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Storytellers and their discursive strategies in a post-acquisition process

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Abstract

Purpose – The aim is to discuss how storytelling can be used in different ways to enlighten change processes occurring within and after a takeover situation.

Design/methodology/approach – Case study research based on in-depth interviews critically examined as forms of narratives.

Findings – Storytelling gives the organisation the possibility to change its goals.

Research limitations/implications – Through storytelling analysis contradictions and limitations are provoked within the takeover process.

Practical implications – Storytelling is always about various stories, which one needs to read into practice.

Originality/value – The paper illustrates the value of acquisitions as seen through the eyes of the key players.

Keywords Narratives, Storytelling, Change management, Acquisitions and mergers

Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction

Mergers and acquisitions are commonly characterized by the clash of cultures (Barros *et al.*, 2003; Evans *et al.*, 2002). Managerialism usually assumes two approaches to implementing the change process. The first is the logic of absorption that implies the intent of making the acquired company like the purchaser. It is supposedly accomplished by reproducing its values and practices. The second is the logic of integration, where the emphasis is on “capturing hidden synergies by swapping and leveraging capabilities” (Evans *et al.*, 2002, p. 263).

The implementation approach determines the level of change in the organizations (and impact on individuals) involved in the process (Barros *et al.*, 2003; Evans *et al.*, 2002; Marks and Mirvis, 1998). Absorption implies the dissemination of the acquirer’s values, practices, and artifacts throughout the acquired organization. It aims at a high level of change for the acquired organization and little or no change for the acquirer. Integration, on the other hand, implies change for both organizations involved, and also for their employees.

This paper analyzes discourse practices of three experienced executives during a post-acquisition process determined by the logic of absorption, by using discourse analysis (Grant *et al.*, 2001, 2004; Hardy, 2001; Phillips and Hardy, 2002; Spink, 2004). Our main objective is to better understand how experienced executives use narratives



and storytelling to frame – and reframe – their own role and to “strategically” position themselves in the change process.

The paper is structured in four sections, besides this introduction: the next section presents a short review of existing literature on storytelling within the field of discourse analysis; we then describe the methodological approach, the context of the absorption process, and present three individual narratives of the change process; this is followed by an analysis of the similarities and differences among narratives and stories; we conclude by discussing the ambiguous nature of the official story, disseminated by the acquirer.

Narratives, stories and storytelling

In recent years, influenced by the “linguistic turn” (Rorty, 1991), researchers began to perceive texts as important forms of social action (Linstead, 1999) and constituted a field of inquiry strongly influenced by socio-constructivist epistemology. This field is now based in a variety of research methods, which include the study of narratives (Czarniawska, 1998; Riessman, 1993) and stories (Boje, 1995; Gabriel, 1991, 2000), the comparison of competing narratives (Buchanan, 2003), the interpretation of symbolic speeches (Heracleous, 2006), discourse analysis (Grant *et al.*, 2001, 2004; Hardy, 2001; Phillips and Hardy, 2002), and the study of language games (Mauws and Phillips, 1995).

Narratives may be defined as discrete units, detachable from the surrounding discourse, with clear beginnings and endings and a chronologically-determined sequence (Riessman, 1993, p. 17). According to Czarniawska (1998, p. 2): “A narrative, in its most basic form, requires at least three elements: an original state of affairs, an action or an event, and the consequent state of affairs.”

Stories, in turn, can be defined as “narratives through which events, at times major, at others trivial, become charged with symbolic significance” (Gabriel, 1991, pp. 857-8). Stories help to provide coherence and make sense of a chaotic and senseless world, and constitute a reflexive process. In constructing their stories, individuals create their own identity (Gabriel, 2004a, b). Moreover, story construction and legitimization is not trivial, as stories may be challenged or ignored.

Individuals make sense of actions, events and objects, or explain the relationship among them, using the interpretative schemes they have learned through experience and socialization (Soederberg, 2003). Narratives and stories are discourse practices that integrate, through language, the sense-making apparatus of organizations.

