Book essay on "leadership & cultural webs in organizations: Weaver's tales"

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ABSTRACT

Changing organizational culture is a top priority for new senior managers but several obvious and hidden cultural elements interconnect to hinder and even entrap them. McLean (2013) draws from social anthropology with strong tribute to Clifford Geertz for defining organizational culture as sets of webs. Managers as weavers of organizational cultural webs attempt to understand threads made up of semiotics, semantics, structure and people — and to change them. Researchers as weavers become deeply immersed ethnographically within an organization to develop an overall storyline or fabric (meta-conversation) on examples of leadership seeking to effect change in organization culture. McLean encourages leaders to apply a cognitive rather than mechanistic approach to understanding and attempting to change organization culture. His approach is based on managers driving and researchers exploring thinking (framing), estrangement, rethinking (reframing), enactment and exemplification. Managers seek to stimulate organization cultural change collectively through being a weaver among weavers.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Changing organization culture — facing the web and its host

Changing corporate or organizational culture is often on the top of the leadership agenda for new senior managers. The newcomer is walking straight into the equivalent of an organizational spider web. The new manager is ensnared by an overwhelming spider web absorbing and resisting change. The change agent faces strangulation from the web itself and paralysis or poisoning from the spider's venom — but the mission is to change the web and the spider. How then can the new manager design and spin the strands of corporate culture and change the mind and direction of the spider — and the organization?

Setting aside the spider as a central controller of a spider web, the strands and yarns are analogous to an underlying pattern or system containing common reinforcing values, norms, semantics and semiotics capable of absorbing, withstanding or repelling intruders. The spider web is an analogy for organization cultural webs

2. Cultural webs in organizations

Defining organization culture as a web is an established perspective in organization studies. Johnson (1992) defined a "cultural web" of an organization as a paradigm ("a core set of beliefs and assumptions which fashion an organization's view of itself and its environment") (p. 30) supported by power structures, organizational structures, control systems, rituals and routines, stories and myths, and symbols (p. 31). Johnson's perspective built on Schein's (1985, p. 36) definition of group culture as:

> A pattern of shared assumptions learned by a group as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration which has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think and feel in relation to those problems.

Johnson (1992) presented three summary cases on how managers define cultural webs including a menswear clothing retailer, a consultancy partnership, and a regional newspaper (p. 32). He advocates a positivist approach to strategic organizational change where it is "the social, political, cultural and cognitive dimensions of managerial activities which both give rise to the sort of incremental strategic change typical in organizations: but which can also be employed to galvanize more fundamental strategic change" (Johnson, 1992, p. 36).

McLean outlines an account of his academic and consulting journey through organization Culture and change over more than thirty years — but does not mention Johnson's work on cultural webs. Clifford Geertz is nominated as the strongest influence on the development of his thinking and consulting in this field. "Leadership & Cultural Webs In Organizations: Weaver's Tales" represents a tribute to Geertz both with respect to his view of cultures as webs of signification, and his approach to ethnographic research through thick description.

McLean supports Geertz's view of culture as "interpretations that members of a culture place on their experience – to understand how

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they make sense of things" (McLean, 2013, p. 21), and his definition of cultural webs – "Man is an animal suspended in webs of signification he himself has spun. I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretative one in search of meaning" (Geertz, 1973, p. 5). McLean expresses cultural webs as a form of fabric:

> Through the phrase "webs of signification" Geertz is suggesting that, as members of social groups, communities and societies we acquire a complex interconnected conceptual fabric through which we interpret and give meaning to our experience. This is a fabric formed and affirmed over generations through everyday interactions and exchanges and is characterized by an unquestioned and taken for granted sense of normality.

[McLean, 2013, p. 26]

Cultural webs help individuals and groups to deal with uncertainty and ambiguity — but they shape and are shaped by them. McLean highlights similarities between spiders' and cultural webs:

> Webs are hard to see, they are durable and resilient. Their elaborate patterns enable rapid passage for those familiar with the network of preformed pathways. They entrap the unwary, entangle strangers who blunder into them and disable adventurers who would ignore them. If ruptured or torn they are quickly repaired.

