

# Myth Making: A Qualitative Step in OD Interventions

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*An important aspect of organizational culture, which gives meaning to process and structure in human interaction, is myth making. This article proposes that organizational myths must be analyzed and incorporated into planning for organizational development. Typologies are presented to categorize myths according to their function. The role of myth within the organization's culture is discussed. The consultant is provided with methods and qualitative techniques for diagnosing the meanings and functions of myths. A life-cycle concept is applied to the timing of an intervention, recognizing a myth's different stages of acceptance and susceptibility for change. Finally, a number of potential interventions are discussed in relation to their impact on the organization's myth system.*

Organizational participants, consultants, and researchers will attest that organizations are not perfectly rational or logical systems (e.g., March & Olsen, 1976). Organizations are replete with competing ideologies and goals that result from the uncertainty pervading them. Organizations must function within turbulent environments (Perrow, 1972; Emery & Trist, 1965),

with complex technologies (Thompson, 1967), and threatening political climates (Tushman, 1977). Instead of clear-cut paths to achieving goals and objectives, people in organizations, as well as consultants working with them, are forced to sift through incomplete

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or conflicting stories, observations, and opinions to make sense out of the dynamics in them and their relationships to the environment.

This milieu of uncertainty is the foundation upon which organizational cultures arise to provide a framework within which shared meanings are developed. Organizational culture, as used here, includes the unique language, symbols, metaphors, and myths that arise from the organization's situation and the interactions of its participants. These particular components of culture facilitate the feelings of rational action in the midst of otherwise overpowering uncertainty and political maneuvering. Myths in this context represent one way in which other elements of organizational culture are conceptually organized into a system of organizationally relevant logic.

## THE MYTH-MAKING SYSTEM IN ORGANIZATIONS

Myth making is an adaptive mechanism whereby groups in an organization maintain logic frameworks within which to attribute meaning to activities and events. The meanings that organize past activities and events into a system of logic then become the basis for legitimizing present and future behaviors. A myth-making system is evident to some degree in every organization. Without such an adaptive system, the technological and administrative structure would lack sufficient shared meaning to serve as a basis for coordinated behavior in the face of excessive uncertainty.

For those who become socialized into an organization, myths constitute a factual and highly objective reality. They are a major part of the taken-for-granted assumptions and common-sense theories of organizational experi-

ence. In general, we hold myths to be social attempts to "manage" certain problematic aspects of modern organizations through definitions of truth and rational purpose. This process of "management" results in a composite of standard operating procedures and organizational characteristics, such as acceptable practices concerning the treatment of subordinates and procedures for their placement, transfer, and promotion. A myth is constructed to exemplify why the given practices and procedures are the "only way" the organization can function effectively. March and Simon (1958) point out how unlike the "economic man" we are in the way we "bound" our world to make it *seem* rational. Myths are a form of "bounding," permitting meaningful organizational behavior to occur, while glossing over excessive complexity, turbulence, or ambiguity. Myths narrow the horizon in which organizational life is allowed to make sense.

Because friendship and/or work groups within an organization face different environments and are made up of individuals with different backgrounds and skills, the dominant myths for each group can vary significantly. Myths collide and compete in the ongoing negotiation of power and privilege among groups attempting to determine the dominant myth-making system. Once a myth is accepted as a basis for a group's belief structure, however, it will be strongly resistant to change.

## MYTH MAKING AND ORGANIZATION DEVELOPMENT

Interventions by OD consultants not only affect the structure and process of human interaction, but also the

delicate fabrics of socially constructed realities (Berger & Luckman, 1967). In their attempts to examine the organization's myth system, OD consultants often substitute their own myths for those of the client organization. In theory, many OD techniques (e.g., survey feedback, process analysis, confrontation meeting) focus on the discrepancy between story and action to promote organizational change. An assumption among some consultants is that all myths are dysfunctional to the accomplishment of organizational goals. The revelation of these inconsistencies will presumably facilitate more effective modes of behavior.

