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Irony and Organizations: Epistemological Claims and Supporting Field Stories
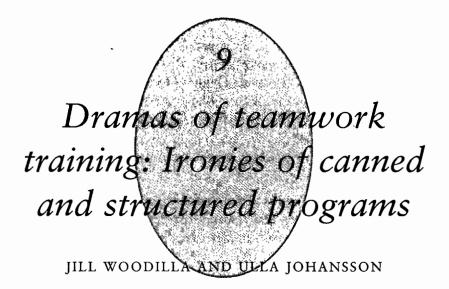
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Dramas of teamwork training: Ironies of canned and structured programs

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In this chapter we examine the practice of teamwork in a manufacturing company and the introduction of canned and structured teamwork training through an ironic lens. The empirical material, drawn from an ethnographic study, is presented as a narrative with three episodes. The ironic perspective enables us to demonstrate the situational irony of the training program that turned out to be counterproductive to teamwork. We show how the workers in this ironic situation used verbal irony in order to cope with the managerial discourse and their own reality – and how irony helped them get the daily work done. We also claim that irony allows us to critique the consultants' work while remaining sympathetic towards the consultants themselves.

The narrative turn in organizational studies has opened up new ways of examining both the everyday discourse of organizational members, and the tools researchers use to examine such practices in the production and maintenance of organizational realities. In this chapter we feature an ironic reality construction that helped workers handle an everyday practice that was decoupled from the legitimate official discourse – because irony facilitated coping with the multiple realities that the workers were part of and must relate to. We also argue that irony sometimes seemed to be nec-

essary in order to simultaneously handle the different – and often contradictory – realities they confronted. Irony therefore could be interpreted as a vehicle or device that facilitated the actual job they performed.

We also regard an ironic lens as a useful tool for the constructivist researcher when interpreting and reporting empirical material. Irony, contrary to metaphor, is little used in organizational studies, but has, as we mentioned in our introductory chapter, been extensively used in other disciplines. Irony enables contradictory, ambiguous, and paradoxical meanings to be included, and, as Brandser and Sköldberg claim in their chapters, it can be seen as a critical mode of postmodern critique. Brandser argues that irony is a scholarly identity and platform for a postmodern critical academic and Sköldberg argues for irony as the trope of postmodernism (see chapters 4 and 3 this volume). In our view irony provides both a perspective and a tool for academic work.

In this chapter, we use an ironic perspective to explore the situational ironies in a change process in a manufacturing organization that followed successive fads in how to do teamwork. It is an ironic story that also can be seen as sad from the perspective of each of the participating groups: managers, consultants, and workers. The well-intended, caring managers worked hard to improve the performance of their company through with the help of consultants who delivered the programs they promised. The workers, who were well aware of what was going on, could only hope that "this time it will work out." It is sad because it never did work out. In fact, the more workers were trained through canned and structured training provided by various consultants, the less they managed to improve their performance.

An ironic eye on the empirical situation enables us to uncover and include the multiple meanings and perspectives always present in the reality. Here we use it to examine how teamwork training was used and abused, and how the consultants' canned and structured programs became counterproductive to the aim. The ironic eye allows for a critical examination of the consultants' work, while remaining sympathetic towards the consultants themselves by uncovering and including their good intentions as we demonstrate how these good intentions failed. Because the canned and structured program was not really related to the organizational praxis, it could not work out – although it might well have been a good program in another situation.

Teamwork has been a "constant fad" in the USA during the past

decades.[1] New ways of doing teamwork have been presented one after another, and the number of articles about teamwork is enormous. (For example, an ABI-Inform search on peer reviewed articles published over the past ten years containing "team" in the title yields over 1,500 records.) However, these articles almost always focus on either "how good teamwork is" or "how to do teamwork". Certainly this is the case for the practitioner literature, which is filled with recipes for effective teamwork. In this chapter we do not question the benefits of teamworking in general. However, we take a critical stance towards the canned and structured ways in which teamwork is often presented.

Consultancy and teamwork go hand-in-hand, because consultants are often the messengers who bring the latest teamwork models to the organization. Consultancy has become a growth industry,[2] currently estimated to have total revenues worldwide of the order of $62B with expected annual growth rates of 20 to 30 per cent depending on the country.[3] Somewhat surprisingly, there has been a dearth of articles directly devoted to management consulting in the publications of the Academy of Management. The topic, however, has received considerable attention in the organizational development literature, with some articles going beyond prescriptions for successful program implementation and instead focusing on assessing the relationship between consultant and client[4] or expectations of different stakeholders.[5] More critical streams of research have drawn attention to the influence of the most powerful gurus,[6] the ubiquity of methods across different consulting practices,[7] and the subjective interpretation of "success."[8] This chapter is a critique of consultants using fads and having a program that supposedly introduces "whatever the company needs" in order to survive.

The story is about a US division, here called SnugAdapt, of an international manufacturing firm. The company produces parts for the aerospace, automotive, and construction industries with sales greater than $100 million/year. At the time of the study about 500 men and women worked at SnugAdapt, 280 of them being unionized within the Teamsters union.

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1   Sewell, 2001.
2   Cf., Biswas and Twitchell, 1999; Won, 2000.
3   http:www.kennedyinfo.com/
4   Cf., Kellog, 1984; Shapiro, Eccles, et al., 1993.
5   Cf., Bartunek and Moch, 1987; Westley, 1990; Bergholz, 1999.
6   Clark and Salaman, 1996; Jackson, 2001.
7   Werr, Stjernberg, et al., 1997.
8   Anonymous, 1997; Solomon, 1997.

About 100 employees were technicians and engineers and the rest were administrative employees or managers. In this chapter we use "Snug-Adapters" for members of the organization, and "workers" to refer to the men and women who worked in production (mainly. union members but also some salaried technical employees). Production was organized in work cells according to the types of machinery and the skills of workers. Much of the machinery was old but some was state of the art. Many of the machine operators were steady workers who had been employed for 20 years or more.

