Rhetorical profiling: Modes of meaning generation in organizational topoi

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Abstract

Accounting for homogenous action in seemingly apparent heterogeneous organizations is a research question that persists across prominent organizational studies literatures, and which have become more persistent and pertinent as organizations have become more global and diverse. To address how differing forms of relatively homogeneous solutions to practical problems arise from otherwise heterogeneous organizations, we develop a rhetorical framework that depicts the role of topoi, often understood as a theme or motif or literary convention, in an organization's rhetorical activity and facilitates the profiling of organizations according to how members use topoi as modes of meaning creation. We assert 10 propositions reflecting how members invent and legitimize functional meaning and demonstrate how such meaning can direct the organization toward different discursive paths. Copyright © 2013 ASAC. Published by John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

Keywords: organizational rhetoric, rhetorical framework, rhetorical profile, topoi, argumentation

Résumé

Rendre compte des actions homogènes au sein d'organisations apparemment hétérogènes est une problématique que même les travaux classiques en études organisationnelles n'ont pas pu résoudre. La mondialisation et la diversification croissante des organisations rendent cette problématique plus récurrente et pertinente. Pour examiner comment des formes différentes de solutions relativement homogènes à des problèmes pratiques émergent d'organisations autrement hétérogènes, cet article propose un cadre rhétorique qui décrit le rôle du topoi (souvent considéré comme un thème, un motif ou une convention littéraire) dans l'activité rhétorique d'une organisation et facilite le profilage des organisations en fonction de la manière dont les membres utilisent le topoi comme modes de création du sens. L'article avance 10 propositions qui reflètent la manière dont les membres inventent et légitiment le sens fonctionnel, puis montre comment un tel sens peut orienter l'organisation vers des pistes discursives différentes. Copyright © 2013 ASAC. Published by John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

Mots-clés : rhétorique organisationnelle, cadre rhétorique, profil rhétorique, topoi, argumentation

How do we account for homogeneous activity in organizations? That conceptual question has motivated extensive bodies of research extending from Weber's (e.g., 1947, 1978) focus on the link between bureaucracy and noncoercive obedience in organizations as a way of understanding apparent homogeneous activity (Tompkins, 1984) to the contemporary literatures of institutions, sensemaking, and structuration. Yet, the question endures and is especially relevant given that today's globalized organizational activity involves intensely heterogeneous actions, actors, environments, meaning systems, and institutional fields.

Over the last few years, a number of scholars have sought to bring rhetorical concepts to bear on the question of homogeneous action (e.g., Conrad, 2012; Green, 2004; Green, Li, & Nohria, 2009; Jarzabkowski & Sillince, 2007; Sillince, 2005; Sillince & Barker, 2012; Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005) with work that has a compelling foundation. Rhetorical theorists such as Tompkins have long argued that rhetoric has existed since ancient times as the persuasive sensemaking process organizations use to turn heterogeneous individual thoughts and actions into rational and functional collective practice (see Tompkins, 1987, pp. 77–83; Tompkins as quoted in Barker, 2004, p. 2). This is done so that the organization can solve the practical problems it faces, such as how to get everyone to work together relatively consistently, so that the firm is successful.

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Accordingly, we define discursive homogeneity and heterogeneity as the discursive construction of consensus or conflict about a practical problem. Green et al.'s (2009) work on Total Quality Management and rhetoric is a useful example as their study sought to understand how rhetorical premises were shaped by, and were subsequently shapers of, institutional logics and sensemaking that rhetorically moved actors toward authentic and legitimate consensus on how to deal with common, practical problems. We also find a similar example in Sillince and Barker's (2012) description of how actors use rhetorical tropes to move from the heterogeneity of a rhetorical disruption through the inauguration of a metaphorical device that subsequently builds homogeneous standard practices.

Yet accounting for how any diverse organization can act as a collectivity of its individual members to solve its problems remains elusive. As Green et al. (2009) and others have noted, we can readily observe how rhetoric may lead to reasoned, collective action in a particular organization (e.g., via the establishment of validated decision premises; Tompkins & Cheney, 1985). But rhetorical practice seems to vary considerably across organizations (Conrad, 2012). Scholars have noted a number of effective uses of rhetoric to solve problems and enhance firm performance (e.g., Jarzabkowski & Sillince, 2007; Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005) as well as organizations developing mere rhetorical verbiage that masks underlying coercive structures (Barker, 1993; Tourish, Collinson, & Barker, 2009). While these organizations may have apparently homogeneous action and may actually be effective, the mode of rhetorical practice in these organizations differs considerably; that is, the practice of rhetoric can be a highly variable experience.

We engage with this issue of differing rhetorical modes of practice across organizations and seek to understand how differing rhetorical practices can still lead to relatively homogeneous collective action. To depict rhetorical modes in action and how they differ, we draw on a central concept in rhetoric: *topoi*. Often defined as the underlying topic (*topos*) or topics (*topoi*) framing an argument (Kjaer & Palsbro, 2008; Stewart, 2005), *topoi* also have a motivational quality as these rhetorical topics form the essential lines of reasoning in an argument that enables members to create the shared consensus they need to solve their practical problems and achieve their aims (Clark & Delia, 1979, p. 195). We define *topos* as a line of argument relative to a practical problem, whereas *topoi* represent a set of closely related minor premises that form a general consensus among members as to how to solve that problem.

