

Organizational Symbolism: A Multi-dimensional Conceptualization

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ABSTRACT

Organizational symbolism was a new and exciting topic of management research 15 to 20 years ago. After experiencing a period of much attention from both researchers and practitioners, the topic seemed to fall out of favor. Over the past ten years, there have been few studies devoted to symbolism. I believe this may be due in part to the lack of a cohesive conceptualization. Approaches to the topic were so diverse that they appeared to be studying totally different concepts. In an effort to re-invigorate attention to organizational symbolism, I present a comprehensive framework to guide future studies. It is my hope that providing this integrative framework will encourage richer, more complex, and more relevant conceptual and empirical work on organizational symbolism.

Keywords: Organizational Symbolism, Symbolism, Culture

The term "organizational symbolism" conjures up a wide variety of meanings within the organizational community. The concept, taken in its most general form, has been applied to many organizational arenas including: the institutional theory perspective of policies and practices being symbols of legitimacy; the view in the human resource literature of specific organizational characteristics signaling to job applicants what it might be like to work there; and symbols as one of the primary indicators of organizational culture. The common thread throughout these diverse literatures is the general notion of *something* representing *something else*. In the context of this paper, "organizational symbolism" refers to the study of an identifiable action, object, or language that conveys an abstract meaning.

Organizational symbolism, then, is the study of the expressive functions of organizational life. The concept received considerable attention in the management literature during a period 15 to 20 years ago (e.g., Bowles, 1989; Larsen & Schultz, 1990; Young, 1989). As Gagliardi (2007) noted, the early 1980s was the founding time of the Standing Conference on Organizational Symbolism. Although much of the research was interesting and conceptually rich, the studies approached the concept quite differently, often focusing on one aspect of symbolism without placing the studies in an overarching theoretical framework. In the past decade organizational symbolism research has dropped off dramatically. I believe this may be due in part to the lack of a cohesive conceptualization. The purpose of this paper is to put forth an organizational symbolism framework with an eye toward conceptually linking the underlying aspects of organizational symbolism and focusing future research.

ORGANIZATIONAL SYMBOLISM RESEARCH

A review of the organizational symbolism literature indicates that several conceptual views have emerged. Some researchers have addressed symbolism as it relates to organizational culture. Organizational symbolism has been viewed as a means by which cultures are created and maintained. Louis (1983) asserts that organizations can be viewed as "culture-bearing milieu", containing a set of common norms for actions, and languages and other symbolic vehicles for expressing these commonalities. Organizations exist as systems of shared meanings that are developed and sustained through the symbolic process (Smircich, 1983). Within the cultural context, organizational symbolism is a means to a collective end for the organization, that is, a tool by which the organization's reality is defined and communicated.

A second popular approach to symbolism follows logically from the first. If these symbols in organizations are so meaningful, why not try to manage them? Peters (1978) viewed symbols as tools that could, and should, be used to affect change in organizations; he asserted that managers should manipulate symbols to create their preferred interpretations. Dandridge (1983) also emphasizes the functional perspective of symbols, defining three duties they serve in organizations. These are the energy controlling, descriptive, and system maintenance functions. Managers can facilitate smooth operation through cognizance of symbolic aspects of phenomena, and by actively managing symbols to

create specific reactions. Symbols are mechanisms organizations can use to signal their management philosophy to workers. For instance, symbols such as stories and metaphoric language have been shown to be effective means of communicating organizational policies to employees (e.g., Martin & Powers, 1980; Sackmann, 1989; Wilkins, 1983). Abstract concepts such as value systems can be simplified and transmitted to employees through concrete symbols. In turn, individuals interpret the symbolic actions and make inferences about the organization.

The third area of symbolism that has received considerable attention addresses the utility of management actions as symbols. Fuller, Edelman, and Matusik (2000) proposed that formal organizational structures created in response to civil rights legislation might be symbolic in nature, conveying meaning of legal compliance to employees. Further conceptualizations focus on management's symbolic actions as attempts to rationalize or legitimate decisions, or as results of organizational power and politics (Pfeffer, 1981). The power and social influence aspect of symbolism has addressed issues such as increasing power by increasing the illusion of control, and using organizational narrative to communicate the organization's power structure (Mumby, 1987).