This chapter draws on a secondary analysis of an ethnographic study made at SnugAdapt in the 1990s by one of the authors. Field work, which was conducted in two periods, included participant observation both of the production plant and the administration, formal and informal interviews with individuals at every level and in every department, and analysis of company documents. Field data included recordings and transcripts of interviews, observation notes and separate reflections. The result of the original study was reported as a series of stories in a doctoral thesis.[9] This chapter is a reexamination of the material from an ironic perspective. Examples of verbal irony are taken from conversations on the shop floor and ironic graffiti in the work cells and offices. The situational irony is an interpretation made by the authors when reading and analyzing the data from the ethnographic study.

This chapter is organized as follows. The first section identifies our interest within the literature of consultancy. The second section presents the empirical material as three episodes in the history of the company. The third section is a discussion and analysis of different themes of the empirical drama.

Management Fashions, Consultants and Gurus

Within institutional theory there has·been an increasing literature about management fashions and management gurus who become associated with particular fads.[10] Critical scholars have questioned the guru's role and pinpointed that it is not so much a recipe for organizational enactment as it seems to be part of the manager's own identity building.[11] The literature

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9 Woodilla, 1998.
10 Cf., Abrahamson, 1996; Abrahamson and Fairchild, 1999; Staw, 2000.
11 Furusten, 1999; Jackson, 2001.

on fashions – in both the academic and business press – can be divided roughly into two kinds. First, there are those who search for – or supply – a recipe, as a normative guide to how to act in order to change an organization positively. Second, there is a growing number of authors who take a critical distance towards these recipe books. The phenomenal spread of total quality management, for example, with its global appeal and distinct technical practices, is one such fashion that has come under intense scrutiny even while it is being embraced as essential for the wellbeing of America.[12]

Management consultants, while less researched as a topic of scrutiny, can be seen as messengers for gurus. The economic model of consulting "dovetails effortlessly in the larger management fashions production line, which ties together consultancy, business schools and business press in an eye-watering productive chain."[13] Local consultants stabilize a fashion by writing a recipe that introduces a fashionable organizational practice within the linked networks served by the consulting group. In particular, consultants can provide canned and structured programs in technical applications of specific programs, such as teamwork.

While individual managers may have any one of a number of reasons for employing a consultant, it is generally assumed that increased economic performance will result from their intervention.[14] Yet, as critics of consultancy point out, bottom line results are seldom achieved because the project is defined in terms of the work the client will do and the products they will deliver.[15] Consultants are accountable for providing a program – which may be assessed by its recognizable features – that is, by its canned and structured nature, and not for specified results. Managers are left to implement the consultant's recommendations, to make the "good recipe" work. When the recipe does not work, another consultant, with another recipe, is eager to provide another set of solutions.

We see managers and consultants as co-dependent in perpetuating uncritical adherence to management fashions. When we turn our ironic eye on one organization and view ways in which consultantancy is implicated – or not – in workers' understanding and use of teamworking, we find paradoxes and ambiguities. We critique the work of consultants in providing canned and structured programs, and managers' uncritical

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12 Zbaracki, 1998.
13 Caulkin, 1997:33.
14 Staw, 2000.
15 Schaffer, 1998.

acceptance of these programs, while remaining sympathetic to the individual actors themselves.

The drama of the workers who lost their art of teamwork when formally instructed in "How to do teamwork"

This story is about the introduction of teamwork into a manufacturing company. Some years ago management and workers reorganized themselves. They did not label their new way of working as *teamwork*, but it included some of the characteristics often associated with this discourse. Later, when a prominent management guru talked about the way of working in this company as a beautiful example of what teamwork could be, some people interpreted the reorganization into *teamwork* as a success.

As time went by and the company again needed to improve its commercial performance, management looked for new reciepies for effective reorganization. At this time, *teamwork* was a buzzword in the professional network of the senior managers. The term *teamwork* launched the vehicle for success, as *the new way of working*, and senior managers arranged for a training program on teamwork. Ironically, management (at least from the workers' perspective) had forgotten that the workers already worked in teams, and the consultant hired as the instructor of the training program ignored the fact that the workers already had an existing knowledge, including both training and experience, in teamwork practice. Rather, teams flew like a fad into the company in the guise of something new, as something new that should replace the *old way* of organizing the work. The structural irony,[16] however, was that the more teamwork was launched as the discourse workers should now (again) learn and practice, the more it seemed that they were unlearning what they already knew and had been used to doing. Consequently, the more they were taught about teams, the less they worked as teams.

In this – in itself ironic – organizational reality the workers themselves used a lot of irony. They used irony when talking about teamwork, and they used ironic comments about management. Their irony, however, was not directed towards their own work performance, but clearly focused on

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16 Muecke, 1964; Lucariello, 1994.

the discrepancy between their own praxis and way of understanding the situation, and different official rhetorics. In their relation to the machines and the mechanical work they performed, workers acted in an inventive and creative way that lacked irony. It was when they related to the different organizational worlds created by official discourses and managers' interpretations that they were filled with irony.

We report the empirical study of SnugAdapt as a narrative[17] structured as three episodes from an ongoing serial drama, where each episode takes the reader into the organization, pointing to what seemed to be important for the SnugAdapters at the time. The three episodes correspond to periods with different company leadership and different approaches to organization, while the majority of the workers remained the same. The story is told from the perspective of the researcher who was directly involved with the production work, and who wanted to make some sense of the ambiguities and multiple realities that were often evident in the moment. The drama has none of the grand theme of tragedy or comedy. Instead it plays out as a *soap opera*[18] where the characters remain the same from episode to episode, and although each episode has a unique plot, similar themes – of dis- and re-organization, of new practices and relationships – constitute the realities of everyday worklife.