Thus *topoi*, as framing modes of argument, give a sense of direction and intention to an organization's rhetorical discourse and potentially become what Grue (2009, p. 306) called "argumentative warrants" or major premises (Green et al., 2009, p. 14) for subsequent and apparently rational choice making. That is, organizational *topoi* represent the configurations of organizational values we use as modes

for generating shared understandings and meanings as we need them. *Topoi*, as critical lines of argument in an organization, constitute a discursive mode (systemic and formulaic method of consistent rhetorical practice) for inventing arguments concerning what is the common problem to be solved and how best to solve it both authentically and legitimately (Cushman & Tompkins, 1980, p. 43). At this invention stage, *topoi* can be represented by enthymemes (or accepted truisms) used by members in argumentative reasoning (Prelli, 1989).

In this paper we examine how such rhetorical problem solving unfolds as a differing experience across different organizations. We develop a framework of rhetorical profiles, underpinned by 10 propositions, depicting how some organizations generate *topoi* that serve as modes for creating useful responses to organizational problems, while other organizations produce *topoi* that serve as modes that tend toward cynicism and unresponsiveness. We conclude by describing how our profiles and propositions help us to account for the variance in rhetorical practice across organizations.

The Organization as Rhetorical Entity

Tompkins, a modern theorist of rhetoric, conceptualized organizational rhetoric as modes of meaning-generating arguments that solve practical organizational problems. He connected organizational rhetoric to sociological theories, especially to those of Weber and Burke (Tompkins, 1987), and explained how organizations became distinctive and consistent argumentative modes because the very process of organizing is the creation of ongoing, intrinsic arguments about what is real and thus meaningful (Tompkins, Tompkins, & Cheney, 1989; also see the similar argument by Green et al., 2009). His conceptualizing provides a useful standpoint for engaging the fluid and dynamic terrain of rhetorical practice across differing organizations.

Tompkins begins his consideration of organizational rhetoric with Burke's integrative definition of rhetoric as "The use of language as a symbolic means of inducing cooperation in beings that by nature respond to symbols" (Tompkins 1969, p. 43). This definition pushes our attention, in terms of organizational sensemaking, to the complex and sophisticated modes in which we create the discursive conditions for rhetorical arguments to arise and shape our subsequent meaning creation within our organizations. Inspired by this definition, Cushman and Tompkins subsequently defined *organizational rhetoric* as discourse that "guides the creation of effective expression capable of moving audiences to make appropriate judgments in regard to the solution of practical problems" (1980, p. 43). Here, Tompkins is conceptualizing rhetoric as a sociopsychological means (Tompkins, 1987) or *mode* for symbolic humans to create ways of collaborating, coordinating, and connecting together

in collectivities and is thus essential for the necessary shared sensemaking that will lead to solutions to practical problems.

According to Cushman and Tompkins (1980, pp. 44–52 in particular), rhetoric works when members perceive that they are using persuasive discourse to solve their practical problems (also see related arguments in Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1968). Under these circumstances, individual arguments (topoi) in the organization's problem-solving rhetoric converge into validated and apparently useful topoi about the purpose and direction of the organization as well as the means by which that purpose and direction will be achieved, as in the consistent rhetorical forms noted by Jarzabkowski and Sillince (2007). Essentially, from Tompkins' perspective, the organization is a rhetorical entity with topoi giving that entity its force, that is, its mode for generating apparently functional meaning. This can in turn generate relatively homogeneous and effective collective action given all the ambient heterogeneity marking any organization's day-to-day environment.

Legitimizing and Moving Rhetorical Topoi

Cushman and Tompkins (1980, pp. 56–65) developed a system of rhetoric that addresses two elements in the formation of topoi and the subsequent move toward a rational consensus, what we today would call a commonly shared, apparently functional configuration of meaning (Barker, 1993). They argued that to be effective—that is, to create modes of collaboration, coordination, and connection to facilitate purposeful collective action in a heterogeneous organization—topoi must pass both an invention and judgment test.

Invention “is the process of discovering arguments that suggest principles capable of coordinating action in the resolution of practical problems” (Cushman & Tompkins, 1980, p. 56). Topoi pass the invention test if they generate meaning that the organizations' members see as sensible and right—a correct common purpose for them to coordinate their behaviour around and develop interpersonal connections via collaborations. To use Weick's terms (e.g., Weick, 1995; relatedly, Watson, 1995), passing the invention test means the topoi is plausible and assists sensemaking. Topoi thereby become tighter and more powerful as a rhetorical force, as it builds sensemaking traction.

The judgment test, however, goes beyond the requirement for reasonableness and rightness needed for assessments of invention. People also judge topoi in a procedural way; first, assessing topoi favourably if the argument is plausible, which satisfies invention criteria, *and* if the topoi enables us to understand how we should act to bring the argument into reality. For example, staff might accept the need for an organizational restructure as a means of solving certain organizational problems (i.e., the restructure proposal passes the invention test). However, should arguments be made for executing the restructure that appear extreme or unnecessary, although staff may accept the need for the restructure, resistance may occur because

staff remain unconvinced that they can act in ways that create value from it. The topoi have therefore failed the test of judgment because of disputes concerning enactment.