Discourse analyst scholars, such as Grant *et al.* (2004) and Phillips and Hardy (2002), define their approach as the systematic research of all kinds of discourse practices (for instance, written or spoken texts, artifacts and visual representations) with the aim of explaining how these practices are produced, distributed and consumed. By their turn, Alvesson and Kärreman (2000, p. 143) point out that the conventional research methods in this field underestimate the usage of language to accomplish things. They recognize the contribution of discourse analysis and encourage other scholars to overcome the “naïve view of language as a mirror of external reality or someone’s inner world.” Similarly, Alvesson (2003) argues for the need of avoiding the predominant romantic view and interpret the narratives constructed during the interviews as performances. Spink (2004), in turn, notes that the narrative is produced through a dialogue between narrator and listener, when both put into action their own

interpretative repertory and face a power relation, at a precise historical moment; and Gabriel (2004a, b, p. 74) points that:

It is the researcher's task not merely to celebrate the story or the narrative but to seek to use it as a vehicle for accessing deeper truths than the truths of undigested personal experience.

Field research

Methodology

This paper is part of an extensive research project about the phenomenon of cultural hybridization (Bhabha, 2003; Burke, 2003; Canclini, 2003; Calás and Arias, 1997) that unfolded in the Brazilian subsidiary of a multinational bank that experienced successive change processes. The background of this paper is the acquisition and the absorption of another bank that took place in 2003 and 2004.

The data collection included in-depth interviews with three top executives: one at the acquirer organization and two at the acquired organization. Interviewees were selected for their personal and professional trajectories: the executive from the acquiring organization was assigned to a key role in the integration process and the other two executives worked for the acquired organization, but had different origins inside the company.

The interviews were undertaken by one of the authors who have previously participated, as a human resources manager, in the design of the absorption process. At the time the interviews, the interviewer held a contract to maintain an educational program for HR professionals. From a procedural perspective, the second author, who was not related to the organization, had the task of independently analyzing all data, with the objective of maximizing a detached perspective.

The interviews evolved around elements of the executives' personal and professional history and their perceptions of the acquiring bank and the absorption process. With the interviewees' consent, all interviews were recorded and transcribed. Later, the interviews were analyzed. All names mentioned in this paper are fictitious.

The absorption process and genesis of the official discourse

Dutch Bank has its roots in Europe in early nineteenth century and set up its Brazilian office at the beginning of the twentieth century. In 1998, due to the business opportunities created with the liberalization of the Brazilian economy and according to the company's growth strategy, Dutch Bank acquired Brazilian Bank, a family-owned firm. When the integration was initiated, Dutch Bank had nearly 2,500 employees, while Brazilian Bank had 22,000 employees.

In 2003, in a second step of the same growth strategy, Dutch Bank acquired Italian Bank, a bank founded in Brazil in 1900. Italian Bank was then controlled by an Italian financial institution and had 6,000 employees in Brazil. It is worth noting that, in 1998, Italian Bank had acquired Japanese Bank, a bank dedicated, from its inception, in 1940, to the community of Japanese-Brazilians. The Italian Bank's acquisition consolidated Dutch Bank's position as one of the four largest banks in the country, with nearly 28,000 employees distributed across 2,000 branches and offices. Table I provides a timeline of the main events.

The Dutch Bank's board began the integration of Italian Bank by defining some principles that originated the official discourse for the entire process: first, the most

suitable people from both organizations should be retained; second, the integration should be completed by late 2004; third, it was essential to preserve businesses and customers; and fourth, all possible synergies should be captured, especially by quick cost reductions.

Besides, key values of Dutch Bank, such as respect for individuals and diversity, should condition all major decisions. These values pervaded the discourse that was continuously ratified along the whole process in order to communicate the goals of the process to employees. The official discourse was disseminated through speeches given by top managers, a specially designed internal bulletin aimed at keeping track of the deal, e-mail messages, meetings, presentations, newsletters and other institutional media.

From the time, the intent to acquire was disclosed, in April 2003, and completion of the acquisition, in October 2003, hundreds of professionals from the bank and service providers took part in activities aimed at the integration process. These activities included, among others: the comparison of products, services and systems; the comparative study of organizational cultures; the understanding and comparison of organizational structures; the appraisal of professionals of the acquired organization; and the formulation of training plans.

