out within the Microworld

Early on in *The Fifth Discipline*, Senge devotes an entire chapter to an exposition of the “beer game”, which was first developed in the 1960s at MIT and has been played “on five continents, among people of all ages, nationalities, cultural origins and vastly varied business backgrounds” (1990a, p. 41). Senge notes that, irrespective of the players’ backgrounds or origins, the same crises ensue in the game with respect to the production, distribution and consumption of beer. These graphically illustrate the underlying barriers to implementing a learning organization which are the fragmentation of problem solving, an overemphasis on competition to the exclusion of collaboration, and a tendency of organizations to experiment or innovate only when compelled to change by outside forces (Kofman & Senge, 1993). Senge argues that, in addition to making these barriers visible, “microworlds” like the beer game can be a critical technology for implementing the disciplines of the learning organization.

“Microworld” is a term coined by Seymour Papert, a media technology professor at MIT, to describe an interactive computerized environment that simulates a real-world

situation. According to Senge, microworlds can help managers and their management teams begin to learn about their most important systemic issues by “compressing time and space” so that it becomes possible to experiment and “learn by doing” what the consequences of their decisions are in the future and in distant parts of the organization. Increasingly sophisticated computer technology is helping to create what Senge describes as a new type of “managerial practice field” for management teams. These are places where teams will learn how to learn together while engaging their most important business issues. Drawing parallels with sports teams and performing arts, Senge questions why it is that, unlike athletes and musicians, in most organizations “people only perform. They rarely get to practice, especially together” (Kofman & Senge, 1993, p. 19). Building microworlds will help managers practice by “helping us to rediscover the power of learning through play” or, more correctly, “relevant play” (Senge, 1990a, p. 315).

To give substance to his argument for microworlds and simulation games in general, Senge has provided a number of case studies of organizations which have been able to make important breakthroughs with them. Perhaps the most celebrated case is the “claims learning laboratory” that was built by a systems group from MIT for Hanover Insurance. Managers at Hanover felt that internal practices were contributing to claims settlements that seemed to be significantly higher than was fair (Hampden-Turner, 1992). By playing the “claims game” within this microworld, Senge shows how managers were able to pinpoint the source of the problem of escalating costs in the quality of the claims settlements that were being made. Senge recounts the all-important a-ha moment with obvious relish: “suddenly there is a wave of realization through the room: *If it weren't*

*for all of those overpriced claims settlements, we'd all have more money to build our departments to what they really need to be!"* (1990a, p. 329). Later he shows with a quote by one of the participants how dependent the managers had become on their microworld: "so what if we went back to the microworld... and tried out some other possible strategies" (1990a, p. 331). In a later account of this case, Senge informs us somewhat tersely that the takeover of Hanover Insurance by State Mutual Insurance uprooted the management support for the lab so that it never had the opportunity to demonstrate its full value in terms of the anticipatory learning it had generated.

In advocating microworlds as a critical component of the learning organization vision, Senge provided managers with a powerful setting theme within which they can find a safe haven for dealing with, and regaining control of, a world that has seemingly gone out of control. In this respect, he has literally presented managers with an opportunity to transport themselves out of their immediate time and space situations to the relative comfort of a world in which problems can be properly managed and even played with alongside one's colleagues in a safe and sealed off environment. The microworld theme acts as a powerful transcendental antidote to the "living in an unsustainable world" setting theme that emerges from Senge's writing which stresses that collectively we have lost control of the modernist project and need to act immediately. As Senge and Fulmer somewhat invitingly promise, "by utilizing microworlds to participate in the anticipation of these consequences, created with system dynamics, managers and their organizations can discover a new capacity for gaining control of their destinies" (1993, p. 33). Giving the microworld fantasy theme even more rhetorical weight is the allure of technology which, of course, will only continue to get better.

Despite the factors that have prevented microworlds from reaching their full potential (most of these being managerial rather than technological), Senge suggests that, with even more sophisticated technology, “future microworlds for teams will allow managers to play out their real-world roles and understand more deeply how those roles interact” (1990a, p. 337). Ultimately, I am reminded of the 1970s science-fiction movies *Westworld* and *Futureworld*, in which the virtual and real worlds become confused. My unease is not assuaged by the cheery pronouncement that, “when practice fields are cultivated in an organization for a sustained period of time, learning in simuworlnds and microworlds becomes seamlessly integrated with the real organizations they shadow” (Keys, Fulmer & Stumpf, 1996, p. 34).

## Sustaining the Vision of the Learning Organization

### The Critique

The learning organization continues to inspire a large and growing body of literature in both academic and practitioner journals. While much of this work seeks to build and refine the rhetorical vision of the Learning Organization, a sizable portion of it is devoted to critiquing the vision on several fronts. The first front homes in on the ambiguous, amorphous and ill-defined nature of the vision. While, as one commentator has observed, the learning organization has become a “very big conceptual catchall to help us make sense of a set of values and ideas we’ve been wrestling with, everything from customer service to corporate responsiveness and speed” (Keichel, 1990, p. 133), the quest to understand the concept of learning organization has been likened to “trying to understand the concept of an elephant while blindfolded. Your perception of the whole is determined by the part that is closest to you” (Calvert et al., 1994, p. 39).

In a review of the rapidly expanding body of literature that addresses the learning organization and organizational learning in general, Tsang (1997) has expressed concern at the growing dichotomy between what he identifies as two isolated streams of research--the prescriptive stream, which focuses upon the question "how should an organization learn?" (i.e. the learning organization) and the descriptive stream which deals with the question of "how does an organization learn?" (i.e. organizational learning). He laments that books on the learning organization like Senge's tend to be based on the authors' consulting experience rather than systematic or rigorous research. They tend to present only one model of the learning organization, which is supposed to be universally applicable, and ignores the cultural specificity and contextual constraints of their theories. Kilmann (1994) acknowledges that the learning organization literature is brimful of illustrations and vignettes from actual companies that are practicing what authors like Senge are advocating. However, he argues that "it is not enough to show executives what it's like being a learning organization, we must also provide them with the declarative and procedural knowledge for getting there" (p. 230).

DiBella (1995) has helpfully identified three different orientations within the learning organization literature--normative, developmental and capability. The normative perspective of the learning organization exemplified best by Senge presumes that learning as a collective activity takes place only under certain conditions or circumstances. Within the "developmental perspective", the learning organization is realized not in an absolute state but through stage evolution and occasional revolution (Dechant & Marsick, 1991; Torbert, 1994). In this respect, the learning organization is always in a state of becoming with learning styles and processes adapting at each stage in

the organization's development. According to DiBella, both of these perspectives view the learning organization as a "matter of becoming", presupposing that learning is not indigenous to organizational life. By contrast, the "capability perspective" sees all organizations as having learning capabilities that embody distinctive styles or patterns of learning (Brown & Duguid, 1991; Nevis, DiBella & Gould, 1995).

