

ORGANIZING & ORGANIZATIONS

FOURTH EDITION



**STEPHEN FINEMAN,
YIANNIS GABRIEL & DAVID SIMS**



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Where we argue that organizing is a set of social activities through which we try to make our lives more predictable, effective and stress-free. Yet, organizing is itself far from an orderly process, usually involving conflicts and compromises with others and a constant attempt to make sense of what is going on around us.

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Where we consider how the learning with this book can be taken forward. We argue that life in and out of organizations is too complex, calling for lifelong learning rather than rigid theories and formulas. Success, both at the individual and organizational levels, comes to those who are not prisoners of their earlier achievements, but those who can engage the situations facing them with flexibility and practical acumen. We give a range of specific suggestions on how to take this subject further.

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PREFACE TO THE CURRENT EDITION

This fourth edition of *Organizing & Organizations* follows firmly in the footsteps of its predecessors. It retains an informal style, grounded in illustrations from actual organizational events and experiences. The chapters continue to eschew many of the neat, but artificial, divisions to be found in more traditional organizational behaviour textbooks, reflecting our conviction that organizational life rarely follows such tidy segmentalization. Typically, an amalgam of different concepts and frameworks need to be brought to bear if we are to make sense of the oddities, crises and regularities of organizational life.

We are mindful, however, that the student of organizations needs guidance, so we have added still further study aids to this revision. Each chapter is now enlivened with pictorial illustrations and concludes with a summary of key theoretical strands, review questions and downloadable readings. We have not deserted the Thesaurus – a mine of up-to-date information at the end of this book. And should you wish quickly to find a traditional organization behaviour topic, we have expanded the matrix at the start of the book to help you locate it.

All chapters in this edition have been updated, but we have added two new ones: 'Influence and Power', and 'Innovation and Change,' reflecting the ascendance of these issues over recent years.

Stephen Fineman, Yiannis Gabriel and David Sims, 2009

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

Readers familiar with conventional textbooks on organizations will find this book rather different in structure. Instead of the usual sequence of analytic levels – the individual, the group and the organization – all three are embedded in each chapter, befitting the topics discussed. So we invite you to move from section to section as your fancy takes you – but please read the introduction, Chapter 1, first. If you do not find what you are looking for there, go to the index.

Each chapter offers you a guideline on how to go into further depth on a subject if you wish. The latter is achieved via the user-friendly information at the end of each chapter. This is in four parts:

1. **Key points** – a brief listing of the major points or arguments in the chapter
2. **Theoretical signposts** which identify the key theoretical strands that inform the chapter's contents
3. **Review questions** to test and apply your understanding of the ideas in the chapter
4. **Reading on** – downloadable articles from especially pertinent journals, all obtainable from the companion website to this book: www.sagepub.co.uk/fineman.

The Matrix

To help you quickly identify where a popular organizational topic is located (e.g. change, leadership, communication), we have, apart from the contents and index pages, included a matrix on pages xii–xiv. This shows you, at a glance, the most appropriate chapters to turn to if you want to track down a traditionally popular topic in organizational behaviour.

The Thesaurus

Throughout the book, you will notice highlighted words in the text. These provide a short-cut route to more detailed knowledge as you go along – via the Thesaurus at the end of the book. The Thesaurus covers much of the material you will find in other textbooks.

For example, should you wish to know more about **rituals**, **empowerment** or **emotions**, terms highlighted in a number of chapters, turn to the alphabetically ordered Thesaurus where you will find a cogent summary of each and some key academic references (which are cited in full in the book's bibliography).

The Thesaurus, the Matrix and the end-of-chapter information will, together, help you thoroughly explore significant phenomena of organizing – their meanings, their real-time experiences, conceptual foundations and applications. Alongside the illustrations and stories in the book, these resources should help you in your essay writing and exam revision. We hope you enjoy this multi-layered approach to our subject.



The Companion Website

Be sure to visit the book's companion website at <http://www.sagepub.co.uk/fineman> for a range of teaching and learning material for both lecturers and students, including full texts of key journal articles, comprehensive study skills guides, and personal tips from the authors on using the book as a teaching resource.

WHERE TO FIND A POPULAR ORGANIZATIONAL TOPIC

Popular Topic	Chapter
Change	<p>Ch. 7: Change as created and managed by a leader and through contrasting leader activities and roles.</p> <p>Ch. 15: Different reactions to change; coping with change and stakeholders of organizational change.</p> <p>Ch. 20: Change as intrinsic to career pathways; navigating and surviving change through new learning, confronting prejudices and networking.</p>
Communication	<p>Ch. 7: The role and politics of written communications; communication by managing meanings and physical symbols.</p> <p>Ch. 18: Communicating through humour; how messages are sharpened, disguised, coded or embellished through humour and joking relations.</p>
Conflict	<p>Ch. 8: The nature of overt and covert conflict. Ways of trying to resolve conflict.</p> <p>Ch. 9: The effects of ideological conflict in organizations – disruption, strikes, sabotage.</p> <p>Ch. 10: How group differences can become conflictual; constructive and destructive conflict.</p>
Control	<p>Ch. 5: Control by organizational bureaucracy and rules. How and why rules are constructed; how we comply with, challenge or evade them.</p> <p>Ch. 6: Controlling work behaviour by the design and layout of physical space; visible and invisible boundaries.</p> <p>Ch. 14: Machines and technology as a means of controlling the pace, place and productivity of workers.</p>
Culture (Organizational)	<p>Ch. 2: Organizational culture shaping the values and norms of an organization. How the organization presents itself to outsiders and sub-cultures of control within organizations.</p> <p>Ch. 18: The cultural expression of cohesion, conflict or disaffection.</p>
Decision Making	<p>Ch. 12: Extreme and everyday decisions that are morally questionable. Short cuts to decision making.</p> <p>Ch. 13: Decision making on 'green' issues; the role of politics, stakeholder interests and emotions.</p>
Environment	<p>Ch. 13: The natural environment and organizations. How the environment is constructed and contested.</p> <p>Ch. 23: The organizational environment as a dynamic, complex, disordered system.</p>

WHERE TO FIND A POPULAR ORGANIZATIONAL TOPIC

Popular Topic	Chapter
Ethics	<p>Ch. 12: The moral foundations of businesses and how they are shaped and challenged by personal agendas and politics.</p> <p>Ch. 13: Protecting the planet as an ethical concern. Organizations that proclaim their social responsibilities and organizations that evade or suppress them.</p> <p>Ch. 17: The ethics of 'using' sex at work; the ambiguities and oppressions of sexual harassment and sexual politics.</p>
Gender	<p>Ch. 11: How gendered language, stereotypes and prejudices divide people at work. The effects on individuals and organizations.</p> <p>Ch. 17: The way notions of femininity and masculinity infuse organizational cultures and workplace practices.</p>
Group	<p>Ch. 10: The history and evolution of groups in the workplace. Intra- and inter-group dynamics.</p>
Innovation	<p>Ch. 15: Innovation as a process, often linked to entrepreneurship. Innovation is hard to plan and fickle in realization. Why some innovations fail while others succeed. Fashion and innovation.</p>
Leadership	<p>Ch. 7: Contrasting conceptualizations of leadership and leading. The importance of followership and the deployment of power.</p> <p>Ch. 9: How different forms of power underpin a leader's influence. How such power is used.</p>
Learning	<p>Ch. 2: Learning about an organization from a job applicant's perspective and as a regular employee.</p> <p>Ch. 3: Different forms of knowledge. Learning styles and developing skills. The politics of learning.</p> <p>Ch. 5: Learning the overt and tacit rules of the organization.</p> <p>Ch. 23: Active learning; ways of learning about organizing and organizations in changing times.</p>
Motivation	<p>Ch. 4: Motivation – a cultural resource or personal need? Critique of motivation theories. Attempts to 'manage' motivation at work.</p>
Organizational Structure	<p>Ch. 5: The role of a bureaucratic structure; its functions and dysfunctions.</p> <p>Ch. 20: The increasing flexibility of organizational structures. Invisible structures on which advancement and promotion depend.</p>

WHERE TO FIND A POPULAR ORGANIZATIONAL TOPIC

Popular Topic	Chapter
Perception (Social)	Ch. 4: Perceptions of fairness and of others' intentions and trustworthiness. Ch. 1: Shaping perceptions through marketing and image making.
Personality	Ch. 1: Measuring personality; pitfalls and politics.
Power and Politics	Ch. 8: The 'games' played in organizations; their sources, rewards and social costs. Ch. 9: Bases of power; links between knowledge, power and politics. Sources of powerlessness.
Technology	Ch. 14: The effects of technologies on the meaning and feeling of work. Machines as sources of liberation or powerlessness and enslavement.

1

INTRODUCTION: ORGANIZATION AND ORGANIZING

What is an organization? Everyone knows: universities, airlines, chemical plants, supermarkets, government departments. These are all organizations. Some have been around for a long time, employing numerous people across many continents – Microsoft, Shell, McDonald's, Toyota. Others are smaller, locally based – a school, a family-owned restaurant, a small consulting firm, a pottery.

Organizations enter our lives in different ways: we **work** for them, we consume their products, we see buildings which house their offices, we read about them in the newspapers and absorb their advertisements. When we look at organizations, especially the larger, older, famous ones, they seem solid, they seem permanent, they seem orderly. This is, after all, why we call them organizations. Images of organizations as solid, permanent, orderly entities run through many textbooks. But, in our view, these books tell only half the story. They obscure the other half: the life and activity that buzzes behind the apparent order. Sometimes this bursts into view, revealing chaos even – such as when computer systems break down, when there is delay or accident on an airline, when products are sent to the wrong destinations or when bookings are made for the wrong dates. They also obscure the immense human efforts and energies that go into keeping organizations more or less orderly.

In this book, our focus is not on 'organization' but 'organizing' – the activities and processes of doing things in organizations. We do not take organization for granted; after all, many large and well-known organizations have faded or died for one reason or another. Instead, we focus on the *processes* of organizing and being organized. We highlight the *activities* which go on in organizations. We look at our **emotions**, the **stories** and gossip which we trade, the deals we strike, the games we play and the **moral** dilemmas we face when in organizations.

Organizations get likened to many things – machines, armies, garbage cans, theatrical plays, the human body, and so on. We find the analogy of a river helpful. Like a river, an organization may appear static and calm if viewed on a map or from a helicopter. But this says little about those who are actually on or in the moving river, whether swimming, drowning or safely ensconced in boats. Our aim in this book is to highlight the experiences of those people who actually know and understand the river well, to present their stories and learn from their adventures. We are hoping that the images

of organization which we generate have more in common with the moving, changing, living river than with the tidy lines of a map.

WHAT DO YOU KNOW ALREADY ABOUT ORGANIZING?