However, should employees be persuaded that they can add value through appropriate activities, the argument for restructure might pass the judgment test and thus move toward a sense of collectively-shared functional meaning among the organization's members. In our view, passing the judgment test depends on the ability of organizational members both to experience and to develop significantly any rhetorical initiative. This process leads to the formation of noncoercive homogeneous functional meaning and member recognition that the meaning has legitimacy and utility (Green et al., 2009). We can then see invention and judgment as a two-stage process. If an initiative originates discursively from a person, place, or space that does not have the confidence of those who are expected to respond positively, then the first test has failed. However, if the initiative passes the invention test, but members are unable to take ownership of the initiative and create new and useful meaning from it, the second test fails.

Yet topoi are far from stable, and the sense of rhetorical homogeneity that members experience from arguing with them evolves over time as the organization's environment changes. The movement of topoi will then reflect a key shift in how the organization creates persuasive meaning in response to change as the organization continually seeks to create enough discursive homogeneity to solve its changing, practical problems. Tompkins (1993) found such movement when he analyzed how the foundational framing topoi of the US Space Program shifted from a focus on safety during the Apollo years to, during the space shuttle era, an emphasis on time (the demand to keep the shuttle launches running on schedule) and cost (the demand to keep the shuttle program on budget), which directly contributed to the faulty decision making underlying the space shuttle Challenger disaster.

But, how do particular topoi arise from organizational structures that then gain the legitimacy necessary (via passing the invention and judgment tests) to influence organizational action in particular directions? In contemporary organizational settings we find an indeterminate number and variety of recurrent rhetorical situations. The principles underlying topoi suggest that they have three sources: conventional expectations in rhetorical situations, knowledge and issues available in the institutions and organizations in which these situations occur, and concepts available in specific networks of knowledge. Any of these sources can serve as conceptual places that yield arguments possibly useful in a rhetorical situation related to the genre, institution, or discipline (Miller, 1987, p. 67). However, while topoi act as the backing that provides assurance that an argumentative warrant is applicable and that backing is generally tied very closely to the conceptual structure of a given discourse community, topoi are context sensitive and enmeshed in varying particular circumstances and issues that both shape organizational persuasion and serve as

conceptual connections between human reasoning and the particularities of practical situations. Thus topoi give an organization's discursive practices the potential to move, that is, to evolve, institutionalize, and become reasonably stable over time.

Sillince and Barker's (2012) tropological model of rhetorical movement in fluid organizational contexts depicts how organizational meaning (topoi in our terms) is discursively inaugurated and moved forward via a chain of progressive tropes. These four tropes enable rhetorical argumentation by bringing to the foreground the meanings (again topoi in our terms) that will shape the action we take in the here and now. Sillince and Barker further noted the possibility to derail the movement of such rhetorical arguments through the operation of political resistance and multiple agency and suggest that forward movement is not inevitable. Relatedly, Sinha, Inkson, and Barker (2012), in their examination of multiple agency, argue that to have persuasive effect, organizational arguments require rhetorical validation and support (passing invention and judgment tests) by a number of stakeholders (agents) and that stakeholders constantly evaluate the authenticity of the ongoing movement of rhetorical topoi in collective sensemaking. Although not addressing topoi specifically, there are related discussions about the movement of meaning during organizational change in the work of change theorists who take discursive approaches (e.g., Conrad & Poole, 2013; Poole & Van de Ven, 2004).

As Conrad (2002) has observed, scholars working from Tompkins' perspective have gravitated more toward studies of identification, decision premises, and concertive control and have yet to pursue systematically the role of topoi in the movement from discursive heterogeneity to discursive homogeneity. Acknowledging this gap, we next construct such a framework for charting the movement of topoi across differing organizations.

Organizational Profiles as Modes of Rhetorical Meaning Construction

Drawing on the understanding of topoi as advanced above, we have developed a system of rhetorical profiles and set of propositions for characterizing different modes of discursive practice in organizations. We intend the word *profile* here to work in a way consistent with a rhetorical perspective. In common practice, we use the word *profile* to represent the extent to which something exhibits various characteristics. Subsequently, we can envision an organization's *rhetorical* profile as representing a relatively and reasonably consistent mode for generating meaning that leads toward particular member actions. This view of profile as mode is analogous to what Burke (1984) called *rhetorical orientations*: intrinsic methods of generating meaning and action with a particular sense of intention and direction.

We begin by describing propositions related to how topoi become legitimated and cohere into profiles.

Rhetorical Legitimacy

Initially, the legitimacy of a discursive initiative is found in its point of generation, which is the perceived legitimacy of the organization's management (e.g., an executive) or members (e.g., a work group) that initiate rhetorical topoi in relation to a practical problem (Sillince & Barker, 2012). As explained above, if the topoi continues to gain legitimacy and continues to pass the invention and judgment tests, we would expect to see this movement grow out of noncoercive conversations and organizational decisions rather than forced compliance or the implicit threat of organizational sanctions. Thus, topoi become rhetorically self-generating rather than imposed, and begin gaining the traction necessary to converge into a homogeneous meaning.

