system (Reading 4) and has elements of Mintzberg's adhocracy. A steady stream of literature, training, group activities, public meetings, rituals, and supervisory and peer reinforcement inculcated the company's values and messages. Kunda cites Etzioni's work in arguing that employees' resulting emotional attachment to their work and self-direction reduced the need for more formal monitoring and control mechanisms.

Tech's corporate culture offered employees many positive benefits, but it demanded a great deal in return, including a substantial part of their personal identity. Though most employees liked both their jobs and their employer, many tried to dissociate themselves from the corporate culture or remained ambivalent. As McGregor argued (Reading 9), borrowing from Maslow, most people want a satisfying job, and self-fulfillment at work has often appeared to be the ideal antidote to the alienating qualities of bureaucracy. But a workplace that tries to serve both economic goals and human needs blurs the boundaries between self and work and threatens to absorb one's personal identity into a work role. In addition, to propose an identity between personal self-actualization and a company's business objectives invariably raises the kinds of questions about motives that critics have posed since Human Relations. Because strong corporate cultures try to shape how people think and feel, Kunda suggests they encroach on employees' private selves even as they offer a uncommon sense of community and working conditions that are generally superior to those of conventional firms.

But Kunda's concerns with the harmful effects of corporate culture initiatives have been partly overtaken by recent events. Since the early 1990s, the Japanese threat has receded, and the managers of large corporations now want their employees to act more as if they were free agents in a marketplace rather than permanent employees of an organization or members of a single community, as Bennett Harrison argued (see Reading 26). After Kunda studied the company, Tech faced economic difficulties in the 1990s and had to resort to layoffs. As with welfare capitalism more than fifty years earlier, when promises of security in return for commitment become too costly, they must be discontinued. For Tech and most other American companies since the 1990s, "The rhetoric of organizational communities and cultures is being replaced swiftly by the rhetoric of markets and entrepreneurs. . . . Out of the ashes of discredited bureaucracy, stuck with metaphors of obesity and waste, familiar notions again appear, including laissez-faire capitalism and the survival of the fittest" (Kunda and van Maanen 1999, pp. 73ff.). Eventually Tech was acquired by a younger competitor and ceased to exist as an independent company.

27

# ENGINEERING CULTURE

## *Control and Commitment in a High-Tech Corporation*

GIDEON KUNDA

### 1
### CULTURE AND ORGANIZATION

"Welcome to Technology Region—Working on America's Future," proclaim the signs along Route 61, the region's main artery. It is early, but the nervous, impatient energy of high-tech is already pulsating through the spectacular countryside. Porsches, souped-up Chevies, Saabs, indeterminate old family station wagons, motorcycles, company vans, lots of Toyotas—the transportational variety is endless—edge their way toward the exit ramps and the clusters of "corporate parks," engineering facilities, conference centers, and hotels that are the place of daily congregation for the region's residents. As their cars jerk along, some drivers appear engrossed in thought, a few may be observed speaking into tape recorders or reading documents from the corner of their eyes. In "the region" the future is now; time is precious; and for many of the drivers work has already begun.

The parking lot in front of High Technologies' Lyndsville engineering facility is rapidly filling. High Technologies Corporation—"Tech" to most of its employees—is one of the larger, more successful, and better known of the Region's corporate residents, and reputed to be on the "leading edge" of the high-tech industry. The Lyndsville facility is home to a number of Tech's more prominent and promising engineering groups. It is a low, sprawling, ugly building squatting behind the spacious parking

lot carved out of the countryside a few miles off the highway.

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The many hundreds of people employed at Lyndsville whose day begins as the night shift ends are, on the face of it, a fairly homogeneous group. The age is predominantly late twenties to mid-thirties. Almost all are white and—except for secretaries—most are male. Many would characterize their social status as "upscale." Almost all have college degrees, mainly in fields of the technical sort, with a majority in electrical engineering and computer science. The range of compensation is wide, but the average, by most standards, is well above the comfort zone. The dress code is loose, if rather drab. Business attire seems almost theatrically out of place and suggests association with the outside world, usually with "business types." The general demeanor combines a studied informality, a seemingly self-assured sense of importance, and a clearly conveyed impression of hard, involving, and strangely enjoyable, even addictive, work. Many routinely refer to their work as "state of the art"—of considerable quality, innovativeness, and profitability, and thus intrinsically, unquestionably, and self-evidently worthwhile.

Over the course of the workday, the Lyndsville facility appears to assume the character of its inhabitants: a combination of effort and informality, freedom and discipline, work and play. After early coffees or breakfast in the open cafeteria, the labyrinth of cubicles that occupies much of the internal space becomes the stage for a seemingly chaotic variety of individual activities and complex networks of interaction that take place against a background of subdued but persistent squeaks and whirs from terminals, keyboards, and printers. At first glance, one would be hard pressed to identify differences in rank, status, or power. In many identical and modest-looking cubicles, people are tapping away at computer terminals. Meeting rooms on the periphery are occupied by small groups in apparently intense, occasionally volatile, and sometimes playful discussion. In the central lab space, people are wandering between tangled cables connecting rather unimpressive-looking pieces of equipment to each other and to the ceiling. The cafeteria is occupied throughout the day. Although it often appears that people come and go as they please, it is fairly well established that long hours are the norm. Those not present are assumed to be working elsewhere. Many will continue working through the evening, some on their company-provided home terminals. Others will do so in their minds and—a few would report—even their dreams.

The observer, comparing the glimpsed scenes of life at Lyndsville with traditional or commonsensical images of work life in profit-seeking corporations, might wonder what is going on here. Are things as chaotic and uncontrolled as they seem? How and by whom are the collective interests maintained? Why do people work so hard and claim to enjoy it? Is it the work itself that is intrinsically satisfying? Or is it something about the social context in which it takes place? More broadly: what is it like to work here? Is this the organization of the future? Or is it perhaps a futuristic revival of the past?

To insiders, the scene at Lyndsville is "typical Tech"—a way of life taken for granted, with nothing to puzzle over. If asked to address some of the observer's concerns, many would retort rather matter-of-factly that what one has observed are nothing more than manifestations of Tech's "strong culture." If this at first seems somewhat tautological, it soon becomes apparent that "the culture" is a popular explanatory concept, frequently used as a description of the company, a rationale for people's behavior, a guideline for action, a cause for praise and condemnation, pride and despair, a quality that is said to distinguish Tech from other industries and even from other high-tech companies. "It is," many would say, "what makes us what we are." What do they mean? One answer is to be found among those who consider the "strong culture" their domain.

## Tech Culture: A Managerial Perspective

On this randomly selected workday, the Lyndsville engineering facility is the stage upon which practical managerial concerns with "the culture" are acted out. A few miles away, in a fairly spacious but still modest office at Tech's corporate headquarters, Dave Carpenter is preparing a presentation to be given at Lyndsville later in the day. He is one of the more senior managers in the Engineering Division, and has been with the company a long time. *[ . . . ]* The group at Lyndsville has recently been made part of his organization—"his world"—in one of the frequent reorganizations that are a way of life for Tech managers, or, as he would say, "a part of the culture."

For Dave, as for many managers, cultural matters are an explicit concern. Dave considers himself an expert. One wall of his office is covered with a large bookcase holding many managerial texts. Japanese management, in particular, intrigues him, and books on the subject take up a whole shelf. ("They know something about putting people to work—and we better find out what it is.") Dave has a clear view of what the culture is all about and considers it his job not only to understand, but to influence and shape it for those whose performance he believes to be his responsibility.