You probably know far more than you think. If you have been formally employed, you have already peeped behind the organizational screen; felt what it is like to be told what to do or to tell others what to do; to do boring or exciting work; to sink into mundane routine or cope with unexpected crises and problems; to interact with a wide range of people; to daydream; to see inefficiency around you; to try and meet deadlines; to feel stress; to experience elation and excitement; to see how differently different managers do their work; to give and receive help from others ... If you have not had a job, you have been part of organizing in project groups at school, sports meetings, family holidays, Christmas dinners, pub crawls, cinema outings with friends, trips to clubs and so forth. You do not have to have had a **leadership role** in these to be part of organizing, and already to know, through experience, what seems to operate successfully and what seems to fail. Trust these experiences; they are very important. Use them actively as you read this book; build on them with the concepts, stories and studies that we relate to you.

ORGANIZING – KEEPING THINGS IN ORDER

In this book, organizing is treated as a continuous set of activities. We all have different perceptions of, and tolerances for, disorder – revealed classically in the contrast between a teenager's view of a 'tidy' bedroom and that of his/her parents. In work settings, 'getting organized' means different things to different people. Some people seem to operate effectively for years in offices with papers and files strewn all over the place, using their memory as a diary. When challenged about the apparent chaos, they will usually retort that it is fine for them, as long as no one else moves things around.

But not all of us find organizing easy or agreeable. This is how Bill, a manager, described his 'typical day':

REAL-LIFE EXAMPLE

Getting organized is something that I don't find easy. I have in front of me a book called *Get Yourself Organized* offered by a friend, who was perhaps trying to give me a hint. It looks appealing; it looks sensible. It is written in clear type, with a bold 'key message' printed on every other page:

- Decide on your major priorities.
- Put a timescale and deadline on each priority.
- If you can do it today, do it!
- Who do you need to contact to make things happen?

- Interruptions – avoid them!
- At the end of the day, leave your desk clear.

Well, I kept a diary of some of the things that happened to me the other day. Here are some snippets:

It's 7.30 in the morning and I'm driving to work, the loose ends of yesterday still in my head. I've got a 9.30 meeting with the strategy committee and I'm not looking forward to it. I need to get my ideas straight on how we market the new truck, or I know John will screw me and get the cash for his new project ... Mobile rings. It's my secretary, Alice – have I remembered the lunch meeting with Dr Hosikkii from our Japanese subsidiary? I'd totally forgotten about it.

At my desk and a screen full of emails. I'll answer the important-looking ones first. Bill phones; he urgently wants to see me before the 9.30 meeting ... He comes in, looks awful. He tells me he needs a few days off because his son's very ill. Of course, he must go home, but how am I going to manage with him away?

I'm ten minutes late for the meeting; I feel embarrassed and the Chief Executive looks disapproving ... It's a tense meeting but I seem to have at least one ally – Jean from Sales. I can trust her, but it's Alan from Production who I can't figure out. Sometimes he's with me, sometimes he's really obstructive. I must take him out for a drink and have a bit of a chat...

The meeting breaks up and I take the opportunity to walk back with the Chief Executive. I explain my lateness and manage to get him to hear my plans for shifting the staff around in my section and the problem of overload. At least he didn't say a new appointment was out of the question...

Back to my office and Alice looks tense. The main computer is down and we need the financial forecasts for the annual report. I phone Helen in Accounts – she's helped me in the past. Meanwhile a call-waiting from Germany on the spec for the new truck. They need to go to press on it this week. I'm really angry with the agency who were supposed to coordinate this. I phone them and lay it on the line. They cost us a small fortune; I'm going to have to look around for a new agency...

A good lunch with Hosikkii; I realize now that I'm going to have to visit him in Tokyo much sooner than I thought. It's an exhausting journey and I can't stay away more than three days. I'm away from my kids yet again...

2.15 pm. The Chief Executive calls me – I've won! Great! Not only will I get what I wanted for marketing the truck, but I can also hire a new assistant. Sometimes I love this job ... I tell Alice to pass the news around. I dash over to Mark's office and congratulate him. He persuaded me in the first place to increase our bid.

I stop at Brenda's desk in the big, open-plan office. 'I know you want something from me', she says, 'that's the only reason you ever visit me'. 'How can you say that!', I reply, sounding offended. She's right, of course. I ask her if she has any advance news on the customer survey we conducted last month. She feigns ignorance, and then slips me a computer print-out from her draw. 'I need this back today, please; it's red hot.'

I find a quiet corner to hide and read the report. Wow! Two of our products have done disastrously. We are going to need a completely revised PR plan. Is that why the Chief Executive's been so accommodating? More work for me?

Alice bleeps me. Says I need to call Eric. I call right away. Never keep your Director waiting. He wants me to stand in for him at an executive meeting tomorrow because 'something's come up'. I dutifully agree; I bet it's the customer survey stuff. But it also means cancelling the appraisal interview I'm doing on Marcus. He'll get even more stressed now. I'll get Alice to make my excuses.

Two more meetings. The first is terminally tedious: a presentation from a consultant on a computer information system. He couldn't sell me a washing machine. Fortunately, I'm interrupted, with a query over the copy on our new trade brochures – are we being sexist? The second was an hour with a research student from a university who was looking at marketing in the automotives sector. She actually had some thought-provoking questions; it's a shame I couldn't give her more time. And it was hardly quality time – my phone rang four times, each time with someone wanting an instant decision or opinion.

4.00 pm already. Grab a coffee. Meet Jane at the machine. Had I heard that Martin was leaving? No, I hadn't. It's rumoured that he's got a plum job in Wales with one of our competitors. 'More re-organization for us', I quipped. The rest of the afternoon I found I couldn't get Martin's leaving out of my head. Maybe that's just what I should do...

It's 6.15 pm and things, at last, have quietened down. I'll see what's left of the emails and what new messages there are. Oh yes, I must get the agenda for tomorrow's executive meeting, otherwise I'll look a prat. 'Alice, are you still there ...?'

AT THE END OF THE DAY, LEAVE YOUR DESK CLEAR, says the book.

They must be joking!

Organizing, in this account, involves tensions, preferences, interruptions, politics, power and personalities. Maybe Bill could have been a better organizer, but his account chimes with what we know about the experienced realities of managing. It is often a whirl of activity; quick switches from one issue to another; gossip and speculation; people dependent on each other; bargaining and compromise; developing contacts and friends; reconciling work pressures with domestic demands; time is always precious. The picture of the cool, rational thinker, quietly planning the day, is a myth.

FRONT STAGE, BACK STAGE

The process of organizing defies tidy, universal, categories. As consumers (customers, students, passengers and so on), we take for granted that things will get done. Lectures, meetings, examinations, happen. Individual and group effort come together to create the hard product – the car, mobile phone, DVD player, pen, paper; or the service – delivering a meal, cutting hair, preaching a sermon, policing a city, running a train. We hardly bother with the organizing processes behind these events. The struggles, politics, negotiations, anguish and joys of actual organizing remain, for the most part, invisible to the consumer: they are back stage. When they are inadvertently revealed, showing how precarious organization can be, it can come as something of a shock – as the following tale from one of us reveals:

REAL-LIFE EXAMPLE

Once I was booking tickets for a family holiday at a local, family-run, travel agent. They were busy, and I queued for a long time. Eventually, I was served by an elderly gentleman who was having difficulty matching the glossy brochure packages with the figures on his computer screen. He got very confused – neither the dates nor the prices seemed to match the published details. The queues behind me were growing ever longer. The staff were getting hopelessly overloaded and stressed. The tension was growing, but, like good British customers, no one in the queue complained. The breaking point came with a loud, sharp, whisper from a younger, female, member of staff to the man who was serving me:

‘For Christ’s sake, give it up, Dad! He only wants a flight reservation; it’s not worth our trouble.’

The man turned on her immediately and retorted, through clenched teeth:

‘How dare you! A customer is a customer; that’s what we’re here for!’

He then proceeded to tell me that ‘they only tolerated him in the shop at weekends now’ and they had their ‘differences of opinion’.

Some of the entrails of the organization had suddenly been revealed. I had seen something I should not have seen, and I was uncomfortable. I did not want to witness a row or receive a confession – I wanted a family holiday! I now mistrusted the service. I could not play my customer role properly if they did not play out their role as ‘travel agents’.

I decided to go elsewhere.

ORGANIZING AS A MEANING-CREATING PROCESS

When we get close to the experience of people organizing, there is the impression of a lot of personal and interpersonal work going on. In the above exchange, the protagonists were not just observing or responding to each other’s actions; they were also making judgements and creating meanings for themselves.

Seen through the eyes of different individuals, what happened may have seemed very different. Each may have told a different story about what ‘really’ happened. For example:

- the elderly gentleman’s story: ‘customers were happy to queue for personal, caring service’
- his daughter’s: ‘customers were in a hurry, dear old dad all at sea’
- the story-teller’s: ‘customer pressure reveals cracks in the organization’
- other customers’: ‘incompetent travel agents’; ‘rude young people’; ‘poorly organized office’.

The *meaning* of the incident is not obvious. Even the meaning of particular words or sentences may be ambiguous. ‘It’s not worth our trouble’ could be interpreted as a personal insult, or as an expression of frustration with dad – or with customers in general.

‘A customer is a customer’ could be taken as a brave assertion of good old-fashioned service. But in this case, what about all the customers waiting? Does their inconvenience count for nothing? Alternatively, it may have been a dig at the way young people conducted business, just for the money. We are continuously creating meanings for ourselves; a better understanding of organizing can help improve our understanding of others’ meanings.

While most of us in organizations seem to be ‘doing a job’, listening to someone talking, tapping keyboards, talking into telephones or soldering electronic components, we are also making and exchanging meanings – a fundamental human/social process. Organizing, as we are presenting it in this book, is intimately concerned with the way that people create meaning for themselves, with others, during their working lives. As we interact with others at work, we bring our personal histories and our past experiences with us – finding common ground, compromising, disagreeing, **negotiating**, coercing. This is a vibrant, mobile process, often full of tensions, frustrations and possibilities.

Some portraits of organizations present a bleak picture: the isolation of the individual, lost in an impersonal **bureaucracy**. Some employment is indeed experienced in this way. But this is only part of the picture. People at work also create their own **realities**, an ever-rich **symbolic** life providing a sense of who we are and where we belong. Among other things, this involves swapping rumours, stories, gossip, **jokes** and laughter. We pick up and contribute to the chat about the organization’s heroes, villains and fools. In this way, ‘the organization’ takes on a special, personal meaning. The organization may then be seen as a caring employer, an impersonal machine, a nest of vipers, a pressure cooker, a castle under siege or any of many different symbolic entities.

ORGANIZING AS A SOCIAL PROCESS

For much of the time, organizing is a social as well as a personal process, involving groups working together – part of the raw material of meaning-making. This is well illustrated when organizing something from scratch. Imagine yourself as a newly appointed area manager in the sales department of a large publishing organization. You and your four fellow area heads, Sunil, Barbara, Robyn and Nick (each representing different geographical regions) have had some informal discussions and one of the ideas that you came up with was to reward the top performers in the department with a range of awards. You feel that this will provide a boost for morale and enhance the motivation of the salespeople; you want to give it a try before maybe turning it into an annual event. This has been a good year for sales. There is some money in the system and you are confident that your budget can absorb a lively ceremony.

