

Melinda Knight, Editor
University of Rochester

**Leading Organizations
Through Transition:
Communication and Cultural Change**

By Stanley A. Deetz, Sarah J. Tracy, Jennifer Lynn
Simpson. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications,
2000. 232 pp.

Reviewed by Deborah J. Barrett
Jones Graduate School of Management, Rice University

With the number of mergers and acquisitions, restructuring of corporations and industries, and downsizing, effectively managing change inside organizations is essential. Change management cannot be successful without effective communication, and effective communication depends on an understanding of the important role culture plays in any change program. Anyone interested in better understanding the role of culture and communication in an organization will find *Leading Organizations Through Transition: Communication and Cultural Change* useful. According to the introduction, the "purpose of this volume is to address the role of communication in organizational culture and cultural change efforts, especially during periods of transition, mergers, innovations, and globalization" (p. xi). The book includes a discussion of the development of organizational cultures, the role of visions in directing organizational strategy and operations, the importance of ethics and how to integrate ethical standards into the culture, the use of language and metaphor to communicate key concepts and messages, and the effect of technology and globalization on culture, with well-chosen examples and cases throughout.

Each of the 10 chapters begins with an overview, a list of objectives, and questions to consider. Chapters end with discussion questions and recommended readings. This format, perhaps reflecting the book's origin as the electronic text for an online course in organizational culture and cultural change, effectively engages the reader in thinking about and applying the key concepts. The first two chapters, "Managing Hearts, Minds, and Souls" and "Assessing and Changing Organizational Culture," provide explanations of culture and its importance in managing change in organizations. The authors draw upon scholarly work on culture, and effectively weave theory with practice. For instance, in the first chapter

the authors synthesize concepts from the research of G. Hofstede (1990), S. Cartwright and C. Cooper (1992), and E. Schein (1992), and include a "Sample Culture Assessment Test" to allow readers to apply what has been presented to their own organizations. In the second chapter, the authors relate culture to change and incorporate Kotter's (1995) eight steps to achieving major transformations in business. The third chapter, "Vision and Cultural Development," provides a very sound, albeit general, explanation of what makes a strong, effective vision and how best to develop one that aligns with the cultural values of the organization. At the end of the chapter is the "Sample Organizational Identification Questionnaire," which is designed to determine the readers' attitudes toward their company and its values.

Chapter 4, "Guiding Interpretations and the Art of Framing," is undoubtedly one of the best in the book. Whereas the first three chapters border on being a little too general, this chapter is very specific, insightful, and clear in discussing the role of language in communicating and shaping the culture of an organization. The authors conclude: "Although leaders do not and cannot completely control all events, they nevertheless influence how events are seen and understood. Arguably, the most central tool of influence is language. Most leaders spend nearly 70% of their time communicating, but few pay close attention to how their language influences the interpretive frameworks of those around them" (p. 72). Afterward, the authors connect "framing" to visioning and cultural change, using John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King as examples of speakers whose language shaped the vision of their followers and "literally created a new reality" (p. 74). The included table "Discursive Framing Tools and Their Use" provides an excellent overview of the purpose and use of different discursive tools—metaphors, stories, traditions, slogans, artifacts, contrasts, and spin—that shape and communicate cultural norms within an organization.

In Chapter 5, "Employee Participation and Cultural Change," the authors again combine theory and practice, providing excellent examples to illustrate the concepts. The discussion and example on interpersonal communication qualities is particularly useful. They do, however, miss an opportunity to discuss team dynamics in organizations. In addition, although the authors do talk generally about empowerment, they do not provide enough information on how to ensure employee participation in cultural change. Chapter 6, "The Ethics of Cultural Control and Organizational Change," in contrast, is a jewel, for it delivers on a promise to explore "what it means to be an ethical cultural manager and lays out different ways organizations can plan for and deal with ethical dilemmas stemming from cultural management and change" (p. 116). After justifying the need for ethical considerations, the authors provide an interesting and insightful discussion of the cultural elements conducive to uneth-

ical behavior, such as closed highly cohesive systems, vague or contradictory vision statements, and excessive organizational segmentation. The authors go on to explain how to create an ethics program based on a meaningful ethical credo, which should parallel the vision and be "accessible, realistic, and doable" (p. 132). The authors also use the Lockheed "Ethics Challenge" game to illustrate how one company made its training on ethics meaningful, yet fun. They conclude their discussion by noting that "being an ethical leader in today's organization . . . means going beyond living up to one's own moral code to maintaining an organizational culture that motivates and rewards ethical behavior from all employees" (p. 139). An "Ethical Audit" nicely ends this chapter.