A key aspect of Tech culture, Dave often points out, is that formal structure tells you nothing. Lyndsville is a case in point. "It's typical Tech. The guys up there are independent and ambitious. They are working on state-of-the-art stuff—really neat things. Everyone, including the president, has a finger in the pot. The group is potentially a revenue generator. That they are committed there is no doubt. But they are unmanageable." How then, he wonders, can he make them see the light? Work in the *company's* interest? Cooperate? Stop (or at least channel) the pissing contests? And not make him look bad? Dave knows that whether he controls it or not, he "owns" it—another aspect of the culture. And as he reads the company, his own future can be influenced by the degree to which he is credited with the group's success. And he is being watched, just as he watches others. His strategy is clear. "Power plays don't work. You can't *make 'em* do *any*thing. They have to *want* to. So you have to work through the culture. The idea is to educate people without them knowing it. Have the religion and not know how they ever got it!"

And there are ways to do this. Today Dave will make his first appearance at Lyndsville. He will give a presentation about the role of Lyndsville's various technical projects in Tech's long-term business strategy. "Presentations are important in this culture," he says. "You have to get around, give them the religion, get the message out. It's a mechanism for transmitting the culture." Sending and interpreting "messages" are a key to working the culture. Dave is clear about what he wants to accomplish: generate some enthusiasm, let them work off some steam, celebrate some of the successes, show them that they are not out on their own, make his presence felt. And maybe give them an example of the right "mindset." In "the trenches" (a favorite expression), he is sure, there must be considerable confusion caused by "the revolving door"—the frequent changes of management. Lyndsville reputedly has quite a few good and committed people. It is a creative group. But it is also considered a tough, competitive environment. Some say it reminds them of the early days of Tech, when commitment and burnout went hand in hand. Perhaps. The company has been changing. But some things stay the same. Dave remembers life in the trenches. He was "there" years ago, he has paid his dues—including a divorce—and he still feels an affinity for the residents of the trenches, some of whom he will meet today. And, as always, he is prepared. He reaches for the tools of the culture trade—the "road show" color slides used at yesterday's strategy presentation to the executive committee—and selects the ones for today.

Concern with the culture is not just the domain of senior managers; it has also spawned a small internal industry that translates global concerns, ideas, and messages into daily activities. Near the front lobby of the Lyndsville building, a large conference room is being prepared for more routine "cultural shaping." Alone in the room, Ellen Cohen is getting ready to run her "Culture Module" for the "Introduction to Tech" workshop for new hires, also known as "bootcamp." It will take two hours, and if everything runs smoothly, she will stay for Dave Carpenter's presentation. ("It's a must for Tech-watchers. You can learn a lot from attending.") She is an engineer who is now "totally into culture." Over the last few years she has become the resident "culture expert." "I got burnt out on coding. You can only do so much. And I knew my limits. So I took a management job and I'm funded to do culture now. Some people didn't believe it had any value-added. But I went off and made it happen, and now my

workshops are all oversubscribed! I'm a living example of the culture! Now I do a lot of work at home. Isn't this company super?"

She is preparing her material now, waiting for the participants to arrive. On one table she is sorting the handout packages. Each includes copies of her paper "A Culture Operating Manual—Version II"; some official company materials; a copy of the latest edition of *Tech Talk*, with an interview with the president and extensive quotations from his "We Are One" speech; a review of academic work on "corporate cultures" that includes a key to the various disguised accounts of Tech; a glossary of Tech terms; and a xeroxed paper with some "culture exercises" she has collected for her files over the years. "It covers it all. What is a Techie. Getting Ahead. Networking. Being a Self-Starter. Taking Charge. How to Identify Burnout. The Subcultures. Presentations. Managing Your Career. Managing Your Boss. Women. Over the years I've gathered dynamite material—some of it too sensitive to show anyone. One day I'll write a thesis on all of this. In the meanwhile I'm funded to document and preserve the culture of Engineering. It's what made this company great. 'Culture' is really a 'people issue'—a Personnel or OD [Organization Development] type of thing, but they have no credibility in Engineering, and I'd rather stay here, close to the action. It's a fascinating company. I could watch it forever. Today I'm doing culture with the new hires. I tell them about how to succeed here. You can't just do the old nine-to-five thing. You have to have the right mindset. It's a gut thing. You have to get the religion. You can push at the system, you drive yourself. But I also warn them: 'Win big and lose big. You can really get hurt here. This place can be dangerous. Burnout City.' And I tell them the first rule: 'Do What's Right.' It's the company slogan, almost a cliche, but it captures the whole idea. 'Do What's Right.' If they internalize that, I've done my job. My job? They come in in love with the technology; that's dangerous. My job is to marry them to the company."

What does "Tech's strong culture" mean to Dave Carpenter and Ellen Cohen? First, and most broadly speaking, it is the context of their work life, a set of rules that guides the relationship between the company and "its people." At one level, the culture offers a description of the social characteristics of the company that also embodies a specification of required work behavior: "informality," "initiative," "lack of structure," "inherent ambiguity," "hard work," "consensus seeking," "bottom-up decision making," "networking," "pushing against the system," "going off, taking risks, and making things happen." But, as the frequently heard metaphors of "family," "marriage," and "religion" suggest, the rules run deeper. The culture also includes articulated rules for thoughts and feelings, "mindsets" and "gut reactions": an obsession with technical accomplishment, a sense of ownership, a strong commitment to the company, identification with company goals, and, not least, "fun." Thus, "the culture" is a gloss for an extensive definition of membership in the corporate community that includes rules for behavior, thought, and feeling, all adding up to what appears to be a well-defined and widely shared "member role."

But there is more. For Dave Carpenter and Ellen Cohen, as well as many others, the culture has a dual nature: it is not just the context but also the object of their work lives. The culture means not only the implicit and explicit rules that guide and shape their own behavior and experience of work; it is also the vehicle through which they consciously try to influence the behavior and experience of others. The "culture," in this sense, is something to be engineered—researched, designed, developed, and maintained—in order to facilitate the accomplishment of company goals. Although the product—a member role consisting of behavior, thoughts, and feelings—is not concrete, there are specified ways of engineering it: making presentations, sending "messages," running "bootcamp," writing papers, giving speeches, formulating and publishing the "rules," even offering an "operating manual." All are work techniques designed to induce others to accept—indeed, to become—what the company would like them to be.

This duality reflects a central underlying theme in the way culture is construed by many Tech managers: the "culture" is a mechanism of control. Its essence is captured in Dave Carpenter's words: "You can't make 'em do anything; they have to want to." In this view, the ability to elicit, channel, and direct the creative energies and activities of employees in profitable directions—to make them want to contribute—is based on designing a member role that employees are expected to incorporate as an integral part of their sense of self. It is this desire and the policies that flow from it, many insiders feel, that makes Tech "something else."

The use of culture in the service of control in a modern corporation might seem at first strange, even unique, to those for whom culture is a concept more meaningfully applied to Bornean headhunters or to the urban literati. Tech managers, however, are not alone. A practical concern with culture and its consequences is widely shared among those for whom the corporate jungle is of more than passing interest.



## Culture and Control

In recent years, the concept of "corporate culture" has captured the imagination of both students and practitioners of management.

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Moreover, a large and profitable body of popular managerial literature has capitalized on these ideas, proclaiming a relationship between culture and the "bottom line." Terrence Deal and Allen Kennedy (1982: 15), for example, claim that with a strong culture, a "company can gain as much as one or two hours of productive work per employee per day."