DiBella (1995) points out that, while each of these three perspectives has a different set of implications which can be in direct conflict, they contribute in a unique way to our understanding of the learning organization and organizational learning. He, therefore, advocates a "contingency approach" to selecting a particular perspective on the learning organization which recognizes our underlying theoretical assumptions about what organizations are and are for, and takes account of the needs and constraints of the particular organizational context. The normative perspective, he argues, creates a sense of vision that can inspire strategic, managerial action in situations when immediate action is deemed necessary. The developmental perspective reminds us of the need to consider organizational history and how learning is contingent on an organization's stage of development. The capability perspective, on the other hand, "appears to be the least threatening since it does not presume the existence of disabilities which require major change initiatives to rectify" (DiBella, 1995, p. 289). It is, therefore, better suited to relatively stable environments in which disruption needs to be minimized.

This contingent and multi-perspective approach to reconciling the emerging gap between the learning organization and the organizational learning literature appears to be gathering favour among many writers working within the field. Jones and Hendry, for example, suggest that "we need to hold onto the idea of 'learning organization' as a

‘direction whilst ‘organizational learning’, which is an aspect of the ‘learning organization’, is seen as a descriptive or heuristic device to explain and quantify learning activities and events” (1994, p. 157). Similarly, Burgoyne (1995b) states that

The learning company is an invention, not a discovery, a proposal, not an observation. Having said that, it is clearly one that manages its own learning processes to its advantage. The organizational learning process can, and indeed arguably must, exist whether it is known and managed, and to good effect or not--just as everyone has a state of health, what varies is whether it is good or bad, known or unknown. (1995, p. 22)

Enthusiasm for this contingent view is, however, by no means universal. Within the field of adult and continuing education, for example, the learning organization has generated mixed reactions. While there is a general sense of encouragement that the term “learning” has finally found its place in the business lexicon, many have expressed concern that the vision ignores or does not properly apply adult learning theory and principles. For example, Fenwick objects to the conflation of individual and organizational learning within the learning organization in which “the workplace appoints itself as the individual’s educator, personal development counsellor and even spiritual mentor” (1998, p.141). The learning organization meets the worker’s needs only if these are not in conflict with the organization’s needs. This results in a bias towards instrumental versus other forms of learning that may be equally valid and important to the worker. Moreover, because organizational learning is conceptualized within the learning organization as something that is shaped by non-reflexive managers and educators,

workers frequently become marginalized from the learning process that the learning organization purports to include them in.

A number of writers have questioned the ethical and moral basis of the rhetorical vision of the learning organization. In an editorial essay that appeared in *Organizational Science*, Victor and Stephens point to the moral questions of what they observe to be the “dark side” of such new organizational forms as the learning organization, observing that “the boundaryless, adaptive learning organization will exact a price from everyone involved” (1994, p. 481). Specifically, they question the morality of the incessant demand that is placed on workers to continually adapt and innovate, which puts undue pressures on the many individuals who derive a great deal of comfort from the predictability and routine offered by more traditional organizational forms. They also suggest that learning organizations have a negative impact upon interpersonal relations, observing that “these high-velocity, high-commitment workplaces--flash in the pan collectives--offer no ongoing relationships, no safe haven, no personal space” (p. 481).

Burgoyne has acknowledged that “some of the ideas associated with the aspirations for new forms of learning company are being used to sugar the pill of the delayering, downsizing organization” (1995b, p. 22). He also fears that the abuse of such ideas poses the greatest threat to the emergence of a genuinely more progressive form of organization. Similarly, Watkins and Marsick (1993) have identified a number of barriers that have prevented organizations from realizing the vision of the learning organization. They point to the culture of disrespect and fear that has taken hold of a part-time, temporary and overtaxed workforce that is suffering from a combination of learned helplessness and “truncated learning” engendered by the “ghosts of learning



efforts that never took root because they were interrupted or only partially implemented” (p.240).

Other commentators have been critical of the lack of attention paid by the proponents of the learning organization to questions of power, politics and ideology within organizations. For example, Foley (1994) claims that pursuit of such ideals as the “learning organization” is a myth which disguises a process whereby global capitalism is reorganizing itself. Along similar lines, Coopey (1995) has suggested that, “despite the rhetoric, the Learning Organization seems to be placed within a unitarist framework of relationships, a utopia to be ushered in through the pursuit of shared goals in a climate of collaborative high trust and a rational approach to the resolution of differences” (p. 353). Coopey predicts that, because proponents of the learning organization have stressed the control and plurality of the learning process rather than the question of who should and who should not exercise that control, the learning organization

Might well be destined to be transformed from a root metaphor, helping to explain the nature of organizational activities and performance, to a mechanism through which managerial control is improved under dramatically changed external circumstances. If this were so, employees could be expected to resist managerial pressures to conform, using their transformative capacity in defensive ways inimical to the aims of a learning organization. (1995, p. 355)

This tendency for organizations to take a new perspective like the learning organization which challenges old patterns of thinking and behaviour and incorporate it

in a way that turns it into another tool of control is also noted by Hawkins. He observes that Senge

Provides us with exciting ways of perceiving organizations and their problems systematically from new paradigm and post-Cartesian epistemologies, and yet consistently writes with a mechanical perspective about gaining leverage to the organizational learning in a way that dualistically separates us from that which we are trying to control. (1994, p. 72)

Dovey (1997) acknowledges that the profound changes that are offered by the learning organization are seldom achieved in practice primarily because of the reluctance or inability of corporate leaders to confront the central issue of the transformation of power relations within their organization. However, he is optimistic that the promise of the learning organization as a potentially powerful and radical strategic option can still be realized if leaders become willing to be guided by a theory of radical humanism that embraces notions of resistance and struggle in the processes of organizational transformation.

Perhaps the most articulate response to these criticisms has not come from Peter Senge who has, by and large, not appeared to have been moved to take these directly on in the literature, but from John Burgoyne, one of the co-creators of the “Learning Company” concept. Burgoyne (1995a) speculates that the popularity of such movements as excellence, quality and collective learning is directly linked to the underlying shift in the predominant forms of work, at least at the “frontiers of practice” within advanced capitalist societies. Specifically, he is concerned with the shift from “mentofacture” (i.e.

knowledge work and post-industrialization) to “spiroculture” (i.e. the creation of meaning and identity). Management fashions function as “transitional myths” which, because they make sense in both worlds, help to make the transition possible. Burgoyne’s primary concern is how this transition has been manifested in how we conceptualize learning-from-experience (LFE) within the workplace. He suggests that LFE is undergoing a necessary change in conceptualization from one of the individual learning alone by discovering the dynamics of a concrete environment as presented in Kolb’s “learning cycle” (Kolb, 1984) to one of people co-creating the meaning of their shared experience of the world as presented in the collectivist rhetorical vision of the learning organization and its variants. Burgoyne identifies “meta-dialogue”, that is dialogue about the basis for believing that things might be credible, true, or useful, as being a crucial process and tool in facilitating learning within the learning organization. In this regards, he directly addresses the concerns expressed by the adult learning camp regarding the conflation and subjugation of individual learning by organizational learning within the learning organization. He is also mindful of the political dimension when he acknowledges that “the prospect of dialogue as a generator of useful LFE does presuppose the willingness for, or inevitability of, a degree of power sharing both in dialogue and its consequences (action or joint meanings)” (1995a, p. 70). On balance, he appears to be mildly optimistic about the possibility of this coming to pass with his comment that “the post-modern pluralization of desire and motivation does level the playing field and itself represent a break-out from modernist control” (1995a, p. 71).