Topoi reflect syllogistic lines of reasoning. Therefore, developing links to other topoi (i.e., opening up issues) widens (a) the number of sources of justifications by adding extra premises and (b) the number of implications by showing how the syllogism's conclusion or claim can be used as a premise in another syllogism (Sillince, 1999) and thus become self-generating. A widened number of justifications and implications create traction because they facilitate passing the two tests and keep topoi alive within the minds of members. The number of justifications and the number of implications are mutually supportive for the following reasons: (a) more justifications of a topoi lead to more use of that topoi in conversations—under routine circumstances, when people reference topoi in conversation, they create cognitive legitimacy (Green et al., 2009, p. 13) for that topoi leading to the topoi becoming self-generating; (b) topoi that have cognitive legitimacy are understandable, taken for granted (Suchman, 1995), and do not have emotional blocks and resistances associated with them (Sewell & Barker, 2006). People easily engage with them. They are therefore ways of opening up issues. This suggests:

Proposition 1. A topoi begins to self-generate legitimacy when people have conversations that open up rather than close down issues.

Aristotle (trans., 1991) suggested that the persuasive orator uses enthymemes, or syllogisms, that are imperfect probabilistic and context sensitive (Sillince, 1999), which enables the audience to persuade themselves by supplying the missing premises from its own taken-for-granted beliefs. Enthymemes thus are syllogisms with empty spaces for members to add their own contribution (Tompkins & Cheney, 1985). An audience can make their own contribution by: (a) defining something or demonstrating actions that have a symbolic significance (Burke, 1966), (b) implementing something, or (c) enrolling supporters.

Heracleous and Barrett (2001) showed at the level of language how organizational change in the London Stock Exchange was facilitated by this method. Change agents used, as unstated premises, their audience's taken-or-granted beliefs that London should remain a preeminent financial centre and that information technology was a way of modernizing transactions. When people listened to change agents' arguments, they supplied these missing premises themselves and thus became active in a process of self-persuasion (Aristotle, 1991), which suggests the following:

Proposition 2. Topoi are more persuasive when they are framed as enthymemes than when complete syllogisms are used.

Although we began with topoi arising from noncoercive discourse, we do recognize that coercion occurs in organizational situations (Tourish et al., 2009). Members better accept coercion as a minor premise so long as their methods for action are predominantly under their own control (Sewell, Barker, & Nyberg, 2012). Members are more likely to accept managerial decisions if they have participated in the consultation process. Coercion is only effective if it results in filling one of the spaces in an enthymeme in which the coerced addition is further contextualized by uncoerced additions, which is the audience signalling its acceptance of what had been an involuntary part into a willed whole. Here coercion is made a minor premise of an overall topoi about respecting, consulting, and listening that suggests the following:

Proposition 3. Topoi that contain coercion as one of several minor premises are more acceptable than topoi in which coercion is the only premise.

Completely imposed topoi offer no way via spaces in enthymemes for members to engage the topoi in a manner that develops and customizes it to their practical problems, enabling them a sense of ownership and an ability to rationalize the need to share the topoi in their collective sense making.

Rhetorical Development

Rhetorical development issues are concerned with an organization's rhetorical strength and capability in terms of the forms of discourse it generates (Holt, 2006) and of the legitimate infrastructure it uses in that generation (Ashcraft, Kuhn, & Cooren, 2009). By infrastructure we mean the capability for topoi to become effective problem-solving discursive mechanisms in the organization's rhetoric. To be effective, rhetorical infrastructure must enable members to develop multiple manifestations of topoi that enhance the organization's way of discursive problem solving. Thus the strength of topoi is increased by support from a discursive

infrastructure that provides the language means for reasoning about and motivating organizational action. Topoi are therefore stronger and better-developed when combined in a mutually supporting rhetorical infrastructure, which suggests:

Proposition 4. Rhetorical strength is increased when the elements of the infrastructure are mutually supporting.

In a sense, an effective rhetorical infrastructure creates more infrastructure, as McKinney, Barker, Smith, and Davis (2005) found in their study of flight crews. The authors noted how flight crews were more capable of generating rhetorical arguments that led to effective crisis management if they already had a discursive infrastructure in place. Effective (i.e., legitimate) infrastructure creates more effective infrastructure when environmental changes necessitated better ways of solving practical problems. Essentially, a rhetorical infrastructure of legitimate topoi creates an appetite for more. The organization has an appetite for rhetoric because its members experience both a need to use rhetoric and an enthusiasm for fulfilling that need.

From this standpoint, we can see a rhetorical infrastructure as an organizational resource that, to use Barney's (1991) well-known model, can create a competitive advantage. A rare infrastructure reflects distinctive linguistic elements; a valuable infrastructure holds linguistic elements that carry procedural knowledge and thus constitutes a capability; inimitable infrastructure is one that is causally ambiguous (the infrastructure connects linguistic elements about behaviour and performance and thus expresses effects of actions on outcomes that is opaque to competitors unfamiliar with the infrastructure) and socially complex (linguistic elements connect people and thus express human relationships that are impossible for competitors to re-enact); and a nonsubstitutable infrastructure contains linguistic elements that would seem out of place in other organizations. These four attributes increase competitive advantage (Barney) and suggest the following:

Proposition 5. Discursive infrastructure that is rare, valuable, inimitable and nonsubstitutable gives the organization a competitive advantage.

Next, we draw on our above discussion of rhetorical legitimacy (passing invention and judgment tests) and rhetorical development (generative infrastructure), and develop four profiles for understanding how different modes of rhetorical practice arise via topoi in organizations. We also develop further propositions as they are relevant to the four profiles.