*[ . . . ]*

The popular managerial press is even less restrained. For example, in their best-selling *In Search of Excellence*, Thomas Peters and Robert Waterman (1982) convey their ideas with almost evangelical fervor. Management, they claim, is the art of creating strong corporate cultures by "shaping norms," "instilling beliefs," "inculcating values," "generating emotions." "Strong cultures" are based on intense emotional attachment and the internalization of "clearly enunciated company values" that often replace formal structures. Moreover, individualism is preserved; for employees, the companies "provide the opportunity to stick out, yet combine it with a philosophy and system of beliefs. . .that provide the transcending meaning—a wonderful combination" (p. 81). The ideal employees are those who have internalized the organization's goals and values—its culture—into their cognitive and affective make-up, and therefore no longer require strict and rigid external control. Instead, productive work is the result of a combination of self-direction, initiative, and emotional attachment, and ultimately combines the organizational interest in productivity with the employees' personal interest in growth and maturity.

Thus, in the view of proponents of strong cultures, work in such companies is not merely an economic transaction; rather, it is imbued with a deeper personal significance that causes people to behave in ways that the company finds rewarding, and that require less use of traditional controls. The company, in this view, harnesses the efforts and initiative of its employees in the service of high-quality collective performance and at the same time provides them with "the good life": a benign and supportive work environment that offers the opportunity for individual self-actualization. Broader implications are often drawn from this depiction of corporate life. The prescriptive literature goes so far as to propose that such corporate cultures are a solution to the problems created by an allegedly overbureaucratized and underperforming organizational society. To accomplish this, managers are offered (often for a price) a variety of methods and techniques: participative decision making, overt uses of rituals and ceremony, the management of symbols and meanings, explicit formulation of a "corporate philosophy," and so forth. All supposedly produce the kind of employee whose orientation to work, Deal and Kennedy (1982: 9) approvingly suggest, is captured in the following quotation: "I feel like putting a lot of time in. There is a real kind of loyalty here. We are all working this together—working a process together. I'm not a workaholic—it's just the place. I love the place."

The concern with culture detected at Lyndsville and the convergence of practical and theoretical notions of culture and its management in the academic and managerial literature reflect a widespread and growing managerial interest in finding innovative solutions to the foremost problem of management: the conflict of interest that lies at the heart of the relations between organizations and their members. Purposeful collective action, whatever its

circumstances, requires the coordination of activities of a diverse and heterogeneous membership. There is, however, an inherent conflict between the demands organizations place on the time and efforts of their members and the desires and needs of members when left to their own devices. Thus the age-old managerial dilemma: how to cause members to behave in ways compatible with organizational goals. Bureaucratic work organizations, Amitai Etzioni (1961) suggests, have traditionally relied mainly on utilitarian forms of control: the use of economic power to elicit compliance with rules and regulations from a work force concerned mainly with maximizing material rewards. The rhetoric of culture, however, indicates a shift in managerial sensibilities to a different form, one that Etzioni refers to as *normative control*.

Normative control is the attempt to elicit and direct the required efforts of members by controlling the underlying experiences, thoughts, and feelings that guide their actions. Under normative control, members act in the best interest of the company not because they are physically coerced, nor purely from an instrumental concern with economic rewards and sanctions. It is not just their behaviors and activities that are specified, evaluated, and rewarded or punished. Rather, they are driven by internal commitment, strong identification with company goals, intrinsic satisfaction from work. These are elicited by a variety of managerial appeals, exhortations, and actions. Thus, under normative control, membership is founded not only on the behavioral or economic transaction traditionally associated with work organizations, but, more crucially, on an experiential transaction, one in which symbolic rewards are exchanged for a moral orientation to the organization. In this transaction a member role is fashioned and imposed that includes not only behavioral rules but articulated guidelines for experience. In short, under normative control it is the employee's *self*—that ineffable source of subjective experience—that is claimed in the name of the corporate interest.

Attempts to implement normative control in industrial settings might be considered "something else," but the ideas on which it is founded are not new. In his classic *Work and Authority in Industry*, Reinhard Bendix (1956) identified an inexorable trend in the evolution of managerial ideology from the early days of Frederick Taylor's "Scientific Management" to the formulation of the theory and practice of "Human Relations" by Elton Mayo and the numerous scholars and practitioners who followed him. For Bendix, the essence of the trend was a growing managerial interest in the psychological absorption of workers by organizations. This represented, in his view, a systematic encroachment on previously private or unregulated domains of work life—irrational sentiments and attitudes—a sort of creeping annexation of the workers' selves, an attempt to capture the norms of the workplace and embed control "inside" members.

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In sum, the recent popularity of the idea of strong corporate culture may be seen as the culmination of a pronounced historical trend in managerial ideology and practice toward forms of normative control. In the most general terms, shaping the employees' selves in the corporate image is thought to be necessary in order to facilitate the management and increase the efficiency of large-scale bureaucratic enterprises faced with what the managerial literature refers to as "turbulent environments": rapid technological change, intense competition, and a demanding and unpredictable labor force.

However one views its causes, the evolution of organizational forms based on a managerial ideology of normative control leads to heavy claims against the self—the thoughts, feelings, and experiences of members of work organizations. More than ever, domains of the self once considered private come under corporate scrutiny and regulation. What one does, thinks, or feels—indeed, who one is—is not just a matter of private concern but the legitimate domain of bureaucratic control structures armed with increasingly sophisticated techniques of influence.

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How then are we to evaluate the widespread managerial concern with "strong cultures"? On the face of it, as we have seen, the essence of the ideology of strong cultures is a restatement and a reaffirmation of the doctrine of normative control. This formulation, moreover, attempts to preempt the well-known criticisms. In the strong corporate culture, its proponents assert, normative control offers increased freedom and autonomy rather than tyranny, individualism rather than groupthink, creativity rather than conformity; and, for those concerned with the techniques of implementation, it is claimed to be technically feasible, as illustrated in numerous anecdotes (some using Tech as a model) in the self-help managerial literature. If anything, in the gospel of strong culture, what was once seen as the breeding ground for the diseases of bureaucracy is now heralded as its antidote. Normative control—or at least the rhetoric associated with its practice—once again rides high.

Are these claims justified? Does the strong corporate culture indeed foster a form of affiliation that generates personal and collective "highs"? Or is it a new guise for tyranny in the workplace—an unwarranted invasion of privacy driven by commercial interests? Or is it just another cycle of empty managerial rhetoric that obscures the real and unchanging nature of work organizations and the people they employ? *[ . . . ]*

Some answers may be found at Lyndsville among those for whom "Tech culture" and its demands are an everyday reality. Are the people whom we encounter there happy automatons? Brainwashed Yuppies? Self-actualizing human beings? Do they think of their experiences at work as authentic expressions of themselves or as stylized roles? Is the Lyndsville engineering facility a prison or a playground?

On this randomly selected morning, a number of different experiences of the strong culture are being played out in the large, open office space beyond the conference rooms where those who live the culture spend their day. In one corner of the building, Tom O'Brien is hunched over his terminal, his back to the opening of his cubicle. He is wearing earplugs to close off the rest of the world. Things are going well, he would acknowledge, almost too well. His promotion just came through. He is now a "consulting engineer"—a title coveted by many Tech engineers. His contribution to a number of key projects is apparently being recognized by the faceless mass that determines reputation in the "technical community," and he is getting more and more electronic mail from all over the company. In his group he is considered the resident expert on XYZ technology. This year he earned close to 60K, and for the first time he was given stock options—the secret sign of inclusion. His current role is rather vaguely defined, and he can get involved in almost anything. In fact he is expected to, and he is aware of the pressure to "make things happen" and how it works on him. "That's the culture—designed ambiguity. It sucks people in," he says. He has been invited to join a number of task forces, and is thinking of learning some of the business issues. Recollections of his burnout episode a few years back and a brief and unsuccessful stint at a crazy start-up company have lost their painful edge.