You and your fellow area heads decide to hold a meeting to discuss the ceremony. A host of initial questions arise: what exactly do you want to organize? What is the real purpose of the function? What kind of function is it going to be: ‘Serious’? ‘Light-hearted’? A mixture of both? What exactly is the budget? What are the possible dates and venues for the event? What events may compete or clash with yours? How are you going to decide whom to award? What awards are you going to offer? It is beginning to look rather complicated – so it is comforting to know that there are others there to help out.

Yet early discussion with your fellow area heads seems to make things worse – more disorganized. They each seem to have different ideas, opinions and interests. Robyn and Nick seem very concerned about the budget – in the past, they have been accused of

wasting money on social events when the organization could ill-afford them. They argue for a modest ceremony on company premises, modest catering (tea and biscuits) and modest awards (music tokens and the like). Sunil, on the other hand, wants 'more style' – an expensive hotel, lavish entertainment, an after-dinner speaker and big prizes: weekend breaks in posh hotels, expensive pieces of electronic gadgetry. He always likes doing things with a flourish and his budget is certainly larger than any of the others. You and Barbara appear to occupy the middle ground. During the discussions, the stress level rises and sometimes the five of you seem to be speaking different languages – and getting quite angry with each other. And this is just about organizing an award ceremony! It is impossible to move forward without making some compromises – and you feel you have made lots. The meeting ends up without a decision.

For a week or so, nothing happens and you are beginning to suspect that the awards ceremony will be yet another good idea that came to nothing. Then, quite by chance, Linda, a management student from the local university, arrives to start a six-month internship in your section. You had quite forgotten about her. Linda seems a very competent and assertive person, she has masses of energy and her laughter is infectious. The idea dawns on you that maybe she is the person who could run the event. This gives you enough impetus to call another meeting of the area heads, re-opening discussion on the awards' ceremony – they seem interested, especially when you offer to 'resource' the planning and organizing of the event with a dynamic new member of your staff.

The second meeting is far more effective. Things are starting to shift. The five area heads are now listening more to each other – maybe they feel that they have already invested enough in the idea of the awards ceremony not to let it stall again; besides, the young intern seems full of energy and ideas which inspire confidence and trust. While few firm decisions are made, a tentative budget is agreed and many positions on many issues draw closer – the venue, the number of awards, the size of the prizes and so on. In the next few days, Linda sets up an email discussion list for the area heads called 'Prize Ideas' which generates some good thoughts – as well as some outrageous ones!

Over the next few weeks, a plan of action was agreed and things started to fall into place. As Linda assumes more and more responsibility for the event, you are happy to delegate decisions to her. She seems to have an eye for detail, keeps meticulous records of decisions and has a knack of anticipating difficulties before they emerge. She is certainly an excellent planner. At crucial moments in the process, she will ask for advice or guidance, and you occasionally consult with your fellow area heads. You have each decided to award the top three performers in your areas and have used a rather rough measure – the size of sales – to decide whom to award. This seems to be fair and equitable. It is Linda, however, who points out that the top performer of one area has generated less revenue than some lesser performers from other areas. After prolonged discussions, all five area managers decide to stick with the original plan, but not to announce publicly during the ceremony the size of each prize-winner's sales. A big difficulty emerges on who should receive the top prize – this becomes a major bone of contention and threatens to derail the entire plan. Each area manager can think of very good reasons why his or her top performer should win the overall prize. Many strange and fanciful ideas are proposed on how to break the deadlock. Eventually, a compromise is reached: there will be no overall winner this year. Instead, each area will have a gold, a silver and a bronze prize winner.

As the key day approaches, up pop the snags. The grand plan has to be re-negotiated several times – usually when someone fails to deliver on what they promised or the

group has neglected an important item. Linda continues to be excellent – gently nagging, independent and persuading. Some people in the office (not you) find her too bossy, too controlling; they get sulky or irritated. But they hang in there nevertheless as the time pressures are enormous and the whole group now wants the event to succeed. **Communication** and coordination are essential – which are often easier said than done.

ORGANIZING AND IMPROVISING

Things, it seems, rarely go entirely according to plan; even the best laid plans occasionally come to grief. On the day of the event, you face near calamity: the food and wine for the reception fail to be delivered at the agreed time; there is a bus strike in the city; and your after-dinner speaker, a local literary celebrity, informs you by text message that she is stranded by fog at Milan airport and will be unable to attend. Rapidly, you, your fellow area managers and the excellent Linda start making urgent contingency plans. Some of them are a waste of time – the food and wine arrive, if a little late. At the last minute, Linda resolves the after-dinner problem. Her favourite uncle, it turns out, is none other than the former CEO of the country's largest chemical company, someone well-known as the television presenter of a popular programme in which he grills the directors of large multinationals. Sir Eric will be delighted to be the guest of honour at the awards, even if his name does not feature on the official programme.

What have you learned? Successful organizing may depend on a sound plan but **planning** alone is no guarantee of success. Planning ahead provides a needed sense of security and direction, but a rigidly planned event can fail because it does not allow people sufficient opportunity to improvise when things are not working out. When crisis strikes, the group responsible for the organizing may fall apart. Those who had expressed reservations about the plan may say: 'we told you so, you insisted on doing things your way, now you sort out this mess.' Being able to work effectively as a team, thinking on your feet, maintaining your cool and the goodwill of those involved under pressure, are all important in ensuring the success of your project.

There are, of course, individual differences here. Some people are quite happy improvising and managing crises. They can live with uncertainty and chaos, placing their faith in 'muddling through'. They believe that 'it will be alright on the night', and they are frequently proven right – to the intense annoyance of others. These others seek to **control** uncertainty. They are serious, methodical people; they like order, planning, routine and do not generally like 'fooling around'. They mistrust improvisation, chance and spontaneity, but what they really abhor is unpredictability.

SUCCESS OR FAILURE?

Some of the causes of **success** and failure in organizing are common, no matter what the specific organizing at hand seeks to achieve. Placing excessive reliance on a machine, an animal, a person or the weather, on anything over which you have limited control may undermine your plan. Poor **communication**, inadequate budgets, irreconcilable differences, personality clashes, unanticipated events and low motivation can frustrate any organizing.

However, even if things run smoothly, it does not make an event a success. In fact, success and failure are themselves **meanings** which we attribute to events, meanings which we usually develop as we **talk**, **joke** and **gossip** with others. Imagine if, a few days

after the awards ceremony which you organized and which everyone enjoyed, you come under criticism from the head of your sales department for 'mispending the department's money on extravagant functions, like that farce of a drunken party organized recently'. Imagine too if rumours start to reach you of salespeople who grumble about the awards, claiming that they all went to the 'yes men' in the department, those same ones with the cosy routes and easy sales.

You may be surprised at such a development. Instead of receiving thanks for organizing what seemed a much enjoyed event, you come in for criticism. This may be one of the best lessons that the example teaches us: just when we think that we are free to organize others, we may ourselves be part of someone else's organizing activities. Your event may have been a success in terms of your objectives and values, but a resounding failure in terms of theirs – and they have the power to make their judgement stick.

Under such circumstances, it may be helpful to present to the departmental head some arguments and evidence, showing that most of those participating in the function found the event not just enjoyable but also extremely useful, that morale has soared since the event and that sales have taken off. This type of evaluation and assessment is itself an important aspect of organizing. Would you do things differently, if you were organizing the same function all over again? Are there any short cuts that you have learned? Might you have opted for a different event? Would you like to work with the same people again?

Some major events are organized on a one-off basis, as in the example above. A military campaign, the staging of the Olympic Games, a business take-over, a wedding – such events seem to call for their own unique organization. Most events, however, are not organized like this. They are part of ongoing processes of organizing. Admitting a new class of undergraduates to a degree, preparing a company's accounts, taking in new stock, recruiting new staff, purchasing new equipment, and many other activities, are like painting the Golden Gate bridge in San Francisco: by the time you have finished, it is time to start all over again. The awards ceremony may itself become an annual event – with new experience, the earlier mistakes are avoided, the difficulties are ironed out and the ceremony becomes a ritual about which people grumble, gossip and joke, but which they ultimately respect and value.

ORGANIZING AND MANAGING

Most organizations designate certain types of employees as managers. This is an important part of their *identity*, something that differentiates them from mere foremen, supervisors, clerks or workers. Yet, the example suggests that managing is not something that only designated managers do. Everyone involved in a collective project is involved in managing – managing budgets, managing information, managing timetables and so forth. Managing his boss's diary can be a consuming activity for a personal assistant, someone *not* designated as a manager. The personal assistant may also have to manage his boss's moods, his public appearances and even his family crises.

IN CONCLUSION

We have argued for a shift from the notion of organization to organizing. Organizing is to be seen as a social, meaning-making process where order and disorder are in constant tension with one another, and where unpredictability is shaped and 'managed'. The raw

materials of organizing – people, their beliefs, actions and shared meanings – are in constant motion, like the waters of a river. And, like a river, they look quite different depending on how close you are to it. In the chapters that follow, we attempt to communicate the feel of this flow; to portray something of the richness, variety and surprise of life in organizations.

KEY POINTS

- Unlike other textbooks that start with organizations as ‘facts’ and then examine what goes on ‘inside them’, this textbook starts with organizing as a set of actions, before moving on to examine organizations.
- Unlike many other areas of study, students already know a great deal about organizing and organizations from their personal experiences as employees, consumers or observers; hence, this book invites you to build on this experience as the basis of your learning.
- Organizing seeks to maintain order in order to make our lives more predictable, efficient and stress-free; however, organizing is not always ‘orderly’, involving tensions, preferences, interruptions, politics, deals and personalities.
- Organizing is a social process, involving interactions of different people with different interests, priorities and needs.
- Sense-making is crucial for organizing; any kind of organizing requires that participants make sense of the task facing them, of their needs and priorities, and of each other’s words and actions.
- Organizing involves strong emotions, both positive and negative, generated by the task as well as by the relations between those who collaborate; these include hope, frustration, anxiety, excitement, satisfaction and disappointment.
- Organizing frequently encounters unexpected situations and events; plans are rarely implemented in every detail; hence, improvising, taking action which has not been planned, frequently must come to the aid of organizing.
- Management is not something done by people designated as ‘managers’, but is distributed and shared among all those involved in organizing a collective project.

>>>>>>>>>> THEORETICAL SIGNPOSTS >>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>

The major themes in this chapter lie in the areas of learning, organizing and sense-making. How do we learn to organize? How do we learn to act effectively in organizations? How do we learn to be successful managers? These are questions that have generated much scholarship and will be addressed in several of the chapters of this book where you will find references to relevant literature. The importance

of sense-making as a dimension to all organizing was demonstrated by Weick (1979), while Fineman (2006b) has explored the emotions of organizing. Czarniawska (1999) is one of many theorists who have highlighted the importance of language for all organizing, while Gabriel (2008b) has provided a systematic account of 240 keywords that help us organize our thinking and our actions.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Reflect on the organizing that you undertook before joining the academic programme that you are currently engaged in. What organizing was necessary before you could join the course? Who helped you? What technology helped you in your organizing? Were there any times when you had to rely on improvising?
2. What exactly is meant by 'sense-making'? How do you make sense of the following events:
 - (a) your manager offers promotion to one of your junior colleagues, who will become senior to you
 - (b) your employer announces a merger with one of your organization's main competitors
 - (c) your academic performance has taken a sudden change for the worse; having become accustomed to getting high marks, you now find yourself consistently earning middle and low marks.



