

CHAPTER 13. THE ORGANIZATION AS THEATER

CHAPTER 13 OVERVIEW

Chapter 13 Summary

Chapter 13 explores organization as theater. A close look at everyday life raises questions about the assumed cause-and-effect connection between organizational activities, events, and outcomes. Particularly in organizations confronting substantial ambiguity and uncertainty, structure and process are often shaped less by efficiency concerns than by the desire to maintain legitimacy in the eyes of important constituents. Organizational drama is constructed to conform to blocks of contemporary myth: strategic planning, total quality, reengineering, or whatever is seen as a sign of being modern and well managed.

The authors probe the multiple functions of organizational drama:

1. Promoting cohesion.
2. Portraying the organization to itself—fostering core beliefs and cultivating essential values.
3. Providing space for organizational members to do their jobs.
4. Helping people to cope with ambiguity and confusion.
5. Enabling people to find faith and meaning in their work.
6. Offering rules and cues for effective behavior (how to play roles without reading the wrong lines, upstaging the lead actors, or wrongly interpreting an organizational tragedy as comedy).
7. Expressing fears and joys.

Organizational drama serves external functions as well:

1. Keeping the organization viable by making its work credible to important outside audiences.
2. Offering reassurance to external constituents that all is well.
3. Bonding organizations to their environment.
4. Incorporating prevailing societal myths and values.
5. Conveying “progress” and a “modern” appearance.
6. Reflecting legal and social expectations.

The authors illustrate the dramatic aspects of organizational structure and processes (such as meetings, planning, evaluation, collective bargaining, and the exercise of power). Although these are supposedly rational activities, they are also powerful

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symbols that can express more than they accomplish. The authors caution readers about narrowly rational tendencies to view organizational symbols and dramas as empty or depressing. Instead, they suggest that symbolic forms respond to basic human needs for hope, order, faith, predictability, and meaning in an uncertain world.

Chapter 13 Key Terms

Isomorphism: Similarity in form. As used by DiMaggio and Powell, *isomorphism* refers to processes that cause organizations to become more like other organizations, particularly when they belong to the same organizational field. *Coercive isomorphism* occurs when organizations become more similar in response to outside pressures or requirements; *mimetic isomorphism* occurs when one organization simply copies another; and *normative isomorphism* occurs when professionals (such as lawyers, doctors, engineers, or teachers) bring shared ideas, values, and norms from their training to the workplace.

Chapter 13 Major Case Examples

- The Polaris missile system
- Schools and universities (structure, planning, evaluation, exercise of power)
- U.S. regulatory agencies

SUGGESTIONS FOR TEACHING CHAPTER 13

The central ideas in Chapter 13 revolve around an image of organizational events as theater: dramatic performances that promote internal cohesion, symbolize certainty in an ambiguous world, and bond organizations to their external environments. This chapter can be used to:

1. Examine organization as theater.
2. Identify theatrical abilities essential for good leadership.
3. Explore the art of impression management.

Teaching methods appropriate for each approach are described in the sections that follow. Student exercises keyed to the approaches appear in “Student Exercises for Chapter 13,” beginning on page 7.

Chapter 13: A Focus on Organization as Theater

Meyer and Rowan’s “logic of confidence” concept often helps students who struggle to grasp the positive power and meaning of organization as theater. Support and freedom to work without excessive surveillance by outsiders makes it easier for organizations to get

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on with the task at hand. One way to illustrate this idea is to focus on the classroom itself. Cases and films can be useful as well. (Also see Exercise 13.1.)

Chapter 13: Focusing on the Classroom as Theater

Students can gain understanding of the positive power and meaning of organization as theater by focusing on the classroom itself.

Instructors can explain how “educational essentials”—the syllabus, the instructor’s credentials, the layout of the room, departmental coordination mechanisms, textbooks and cases, handouts, exams and term papers, required readings and assignments—signal to relevant constituents that learning is taking place and how these key symbols help you get freedom and support from department chairs and deans. (Professors, for example, are typically required to keep copies of course syllabi on file in a departmental office and are often asked to include a variety of boilerplate items about academic integrity, grievance procedures, and so forth. These syllabi may be studied by department chairs doing performance evaluations and by visiting accrediting teams, but rarely does anyone check to see if a syllabus reflects what happens in the course.)