The integration began in November 2003. In December 2004, Dutch Bank reported to its European head-office that all integration-related objectives and goals related had been achieved. Hence, the case should be considered a success. On the other hand, several pieces of evidence suggested that integration was only partially achieved. For instance, by late 2004, for legal reasons, Italian Bank and Dutch Bank still operated under its own brands and branches were kept separate. In other words, the success in the integration process, measured against the original goals expressed in the official discourse, was in fact controversial.

Bruno's perspective

Bruno is 52 years old, a Brazilian born to Brazilians, married, with three children. Bruno's parents did not attend college, but Bruno graduated from one of the country's most prestigious business schools. After almost 30 years in a steadily climbing professional career, he was hired by Dutch Bank in 1998 to fill a key-role in the Brazilian Bank's integration process.

Bruno was involved in every step of Italian Bank's acquisition and integration processes. In 2003, the debate on the principles of integration began. According to Bruno:

Year	Event
1900	Italian Bank opens an office in Brazil
1917	Dutch Bank opens an office in Brazil
1925	Brazilian Bank is founded in Brazil
1940	Japanese Bank is founded in Brazil
1998	Italian Bank acquires Japanese Bank
1998	Dutch Bank acquires Brazilian Bank
2003	Dutch Bank (Dutch + Brazilian) acquires Italian Bank (Italian + Japanese)
2004	Dutch Bank reported that the integration of Italian Bank was a success

Table I. Organizations involved in successive acquisitions

We wanted to keep Italian Bank functioning as intact as possible because we didn't want to run the risk of losing all its qualities. At the same time, we wanted to design a well-organized integration plan in order to gradually merge the two businesses. We also defined it as absorption: Dutch Bank's systems and processes should prevail, with the idea of maintaining the good things in the acquired bank's management and knowledge. We then concluded that the best of both administrations and of both banks should be kept; the same would happen with the employees. We were also going to integrate while respecting the logic and culture of the businesses, and minimizing any inconvenience to customers.

The main guideline was to manage both banks independently. Bruno was assigned to manage Italian Bank, with the mission of keeping it untouched and preventing those responsible for the various areas at Dutch Bank from clumsy interference with Italian Bank's businesses.

In late October 2003, two events were organized to publicize the deal and the new guidelines. All managers were invited. When the first event was over, the new board took the control of the acquired organization and dismissed some of the Italian Bank's Board Members. They then met with the team of directors that was retained. Bruno underscored his concerns with his own behavior at that initial moment. About the Dutch Bank culture, he declared:

[I must] be very careful with my personal style, and the style of this bank here, a Dutch style. We walk down the corridors all day long, we do management by walking around, by talking to everybody [...] and it is very informal [...] But, on the first day, when I went to the Treasury to see how things were – the cash flow, the positions – and to meet people, there was a crisis going on in the bank!

November and December were devoted to evaluating the acquired bank's organization and people. The new board sought to clearly communicate guidelines such as "not to destroy anything" and "respect for the Italian Bank's culture and ability to do business." Communication efforts included visits at the various headquarter areas and some branches, in addition to meetings across the country. At that time, Bruno sensed that employee self-esteem was damaged.

In December 2003, around 200 people were fired, a fact that provoked a quite negative reaction. Nevertheless, Bruno believes that his decision was correct, as retaining that staff was a barrier to integration. According to the interviewee, these were people linked to the dismissed directors, "with bad habits" and "attitudes that were incompatible with Dutch Bank's values and practices." For him, the "managerial cleansing" and another measure of impact – closing some branches that had reported losses – generated immediate gains. Afterwards, according to the interviewee, the results began to show up and the bank resumed growth.

At the beginning of 2005, integration was officially considered to be a success. According to Bruno:

We can't even feel that there are two banks anymore. We have two front lines, two banks, two commercial structures led by one person, with the same guidelines. This means, I consider it a success, a great success [...] despite some flaws in the process. We closed some branches and continued without losing accounts. The amount of transactions remained the same and profits increased. We were able to yield all the results we wanted to this year.

