

The charismatization of routines: Management of meaning and standardization in an educational organization

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Abstract

This paper reports a study of a Swedish School company, characterized by charismatic leadership and a radical vision, trying to create and implement standard operating procedures. We illuminate how efforts to bureaucratize are given meanings quite different to conventional ones of experiences of constraints and, at best, reluctant acceptance. The charisma that the members of the organization ascribe to the founder and the linking of standardization with radical corporate vision and identity building are viewed as central. Theoretically, the paper aims to throw some new light on the theme of organizational control through showing how different forms of control may intersect. The need to develop ideas that can bridge various forms of control is emphasized. Hence, we suggest a concept that may prove helpful in such a project: the charismatization of routines.

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1. Introduction

Modern organizations are purposefully instrumentalized human artefacts. The instrumentalization of the modern organization was observed (Weber, 1947) and even celebrated (Taylor, 1947) as it was emerging as a dominant societal force. It can be argued that educational organizations differ from the instrumental and bureaucratic stereotype,

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and should thus rather be viewed as complex and loosely coupled systems (Weick, 1976). Such descriptions draw attention to the complex character of contemporary organizations in general, and of educational organizations in particular. They also tend to de-emphasize the degree of purposeful instrumentalization that characterizes contemporary educational organizations. Arguably, amongst responses to recent changes in the environment of educational organizations in the Swedish context, such as the introduction of vouchers, market mechanisms and competition, we also find instrumentalization, standardization and routinization.

The literature on educational organizations thus generally pictures such organizations as a departure from the bureaucratic form, although some concepts, professional bureaucracy, for instance, do indicate some of the hybrid features and elements of standardization that are associated with the knowledge input to the organization (Mintzberg, 1983). In school organizations, where it is difficult to construct valid and reliable performance measures, an emphasis on cultural-ideological or clan control instead of bureaucratic or market-like (output) forms of internal control would be expected (Alvesson, 1995; Kunda, 1992; Wilkins & Ouchi, 1983).

According to modern organization theory and various studies of management practices, cultural organizing processes constitute a crucial element in organizations. Such processes are often referred to as ‘symbolic management’ (Alvesson & Berg, 1992; Pfeffer, 1981) or ‘management of meaning’ (Smircich & Morgan, 1982). There is frequently a link between the development of cultural-ideological forms of control in organizations and a founder-leader possessed of a radical vision that arouses commitment to the project concerned. This often occurs in business firms, but is less common in public organizations. Such a situation obtained in the empirical object of our present enquiry, namely a fairly young and expanding Swedish educational company known as SchoolCo.

The present paper seeks to explore the interface between charismatic leadership and radical visions on the one hand, and organizational bureaucratization on the other. More precisely, we argue that management of meaning is not restricted to the purely symbolic domain, but also involves the charging of routines and standards with positive value. Management of meaning may also add positive meaning to what would otherwise contribute to a loss of meaning or the infusion of a negative value. Drawing on empirical material from SchoolCo we suggest below that managerial work in this context involves the *charismatization of routines*. We also suggest this last as a new theoretical concept that opens up a vital space in the area of organizational control, drawing upon and developing a special case of management of meaning.

2. Charisma in organizations

The introduction of charisma into organizational analysis is usually attributed to Weber, who regarded charisma as one basis for legitimacy along with tradition and legal-rational authority (Weber, 1947). Since then the concept has been used for a variety of purposes. It has been used for example to analyze archetypes of leadership (Steyrer, 1998), the personalities of US presidents (House, Spangler, & Woycke, 1991), rhetorics (Emrich, Brower, Feldman, & Garland, 2001), feelings in organizations (Albrow, 1992), and processes of self-definition (Weierter, 2001).

Although the above list suggests that this concept has a broad and varied appeal, it is usually adopted as a way of understanding a particular form of leadership. Charismatic

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