Students can discuss how the logic of confidence affects them. How has it affected their decisions to take the course, reactions to the instructor, beliefs in the relevance of course materials and assignments, expectations for learning, commitment and motivation, and so on?

Chapter 13: Cases Focusing on Organization as Theater

Several cases provide opportunities to explore drama in organizations.

- Jan Carlzon: CEO at SAS ([A] [HBS 9-392-149]) explores Carlzon’s engineering of a remarkable turnaround for a sleepy European airline through clear recognition of organization as theater. He was aware that he continually played to audiences both inside and outside the company, and that the onstage performances of the airline’s front-line personnel—the “Moments of Truth”—were critical in influencing any customer’s view of SAS.
- Instructors who used West Point: The Cheating Incident ([A] [HBS 9-481-117]) to explore the political or symbolic frame may want to use case C (HBS 9-482-006) now. The formation of the Borman Commission can be examined as a carefully crafted attempt to evoke external confidence so that General Berry and others can get on with the business at hand. Berry, for example, can redirect calls from the press, Congress, alumni, and other constituents to Borman. Borman has a ready and symbolically acceptable answer to all inquires: “I can’t comment about that now. Of course, we’re studying the problem.” Ask students, “Why do you suppose they selected Frank Borman as chair?” Some students will probably recognize that he was symbolically perfect for evoking a logic of confidence across a broad range of stakeholders. He was a successful businessman, president of Eastern Airlines, West

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Point alumnus, former member of the military, father of a West Point student, and former astronaut (one of the few remaining heroes in the post-Watergate era). Similarly, the committee's membership (a mix of distinguished educators, clergy, legal experts, and business and military leaders) was masterfully selected to elicit widespread confidence and support.

Chapter 13: Films or Videos Focusing on Organization as Theater

Another way to explore organization as theater is to focus on what events mean to relevant organizational actors.

- Popular films that explore how people respond to what they believe they know and see include Peter Sellers's classic *Being There*, Eddie Murphy's *Trading Places*, William Hurt's *Body Heat*, Woody Allen's *Bananas*, and Sir Alec Guinness's classic *The Horse's Mouth*. Hitchcock's *Rear Window* is a suspenseful classic exploring this theme. An injured photographer (played by Jimmy Stewart) spends his time at his apartment window taking in the multiple scenes in his neighbor's window. Was there a murder in an apartment across the way, or did he just imagine it?
- Instructors might want to turn to the theater itself, asking students to read and discuss George Kaufman and Moss Hart's classic farce *Once in a Lifetime*. The play, written about the ambiguity in the Hollywood film industry in transition from silent movies to talkies, satirizes success as a product of illusion, image, caprice, and proper symbols—ideas at the heart of the symbolic perspective.
- The first five minutes of the movie *Patton* or the opening scene from *Dead Poets' Society* can be used as a way of reinforcing the importance of “good theater” to convey what you want others to know and believe.

Chapter 13: A Focus on Theatrical Skills for Managers _____

If organizations are theater, then managers and leaders are, at various times, playwrights, producers, directors, and actors. Instructors may want to focus on how individuals can better prepare and play their assigned roles. Applying the theater metaphor to organizations leads to a list of useful managerial and leadership skills, such as choosing and understanding the audience, staging, selecting costumes and props, writing and adapting scripts, directing the action, creating dramatic impact, and planning for rehearsals and “out-of-town” tryouts. Instructors may want to offer opportunities for students to experience the full range of skills needed for a successful production (see Exercise 13.2), or they can choose to focus on one or two specific areas.

Instructors choosing to focus on one or two of the theatrical skills for good management might consider the following options:

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- Use one of the corporate culture cases suggested in the teaching notes for Chapter 12 (see “Chapter 12: Cases Focusing on Culture and Socialization”). Ask students to focus on one or more of the following issues: diagnosing the organization’s culture and identifying the relevant audience for a drama to resolve the case’s central dilemma; choosing the most appropriate time, place, setting, props or support, costumes, and scenery; writing a script for the case’s central character; and devising ways for the character to rehearse his or her internal drama to maximize chances for its success.
- Show the first five minutes of the movie *Patton*, the opening scene from *Dead Poets Society*, a scene of Gordon Gecko interacting with his office staff in *Wall Street*, or Joe Clark’s first school assembly in *Lean on Me* to explore the power of staging and selecting appropriate costumes and props.
- Use the Cindy Marshall segment of the Bolman and Deal audiotape, *Reframing in Action: Changing Management Traps into Leadership Opportunities* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1991) to illustrate the usefulness of script writing as a way to anticipate reactions, reframe a situation, or increase the likelihood of a successful outcome. Acknowledging the possibility for different scripts emphasizes the importance of rehearsing and adapting scenarios to fit the realities of the situation.
- Ask students to write personal cases about a challenging situation. Students can reconstruct a critical conversation from their case situation, rewriting the script to be more successful. (In courses where students’ personal cases serve as the basis for a final analysis paper, instructors can form small groups in which students rework their case dialogues and role-play their scenarios. In courses where students write personal cases to explore consistencies between espoused theories and theories-in-use when studying Argyris and the human resource frame, the instructor can ask students to return to those dialogues and, in small groups, reexamine them in light of the theatrical metaphor and the symbolic frame.)

Chapter 13: A Focus on Impression Management _____

Instructors can also use this chapter to focus on the art and function of impression management: how and why individuals and organizations work to determine the ways in which others will perceive them and their efforts.

Chapter 13: Cases Focusing on Impression Management

A number of good cases explore how organizations respond to calamities and manage public impressions to maintain consumer confidence and trust, successfully or not. Good examples include:

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- Hitting the Wall: Nike and International Labor Practices (HBS 9-700-047), mentioned in the notes to Chapter 11 for its political issues, can be used here as a case about managing audience expectations: How should Nike respond to persistent charges that its products are made mostly by exploited, underpaid overseas workers?
- In the Tailhook cases mentioned in the notes to Chapter 12 ([A] [KSG 1279.0], [B] [KSG 1280.0], and [Epilogue] [KSG] [1280.1]), much of the problem facing the U.S. Navy as it dealt with a sexual harassment scandal was managing a drama that played very differently to internal and external audiences.
- Deciding Who Decides: The Debate Over a Gay Photo Exhibit in a Madison School ([A] [KSG 1440.0], [B] [KSG 1441.0], [C] [KSG 1442.0], and teaching note KSG 1440.2) is almost entirely about culture and theater. The school superintendent in Madison, Wisconsin, has to decide what to do when the faculty at an elementary school announces plans for a photo exhibit featuring families with gay and lesbian parents. To the teachers, the exhibit is consistent with school philosophy and a matter of academic freedom. But other constituents in the community have a different view. Should the superintendent intervene at all? If so, how?
- Parker Brothers ([A] [HBS 9-580-085] and [B] [HBS 9-580-086]).
- Johnson & Johnson: the Tylenol Tragedy (HBS 9-583-043).
- Exxon: Trouble at Valdez (HBS 9-390-024) and Exxon: Communications after Valdez (HBS 9-493-014).
- Ashland Oil: Fire on the M/V Jupiter (HBS 9-393-004).

Contrasting the Tylenol case with Exxon's handling of the Valdez oil spill—which Bolman and Deal do in their audiotape—makes for lively class discussion about the meaning of managerial decisions and the power of false impressions.

- Procter & Gamble: What's the Story? (HBS 9-593-013) presents an interesting case in which a company's efforts to track down the source of an unwanted news leak ultimately did more damage than the leak itself.

Chapter 13: Films or Videos Focusing on Impression Management

- Members of the Reagan White House staff were masterful impression managers. The Hedrick Smith PBS series *The Power Game* (PBS), based on Smith's book by the same name, was mentioned in connection with the political frame in the teaching notes to Chapter 10. Instructors may now want to show the PBS series segment entitled "The Image Game" (or assign Chapter 12, "The Image Game: Scripting the Video Presidency," in the book). Both provide powerful insights into the art of

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impression management during the Reagan presidency. Viewing the documentary *Ronald Reagan: An American President* (available from Sutton Entertainment Corporation, P.O. Box 7032, Edison, N.J. 08837), the official White House–authorized video of the Reagan years, adds to the impact of the other sources. A fictional look at some of the same issues can be found in the feature film *Bob Roberts*, which depicts a cynical candidate for the U.S. Senate engaging in a broad array of impression-management techniques. A semi-fictional option is *Primary Colors*, the behind-the-scenes story of a remarkably Clintonesque candidate for the U.S. presidency.