Takashi's perspective

Takashi was born in 1947, the son of Japanese immigrants that received a very traditional education within his ethnic group. He was hired by the Japanese Bank in 1965 as a messenger, and was subsequently offered higher positions, including jobs in Japan. In 1998, when Japanese Bank experienced a deep crisis and was sold to Italian Bank, he was a board member. According to Takashi, those were difficult times:

We never thought that Japanese Bank would go bankrupt. But then, suddenly, from one day to the next, your bank doesn't exist anymore. Now it's going to be Italian. Many people actually wept.

Absorption by Italian Bank was marked by tensions. According to the interviewee:

Italian Bank didn't treat us badly, but they did humiliate us a lot and we had a huge cultural problem. We grew for such a long time in one culture that entering a different culture made our people suffer a lot.

When Dutch Bank took over the command of Italian Bank in October 2003, Takashi was responsible for a specific service related to the financial flow between Japanese and Japanese relatives that live in Japan and in Brazil. Takashi speaks about his attendance at one of the first meetings:

He [a member of the new board] said during a lecture that we were to rescue self-esteem, that nobody had died, that the bank had gone, but we were still here. [...] I talked, but did so without any conviction. I was also insecure about my job! There was an Italian Bank manager right next to me! Could I say anything different?

For Takashi, absorption by the Dutch Bank had a different meaning than the previous one, by the Italian Bank. According to him:

Who is gone is gone, but the people who stayed are fighting on equal terms with the people here. They were promoted, which is amazing. I tell them: you should be thanking Italian Bank. And this is no just rhetoric [...] The past six years these people have been absorbing a different culture and acting accordingly. We have shaped ourselves and worked and, because we were here this whole time, had the advantage of blending the two cultures as we went.

After watching a few dismissals from afar, Takashi's entire team moved to the Dutch Bank office, which was a great relief. Speaking about the layoffs, Takashi refers to the inevitability of the process and detached the respect for individuals:

When an employee is fired, there is no other way; those are the circumstances: he is fired. But if I'm not wrong, from what I read, they guide and guide and even try to direct people to positions that are more appropriate for them. That's what I see. I hope it really is this way, right?

Takashi points out that training, communication and other displays of respect adopted by Dutch Bank made the integration process much easier. He says that people felt appreciated. The youthful environment, the number of women and the positions they held at the bank also made an impression on Takashi. He tries to highlight his ability to adapt to cultural change, acknowledging the difficulties faced in the process:

We have to learn everything in life. I'm already more Brazilian. My father walked in front, with my mother behind him. Japanese are like that: the woman behind, the man ahead. It's already different, though, for our generation. My wife walks by my side, and gets mad if she

doesn't [...] You know, adapting is very difficult. Once, a consultant told me: "You have to change your personality a little, you have to adapt!" And I said: Look, at my age, how can you say that to me? I don't think I can do it. If somebody told you to tell me this, tell them that I can change my looks, but one cannot change, not really! It is background [...] It is all about background.

The magnitude of Dutch Bank's businesses makes Takashi classify his influence as "a drop in a bucket." However, he sees that his people feel that they are well accepted, that their opinions are taken into consideration and he concluded: "So work is going well! May we have a long life!"

Pietro's perspective

Pietro comes from an upper-class Italian family that migrated to Brazil after losing their wealth during World War II. In 1965, when Pietro was 19 years old, he was admitted as a typist to his first and only job, at Italian Bank. As he was successively promoted, he took on assumed more responsibilities and was transferred to different regions of the country. He proudly tells the story of the bank he helped build and that, in the early 1990s, was nominated "bank of the year" in Brazil.

In 1998, when Italian Bank acquired Japanese Bank, Pietro was assigned a key role in the Japanese Bank's integration process. According to the interviewee, the acquisition reversed the critical situation of Japanese Bank that was described as an organization:

[...] with a totally rotten credit portfolio, an extremely disqualified situation in all its processes, a totally unmotivated and depleted commercial team, where only the worse had stayed on [...] We turned Japanese Bank into Italian Bank through our policies, our concepts, our values, our traditions, our way.