Episode One: The Big Event

The drama begins with a glance at the previous era. As the reader will grasp, although SnugAdapters – or at least the managers of SnugAdapt – wanted tó constantly talk about the past as worse than the present, and the future as even better, the reality was not that linear, not by a long chalk.

Talking about "the work way back."

Way back was a phrase used by SnugAdapters themselves – a phrase that signaled they were talking about what was before *the revolution* or the *big event*, two phrases that were also in common use at SnugAdapt. It refers to *how things used to be*. The story about *way back* came in small pieces

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17 Czarniawska, 1997; Van Maanen, 1995.
18 Tullberg, 2000.

from conversations, as recollections that were linked with the current situation.

People at SnugAdapt did *not* like to talk about the past. Rather, the company culture was really a symbol of the modern project, in the sense that what was past was definitely considered worse than present. The future was talked about as if it were taken for granted, either by hope or by conviction, that it would be better than the present. The rationality was clear: time goes from worse to better and better. At least it was talked about in this way.

Though it was only two or three years ago when SnugAdapters first talked about the time *way back*, it really seemed to be an ancient time, far away. It seemed as if, at SnugAdapt, when time had passed it had gone forever. Also, there was no nostalgia. Neither managers nor workers wanted to have time *way back* again. One senior SnugAdapt manager talked about the time in the following way:

> When I came it was just as if Fredrick Taylor was in charge. Machines were everywhere. Parts went from a machine at one end of the factory to another machine at the other end; then into inventory, then back out again, and so on. And every time a part was moved it got dinged and scratched a little. One department even designed and made special carts to carry the parts around.

The ironic aspect of this comment is that if Fredrick Taylor had been in charge, machines would *not* have been everywhere, but rather arranged in an efficient sequence. "Fredrick Taylor" signals "old fashioned" in this quote, but the irony is that it was probably a time and motion study of the kind that Fredrick Taylor would have advised that would have been needed in order to solve the very specific situation told about in *this* quote. However, the *tone* of the tale about this "Fredrick Taylor time" indicates that the company *way back* was a place where a professionally enlightened person would never have wanted to work.

The (management) revolution – a foreplay for "the big event"

The revolution referred to the time which began with the arrival of a new general manager, who came to be called "the leader" by the workers, and who himself took the title "president", a title that had not been used before at SnugAdapt. The president came from a consulting group working with the company, and he stayed remained at SnugAdapt for about

three years. These years, and what happened during them, were commonly referred to as *the revolution.*

The major feature of the revolution, as orchestrated by the president, was the stripping of the hierarchy and the flattening of the organization. Before the revolution there were, according to company informants, no fewer than seven layers of managers between those operating the machines and the general manager. During the revolution, most of the managers were fired and the company ended up with only one, or at the most two, layers of managers between the shop floor and the general manager, who was now called president. This meant that shop floor worker became both worker and supervisor of their own work.

The big event – or starting to work as teams without calling them teams

The *big event* was a specific prolonged weekend when the factory arrangement, earlier referred to as Tayloristic, was rearranged into a modular or work-cell arrangement. While the revolution was primarily linked to cutting costs by cutting organizational structure, the *big event* and its implied changes was primarily about the production process itself. The *big event* linked production and customers in a new way. The result of the new work layout, where all the different machines needed to make one specific part were arranged in cells, was that the workers did work as teams – though this way of working was neither labeled teamwork nor was planned as such at the beginning.

The SnugAdapters who participated in the *big event* would recapitulate the story by focusing on the rational new design of the work cell and how it came about. The reasoning started, according to informants, with a group of SnugAdapters asking themselves how they could solve the problem that "it takes us a minimum of 24 weeks from the time a customer says 'I want one' to when we can deliver it to the customer." The way they were reasoning was "How can we cut that in half? How can we reduce those 24 weeks to 12?" In order to solve this problem they went about it in the following way:

> So we spent a couple of days coming up with different concepts and ideas on how to do that. We ended up with designing a small focus factory and decided to go try it. That was on a Thursday night. We came back into work Friday morning, went to one building, and spent Friday, Saturday and Sunday reorganizing it completely, and then drafting

employees to work there. On Monday morning our first pilot-manufacturing cell was in operation. And we were extremely pleased at the results. We had taken that 24 weeks and reduced it to less than 12. We had exceeded our expectations by a significant amount. So we practiced and played with this pilot for about six or eight weeks, and said we ought to do this for another cell.

When told this way, and this was how the story was told to the researcher by a number of different people, the accent was on the rational side of the experiment and its result, and the short time of the change, are in focus. What was also part of the story, though mentioned so often, was that the experiment originally was almost done in secret. It was not discussed openly in the company until it was operating and in action in a successful way. But being so, it soon became the preferred solution for customer delivery problems, problems that had been a headache for the company for a while and now called for immediate solutions.

When the machines were grouped in cells, the workers started, without anyone telling them, to work as teams. The workers had never before worked closely together to produce a complete part or a final product. Rather, each person had concentrated on a single machine or one small part of the process, then "threw it over the wall to the next stage" as the saying went. After the big event, when grouped in small cells, something happened to the wall that had never existed in a literal sense, as an artifact, but was symbolic in its nature. The wall either crumbled or moved to surround the whole cell. Within the cell, workers handled the product from the beginning to the end of the production process, and focused on how fast they could deliver to the customer. Customer delivery became a new focus for the workers and brought customers to the forefront of their minds for the first time. Customers had previously inhabited a different worlds than the workers; however, after the big event, customers and workers talked to each other. Because the layers of managers had gone, workers were asked directly about the time of delivery. Workers would ask the customer to come and see them if there were problems they thought could be solved mutually, and the workers also visited the customer to see how the part was to be used.

In this customer-focused new culture, it was not a big step for workers to cooperate with each other within the cell. So without anyone talking about teams or cooperation, they just started to cooperate and consult with each other on how to make the customer delivery as quick as possi-

ble. Workers started to share tools, which they had not done before – previously they might have taken each other's tools without asking. So this relational change might be described as a change from stealing to sharing tools.