- The U.S. government’s handling of its relationship with Iraq in the Gulf War of the early 1990s and in the invasion of Iraq in 2003 provide powerful examples of impression management. An ABC News documentary entitled *A Line in the Sand* and a video biography of Hussein, *Who Is Saddam Hussein and Why Is He Defying the World?* (both available from Critics’ Choice Video) provide good background for discussion of the first Gulf War. A *60 Minutes* segment, “It Pays to Advertise?” (CBS, December 2002) examines “the arsenal of advertising and communications techniques the Bush administration is employing to sell a possible war on Iraq.” Students can analyze and contrast the impression management strategies of George Bush, Sr., George W. Bush, and Saddam Hussein.
- Alternatively, instructors may want to use popular film clips to present examples of impression management and what individuals and organizations do to promote a favorable image. Students can reflect on their reactions both to the specific examples and to the broader idea of impression management. Films in corporate settings such as *Wall Street*, *9 to 5*, *Baby Boom*, and *Working Girl* are perfect, as are films about individuals’ efforts to project preferred images, such as *Being There*, *Trading Places*, *Body Heat*, and *The Horse’s Mouth*.

STUDENT EXERCISES FOR CHAPTER 13

EXERCISE 13.1

Focus: Organization as Theater

If your course includes ongoing student groups, have students apply the ideas from the chapter to their own group history, process, and structure. Groups can meet and discuss these issues, write an analysis paper, and/or prepare a brief presentation of their findings, illustrated with stories or vignettes. Students could also communicate their results in the form of a brief skit.

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EXERCISE 13.2

Focus: Theatrical Skills for Managers

Have students in small groups prepare short dramatic productions for the class. For the scenario, you can assign a case (see the teaching notes for Chapter 12, "Chapter 12: Cases Focusing on Culture and Socialization," for suggested cases; also see the suggested case described later in this exercise) or have students present personal cases and choose one to dramatize. You might assign the same case to all groups or assign a different case to each group, sacrificing the opportunity to compare group diagnoses and presentations but increasing the scope and variety of issues.

Each group will prepare and present a short production dramatizing how the case's central character might resolve the current dilemma. In preparing presentations, students should focus on the following:

- Identifying the relevant audience in the case. (With whom does this character need to interact? Whom does this organizational drama need to "play to"?)
- Diagnosing the organization's culture and its implications for staging an appropriate production. (How does the organizational culture affect the character's choice of setting, scenery, costume, and necessary props?)
- Writing a realistic script for the actors in the case. (What does this central character need to say? To whom? How? Where? When? How do you anticipate the response of key others in the case situation? Why?)

Students should be encouraged to adapt and rewrite their scripts, if necessary, to present their best attempt at a successful and realistic resolution of the case's core dilemma.

This activity can be debriefed on a number of levels. After staging the "case drama," the student presenters can share their answers to the above questions and explore their diagnosis of the case with the larger group. The class can then discuss their reactions to the group's drama—how the presentation affected their willingness to see the situation from the presenters' perspective. Finally, student presenters (in the large group or in their small groups) can draw parallels between their staging of the drama for the case character and their own experiences of staging the role play for their classmates.

An example of a case that could be used for this purpose is a famous situation from the Civil War in which a leader goes on stage to face a very tough audience. In the days leading up to the battle of Gettysburg, Colonel Joshua Chamberlain, commander of the 20th Maine infantry regiment, is suddenly saddled with a group of extremely disgruntled mutineers who refuse to fight and want to go home. General Meade has ordered Chamberlain to make them fight or shoot them, at his discretion. He decides to talk to them. The question, if you're Chamberlain, is: What do you say?

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Professor James Clawson of the University of Virginia has developed an extensive teaching note around this case that is available online at <http://faculty.darden.virginia.edu/clawsonj/pdf/Chamberlain.pdf>. The note includes a discussion of the facts of the case. A one-page version of the case is also available at http://bloch.umkc.edu/classes/bolman/chamberlain_case.htm. The movie *Gettysburg* contains a dramatization of this scene. Clawson believes the activity works better without the film, but other instructors report that they have found the film helpful.

If this case is used, audience members can be asked to position themselves as the mutineers and to respond as they believe the mutineers would to whatever Chamberlain does. This role play can be repeated several times—every run is different.

Note: This activity can be adapted to an individual or group written assignment, in which students use the theatrical metaphor to guide and frame their diagnosis, analysis, and suggested resolution of the case dilemma.