The Command and Control Profile

Between Figure 1's two axes (rhetorical development and rhetorical legitimacy) rest four distinct and recognizable

Figure 1.
Organizational Rhetorical Profiles

rhetorical profiles. The first profile, command and control, represents organizations whose rhetorical mode reflects little utility in discursive engagement with their participants. Persistent heterogeneous interests are dealt with using power, authority, and discipline. Engagement and empowerment are minimized and unlikely to achieve traction. Functional meaning is imposed and not negotiable. Agency costs are kept to a minimum resulting in a paucity of discursive infrastructure, resources, and collateral.

A command and control profile reflects an organization with a low appetite for topoi, little perceived need for rhetoric to solve practical problems, and little enthusiasm for creating it. In such organizations challenges are seen as illegitimate and new topoi are self-limiting, which suggests that the appetite for topoi is a self-limiting cultural attribute:

Proposition 6. Under command and control, challenge is seen as illegitimate so that organization members are not encouraged to establish topoi to solve practical problems.

Stereotypical, highly rational-legal organizations are representative of this profile, although any organization that has historically chosen to elevate managerial prerogative in order to carry out its objectives will reflect command and control rhetoric (Tourish et al., 2009). The command and control organization sees no apparent need for either the invention or the judgment tests, so the topoi are not in rhetorical play (see Sewell et al., 2012 for a related discussion of how intense pressures toward surveillance inhibit the ability of an organization's member to manoeuvre discursively). In Cushman and Tompkins (1980) conceptualization, an imposed shared functional meaning is invalid as it has no rhetorical potential for the solving of practical problems.

However, subterranean discourses of resistance and subordinate value systems may emerge that offer alternative

rhetorical legitimacies for organizational employees (Humphreys & Brown, 2002), with these discourses being generally located at the organizational margins. Kennedy (1999) further suggests that some strategic, ethical positions for rhetoric are potentially available at the command and control margins using "impolite and disruptive" tactics that disperse the centrality of logic in rhetoric by operating a logic of its own—one that uses parody and satire to question accepted norms (Kennedy, 1999, p. 26). We also found an alternative approach to framing rhetorical resistance at the margins of the command and control profile in the institutional entrepreneurship literatures with instigators being located not only at the margins, but also at other locations (Battilana, Leca, & Boxenbaum, 2009). Other examples of framing rhetorical resistance include Maguire and Hardy's (2009) account of the deinstitutionalization of the infamous pesticide DDT and Maguire, Hardy, and Lawrence's (2004) analysis of the operation of institutional entrepreneurs with regard to the transformation of existing institutional arrangements concerning treatment advocacy of patients with HIV/AIDS.

The Regressive Profile

This profile reflects a regressive response to the command and control profile when organizational leaders, who are faced with the failure of command and control, belatedly recognize that the erosion of the natural deference to authority requires at least lip-service engagement with organizational members. New initiatives may emerge via the development of topoi that reflect plural interests and the need for participation schemes to provide a voice that might assist practical action (Conrad & Poole, 2013). Typically however, such topoi fail to pass even a modest invention test and as a result, any attempts at procedural engagement are seen as entirely specious and nonlegitimate. Organizational participants are likely to remain unconvinced that substantive change has occurred at all. This profile reflects the crucible of much of the change management literature and offers a simple yet powerful explanation as to why change initiatives are frequently doomed to fail (Doyle, 2002). When politically contested topoi arise among a divided, heterogeneous membership and when heterogeneous perspectives and concomitant behaviours remain pervasive, the topoi that rise in the organization's discourse will fail both the invention and judgment tests.

The presence of an infrastructure that generates useful topoi requires cognitive legitimacy so that the line of argument becomes taken for granted. Topoi acquire cognitive legitimacy more easily when they are related to behaviours and beliefs that are tightly shared across an organization's members as the members will establish and enforce norms that make certain issues closed and nondiscussable (Tompkins, 1984). Similarly, when beliefs and behaviours are influenced by a common goal and value

system, this generalized goodwill forms the basis for widespread trust in the predictability, continuity, and controllability of social relations (Conrad & Poole, 2013). This goodwill provides the ontological security for members to take beliefs and behaviours for granted in order to create social capital to the organization's advantage (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998) via legitimated rhetorical infrastructure.

When political conflict occurs, the heterogeneous differences between people in their beliefs and behaviours become explicit, visible, and open for discussion, which erodes trust and social capital. But the inconsistent use of topoi to build legitimacy and to develop infrastructure means that regressive organizations will struggle to establish topoi that authentically address practical problems. Put simply, the organization will struggle to generate effective topoi and members will then lose their appetite for further rhetorical engagement. We found a useful example in Sinha et al.'s (2012) analysis of an airline industry's failed acquisition. The CEO of the airline they studied continued to escalate commitment, via available rhetorical infrastructure, for his acquisition strategy even when financial evidence indicated that the acquisition was failing. As the legitimacy of the CEO's rhetorical position began to deteriorate, heterogeneous differences emerged from stakeholders' discourse, which soon forced the executive's resignation and the acknowledged failure of the acquisition.