### Senge's Response

Senge's presence in the academic literature's critical debate about the learning organization that, to a certain extent, he has inspired could at best be described as muted and at worst negligent. His activities indicate that he has been more concerned with sustaining the rhetorical vision among his consultant and practitioner followers. Clark and Greatbatch (1999) suggest that a key activity of management gurus is to convince their followers that it is their particular ideas that offer the most relevant solution to the immediate problems they are experiencing and trying to resolve. This activity is not only important during the consciousness-creating phase of a rhetorical vision but also during the subsequent consciousness-raising and consciousness-sustaining phases (Cragan and Shields, 1996). The fantasy theme analysis has revealed the dramatic foundation that serves to make Senge's rhetorical vision of the learning organization such a compelling one for potential followers. But what has Senge done to ensure that his rhetorical vision continues to sustain interest and stave off the inevitable rejection of another management fashion? I think there are two features of the way in which Peter Senge has gone about organizing his rhetorical vision that are particularly salient when considering this question.

First, as was observed earlier, Senge appears to prefer to be loosely linked with numerous organizations in which he assumes a comparatively lower profile role and works in a more collaborative mode. He is committed to creating new organizational forms through which he has weaved an intricate web of academics, executives, consultants and practitioners who are committed to preserving and extending the vision of the learning organization. Innovation Associates and the MIT Organizational Learning

Centre (OLC) were the prototypes for the new organizational form that he and his colleagues are interested in creating. In 1996 Senge along with co-founder, Charlie Kiefer, sold Innovation Associates to the Arthur D. Little consulting firm (Ross, 1996). In an effort to extend the work of the OLC beyond its Anglo-American origins (and the direct control of MIT!), the OLC was “recreated” in 1998 as the Society for Organizational learning (SoL). SoL is a non-profit, member-governed organization with global ambitions inspired by the peculiar brand of “chaordic thinking” of Dee Ward Hock, the creator of the organizational infrastructure that supports the Visa card organization, (Waldrop, 1996).

In reading the letter inviting potential individuals and groups to join SoL, Senge and the other two chairpersons--Arie de Geus and Goran Carstedt--show that they are keen to model the disciplines of the learning organization when they state: “as with all living systems, a global network cannot be controlled or pre-determined...Different chapters (fractals) will pursue their own aspirations and issues and will adapt SoL’s basic design to the requirements of their social cultural environment” (<http://learning.mit.edu>). Despite these good intentions, Senge is cautious about SoL’s ability to disseminate the learning organization vision across the globe, observing “the challenge for all of us at SoL is to manage growth, commitment, community, and scope without watering down the principles that make organizational learning a valuable objective for organizations of all types” (Fulmer and Keys, 1998, p. 41).

This change of direction was further reflected in the themes of the 1997 and 1998 “Systems Thinking in Action” conferences that were respectively billed as “From learning organizations to learning communities” and “Learning communities: building

enduring capability”. According to the 1997 conference brochure, this theme was selected to emphasize the growing importance of the communal nature of learning because “organizations don’t learn: people do”. A “learning community” is defined in the brochure as “a diverse group of people working together to nurture and sustain a knowledge-creating system through improving theory and method, enhancing people’s capabilities, and producing practical results”. Peter Senge’s keynote speech at this conference promised to help participants discover what it was like to be part of an integrated learning community. Learning communities are viewed as being a, if not *the*, “natural pattern of organizing” and, as such, they represent a whole new territory with which to continue to develop the work of the five disciplines. The 1998 conference brochure solemnly predicted that “the corporations and organizations of tomorrow are those that can grasp the importance of learning communities and begin building the foundational capabilities for continued success.”

In addition to his organization building activities, Senge continues to display a remarkable affinity for publicly reflecting on how and why the learning organization was socially constructed as the next management fashion. In recounting what motivated him to write *The Fifth Discipline*, he recalls

It sort of hit me one morning about three years ago while I was meditating that the learning organization was going to be a hot area in business. I had already watched a fad cycle come and go related to work I had been doing for years with Innovation Associates. We had been teaching courses in personal mastery and leadership since 1979, and we all sat on the sidelines and watched as other people wrote about vision, empowerment and

alignment - ideas that we had been teaching for years. That morning as I meditated it dawned on me that it was not O.K. to sit on the sidelines this time. It was time for a book on the subject of learning organizations, and I wanted to get it out before the whole world was talking about them. I didn't want to define the territory; it is really too broad for one book. My hope was to establish a point of view of learning organizations that might serve as a reference point. (Galaghan, 1991, p. 38)

As it turned out, the book has become *the* rather than merely *a* reference point for work on the learning organization, selling over 650,000 copies worldwide (Webber, 1999). He is, however, typically ambivalent about the success of the book commenting "I am not even sure that it's such a good idea for the field that this book has been as popular as it has" (Fulmer and Keys, 1998, p. 34).

He also appears to be quite philosophical about the prospect of the learning organization falling out of favour, accepting it as part of the natural cycle in management thinking in which managers embrace new ideas, explore them and move on to the next one (Griffith, 1995). While he is not the first management guru to express concern about his or her concept being consigned to the pile of 'last year's models', his public statements suggest that he wants his audience to be fully aware of what they are getting into when they decide to embrace the learning organization concept. Perhaps by being explicitly reflexive about the management fashion enterprise and his role within it, Senge hopes that his followers may be more likely to resist the inevitable rejection phase of the cycle and persist with his concepts long after they cease to remain fashionable. The idea being that the learning organization is too important to be treated as another passing fad.

In a rhetorical turn reminiscent of Tom Peters' opening comments about there not being any "excellent companies" in his book, *Thriving on Chaos* (Peters, 1987), Senge has stated a number of times that there is, in fact, no such thing as a "learning organization". Instead, he states that:

The learning organization is a thing we create in language. Like every linguistic creation, this category is a double-edged sword that can be empowering or tranquilizing. The difference lies in whether we see language as a set of labels that describe a pre-existing reality, or as a medium in which we can articulate new models for living together.

(Kofman & Senge, 1993, p. 16)

His unapologetically normative perspective suggests that Senge is more than aware that he is trying to create and sustain a rhetorical vision. When pressed to define the learning organization, he has responded by saying that the learning organization is essentially a vision adding, "this isn't pie-in-the-sky stuff. I believe nothing motivates change more than a clear vision" (Meen & Keough 1992, p. 58). There is no apparent attempt on his part to use a rhetorical sleight-of-hand by having his audience confuse his essentially normative vision with a descriptive vision. However, in the media accounts of the learning organization these two visions do frequently become blurred and confused.