[McLean, 2013, p. 27]

McLean develops his book around characteristics of spiders' and cultural webs in organization contexts. Managers seeking substantial change to organization culture need to see the underlying cultural webs and their combinations of threads — and intervene to produce cultural change.

3. Objective versus cognitive views of organization change

In Chapter 1.1, McLean discusses shortcomings of an objective mechanistic view of leading organizational change, suggesting rejection or relinquishing of concern for objectivity, the search for universal truths, thinking that flows from seeing organizations as machines or structures, and participants not as engineers or architects. He leans toward a perceptual or cognitive view of an organization basing the book around an organizational anthropology perspective of human actors knowing and perceiving their world through the medium of culturally specific terms of reference (Smircich, 1983).

4. Organization cultural webs: a framework

In Chapter 2, McLean takes the reader on a definitional journey through key concepts associated with culture and meaning derived largely from Geertz's views. He supports Geertz's argument that "achieving an understanding of a culture called for deep familiarity based on living in or alongside a society or community" (McLean, 2013, p. 21), and extends this application to managers and researchers within organizations.

McLean explores organization culture through semiotics, semantics, sensemaking, learning, embodiment, enactment and intervention. He develops a framework for discussion on cultural webs based on interpretive schema, systems of belief and explanation in an organizational context. Language and physical settings within an organization express signs, symbols, rituals, artifacts and shared values that are important for identifying and mapping cultural webs.

McLean uses a thick-description case study to highlight issues associated with a large organization identifying and responding to competition, where management attempted to transform the organization to a customer-focused culture. Language and symbols are identified and discussed as key cultural elements in the study; managers play a key role in creating and maintaining language and key symbols within an organization — but cannot do this on their own.

5. Revealing organization culture through symbols

In Chapter 3, McLean develops a working definition for symbols in organization culture: "[Symbols] embody and express meaning and serve as vehicles that carry meaning. An understanding of symbols in organizational life is therefore an essential; part of any understanding of culture and processes of cultural change" (McLean, 2013, p. 41).

Formal Symbols including messages conveyed by the organization through advertising, promotion, publicity and mission statements can be readily viewed by an incoming or prospective manager as their first impressions. Informal symbols are harder to discern but convey deeper insights on prevailing organization cultures. Office settings, design, furnishings and layouts combined with internal interpretations of them are important symbols of culture.

Although viewing the symbols of an organization and drawing initial conclusions about associated culture is useful, deep understanding of acculturation over time is essential. McLean outlines socialization into an organization based on phased acculturation for an incoming manager including encountering formal symbols; early socialization, secondary deeper socialization and deep familiarity with the culture. McLean explores symbols that managers seeking change are able to use as interventions. Artifacts associated with high-profile symbols such as CEO speeches, corporate publicity, corporate logos and promotions can be carefully crafted and manipulated by managers to convey changes in formal external and internal meaning associated with the organization. Low profile symbols are "seemingly irrelevant and mundane phenomena that form part of a pervasive context of organizational life" (McLean, 2013, p. 51) — but some of them may be consciously controlled to motivate people to think positively (or otherwise) about the organization. The manager's main task is interweaving high and low profile symbols into form and pattern that is organization culture — is at this point of the book that McLean introduces the manager seeking cultural change as a 'weaver'.

6. Managers weaving their meaning of cultural change

In Chapter 4, McLean explores challenges for managers to weave their meaning of cultural change not just into an organization with usually strong and established culture, but with other weavers maintaining that culture. He highlights a key paradox that while leaders will try weaving their preferred meaning for cultural change, they are facing multiple interpretations and meanings of the same organization's culture. The manager in effect becomes a weaver among weavers (McLean, 2013, p. 64). McLean supports this view through differentiating between a Cartesian worldview and a semiotic perspective: "If the Cartesian worldwide casts culture as an object or phenomenon that is separate from us and leads us to think of it as some 'thing' that can be managed or manipulated, the semiotic perspective holds that we are participants in a culture and are continuously influenced by it while, simultaneously, shaping it. We are all cultural weavers" (McLean, 2013, p. 66).