In addition to the above views of symbolism, there have been several multi-dimensional conceptualizations. Dandridge, Mitroff, and Joyce (1980) categorized symbols by type and function, and Dandridge (1985) addressed the management of symbols through the viewpoint of both the influencer and the respondent.

From the above conceptualizations, we turn to the empirical work on organizational symbolism. The research that is relevant to this paper is that which explicitly examines the functions of organizational symbols, as opposed to those that simply include symbolism as one aspect of organizational culture.

Some research has addressed the symbolic meaning of physical organizational characteristics. Ornstein (1986) sought to discover whether people would attribute characteristics to the organization based simply on differences in the appearance of company lobbies. She used pictures of three different organization reception areas that were decorated differently and whose receptionist was dressed differently. The three types represented authority, empathy, and rewards. Her results supported the conclusion that physical symbols do act as communicators of information and meaning, above and beyond the function of the object itself. Zalesny and Farace (1987) examined the symbolic meaning of open offices by surveying employees both before and after a company changed to an open office design. This democratization of the physical environment generated different reactions from employees, depending on their organizational position. There was an increase in favorability for clerical employees (low status), and a decrease for managers (high status). There was no significant difference for those in the professional category.

Martin (1982) examined the value of three types of communication mechanisms to see which one would be the most effective symbol. Organizational stories are often thought to be an important part of organizational culture and as such, carriers of symbolic meaning. In order to test this, Martin examined the effectiveness of three types of communication – stories, written abstract statements, and quantitative data – in conveying organizational policies. She found that both belief in the policy and commitment were most strongly affected by the story.

Finally, the symbolic meaning of organizational language has been studied. Evered (1983) used a case study to examine the symbolic use of language in the United States Navy. His work supported claims that language is a structured system of symbols that allows a particular group of people to communicate meaning and regulate activity. Evered uses symbols such as ranks and ratings, craft terms, acronyms, abbreviations, and slang to highlight the process by which symbols convey meaning, and ultimately generate and maintain organization.

In summary, the organizational symbolism literature has benefited from rich conceptualizations of symbols as carriers of meaning in organizations. However, aside from the view of symbols as part of culture, there have been relatively few empirical studies. It is therefore prudent to turn attention to possible reasons for this shortfall.

WHAT IS MISSING FROM THE SYMBOLISM LITERATURE?

The work on organizational symbolism, though interesting, appears to lack an explicated framework. The conceptual definitions used to describe symbolism are often quite different, as though referring to entirely separate concepts. Ideas range from an instrumental management tactic to emerging meaning given by employees. Not surprisingly, empirical work has followed, being for the most part narrowly focused, studying one aspect or type of

symbolism without reference to broader issues or context. I believe there is a need to clarify and synthesize the research into a multi-dimensional framework to guide future conceptual and empirical work. Little has been done, for example, to suggest the conditions under which symbols will be believed. In addition, do all types of symbols have the same effect? As Ornstein (1986) stated, studies of "types of symbolic information and the processes underlying how this information is perceived and translated into impressions about organizations need to be undertaken" (p. 227). Further, "The study of organizational symbolism...promises to provide a new view of how organizations *really* [italics in original] work." (Turner, 1986, p.103) However, in the years since, these pleas were published, little has been done to clarify the concept. In fact, as stated earlier, the research in the area has tapered off. This may be a result of the hazy conceptual definition and the difficulty tying the research together.

ORGANIZATIONAL SYMBOLISM FRAMEWORK

In order to begin to focus answers to these questions, I present my conceptual framework below in two sections. First, I describe the dimensions of organizational symbols that make up the core of the framework. Second, I present additional components that are also of interest to the study of organizational symbolism.