This confusion is further exacerbated by his attempts to respond to demands by practitioners to make the learning organization more concrete and to lay out the steps that are required to create one. His first attempt to address this challenge, *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook* (Senge et al., 1994) received a mixed reception from the practitioner community with the general consensus being that, while it contained some



interesting and provocative ideas, it was still not sufficiently practical. Five years later, Senge and his colleagues have produced the book *The Dance of Change* which is tellingly subtitled “The Challenges of Sustaining Momentum in Learning Organizations” (Senge, Kleiner, Roberts, Roth, and Ross, 1999). The term “dance of change” refers to what the authors suggest is the inevitable interplay between “growth processes” (i.e. the five disciplines) and “limiting processes” (i.e. the ten challenges that accompany any change process). These challenges are grouped into three categories: challenges of initiating change (“We don’t have time for this stuff!”, “We have no help!”, “This stuff isn’t relevant”, “They’re not walking the talk!”); challenges of sustaining momentum (“This stuff is...!”, “This stuff isn’t working!”, “They’re acting like a cult!”); and challenges of systemwide redesign and rethinking (“They...never let us do this stuff”, “We keep reinventing the wheel”, “Where are we going?”). To overcome these challenges, Senge urges managers to replace the predominant “company-as-machine” model with a “company-as-living-organism” model, concluding somewhat blandly, “we need to think less like managers and more like biologists” (Webber, 1999, p. 180). While by no means a “has-been” in the management guru arena, Senge’s publishers must be relieved that this long promised sequel has finally materialized. It will be interesting to see whether this latest book and the media attention it receives has the dramatic qualities required to re-ignite and sustain interest in the learning organization vision over the longer haul.

## Summary

In this chapter we have observed that, although by no means unique or original, Peter Senge's vision of the learning organization has proven to be remarkably popular and persuasive. While he shares some of the common characteristics of management gurus (i.e. a solid academic pedigree combined with a gift and predilection for self-promotion), there are also a number of features that distinguish him. These include a distinctive anti-guru persona and a determinedly decentralized and collaborative approach to organizing his activities. He has disseminated a new age message that attempts to integrate Eastern and Western philosophies that can appeal to both managers and employees in the private, public and not-for-profit sectors. Most notably, senior executives and those working in the field of human resource development appear to have been most vocal in their support for Senge's vision of the learning organization.

In examining this rhetorical vision, four key fantasy themes were described and identified. These included 'living in an unsustainable world' (setting theme), 'getting control but not controlling' (action theme), 'the manager's new work' (character theme) and 'working it out in the microworld' (setting theme). This chapter has suggested that it is the dramatic qualities of his socially-rooted vision, that is, its ability to inspire followers to see themselves actively engaged in building a learning organization, that have helped Senge's vision stand out from other competing conceptions. Senge's collectivist vision of the learning organization continues to hold lingering generative

power for researchers and practitioners alike because of its underlying social master analogue. The vision resonates with a substantial constituency of individuals who are seeking a higher level of meaning and purpose in the work that they do and with the people they work with. Only by working together in a common cause can an individual truly realize his or her full self.

The learning organization concept has come under considerable critical scrutiny. The idea has been attacked on instrumental, theoretical, moral and political grounds. While Senge and his colleagues have not responded directly to this critique, they have sought to clarify and reaffirm that the learning organization is an aspiration and, as such, it should defy precise definition and implementation directives. They have also endeavoured to expand the vision to encompass learning communities that supersede and transcend the barriers and resistance that have been encountered in many organizations. This has required innovative changes to the organizational forms that support the rhetorical vision to ensure that it extends well beyond its traditional North American base. In the process, Peter Senge has shown himself to be an adept and agile sanctioning agent who, by putting into practice much of what he preaches, has been able to sustain widespread interest in his rhetorical vision.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

“What’s wrong with a phenomenon that brings comfort to so many people? That’s a bit like asking what’s wrong with a lobotomy, a steady diet of happy pills. The rise of charismatic authority figures is always disconcerting, especially when they malign rationalism and exhort us to abandon critical thinking in order to realize spiritual growth. Pop gurus prey on existential anxieties and thrive when our fear of being alone and mortal in an indifferent universe is stronger than our judgement. No one who seeks worship, however, covertly, deserves respect. Argue with them, please”.

(Kaminer, 1997, p. 60)

“Putting on a tie makes me puke. Putting on a black suit makes me want to puke even more. And hanging out with a bunch of pompous old white male bastards who run large corporations doesn’t do a lot for me.”

Tom Peters quoted in *Report on Business Magazine* (1992, p. 13)

### Introduction

In the introductory chapter, I laid out the three main purposes of the study. First, I wanted the study to build on and add to the emergent theoretical debate about guru theory. It was an area that had traditionally been neglected yet it appeared to be teeming with intellectual promise. Second, I wanted to provide more empirical material that could inform this emergent theoretical debate. I observed in the literature a general paucity of good, systematic and detailed empirical case studies of individual management fashions. Third, I wanted to develop a rhetorical critique that might engage both practitioners and academics in a critical dialogue about the sources of the underlying appeal

of these and other management guru-inspired management fashions and to reflect on the quality of managerial and organizational learning that they have been responsible, either directly or indirectly, for generating. In my interactions with both academics and practitioners I had come across numerous individuals who were equally curious and asking similar questions about the management guru and management fashion phenomenon but to all intents and purposes, they were not talking across their respective community boundaries. It was hoped that this study might provide some stimulus, or at least raw material, to enable such a dialogue to take place.

In this concluding chapter I will take each of these three purposes and assess what, in particular, the study may have contributed to fulfilling them. I will also discuss some of the limitations of the study that may have restricted its ability to make a fuller contribution. In light of these limitations, I will identify some potentially fruitful directions and areas for future research. The chapter begins by looking at the empirical contributions of the study. It then reviews its theoretical contributions, assessing what the study may have been able to add to the emerging theoretical debate. The chapter and the study closes with a consideration of the challenges and pitfalls of facilitating a critical dialogue about management gurus and management fashions between the academic and practitioner communities.

## Expanding the Empirical Account

### Contributions

This study has provided detailed rhetorical critiques of three organizational improvement programs that attracted the largest followings during the 1990s in North

America. While a number of critiques have already been conducted of the reengineering movement (e.g. Grint, 1994; Grey and Mitev, 1995; Wilmott, 1994), the effectiveness and the learning organization movements have not previously been analysed in any systematic fashion. With the exception of Wolfe (1998), Stephen Covey has eluded academic scrutiny. Likewise, although the concept of the learning organization has attracted a great deal of attention, I am not aware of a study that has looked at either Peter Senge or the movement that has developed around him.

In addition to breaking new empirical ground, the multiple cases allowed for comparisons to be made of the shape and form of the three managerial movements that arose during approximately the same time period. Historically, researchers have tended to treat management fashions indiscriminately. One fad is much like another. These three case studies have, however, revealed some important differences as well as some important similarities between them and it is these that will be described in this section. The key rhetorical elements of each of these management fashions are summarized in Table 14.

Beginning with the sanctioning agents of each management fashion, it is clear from the reading of the public discourse that the credibility and charismatic qualities of the management guru's persona are a very powerful legitimizing agent for a management fashion. Most of the journalistic accounts of these management fashions pay particular attention to the background and personal presence of the guru, to the point that the fashion and the guru appear to be inseparable in the reader's mind. Given the central role of the management guru in guaranteeing the management fashion, it is intriguing to observe the diverse personae that have been constructed around each management guru.