For this reason the regressive profile is the profile of paradox: the organization says one thing, but does another. Typically, when managerial initiatives fail the first stage of invention and judgment, employees cynically disregard managerial claims of participation or engagement and react with calculations of expediency that enable them to function without being convinced or engaged by managerial rhetoric. Thus, politically contested topoi are less likely to become institutionalized and less likely to gain power as a legitimate argumentative resource for solving practical problems, which suggests the following:

Proposition 7. Politically contested topoi are more difficult to institutionalize as important elements of discursive infrastructure than topoi that are not politically contested.

Because of this paradox, the regressive organization will develop a rhetorical infrastructure as it generates discourses, such as continual new change initiatives of the latest best practices or weekly update emails from the executive, but these topoi would remain politically contested with little validated legitimacy that comes from members' application of the invention and judgment tests. In the regressive profile, we would expect to find a high level of rhetorical development by the organization's members, but their discourse would reflect resistance, disillusionment, complaint, and cynicism. We find an example of both high engagement and high resistance in Symon's (2005, 2008) accounts of the introduction and development of IT systems

in a UK public sector organization and in Waring and Bishop's (2010) study of the introduction of lean work systems among UK hospitals. In both studies, a high degree of rhetorical development was in evidence concerning the changes being introduced into these organizations, which signals movement up the vertical axis of the profiles model. But the purposefulness and functionality of the discourse here became a coping mechanism for both advocates of change and their resisters, offering only cold comfort because the topoi in play were failing to instigate cognitive legitimacy and gain problem-solving traction in the short to longer term.

The Progressive Profile

The progressive profile characterizes an organization that has made a decisive shift in terms of engagement with its members. Rhetoric generated here generally passes the invention and judgment tests, and so legitimacy will be high with members willingly suspending heterogeneous interests in favour of a collective will. Members have the sense that they are creating functional meaning in their discourse and take on more ownership of and connection with the broader organizational purpose, which, in turn, means the topoi gains increasing traction.

The issue at hand however is the rhetorical strength of the organization's discursive infrastructure. The organization may seem locked in a sense of becoming without ever seeming to reach its potential. An organization captured by this profile lacks a full mode of useful topoi that must be nurtured and iteratively developed to create powerful and functional topoi. Rhetorical legitimacy (e.g., in this profile, the sense among members that "our organization is doing the right thing") can take hold before the requisite rhetorical development occurs, which means that the supportive rhetorical forms and discourses required for adequate member coordination and collaboration, as an example, have yet to develop. The discourse may be homogeneous, but will still lack functionality in terms of the ability to move the topoi forward in argument effectively. The organization will have to commit to and invest in cultivating this functionality to realize its rhetorical potential if it is to move beyond the sense of becoming.

In the progressive profile, its members have accepted the organization's "ends" but have yet to accept its means. Thus, while a degree of homogeneous collective behaviour is possible within the profile, the lack of discursive infrastructure depth in the progressive organization means its longevity remains doubtful without an investment in rhetorical development. Without such investment, members struggle to achieve an argumentative ability to reconcile ends and means in a way that can be easily understood and used to generate meaning (Perelman, Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1968, p. 273). For example, while an executive may have committed the organization to a change, he may be struggling, rhetorically, to persuade members to buy into that change, thus eroding the leader's political

control (Denis, Langley, & Cazale, 1996). Or topoi about strategic commitment may have been created by means of a top down political fiat from executive managers, but not by topoi that enroll the professionals and middle managers who are responsible for local implementation (Finstad, 1998, p. 726). The organization experiences a legitimate need for rhetoric, but the lack of infrastructure means that the appetite for fulfilling that need is still inhibited from developing. These examples suggest the following:

Proposition 8. A legitimate topoi is more likely to lead to action if the organization has developed a rhetorical infrastructure than if it has not.

The third profile is potentially indicative of a new organization or an organization that has undergone a substantive organizational change, but the change is nascent and unproven. Where the former are concerned, many entrepreneurs and their firms are often small with nascent institutional infrastructure and are sustained by collaborative practices of sensemaking. Relatedly, Lounsbury and Glynn (2001) have suggested that entrepreneurs use sensemaking devices, such as stories, to identify and legitimate their activities in order to attract capital investment and hence create wealth, which then builds rhetorical infrastructure for moving topoi forward. Holt and Macpherson's (2010) study of small business entrepreneurs highlights differences among how these entrepreneurs build upon nascent rhetorical infrastructure. The rhetorical strategies adopted by their entrepreneurs demonstrate a rich awareness of persuasive rhetoric and a distinct sense of their audiences; however, the extent to which the entrepreneurs' rhetorical performance secures institutionalization of organizational routines remained uncertain, which suggests that the forward movement of the entrepreneurs' topoi is difficult without supportive rhetorical infrastructure.

Thus, homogeneous meaning is created but remains partial and precarious until the discursive mechanisms that drive its topoi toward functionality emerge and institutionalize. Fundamentally, the organization needs additional representations, stories, narratives, and demonstrations to maintain legitimacy and enhance its rhetorical infrastructure if it is to create functional meaning (Heracleous & Barrett, 2001; Zbaracki, 1998). Typically, the third profile reflects organizations that have adopted short-term time horizons rather than investing in the development of rhetorical infrastructure.