Dimensions

I have identified five dimensions of the organizational symbolism concept that are important to take into account when conceptualizing research questions. As explained below, they are the type, direction, source, message, and substance of the symbol.

Type of Symbol

Is the symbol an action or an object? And which type of action or object? Examples of symbols not only include the classic language, myths, and stories associated with culture, but also organizational phenomena such as titles, decisions, structure, personnel policies, and the physical environment, all of which have the potential to carry symbolic meanings. It seems reasonable to propose that the many types of symbols may not all have the same effect. For example, the effects on employees may differ depending on the various types of symbols described earlier – stories, the physical organizational environment, and language.

Direction of the Symbol

The second dimension is the direction the symbol is projecting meaning -- external versus internal. Is the signal being sent outside the organization to the environment or inside to employees? In other words, for whom is the meaning intended? An example of the symbol being projected externally is institutional organizational theory, where practices are often adopted by organizations in order to appear legitimate to other organizations in the industry. In other words, they are using a symbol – in this case a practice – to send meaning outside the organization. If the direction of the symbol is internal, organizational management is using a symbol to communicate meaning to employees. For example, Fuller, Edelman, and Matusik (2000) examined whether organizational legal structures serve as symbols of compliance to employees. Further, the very process of management, in fact, has been viewed as serving symbolic functions, that is, sending meaning to employees (e.g., Pfeffer, 1981). One very interesting aspect to the direction the meaning is sent is that many symbols at the organizational level could (intentionally or not) project meaning two directions. Organizational structures, policies, and practices that are visible to both external and internal constituents may actually send meaning both directions.

Source of the Symbol (proactive vs. reactive)

The third dimension involves whether the symbolic meaning stems from a proactive or reactive perspective. This dimension very concerned with intent and the sequence of events. A proactive perspective is when the meaning of the symbol is in the eyes of the sender – top management for example. In other words, when symbols are consciously sent, the sender intends to communicate a meaning to others. An example would be a speech that a top manager gives with

the intention of conveying some values to employees. In this case the symbol (speech) is being used purposefully to affect employees' perceptions. This proactive view is similar to the individual-level impression management concept wherein a person says certain things in order to intentionally affect others' perceptions. In addition to the sender proactively taking action, another aspect of the source of the symbolism is critical. That is the receiver's interpretation. This is the reactive perspective. In this case, employees (receivers) make meaning in the actions and policies of others. The important distinction here is that employees may very well take meaning from actions that were done for functional or substantive reasons, with the person taking action (sender) not intending for them to be symbolic. An example of a reactive symbol is if an organization lays off employees following systematic, rational analysis of information. However, after the layoff announcement, employees have their own interpretation of the event, not attributing the decision to a rational process. Here, the symbolic meaning is in the mind of the receiver; thus the symbolism is reactive. This reactive perspective is much like the social construction of reality in which symbolic actions and objects are methods by which knowledge is reaffirmed (Berger and Luckmann, 1967). In social construction, the meaning-making takes place after the fact, by the individual. The policy could very likely have been implemented for a reason that is quite different from the meaning ascribed to it by the receiver. To summarize the proactive versus reactive aspect of symbols, you must take into account viewpoints of both the influencer and the responder (Dandridge, 1985).

Message of the Symbol

The fourth dimension of symbolism is the function or content of the symbol. This means simply that you must take into account the type of meaning that is intended (proactive) and/or received (reactive). Many symbolic messages have been identified; the most common are power, legitimacy, unity, recognition, support, fairness, and concern. Further, symbolic messages have included other aspects of organizational culture such as customer service, competitiveness, and teamwork. An important aspect of the symbol's message that has not been a prominent part of the literature is that the distinction must be made clear that the message of the symbol may be different in the mind of the sender versus the receiver. One symbol may have different, even contradictory, meanings and this fact "must always be borne in mind in symbolic analysis." (Morgan, Frost, & Pondy, 1983 p.13) For example, an organization may adopt a new grievance policy in a proactive attempt to signal to employees that the organization is fair. However, because of the failure of similar policies in the past, employees may see the message of the symbol in a much more negative light, taking away a far different meaning.