Reading On

The articles below are available for free to readers of the fourth edition of *Organizing & Organizations* via the book's companion website at www.sagepub.co.uk/fineman

Currie, G. and Brown, A.D. (2003) 'A narratological approach to understanding processes of organizing in a UK hospital', *Human Relations*, 56 (5): 563–86.

This article outlines a narratological approach to understanding how middle managers and senior managers in an NHS hospital made sense of the introduction of a series of interventions led by senior managers, illustrating the role of individual and group narratives in processes of collective sensemaking.

Gherardi, S. (1999) 'Learning as problem-driven or learning in the face of mystery?', *Organizational Studies*, 20 (1): 101–23.

This paper explores, from the perspective of the sociology of knowledge, the implicit assumptions underlying the Organizational Learning literature, and looks for alternative ways of conceptualizing learning-working-innovating as non-distinct activities. The term

'learning-in-organizing' is proposed as a replacement for 'organizational learning', so that its distributed and provisional nature can be considered when interpreted as a practical accomplishment.

Hatch, M.J. (1999) 'Exploring the empty spaces of organizing: How improvisational jazz helps redescribe organizational structure', *Organizational Studies*, 20 (1): 75–100.

This paper uses jazz as a metaphoric vehicle for redescribing the concept of organizational structure in ways that fit within the emerging vocabulary of organization studies. It begins with a description of some basic elements of jazz performance – soloing, comping, trading fours, listening and responding, groove and feel – and builds on these to redescribe organizational structure as ambiguous, emotional and temporal.

Vince, R. (2002) 'Organizing reflection', *Management Learning*, 33 (1): 63–78.

This article considers what is involved in the practice of reflection for organizational learning and change, with emphasis on reflection as an organizing process rather than on the individual, 'reflective practitioner'. The author describes a way of 'organizing reflection' that can create and sustain opportunities for organizational learning, exploring some of the literature on reflection and describing four reflective practices. Collectively, these four reflective practices constitute an approach to reflection that represents one way of organizing for learning and change.

2

ENTERING AND LEAVING

This chapter explores the realities of joining a new organization, becoming socialized and part of the culture, and then exiting or moving on. Each of these interlinked areas highlights specific organizational processes and procedures – such as recruitment, selection, redundancy programmes, downsizing and retirement. But, also, in their different ways, each is shaped and experienced through individual and organizational politics, values and emotions. How do we learn to survive or thrive in an organization? When does this work well and when does it fail?

Joining a new organization is usually a memorable experience, because of its mix of emotions – apprehension, excitement, tension, confusion. Each new encounter, each new person introduced, adds to the impression of what the place is like. It is the first of many steps through which we become part of something called ‘the organization’. But while we gradually fuse with the organization, we also help make it what it is – we confirm and reproduce its culture and, maybe, change it.

Our initial experiences set some of the psychological and physical boundaries to the place that we call **work**. We cautiously experiment with what we say or do. What is the reaction? Is it acceptable? We are learning our way around, finding where we fit in. In social science terminology, we are seeking clues to the culture, **norms** and **values** of the community we are entering. None of this appears in the organization’s recruitment literature. There may be a hint of things to come from rumours and stories about the organization. Mostly, however, we have to find out as we go along.

Leaving the organization changes the scene. It may occur smoothly and comfortably at the statutory end of a working lifetime. Traditionally, this has been celebrated in eulogies and the presentation of gifts, often for long, loyal service. But this picture is becoming rarer. Fewer organizations nowadays have permanent employees, signed up for a lifetime **career**. There is a flow of short and medium-term appointments, a coming and going. Entering and leaving can often be a fairly anonymous affair, neither particularly celebrated nor mourned. Aaron, an engineering manager, makes the point:

You know, in this place it's hard to keep track of who's joining and who's away. People are moving around all the time. I'm now on my third assistant in 18 months! I keep getting emails from my boss about who's arriving and who's going – would I like to sign a farewell card? Often I haven't a clue who they are! Working in project teams doesn't help. When the project ends, people move on – sometimes here, sometimes to another company, sometimes unemployed. It's a peculiar atmosphere, but I take it for granted now.

While Aaron has accepted the rapid changes, those seeking stability and security at work can feel unsettled by the shifting patterns. The temporariness, the faces that come and go, reduce feelings of belonging and commitment to the organization – 'I obviously have to look after myself here; I'm on my own'.

Retrenchment and downsizing sharpen the picture. Layoffs and redundancies are commonplace in our times of boom and bust. They mark a pragmatic approach by companies: when times are tough, people will lose their jobs; they are costly 'extras'. They may also be victims of a **management** fashion to create a 'leaner', 'fitter', or 're-engineered' organization. But redundancy, for whatever reason, is typically a harsh way of separating a person from an organization and can leave psychological – as well as organizational – scars. Like most separations or drastic changes, it quickly exposes the raw elements of the relationship between the individual and the organization.

GETTING IN – FIRST IMPRESSIONS

Why Join Shell?



The top five reasons to join us:

- We're committed to securing a responsible future.
- We offer huge diversity.
- We're at the forefront of technology.
- We offer great training and development.
- We're truly global.

Shell lets you choose. What you do and where your career goes depends entirely on how curious you are. There are no limitations. Shell invests in its people and recognises them as its most valuable asset. (Amir)

I have great opportunities to make a difference by influencing the content of policies that are being developed for all Shell businesses in the UK and across the EPE businesses. I love working in an environment where I have real responsibilities, where I continue to be challenged and where I can add real value to the development of others – that's what's important to me. (Joanne)

Glossy brochures and company websites, like Shell's, contain enticing descriptions of corporate life.¹ They are skilled exercises in public relations, designed to extol the benefits and delights of joining the organization. Collectors of recruitment brochures will detect common images. They suggest, for example:

- multi-ethnicity
- advancement
- training
- internationalization
- equal opportunities
- serious work
- the latest technologies
- excitement.

In these ways, the organization parades its best costume, carefully tailored to influence the newcomer. The business of self-presentation has begun, exposing the surface symbols of the organization's **culture**. Shell includes a statement of corporate values that suggests care for the environment and contribution to community development. McDonald's vision is to 'put people at the centre of everything we do – and that goes for our employees as much as our customers'. And the British Army promises that 'Army life is always full of challenges and no two days will ever be the same'.

The formal apparatus of the organization has swung into action – and there is more to come. Wooing new, desirable-looking, employees means presenting an attractive organizational image. Blemishes are heavily camouflaged or simply left out of the picture. It is assumed, not unreasonably, that when people have to make a difficult decision on what job to choose, relatively unambiguous information is helpful. Given that the organization wants your skills, they gain little by revealing that, actually, there are controversies over its environmental record, that its employment practices are sometimes exploitative, that very few black people or women get to the top, that you might be bullied, that international travel is reserved for senior managers, that the computer system is in desperate need of renewal, or that the training budget has just been substantially cut. Moreover, it is likely that many potential applicants will want to believe the organization is glamorous, socially responsible, international, aggressive, or whatever, because that represents some ideal image they hold of themselves. They are therefore content to collude in the **myth** of the exemplary organization – especially if jobs are in short supply. The business of selection has begun; both parties – candidate and organization – are exchanging the **impressions** they want to present to one another.

Typically, interested job candidates will groom themselves for the part. 'Respectable' suits and shirts – 'power dressing' – replace casual wear for males and females alike.

Men's Interview Attire

- Suit (solid color – navy or dark grey)
- Long-sleeved shirt (white or coordinated with the suit)
- Belt
- Tie
- Dark socks, conservative leather shoes
- Little or no jewellery
- Neat, professional hairstyle
- Limited aftershave
- Neatly trimmed nails
- Portfolio or briefcase

Women's Interview Attire

- Suit (navy, black or dark grey)
- The suit skirt should be long enough so you can sit down comfortably
- Coordinated blouse
- Conservative shoes
- Limited jewelry (no dangling earrings or arms full of bracelets)
- No jewellery is better than cheap jewellery
- Professional hairstyle
- Neutral-coloured tights
- Light make-up and perfume
- Neatly manicured and clean nails
- Portfolio or briefcase

Figure 2.1 How to dress for an interview?

There are recruitment consultants keen to advise on such matters, such as About.com. Figure 2.1 shows some of their suggestions.

To deviate too far from expected, conservative dress risks being stereotyped, labelled as 'unreliable', 'radical', or 'will not fit in'. First appearances are notoriously poor guides to character; nevertheless, we use them all the time in our interpersonal judgements. Street-wise job applicants know this, and learn to adjust their résumés to the requirements of the job – accentuating some features and playing down others. They also research the organization in advance to demonstrate the seriousness of their intent to an interviewer. Some will have topped off their armoury of **skills** with special training on being an effective interviewee, to create the right impression or **perception** (countered, ironically, by interviewers trained to see beneath a feigned presentation).

CONVINCING PERFORMANCES

The initial coming together of company and candidate involves careful make-up and posturing. At first sight, this may appear irritatingly trivial: 'what's it got to do with the real me, and the actual job?' But the way we present ourselves to others, through a rich array of social protocols – language, dress, gestures, rhetoric – constitutes an essential part of social reality. From an early age, we learn certain social conventions through which we can interact – with a fair amount of shared meaning. There is much



"OH!... YOU DID DRESS UP FOR THE INTERVIEW."

Figure 2.2 The vagaries of impression management.

Source: www.cartoonstock.com

'impression management'. We are constantly managing how we come over to others, wanting to look 'right' in their eyes.

At certain points in time, getting our **performance**, appearance or act right – doing what is socially correct within extant conventions – is vitally important. This holds as much for a first romantic date as a selection **interview**. The moment is all. If we fail in our judgement or act, we risk rejection. This sometimes means a strange 'double take', of the sort: 'I need to give that person interviewing me a strong impression of my strengths and enthusiasm for the job. But I'm sure she knows I'm doing that, so will she believe what I say?' If we extend this analysis, it is possible to view life as a stream of public performances, a dramaturgy, accompanied by private, in-the-head, commentaries.

Selection

The time and effort a company wishes to devote to selecting its employees can vary enormously. A selection decision may be made on the basis of a letter or web-based application and a short interview. In the now global recruitment market, the face-to-face interview can be dispensed with in favour of a virtual interview via video conference, web cam, or the services of a recruitment consultant to screen candidates.