The Seat of Argument Profile

When topoi readily pass the invention and judgment tests, that is, when topoi are validated as effective and rational mechanisms for solving practical organizational problems, they become what Cushman and Tompkins (1980, p. 64) called, a "seat of argument." As such, members now use the topoi to create powerful and functional meaning that *makes*

sense. The organization's members understand the argumentative directionality and intentionality of their topoi and can reason out how to act accordingly and effectively. The conditions for effective persuasion over time are now present.

Thus, a seat of argument profile suggests that an organization's clarity of purpose, emergent rational consensus, and the homogeneous intent in discursive activity have all reached such a sustained level that members experience an internal and external consensus that is legitimized and sustained over time. This is the point at which the organization can rhetorically generate and sustain a full appetite for rhetoric.

More importantly, rhetorical development and legitimacy in the seat of argument mode is now generative rather than static. Typically, a repertoire of rhetorical methods has developed that reflect implicit understanding as to how to present, discuss, and critique alternative strategies that help to constitute the organization's sense of how it is distinctive from other organizations (Sillince, 1999). Such rhetorical mechanisms have the ability to heighten commonality and homogeneous meaning creation and encourage an appetite for sustained argument. Organizations that have survived for many decades, capturing general respect and recognition along the way, can in-and-of themselves become perceived as a seat of argument that is legitimate both internally and externally. Such organizations' performativity levels and reputation mark them out as leaders within their category or industry. Their topoi for doing work are tested and proven both in the past and present.

A high appetite for topoi requires a rich rhetorical infrastructure that encourages the supporting of topoi through strong rhetorical development (*Proposition 5*) and that increases the potential of this discursive infrastructure to be self-generating (*Proposition 1*). This process involves a multiplication of justifications and conversations (*Proposition 1*), resulting in an even greater use of rhetoric. Rhetoric involves the invention of new topoi (Hannken-Illjes, 2006) as changes in environment and context might urgently demand (Sillince, 2007). The seat of argument appetite for topoi is a self-generating and self-reinforcing cultural attribute and suggests the following:

Proposition 9. If the appetite is high then members will be encouraged to establish new topoi that will further increase the appetite for topoi.

A seat of argument's rhetorical development is both a strong (infrastructure elements are tightly linked and mutually supportive) and prevalent (there are many instances of each element) resource for the organization. Rhetorical strength is derived from the self-supportive and interconnected character of the elements of the infrastructure (*Propositions 5*) and the appetite for argument (*Proposition 9*). This acts as an engine of semi-independent reasoning that balances the self-interest and cognitive shortcomings of individual leaders. Such organizations are able to generate

necessary discursive resources that enable a multivoiced discussion and inhibit dominance by individual leaders. The wide variety of infrastructure elements that have had to pass the invention and judgment tests would result in a high state of scrutiny of idiosyncratic, sociopathic, or egomaniac leaders. It would also encourage transparent and inclusive debate in which topoi are judged on their merits. The highly linked quality of the discursive infrastructure would ensure there was no “last word” on any issue, thus preventing domineering leaders from closing off issues (*Proposition 1*), which suggests the following:

Proposition 10. Seat of argument organizations make decisions that are less subject to the errors of individual leaders.

Notably, the seat of argument mode does depict the organization as changeable and responsive to environmental turbulence. With a vibrant rhetorical development system, the organization is capable of argumentatively creating new warrants and evidence that enable new premises to form (Green et al., 2009; Grue, 2009) and for the organization’s syllogistic reasoning structures to adapt to and even anticipate changes. Entrepreneurial rhetors (Green et al., 2009) would find the conditions right for creating new arguments and the organization’s members would have invention and judgment testing methods in place to interrogate the legitimacy and usefulness of these new arguments.

Discussion

Summary

To summarize, the command and control profile represents a traditional model of unitary management that is likely to be more pervasive than most managers would admit. Functional meaning is created but it relies on discursive mechanisms that may be coercive and unfriendly toward real employee involvement in decisions or initiatives. In the abstract this profile represents the separation of conception from execution (Braverman, 1974).

The regressive profile represents the emergence of HRM and putative enlightenment. This profile is regressive however, because it reflects the cynicism of organizations that, for example, claim human resources to be their most important asset, only to fire workers when the whims of short-term capital markets require erosion of agency costs. Thus, the profile describes those organizations whose employees remain impervious to the hyper-rationality and intensity of the rhetorical discourse that we are “all in this together.” Rhetorical legitimacy is simply absent. Functional meaning is likely experienced as contested terrain in which topoi that build homogeneous meaning and concomitant action to achieve the organization’s purpose remain elusive.

The progressive mode offers rich rhetorical opportunity and potential, and could lead an organization toward the rhetorical utility found in the seat of argument profile. But the key word here is *could*. The organization still lacks the infrastructure necessary for a full rhetorical appetite to develop, and for the organization to create the rhetorical capacity it needs for its topoi to become a powerful seat of argument. The seat of argument profile reflects an organization whose mode is a well-established rhetorical infrastructure that enables the development of legitimated meaning and action in the face of internal and external heterogeneous pressures. Invention and judgment are equally matched with a rich array of rhetorical representations and resources. The organization can develop new and effective topoi that become legitimated and integrated into member thought and action. Although functional meaning in terms of homogeneous collective behaviour is characteristic of the seat of argument profile, the longevity of this experience remains doubtful without continual rhetorical development. A simple regressive act by management still has the potential to unleash latent heterogeneous manifestations that fracture generative functional meaning and cause effective topoi to lose legitimacy. Still, this profile stands in direct contrast to the functional meaning in the command and control profile that is simply imposed by coercion.