According to Pietro, the news that Dutch Bank had acquired Italian Bank was perceived positively, both for the positive image of the Brazilian Bank integration process and for the common European roots the two organizations shared. Pietro said that Italian Bank and Dutch Bank share the same concepts of businesses. Nevertheless, Pietro confessed to a certain insecurity:

When you are the acquired bank you get apprehensive. Who is coming? Who is the conqueror? We came in worried, tense, anxious. After all, you had invested a whole life in an organization and, at the peak of the career in this organization you feel the ceiling collapsing under your feet. Besides, you have reached a certain age and you don't know how to deal with this. You have a family, children to rise, and a whole bunch of other things. In addition, there is the responsibility towards customers that put their trust on your work and your business. After all, how will all of it stand?

But in October 2003 the arrival of the group responsible for the management of Italian Bank (the new board), relieved the tension. On the first day, Italian Bank's professionals were invited to a meeting and told that nothing would change, that they should go on with their business as they have always done. Pietro imagined that this behavior would change. However, much to his surprise, the promises were kept.

Pietro understands that the process of integrating Italian Bank into Dutch Bank was peaceful, and stress was minimized by harmonious, respectful actions:

When an integration process takes place, some sectors naturally overlap; unfortunately, you can't have two foreign exchange directors, can you? You can't have two superintendents, two

presidents and so forth. Everybody knows that some people will become redundant. But how does this go? It can be respectfully or not, and Dutch Bank has a lot of respect for people.

Pietro said he was engaged in “building a third bank.” He also emphasizes his absolute devotion to his profession:

I do this because I like to be this; I like to do this. It’s in my blood. I like this business. I like to be what I am. If I could be the president, it would be better still.

Despite the whole change process, Italian Bank met its targets for 2004. This was a source of great pride for Pietro, who views this integration process as the best he ever saw, due to the respectful treatment, the trust, the feeling of being welcomed and making new friends.

In early December 2004, Pietro told his subordinates that the integration process was over. For him, the problems were solved and the relationship with customers had been managed. In his appraisal, the essential issues are learning and adaptation:

In Rome, like the Romans, isn’t that so? I think we shape our life one day after another and you have to learn a lot throughout. Life is a set of learning experiences and you have to be always open to new attitudes, to new things.

Assessing his performance during the integration process, Pietro acknowledges the contribution of his group to the acquirer and claims that he, too, is learning. He is proud of having won a sales campaign whose prize was a trip to Dutch Bank’s European headquarters, followed by two days in Paris with his wife:

I’m talking about appreciation. Of course! I’m very happy to see Amsterdam, the headquarters, and who wouldn’t like to spend two days in Paris? But this has a deeper value to me, a victory. It’s different. Victory for us, for me, is priceless, and this prize has a much deeper meaning for me.

Discussion

Bruno, Takashi and Pietro are important characters and, one may assume, archetypal figures in the change process. They have had different life and professional paths that brought them to noteworthy positions in the management of their institutions and that conditioned their discursive strategies.

Bruno, the skillful reproducer

Bruno graduated from an elite school and developed his career in various multinationals. Dutch Bank hired him to play a key role in the integration of Brazilian Bank into Dutch Bank, between 1998 and 2003. During this time Bruno built personal alliances and consolidated his status as a member of the management elite. At the incorporation of Italian Bank, Bruno played an active role in the formulation and dissemination of the official discourse, a discourse that tried to reconcile two different strategies: absorption and integration. For instance, it was said that Dutch Bank’s culture should prevail and, at the same time, the best values and practices of the Italian Bank were to be kept.

His narratives and stories display neutrality and linearity. During the interview, his answers were usually followed by a set of principles and actions, or even by the identification of priorities. The narrative had a chronological sequence, with clear

beginning, ending and plots. Conditions and unexpected events were plainly justified by objective and clear reasons.

Bruno appears to have assimilated his role easily and securely. His discursive strategy replicates the official discourse of preserving and respecting people, while attempting to contextualize and lend a natural character to the darker side of the acquisition, which might be seen as contradictory towards the official discourse: closed branches agencies and dismissals. We can safely say that Bruno is an astute and sensitive reproducer of the official discourse, capable of interpreting the main focal points and rebuilding the discourse in such a manner as to neutralize discordant facts.

Takashi, the wise survivor

Takashi was hired by Japanese Bank in the 1960s, with prospects of following a linear professional path, preferably at the same institution. But his cultural and social roots and this professional career clashed with the changes mandated by acquisitions and the respective absorption processes that took place since the 1990s.