There is, however, some disagreement as to the need to demythify the practice of OD. Margulies (1972), for example, describes the OD consultant as somewhere between an applier of behavioral science principles and a "magician" employing such tactics as placebos and myth making to effect change. Almost to the other extreme, French and Bell (1973) define OD as the application of behavioral science principles that completely demythify poorly understood organizational phenomena. Unfortunately, the consultant attempting to alter components of a dominant myth often confronts great resistance when a change strategy threatens to unlock inconsistencies or ambiguities that are being explained and even controlled through the current myth structure. Since, in our opinion, the client organization and the OD consultant both use myths, an intervention becomes an occasion for potential myth conflict between client and practitioner.

## A TYPOLOGY OF ORGANIZATIONAL MYTHS

There are numerous functions of myth

making that benefit both client and consultant. Our typology of myth functions draws upon the work of Thompson (1967) and categorizes myths in accordance with whether they deal with *standards of desirability* (1 and 2) or with *cause and effect relationships* (3 and 4).

### *Myths concerning standards of desirability*

1. Myths that create, maintain, and legitimize past, present, or future actions and consequences
2. Myths that maintain and conceal political interests and value systems

### *Myths concerning cause and effect relationships*

3. Myths that help explain and create cause and effect relationships under conditions of incomplete knowledge
4. Myths that rationalize the complexity and turbulence of activities and events to allow for predictable action taking

We believe myth making will be most obvious in organizations where standards of desirability and cause and effect relationships are unknown or in dispute. These four categories are designed as a heuristic framework within which to further consider and analyze the functions of myths in organizations.

### **Myths that create, maintain, and legitimize past, present, and future actions and consequences**

Margulies (1972) has pointed out how the myths of "newness" and "rational scientific principles" can give added legitimacy to the consultant in gaining entrance into the client organization and generating the support of influential people once inside. War stories (Mitroff & Kilmann,



1976) can also be used by both client and consultant to legitimize the continuance of techniques that worked well in the past and to target the scope and direction of interventions.

Besides anchoring the present in the past and providing legitimacy, myths can be important creators of organizational futures. Clark (1972) and Pettigrew (Note 1) have reported how entrepreneurs and reformers at times have pushed aside old structures in favor of the image of the future they intend to create. Sproull and Weiner (Note 2) have documented how this type of process was of prime importance to the creation of the National Institute of Education. Images of the future were molded and shaped in ways that allowed the mobilization of support and legitimization of policy statements. Influential persons involved in the myth creation also aided this process by giving their prestige and reputation to this myth, thus helping it attain greater concrete reality.

King (1974) has described how "expectation effects" explain the results of many OD efforts. One group of clients, for example, was told their intervention would lead to greater productivity, while the other group was told that improvements in interpersonal relationships would result. King found that the expectations conveyed before the intervention predicted its outcome. Myths about the past can also mobilize support and provide protection against threatening groups. In other words, myths create a momentum of their own.

### **Myths that maintain and conceal political interests**

Pfeffer (1977) has described how myths can be used by the dominant coalition in an organization to camou-

flage its power, make decisions in secret, and hide the results of those decisions. Myths are inexorably intertwined in an organization's power structure. This is often not the power hierarchy defined by the organizational chart. Instead, actual power groups often use the rationalizing function of a myth to justify actions that might appear selfish or unethical. For example, when the federal government decided to create the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA), it was done under the guise of providing cheap and efficient electrical power to that region (Selznick, 1966). The political motive, to prohibit the growth of powerful private interests, was shielded by the myth of benevolence.

There is a further interaction between power and its supporting myth. While power groups have the ability to maintain and impose their own myth structure on others, the myth provides the framework for the full and unquestioned use of such power. The U.S. auto industry serves as a recent example. For many years, executives of the major auto companies were convinced that the domestic car buyer would never settle for a small, compact car. The lack of success with a few of them (e.g., the Vega and the Pinto) served only to support this idea. Internal planners and external critics argued in vain for resource allocations (and a better quality product) in the face of this overriding belief. Only when the evidence became overwhelming (i.e., a drastic drop in sales and profits) did the auto makers re-examine the "big car" myth.