Right now Tom is trying to understand the intricacies of a failing project. Rick Smith, the project manager, was finally removed, and someone has to figure out what the hell was going on: the technical problems and also some of the people issues. ("A lot of egos involved!") Tom was the natural choice. It temporarily adds a few extra hours to the working day, but it's fun, it's a challenge, it's involving. Today he came in earlier than usual, and he will probably spend most of the weekend on it. "Boy, did they ever screw up," he says as he stares at the screen. Every now and then an audible beep announces the arrival of an electronic message. He fights the temptation to flip screens. "It'll take a while today just to go through the mail and stay current. Things sure pile up when you're riding the wave. That's the culture. You have to learn to work it. And to protect yourself. People can get swept away. It's great. Like the joke. You get to choose which 20 hours to work out of the day."

Many at Tech would consider Tom a standard success story, a living affirmation of "the culture" and the claims of its proponents. On the face of it, he appears to have successfully incorporated the member role. The company and his work seem to be central to his sense of self. He works hard and seems to enjoy it. He is emotionally committed. He considers himself, and is acknowledged to be, self-directed, capable of "making things happen," and in need of little explicit supervision. He sees the freedom as a source of creativity and opportunity, beneficial both to him and to the company. Income is important, not only in material terms, but also as a symbol of recognition and inclusion. Yet, as Tom's recollection of his burnout episode suggests, there is a darker side to life at Tech, and its signs are never too far

from the surface. For Tom it has perhaps receded into the past, now no more than a war story and even a source of pride. Nevertheless, he appears at times wary and watchful, even cynical or ironic about the culture, the company, and himself. . . .

For others, the dark side of the culture looms large. In a similar cubicle not far away, Rick Smith—recently removed from his position—is slowly cleaning out his desk. He stops every now and then to light another cigarette. Mary, his secretary, is in the outer cubicle pretending to be occupied even though the phones have stopped ringing. Like many other familiar and less familiar acquaintances of Rick's, she is behaving as if nothing has happened. He is not sure if he should be grateful for this studied "business as usual" demeanor, but he plays along with it. However, the large, half-filled cartons on the table and the blank screen on his terminal—sure indications of a standstill—belie the signs of routine. Rick would acknowledge that he has burnt out. "I should never have taken this job. Can't quite figure out when things started to go wrong. Bastards just threw me into this damn project. No feedback, no guidance, no support, no warning. 'It's Tech culture,' they say. 'Do What's Right,' Some help! I was so busy with all the details, never had time to get deep enough into the technical stuff. Had to rely on the group members. And they wouldn't communicate. With each other. Or with me. And the schedules were unrealistic in the first place. Probably because of all the politics. When we started to slip, things just fell apart. Everyone was watching. Probably whispering. I found out later that my boss was checking who was logged on at night. They do that. This company's like an aquarium. And my problems at home didn't help. Drinking more and more. What comes first—sipping or slipping? It hit the fan when I told them I was taking two weeks to dry out again—right before the last schedule slip. Luckily the guys in process engineering up in Hanover were willing to take me. The EAP [Employee Assistance Program] advisor here helped—he's a company shrink. Contracted and sworn to secrecy. A real professional. They have a lot of experience with this type of thing. Finally found something for me. Had to do a lot of looking first. Maybe I should take it easy for a while. Or even reconsider this whole damn company! If I can afford to—there should be a warning out front: High Technologies—It's Hazardous to Your Health."

Rick Smith is a casualty. For most who know the company, it is an inevitable part of work there—indeed, of engineering in general. Not everyone, it is conceded, can live in such an environment: some leave, or distance themselves in one way or another from the company's strong demands. Occasionally, like Rick, they succumb. He appears to feel used, betrayed, manipulated, even oppressed: living in an "aquarium," constantly watched, driven to drink. If one wished to make a case that the culture is a guise for a benign yet invasive tyranny, he would be a prime example. Yet even as he expresses the pain of his situation, he is concerned with finding another job at Tech, plans to stay, expresses a certain gratitude to the company for providing help and tolerating failure, and cannot refrain from making an ironic observation about the company—the hallmark of successful membership. Indeed, he has made his burnout and alcoholism quite public. His personal suffering is an indication—to himself and to others—of the lengths to which he is willing to go in his desire to succeed, to contribute to the company, to adopt the member role. Economic need may account in part for this, but here, too, an observer might find evidence of considerable ambivalence.

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These glimpses into life at Tech suggest that there is more to "the culture" than unilateral normative control. Managerial ideology and managerial action designed to impose a role on individuals are but one side of the question of control—they are normative demands. As Erving Goffman (1961a) points out, members are never passive objects of control; they are free to react: if conceptions are imposed, they are also systematically dealt with. Members are active participants in the shaping of themselves and of others. They may—at various times—accept, deny, react, reshape, rethink, acquiesce, rebel, conform, and define and redefine the demands and their responses. In other words, they create themselves within the constraints imposed on them. What kinds of creations have we observed at Lyndsville?

None of the people whose privacy we temporarily invaded are easily categorized as accepting or rejecting an imposed role, as subjects of a tyranny or beneficiaries of a benign environment. What they do appear to share is a profound ambivalence about their involvement. They seem aware of the company's demands and their significance. Although they exhibit signs of acceptance, they also indicate considerable wariness and even a degree of cynicism about the company's expectations, even as they are investing their efforts, planning to get ahead, or contemplating the price of failure. *[ . . . ]*



## 3
## Ideology: Tech Culture Codified

Tom O'Brien has been around the company for a while; like many others, he has definite ideas about "Tech culture" and what it takes to get things done in Engineering. But, as he is constantly reminded, so does the company. When he arrives at work each morning, he encounters evidence of the company point of view at every turn. First are the bumperstickers adorning many of the cars in the Lyndsville parking lot. "*I love Tech*!" they declare, somewhat unoriginally, the words underscored by the ubiquitous little red heart designed into the company logo. "This shit is everywhere," he says. "I got it on my own car."

If the bumperstickers seem trivial, almost tongue-in-cheek, the short walk to his cubicle takes him past a plethora of more serious stylized references to his experience as a member of the organization. Inside the building, just beyond the security desk, a large television monitor is playing a videotape of a recent speech by [company president] Sam Miller. As he walks by, he hears the familiar voice discuss "our goals, our values, and the way we do things." "It's the 'We are One' speech," he notes as he walks by, "nothing new." He has read the speech in a company newsletter, and excerpts are posted everywhere. Turning a corner, he stops by a large bulletin board fixed to the wall next to the library. On one side is a permanent display including the well-known statement of the "Company Philosophy" ("It's the Bible—the Ten Commandments for the Techie: make a buck and do it right"), and a selection of personnel policies titled "Your Rights and Obligations." On the other, clippings and copies of recent references to Tech in local, national, and trade newspapers are prominently posted. He glances at the latest addition, "High Motivation in High-Tech: The New Work Force"; an anonymous hand has highlighted the company name in bright yellow. By the cafeteria, where he stops for coffee, a flipchart calls attention to Dave Carpenter's presentation ("High Technologies' Strategy for the Future—How You Fit In. The talk will be videotaped"), and to a workshop on "Career Management at Tech: How to Make the Most of Yourself." Close by, piles of brochures are stacked on a table in front of the personnel office. Tom takes one, headed, "If you are experiencing signs of stress, perhaps you should give us a call." Inside it offers some words of wisdom: "Everyone experiences stress at some time. . . . Stress isn't necessarily a bad thing. . . . You can do something about stress." He turns into the workspace labyrinth, picks up his mail, and enters his cubicle, where he plans to spend the morning.