McLean uses a thick description case study to highlight how an incoming manager and their management sought to identify key organization culture values (in this book, effectively part of cultural threads) — and then to weave change in them through embodying changes to values through language, key planning activities and by personal example. McLean then explores development of meaning – weaving – through asking questions about symbols, and then reframing the symbols through asking or answering the questions differently. Turning reframed symbols into metaphors can be vital for managers seeking change. McLean draws on a Social Constructionist view that "Language does not describe action, but is itself a form of action" (Gergen, 1991, as cited in McLean, 2013, p. 79).

While Mclean focuses on business and government organization case studies throughout the book, to support discussion on reframing culture, he uses an academic example where the prevailing culture (or dominant logic) was to work with practitioners to diagnose, fix and solve problems within a business organization — but that was reframed toward refocusing on organization strengths and capabilities to achieve change and growth. The reframed perspective – Appreciative Inquiry – developed by Cooperrider (1990, as cited in McLean, 2013, p. 75), has over time developed into a distinct model for business analysis and strategic change.

McLean explores additional threads of cultural webs including organization systems and procedures. Managers, their teams and those allocated roles and responsibilities for designing, developing and maintaining systems and procedures build and maintain organization culture associated with them. While most of the organization culture associated with systems and procedures is through language in the form or words and vocabulary, artifacts such signage, appointments and departures, building design and office layout all contribute to the composition of cultural threads.

Identification of so many cultural threads is complex and could anesthetize or overwhelm an incoming manager seeking cultural change. McLean calls for mindfulness to stay awake and step beyond entrenched organization culture. (McLean, 2013, p. 100).

7. Facing failing cultural webs

Chapter 5 opens with recognition that webs are strong and resilient, based on multiple points of connectivity and elasticity, capable of absorbing stress from one section across the whole of it. McLean admires the strength and underlying resilience of spider webs which he can see within established organization cultures. Nevertheless, organizations are not invincible, and incoming managers may be consciously or unconsciously facing weak, broken or collapsing cultural webs with the specific mission of literally saving the business. Even organizations with strong culture in a time of great change, uncertainty, disruptive technology and heightened states of flux, face forces more than capable of destroying their cultural webs. Weavers need to be able significantly re-spin parts of or produce new webs of culture quickly — or face organizational extinction. McLean believes that it is possible to weave cultural change under such conditions, but offers an underlying premise that "if cultures are to change then our thinking about organizations and change processes also needs to change" (McLean, 2013, p. 105).

After considerable discussion and analysis on deep understanding of organizational culture, McLean attempts to reframe the notion of organizations in the face of high uncertainty and disruption, from thinking of an organization as an object or noun to focus on what it does i.e. 'organizing', drawing on a key sensemaking concept from Weick (1979). McLean reframes the notion of organization change from asking the question "how to change a culture" (as if it is an object) to "how can we create the conditions in which cultural change occurs" (McLean, 2013, p. 106).

An evolutionary approach to cultural change may not be fast or different enough to face current technological, market, economic and environmental change. McLean favors a disruptive framing of cultural change over a gradual, Darwinian structured change. His examples highlight stepping out of current organization culture and engaging with different successful cultures, including inquiring deeply into successful competitors or organizations in different industry sectors.

Such inquiry has to produce learning expressed through compelling "out-of-the-ordinary" conversations that challenges language, vocabulary and meaning within the organization quickly without paralyzing it. "Safety" issues for such conversations and possible associated actions are discussed with provision and permission for individuals and groups to talk and act. A meta-conversation around new and different webs of culture may emerge from these discussions and actions — but urgency and time and stakeholder pressure will require substantial extra workload and overtime weaving to executive sufficient change to avoid extinction. By the end of chapter, the reader is scratching their head wondering if cultural change is even possible under such uncertain and disruptive conditions.