Table 14

The key rhetorical elements of three major management fashions of the 1990s

Technical Term	Case One	Case Two	Case Three
Rhetorical Vision	Reengineering	Effectiveness	The Learning Organization
Symbolic Cues	<i>The Reengineering Revolution</i> <i>Reengineering Management</i>	<i>The Seven Habits</i> <i>First Things First</i> <i>Principle-Centered Leadership</i>	<i>The Fifth Discipline</i>
Sanctioning Agent(s)	Michael Hammer James Champy	Stephen Covey	Peter Senge
Master Analogue	Pragmatic	Righteous	Social
Setting themes		'Back to the Farm'	'Living in an unsustainable world' 'Working within the Microworld'
Character themes		'Finding True North'	'The Manager's New Work'
Action themes	'Preservation of Self' 'Redemption of Self' 'Representation of Self'	'Working from the Inside Out'	'Getting Control But Not Controlling'
Fantasy type	'Restoration'	'Restoration' 'Fetching Good Out of Evil'	'Fetching Good Out of Evil'

In one corner stands Michael Hammer, a truculent and outspoken provocateur who appears to take great delight in shocking and terrorizing his audience. In the opposite corner stands Stephen Covey, a considerably more solemn and deliberate presence who measures every word as if it is worth its weight in gold, gliding determinedly through his sermon. In an entirely different ring stands Peter Senge, the unassuming Ivy Leaguer who projects a studiously anti-guru persona through his soft-spoken, high-pitched voice and donnish attire.

In addition to divergent personae, each management guru has gone about the task of organizing his rhetorical vision in entirely different ways. Stephen Covey has maintained

close control of his vision by internalizing all of the associated consulting activities and supplying a dazzling array of product lines originally to very good effect through the Covey Leadership Center and, more recently and less successfully, with the merged Franklin Covey Company. By contrast, Peter Senge has professed and evinced a far more collaborative approach to organizing, developing loose and tight associations with numerous organizations while maintaining his links with the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Michael Hammer has severed his link with the Harvard Business School and has set up his own corporation that continues to present seminars. He and his former associate, James Champy, have made no apparent effort to create and impose a monopoly on the lucrative consulting business that emanated from the reengineering movement. Although in a recent television documentary, Hammer acknowledges that he would have become a considerably richer man had he attempted to do this (Snoddy, 1999).

In comparing the rhetorical communities that have formed around each of these visions, Covey's rhetorical vision has had perhaps the broadest audience base upon which to draw. With its focus on individual responsibility and accountability, and its emphasis upon the integration of work and home lives, Covey's effectiveness movement includes executives, middle managers and employees at all levels within both private and public sector organizations. The reengineering vision, on the other hand, found particular favour among senior executives and consultants from the private sector (most notably those in information technology and finance functions) who were lured by the promise of dramatic performance improvements and cost savings. The learning organization has attracted most interest from senior executives from all three sectors who are driven by more ostensibly altruistic concerns as well as human resource developers and training



managers keen to move learning processes higher up the crowded corporate agenda.

While there is no doubt considerable overlap between the rhetorical communities that have coalesced around these visions, it is apparent that the content of the vision and the marketing and communication strategies employed by the gurus and their supporting organizations have created quite different communities in terms of membership and the degree and levels of commitment they evince.

Turning to the content of these three management fashions, each could be placed at different points along a continuum that measures the relative weight placed by the vision upon organizational versus individual change. At one end of the continuum, the reengineering vision is almost entirely preoccupied with organizational design and process issues. Individuals are there merely to fill roles that are created by revamped business processes. At the other end of the continuum, Covey's effectiveness vision focuses on individual transformation, suggesting, but not articulating in any substantial way, that organizational change will necessarily follow if individuals take responsibility for themselves and cease to worry about wider organizational issues. With the emphasis placed on creating learning organizations, it would be natural to assume that Peter Senge's vision lies at the organizational end of the spectrum. However, closer inspection reveals that, with his five disciplines which include both "systems thinking" and "personal mastery", Senge has attempted to create a vision that integrates both individual and organizational transformation and, is therefore best conceptualized as spreading either way along the continuum.

As was explained in Chapter Four, part of the reason that these three case studies were selected was that they were viewed as being good exemplars of the three master

analogues which Bormann and his colleagues have found to run through all of the rhetorical visions in America that they have analysed. In this study I have suggested that the reengineering vision is rooted in a pragmatic master analogue because the primary reason for pursuing that vision is that the potential follower has no other choice than to pursue it. To ignore it would mean certain extinction. Covey's vision of effectiveness, by contrast, is rooted in a righteous master analogue which stresses that followers should pursue the vision because it is the right thing to do. The vision is, after all, founded on principles that are universal and indisputable. Peter Senge's vision of the learning organization is rooted in a social master analogue which urges followers to collectively pursue the vision because it is a good thing to do. In working together to create the common goal of a learning organization, individuals can transcend their differences and find inner peace.

In focusing on the illustrative power of each of the three case studies, it is likely that I have overstressed the exclusivity of each master analogue. In actual fact, one can observe elements of the other two master analogues in each of this study's three visions. In stressing the relative superiority of each of their visions, Covey and Senge are, to a certain extent, basing their appeal on pragmatic grounds. That is, they urge you to consider this vision because you have no choice but to follow. Similarly, by placing some emphasis on the validity of their respective visions, Hammer, Champy and Senge partially base their appeals on righteous grounds. The vision has proven to be successful so why not pursue it? Finally, I have observed Hammer, Champy and Covey stressing the social benefits, particularly in terms of team-work, that can be reaped as a result of pursuing their respective visions. In sum, elements of the three master analogues can be

traced in each of the rhetorical visions that have been analysed in this study. However, I would argue that one master analogue quite clearly predominates within each vision.

In light of the fact that each rhetorical vision is undergirded by a different primary master analogue, we should not be surprised to learn that the building blocks or fantasy themes of each vision vary in number, mix and type. While strong setting and action themes were identified in both the effectiveness and learning organization visions, no singularly powerful setting or action theme was identified within reengineering. The effectiveness movement derived considerable rhetorical energy from the frontier mythology of America's agrarian past. The learning organization, on the other hand, drew on two settings at quite different scales - the global system under environmental threat and the considerably more intimate sanctuary of the computer-simulated microworld.

With respect to character themes, both the reengineering and the learning organization visions focused heavily on the changing roles of the manager. The learning organization vision stressed the positive aspects associated with the new manager's roles within this new vision. The reengineering vision, by contrast, emphasized the negative characteristics of the conventional recalcitrant middle manager and then offered a path of salvation for those bold enough to take it. The effectiveness vision drew largely on characters outside of the corporate world for its inspiration. These included both high profile individuals and ordinary folk just like the readers. Indeed, the individual testimonial appears to becoming a central feature of Covey's proselytizing strategy.

There was more commonality between the action themes identified within two of the cases. Each adopted a variant of a stage model to show how individuals could

progress through some well-articulated scripts in order to transform their current situations. Covey's pilgrimage was considerably more spiritual and individually driven than those described in the other two visions which tended to take a more active account of the individual's changing organizational context and constraints. Senge's action theme was considerably less formulaic than Covey's. The relative vagueness of this theme is something that he has consistently been criticized for by practitioner audiences anxious to get a handle on the 'how-to' of the learning organization.