Cultural commentary finds him also in the relative seclusion of his own space. As he sits down, he switches on his terminal in a practiced, smooth move, absentmindedly logs on, and turns to the screen. On his technet mail he notices among the many communications another announcement of the afternoon events; a memo titled, "How Others See Our Values," reviewing excerpts on Tech Culture from recent managerial bestsellers; a request to be interviewed by a consultant for a culture study; and the daily review of all references to Tech in the press. In his mail ("the hardcopy"), he finds *Tech-knowledge*, one of a large number of company newsletters. On the cover is a big picture of Sam Miller against the background of a giant slogan—"We Are One." He also finds an order form for company publications, including Ellen Cohen's "Culture Operating Manual." His bookshelf has mostly technical material, but also a copy of *In Search of Excellence*, distributed to all professional and managerial employees, and a business magazine with a cover story on Tech's corporate culture, titled "Working Hard, Having Fun." For good measure, an "*I love Tech*" bumpersticker is fixed to his filing cabinet. The day has hardly begun, yet Tom is already surrounded by "the culture," the ever-present signs of the company's explicit concern with its employees' state of mind (and heart).

Although their stance toward such commentary varies considerably—for some it is "a useful guide to survival," for others "Big Brother shit," and for others yet an elaborate game or simply "the facts of life"—most insiders (as Tom would say) "speak Tech culture fluently": they easily reconstruct and often make use of its style and substance. For members, then, the company perspective on the culture is familiar, systematic, comprehensive, thought-out, well-articulated, and associated with the company's interest. It is, in other words, a pervasive "organizational ideology."

[ . . . ]

## Top Management: The Voice of Leadership

Senior managers at Tech espouse a distinct and systematic view of the company and its members in written documents that formulate and codify the abstract principles underlying the managerial perspective, and in recorded speeches and interviews that offer personal interpretations of the official point of view.

[ . . . ]

For example, in the "Engineering Guide," immediately following the company philosophy, one finds an explicit formulation of the essence of the "corporate culture": the company is characterized by "informality" and "trust," its employees by "maturity" and "self-direction."

### Tech Culture

High Technologies is a people-oriented company. The employees receive courteous, fair and equitable treatment. . . . Management expects hard work and a high level of achievement. . . . great deal of trust is placed in employees to give their best efforts to a job. . . . Employees are expected to act in a mature manner at all times. . . . The matrix organization is goal-oriented and depends on trust, communications and team work. As a result, most employees function as independent consultants on every level, interacting across many areas necessary to accomplish the task.

Honesty, hard work, moral and ethical conduct, a high level of professionalism, and team work, are qualities that are an integral part of employment at High Technologies. These qualities are considered part of the Tech culture. Employees conduct themselves in an informal manner and are on a first-name basis with everyone at all levels. . . . The opportunity for self-direction and self-determination is always present.

[ . . . ]

Finally, a booklet titled "Bet on Yourself: You, Your Career and High Technologies" explains the company policy with regard to career development, emphasizing the official view of the relationship between the company and its employees. "Freedom to manage work" coupled with "individual responsibility" and "self-management" are the key.

[ . . . ]

Three themes are apparent: Tech's depiction as an organic entity whose goals, shared by all, reflect a moral stance vis-à-vis the world; the company's "people oriented" social organization, combining paternal care and trust with an informal atmosphere, freedom of action with responsibility; and an elaboration of members' desired attributes. Required behaviors are vaguely defined: creativity, taking initiative, hard work, meeting commitments, "doing it right," are thought to reflect internalized values, beliefs, and feelings; "self-generated discipline," "attitude and desire to succeed," "caring," and "loyalty" are considered evidence of personal "growth" and "maturity."

Such documents are generally regarded as "apple pie and motherhood statements": abstract and idealized, they reflect management's desires, even wishful thinking, in formulations removed from everyday reality. They are rarely, therefore, the focus of attention. However, the principles they embody are frequently restated and interpreted in the less organized but more concrete words of senior managers attempting to explain, exemplify, substantiate, and validate the main themes of the managerial perspective.

### Senior Managers Speak

The recorded thoughts, observations, and ideas of senior managers are perhaps the most frequently encountered form of ideological expression. Here, the managerial perspective is presented in the name of real people, whose experience is often used as evidence for its applicability. The focus is mostly on mundane concerns of business and technology, but explicit references to cultural matters are often present.

Newsletters are the most widespread media for disseminating the personal views of senior managers through interviews, reprints of speeches, and occasional signed editorials. Their number varies, but the average in Engineering is around two hundred; of these, most are funded by company budgets. Some are limited to the ranks of management, others to occupational groups, and others still to particular organizations. They appear weekly or monthly in employee maildrops or homes; others wait around to be picked up or appear magically on the technet. All are kept in the library stacks, and clippings of key items are routinely posted.

Speeches, presentations, and interviews given by senior managers are routinely videotaped. Edited versions are found in the libraries and are used by training and public relations groups. Some tapes are used in workshops and seminars; others, like Sam Miller's "We Are One" speech, are screened in public during lunchtime sessions and shown throughout the day in strategic locations. . . .

Senior managers address the three main themes of the managerial perspective: the company's moral purpose, the nature of its social organization, and the attributes of the member role. Sam Miller is a key figure in this rhetoric. He is widely recognized as someone with a distinct point of view, referred to by insiders as a "vision," a "philosophy," or a "religion." Regarded by many as the originator of "the culture" and a key figure in its preservation and maintenance, he is frequently interviewed, and ideas associated with him are well known and widely circulated.[1] Other senior managers repeat and interpret similar ideas.

[ . . . ]

The morality of the company's mission also extends to its internal social organization—commonly described as "people-oriented." In a taped speech, Miller relates that orientation to ideas derived from early Human Relations theorists:

> We almost have a moral obligation to society. We owe it to society to do it. . . . What is most important is where your heart is. When we started Tech, the business fad was McGregor and Theory X and Y. Some tried and said: "I *knew* it wouldn't work." We made it work! And for an American company, we do it well!

[ . . . ]

Aspects of the company's "people orientation" are frequently adumbrated. In a recorded speech, the vice-president of Human Resources discusses the company's "commitment to its people":

> We have always tried to transmit the notion that people are our most important asset. In a time of crisis, our initial reaction is to protect our employees. . . . During the past years our values regarding job security have been severely tested as never before. And while we do not guarantee full employment, we have lived up to our commitment to manage the business in a way that reduces the likelihood of resorting to involuntary separation of our people. High Technologies is its employees.

Much is also made of the balance of freedom and discipline that is supposed to characterize working life in the company. Freedom is reflected in enhanced autonomy for members, otherwise known as "bottom-up management." The vice-president of Engineering says in an interview:

> I believe you just can't manage a fast-growing, fast-moving organization in detail from the top. It limits the growth if you try to do it that way. So we've continuously tried to push decision making functions down inside the organizations to product lines, to engineers.

Autonomy, in this view, must be coupled with responsibility:

> One of the concepts that hasn't changed from the beginning of the company is that people are responsible for the success of the projects they propose. "He who proposes does," and is judged on the results. That fundamental philosophy hasn't changed. I hope it never does. We have to keep working to make sure that engineers feel they can propose things and go out and do them—that they aren't powerless, that they can get decisions made.

[ . . . ]

A certain experience of membership is thought to follow from incorporating these values.

"Excitement" and "fun," in particular, are frequent glosses for the emotional outcomes of hard, autonomous work. In a typical statement, the VP of Engineering describes his view of the desired state: "We spend a lot of time trying to make it fun to work here, make it challenging and exciting, make you feel as though you can make important contributions."