Substance of the Symbol (Image versus essence)

The fifth and final dimension deals with the substance of the symbol, or the reality underlying the symbol. This dimension is by far the most complex, the most elusive, and therefore, the most fascinating. The basic definition of a symbol is a concrete object that represents an abstract concept. The symbol can be thought of as the image (e.g., company slogan) that represents a substantive essence (e.g., focus on employees). To explain further, an organization may adopt a slogan espousing concern for the welfare of their employees. This would be the symbol, or concrete action top managers took to symbolize concern for employees. The question is, however, what is the underlying reality about the organization's treatment of employees. If employees believe that the organization and managers in fact, do not care about the employees and/or do not treat them with concern, then the symbolic image is empty (image without the essence). The literature supports this notion that we must take into account both the symbol and the underlying reality. In other words, we cannot simply assume that the message of the symbol is the "truth" about the organization. A person's beliefs about a concept are determined both by the substance or 'essence' and by the communicated images (Alvesson, 1990). In his seminal book, Goffman (1959) highlighted the importance of comparing the symbol to the underlying reality. He noted that if the underlying reality is known, then consistency between that and the symbol is critical. If a symbol attempts to convey a meaning that contradicts the underlying reality, the symbol will be ineffective. This dimension is especially important in organizations because symbols are often sent to convey meaning to employees. However, employees normally are aware of the underlying reality in the organization; therefore, any inconsistency will be problematic. Too often, those who study organizations look exclusively at the image that is presented by management (the formal organization), and assume that it is also the essence of the organization (the informal

organization). Fuller, Edelman, and Matusik (2000) applied this concept to organizations use of formal structures to symbolize fair treatment of employees, noting that the perception of employees will depend also on the actual treatment employees receive.

Contextual Components

The five dimensions above serve as a conceptual blueprint to frame organizational symbolism research. In addition to those factors, several contextual variables should be addressed. One such component is individual-difference factors. Although organizational symbolism research has not yet explicitly incorporated these individual-level variables into its research, their importance seems obvious. Symbolism examines how people respond to, and derive meaning from, different types of symbols. Incorporating individual difference factors into the framework will direct work to examine the ways in which personality, values, demography and other factors influence meaning-making.

The comprehensive framework should also address several other potential contingency factors and boundary conditions. First, we should include the hierarchical level in the organization. When looking at symbols that are being used within an organization, it would be important to take into account the hierarchical distance between the sender and the receiver. This could affect power relationships as well as the likelihood that the receiver is aware of the underlying reality. Second, it would be necessary to examine the consistency of the symbol with other symbols in the same organization dealing with the same phenomenon. In other words, employees might make comparisons concerning the frequency the organization addresses the phenomenon and the nature of the dissemination across the organization. Third, the type of organization and industry should be considered in the framework as this may be an important factor in determining the effectiveness of symbols. Fourth, we should incorporate a broader range of affective and behavioral organizational consequences to the use of symbols. Studies should examine not simply the effectiveness of symbols, that is, was the meaning accepted, but also the potential for employees' negative affective reactions to some situations in which organizations used symbols. This would likely occur in a case such as Goffman (1959) described in which the symbol's message and the underlying reality are contradictory.

ILLUSTRATION OF TWO STUDIES

In order to further explain my framework, I examine two empirical studies of organizational symbolism described earlier and place them in the context of my dimensions. In Ornstein's (1986) experiment, she used physical objects as symbols to communicate meaning to employees. Elements of the workplace such as furniture and wall decorations are often chosen without considerable thought, and are often deemed to be rather innocuous aspects of an organization. However, this study showed that individuals inferred characteristics of the organization's climate based on the physical symbols. These items were in fact symbolic, whether or not management intended to send a message. This study illustrates that the type of symbol is important as well as the fact that the meaning can be strictly reactive. There was no attempt here to proactively send a message. Although this study only examined symbols of the most basic, purely physical, form, it strongly shows the importance of attention to the interpretive nature of simple aspects of organizational life.