What is clear from the study is that the Burkean motives of identification, transcendence and hierarchy could be detected in all three rhetorical visions even though they were associated with different types of fantasy theme. The critical first step for the guru is to ensure that managers can quickly find themselves within the vision. Getting managers to *identify* either with a strong setting theme (i.e. a dysfunctional organization or a mythical past) or character theme (i.e. a regular over-worked, under-resourced manager) within a vision appears to be an effective means for establishing a rhetorical link with the guru's audience. Having achieved this, the guru has then to ensure that managers can be clear about how they can *transcend* their current situations or roles. An action theme (i.e. a step-by-step model) or a character theme (i.e. a famous or infamous role model) can provide a powerful means to show them the way ahead. At the same time, the manager needs to be clear that, through transcendence, he or she can continue to progress and move forward through some kind of *hierarchical* system within the new organizational form. The rhetorical vision must not force them to lose ground within the organization. Strong character themes are particularly effective in giving the manager

confidence and reassurance that things will turn out well if they decide to participate fully in the rhetorical vision. They will, in fact, be better off at the end of the day.

Bormann (1982) has identified two major fantasy types that originate in the puritan settlements of the New World and have proven to be a remarkably resilient feature of American public discourse in the last three hundred years. The “restoration” fantasy type which urges Americans to hearken back to the perfect society originally envisaged by the founding fathers, has been traced by researchers in numerous religious, political and social movements and can clearly be seen in Michael Hammer and James Champy’s call to make America great again as well as Stephen Covey’s plea for Americans to turn away from the predominant ‘personality ethic’ back to the ‘character ethic’. Interestingly, Senge makes only limited reference to America’s past, preferring instead to look ahead at creating new models of community and society. The “fetching good out of evil” fantasy type dwells on the positive community building forces that can be harnessed when Americans are under threat. This motif can be clearly detected in Covey’s vision but is probably most pronounced within Senge’s learning organization with its heavy emphasis upon collective action in the face of global catastrophe.

All three visions clearly resonate with the deep cultural proclivities of the American psyche. In this study I have begun to trace some of these points of resonance but I sense that there is considerably more opportunity for a deeper and more extensive investigation particularly from scholars who are more deeply immersed in American history and cultural studies. This work would also seek to delineate the cultural specificity of these visions, helping non-American scholars assess to what extent the rhetorical visions are truly universal. Appreciating that looking to the past and to the broader national culture

is crucial for furthering our understanding of contemporary, supposedly future-oriented, managerialist rhetorical visions, is a critical first step in a research program that holds considerable promise.

### Limitations and Future Directions

The first and most obvious limitation of this study is that it encompassed only three case studies. As discussed in Chapter Four, these case studies were conducted in order to provide a deeper description of the discourse related to management fashions and to sketch out the beginnings of an exploratory framework within which to better understand the management fashion and management guru phenomenon. The case study approach was taken because I was asking “how” and “why” questions about a contemporary set of events over which I had little or no control. A multiple case study strategy was chosen in the hope that it might lay the groundwork for further theorizing through a still larger collection of cases. These case studies were specifically selected because they were three very popular management fashions that had emerged during the same time period. They also provided graphic illustrations each of the master analogues that had been identified by Bormann and his colleagues at the Minnesota communication school.

The obvious next step for empirical research would be to extend this dramatic method to other management fashions, especially those that have emerged prior to the 1990s. For example, fantasy theme analyses could be conducted of the Total Quality Management, Excellence, Theory A and Theory Y and even the Scientific Management movements. It would be especially interesting to see if and what master analogues could be identified for each of these and other popular movements. Similarly, in building up a

collection of fantasy theme analyses of management fashions it would be worthwhile assessing any patterns that might be detected in the predominance of action, setting or character themes. This might help us to determine, for example, if certain themes tend to predominate during stages of the economic cycle. And what are the recurrent fantasy types, if any? Have any new fantasy types emerged?

In this study the focus has been on trying to understand the processes by which a management fashion is articulated, disseminated and legitimated with specific reference to the role of the management guru. Given the media's pivotal role in this process, business media documents as well as the gurus' original texts have served as the primary source of data. While this has proven to be a rich and varied source of data, it has inevitably limited the range and scope of the study. One obvious area where we need to extend our empirical reach is to collect primary data from both the consumers and the producers of management fashions. In Chapter Two, studies by Huczynski (1991) and Watson (1994) were singled out as lone yet commendable attempts to ascertain through interviews how managers themselves actually made sense of management gurus and management fashions. More recent studies conducted by Knights and McAbe (1998a; 1998b) illustrate the utility of conducting ethnographic analyses of the impact of management fashions as they are adopted and implemented within organizations. A ground-breaking study by Clark and Greatbatch (1999) draws on interviews with five management gurus to develop an explanation of guru impact and success informed by Actor Network Theory. They identify the role of the book editor as one that is particularly significant and requires further exploration. From my own experience I would add the distinctive roles played by the speaker's bureau, the seminar production

agency and the meeting manager in the management fashion industry. Detailed studies of each of these would, I am sure, yield some important new insights that would also help to fill out our understanding of this relatively under-analysed industry.

As was noted in Chapter Three, Symbolic Convergence Theory (SCT) and Fantasy Theme Analysis (FTA) have been applied exclusively to American phenomena. This study is no exception to this tradition, although it has encompassed media accounts from other countries, most notably Canada, the United Kingdom and New Zealand. Bormann has developed SCT with the aim of making it a theory that can be generalized to all cultural contexts. It would, therefore, make sense to conduct fantasy theme analyses in other national and regional contexts to see how generalizable the theory actually is. My sense would be that, with the globalization of the mass media and the widening influence of managerialism, the theory and the method may be more generalizable than it might have been previously. I am hoping to have the opportunity to assess this question by conducting some case studies of management movements that have developed in national contexts other than the United States.

Finally, I think that there may be potential to conduct empirical research that is guided by SCT and FTA on other management and organizational phenomena, beyond management fashions and management gurus. In Chapter Three I reviewed an array of SCT-informed empirical studies that had been conducted by communication scholars on phenomena as diverse as political communication, social movements and interpersonal and small group communication. One area that I think would be particularly interesting to explore would be to examine the linkage between internal and external communication processes within an organization or even within an industry. For example, why is it that



certain strategic visions gain widespread acceptance and buy-in within an organization or industry while many others are ignored or, at best, given grudging lip service? How do strategic visions spread between organizations? Can we discern distinctive stages of consciousness-raising, sustaining and maintaining followed by decline and decay? What are the processes by which new managerial or technological ideas are brought into the organization? Which individuals prove to be the most influential and what rhetorical strategies and tactics do they adopt to influence others? These and other related organizational communication questions would be worth pursuing using a fantasy theme analysis that is informed by symbolic convergence theory.

## Theorizing Management Gurus and Management Fashions

### Contributions

The review of the of the management guru and management fashion literature that was conducted in Chapter Two revealed a body of research that, though still relatively limited, was rapidly gathering momentum. Not surprisingly, given its infancy, it remains relatively under-theorized and empirically under-explored. The present study has attempted to contribute to active theory development by introducing a method of rhetorical criticism that has previously not been used to analyse the management guru and management fashion phenomenon. Clark (1995) demonstrated the explanatory power of the theatrical metaphor in his dramaturgical analysis of the consultant-client relationship. This study was launched to extend this method beyond face-to-face interaction and to encompass the mass-mediated realm of the guru-follower relationship. With its traditional preoccupation and proven track record in investigating large and

small group communication processes, many of which were analogous to the management fashion setting process, SCT and FTA appeared to hold considerable promise.