Also, workers had a lot of fun together. Because they did not have supervisors breathing down their neck they could relax and talk to each other. They had pot-luck feasts at lunchtime, organized by the older women. Because they no longer were required to "punch in and out" with a time-clock they took time off from work as needed to deal with personal business, and so could concentrate better when they were at work.

Ripples of the revolution

These changes attracted attention outside SnugAdapt. The results turned out to be both productive and energizing and managers and workers alike talked about the *big event* with pride. Even though it was a chaotic time, SnugAdapters afterwards remembered the positive energy being generated during the *revolution* and the *big event*. Even though they might complain about the present, they said they would not want to have the time *way back* back again.

Episode Two: Fame and Infamy

Throughout SnugAdapt the daily demands of production work continued, outside the company the changes of the *big event* and the way in which they were talked about attracted attention from other managers and consultants. The workers did not label their new way of working as *teamwork*, but when a prominent management guru talked about the way of working in this company as a beautiful example of what teamwork could be, some people interpreted the reorganization into *teamwork* as a success. Others had different opinions.

The guru comes and tells the world that SnugAdapters are working as role models for teamwork

About a year after the big event, a popular management guru, with ties to the consulting company that the president once worked for, saw links between the changes at SnugAdapt and his current interest in speed. Paying a whirlwind visit to SnugAdapt, the guru singled out the speed gained by ignoring the computer system for a traveling paper trail and by dedi-

cating special teams to expedite rush orders. The guru's video program, which was shown at management seminars and on television, immortalized the potential ability of production workers to solve all problems. The same story was later included in a best-selling book. It was a big event for SnugAdapt, and it gave recognition to the teamwork that, when it emerged from cooperation amongst the workers, was not even thought of as teamwork.

The guru's story began with the new president, overwhelmed by the task of turning around a business he barely understood, getting a phone call one day while out visiting customers. The production engineer asked him, "What should we do – the computers are down again?" The president replied, "Forget the computers. Go to the five and dime store, buy some crayons, mark the boxes, and ship them." Rising to the challenge, shop-floor workers took charge of the whole process, and the customers received their product on time. Building on this success, a handpicked group of workers took specially reclassified jobs (to placate union rules), formed a *rapid deployment team* and were given the authority to put together complete parts as needed. The energy these men brought to their new assignment was striking – and infectious. SnugAdapters described this atmosphere by saying, "The whole factory couldn't change quickly enough." Workers formed teams to attack production problems, used their ingenuity to devise solutions, and everyone breathed a (collective) sigh of relief that (almost certain) disaster had been averted.

The excluded customers requests

Following national exposure on the TV show, SnugAdapt gained the reputation of being a company that satisfied all its customers' desires. This, however, was far from true. The *big event* had not affected the whole organization. Some parts of the production process were still waiting to "get the big event" or to be reorganized in similar ways. Only a small portion of the organization was working in self-directed groups, although the TV program proclaimed the company as "the problem solving and speedy teamwork organization." One manager remembered the aftermath.

During the six months after the publicity and the media blitz, our customers would send letters of complaint with the guru's articles stapled to them, writing, "How come you treat everyone else great but you treat me lousy? If you have gotten to the point of taking an 18 week lead time down to two weeks, how come my product is four weeks late?" Stapled,

attached, article by the guru. People were laughed at. The people who took it in the teeth were our sales force, the front line. They got beat up, and I really feel sorry for them having to have gone through that.

If the program itself gave a sense of pride to the workers, the aftermath from in the shape of disappointed customers gave birth to the opposite reactions. SnugAdapters felt discouraged and frustrated at the same time as the golden story about the teamwork was going around outside the company.

"The Suits" were not amused either

The top representatives of the British conglomerate never visited Snug-Adapt. They kept themselves informed through the financial statements that were the sole focus of their interest. SnugAdapters knew these men only from their photographs in the annual report, where they wore dark suits and white shirts. Therefore, they were commonly talked about as "the Suits" – and no one at SnugAdapt wore a suit except for very special occasions.

According to the Suits, SnugAdapt's financial results were not matching forecast, and the final figures were not justifying the faith that management was putting in the workers. The president of SnugAdapt, being convinced that they were on track, pleaded for more time to show results. He went to England to make a presentation to show his expected projections of SnugAdapt's future results. However, the chairman of the board was not convinced. He did not even allow the president to make his speech. Instead, the chairman grabbed the marker and wrote a large "X" through the diagram of the SnugAdapt's situation, thereby clearly demonstrating both misbelief and discontent.

So the Suits quietly orchestrated organizational change at SnugAdapt. They promoted the president to corporate vice president of the British conglomerate, and he became a Suit himself. And instead of this former president, they brought in someone from another division with a special reputation for cost cutting. They also assigned a young American, who had been working in England, to be the financial vice president at SnugAdapt. At first, this man was regarded to be a mole who shipped financial information across the Atlantic, but over time he became one of the most trusted and respected senior managers in the company. All the same, after six or seven years at SnugAdapt, where few managers even wore a neck tie, he always wore a dress shirt, necktie, and dark suit to work every day.

Backwaters – a messy situation with diverse interpretations

Only in fairy tales do things ends well with everyone living happily ever after. In reality, everyday life goes on in a much less clear way. At Snug-Adapt life indeed turned out in ways that were unexpected.

As a result of the ten-minute TV-show, SnugAdapt was considered an expert on teamwork, and SnugAdapters at different levels in the hierarchy traveled around, acting as consultants, putting on their own teamwork show. These consulting opportunities lasted several years, with both union members and managers taking part in the performances. One of the middle managers later described the situation in the following way.