His discursive strategy reflects an effort to preserve his consciousness under threat from the bankruptcy of Japanese Bank and the subsequent acquisition by Italian Bank, and to adapt to the culture of the new owner, Dutch Bank. It is interesting to see that the acquisition by Italian Bank, although traumatic and humiliating, was unable to dismantle the social networks that had formed across Japanese Bank employees. For Takashi, the second acquisition is a shot at redemption, sustained by the similarities between Japanese Bank and Brazilian Bank, by Dutch Bank's sustainability discourse, and by the relationships among the original employees of Japanese Bank and customers with Japanese roots.

It can be said that Takashi is a survivor articulating a narrative of overcoming and adaptation, attempting to preserve his original values and adapting superficially to the new owner's cultural traits. For instance, he tries to accept the relevant role women and younger professionals play in the new environment. Takashi's narratives show the residual tension between professionals originating from Japanese Bank and the ones who came from Italian Bank. There is a clear split between "we" – the survivors from "our family driven bank" – and "they" – the others, "performance driven bank." He analyzes the discourse and practices, searching for adaptation, albeit keeping a skeptical attitude. Takashi recognizes that he does not fit the prevalent profile of the professionals from the acquiring organization and tries to transform these differences into opportunities.

Pietro, the novice illusionist

Pietro, a young immigrant born in Italy, was hired by Italian Bank in the 1960s. His expectations were similar to Takashi's, that is, to learn a trade and follow a safe path inside the company through to retirement.

Pietro's discursive strategy shows that, during the acquisition of Japanese Bank by Italian Bank, he played the role of a conqueror, motivated by radically changing the weak, bankrupt acquired institution in the image of the acquirer. In the following process, the acquisition of Italian Bank by Dutch Bank, he shifts from conqueror to conquered, but attempts to neutralize the negative connotation of the status by taking into account the European roots of the two institutions involved. This circumstance,

which has great symbolic meaning to him, helps him neutralize and minimize the differences between the two organizations.

Pietro acts as if there were no important cultural differences between Dutch Bank and Italian Bank and as if he had fully integrated into the acquirer's staff. He tries to appear at ease adapting to the new order and to draw close to the new management group. He minimizes problems and failures. For Pietro, not even the maintenance of separate brands and branch networks can deny that the integration was a great success. Pietro mimics the official discourse and reproduces it unabashedly.

Similarities and differences

What similarities and differences lie between the discursive strategies of the three interviewees?

The discursive strategies utilized by Bruno, Takashi and Pietro were conditioned by the respective professional paths and by the positions they hold. Bear in mind that, at the time that the interviews were made, they were all senior managers at a large financial institution. As a result, their interpretation of reality, their articulation of their own histories and their creation and dissemination of narratives are conditioned by the limited freedom their backgrounds and positions allowed. To not adopt the official discourse might hazard isolation, or even exclusion, with significant negative impacts on their lives and those of their families.

One should notice that they seem strongly influenced by the rhetoric and official discourse of Dutch Bank. This rhetoric, firmly anchored in the principles and values mentioned in a previous section, was a mandatory reference against which all things were measured. They all tried to assimilate and adapt to this rhetoric, neutralizing, reframing or minimizing facts that counter the official narrative, or their understanding and interpretation of it.

However, each one assimilated the official discourse and adapted his own discourse to it in his own way, depending, as mentioned above, on their personal and professional backgrounds. Bruno appears to be a natural adopter of the official discourse, and to feel at ease reproducing it. Pietro mimics the contents and makes an effort to adapt it to his surrounding reality. Takashi, in turn, appears to experience greater trouble and seeks out a synthesis of his personal and professional values on the one hand and of the new discourse on the other.

Each of them speaks from a different position as to the role played in the change process. Bruno speaks from the position of the designated chairman for the acquired bank. He was the executive chosen by the president of Dutch Bank to conduct and guarantee the success of the change process. In fact, as a member of the board of the acquiring organization, he designed the integration strategy and helped formulate the official discourse. Besides, one must consider that he was hired after the acquisition of the Brazilian Bank by the Dutch Bank, which means that he belonged to none of the original social networks present in these organizations. His narrative can be read as one from an independent, experienced and successful top manager showing off his deeds.