*[ . . . ]*

> We must keep this atmosphere which generates creativity, makes people work hard and makes them *enjoy* working hard, challenges them to learn, challenges them to do new things, challenges them to take chances, and challenges them to be careful in their approach to things so that we never gamble the whole company—and this, I think, is still the goal, still the secret of our success.

*[ . . . ]*

## Conclusion: Culture Decoded

*[ . . . ]* These images provide a backdrop to everyday life in the organization, forming a dense matrix of meaning that is constantly, if peripherally, in a member's view. Relentless repetition is the rule. The material is circulated on the technet, posted in public places, distributed in the mail, encountered in workshops, and used as decoration. Consequently, ideological formulations—ready-made words of wisdom, platitudes posing as insight—become a constant background noise.

*[ . . . ]*

The metaphors used to characterize Tech as a social entity are based on the imagery of "family" or analogies with morally sound institutions: religion and science.

*[ . . . ]*

Traditional forms of control associated with bureaucracy are relegated to a supporting role. Instead, control is thought of as the internalization of discipline reflected in the attitudes, orientations, and emotions of committed members. The company is presented as informal and flexible, and its management as demanding yet trusting. The community is characterized as "bottom-up," loose, free, a "people company." In this view, members are not constrained by enforced or traditional structures and the explicit behavioral rules associated with them. On the contrary, they are expected to engage in a form of creative chaos where decisions emerge through a political process of negotiation between innovative members. Discipline is not based on explicit supervision and reward, but rather on peer pressure and, more crucially, internalized standards for performance. There is little mention of the economic structure, and the importance of economic rewards is underplayed, even frowned upon. It is a fact of life, but not one to be emphasized; instead, rewards are seen as arising from the experience of communion, of belonging, of participation in the community as organizationally defined.[2]

Describing a "culture" in this fashion does away with the sharp differences between categories of people that were once the hallmark of organization and focuses instead on the similarities. Thus, the functional and hierarchical distinctions between categories of members are underplayed and vague. The image is of a collection of undifferentiated individuals fulfilling the general requirements of appropriate membership. Unity and similarity are emphasized, authority and power deemphasized. . . .

The central image for the member role is that of the self-starter, the entrepreneur. Behavioral rules are vague: be creative, take initiative, take risks, "push at the system," and, ultimately, "do what's right."

*[ . . . ]*

Central to this view of the member role is the blurring of boundaries between self and organization. The member role is "incorporated," based on "strong identification," an inextricable connection to the company, with little "demarcation." It involves "the whole person" and is based on powerful emotional ties expressed in "zeal" or at least "enthusiasm."

*[ . . . ]*

# 4

# Presentational Rituals: Talking Ideology

"It's not just work—it's a celebration!" is a company slogan one often hears from members attempting to describe life at Tech. Less formally, many refer to Tech as "a song and dance company."



And, more privately, some agree that "you have to do a lot of bullshitting in groups." Like much of the self-descriptive conventional wisdom that permeates the company, these observations—whether offered straightforwardly or cynically—contain a valid observation: everyday life at Tech is replete with ritual.

Ritual, most generally speaking, is "a rule-governed activity of a symbolic character which draws the attention of participants to objects of thought and feeling which they hold to be of special significance." At Tech, as insiders well know, members regularly participate in a variety of such structured face-to-face gatherings: speeches, presentations, meetings, lectures, parties, training workshops, and so forth. Dave Carpenter's planned appearance at Lyndsville and Ellen Cohen's culture seminar are examples, along with more routinely occurring events such as Tom O'Brien's weekly team meeting with the members of the ABC project. Whatever else they are intended to accomplish, these events are also occasions where participants, speaking as agents for the corporate interest, use familiar symbols—presentational devices, stylized forms of expression, company slogans and artifacts—to articulate, illustrate, and exemplify what members in good standing are to think, feel, and do. In short, these gatherings, which I will refer to as presentational rituals, are where the organizational ideology—the managerial version of Tech culture and the member role it prescribes—is dramatized and brought to life.

*[ . . . ]*

From this perspective, then, ritual may be seen as a mechanism of normative control. . . . In this sense, rituals are "mechanisms through which certain organizational members influence how other members are to think and feel—what they want, what they fear, what they should regard as proper and possible, and, ultimately, perhaps, who they are."

It is precisely this quality of ritual that appeals to Tech managers. At Tech, concern with the shaping of members' thoughts and feelings is high. Conventional managerial wisdom has it that extensive and recurring participation in ritual gatherings where the organizational ideology is enacted causes members to "internalize" the culture and infuses them with the right "mindset" and the appropriate "gut reactions." In short, those with an interest in engineering culture consider presentational rituals a mechanism for transforming the abstract formulations of Tech's organizational ideology into the lived experience of members. "They are," in the words of one manager, "where Techies are made."

*[ . . . ]*

## Bootcamp: Learning the Culture

The Orientation Workshop, titled "Intro to Tech" but often referred to as "bootcamp," is a two-day training event offered several times a year. Designed for engineers with a few months experience in the company, it is fairly popular and draws attendees from beyond the target population. Since the workshop is thought to transmit valuable knowledge about the company, participants occasionally sign up for more than one session. More experienced managers from Engineering and other functions occasionally participate too, believing that understanding the company and its engineers provides an edge over the less knowledgeable.

Like other in-house training events, the intro workshop must be marketed and sold in order to survive the internal entrepreneurial process. "Bootcamp" has made it in the marketplace. It is a flagship event and an important vehicle for "getting the word down" and "getting the message out." Each session is advertised across the technet, and enrollment averages about twenty.

The workshop has a carefully planned and well-defined structure. The history, business interests, products, and culture of Tech are covered in sequence. Each topic is treated in a discrete module: a two-hour session based on a presentation by a trainer or an invited guest speaker. Participants sit around a large table. Each is given a name tag and a package of materials: paper, pencils, markers, the "Engineering Guide," an employee handbook, copies of Tech newsletters, a booklet describing the history of Tech, a number of internally published research papers on Tech culture, and a mimeographed copy of "The Sayings of Chairman Sam"—a compilation of anecdotes about Tech attributed to its founder and president. The schedule is heavy,

running from early morning coffee through lunchtime yawns to five o'clock fidgets on two consecutive days. There are short coffee breaks between presentations, and a one-hour lunch break.

The module on Tech culture comes first. Ellen Cohen is the invited speaker. Introductions are made. The twenty-five participants give brief descriptions of their organizational location and technology. Most are "new hires" three to six months out of school; some have transferred from other companies. One or two have vaguely defined jobs in Corporate, there is an older engineer from Manufacturing, a fairly senior finance manager from Engineering, and a technician from Field Service.

"Culture" is not a notion that engineers take to easily, and newcomers are often unfamiliar with the appropriate behavior in Tech training seminars; consequently, the module—designed as a series of interactive exercises—requires some goading. After passing out handouts summarizing the talk, Ellen writes the word "culture" on a large flipchart and says:

> "The topic today is culture. We have a spectrum of people here from all over the company. Feel free to chime in. 'Culture' has become something of a fad. First, what is 'culture'? What do you think?"

A young engineer slouching in the corner answers: "Fungus. I had a culture for my senior science project. But my dog ate it." Some laugh. Ellen smiles too, but continues undaunted. "We're looking at behavior, at people. What is the characteristic of people at Tech?" She waits, marker in hand, with a warm, inviting-looking smile, nodding in anticipation, perhaps indicating the signs of affirmation she is looking for. Her question hangs. No answers. Some coffee sipping. "You feel like you've all been chosen, right?" she says, nodding her head more vigorously and still smiling. Still no replies. The stony silence highlights the incongruity of her demeanor, but she persists. "What else? What are people like at Tech?" Some volunteers speak up, drawn in by discomfort, if nothing else: "Friendly." "Amicable." She writes it all on the flipchart. The tempo picks up: "Individual- and teamwork." "I'm expected to be a good corporate citizen." "Strong customer orientation." "People tend to like Tech no matter how confused," she says, and adds: "How do you feel?"