Of the last three substantive chapters, Chapter 7, "Culture and Technological Change," and Chapter 9, "Managing Culture in Multinational Organizations," are rather weak when compared to the other chapters. The introduction to Chapter 7 claims that "this chapter explores the issues surrounding the implementation of new technological systems and probes how such change may impact the organization at a deeper level" (p. 144), but the chapter simply does not follow through. Except for the table on assumptions about information that compares how IT professionals and the rest of the world see information (adapted from E. Schein [1992]), Chapter 7 provides little that is specific. Chapter 9, "Managing Culture in Multinational Organizations," also falls short. Similar to the technology chapter, this chapter is far too general and provides little that a manager could actually use. With so much work having been done on the effect of globalization and on cross-cultural issues, particularly on the communication challenges, I find it surprising that the chapter does not cite any of that work, although C. Bartlett and S. Ghoshal's *Managing Across Borders* (1989) is listed in the recommended readings. The apparent failure to draw on the research of others stands out since so much of the rest of the text relies on previous scholarship and so effectively interweaves the research with original ideas.

Chapter 8, "Managing Culture Through Transition Periods," is the only chapter that addresses major organizational changes and most directly addresses the theme of the title "leading organizations through transition." This chapter is also the place in which communication is approached on a practical level, with specific actions suggested. Chapter 8 takes readers through various major changes, such as leadership transitions, mergers and acquisitions, downsizing, and reorganizations. The authors are strongest on the process of merging cultures and, using the marriage analogy, provide practical steps in communication during a merger, from the announcement to the post-merger management. For instance, in the section on implementing the announcement plan, media, messenger, and messages and the importance of feedback mechanisms are discussed (pp. 176-77). This chapter, too, is somewhat light on the recog-

dition of existing scholarship on change management, although the authors do use Tichy's transformational framework (1996).

Chapter 8 probably should have been the last of the substantive chapters because it functions as the climax of the book. What the authors have as their final chapter, however, is Chapter 10, "Putting a Change Process Together," which they regard as a "review and reinforcement of the development of ideas in the book as a whole" (p.196). Little new is introduced, although the authors do include a section on writing cases as a way for organizations to understand their organizational processes. The chapter concludes with a case that enables readers to apply what they have learned in the book. The case does a nice job of suggesting the actions needed to ensure communication's integral role in change management; in fact, the case highlights one area in which the book could have done more—that is, in discussing the specific role of communication in shaping the content in organizations. The question posed in the case is: "Is communication a noun or a verb? a what or a how?" Is communication "content" or "process"? (p. 209). Throughout the book, communication seems to be regarded mostly as process, a means to an end, the way to deliver the content of culture. However, for organizational communication to be effective, it must involve the content as well. As the case concludes, "real communication" is "(a) meaning/content-based, (b) a 'whole' effort rather than piecemeal tasks, and (c) integral to the entire change process" (p. 218). Such "real" communication is a lofty and worthy role, and many communication professionals will likely wish the book had provided more guidance on how to make that role tangible. Readers are also likely to wish for more discussion that illustrates how to implement effective communication or use it to facilitate cultural change.

The title of the book, *Leading Organizations Through Transition: Communication and Cultural Change*, is ultimately somewhat misleading because it unfortunately sets expectations never realized. Despite this apparent limitation, the text is a very good book. It is not a book on communication as much as it is a book on culture; it is not as much about transition or change management as it is about the day-to-day management of culture; and finally, it is not as much about leading as it is about managing. The introduction indicates that the original audience was executive MBA students and that "the materials and course have been very successful with mid-level managers," and the book is clearly designed with these readers in mind. For communication classes, however, the book probably does too little with "real" communication. Yet, despite the misleading title and the few shortcomings discussed, teachers and researchers will find much of the book highly useful. The book contributes well-grounded perspectives on culture and on how organizations work or should work. The chapter on framing in particular raises some important questions on the power of language in shaping culture within a business

context, and the chapter on ethics provides a useful and simple look at a complex topic. The text would work well in a graduate-level course on change management, and some of the chapters would work effectively in MBA communication courses. In addition, the framing, visioning, and transitions chapters could also be used in a change communication course. Thus, the book has considerable merit and should be of interest to those wanting to understand the role culture can and does play in organizations today.

REFERENCES

- Bartlett, C., & Ghoshal, S. (1989). *Managing across borders: The transnational solution*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.
- Cartwright, S., & Cooper, C. (1992). *Mergers and acquisitions: The human factor*. Oxford, UK: Butterworth, Heinemann.
- Hofstede, G., Neuijen, B., Ohayv, D., & Sanders, G. (1990). Measuring organizational cultures. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 35, 286-316.
- Kotter, J.P. (1995, March-April). Leading change: Why transformation efforts fail. *Harvard Business Review*, pp. 59-67.
- Schein, E. (1992). *Organizational culture and leadership* (2nd ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Tichy, N. (1996, Spring). Simultaneous transformation and CEO succession: Key to global competitiveness. *Organizational Dynamics*, pp. 45-59.

Copyright of Journal of Business Communication is the property of Association for Business Communication and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.