### **Myths that help explain and create cause and effect relationships**

Under conditions of incomplete knowledge, myths function to support



decision making and rationality by creating cause and effect relationships. This allows organizational actors to assign causes to the present, once meaning is determined for the past. Problems can arise when knowledge gained from the past is built in as an assumption regarding the future. Since the assigned cause and effect relationship is usually consistent with the current dominant myth, "data" derived from prior activities and events will tend to support that myth and the existing power structure.

Women's groups, for example, have charged that men have perpetuated a myth about female unreliability in order to exclude them from better and higher paying jobs. The belief was that most women were only working until they could get married, get their husband through school, and the like. In other words, a woman's career was naturally (or instinctively) secondary to her family. By providing a rationale for not promoting women, a self-fulfilling prophecy developed. Not surprisingly, most women chose to leave the labor force when other opportunities were available. That is, the data supported the dominant myth.

### **Myths that rationalize complexity and turbulence to allow for taking predictable action**

Myths of this type play an important role in providing the illusion of rational intention and action and in creating predictability in the face of random and evolutionary forces. Many actors are predisposed to see every action as the result of an *a priori* goal. Every effect must have causal intent. Even if an action is unintended, many search out "latent" goals that explain its origin. Consultants may be making a mythical assumption in treating

organizations as identifiable, measurable, analyzable, and changeable (Greenfield, 1973). Here, the socially constructed reality of the consultant affects the actions and consequences of system actors.

Myths may be used to simplify the complexity of the flow of events by resorting to ethical codes (Emery & Trist, 1965) or standards of acceptability. Rather than respond to the turbulence of the environment directly, organizations often enact a simpler environment of rules and rituals for reaching their decisions.

Mintzberg (1973) has noted that many executives mythically adopt the planning, organizing, directing, and controlling model of management, when in fact they make decisions in haste and work in fast-paced environments with frequent interruptions. Managers are also bombarded by competing demands from their superiors, subordinates, and peers. When subordinates make requests or demands to alter certain procedures, the manager will frequently invoke the myth of "tradition" or "past success." Procedures become embedded in the fabric of organizational life and become "the way things are done here." Essentially, the myth in this case provides the manager with a ready-made rationale to avoid re-examining certain aspects of the system. The result is to gloss over much of the potential complexity in the organization's internal processes.

In summary, organizational myths are neither inherently positive nor negative. They are facts of organizational existence that serve as another factor to be considered, analyzed, and potentially altered or incorporated in change efforts. Unlike French and Bell (1973), we do not advocate simply sweeping aside "dysfunctional" myths.

Instead, the myth system of certain groups may have to be taken as a given, modified, or enriched depending upon the anticipated scope and objectives of the organizational development effort. The first step must be to determine what myth system(s) are functioning in the organization.

## STRUCTURAL ANALYSIS OF MYTHS AND MYTH MAKING

One problem with analyzing myths is that the consultant must translate the client organization's *reconstructions* (i.e., stories, sagas, retrospections, linguistic categories) into common and opposing themes before he or she can derive the logic of the myth-making system. This requires a more qualitative process akin to psychoanalysis to investigate the client's reconstruction of "why" a certain event or activity occurred. A recommendation of structural anthropologists, particularly Levi-Strauss (1955, 1963), is to identify the episodes of the mythical account throughout the client organization and then to analytically infer the underlying structure of the myth-making system.

For example, suppose we ask people how or why a certain tradition or rule came into being. Techniques, like phenomenological interviewing, that allow individuals to freely recount episodes seem appropriate here (Massarik, Note 3). People may reconstruct differing historical accounts of that event, depending upon their tenure, level, specialization, industry environment, and a host of other contextual variables. This contextual variance ought to be studied rather than controlled since it may reveal the logical themes that bind the accounts together.

We will not discover the meaning of organizational myths in a single convention, rule, procedure, or philosophic tidbit. Nor will we discover it in averages or tests of co-variation. A myth-making system is revealed in the logic that connects a wide variety of seemingly disjointed elements. The elements of the underlying theme occur in sets, the meaning of which is discovered by contrasting one element with other elements in context rather than a single element with itself.