Many large companies subject candidates for managerial and professional jobs to a sequence of interviews, **psychological tests**, group discussions and exercises. Assessors will record their observations and candidates will be judged against a set of previously agreed criteria of competence. This is the questionable arena of selection. Questionable, because there are many studies which reveal that devices such as selection interviews and **personality** tests have variable reliability and predictability. Judging people's competence in areas such as leadership, interpersonal relationships, working under

pressure and so forth is notoriously difficult, not least because, as suggested earlier, a candidate's performance in a selection procedure can reveal as much, if not more, about that procedure as the candidate's actual work behaviour. But an elaborate selection process offers the apparent reassurance that a poor decision will be unlikely and it will be possible to control entry to the organization. It is also a **ritual** through which difficult decisions can be made to appear possible. With tools that promise objectivity, selector and candidate alike can feel that a thorough and fair job is being done.

Sometimes the **ritual** of selection can border on the absurd or reckless when some of the common methods are omitted, or treated too casually. In 2003, for example, officials at Buckingham Palace, the London residence of the British monarch, failed to do a basic web search which could instantly have revealed details about a particular applicant for a footman's job. They also failed to follow up a brief telephone conversation they had had with the applicant's referee. The man, nevertheless, got the job. He happened to be an investigative journalist for a major newspaper. He was given access to some of the most sensitive areas of the Palace in a time of very high concern about security and terrorism. Moreover, the Palace was supposedly ringed by foolproof security. Events such as these show selection in a different light: how it is done provides a clue to how the organization appears to care for its staff and how professional it is in some of its judgements and procedures.

Politics and Cultures

Yet the elegance, or professionalism, of a selection procedure does not insulate it from political influences. **Politics** focuses attention on the personal interests and idiosyncrasies of the selectors and their power to make their own particular judgements prevail. They also demonstrate that we often need to turn our attention to *informal* mechanisms in the organization for a more complete understanding of what is happening.

An associate of ours failed to win a top appointment with a London-based publishing company. She was one of two shortlisted candidates and she had attended four separate interviews, the last one being with a panel of directors in the company. To all outward intents and purpose, the job should have been hers. She had a fine reputation in her field – she outshone the other candidate in her qualifications and experience. Furthermore, the night before the final interview, she heard, from an 'inside source', that the job was hers. So what went wrong?

It was hard to find out – details of the proceedings were secret, as they often are. But the insider, now much embarrassed, was determined to uncover the reason. It transpired that, in the final interview, our colleague had mentioned that if she were offered the job, she would have to commute to work for a time. Her family were well settled in their home town out of London where her children went to school. She would consider setting up a second home if necessary, but first she would like to take the commuting route. The point was well taken, with apparent sympathy, during the interview. Her honesty, however, proved to be a tactical error. After the interview, the Managing Director, who was chairing the selection panel, declared firmly that this was not his idea of commitment or loyalty to the job; it was not what he would do if he were in the applicant's position. He would not permit the appointment of someone who did not move to the job right away. **Prejudices** and dubious practices meld in the informal practices that underpin some selection decisions.

Job applicants who dutifully respond to advertised vacancies can unwittingly fall foul of invisible political structures. Personal contacts and friendship networks bring some people, but not others, to the special attention of employers. In close communities, informal channels (rumour, casual chat) can keep many available jobs filled – especially in times when work is scarce. It is not unknown for an applicant to be processed right through a selection procedure, ignorant of the fact that the job has already been offered to someone else – secretly. Sometimes, when various people are involved in an appointment (such as a specially convened interview panel), not all of them know that there is already a favoured candidate – something that is revealed in the discussions and **political** squabbles following the interview.

This is a clear example of ‘homosocial reproduction’, rather inelegant shorthand for the phenomenon of hiring people who are similar to influential people already in place. Put another way, people feel less **anxious** about working with others who are like them, so they will consciously or unconsciously veer toward people who seem, on first impressions, like them in social values and **attitudes**. This is the psychological explanation for the ‘old school tie’ phenomenon – feeling warmer towards people who share one’s own educational background, especially a specific school or university. It also accounts for why certain, ‘strong’, organizational cultures perpetuate themselves: that ‘Shell’, ‘Disney’, ‘Hewlett Packard’ or ‘Marks and Spencer’ way.

A strong **organizational culture**, where everyone shares a common vision and purpose (often influenced by a charismatic chief executive), can be a recipe for corporate success. It is an idea that gained prominence in the 1970s to account for the considerable success of Japanese organizations. Japanese organizations and Japanese society, it was argued, foster values of cooperation, loyalty, innovation, flexibility and sheer hard work, which account for their success. Above all, Japanese companies have strong cultures, which bond their members into highly cohesive and effective teams (although under fairly paternalistic management). In sharp contrast to many Western companies, they are part of a bigger ‘us’. People are inspired to great feats of productivity, seeing themselves as heroes. A British, an American and a Japanese car worker, runs the story, were asked by a researcher what they do: ‘I’m fitting hub-caps’ says the British worker; ‘I’m making profits for Henry Ford’, says the American; ‘I’m a member of a team who make the best cars in the world’, says the Japanese worker.

The Japanese success story has faded in recent years, as have many of the Western corporations that have followed their lead. This is because strong cultures have been found to work well in stable social and economic times, but when they need to respond to rapid economic or social **changes**, to transform themselves to survive, they are often slow and ponderous. Indeed, it almost spelled the demise of an inward-looking Marks and Spencer in the 1990s. The company had failed to acknowledge and respond to radically changing consumer tastes.

SETTLING IN AND SOCIALIZATION

The period of settling in can be a confusing time. The cultural messages from the recruitment literature and selection process do not always match the actualities of being in the organization. The first hint about organizational *sub-cultures* begin to emerge – the sales department is cynical about the production unit; both despair about the poor service from the human resources department; no one speaks to quality control.

Sub-culture is an important concept in that it describes the special understandings, bondings, shared backgrounds and beliefs of particular groups within an organization. They are *sub*-cultures because they exist beneath the wider organizational culture. While the *overall* culture of an organization may be shared by everyone, significant sub-cultures will bind, say, just all women within the organization, all the older staff, all the black employees or all the smokers who meet outside the building for a cigarette break. These people may feel that, irrespective of rank or department, they are emotionally bonded through their particular common experience, background or heritage. Different departments may develop their own sub-cultures and end up seeing other departments as 'them'.

Some of these organizational sub-cultures may challenge the **values** promoted by management. For example, one of our students worked for a large accounting firm, the product of a recent merger. The merged company produced an attractive brochure extolling its 'core values' – the fundamental beliefs which supposedly underpinned its whole way of working: 'excellence, dedication, team work, decisiveness and integrity'. But these values, according to our student, carried little credibility with the staff. In her own words:

The merger had produced a company in which people refer to themselves as ex-A or ex-B; different paperwork and different procedures are still in operation. As far as decisiveness is concerned, after nine months of negotiation, no decision has been made by the two rival camps about which computer system should be used. As for integrity, who can forget that the man who masterminded the merger, and who now stands behind the 'values campaign', had told the financial world that there would be no merger, just three months before the event?

In these instances, we can talk of the emergence of 'counter cultures', which define themselves through their opposition to the dominant value system – or at least to the values of those who dominate. Newcomers are exposed to such cultural nuances, sometimes in surprising ways. For example:

Christine started working at a branch of an elite jewellers which was based in the duty-free area of Manchester airport in the UK. 'I had a short training in which the company's main values were drummed into me. Customer service – doing anything to please the customer and effect a sale. It didn't take me long to realize that this was not how the employees saw it. I was surprised to see that the unspoken rule among employees was to be as difficult and unpleasant to the customers as possible. If a customer was in a hurry to catch a plane, staff would prolong the procedure to the point where the customer was red with impatience. If a customer appeared not very well off and asked for a price, staff would say: "this is outside your price range, Sir." In fact, I soon realized that there was a kind of league table – the more unpleasant and difficult you were to the customers, the more you rose up the scale.'

Hassan discovered he had made a mistake and mentioned it to his boss. 'Listen', retorted the boss, '**you** haven't made a mistake. The system has. Whenever something is wrong, you must come and tell me the accounts system has screwed up. Then we can look at the problem and try to improve the system. The system will lose prestige, whereas you'll have gained recognition because you spotted the error. You see, this company likes winners'.

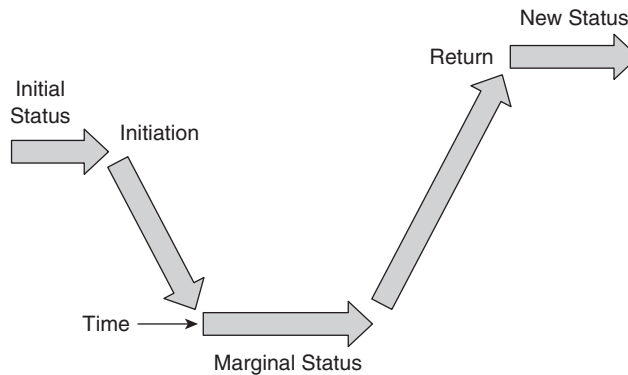


Figure 2.3 Rite of passage

These events are **rites of passage**, ways by which established organizational members initiate and socialize new people into the actual working customs of the organization. Rites of passage appear in all communities and have long fascinated anthropologists. They are key processes or events that affirm or deny a worker full status amongst their colleagues. Figure 2.3 tracks the way one's status shifts during a rite of passage, from entering the initiation process to successful accomplishment.

Rites of passage can sometimes be gentle and full of light but pointed humour. At other times, they can be harsh, even humiliating. Indeed, groups as diverse as military personnel, prisoners, chefs, the police and fire-fighters will use degradation as a way of socializing the newcomer. Others are mixed in their methods. For instance, waitresses can confront some **stressful** challenges in order to 'make the grade' with their colleagues:

I remember my cousin who was hazed [initiated] in a job. It was her first night as a cocktail waitress in a bar. Her manager and colleagues told her, about 20 minutes into the job (so she was already set up for stress), that a key part of her job was counting how many straws and napkins she was distributing to customers that evening. It was a Friday night in a college town bar. You can imagine how crazy the place got. Well, needless to say, she lost count, and things got dicey. Some convincing drama by the manager and colleagues reduced her to tears by 2:30 am. Then she was let in on the joke. All night, her colleagues had been observing her frantic efforts to comply with the napkin/straw inventorying, and it must have given them all that warm fuzzy sense of re-commitment to the team. But I can tell you it bonded her instantly to the organization and she got a lot of mileage out of the story over the years.²

Rites of passage are part of the unwritten socialization procedures of organizational life; they are not to be found neatly listed in a job description. They are akin to a second selection system, but are every bit as important as the first one. Surviving them connects the individual to the work group, an emotional bonding that is crucial for group cohesion and is at the core of an organization's sub-culture. Rites of passage reveal themselves most clearly and consistently in strong-culture companies. For example, some present new employees with a series of specific hurdles to jump – surviving punishing

working hours; performing very basic work to remind them of their humble status in the face of all they will have to learn; complete immersion in one part of the company's core business until they have full mastery of it; sacrificing domestic and leisure time for the company. McDonald's, the pervasive hamburger chain, is meticulous in ceremonially rewarding its staff with badges and certificates as they move from one hurdle to the next. In this way, one's progress is visibly delayed until one conforms to the company's expectations. Such is the potency of this form of conditioning that it can take a remarkably short time for people to fall into line. They soon speak the corporate language and perform according to the rules: socialization is complete. This often involves a change in self-identity where our self gets fused, to a lesser or greater extent, with those with whom we now feel we belong. The tell-tale signs of this are when people start making statements about what 'we' are doing at work; 'our' latest project; the way government fails to understand 'our' way of working and so forth. 'I' is not used; it has become part of a greater whole.