Contributions to Scholarship

We have proposed a framework of four rhetorical profiles and 10 propositions that illustrate different modes of discursive practice in organizations. Essentially, we have argued that each profile characterizes a consistent discursive manner through which the organization approaches the day-to-day solving of practical problems via topoi. These four modes characterize “an organization’s model of being, that is, how an organization is in the world” (Cooren, Brummans, & Charrieras, 2008, p. 1340) and explain how very different rhetorical practices can occur across different organizations. Thus, our profiles depict four different rhetorical modes that work via topoi to create very different discursive realities.

We have argued that for topoi to create effective meaning and meaning that builds a common sense of homogeneous functionality, those topoi must pass tests of invention (is the argument right and reasonable?) and judgment (can members take ownership of the meaning and use it to transform their own ability to engage with and add value to the organization?). Passing these tests bestows perceptions of legitimacy to the topoi and enables them to form a powerful rational consensus that serves as a source of functional meaning within the organization. To make this discursive move into a rational consensus of shared organizational meaning that gains seat of argument status, the organization also needs an effective rhetorical infrastructure that facilitates the necessary coordination and collaboration

mechanisms that members require to argue with each other (to evaluate and apply their topoi) effectively.

Applied Implications

The profile framework also represents a way of integrating current instrumental and intrinsic concerns among scholars and practitioners of managerial rhetoric. By focusing on the movement of topoi as rhetorical arguments in an organization, we have described a way for all organization members to understand how deeper level, intrinsic values and strategies work as rhetorical topoi that must be developed and legitimized at the instrumental level of everyday organizational discursive practice. Our rhetorical profile model also complements recent work such as Green et al.'s (2009) analysis of rhetorical proofs and deduction by arguing for the effect of different rhetorical modes in framing how such deductions can occur differently in organizations operating from dissimilar modes.

Our framework also suggests that an understanding of rhetorical profiles and the movement of topoi helps explain how an organization can realize a discursive competitive advantage (*Proposition 5*). Seeing organizations as rhetorical entities with characteristic modes of discursive practice give a new perspective to organizational inertia depicting it as a complex process involving successfully creating competitive advantage via topoi (*Proposition 5*) and institutionalizing topoi in a self-reinforcing state of legitimized acceptance.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

A key limitation of our present profile framework is that we have focused our model primarily from Tompkins' writings on topoi and organizational rhetoric. Although Tompkins' theoretical streams are well known, we can find other streams of research that develop topoi (e.g., Hannken-Illjes, 2006). Additionally, we have only dealt with Aristotle's concept of topoi as it was conceptualized by Tompkins and have not engaged key elements of Aristotle's writings on topoi such as common and special topics as well as distinctions between enthymemes and syllogisms made by other researchers. Further development and expansion of topoi as an organizational rhetoric concept and of the relationship of topoi to organizational enthymemes and syllogisms are clearly warranted, especially in terms of contemporary theories of institutions, sensemaking, and organizational constitution.

Further to this point, our framework suggests that rhetorical topoi play a key part in the institutionalization and de-institutionalization process. To gain strength, topoi must become taken for granted and legitimated (*Proposition 7*), which tends the organization's discursive mode and concomitant institutional work (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006; Suddaby, 2011) toward institutionalization. However,

even strongly legitimated and supported topoi are fragile and environmental changes (such as the departure of a key executive/rhetor) can put the political contestation of topoi back into play. Unless the organization's infrastructure can tolerate such disruptions, rhetorical legitimacy will fall, the organization's appetite for rhetoric will begin to fail, and the organization will tend toward deinstitutionalization.

The framework also raises the issue of the formal and informal mechanisms for invention and judgment tests and how these tests are influenced by cultural context; for example, how a permeable boundary is kept between internal and external legitimacy of topoi. The division of self-generation (*Proposition 1*) into self-limiting and self-reinforcing topoi raises another issue: What are the specific inter-relationships between the different elements in a rhetorical infrastructure that make them either negatively self-limiting (*Proposition 6*) or self-reinforcing (*Proposition 9*)? Finally we see an important question in pursuing how organizations can move from one profile to another: How is the fear inducing use of topoi in the command and control profile perpetuated or broken? How is hypocritical and self-deceptive use of topoi in the regressive profile perpetuated or broken? And, how is tolerance for the coexistence of legitimacy with the limiting underdevelopment of topoi in the progressive profile perpetuated or broken?

The four profiles form a foundation for subsequent research that could test the relationship between the rhetorical meaning that arises in each profile with particular organizational outcomes, such as success in achieving the organization's purpose, prevalence of positive or negative attributes (worker participation, job burnout, and stress, etc.), the ability of change agents to shift an organization's rhetorical system from one profile to another and to identify modes of resistance. Future research concerned with integrating discursive perspectives could also assess how organizations within each profile create (or fail to create) sufficient rhetorical infrastructure and how particular organizations facilitate the creation of engagement that leads to rhetorical legitimacy.

JEL Classification: M1

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