The reasons for selecting SCT and the FTA method for this study were laid out in Chapter Three. Having conducted and presented these three case studies, it would seem appropriate to comment on the validity of the choice of method in light of its application. SCT did, in fact, provide a theoretical framework that was helpful in describing and understanding each of the three management fashions examined in this study. It proved to be sufficiently general to accommodate the distinctive qualities of each fashion and was flexible enough to capture the dynamic qualities of each fashion. Remarkably, I found the translation between theory and the data to be a relatively natural and a genuinely iterative process. I also felt that my interpretations were neither forced, nor constrained, nor overly prescribed. The FTA method enabled me to draw upon my experience and insights to build a distinctively individual yet rigorous and methodical critique.

### Limitations

In Chapter Three I reviewed five indictments that had been leveled by critics of SCT and the FTA method. In that chapter I was able to show that Bormann and his colleagues have done a thorough job of addressing three of these indictments. They have laboured to clarify the basic presuppositions upon which the theory is based; they have clearly demonstrated that the theory can extend well beyond small group to mass communications; and they have bent over backwards to show that SCT is not merely a re-

labeling of old concepts with trivial jargon that lack precision and clarity. There, are, however, two indictments that I feel I have not been able to resolve entirely satisfactorily even after using the theory and method to analyse four case studies including a pilot study. The first of these is that SCT's insights are researcher-dependent and not theory-dependent. The second is that, while SCT presents a developed epistemology, it is ontologically under-developed.

In a critique of an earlier piece of my work that utilised FTA, a reviewer expressed the concern that, although he found the paper interesting and insightful, he was not entirely convinced that the analysis of the basic themes of the guru's work was a result of the application of the methodology presented. He suggested that I could have arrived at the same findings using a more commonplace or conventional analysis would have revealed the same insights. Not being entirely sure what that more commonplace analysis might be I decided to persist with the fantasy theme methodology because I personally have been quite comfortable working with the methodology. I have found that, while it is a technique that is no longer being employed as widely as it once was, it provides a theoretical framework and a vocabulary for capturing what I was observing from my own direct experience. More decisively, it has helped me to say what I wanted to say about management gurus and management fashions. This is by no means the one or even the best way in which to conceptualize this phenomenon but it was certainly the method that helped me move forward the most in my thinking in a way that I found exciting and energizing. In short, it enabled me to identify themes in the gurus' work that were not immediately apparent from my initial reading. Ultimately, however, I recognize that, enthusiasms notwithstanding, the method will, and should, be judged by the reader

on the credibility, coherence and authenticity of the account that is rendered as a result of applying it.

Moving to the other indictment that I believe has not been fully addressed in either this or any other study, SCT and the FTA method still lack a clearly formulated and articulated philosophical base. In common with most communication and rhetorical theorists, Bormann and his colleagues assume that rhetoric is essentially “epistemic”. That is, they assume that rhetoric actively creates knowledge and that, in turn, creates reality and truth. By leaving the ontological questions unasked and unanswered, SCT and FTA leaves itself open to the charges of skepticism and relativism. This possibility has been raised by another reviewer of my work who questioned “isn’t the argument assuming a rather conventional (and dubious) form--that the ideas appeal because the ideas appeal?” My stock response to this question is that it is the dramatic quality of those ideas that make them so compelling to the audience. The problem with this is it doesn’t get at why is it that the quality of drama is so important for humans? We know it to be intuitively true and we also know that we can distinguish between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ drama. But how so we do go about articulating the underlying reasons for this?

In this study I have attempted to address this concern by proposing an exploratory rapprochement between the thinking of Ernest Bormann and Kenneth Burke. Both writers work within the dramatistic tradition and both bring two complementary strengths to the table. Bormann is a pragmatic theorist who has built up an impressive body of empirical research. Burke, on the other hand, is a strong philosopher who has done the most to tackle the tricky ontological questions posed by dramatism. Bormann’s method is helpful in identifying the basic building blocks of a rhetorical vision but somewhat

equivocal when it comes to identifying what basic psychological need that it might be serving for an individual. I recognize that there is something intrinsically persuasive about a particular theme and want to say something about the roots of its potency. Burke's motives provide a language for capturing these and ascribing a motive to a particular fantasy theme.

I have not come across any other attempts at a conceptual merger between Bormann and Burke which is surprising given their dramatic leanings but I think it is something that is worth pursuing further. One potentially fruitful avenue to follow might be to problematize the concept of the master analogue. Bormann is maddeningly vague about what this is, what function it plays and why there are only three of them. He is even less clear about how they should be identified. Intuitively, they strike me as being potentially very powerful ways of distinguishing between different types of rhetorical vision. However, it is quite apparent that they require considerably greater elucidation. Perhaps, in light of Bormann's reluctance to develop this concept further, Burke's canon might be the place to look for this.

Another related criticism that has been leveled at my SCT/FTA-related work is that it tends to privilege the role of the guru at the expense of the other actors in the organizational drama most especially the audience. As one reviewer remarked, "I have troubles with explanations that attribute the appeal of ideas to the cleverness of the presenter and the sleepiness of the audience. Isn't it also possible that these ideas work for the audience?" One of the appeals of fantasy theme analysis is its emphasis on analysing the message rather than any particular agent. I tried to keep this in mind throughout my analysis but will admit that, almost inevitably, I found it difficult, on

occasion, to separate out in my own mind, what was in fact the “message” and what was the guru’s text?

I would say, however, that the rhetorical visions described in this study derive their persuasive power precisely because they do, in fact, “work” for the audience. That is, they directly address the here-and-now needs of managers be they material, psychological, emotional or existential. The aesthetic qualities of the ideas cannot solely account for the popularity of a particular management fashion. They have to find a significant degree of resonance with the audience. This implies some kind of active and not purely passive participation on the part of the audience. Therefore, it is important to demonstrate that a substantial rhetorical community has, in fact, organised itself around the rhetorical vision and to be clear about the motives of the individuals for doing this. This is an area that needs to be further developed on both theoretical and empirical planes.

### Future Directions

This study was essentially an exploratory exercise that also acted as something of an experiment. It took a well-developed and widely used method of rhetorical criticism and applied it to a research phenomenon that was still relatively new terrain for management and organizational scholars. With this in mind, I would suggest that this experiment has been sufficiently encouraging to warrant further exploration both theoretically and empirically as discussed in the preceding section. On the former front, I would suggest three potentially fruitful lines of further exploration.

First, it would be helpful to integrate SCT/FTA within the broader dramatisitic or dramaturgical tradition of social theory. In their published work, Bormann and his colleagues make little or no reference to other scholars who have been inspired by the theatrical metaphor. Most notably, the two widely acknowledged figureheads of the dramaturgical method, Burke and Goffman are, for some reason both studiously ignored. Both Burke and Goffman have influenced a small but dedicated band of management researchers (Case, 1995; Clark, 1995; Mangham and Overington, 1983; Rosen, 1988). Perhaps these and others might wish to explore the potential contribution that SCT/FTA might have in broadening and strengthening the appeal of the dramatisitic method in researching organizational phenomena.