... AND LEAVING

Some people leave organizations quietly, unnoticed. This can be because it is the way they want it: they are uncomfortable about public attention on themselves. Alternatively, they may be part of a floating population of temporary workers who have no deep, or sustained, attachment to the organization. As we have mentioned, such impermanence is becoming much more prevalent in today's organizations. For longer-term employees, however, the farewell party is perhaps the most common organizational ritual, an exit rite of passage. There are the complimentary farewell speeches tinged with nostalgia and humour and the presentation of a gift. A mix of alcohol and bonhomie helps transcend political frictions which may have existed and the leaver should feel able to quit gracefully, with a sense of completion to his or her endeavours. A brief period of mourning may follow, with people talking about how things used to be when the leaver was around. If the person strongly influenced the direction of the organization (for good or ill), his or her memory may be enshrined in stories which are passed on to future employees.

As well as marking an end to someone's organizational efforts, the farewell celebration legitimates vacating the job for someone else. It is problematic if this point is misread, or misunderstood. To illustrate: many a leaver will exit to the sentiment, 'it will be great to see you around here any time.' Those who respond literally to such an invitation may be disappointed, as the following tale from a human resources manager reveals:

Brian was a production executive. He loved his work with us; I guess he was a workaholic. He's been retired about a year now. We gave him a lavish send-off, a huge party. He was a popular man, you see. About a month after he left, he popped in to see us. Of course, it was great to see him and to exchange stories. I got the feeling then that he wasn't adjusting too well to retirement. He said he'd keep in touch with us, and that he did! It seemed like every week he'd be in – trying, really, to be where he thought he belonged. Eventually, one of his old colleagues came to see me, in despair. 'He's driving us mad,' he said. 'He's a nice guy, but we don't want him any more. He wants to do our job for us; he can't let go.'

The emotional bonds of organizing are very real, but they are often temporary and heavily entwined with daily work routines. The leaving ritual effectively marks an end to a person's organizational membership and disenfranchisement can be rapid. Only special friendships survive. Without the everyday sharing of work, old interpersonal attachments are left without roots, or a proper context for expression. This can come as quite a shock to people who quickly find their old workmates relative strangers once they have left the organization. More cynically, one can regard many organizational relationships as a means to an end. We try to get on with people because we have to – to get the job done, to get through the day, to earn a living.

Recently, exiting organizations and employment has become complicated by an additional factor: the longer active lifespan of many workers and a trend away from a mandatory retirement age. Changing demographic patterns have challenged traditional notions of retirement. There is an increasing number of people wanting to work beyond 60 or 65 years of age and many are supported by legislation that outlaws age discrimination at work. Furthermore, as both the state and employers begin to withdraw from pension provision, many workers need to supplement their existing pensions with further paid work.

These changes have opened the door to more flexible retirement policies: some employees choose to continue to work full-time into their senior years, deferring the exit process, while others will complete the retirement ritual, only to return to their previous jobs on a part-time basis. For employers, such arrangements challenge any overt or covert ageism in their employment policies, while offering the benefits of retaining important knowledge, skills and social capital.

Yet there is another image of leaving, which is far removed from the canapés and congratulations. This is the world of redundancy, restructuring and **downsizing**. People have to leave because their jobs are no more. The vagaries of the market economy can sometimes, seemingly overnight, turn a 'caring, family' organization into a beast which consumes its own children – in order to survive commercially. 'Our most important asset, people', rarely endures a severe downturn in trade, a world recession, or new mechanization; other interests take precedence. Yet when people invest fair parts of themselves and their security in their employing organizations, job loss comes as a very upsetting event. A person's identity is at stake. For the first-time **unemployed**, the loss of income, status and routine activity can feel like a collapse of **meaning** at the centre of their lives. Those who have been made redundant more than once tread warily through the world of work, cautious about their commitment to any one company and with a sense of detachment – 'it's just a job'.

Organizations approach the management of redundancy in different ways. The closest one finds to a supportive ritual is in attempts to soften the blow through generous redundancy payments and 'outplacement' support – to help people find new jobs or other activity. Otherwise, there is a mishmash of responses. Some senior managers cannot face the task of announcing redundancies themselves, so they delegate it to an internal, or external, 'hatchet person', some of whom are well practised at that kind of work. Then there are people who find out about their own redundancy from internal rumours or what they read in their local newspaper. Others hear by letter, or return from a break to find that their job is no more. The UK Accident Group has added a new dimension to this process. The company employed a large number of staff to advise clients on how to recover damages due to accidents they had suffered.

In 2003, without warning, all staff received a mobile phone text message that they were not being paid and were redundant, forthwith. The company had gone out of business. The message came as a huge shock. But the technology that carried the message added insult to the injury.

In sum, we cannot but wonder at the apparent courtesy and charm which can bring a person into an organization, and the acrimony and disarray which, sometimes, can mark the leaving. Perhaps, most of all, it reminds us of the curious fragility of social orders and of organizing.

KEY POINTS

- Entering and leaving organizations are critical transitions in our work lives.
- Most organizations wish to present a glossy image to the outside world, but once inside an organization, one often gets a different picture.
- The rational procedures of recruitment and selection are often overlaid with political interests – which may not give the candidate a ‘fair’ hearing or decision.
- Entering and leaving is marked by both formal and informal social rituals, exposing the deeper aspect of the organization’s culture and sub-cultures.
- There is a gradual process of getting to know one’s place in an organization – learning its customs and practices, becoming socialized. This is crucial to survival, and can sometimes be testing.
- An organization can soon become part of our self-image and identity, complicating departures, especially forced departures.
- We can insulate ourselves from the stresses of job change by reducing our commitment to an employer.

>>>>>>>>>> THEORETICAL SIGNPOSTS >>>>>>>>>>>>

The major ideas in this chapter can be found in three main areas:

- > career theory
- > dramaturgy and impression management
- > socialization and rites of passage.

Career Theory

Entering an organization has traditionally been associated with a step on the career ladder, a notion that can be traced to the seminal writings of Max Weber and his ideal

type bureaucracy (Weber, 1946). Workers can gradually ascend the hierarchical ladder as they acquire more qualifications and experience; and their personal identity is much determined by their work role, their position and their organization. While this picture has not vanished, career theorists are now more concerned with 'post-bureaucratic' organizations, where structures are more fluid and people are in and out of different types of work, refining their 'employability' through training and education (see Hall, 1996; Osterman and Arthur, 1998). Theorists, such as Arthur and Rousseau (1996) and Hall (1996) have described the 'boundaryless career' where people criss-cross different employment sectors. Others talk of 'portfolio careers' (Handy, 1996) where several mini-careers or contrasting jobs are pursued with no exclusive commitment to any one or to any single employer. Flexibility is the key. Post-modern theorists, such as Fournier (1997) and Grey (1994) have argued that such shifts are marked by more fragmented personal identities, assisted by 'disciplinary technologies', such as frequently re-crafted CVs and advice on new ways of presenting who you are.

Dramaturgy and Impression Management

These are rooted in the seminal work of sociologist Erving Goffman (1959). He speaks of the Presentation of Self in Everyday Life – how we don particular 'masks' and use role 'scripts' to give the right social impressions to others. In his turn, Goffman was inspired by role theory, a cornerstone of social psychology (Biddle, 1986). Dramaturgy, as the label suggests, takes the theatre as analogy for social life and the importance of pulling off a good performance – as befits formal interviews for jobs and other social encounters where we are being evaluated or judged. For dramaturgists, appearances are everything and rehearsals are vital: we are managing the impressions we give off to others and adjusting them to particular contexts. These can sometimes be subtle processes as we adjust to the feedback we receive from others. Following such ideas, writers such as Mangham and Overington (1987), Rosen (1985) and Giacalone and Rosenfeld (1991) have looked at the nature of impression formation in a variety of organizational events or settings.

Socialization and Rites of Passage

Socialization theory aims to explain how we become part of a social unit, gradually adopting some of its ways: norms, values and beliefs. Schein (1968) argues that socialization in the organization's process varies in its consistency. Some individuals may accept socialization and conform, while others will rebel or even adapt the organizational norms to their own needs. In other words, it can often involve conflict and struggles. Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) focus on the importance of organizational learning in a dynamic model of socialization, where tacit knowledge – such as stories and gossip – is in constant interplay with formal knowledge – the sort found in rule books, reference manuals and job descriptions. The two different sorts of knowledge inform each other while sharing tacit knowledge is fundamental to the process of socialization.

Rites of passage are often intrinsic to organizational socialization, defining the passage from one status to another. Its academic origins attest to the early twentieth century work of anthropologist Arnold Van Gennep (2004). He noted how particular rites,

or ceremonies – such as baptism, marriage and funerals – were key to a major change in one's position in society. He argued that all rites of passage are marked by a phase when the individual is separate from their social group; a phase when they are in 'liminality', between the old and new groups; and a final phase when they have passed successfully into their new group. Formal rites of passage can be found in the swearing-in ceremony that marks a foreigner's passage to full citizenship of a nation, and an employee's need to complete the 'rites' of their company training programme in order to move from probation to full-employee status. Informally, organizational folklore abounds with stories of ritual fun or humiliation that the novice must bear in order to become fully accepted. Indeed, some writers, such as Nuwer (1999), see rites of passage as an important way of deciphering the key values and constraints of an organization how micro changes occur (see also Ashforth et al., 2000; Trice and Beyer, 1984).

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. In what way is impression management part of the recruitment and selection process? How have you managed your part in such circumstances?
2. What are the roles of dramaturgy and organizational culture in explaining how we become socialized in the workplace?
3. What is the function of rites of passage when entering and finally leaving an organization? Could we do without them? Relate to ones you have personally experienced.

NOTES

1. See <http://www.shell.com/home/content/uk-en>
2. See <http://www.hrpost.com/forums/teamwork/9910/msg00017.html>



Reading On

The articles below are available for free to readers of the fourth edition of *Organizing & Organizations* via the book's companion website at www.sagepub.co.uk/fineman

Bozionelos, N. (2005) 'When the inferior candidate is offered the job: the selection interview as a political and power game', *Human Relations*, 58 (12): 1605–31.

The article advances the view that the selection interview frequently serves as a political arena for various power networks in the organization whose interests may be conflicting. Members of the interview panel try to advance the interests of the power networks to which they belong by lobbying for the candidates whose background and values concur most with

those interests. The notion of the interview as a political and power game is illustrated with a case from the academic environment.