8. Corporate Web disruption: weaving webs through a merger

In Chapter 6, McLean explores development of a meta-conversation as a vehicle for organization culture change through a disruptive event through a thick-description case-study of the merger of divisions from two large and established European telecommunications companies, each with distinct corporate cultures. McLean's ethnographic account of steps to establish a meta-conversation for the two divisions before during and after the merger is an outstanding example of deep, unfettered and trusted embedding of researchers and consultants within each organization and in the virtual environment set up for development for the meta-conversation — the "Culture Square" (McLean, 2013, pp. 136–169). Detailed accounts of expression of separate corporate cultures, and development of a new meta-corporate culture are included. A wide range of views and emotions are captured in these accounts — including changes of perception overt the "Culture Square" virtual environment over time.

The "Culture Square" virtual environment highlights emerging Internet-based applications to support development and sharing of changing organization conversation and change. Newer social media applications offer different forms of organization-wide real-time interactivity. An interesting account is outline in this chapter of a social networking technology offered by IBM to host large-scale conferences and supporting conversation that turned out to be vital for a key division of IBM itself to change its corporate culture toward being more customer-focused, innovative and sustainable. A flood of new social media and mobile applications will offer new opportunities and challenges for creating and sharing real-time conversations anywhere, anytime (JAM example, McLean, 2013, pp. 169–173).

Although McLean offers a deep account of developing the "Culture Square" up to the point where the companies actually merge, advocating success in establishing a meta-conversation, more ongoing research is required to analyze whether or not a new cultural web was actually created in the merged company.

9. Cultural patterns that connect

In Chapter 7, McLean highlights "patterns that connect" as "the recurring manifestations of cultural patterns that show up in all aspects of organizational life" (McLean, 2013, p. 177). He explores four key patterns through thick description case studies. I have added summary titles for each cultural pattern discussed by McLean: *Sleepy Hollow: The Pot-Plant Problem*; *Engineering Incorporated: When the Solution is the Problem*; *System Solutions: Organization as Algorithm or Cult*; and *Dartington Glass: Codifying Embedded Artisan Knowledge*. Key points from each pattern and associated case study are outlined below.

9.1. Sleepy Hollow: The Pot-Plant Problem (McLean, 2013, pp. 178–182)

During a meeting to review research into their corporate culture (a UK manufacturer of chemical products), a fateful remark applied the metaphor of a pot-plant to the organization — too constrained by an invisible corporate culture holding back substantial growth. The remark prompted a frank conversation highlighting physical cramped conditions, reluctance to convert R&D to products, reluctance of the board to make strategic decisions and various cultural issues holding back organizational growth. The conversation continued preferring to take the plant out of the pot and put it in soil in a garden — and the organization moved to larger premises and within six months had launched a new range of products

9.2. Engineering Incorporated: When the Solution is the Problem (McLean, 2013, pp. 182–188)

A large UK manufacturing company had lost over 20,000 of its employees (one third of its workforce) in less than three years. Senior management produced a plan to encourage engineers to innovate and to lead change in the organization, with consultants and researchers helping to develop "Action Plans". During action plan sessions, engineers enthusiastically spent time creating the Plans — but when they went back to their day jobs, implementation was deferred. Although the deferral appeared to be attributable to daily work pressures, further research uncovered engineering mindsets that encouraged the impression of activity but focused on precision and standardization and nor taking risks i.e. inhibitors to innovation. The Action Plan had become a problem rather than a solution. In this scenario, the researchers recommended a contrarian "Inaction Plan" that attempted to recalibrate attempts at direct change toward inquiry into other possible approaches to change.

9.3. System Solutions: Organization as Algorithm or Cult (McLean, 2013, pp. 188–194)

A UK manufacturer and developer of computer hardware and software sought support in training associated with the management of change. Researchers and consultants found that although the language and vocabulary used by the organization was English, intense use computer and performance acronyms made the conversation foreign to them.

Behind the dense sets of acronyms were some key cultural patterns: Entrepreneurial technical experts driving the company; work thrown over the wall to the next group; endless cycles of change initiatives cascading through the organization but never stopping before the next set were initiated; clear but complex symbolic representation of symbols through flowcharting; flux and impermanence of products; previous history counted for nothing in the pursuit to learn the company's protocols strategies, particular language and technologies; and, intense loyalty to the company. The company culture bordered on cult membership where individuality was suppressed.