> We were surprised by the reaction to the TV show. Suddenly we were experts in doing it right – if only we knew what *right* was. Managers from other companies wanted to come and talk to us – and bring their union people to get the message straight from the floor. Researchers wanted to see what we did and the local newspapers were always after us for a human interest story. We – some management and some union folk – put together a nice little program. After a while we could do it in our sleep. In fact, we're still doing it – we just dust off the same slides, get into the spirit of things back then and start talking. The audience laps it up. They never seem to tire of how we changed things overnight – and they seldom ask about what is going on now.

What *was* going on in the company was *not* a continuation of the story the consulting SnugAdapters "spread around the world." The good teamwork spirit faded more and more. Though supervision was struck from the formal organization chart, it returned in the guise of commandments. A new atmosphere and a new language were created. Instead of a supervisor "breathing down your neck," a manager would say, "You're empowered – just do it!" Then the manager, being busier than ever, walked away before the workers could even ask what *it* was or how *it* should be performed. For most workers this situation to was even worse than being told exactly how to do the work and having every detail controlled for them. Because the workers had started to cooperate with customers, lots of things were complex and unclear, and needed to be discussed and clarified.

In the management of the company yet another new president, who personally had little enthusiasm for teamwork, wanted to continue the famous teamwork practices that had proved to be so good. So he decided

to restructure the company and put together a team for each business unit. However, this never turned out the way he had envisioned.

> One of the first things Bill (pseudonym) did as president was to change the focus in the business units. I suppose a new president always reorganizes. His scheme was to put two people in charge of each business – one a marketing guy and the other an operations person. In theory it was a great idea – the two were supposed to work together. The marketing manager drummed up business and the operations manager made product. But the orders never matched at the end of the month – we have to scramble to make what's needed for actual customers – forget about teamwork! Just switch to firefighting mode and do what you need to do to get the product out the door.

This Janus-face of production scheduling followed a monthly rhythm. At the beginning of the month workers worked in teams, helping each other to solve customer problems and orienting decisions towards product quality. The workers wanted to stay this way all the time. However, during the last week of the month managers said they had to meet production goals – which were always quantified. The message given this last week was, "Do it. Ship it!" Here, what "it" was, was clear. "It" was the product that should be shipped whether it was high quality or not. The workers were very frustrated. They might go to the manager and say, "This is not what the customer wants!" because they knew it would not fit the customer's assembly needs. However, the manager would say, "It meets written specification, ship it!" And frequently the product *would* be returned, and a new round of arguing with the customer would begin. Here, the workers would not have this responsibility. Rather, a quality engineer would be expected to prove that the part had been made properly according to given specifications, so that SnugAdapt would not have the cost of remaking the product. "Tell them it isn't so" was a common remark that was heard in the corridors about things everyone knew *was* so! And though the workers could easily have prevented the whole mess – and explicitly asked to do so – they were left out of the whole go-around, at least until they, now and then, got told to produce a new product instead of the earlier one.

The irony was that at the end of each month, the workers were expected to flip back to what the customer *really wanted* and make sure that the product came out that way. At the end of the month, if they had trouble

meeting production goals (which they always did), the whole circus would repeat itself.

Teams as the ironic answer to SnugAdapt's problems

Though most SnugAdapters recognized the messy situation, they had different answers to the questions of how it came about and what to do about it. Workers, as described above, would prefer to do what they now considered to be professional work: to work in teams focusing on customer satisfaction and product quality. The workers were saying, "It's the customer who pays us, we work for the customer,." evoking not only a *customer focus* but also a *common purpose* and a helping rather than competitive culture – in other words, teamwork the way the workers understood it.

Managers had other goals. They needed to make sure double digit profits happened, because this was what the conglomerate demanded. Snug-Adapt's president, at a meeting at the London headquarters, declared "*That* is impossible!" But because the response from above was, "Just do it!" the slogan cascaded downwards to the workers and became, "You need to focus on business goals!" This was a highly ambiguous directive from the workers' perspective, which could only lead to more confusion.

Episode Three: "Proper" Teamwork

In the complex and, for everyone, unsatisfactory situation of the previous episode, the president came up with a new idea. He looked around at what everyone else in his industry was doing and he found they were working in teams!

The president has an idea – "Maybe teams are the solution."

At this point in time the senior managers agreed that things were out of hand – and not the way they should be. The talk at the highest level in the company was phrased around, "We need to refresh the workforce," inferring that the workers were tired and needed to be reminded of, and return to, the spirit that once upon a time existed.

The president, who was not present in the era of the *big event*, and had only heard about the golden days when SnugAdapters had boundless energy and everyone worked together, wanted to recapture some of the magical power that would, hopefully, make everything *right again*. Whatever

changes he made had to be fast and cheap in order to save both the company and his own skin from the wrath of headquarters. And because all the companies in the president's network had teams in their formal organization, he decided that teams would be the solution for SnugAdapt's future.

However, this president, running the company six years after the *big event*, was an engineer who liked and demanded structure. That the magical teamwork of the earlier time was not a matter of orchestrated structure but emerged spontaneously never occurred to him. He took it for granted that teamwork should be deliberately planned and structured. So he looked for, and engaged, a local consultant, who proposed a structured plan for achieving teamwork within 90 days. Later the president admitted to the researcher that the consultant's goals and philosophy were not really compatible with SnugAdapt's interests and culture and that he had not explored what "a structured teamwork plan" meant, but rather, "I believed what he said because I wanted to believe what he said."

A consultant comes as the savior and tells the workers "How to do proper teamwork."

Initially, the workers were enthusiastic about the consultant, because he visited the shop floor and explained that he was there to help them. The consultant nodded in sympathy as workers spilled out all their frustrations, citing problems with machinery maintenance, illogical scheduling, and insufficient company leadership. He talked with the workers about their work and their views of the problems. To the researcher, the consultant said at this the time, "These men are great – they can do anything if they are given the right teamwork tools."