Unobtrusive elements, such as codes of ethics, procedures for hiring, rules for budgeting, and symbols of office, are assumed here to be fundamental elements, which under systematic analysis may reveal the underlying socially constructed logic that interrelates them. An observed action, practice, or ritualistic behavior has no meaning except in the context of other historical elements. By analyzing these relationships across time and context, the myths should become more obvious—i.e., more obvious in the same sense that words have more meaning in the context of a sentence. Organizations, for example, in which family imagery and metaphors (e.g., "the old man," "the parent office") are employed, suggest behavioral patterns and appraisal systems quite contrary to a setting where we hear stories of "empire builders," "domains," and "young princes."

The consultant may wonder what to focus on in the client organization's reconstructions. Some suggestions are:

1. Recurring metaphors and themes that appear across rationalizing accounts (e.g., racial imagery, historical labels);
2. Categorizing dimensions employed in the accounts, such as status

differentiations; us vs. them, good vs. bad, appropriate vs. inappropriate, formal vs. informal;

3. Underlying oppositions and contradictions; the coexistence of mutually exclusive or competing beliefs (e.g., "the common good" in the face of piece-rate incentives).

While we know of no current efforts to apply such an analytical framework to the study of organizational myth making, we believe the above guidelines coupled with research into the implications of different organization structures could reveal unseen aspects of formal organizations and human behavior in them.

## THE USE OF MYTH DATA IN OD

For the OD consultant, the critical issue is the diagnosis of myth making and the associated implications for organizational health. Consultants, as unsocialized intruders, are told many stories about the organization. These should be carefully recorded to capture the subtle variations among the versions told in different units and at various levels. These reconstructions may give clues to the state of the system and where there is impetus for change.

As the "intruder" gains entrance, he or she quickly learns a new language. To the extent that language not only determines what we see, but how we interpret what we see, careful documentation of organizational and group language is in order.

The consultant will know if he or she has isolated the important aspects of myth making when he or she begins to be able to predict and interpret behavior the same way as the client. The

consultant who employs the same categories and "actions in use" soon ceases to be viewed as the intruder. If the practitioner is able to identify the relevant organizational myths that support the decision-making process, the following is a partial list of the potential uses of such data.

## The myth-making life cycle

A problem often encountered is the timing of change. For the purpose of selecting an appropriate intervention point, a life-cycle concept can be applied to the myth-making process. Organizational development theorists (e.g., Cohen, Fink, Gadon & Willits, 1976) have stated that the best time to intervene is when sufficient tension exists in the system to motivate organizational actors to seek alternate methods for action. This occurs when the environment begins to withdraw expected reinforcements. As a heuristic device, four stages of a myth cycle are developed below. The example is a small company that finds its environment changing from one of non-competition to strong competition. Table 1 shows the four potential stages this company's myth-making system might experience. In this case, the company's defined mission—to produce only the finest quality products regardless of cost—will be used as the dominant organizational myth.

The ability to maintain a myth will be dependent upon a group's relative power within the organization. How each group then perceives its goal as being convergent with, or divergent from the organization's will help determine that group's acceptance of the overall organizational myth. The point is that myth evolution does not have to be a smooth process, but can



*Table 1. The Myth-Making Life Cycle*

<i>Myth Stage</i>	<i>Company Situation</i>	<i>Myth Development</i>
I. Development	Rapid growth, high profitability, bright future outlook; no real competition.	Myth is successfully guiding decision making and organizational strategy. "Developing myth"
II. Maturation	Company's growth slowing, but still recognized as solid leader. Some competition which is inconsequential.	Myth and company identity completely intertwined. Myth strength still high. "Solid myth"
III. Decline	Competition has become substantial. Profitability slipping. Mission is a hindrance to action.	Most organizational units looking for ways to bolster myth, but some groups beginning to develop competing myths for renewal. "Myth split"
IV. Reformulation	Company's situation has deteriorated to the point that precipitates a change in leadership.	Myth redefined to include new quality range for products. "Myth shift"

be erratic, depending upon the support the organizational myth receives from divergent groups and the environment.