Some of the participants raise their hands. She calls on each in turn.

> "I like it here. I hope for profit. I respect Sam Miller a lot. Where I worked before you'd hope they fail! Here the executives aren't as ruthless as in other companies; they are more humane."
>
> I haven't met anyone here I don't respect."
>
> "I flash off on the technet and get to people without them wondering why; they are open and willing to share information."
>
> "People understand. There is tolerance for new people."
>
> "There's a supportive atmosphere."

As they speak, Ellen makes encouraging sounds and lists key phrases on the chart: "profit; not ruthless; humane; respect; open; share info; tolerance; supportive."

When the sheet is full, she pulls it off the flipchart, pastes it to the wall, and says: "This is what makes Tech a different kind of place. People are relaxed and informal. What else?" Someone says: "There is little difference between engineers and managers; it's hard to tell them apart." "Authority Not a Big Deal," she writes in bold letters on the flipchart. Then she adds: "In other places you're incompetent till proved otherwise; here it's the other way around, right?" Not waiting for an answer, she writes "Confidence in Competence," and says: "They know what they are doing, or believe it." "A little too much," the guy sitting next to me whispers to his neighbor.

Disagreement soon surfaces. Jim, a technician who has been around the company for a number of years, raises his hand. In the interchange with the instructor that ensues, she uses his objections to make additional cultural points:

Jim: "You may be right. But I've noticed subcultures. It depends on where you work. Technical writers are considered lower than the dust on the floor. They are there to serve the engineers. In Field Service we are considered above them but not equal to engineers."

Ellen: "Tech is a technical company founded by engineers. Engineers hold a special place in some people's eyes. There are status differences based on what you know. But if we don't work together—we don't sell."

*[ . . . ]*

Ellen turns to the flipchart, writes, "We Are A Family," and says:

> "This is the most important one. We have a no-layoff policy. It's the ultimate backup plan. It would break some people's hearts if we had to do it. We face it as a family: cutting costs, hiring freezes. Every member is asked to contribute."

A young woman from Corporate who has been silent so far bursts out in a concerned, almost angry tone:

> "I work in Corporate. A lot of the stuff is only a myth there. I see the very high up people fighting to the death. There is no clear person with the last word. They bounce responsibility around."

She starts to give an example from a well-known failed project, but Ellen interrupts her rather brusquely:

> "Tech isn't wonderful or glowing. It's not. It's human. But it's the best I've seen! I was a nomad before I came here. I'm sorry you haven't seen the rest of the companies so you can appreciate Tech. [Pause.] That is another thing about Tech. People are quick to point out faults, as if they didn't have any. Where I worked before there was rampant empire building. Tech is much better. We are a state-of-the-art pioneer. There is great love and great criticism of the company."

The challenger has been reprimanded and temporarily silenced, and her challenge reinterpreted to support rather than undermine the ritual frame.

For some participants the culture module appears to make sense, and they join the discussion as supporters, challengers, questioners, or learners. Others seem more skeptical. They smile to themselves, or to a neighbor, or pull out computer printout, clearly indicating their lack of interest. They prefer the "hard data" and the facts. They see explicit cultural analysis as "fluff," the engineer's term for discourse identified with the social sciences or with "people-oriented" managers.

The emotional intensity of the module's conclusion, however, seems to captivate all the participants. Ellen flips off the viewgraph, puts down the marker, and gives a short talk that sounds off-the-record, very personal, almost motherly:

> "There is a down side to all of this! There can be a lot of pain in the system! Be careful; keep a balance; don't overdo it, don't live off vending machines for a year. [Laughter.] You'll burn out. I've been there; I lived underground for a year, doing code. Balance your life. Don't say: 'I'll work like crazy for four years, then I'll get married.' I heard this from a kid. But who will he marry? Don't let the company suck you dry; after nine or ten hours your work isn't worth much anyway."

The sudden switch to a subversive-sounding message creates an air of rapt attention. All eyes are on her as she walks slowly from the flipchart to the center of the room. After a brief pause, she adds the finishing touch: "What kind of company do you think allows me to be saying these things to you?" Nobody stirs for a few moments, and then a break is called.

*[ . . . ]*



## 5
## Self and Organization

### Managing Role Responses

Role embracement—expressing identification with aspects of the member role—is a widely shared and often-recurring feature of self-reports. Generally referred to as "being a Techie," role embracement is reportedly experienced as a general orientation to the company, a combination of beliefs and feelings glossed by the label "loyalty." A typical explication is offered by an engineering manager.

> "You know, I like Tech. I don't think of leaving. People might say that the culture swallowed me, but there really is a feeling of loyalty I have. We have a lot of that in the culture. We like working for Tech. It is a positive company. You get really involved. I get a real charge when Tech gets a good press. Or when people I knew from this other company were dumping on Tech, I was offended. I didn't like hearing it. They made

millions with us! Because of us they got rich! They get all this free knowledge from us and say it with impunity! My husband works for Tech and he feels the same way. We spend time with friends talking about work; we're worse than doctors. I guess you can call me a Techie."

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Role embracement, then, means submitting to the company's definition of one's self. Such submission, however, is typically presented as a form of voluntary exchange with the company. A number of different attributes of the company are often cited as facilitating such an exchange. One is the image of the president, who has come to symbolize the "philosophy" and everything that is unique about Tech. A positive view of Sam Miller is frequently heard, particularly at middle and lower levels (more senior managers often tend to be critical; it is a sign of the insider to be close enough to know "the real story"). For example, a mid-level manager, speaking, as many do, in the first person plural, acknowledges his belief in the validity of the ideology, identified with the president. Emotional attachment is presented as a fair exchange:

"Maybe I've swallowed slogans, the party line, the whole Sam Miller 'do what's right' thing. But I *do* believe that Tech 'does what's right.' We don't lay off, even though some people deserve to be laid off. So you feel loyalty back. Sam Miller believes in 'taking care of your people,' and he gets paid back with loyalty. They've never done wrong by me."

A similar exchange is apparent in an engineering supervisor's description of the impact of a speech by Sam Miller:

"I trust the man. He means well. There is a lot of honesty at the top and the bottom of the company. I don't know about the middle. But he really means it when he says it's the company's duty to take care of employees and customers. I've never met him, but I've seen the videotapes. He can be very powerful. I got excited when I heard him say: 'It's our moral duty to give the customers what they want.' *Moral* duty!"

*[ . . . ]*

A second factor facilitating the exchange is the perception of the company's positive treatment of its employees (often in comparison with other companies). Thus, an engineer compares Tech's tradition of job security to its competitors' approach:

"Tech is good because they grow to your weakness; other places, they milk your knowledge dry and then kill you. At Data they pay great, but they fire you as soon as the downturn comes. This company keeps people and retrains them. I just love this company. I would die for it! There is a tradition of job security here: you can have your neck chopped off and it'll grow back again. You take your risks and you're not hurt too bad. Take Henderson's group: they were responsible for Jupiter and now they're back again. 'Fail and you're history' is just hype."

*[ . . . ]*

Engineers often portray Tech as "a good environment for engineering," a "country club" or an "engineers' sandbox" where engineers who are supposedly addicted to their work and emotionally attached to their projects can "play." An engineer in Advanced Development explains:

"Tech has the best engineers. I'm an engineer, and I want state-of-the-art technology. At Chiptech they develop what Marketing tells them. I'm happy as long as you keep me away from marketing types. Tech caters to engineers. Its reputation in the industry is a country club for engineers.