That the workers already both had experience of teamwork and were interested in continuing to work in teams were things the consultant must have been aware of from his conversations with the men and women on the shop floor. However, he was engaged by the president to implement a structured program and to teach *the proper way of teamwork* as it was being used by other successful companies. So the knowledge the consultant gleaned from his initial visits to the shop floor could not be allowed to influence the training sessions. He spiced his talks with some jokes and stories about SnugAdapt, but otherwise no one who attended the training session had any reason to believe that this man had ever visited the company.

The consultant's canned program did not include any of the teamwork methods that SnugAdapters themselves had developed in the past and continued to use whenever possible. The formal training session was a two-day off-site event attended by about 30 key employees chosen by management for their similar attitudes towards change. "We must change!" the consultant exclaimed. His audience nodded. "The president must get involved! It will be hard, but I will show you how!" His patter was personalized by company stories, but only the title page of the training manual was unique.

At the training session, the consultant explained the guaranteed results and carefully structured program, as follows.

The first stage is to have about four cross-functional teams that set bottom-line goals that can be achieved within 90 days. Then we will roll out the program to the departments. Once everyone is using the tools and working in a new way, I promise you that, in the future, whenever a problem arises, a group of people will spontaneously form a team to solve the problem. There will be teams popping up all over the place. You won't be able to stop them.

Ironically, teams were popping up before – but definitely not using the tools provided by this consultant. However, during the training everybody seemed to believe the consultant. His easy manner made the program seem achievable – and his audience liked the idea of getting results quickly that would impress the "Suits". Of course, SnugAdapters knew from past experience it would take a little longer for everyone to get involved. But if top management believed in the workers again, maybe everyone could pull together to turn the company around.

The teamwork *tools* presented by the consultant consisted of rules and guidelines for: "holding a meeting", "brainstorming", and "planning action items". Each team would have two or three meetings, learning how to use these *tools*. Afterwards, team members were expected to work exactly according to this spontaneously *structured* procedure. According to the structured teamwork program, there was also a special "Quality Council" in charge of teams. It was the Quality Council that set up the teams and approved what they should do. The teams would then report their results back to the Quality Council. The council had essentially the same structure as the company because its members were the senior managers and the heads of different departments – plus two union representa-

tives. Only the presence of the union representatives made the Quality Council different, but these representatives felt out of place in the discussions and seldom spoke what was on their mind.

Setting up the first teams happened with incredible speed. The first teams were formed in the last half-hour of the second day of the training session, sometime after 3 pm on the Saturday afternoon. People called out ideas for problems that would show *business improvements*, or bottom-line results, within 90 days, and also the names of people who should be team members. The training session ended in confusion with many ideas and names suggested and recorded.

On the following Monday, at 8 am, a list of six teams, objectives, composition, and meeting dates was posted on various bulletin boards around the factory. Workers who had not been at the training session read the notices to find out if they had been assigned to a team and what they would be expected to do. After the initial training session, the consultant seldom visited the company. Instead, the responsibility for ongoing training and keeping the teams and the Quality Council *on track* was given to a recently hired quality engineer, who was also responsible for their certification programs as well as customer returns for one of the business units.

Team members found out that they needed to attend many meetings, and soon the few conference areas in the factory were in constant use. Teams were composed of both salaried and hourly workers, with managers acting as *team leaders*. Shop floor workers found the arrangements uncomfortable: often they had little knowledge of the business functions talked about by the managers, and, more important, they were not accustomed to sitting and doing work through talking in meetings. Afterwards, when they returned to the shop floor, they often needed to work at double speed to finish the jobs waiting at their machine!

At the end of the first 90 days, all the teams were expected to report to the Quality Council, as mentioned above. Because none of the managers wanted the others to think poorly of them, each presentation highlighted *results*. However, many of these so called *results* of *teamwork* were things that had nothing to do with either the teamwork or the goals discussed during the initial teamwork training. Despite this, the consultant, who attended this meeting, figuratively patted everyone on the back saying, "Well done, now we must roll out the program to the departments."

A *company roll-out* was too much for the workers to stomach. "No," said the workers' leaders. "This will never work. This is not our kind of work." "Do it anyway," came the reply from the senior managers. Work-

ers found themselves attending even more training sessions, once again covering the same *teamwork tools*. Again, they were assigned to teams within their department and were expected to solve some of the difficult problems that the company was facing – in the new teamwork manner for which they had received proper training.

The workers, in this situational irony, use verbal irony directed towards teams.

In this situational irony, the workers' own irony showed more and more. Whenever the managers pushed the new ways of *spontaneously* structuring into teams, one of the very respected workers, here called Dan, who had been with the company for many years, would say,

The whole company used to be a team. And that's all I'm saying.

This single sentence was repeated over and over again in different situations. Interpreting the irony of the sentence requires situational knowledge about the way workers made sense of *teamwork* – a knowledge that managers did not always share. In a non-contextual interpretation, therefore, Dan's sentence is simple, but untrue, since the company was never formally, nor informally, a unified team. However, among the workers it was clear that it referred to the time of the big event when teams sprung up because *everybody* wanted the same thing for the company – solving customer- related problems at hand without labeling them anything else than problems to be solved.

After having said this, Dan would go on and accept the given task. Through the ironic comment he would indirectly oppose the situation, indicating that he would want it done in a different way – or in a way that *he* and his fellow workers understood as teamwork. By doing the task, and by doing it very well, he at the very same time accepted the circumstances at hand. He also showed he understood the managers' discourse. Irony, however, helped him show that he both accepted and opposed it at the very same time.