After identifying that management focus was on in order of importance — "Hardware, Software and Liveware" (Liveware being staff), a reversal of this list prompted widespread questioning of the key cultural patterns in the Organization and ultimately changes away from a cult membership patterns toward more individualized training and expression.

9.4. Dartington Glass: Codifying Embedded Artisan Knowledge (McLean, 2013, pp. 194–198)

A hand-blown glass manufacturer was facing an unusually high level of rejects or 'seconds', so technical director was appointed to identify to fix the problem. He went about the task systematically aiming to collect key data and measurements. However, knowledge and processes associated hand-blowing glass tended to be closely held and implicit within experienced artisans but not codified.

Initially, staff at the plant disconnected anything associated with data collection under a collective cultural view that experience and skill did not need to be supported by measurement. Persistence with new forms of measurement identified and inferior grade of sand as contributing to the high reject rate. Eventually more measurement and codification was added to enhance the artisan's output.

The artisan example highlights challenges for managers who attempt to weave a different cultural web sensitively mixing implicit knowledge with scientific and explicit approaches to products — and is not unlike the transition of the artisan weaver before the Industrial Revolution, and the industrial weaver both designing and overseeing systematically production processes.

To identify and track cultural patterns from an anthropologist's point of view requires "immersion and an acute sensitivity to participants' interpretive frames" (Bateson, 1979, as cited in McLean, 2013, p. 199). McLean states that the insights on the cultural patterns in the four case studies:

> … took form through prolonged observation, conversation and reflection as well as through active participation in day-to-day life. In this sense they represented a form of fieldwork or ethnography similar to that of early anthropologists. We have learned that cultural webs reveal several themselves gradually in the manner if an image emerging in the course of a brass rubbing.
>
> [McLean (2013, p. 199)]

McLean is advocating by example deep ethnographic research strategies for exploring organization webs of culture to identify patterns and types of connection. Ethnographic case studies are used to reveal cultural knowledge, while storytelling is used to help organizations to reflect on their webs of culture (McLean, 2013, p. 201).

10. Revealing webs of culture: key principles

In Chapter 8, McLean explores daunting challenges for managers to understand their organization's webs of culture. Researchers and consultants commissioned to support managers in these activities face similar challenges observing, analyzing, and turning their findings into useful stories for their clients. McLean outlines an approach to reveal webs of culture based on three key principles: *estrangement*, *enactment* and *exemplification*.

10.1. Estrangement

(McLean, 2013, pp. 209–213) draws on perspectives that strangers or people unfamiliar to a culture experience when on confronting or experience it. Culture shock experienced by visitors to a country or region with different symbols, rituals and artifacts to their own may either reinforce their perceptual cultural self-reference (ethnocentrism) or they may enthusiastically embrace differences even more than the locals. McLean sees this stage of heightened senses as vital for viewing an organization culture differently — and revealing key underlying features of it.

Estrangement can be operationalized through sending managers to other companies or countries or contexts to heighten their senses of awareness so that they come back to review, challenge, disrupt and attempt weave different patterns on organization culture. Estrangement may be encouraged through moving or seconding managers and staff in different divisions, departments or workgroups in the organizations — and particularly areas where they would typically work in.

Estrangement is of course expressed through recruiting managers and staff who clearly have different ideas, views and ways of doing things. Despite all arguments about resistance to cultural change, change agents are required to change organization culture. Their heightened sense of issues with existing culture and at least their initial approaches to weaving cultural webs to a different design are required.

10.2. Enactment

(McLean, 2013, pp. 213–217) is where: "managers construct, rearrange, single out, and demolish many "objective" features of their surroundings. When people act, they unrandomize variables, insert vestiges of orderliness, and literally create their own constraints" (Weick, 1979 as cited in McLean, 2013, p. 213). Enactment is sensemaking of organization culture and decision-making. Sensemaking requires cognitive mapping which can be in several forms from simple statements of processes and events, storylines and case studies, cognitive maps, cognitive task analysis simulations and knowledge elicitation systems.