Feldman, D.C. and Ng, T.W.H. (2007) 'Careers: mobility, embeddedness, and success', *Journal of Management*, 33 (3): 350–77.

This article proposes refinements of the constructs of career mobility and career embeddedness and reviews the array of factors that have been found to energize (discourage) employees to change jobs, organizations, and/or occupations. The article also reviews the literature on career success and identifies which types of mobility (and embeddedness) are most likely to lead to objective career success (e.g., promotions) and subjective career success (e.g., career satisfaction).

Schein, E.H. (2004) 'Learning when and how to lie: a neglected aspect of organizational and occupational socialization (Introduction by Hugh Gunz and Paul Willman)', *Human Relations*, 57 (3): 259–73.

This article is based on the lecture delivered by Professor Schein at the Academy of Management meeting in Toronto, 2000. The article builds on Professor Schein's widely cited work on career anchors, examining the various kinds of socialization that individuals undergo in a typical organizational career, focusing in particular on the norms learned about information management in the different functions that the career occupant will encounter.

Sullivan, S.E., Martin, D.F., Carden, W.A. and Mainero, L.A. (2003) 'The road less traveled: how to manage the recycling career stage', *Journal of Leadership and Organizational Studies*, 10 (2): 34–42.

This article examines how organizations can better respond to the needs of individuals who are reexamining and changing their chosen career paths. The term, 'career recycling', reflects a segment of the workforce describing individuals who are reexamining and changing their career paths. Through exploratory interviews, the authors find that recyclers were dissatisfied with their careers and willing to accept the risks associated with changing career direction.

3

LIFELONG LEARNING

Much is written on learning, a topic with far-reaching organizational, educational and political implications. We spend a large part of our lives learning – in our families, at school, in the streets, at college, in organizations. Massive resources are spent on education, training and development. Is this money well spent? How do we learn? What stands in the way of learning? Are there right and wrong ways of teaching? Right and wrong lessons?

And what about learning management? How do managers learn to do their job? What is it about management that can be learned? How is management knowledge diffused? And why are management students spending much time and money attending different types of courses to make use of the knowledge they acquire? How does knowledge translate into practice?

In this chapter, we consider some of the ways in which we learn. We go on to look at different learning styles and different types of learning. We then look at certain types of learning and knowing that go beyond the individual, becoming parts of **organizations**. Can we talk of **group** or organizational learning as processes involving something more than the learning undertaken by their members? Is it true that some organizations, like some individuals, are good learners and others not? We conclude this chapter by considering the relationship between knowledge and **power**.

SOME TYPES OF KNOWLEDGE

One of the difficulties with the word ‘learning’ is that there are many different things which we learn, many different ways of learning and many obstacles which stand in the way of learning. Some learning, like learning a football result, takes place almost instantaneously; learning to use a piece of software may take several days or months; learning to play the violin can take many years. Learning to practise as a professional, a consultant or a leader can take an entire lifetime.

Some of the things we learn are information (e.g. 'there are five divisions in this organization'); some are **skills** (e.g. learning how to drive a car or how to send an email) and academic disciplines (e.g. medicine or engineering); some are stories, like the story of how a particular product ensured the survival of our organization. Learning is something that takes place in the head (knowledge, information, stories), but also in the rest of the body. Juggling, skiing and playing the drums are skills which are located in the limbs at least as much as in the head.

COMMON SENSE

Sometimes we are aware that we know something. Sometimes it seems so obvious that we do not even think of it as knowing. This is referred to as common sense or a taken-for-granted view of the world. Until recently, it was assumed that the earth's resources were effectively limitless as was the earth's capacity to absorb pollution. Today, such views are no longer taken for granted. Instead, what seems commonsensical is the view that we cannot go on indefinitely using the earth's resources without jeopardizing the welfare of future generations.

One of the fascinations of coming into contact with different organizations is realizing that things which we consider absolutely unavoidable are in fact conventions which other organizations do without. We consider it inconceivable that an organization could function without a human resources department until we encounter an organization where 'personnel matters' are routinely handled by other departments, without the need for a special department.

We are bound to take some things for granted. We cannot be checking everything the whole time. So some learning is about distinguishing what is worth focusing on and learning about, as opposed to what should be taken for granted. Within organizations, we constantly make assumptions about the behaviour of other people, about the functioning of machines and equipment, about the operation of different types of systems. It is for this reason that we can easily find ourselves thrown off course if suddenly one or more of our assumptions fail – for example, if our colleague is so depressed that he only wants to talk about his divorce, if the electricity supply fails or if we discover that our boss has been sacked. Tacit knowing is both inevitable and useful – yet, there are times when it stands in the way of learning. We can rely on existing routines and assumptions which served us well in the past, not realizing that the world is changing and that the time has come for new ideas, new **skills** and new ways of engaging with others.

ACQUAINTANCE AND DESCRIPTION

One of the distinctions that has proved helpful for thinking about knowing in **organizations** is between 'knowing by acquaintance' and 'knowing by description'. A shopkeeper knows his or her shop by acquaintance. So too does a manager. By contrast, a management theorist knows his or her subject matter by description, that is through scientific theories or records and observations made by other people.

Most of us know about trench warfare by description, while war veterans who lived through it have a very different type of knowledge of its meaning.

I have read many books, I have seen films, I have been to lectures. Nothing but nothing can capture what it was like to be there. The horror of it. (Joe Laskem, World War I veteran, 'Today Programme', BBC Radio 4, 11 November 1998)

It is for this reason that those who 'know by acquaintance' often believe that nobody who has not lived through their experience can appreciate its meaning, no matter how many books, television programmes or films they are exposed to.

Knowing by description is sometimes referred to as *propositional knowledge*, while knowledge by acquaintance is known as *experiential knowledge*. Propositional knowledge is generally open to traditional forms of testing and proof – by testing the validity of the propositions through experiments, observations or arguments. Experiential knowledge, on the other hand, can be more difficult to test or even to talk about. As Louis Armstrong said about jazz, 'man, if you gotta ask what it is, you ain't never gonna get to know'.

The knowledge that people have of their own organizations is mostly experiential. When we join a new organization, we may be given a description of it – for example, through company prospectuses or corporate videos. These are unlikely to take us very far (see Chapter 2, 'Entering and Leaving'). As we become used to the place, we gain knowing by acquaintance – knowing individuals, knowing procedures, knowing past examples and likely outcomes, and we act with more confidence. Organizing is carried out on both bases, and could not be done on the basis of either one alone. This book, on the other hand, like all books, can only offer you knowing by description – this enhances and speeds up your learning from acquaintance with actual organizations. The two kinds of knowing are not totally distinct; a really good autobiography is a description, but the reader may come away from it feeling almost acquainted with the subject of the book. Knowing by description can be a help in gaining knowing by acquaintance.

SKILLS AND COMPETENCES

Much of our learning involves 'knowing how' to do things rather than 'knowing that' certain things are true. Often, we find ourselves doing things perfectly competently, without knowing the principles which underpin them. We can speak a language without knowing its rules of grammar and syntax; we can ride a bicycle and play billiards without knowing or understanding the physics. Many successful entrepreneurs may know how to set up and run profitable businesses without being able to articulate the underlying principles. Knowing how ('know-how') is often tacit knowledge. This sometimes passes unnoticed and unrewarded. Alternatively, tacit knowledge may be highly rewarded – some chief executives and football managers, for instance, receive large salaries for their supposed knowledge of how to turn around a failing company or football team.

Much of the knowledge in organizations is knowledge by acquaintance and knowing how. This is the knowledge on which much organizing is based. It often amounts to a range of **skills** and competences rather than the application of scientific concepts and theories. Rules of thumb, intuitions, past experiences, organizational

folklore and tacit understanding can be more helpful than the latest scientific discoveries. One of our students wrote a dissertation in which he tried to show that, if only small businesses followed formal appointment procedures for their managers, they would make far fewer mistakes and be better able to compete with larger businesses. He investigated firms where an owner had started a business, and later recruited a manager as an employee. He was surprised to find that recruitment decisions which seemed to be intuitive, where the owner had followed 'gut feelings', were more successful than the ones where more formality and rationality had been attempted. It seemed that such owners knew how to choose a good manager for their business; the more they considered the 'knowing that', the factors they 'ought' to consider, the less likely they were to make a **decision** which turned out well.

One particular type of knowing how is knowing how to get things to happen. A lot of knowledge in organizations can go untapped, simply because people who possess it do not know how to make it work for themselves or the organization. An information systems manager said:

I have been trying to get the board to take an interest in IT for years now. We are way behind most of the rest of the industry. But every time we get near to talking about it properly, the conversation slips off to somewhere else. I just cannot get them to focus on it.

What he was expressing is a common frustration. He has an area of expertise. It is almost self-evident to him that the company would do well to pay attention to that area, but he cannot get it onto senior people's agenda. Many managers are in a perpetual state of hurry, of trying to do more things at once than is really possible, and many issues compete for their attention. However well you know what you are talking about, getting something you care about on the organizational agenda requires a different kind of knowing – knowing how to time your attempt, knowing who to talk to in which order, and knowing how to get them interested. This requires a mixture of **communication** and **political** and interpersonal **skills** without which technical know-how can remain untapped.

LEARNING STYLES

Different people learn in different ways. In a classroom, a teacher may give pupils a question and then suggest that they carry out an experiment to find out the answer. Alternatively, the teacher may give them the answer directly. Is it a waste of time and resources to have students carry out the experiment, given that the experiment has already been done many times? Likewise, if pupils know how to solve a problem, is it necessary for them to know the abstract mathematical principles which underpin the solution?

Learning styles is a concept which seeks to capture the ways different individuals learn. Some people are referred to as 'pragmatic learners' – they prefer to learn how to get things to work, relying on a mixture of intuition, instruction and trial and error. They are interested in results, not theories. Others are known as 'discovery

learners', approaching learning as an adventure and learning best from the satisfaction of solving problems themselves. For them, learning comes mostly from experience. Yet others are referred to as 'critical inquirers', approaching their subject in a systematic inquiring way, using analysis, reasoning and criticism as a means of reaching the deeper principles.

Learning by instruction and learning by experience are both active processes. Learning by instruction requires active engagement with what the instructor says, asking questions, raising criticisms, exploring new applications, trying out different examples. Learning from experience can involve hard work. It can be mental work, reflecting on experiences and trying to understand the reasons for mistakes or disappointments. It can also involve physical work, as in the following example:

Once upon a time, an old man saw that his days were coming to an end. He called his three sons, blessed them and told them that he had hidden a treasure in the field. When he died, they should go and dig the treasure out - it would stand them in good stead for the rest of their lives, he said. The old man died. His sons mourned him and then started to dig the field. They dug every part of the field thoroughly but could find no treasure. Had the old man made a mistake? This is what they thought. Until harvest time came, when they reaped many times the usual crop, for they had dug the field so well. It is then that they realized that the old man had not lied to them.