Martin's (1982) study illustrates several components of my framework. First, the type of symbol matters; stories were much stronger symbolic communicators than other forms of information. Second, her research indicates that the proactive intent and the reactive meaning can, in fact match. Therefore, here, the intent of using stories as symbols was evident, and in addition, the meaning of the symbols was received. And, third, we also need to address the potential for affective reactions to the use of symbols. Often this aspect of the symbolism research has been ignored.

RESEARCH AGENDA

Using this paper's framework as a guide, I offer suggestions for future research questions. As Martin's (1982) study looks at the effectiveness of stories versus other means of communication, future work could compare the effectiveness of various types of symbols. For example, from a top management perspective, are slogans, mission

statements, and other corporate writings effective communicators? Are they as effective as verbal symbols such as speeches? Examination of types of symbols could also compare these top management communications with physical objects such as the layout and décor of offices (cf. Ornstein, 1986). The direction the symbol's meaning is intended should also focus future work. For example, it would be fascinating to compare the meanings those outside the organization versus employees give to the same symbols. Organizations often create visible policies and programs such as diversity and environmental initiatives. The intent of these may be either to send a signal to outside constituents or to internal employees. However, both of these groups see the symbol. Therefore, although top management may have been only attempting to send the meaning one direction, both groups make inferences, perhaps different ones. Another avenue for study is examining whether one type of symbol (e.g., company slogans) is more effective in one type of organization and/or with one type of employees. Perhaps in certain industries, statements such as slogans have been used effectively whereas they are not believed with other types of organizations. As mentioned in my contextual factors earlier, they may be individual characteristics that lead some employees to be more susceptible to symbolic communication. Perhaps certain personality types are likely to believe organizational statements and be less likely to question motives or compare symbolic messages to the underlying reality. Another contextual factor is to include more affective consequences of the use of symbols. Goffman (1959) warned that if the symbol contradicts the underlying reality, harmful conclusions might be drawn. Therefore, we need to take into account the possibility of negative affective reactions to organizations' use of symbols.

Further research could also examine the ways in which the dimensions interact. For example, the type and source of the symbol provide a fascinating area for study. Some types of symbols such as corporate slogans and value statements can be described as "pure" symbols, having an expressive function but not a substantive one. Pure symbols reflect an organization's attempt to send a certain signal (proactive). By contrast, symbolic meaning may be inferred by employees through substantive managerial actions that were not intended as symbols (reactive). In some cases, it may be unclear whether actions have expressive value, substantive value, or both. For example, Edelman's (1992) work on organizational responses to civil rights laws evaluates how organizations create formal structures such as Equal Employment Opportunity offices and minority training programs. At issue is whether these structures have the substantive value of increasing opportunities for minorities and women, and/or whether they serve the expressive function of creating the appearance of attention to the laws. Another interaction that seems promising is the type of symbol and content of message. That is, certain types of symbols may be more effective at sending certain messages. If an organization is attempting to re-energize the workforce after a layoff, simple verbiage such as slogans, mission statements and speeches may be ineffective. To communicate this type of message, it may be necessary to utilize more substantive symbols such as actions and policies.

CONCLUSION

Employees' interpretations of organizational actions are a critical part of the study of organizations. As such, organizational symbolism is an important aspect of this research. I believe that the attention to symbolism should again be the focus of more research. Researchers must not just talk generally of "symbolism" in organizations, but must be explicit as to which facet(s) they are attending. It is my hope that by explicating the various dimensions of symbolism, this paper will provide an important conceptual advance in the study of organizational symbolism. It will allow researchers who study only one aspect of symbolism to place their work in a larger theoretical context. The framework will also guide research questions toward more complexity, incorporating contingency factors, boundary conditions, organizational consequences, and interactions among dimensions. I believe that providing this integrative framework will encourage richer, more complex, and more relevant conceptual and empirical work on organizational symbolism.

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