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Constructing strategic change and regulating identity in the Bank

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This paper reports the findings from a study of ‘Transform’, a Bank’s strategic change program. The study was carried out by developing and applying a discursive model of strategic change to Transform. Findings are presented about how Transform was constructed from ‘grand discourses’ of business and science that were drawn on by senior management, and how a localised discourse of the self was formed at the intersection of these grand discourses. This paper examined how senior management has attempted to govern employee identity and practices through the construction of Transform. In this respect Transform can be understood as a discourse which was designed to regulate identity and influence employee practices by constructing and instilling a particular reality of the Bank for its employees.

Introduction

Since the 1960s the language, tools, and techniques of strategy have become integral to the way in which many organisations are managed and talked about (Mintzberg, 1994; Knights and Morgan, 1995; Whipp, 1996; Barry and Elmes, 1997; Palmer and Hardy, 2000; Samra-Fredericks, 2005). As a consequence, strategy is often employed to manage and describe the task of organisational change. In this study a discursive model of strategic change was designed and applied to the Bank to investigate how discourses
were drawn on to construct an organisational ‘reality’. This approach opened up a study of processes that are central to strategic change in organisations. The organisation investigated in this study, referred to as the ‘Bank’, is an established and major competitor in the Australian banking industry, competing in particular with three other nation-wide banks and with the expanding operations of regional banks. As with a number of industries, the banking and financial services industry was characterised as competitive and subject to the challenges of deregulation and developments in information and communication technologies.

**Grand and local discourses of strategic change**

References to the grand discourse of business in Bank texts were found in descriptions of three related themes of business - a changing environment, bureaucracy, and organisational culture. The combination of the three forces changing the business environment, described above, was argued to have made the Bank’s environment more global and more competitive. As a result the way wealth was created had changed to a more intangible form than that of controlling capital assets. The reported implication of these changes in the ‘globalised business environment’ was that organisations had to work smarter rather than harder, and to do so required a depth of talented people. The second theme of bureaucracy was invoked to describe a range of ‘dysfunctions’ in the Bank. These included an over-reliance on rules and a hierarchy which led to competition and a lack of information sharing among employees. Both the changing environment and bureaucracy themes of a grand discourse of business constructed particular problems and challenges that faced the Bank. In this reality a particular type of organisational culture
and quality of talented people was presented as an imperative. Hence, the problems and challenges defined in the changing environment and bureaucracy themes provided the rationale for drawing on the business theme of culture. The changing environment theme of the grand discourse of business framed a current and future ‘reality’ of the marketplace in which the Bank had to operate. This reality, together with the need to dismantle the shackles of bureaucracy, was then translated into a range of imperatives for the Bank’s culture. Drawing on these assumptions and assertions concerning the environment, bureaucracy, and culture, Transform was developed by the Board of Directors and the CEO as a key strategy to ‘move the Bank forward’. There were also references to a grand discourse of science in Bank texts, found in descriptions of a range of scientific concepts and related practices. These scientific concepts were introduced as a set of natural world truths that underpin beliefs about the nature of reality.

Bank texts, in drawing on and referencing the grand discourses of business and science, invoked a range of conditions and ‘natural laws’. The effect of the grand discourse of business was to describe ‘the way things are’ or ‘reality’ in terms of the nature of the Bank and its current and future environment. From this reality a set of strategic imperatives were defined that, in turn, determined the type of employee and employee performance that was required. Hence the grand discourse of business justified the need for a strategic change program and for a certain type of employee. The effect of the grand discourse of science was to set out how people think and act as individuals and how people interact with each other. Individual shortcomings in terms of behaviour and relationships with others were identified, and it was assumed that an understanding and
application of scientific knowledge could establish ways for individuals to perform and interact more effectively. Hence, the grand discourse of science was drawn on to set out a particular way of understanding and managing the self.

The weaving together of elements of both grand discourses constructed a reality that the Bank would have to respond to in order to survive and grow, while at the same time it produced a solution to the challenges of this reality in terms of how employees could better understand and manage themselves in order to improve their performance. In short, the two grand discourses were interwoven in the sense that the science discourse was drawn on to set out how the self can be, and the business discourse was drawn on to set out a reality in which this particular self became an imperative. In other words, the grand discourse of business defined the problems and opportunities facing the Bank, and the grand discourse of science defined the knowledge about individual performance necessary to solve those problems and exploit those opportunities.

Summary
The findings presented in this paper show how the referencing of grand discourses constructed a Bank with particular problems and opportunities that made Transform a natural and inevitable strategy for the Bank’s survival and growth. More specifically, these findings demonstrated how the grand discourses were drawn on in texts to frame ‘the’ conditions in which the Bank ‘must’ operate and to construct a particular type of Bank and employee that these conditions made imperative. The local discourse of the self was constituted at the nexus of both of these grand discourses as ‘the’ imperative for
strategic change. In this discourse of the self employees were required to understand and manage themselves in particular ways as described above. This local discourse of the self provided the framework for a new subject position that was constructed to engage employees in Transform thinking and practices.

References