Takashi speaks from the position of a member of the Japanese community and the last man from "his bank." According to Takashi, Japanese Bank's bankruptcy destroyed his self-esteem. Referring to the ensuing Italian Bank's acquisition by Dutch Bank, he declared that he had nothing more to lose professionally. He was a

board member at the Japanese Bank and experienced a significant hierarchical downgrade in his insertion at Italian Bank structure. That happened again in the second acquisition. Dutch Bank retained Takashi and his department, inserting it in the fourth level of its hierarchical structure. His survival may be attributed to a very specialized service he had created and managed to keep. His narrative can be read as one from a survivor who intends to be kept in the new order and wants to be seen as the representative of the Japanese colony.

Pietro speaks from the position of a retained manager, in charge of a set of branches originated from Italian Bank. He was previously a board member of the acquired bank. When Italian Bank acquired Japanese Bank, he played the role of the “conqueror.” In the acquisition of Italian Bank by Dutch Bank he faced, for the first time, the experience of being “conquered.” His permanence came with a two-level hierarchical downgrade. His narrative can be read as the expression of his struggle to keep his job.

Regarding the change process itself, Bruno, Takashi and Pietro articulate different points of view. Bruno declares that the process is over and proudly speaks about how successfully it was conducted:

We created a culture open enough to allow us to absorb different parts and, suddenly, all together, form the bank of the future. Nobody is talking about the Italian Bank anymore, neither about the Brazilian Bank or even about the Dutch Bank, but everybody talk about the future.

According to Bruno, these results were due to the background, hard work, study, reflection and vision of the board members from Dutch Bank, who were able to lead the professionals from Italian Bank in the direction of discharging the past and constructing a promising future.

According to Takashi, the first absorption process, the acquisition of the Japanese Bank by the Italian Bank, was traumatic and created an organization he mentions reservedly. He observes tensions among the different groups inside the organization, five years after the process took place.

Takashi sees the absorption of the Italian Bank by the Dutch Bank as an unfinished process, pointing out the maintenance of the two brands and frontlines. He points out the level of respect Dutch Bank showed, among other well appreciated competencies, while trying to justify the feeling of apprehension among the professionals from the acquired organization:

Everybody feels caught in-between. All of them would like to walk around saying: “I am a Dutch Bank employee.” But, due to this legal controversy, the colors of the Italian Bank are still there.

Pietro, in turn, despite of having spent almost 40 years working for the Italian Bank, repeatedly uses the words “light,” “soft” and “pleasant” to characterize the absorption of the Italian Bank by the Dutch Bank. He states, positively, that this is best integration process he has ever seen. According to him, the integration is over, as he stated to his subordinates in December, 2004:

Integration has done and I don't want to hear anybody talking to me about integration anymore. All processes, models, all settlements, policies, behavior, behavior patterns [...] all of it is one. Everything is the same throughout the entire conglomerate.

Finally, one must hypothesize that each one of the interviewees tells his story in order to accomplish specific goals. Bruno seems to minimize drawbacks and ambiguities, and point out his successful choices:

There are a plenty of hits during this process and I'm proud of it. I think we have to put it as learned lessons or firmly registered and then apply them [...] All that initial suffering to change the managerial team was necessary. We must have one single vision of the business. We have to define the philosophy very clearly and I think we defined and implemented it with the utmost integrity [...] we cannot leave off [...]

His arguments are developed in order to demonstrate that the reported results were compatible with the business plan and with the official discourse. To achieve this goal he obliterates pitfalls along the process. For instance, the aim of the change was the complete absorption of the Italian Bank by the Dutch Bank, with the prevalence of Dutch Bank's practices and brand. However, as mentioned before, brands and frontlines were maintained. Bruno's story does not express concern for this relevant drawback.

Takashi, in turn, sends a very clear message concerning his objectives: he wants to extend his job for another five years because he does not feel ready to retire. As he puts it:

I have decided that I shall work until a certain time. If I stop earlier, I will disturb the environment of my home, and it does not help to quarrel with my wife. [...] I have to reach a point where I conclude that it is time to take care of my grandson, to enjoy my grandson.