A second verbal irony relates to *the story about stealthy teams*. One of the bulletin boards had a newsletter describing a conference on teamwork that had been held by the local network of organizations of which, coincidentally, the "structured teamwork consultant" was a member. In the issue of the newsletter on the bulletin board there were photographs of different company displays at the teamwork conference. On the page of these

photos, an empty rectangle had been carefully drawn beside the others, like a photograph of nothing – or maybe of the emperor's new clothes, or the stealth bomber that can not be seen by radar. Underneath this "photo," which was not a photo, the caption read, "Charlie demonstrates the stealthy team." Charlie was the engineering supervisor who encouraged the members of the workgroup to continue with their former – and now officially forgotten – teamworking practices at the same time as they were attending training on the official ways of teamwork. The stealthy team photo demonstrates a complex irony towards the team training. In one interpretation it acted as a reminder of the ways of teamworking that were not (now) teamwork. In another interpretation the workers were acknowledging the engineer's leadership – they believed he should have been recognized at the teamwork conference.

Another ironic example from this workspace became well-known throughout the company. Somehow, an organization chart of the time just after *the big event* remained on a bulletin board here. The chart was dated "1990" and every time someone whose name was in one of the boxes left the organization, a large black X would be drawn through the name. The name of the new incumbent was not added. After a while, once there were more crosses than named boxes, the question "who's left?" was added. By 1997 all except two of the 20 or so boxes on the chart had been crosses through them. The human resource director, wanting an example for a presentation at a company-wide meeting about teams, used this diagram to make his point that the organization *had* changed over the past six or seven years. He said that people who held the workers back from achieving their full potential were no longer part of the organization.

However, this man failed to grasp the irony contained in the chart: the two remaining names were the two men who, in workers' view, did not understand teamwork the way the workers did. The two men had moved to positions of greater power than indicated by the chart. The real irony is that they were not only intensely disliked by the workers, they were also blamed for their lack of understanding of necessary qualities of a management required for changing the organization. Since the differences in the perspectives of the managers and workers were evident in this example, everyone found the visual display of the organization chart with the crossed-through names humorous, though the different layers of interpretation were not evident to everyone. It is probably part of the ironic freedom that was created that allowed managers and workers to interpret the symbolic meaning differently.

The ironic perspective summarized

Here we highlight and comment on themes that emerged from our presentation of SnugAdapt; first, the ironies of teamwork training, including the workers' use of verbal irony within the context of situational irony, and second, the decoupling of a consultant's program from organizational practice, which leads to ironies of consultancy. These two themes reflect paradoxes and ambiguities inherent in the organizational situation of SnugAdapt that are visible to an ironic eye.

The ironic and counterproductive teamwork-training program

Many scholars[19] comment on distinctions between situational and verbal irony where the irony of the situation is in the eye of the beholder, while verbal irony is created in the relationship between speaker and listener. The teamwork training is an example of situational irony: the more workers were trained in canned and structured teamwork training, the less they worked as teams. Because of the workers' linear expectations that the future would be better than the past, they always embraced the teamwork training and met it with positive expectations – that were either never fulfilled or sustained over time.

In the first episode the workers spontaneously work in teams in order to solve production problems. Later they had to fight for keeping decent teamwork conditions. In the final episode, the workers were expected to learn the proper way of *how to do teamwork* through teamwork training by professional consultants, who brought canned and well structured training programs to the company.

While the workers were supposed to follow these programs, the ironic result was that this training became counterproductive. In the end, the researcher found that workers in general were working less as teams than ever. Even more ironic is that solving production problems in the way that was understood as teamwork from the workers' point of view probably would have solved some of the production problems at hand in the company.

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19 Cf., Muecke, 1970; Luciarello, 1994.

Verbal irony – a device to cope with the situational irony

In order to handle this situational irony, and in order to have the work production go on, workers expressed what Luciarello[20] typifies as *verbal irony*. Workers talked about "the stealthy team", noting the double meanings of teams as well as the multiple realities of the ironic situation at hand in the company. Workers' ironic comments were expressed not only in words, but also in a combination of ironic comments, ironic graffiti, and as acts of irony, such as Dan's insistence that everyone remember "the whole company team." From a postmodern perspective, all these expressions could be regarded as texts[21] suggesting that the concept *textual irony* would be more adequate. As Hutcheon[22] points out, "irony is part of the communicative process coming into being in the relations between meanings, but also between people and utterances and, sometimes, between intentions and interpretations." The character of the ironic conversations going on in the company could therefore, following Hutcheon, be regarded as forms of discoursive practice.

Irony made it possible for the workers both to relate to and take distance from what was going on in the company. They could keep an alienated relation to their work, being connected with the very same conditions that from which they, through irony, also were disconnected from. Therefore, irony, in our interpretation, became a tool helping workers to keep their dignity and their own perspectives when these differed from the official ones. The ironic perspective allowed the workers to distance themselves from what was going on in the company, and to acknowledge the official version as well as their own officially oppressed view, without forcing them to give privilege, in a rational way, to one reality over the another. Irony deals with problems of alienation and identity in a sophisticated way, overcoming alienation and enacting it at the same time.

When the workers were taught about *how to do teamwork*, multiple realities emerged and merged. From a performative perspective,[23] multiple teamwork realities were existing in the company. The workers, in our interpretation, through irony, became capable of handling all of them simultaneously, keeping them apart and together at the same time. This

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20 Luciarello, 1994.
21 Barthes, 1977.
22 Hutcheon, 1994:13.
23 Czarniawska, 1993.

capacity is what Mulkay[24] talks about as "the duality of humor" exposing multiple and often conflicting meanings not available through "serious discourse."

The decoupling of the consultant's program from organizational practice

At the beginning, managers and workers alike espoused a belief in the program introduced by the consultant of the moment as imperative for the organization at the time. He was brought in to solve present difficulties, and both the consultant and the organization, i.e. managers and workers, thought his canned and structured program would be the right *medicine*. Ironically, it became the reverse. Not that the program itself was of no use – it definitely was both learned and practiced so that in an evaluation it probably would have been regarded as successful; what it did accomplish, though was the destruction of an already existing system of teamwork. And neither the consultant nor the managers seemed to be aware of this.

Much consultancy literature focuses on the consultant's concern with *getting in* – establishing contacts, credibility and offering a fashionable program.[25] However, there is an inherent conflict in making good consultant packages to deliver as a recipe and improving a specific organizational situation.