Pattinson & Woodside (2007) explored Sensemaking methods for revisiting individual and group decision-making in complex and changing high-technology businesses focused on decision system analysis, event chronologies and cognitive mapping. McLean prefers simulations that reveal deeper held group values and culture expressed through language (conversation and symbols). "Enactment refers to acting out of an assumption in a way that legitimates it as an acceptable and normal form of conduct. Enactment is to define reality through our behavior or acts" (McLean, 2013, p. 216). This form of simulation enables participants to enact organization activities, and researchers to help them to see deeper cultural threads — and perhaps to change them.

Whatever sensemaking approach is applied, it must create sufficient surprise and tension to reveal cultural connections and patterns that managers need to change.

10.3. Exemplification

(McLean, 2013, pp. 218–221) refers to individuals or groups whose views and actions become key stories within the organization's culture. New managers seeking change can use formal symbols of culture to create stories that permeate through the organization. This change perspective attempts to equate the new manager's stories to a 'hero' form of exemplification, but there are other forms.

Exemplification can be expressed through the punishment or restriction (or sometimes willful but stealthy allowance) of managers or staff who violate strongly held but sometimes hidden organization cultural values. Ethical management of expenses, manager recruitment and development by gender or minority group, what constitutes bullying in the workplace, geocentric management differences and various specific processes and events can produce 'hero' and 'villain' exemplifications.

McLean highlights a third type of exemplification, 'fools' or 'jesters'. This group is particularly interesting as they have a key place in cultural histories of most civilizations as those who parody existing cultures — and face a fine line between illuminating key features of the cultures and going too far to the point of ridicule, exclusion and even execution. The fool or jester may reveal quite sensitive issues with current organization culture but captured in stories made palatable by others for consumption by the rest of the organization. McLean offers an instrument (questionnaire) for discovering and revealing organization cultures through identification of hero, villain and fool exemplars.

McLean adds a fourth principle for revealing cultural patterns almost as an afterthought — *Imagery*. Visualization of management thinking has developed rapidly over last fifteen years. Representations of thinking in images of animals or groups (e.g. sharks, whales, tigers, lions, elephants) can be very interesting metaphors for expression of corporate cultures. Recent development of representations of business activities visually represented as business model canvasses Osterwalder & Pigneur (2010) and different types of strategic roadmaps can be powerful expressions or Organization culture (e.g. Moechrle, Isenmann, & Phaal, 2013).

11. The web as a metaphor for organization culture

In Chapter 9, McLean reinforces his view of the spider web as a metaphor for both the surface and underlying strengths within an organization culture. Nine distinguishing features of spiders' webs are expressed in an organization context:

1. Webs are strong, resilient and efficient.
2. Webs rely on secure anchors.
3. The construction of a web commences with the weaving of radial threads.
4. Spiders use temporary threads in the process of constructing a web.
5. Webs are comprised of many interwoven threads.
6. Webs provide non-sticky pathways by which a spider can travel.

7. Webs are hard to see.
8. Webs are comprised of both threads and spaces between threads.
9. Spiders work with up to seven different threads of silk when weaving web.

(McLean, 2013, p. 232).

McLean uses these features as a script or thread for a meta-storyline about Organization culture. He also uses most of his case studies to support discussion of each of these features. Insights from previous chapters are integrated and reframed around these threads. By the end of Chapter 8 the new fabric or storyline on Organization webs of culture has been weaved to look more metaphorically like a set of spider webs.

In the final chapter, McLean reminds the reader that the role of the leader is a weaver who influences everyone else who are also individually and collectively weavers. McLean consolidates a substantial set of findings, comments and insights into a set of key implications:

- be the message: leader as living symbol;
- leader as weaver among weavers — work with many weavers;
- leader as cultural caretaker, broker and sponsor;
- ensure secure anchors;
- leader as cultural provocateur;
- look for the pattern that connects — know your culture;
- attend to the message of the medium;
- shine a light — the power of presence;
- create and guard the quality of spaces between threads;
- encourage overlapping ecologies.

(McLean, 2013, p. 268).

McLean includes a section on the limits of using the web metaphor where he highlights the spider as an individual spinning and managing a web but cultural webs are creations of human social community. An interesting variation on cultural change viewed as webs of culture might be how start-up organizations weave their first webs of culture and if there are particular individuals or groups that actually most of those webs. Also of interest may be identification of weak or vulnerable points or conditions of cultural webs.