The old man of the story wanted to teach his sons a lesson by experience rather than by instruction. Had he said: 'work hard, my sons, to earn your living', the message could easily have been lost. Hard work, the frustration of not finding the treasure and the final realization of what the treasure is are likely to leave a much deeper mark on the sons. You can see now why some of your best teachers were those who refused to spoon-feed you easily digestible pieces of knowledge, which are just as easily forgotten. Instead, they demanded hard work from you. Hard lessons can be harder to forget.

Experience does not necessarily lead different people to the same types of knowledge. Two people can go through what outwardly appears to be the same experience and end up knowing quite different things as a result. Even the three sons of our story could draw different lessons from their experience. The first one, for instance, might have learned that hard work on the fields is the secret of a happy life; the second son might have learned that his father wanted them all three to work together; the third son, for his part, might have learned that hard physical work was not for him and that becoming a watch-repair man was a better way of earning a living. Thus, our individual way of knowing, or **construing** the world, gives a particular spin on what we see happening, and therefore what experience we gain from events. People know things in very different ways. A painter and a policeman would look at a riot in quite different ways and could be expected to draw different kinds of knowing from their observations. A poet and a botanist bring different kinds of knowing to the observation of a flower, and they take different kinds of knowing from it.

If we now relate this to narrative knowing, we would expect people to differ considerably in terms of the kind of story they made out of what they had just seen.

Suppose that you miss an important meeting in your organization. You ask two or three of your friends who were present what happened. You are then likely to get different narratives or stories through which they make sense of what went on, and in which they cast themselves as characters. One may present the meeting as an arena of political and intellectual jousting, where he managed to outsmart an awkward adversary. A second one may report that the meeting was a complete waste of time, with two or three individuals on ego trips being intent to argue about the most trivial points. A third one may report that while much argument took place over trivial matters, the really important **decision** went through 'on the nod', right at the end of the meeting when most people were too tired to notice. These accounts may or may not be incompatible – they each seek to turn the experience of the meeting into a story from which the listener can extract the essence of the meeting.

Knowledge and meaning change as they travel from person to person through stories or information. Even seemingly hard statistics, like unemployment or profit figures, can lead to different conclusions being drawn, as different people read different meanings into them. One form of knowledge that we do not expect to change as it travels from person to person is scientific theory. After all, in the natural sciences, we expect a theory to hold across time, space and **culture**. Yet, in the human sciences, theories are constantly confronted with new and unpredictable realities which demand constant re-evaluation and rethinking.

OBSTACLES TO LEARNING

What stops us from learning? Why is it that sometimes we seem entirely unable to understand something or find ourselves repeating the same mistakes over and over again? It is sometimes said that some individuals can have 25 years' experience, while others merely have one year's experience repeated 25 times. Some people are better learners than others or better able to adapt, update and fine-tune their knowledge to changing circumstances. Learning itself involves a range of skills, which some of us can master better than others.

Many factors can conspire to inhibit learning – poor teaching, a lack of **motivation**, an absence of resources and the apparent lack of relevance can all prevent us from learning. A very important obstacle to learning is old learning, especially when it has assumed the form of habit. Habits that were once valuable can be difficult to shake off when they become counter-productive. One may learn to smoke as a way of being socially acceptable and successful; it is very difficult to quit later. Having learned to pass exams by simply memorizing pieces of information, it is hard to abandon this approach, even when it is no longer adequate or appropriate. Likewise, having learned that success is the product of hard work, we may be unable to stop and think whether the work we are currently engaged in is the right work or not.

Sometimes, old knowledge becomes an object of great emotional attachment. We can almost fall in love with our theories. This is especially the case with primitive theories, like stereotypes or theories which have served us well in the past. We are then quite reluctant to abandon them and replace them with new knowledge, just as an organization may be reluctant to abandon a tried-and-tested product that has brought it much success in the past, when the time for its replacement is ripe.

Maybe the most important obstacle to learning is the fear of failure, a fear that may itself be the product of earlier failures and disappointments. Learning is not nearly as comforting or as reassuring as habit. It can be exciting, enjoyable and life-enhancing but it inevitably draws us outside the comfort zone of what we already know. It can be a disorganized and unpredictable business. It generates many anxieties: are we on the right track? Are we wasting our time and money? Are we going to get the answers we want? Are we going to survive the tests and trials lying ahead? Shall we be branded failures? Are we perhaps stupid or intellectually incompetent? Faced with such anxieties, it is often tempting to fall back on old habits and routines, 'stick to the knitting' and continue doing what we already know how to do.

The teacher's skill lies in keeping these anxieties in check, never neutralizing them completely, but stopping them short of disabling the learning process. A good teacher can help us cope with the disappointment of failure, not by denying it or preventing it, but by turning it into a valuable lesson in its own right. A great teacher can inspire us with a genuine thirst for learning, maintaining our sense of adventure which combines danger with achievement. We can then develop a wide repertoire of learning styles and approaches which enable us to benefit and learn from subsequent experiences, both positive and negative ones.

NARRATIVE KNOWING

This type of knowledge has attracted much attention in recent years. Many statements in organizations may sound factual, but imply a story. Consider, for example, the statement 'since Jeff joined us, model 312 has really started to take off'. Such a proposition can go beyond a mere statement of causal connection between two facts. Instead, it may amount to a story, a very short one to be sure, since the teller of the story can assume that the listeners have the tacit knowledge to make sense of it. They may know, for example, that Jeff was lured from working for the customers' trade association with a big salary offer, and that he is a very personable character; they know the success of model 312 has been at the expense of model 314 which has declined; and they also know that the director who brought Jeff in reduced the chances of his decision being shown to be wrong by arranging a healthy price cut and a big advertising campaign for the 312 at the crucial moment.

It may be that narratives are central to learning. Making sense of the world around us, understanding what is going on, is achieved through turning 'facts' into 'stories'. After a football match or an interview, we prepare ourselves to tell a story of how that match or that interview went. In presenting ourselves to others, we invite them to share our stories, to get to know us through the stories we tell them and to form their own stories out of meeting us. When we go for an interview, for instance, we do not only offer a list of our achievements and experiences – rather, we weave them into a narrative, and usually one that will cast us in the best possible light. At the same time, we listen carefully to the stories told by others. A word or phrase can reveal that they see themselves as a hero struggling against enormous odds, or as a victim of circumstances. Narrative knowing consists of being able to spot the plots of such stories and make sense of them.

AN EXAMPLE

Consider the following story set in a naval camp. The story was often told before the inspection which preceded the handing out of furloughs – the permits to leave the barracks. This was a tense period, when the recruits could be denied exit leaves if their appearance was not up to standard. One particular officer, the story went, liked to torment the sailors by denying them their exit leaves on the most absurd grounds. On one such occasion, he had asked recruits to lower their trousers while standing to be inspected. He then proceeded to cancel everyone's leave. The navy, he had explained, went to great trouble and incurred substantial cost in providing each recruit with three full sets of underwear as part of the military uniform. But, he observed, the recruits had seen fit to discard the regulation white boxer shorts stamped with their serial number, in favour of a motley assembly of briefs. This he regarded as a violation of the military code with disciplinary consequences. The recruits needed a reminder that a sailor was to be a sailor through and through, for instance, by spending some more time in the barracks.

This story had an unsettling effect on new recruits, although more seasoned sailors appeared to find it amusing. As a piece of organizational lore, the story acted as a depository of important knowledge, though the precise nature of this knowledge would vary from person to person. Unlike a moral tale which has a simple message and a straightforward moral, this story could be read in many different ways. Its meanings existed in many different layers. In one sense, the story cast the recruits in the role of victims of sadistic officers. They could take some comfort from feeling proud for surviving such ordeals. In another way, the story suggested that underneath the blinding uniformity of army clothes, each individual could maintain a part of their individuality, symbolized by their underwear. In yet another way, the story acted as a warning for new recruits. Navy life, it seems to announce, is full of unexpected troubles and dangers. Surviving requires more than just compliance to rules – it requires fortitude and, even, a sense of the absurd. As such, it makes its point in a far more telling way than would a mere admonishment: 'be prepared for the worst!' In this way, narrative knowing offers us both a way of making sense of our experiences and a way of coping with difficulties and problems which we face.

COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

One of the important functions of narrative knowledge is to inform people not what the main rules are but how they should be applied. Some rules are applied strictly, others are only applied in certain situations and yet others are routinely ignored. Another function is to inform people how to handle exceptional or difficult situations or to offer tips or good ideas. One of the authors was once delayed at the airport in Denver, Colorado, due to bad weather. As he sat at a café, waiting for his flight to be announced, he overheard the conversation of four pilots sitting at a table next to his. The conversation made uncomfortable hearing, as the pilots recounted some of the most terrifying experiences of their careers – near collisions, failure of equipment, freak weather phenomena, dangerous passengers and so forth. What the author gradually realized was that the pilots were not just trying to impress each other with

evermore scary stories, but they were also passing on very useful information of the sort that may not be found in their flight manuals to their colleagues – they were *sharing knowledge*, in other words, giving tips, comparing experiences, making judgments, drawing very fine distinctions and so forth. They were, in effect, acting as a knowledge network or members of a ‘community of practice’.

The importance of communities of practice has been known since some early studies of organizations. It was clear, in other words, that in order for people to do their work effectively, they often rely on knowledge that they have obtained not as part of a formal curriculum but through informal conversations with their peers. For a time, it appeared as though information available on digital networks might undermine the importance of informally shared local knowledge. But, if anything, the opposite has been the case. The ubiquity of information far from supplanting local knowledge networks makes them more important. Why? Because such networks shield their members from the masses of irrelevant noise or surplus information, communicating instantly on the right wavelength, sharing the same assumptions.

Many authors have argued that this is one of the reasons for the success of localized communities, epitomized in Silicon Valley. As Brown and Duguid have argued:

The Valley persists as a densely interconnected innovative region, though its inhabitants loudly proclaim that the information technology they develop renders distance dead and place insignificant. It persists ... because of the local character of innovative knowledge, which flows in social rather than digital networks. The locality of innovative knowledge highlights the challenge of developing other regions for the modern economy. (2002: 427)

Communities of practice cut across organizational boundaries. A company’s research scientists, maintenance engineers, software developers, accountants, purchasing staff and sales people may well belong to different communities of practice. They may well be able to communicate better with their fellow practitioners than with people within their own organization. Are managers a community of practice in their own right? Undoubtedly, in many ways, managers act as if they belong to a community of practice. It may well be that part of the success of the MBA (Masters of Business Administration) is that it represents an internationally recognizable badge which enables members to join such a community. The nature of managerial work itself, with its ad hoc, unpredictable, improvisatory qualities, would further support the emergence of managers as a community of people bound together by common practices and common concerns.

MANAGERS AS A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

Much of the research on communities of practice has been done on groups of skilled professionals and craftspeople. But how well does the concept of community of practice apply to management? Can there ever be a ‘community’ of managers within which learning can take place, where knowledge is shared? And does their ‘practice’ have enough in common with each other for the concept to be useful?