It is hypothesized that each myth stage will afford different opportunities for change efforts. Stage III, "Decline," in Table 1 corresponds to the period of developing tension. In the decline stage, the dominant myth is becoming detrimental to the organization's ability to react to its changing environment. At this stage, an intervention in the myth structure would be possible because of the internal strife, while at the same time averting further economic loss and subsequent disruption. Stage IV, "Reformulation," represents a final breakdown of the dominant myth structure. At this stage, there can be great tension and open conflict between myths that are vying for dominance.

The previous example of the U.S. auto industry will provide a case in point. The dominant myth that the average consumer would not purchase

a compact car held sway until it nearly destroyed a major producer. In this case, the decline phase for this myth might have occurred when the environment began to withdraw its support, as evidenced by higher gasoline prices and the growing market share captured by foreign competitors. Presumably, re-examination of the myth would have been appropriate at this stage, averting the dramatic reformulation that was necessary to prevent disaster for the industry. It must be noted, however, that prior to the decline stage, intervention attempts would most likely have failed because of the dominant myth's past record of success.

Consultants may feel that the level of organizational diagnosis must correspond only to the anticipated "depth" of the intervention. Therefore, if the change is focused at the individual level, the relevant information would be background, attitude, and skill data.

Fleishman (1953), however, has noted the futility of training individuals and then returning them to groups that hold beliefs in opposition to those supporting the training. Since the dominant myth provides the basis for the group's definition of meaning and acceptable behavior, attempts to change individual behavior must still take into account the myth structure. Even for interventions that are not intended to change the myth, new behavioral or attitudinal components introduced into the system must be complementary.

For major interventions focused at altering a given myth or set of myths, the degree of change desired and the system's propensity to accept such change will be important factors. The greater the change required, presumably the further advanced the myth life cycle would be. This assumes that the system's resistance to change corresponds to a life-cycle progression. In either case, myth analysis becomes an important aspect of any diagnostic effort.

### **Seats of power**

For an intervention to be successful, organizational groups with the power to institute or impede change must be involved in, if not take ownership of, the intervention. Diagnosing the seats of power within the organization can be facilitated by the analysis of the myth structure. The ability of a given group to impose its myth on other organizational members, as evidenced by how decisions are made, is an indicator of real organizational power. Changing the alignment of power groups will necessitate accounting for such a shift in the organization's myth-making system.

### **The soft side of diagnosis**

French, Bell, and Zawacki (1979), when discussing survey feedback as a diagnostic tool, state that "a successful change effort begins with rigorous measurement of the way in which the organization is presently functioning" (p. 185). From the preceding discussion, it becomes apparent that this diagnosis cannot and should not be restricted to "hard" data. Indirect data-gathering techniques must be defined and eventually refined for OD practitioners. This traditionally "soft" area of diagnosis has been left up to the individual consultant's intuition or style.

Since individuals within the organization rely upon the myth as an unquestioned basis for interpretation and decision making, it may not be appropriate to question them directly about these assumptions. Interventions, built on such models as Walton's (1969) third-party, peace making model, which rely upon organizational actors to reveal their assumptions, may not provide an accurate assessment of the myth-making system. The myth that underlies the perceptions of reality will be too deeply imbedded in the cognitive framework to be discerned by introspection concerning "hard" data. Diagnosis must include the collection of multilevel information through participant observation and ethnographic analysis (Pettigrew, 1979) to completely determine the client system's need for, and the receptivity to, an intervention.

## **MYTH-MAKING INTERVENTIONS**

In this section, we would like to propose possible interventions into the

myth-making process of organizations. Our discussion here is tentative and meant to be more exploratory than prescriptive.

### **Demythifying**

French and Bell (1973), as noted earlier, have suggested that OD consultants should concern themselves more with applying behavioral science principles in their intervention strategies. The suggested intervention, in this case, is the substitution of the lawful patterns of the behavioral sciences for the often subconscious myth patterns of clients. Practitioners, therefore, should spend more time training system actors in the principles of the behavioral sciences and developing skills for diagnosing and counteracting common organizational myths. We wonder whether the behavioral sciences have advanced to the point of being able to advocate confidently their "truths" over the "realities" of the people who work and live in complex organizations.