Building on this suggestion and picking up on a limitation of the present study, I believe that it would be especially well worth exploring in considerably greater detail than has been done in this study how the philosophical work of Kenneth Burke might serve to bolster the SCT/FTA method of rhetorical criticism. Specifically, it would be well worth investigating to see if it can address some of the major ontological weaknesses that have been identified by critics. Any individuals wanting to pursue this line of thinking should, however, take note that Bormann exhibited a distinct lack of enthusiasm for this project when I raised it with him (personal communication, November 24, 1996). He is obviously not a great admirer of Burke's work.

Third, I believe it would be helpful to look within the field of rhetorical criticism to identify any other potentially helpful methods that can be brought to bear on the management guru, management fashion and other organizational phenomena. The relatively recent preoccupation with organizational symbolism and concern for narratives

has resulted in a new interest in several modes of literary criticism, most notably French post-structuralists like Derrida, Foucault and Lyotard (Hassard and Parker, 1993; Reed and Hughes, 1993; Townley, 1994). While I applaud this development and the work it has produced, I also encourage management and organizational scholars to cast their nets even wider to look at rhetorical criticism, especially that which has been developed in America where a strong tradition of speech communication has been fostered. Although this field is not widely perceived to be an intellectual hotbed, it does contain numerous methods of rhetorical criticisms that, through conceptual refinement and widespread empirical application, could prove to be fertile territory for organizational and management research. We are generally new to this field. Why not, therefore, learn from those who have been working in this realm for a considerably longer period of time?

## Fostering a Dialogue between Academics and Practitioners

### Contributions and Limitations

Of the three main purposes of that were set out for this study, this is the one that I feel have been able to make the least progress with. Partly this is a reflection of the fact that it is an unrealistic and, frankly, somewhat arrogant ambition for one individual to pursue in isolation. Despite its lack of practicality, however, it did prove to be a remarkably motivating and enduring ambition. Of course, a doctoral thesis is probably the least appropriate vehicle for fostering any kind of dialogue between academics and practitioners. The form most definitely does not match the function in this instance!

Despite the obvious lack of direct success in this realm, I can claim a small measure of indirect success. As I was conducting this study I was invited to speak about my



research on the management guru and management fashion phenomenon at numerous practitioner-oriented events. The first thing that struck me when I participated in these events was how well attended they tended to be. The topic obviously held considerable appeal even though it did not fit that well into any traditional management category and it did not promise any immediate skills transfer. The second thing that struck me was how genuinely interested the participants seemed to be in the topic. It invariably generated considerable and animated discussion, some of it hostile, most of it constructive.

As I began to formulate the dramatic critique of management gurus and management fashions, I began to introduce various components of it into each session. With equal parts surprise and delight I found that the practitioners were not only receptive but also quite enthusiastic about Fantasy Theme Analysis. They appeared to quickly grasp the key concepts and the central idea of the method. Most significant, however, were the few participants who would invariably come up to me after the session and say “and I thought I was the only one who thought this way”. My first instinct upon hearing this was one of pleasure and instant gratification. Perhaps this was something akin, albeit on a comparatively miniature scale, to the adulation that the management gurus command when they speak to the mass audience. Further reflection, however, made me start to appreciate the dilemma that gurus must inevitably face. By telling people what they already instinctively know, you can indeed connect with many people-- in their case, a staggering number of people. However, in the process, are you forced to give up the critical distance so prized by the academic? In other words, if the only way to connect with practitioners is to “tell them what they already know”, are you any closer towards fostering a genuine dialogue? Perhaps the answer lies in trying to commence the

dialogue by locating this point-of-contact and, having gained some measure of trust and respect, consciously challenging it in the hope of finding new points-of-contact. Keeping out of the guru's trap is something that is, no doubt, easier to talk about than to pull off in practice (Jackson, 1996a; Lee, 1991; Reed, 1990)

### Curtain Call

In this study numerous roles have been identified and cast in the production of the three biggest corporate 'blockbusters' of the 1990s: reengineering, effectiveness and the learning organization. Because of his central role in creating each of these organizational dramas, the management guru's role as playwright role has attracted the bulk of the attention. During the course of the study, we have also looked at the roles played by the protagonists and antagonists, the producers, the auxiliaries, the chorus, extras and behind-the-scenes people. But what of the role of the academic in this organizational drama? For many, the appropriate role might be to stay at home and miss the show. However, I believe that academics are in the best position to play the role of "critic" to the guru's playwright .

As Bormann has argued

If the critic can illuminate how people arrange themselves into social hierarchies, how they acted to achieve the goals embedded in their dreams, and how they were aroused by the dramatic action and the dramatis personae within the manifest content of their rhetoric, his insights will make a useful contribution to understanding the movement and its adherents. (1972, p. 400)

In our quest to become effective critics I believe we can learn some valuable lessons from the leading practitioners from the world of the arts.

First, effective critics ignore popular culture at their peril. The dynamic and complex link between 'high' and 'low' culture is not only recognized but actively celebrated in the arts. We have to recognize that popular movements in management like reengineering, TQM, and excellence while, essentially transitory and superficial in nature, are nevertheless, important areas to research because they tell us a lot about managers and management and they have a real and, frequently deleterious, impact on the lives of those who work in organizations that embrace them.

Second, effective critics try to know as much about the audiences they are communicating to, as the artists they are criticizing. This study is one of a number of studies that have set about providing a rhetorical critique of what the 'artists' are trying to say to their audience. However, in order to complete this critique it is important that we begin to explore more fully how the audience actually interprets the artist and his or her work. We have lamentably few good analyses of what roles management gurus actually play for practising managers let alone how they affect them. These studies together with anecdotal evidence suggest that, on an individual level at least, managers tend to be quite ambivalent in their attitudes towards management gurus yet, substantial book sales and widespread and far-reaching organizational change efforts suggest otherwise.

Third, effective critics find the media and make the points that will enable them to connect their critiques to the needs and preoccupations of their readers. As academic researchers, we have to make a concerted effort to reach practitioners and compellingly engage them with rhetorical critiques that are informed by all that is good about the academic tradition. Namely, the desire to look beyond the obvious and taken-for-granted, the determination to see the task through to its full extent, the importance given to

considered self-reflection and a genuine concern with improving the human condition. Perhaps, in future, we should endeavour to connect with other groups, with particular attention to the senior executives who are the primary sponsors of the gurus and their prescriptions.

Dramatism is one methodological framework that is particularly suitable for management researchers who are interested in fulfilling the role of critic because it is both a technique of analysis of human interaction and a method for assessing social theories of human conduct (i.e. a meta-method) (Overington, 1977). It allows “its practitioners to tell stories about organizational mystifications, and in the process, teach their audiences both how to locate mystifications and to relate persuasive accounts of them” (Mangham and Overington, 1983, p. 232). The crux of any work that we do in this area as critics will ultimately rest on the plausibility of our accounts. Plausibility is, of course, ultimately in the eyes of the audience for those accounts.

As social scientists we have learned to hone the rhetoric of our accounts to other social scientists. As we demystify the rhetoric of the management gurus we can selectively learn from that rhetoric how to make our accounts more plausible to the audience of practising managers that needs to hear what we have to say. In this way we can take our place with the others at curtain call.

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