He also mentions another goal:

What keeps me interested here is that we need a bank that is really concerned with the Japanese community, a bank that understands the Japanese culture and profits from it, because it is a wealthy community. If you compare a Japanese client with a Brazilian client, you will see a difference of return of about 40 per cent more.

Takashi correlates his permanence with the formulation of a project whose main argument is consistent with the official discourse about diversity. He sees an association between the practice of diversity and profitability.

Pietro expresses a different set of goals: to resume his professional path (despite of having worked for 40 years already) and to achieve a top position inside the organization. As he declares:

The human being does not live off status, but achievements. I would say that this is one more reason to begin a new career. The Dutch Bank recently organized a dinner party with all the employees that have been with the company for 25 years. Then, the President of the bank came to talk to me, asking what we, employees from the Italian Bank were thinking of the party, and I told him: "It's marvelous, I'm really happy because I've just completed a year with this Bank and would like to complete another 24 years quickly, to get the same homage."

Can this be taken at face value? Probably not. Pietro's main goal seems to be to express his commitment, to assure his future in the organization, and to improve his career prospects.

Final comments

In this paper, we investigate a radical change process in a major financial institution. We analyze the discourse of three seasoned executives who played important roles in

the social construction (and reconstruction) of reality and in the “management of meaning” at the organizations involved in the process (Smircich and Morgan, 1982). The purpose of this final section is to add comments and speculations on the case.

Contradictions and ambiguities in the official discourse

It is important to point out that the completion and consequently the success of the change process could be subject to controversies. Accordingly, to the official discourse, success would be defined as the conclusion of the absorption process by December 2004, achieving certain goals, such as the consolidation of one unique and homogeneous bank, the prevalence of Dutch Bank’s culture, the preservation of clients, and the attainment of previously defined levels of income and costs.

Despite a failure to bring about these goals, in January 2005 the process was officially declared a great success. Therefore, one could speculate that the official discourse served at least two purposes: first, at the beginning of the process, it had to do with framing the reality and with sense-giving (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991); and second, at the end of the process, with celebrating a symbolic victory, even if facts and figures do not support the official claims.

In effect, the official discourse can be considered to be ambiguous. Its stated purpose was to drive the integration process according to certain policies, guidelines, values, such as respect for people and for the culture of the acquired company. On the other hand, it also established the business goals to be attained, leading to actions that could be interpreted as contradictory to those same policies, guidelines and values. These contradictions manifested daily and were only partially resolved by the official discourse. For instance, the principle of diversity implied the acceptance of people with different backgrounds and points of view. Despite this, an expressive number of employees, including managers, were fired for not embracing Dutch Bank’s principles and values. Still, some “non adherent” professionals who occupied key positions or possessed skills and knowledge that were considered to be vital to the business were preserved. As they had to be settled somehow, these contradictions and ambiguities were forwarded to top managers, who attempted to use their own rhetorical resources to elaborate answers for themselves and for other individuals within the organization.

It is also worth adding that the interviewees do not seem to use narratives and stories as elements of resistance to change. Instead, they do it as a means to review their own histories and lend sense to their actions under the new order. As mentioned before, the content of the responses the interviewed executives articulate reflects the influence of their own personal and professional paths. Each one’s background and position at the organization appear to condition the respective discursive strategies. The interviewees doubtless took the official discourse as a reference. Nevertheless, they adapt it and change it according to their own views and personal strategies.

Summarizing the use of stories by the top executives

That said, we can summarize the use of the stories in this case in five different ways to:

- (1) deliver a broad vision, and thus facilitate the attainment of specific organizational goals;
- (2) respond to the contradictions and ambiguities between the official discourse and its practical implementation;
- (3) mitigate the suffering caused by loss;

- (4) express the assimilation of values that the absorption process imposes; and
- (5) attempt safe embedding into the official discourse and thereby assure a place in the new order.

Finally, we must note that this is an exploratory study and that our findings cannot be generalized. However, we hope to have contributed to understanding how top executives use narratives and storytelling to frame – and reframe – their own roles and to strategically position themselves within the change process. We also hope to encourage other researchers to pursue this fruitful line of research.

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