McLean finishes the book with an intriguing response to a question presented at the start of the book.

12. The final storyline – weavers weaving change in organizations – and research

McLean has presented a compelling storyline using the metaphors "weaver", "weaving" and "web" in the context of leading change in organization culture. Each metaphor contains multiples meanings and interpretations.

McLean's selection and use of the terms weaving and weaver is very interesting as they loaded with several meanings and possible applications. The term "weaving" has both meaning from a management practice and researcher perspective.

12.1. The weaver as a manager

A weaver in pre-industrial revolution times directly operated equipment to turn yarns or threads into fabric or cloth. A weaver in the modern occupational sense oversees both spinning (conversion of fibers into yarns or threads) and weaving (interlacing to produce fabric or cloth) as an overall manufacturing or fabrication activity.

McLean argues that a web of organization culture is spun (or weaved) collectively through developed and shared semiotics and semantics — and not by any particular individual. The manager seeking cultural change has to change a very strong, deeply embedded, strongly anchored and highly intertwined threads of semiotics and semantics through overseeing (weaving) a different design and configuration of the web. The actual adjustment, patching or changing sections of the

cultural web though has to be completed by most of the rest of the people in the organization. A key recommendation for a manager leading change is to be a weaver among weavers collecting and designing a revised or new fabric or tapestry of organization change. The manager leading change should aim to cognitively stimulate groups and individuals to think, estrange, rethink through enactment, and to exemplify real change in organization culture to produce growth and a positive future for the organization.

12.2. The weaver as a researcher

McLean refers to the 14th century where pilgrims traveled to various cathedrals and according to Chaucer the Weaver was the guildsman who traveled to Canterbury Cathedral and listened to the stories of his fellow travelers — but did not tell his own story (Chaucer, c1390, as cited in McLean, 2013, p. xvii). However, if the weaver was to compile an account of those stories then they could be seen as a different type of weaver, weaving yarns (stories) into a tapestry or fabric (compilation or larger stories or accounts). The weaver is effectively a field researcher – an ethnographer – watching activities and listening to stories inside the organization and compiling them into thick descriptions of cultural webs.

McLean carefully selects research/consulting projects effectively written up as thick descriptions bound into a meta-storyline. As thick descriptions, each project offers outstanding insights into key organizational issues particularly where they are facing – or need to face – substantial, change, transformation, or merging with other organizations.

McLean draws on ethnographic accounts from a diverse range of organizations based on over thirty years of conducting research and consulting. Some accounts go across all aspects of identifying organization culture and managers organizing to attempt to change culture, while other accounts highlight specific cultural semiotics and semantics, sometimes quite distinct to specific businesses or institutions.

Deep long-term ethnographic research requires very high levels of support, management, time and resources from several stakeholders. Ongoing access and support from managers within organizations to be researched is extremely challenging in a complex environment where managers, divisions, departments and businesses may be restructured, reconfigured or eliminated. Substantial and sustained support is required from universities, research institutions and consulting organizations to enable researchers to literally immerse themselves within organizations. Key insights as expressed by McLean cannot be drawn from short-term surface research methods and projects.

Ironically one of the key strengths of the depth of these accounts of organization culture, is that they appear to be neutral in terms of international cultural factors. Most cases are based in the United Kingdom with a few in Europe and the United States of America and largely based on English-speaking accounts (although the European Communications Networks may have been based on mixed language inputs from participants). Insights into organization cultural webs and changing them in contexts where that are not traditionally English language or western culturally anchored would be very interesting extensions.

McLean notes the increasing use of online environments and applications as spaces where conversation associated defining and changing Organization occur. How such conversations are set up, facilitated or moderated and then translated into wider and deeper accepted cultural storylines will key themes in an era of advancing online open and specific business communities.

Finally, McLean is akin to the weaver in Canterbury Cathedral from over six centuries ago, watching the activities and listening to the stories being told around him,. He did not tell his own story but compiled the stories of others. He has weaved an effective and distinctive web of research into a tapestry of insights and recommendations on Organizational change. He is the leading ethnographic weaver among research weavers.

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