Ironies of consultancy

What was not revealed explicitly in the first episode above was that revolutionary changes followed plans made by the consulting company where the new president had previously been employed. As events played out, when the president was no longer associated with the national consulting firm so as to get new recipes, he chose instead to act as a consultant to the workers as they tried to work out procedures for themselves. During this time the president was often on the production floor, advising and working himself on production problems. He was aware of, and encouraged, the teamwork practices that were springing up to deal with the chaotic situations. In the first episode, although it was probably a consultant's recipe for restructuring that started the process, later on there were no formal

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24 Mulkay, 1998.
25 Cf., Won, 2000.

recipes available, so now the manager/consultant and workers together devised new practices that would work in the situation. These local recipes were constantly being modified and adjusted.

In the second episode, the guru claimed one of these local recipes, and managers and workers at SnugAdapt became consultants carrying the recipe that was now as much the guru's recipe as their own to other companies. Here it was never part of the *consulting contract* that members of SnugAdapt would actually teach new procedures, rather they demonstrated a *best practice* identified by the guru. The executive managers of Snug-Adapt's parent company, however, decided that they did not want to be involved in such *cycles* of consulting that would bring financial favors to the consulting industry rather than to their own firm or industry sector. SnugAdapt's president, seen as devoting unnecessary time to the writing and reading of such recipes, rather than *managing* the situation within the company, was encouraged to move elsewhere.

In the third episode, when the (different) senior managers at SnugAdapt wanted to regain control of the situation, they turned to a consultant for help. And while his recipe might well have brought the business process under control, it did not work for the *ingredients* available on the production floor. Perhaps the president and senior managers themselves *were* thinking of *the whole company as a team* without recognizing different functions. Such speculation on the part of the researcher aside, the consultant and his practices were ultimately rejected.

Our review of the consulting literature suggests that one role of consultants is to bring new practices that *everyone's doing with successful results* to local practices and performance results. In the first episode the new president at SnugAdapt imposed a particular *style* of structure that affected action, but then abandoned the official rhetoric for local practice and practical wisdom. In the third episode of the soap, a hired consultant was unable to see local practices that might tone down the faddish mode of teamwork he presented. The workers *got it* and could do it. Does it matter that the consultant did not? Only, we suggest, if he (or she) might wish to prepare for another style of teamwork training to be presented here or elsewhere at a later date.

Does it mean that a consultant has *failed* when his or her *perfect practice* is not accepted? Only practical wisdom (Aristotle's *phroneis*) rather than perceived wisdom leads to improved performance. A consultant accepts being discarded as *unhelpful* while appreciating that for managers and workers to be able to acknowledge that other (his suggested) practices

exist is enough of à reason for being. The idea of bringing *salvation* in the form of a new practice, while being rejected for having that very practice, forms the ironic identity of consultancy.

Concluding Reflections

As said in the introduction, we regard ironic knowledge and how to use the ironic trope as a capacity that is not acknowledged enough in organization theory. As also stated before, irony is a rare asset in the construction of academic arguments. And, as our interpretation of the ethnography of SnugAdapt suggests, ironies also exist within the purview of (some) organizational actors.

In this chapter we have demonstrated how an ironic eye can reveal critical aspects and relationships of a kind that differs both from traditional critical management theory[26] and mainstream management theory – and therefore could prove useful ground for critical scholars. This ground differs from critical management discourse in a Marxist or neo-Marxist tradition because it does not (only) go against the existing interpretation,; it is not a binary opposition or dialectic critique. Rather it embraces multiple perspectives. An ironic eye also goes beyond simple cause and effect, and therefore enables a more nuanced and multifaceted construction of the reality than a modernist perspective. Irony can hold multiple realities together in a way that postmodernists often proclaim to be the most realistic description of reality.[27]

We find our empirical story ironic in a number of ways. First, the teamwork training that did not result in more teamwork, but rather had the opposite effect, is an obvious irony. This observation relates to Samantha Warren's observations about structured fun that is not fun at all (see Chapter 8). The ironic eye allows us to be critical observers of the counterproductive situation, yet embrace the different actors with some sympathy, since we can also see that they do not have many alternatives. Structuring teamwork, like structuring fun, relies on recipes with standard ingredients, where the ingredients are often taken for granted.

In the messy situation at SnugAdapt, we also observed that the workers themselves used irony in order to cope with the situation at hand. Irony

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26 Alvesson and Deetz, 1996; Fournier and Grey, 2000.
27 Cooper and Burrell, 1988; Rosenau, 1992.

became a device for them to handle the messy and multifaceted situation. The workers were not using irony as a way of resisting change; indeed they wanted and expected changes to happen. Instead they may have hoped that by using irony they could facilitate the types of changes that they themselves desired, changes that the consultant seemed to unable to provide.

It is also somewhat of an irony in itself to find that workers already have this capacity for dealing with multiple realities (through using irony) without clearly privileging one over the other – a capacity that a modernist epistemology lacks because of its desire for a unitary meaning. We suggest that this insight requires further investigation to feature how reality is constructed in everyday practice and in academia.

At the same time we found that the managers seldom used irony (although we would not claim that they totally lacked the ability to embrace and use the ironic mode.). Perhaps managers saw their role as preserving the unitary meaning or discourse. If so, they missed the possibility of negotiating and reconstructing the reality together with the workers – and to have a realistic view of what was going on. Subsequently we claim that a more ironic perspective from the managers may have made them more realistic. Chapter 13 in this volume by Wenedlin Kuepers and Martin Eppler also explores this theme but in a different way.

Moreover, as we interpret and report these multiple realities glued together with the help of irony, we have found that an ironic perspective is necessary for ourselves in order to construct and demonstrate our arguments. An ironic perspective enables one reality to be placed against the other without the need to establish a stable external point of critique.