### **Myth exchange**

The basic assumption of this intervention is that if we dig deep enough into the relationships between actors in complex organizations, a significant part of those relationships will be based upon myths. Interventions focused upon allowing one actor to be able to see through the filters employed by other actors may help to improve communication and understanding. The first step for the practitioner is to demonstrate the existence of different logic systems and filters for viewing reality. System actors must learn to identify different organizational myths as alternative views of reality. The second step in this intervention is

Maruyama's (1974) technique of "transpection," through which the actor attempts to "bracket" her or his own mythical thinking and reason in terms of the logics held by other actors, so that she or he can see the same reality others are seeing. Learning the other's language is a necessary prerequisite to entertaining the other's logic.

The next important step in the exchange is being able to have Actor A (having understood and being able to see with the frames used by Actor B) explain to Actor B just how she or he sees B's world. Practitioners employ similar interventions when they ask participants to engage in "imaging." In imaging, actors are asked to describe how other actors see them. This requires that a three-step process be followed: (1) recognizing differing myths, (2) being able to see the world the way others see it, and (3) being able to communicate what is seen in the logic categories of the original myth before exchange.

### **Myth balancing**

The OD consultant can often note the existence of apparently mutually exclusive activities and events in organizations. Demythifying and exchange interventions may not be enough to cause adjustments in firmly held patterns of belief. Perhaps the intervention to employ here is to balance existing myths with a more multifaceted or dialectical view of reality.

If the relevant myth suggests a rational goal perspective for all action, the practitioner might temper this perspective with a greater emphasis on the use of problem and goal discovery. On the other hand, suppose actors presume that there is little they can do



to counteract the uncertainty of their environments. In this case, a greater understanding of planning and goal-setting models for action might help participants gain greater control over their environment.

In myth balancing, the focus is not on shattering people's deeply held myths, but in providing them with a fruitful way of thinking about their experiences. Rather than picking up on one or the other side of opposing views, the intervention should give participants a balanced view of reality; to allow for the incorporation of existing beliefs by way of modification and balance, rather than rejection.

### Myth enrichment

People like to reconstruct their experiences in a way that puts them in a better light. Their enhanced image of themselves and their organization can promote a higher quality of working life. Here the intervention should cultivate an enriched meaning of the organization and the roles and relationships of those working in it.

There are periods in an organization's life cycle when a crisis of meaning pervades: that is, when cohesion and logic have withered away or been shattered by rapidly changing or turbulent environments. In such cases, the myth-making system exists in a state of future shock. Interventions, which can aid the organization in finding meaningful interpretations and enrich feelings of purpose, direction, and importance, are appropriate.

If, on the other hand, the investigation involves the uncovering of dysfunctional or negative thought structures, then a useful intervention might be to substitute alternative imagery. Giving the client an enriched language

may improve the perceptions of human relationships. Inventing and socializing participants into new myths may give social structure and process new meaning.

### SUMMARY

We envision this line of inquiry as having implications for the kinds of organizational interventions we would expect to see in the future. If we want to intervene in the cultural side of organizations, we must try to understand why and for what purposes myth making occurs. We have suggested that myths emerge to mediate and otherwise "manage" basic organizational dilemmas, such as uncharted ambiguities, basic uncertainties, turbulent environments, poorly understood technologies, and demands for depersonalization and rationalization of human action and purpose.

We have suggested that myths perform a variety of functions, such as: (1) legitimizing and rationalizing actions and consequences that are intended or completed; (2) moderating political interests and value systems; (3) explaining and creating cause and effect relationships; and (4) creating an environment where turbulence and complexity are buffered through rationalization and social reconstruction. To this list, we have added a final opinion: that myth making may fulfill a useful and healthy function in enriching human interaction.

Finally, we have offered a number of suggestions concerning the uses of myths for organizational diagnosis, and the types of interventions that might take advantage of myths and myth making in organizations. We believe the orientation and framework we have presented represents an alter-

native, useful way of studying organizations as cultural phenomena and enriching the meaning of organizational life.

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