*[ . . . ]*

Finally, some depict Tech's business practices and moral stance as worthy of one's commitment. Tech's way of doing business is often contrasted with the less than honest approaches presumably found elsewhere. One project manager contrasts Tech with "sleazy defense contractors"—the companies that develop products for the Department of Defense:

"I worked for a while for a company that was built on those contracts. I worked on the ABM radar. It's not so much that I mind what the products end up doing. No. But all the dishonesty—the excessive costs, the stupidity, the unnecessary work—it really got me down. The norm was: hide the basic specs, follow the letter of the law and produce garbage, then get another contract. Disgusting stuff. Like telling reliability engineers to cook figures. At Tech at least we give customers an honest product. They get what they pay for. Most of the time. I feel good about that."



In sum, role embracement is a recurring theme in members' description of their subjective experience. . . .

Unqualified role embracement, however, is felt by many to be undignified. This is evident in the self-conscious quality of the descriptions, and in the emphasis on a fair and, more crucially, on a controlled exchange with the company. Thus, members claim the right to control the extent and the degree to which role demands are embraced. This capacity for role distancing—one that we have seen enacted in the course of organizational rituals—is often made explicit and elaborated with regard to both the cognitive and the emotional dimensions of the member role.

Cognitive distancing—disputing popular ideological formulations—is manifested when one suggests that one is "wise" to what is "really" going on. Being "wise" implies that despite behaviors and expressions indicating identification, one is also fully cognizant of their underlying meaning, and thus free of control: autonomous enough to know what is going on and dignified enough to express that knowledge.

One frequently encountered mode of cognitive distancing is cynicism. This is usually expressed as a debunking assertion, cast as a personal insight, that reality is very different from ideological claims. For example, an engineer questions the meaning of Tech culture:

"It's like a religion, a philosophy that the company expounds. Sam Miller says, 'Do what's right,' be on the up and up, satisfy the customer, do the right thing by them. He's a weird bird, pushes all this morality stuff. There is a whole Sam Miller subculture. His memos circulate on the technet. It's like a kind of morality thing. You can go into Sam's office if you're not happy about a supervisor. I've heard of someone who has done it. Of course, nothing might get done. In this group, 'do what's right' means 'make your manager visible.' [Laugh.] Aren't all organizations like that?"

A second mode of cognitive distancing is that of detached theoretical observation, often referred to as "Tech watching." Its essence is the ability to interpret Tech reality and view it with scientific detachment; observations are frequently cast in the language of various social scientific disciplines Tech watching not only expresses a point of view that is distinct from ideology; it also reverses roles: members who are often the subjects of organizational research become knowledgeable students of organizations (and of organizational researchers). A senior manager who has since left the company says:

"'Tech culture' is a way to control people, to rationalize a mess, to get them to work hard, and feel good about it; it is really an ideology. Like all other ideologies it is part truth and part lie."

*[ . . . ]*

Tech watching often takes the form of cultural commentary. Says an engineer, possessor of an undergraduate degree in sociology and a fan of Erving Goffman:

"The company may appear informal, loose. Open offices, first names. But there is a *very* distinct status system here. People always ask who you work with. They won't ask you your title or your rank, or look at the size of your office. Once they have you placed, they will treat you accordingly."

*[ . . . ]*

Distancing also occurs with respect to the feelings prescribed by the member role or associated with the organizational self. . . . Denial is accomplished by presenting one's motives for membership as purely instrumental. The relationship with the company is construed as contractual and economically driven, and its emotional aspects denied. For an engineer, this means not only avoiding the "people and the politics," where "emotions" are likely to be found—a typical response—but also a denial that one "loves one's work." An engineer says:

"I wanted the security of working for a big company—no excitement and less pay. I don't identify with any organization. Those things are circles within circles; they come and go, but the job remains. I get green dollars, I do my best, I know my worth. I work flexible hours but *never* more than eight. Technology is *not* my hobby. I have no terminal at home, and I keep my social life separate. I'm a private person. I don't go to the workshops or to the meetings. That's for those who want to make an impression, those who want to get ahead. They can have it. None of the 'addicted to your work,' 'ego-involvement' bullshit. I do my job. All the weird political aspects of the project don't bother me. They fight all the time. They are defensive and paranoid. There is an 'ain't it awful' attitude. Finger

pointing. Accusing each other of screwing up. But I stay away from all of that emotional stuff."

*[ . . . ]*

. . . [D]enial of emotional involvement in work is contrasted both with recognized ideological role demands and with a caricatured depiction of those who accept them.

*[ . . . ]*

In sum, cognitive and emotional distancing reflect the felt necessity of maintaining a controllable distance from the beliefs and feelings prescribed by the member role and displayed as part of the organizational self. A ludic metaphor underlies members' attempts to convey this experience: the construction of an organizational self is seen as drama or as a game. Notions of performing, playing a game, watching oneself, strategically designing roles, and, ultimately, assuming a calculative stance toward the management of one's own thoughts and feelings are deeply ingrained in experience and explicitly articulated by members.

*[ . . . ]*

We have come full circle. If the attempt to engineer culture and accomplish normative control is aimed at defining the members' selves for them, this very attempt undermines its own assumptions. The engineers of culture see the ideal member as driven by strong beliefs and intense emotions, authentic experiences of loyalty, commitment, and the pleasure of work. Yet they seem to produce members who have internalized ambiguity, who have made the metaphor of drama a centerpiece of their sense of self, who question the authenticity of all beliefs and emotions, and who find irony in its various forms the dominant mode of everyday existence.

## Notes

1. Miller's presence is strongly felt throughout the company. A handbook titled "The Sayings of Chairman Sam" has been broadly distributed in training workshops as a lighthearted but still respectful rendition of the founder's thoughts. A more straightforward version of Miller's ideas is found in one of the first sections of the "Engineering Guide," along with the corporate philosophy. Many Tech watchers attribute the culture directly to Miller's innovative thinking and to his long-standing (some would say obstinate) insistence on the preservation of some of its manifestations. Such a perspective is supported—and perhaps influenced—by managerial theorists who emphasize the role of founders and leaders in the formation of a culture, occasionally going so far as to present the company as an extension of the founder's personality (Kets de Vries and Miller, 1984; Schein, 1985). Regardless of one's stance toward such causal arguments, it is beyond doubt that this particular founder is a central symbol in whatever cultural formation has been accomplished or has developed at Tech.

2. The similarities between the ideology of Tech culture and popular conceptions of Japanese management are striking. Rohlen (1974) studied a Japanese bank where employees are supposed to develop an emotional attachment and express it through pride, dedication, and enthusiastic participation. The general ideal is "that of a collectivity, constituted of emotionally satisfying personal relationships, working in the spirit of concord for the general interest." In this system, "considerable attention is paid to the individual … as a human being with an inherent urge for satisfaction and accomplishment. . . There is no need for a person to be independent of his institutional connections in order to achieve happiness. There is no contradiction, that is, between institutionalized work and personal aspiration.… Devotion to duty, perfected through greater self-discipline, in time leads to a reduction of the disturbance caused by conflicting demands. The result is an improved state of personal spiritual freedom and a sense of joy focused on fulfillment in one's work" (pp. 51–52). Rohlen sees in this ideology echoes of the Confucian heritage, a way of relating the organizational ideology to the larger social environment.

One would be tempted to explain similarities to Tech culture as a manifestation of the current interest in Japanese management techniques in popular managerial literature. The concept of culture in organizations is in fact closely related to an interest in Japanese management (Ouchi, 1981). In this view, Japanese organizations have found the solution to the problem of control, and Tech ideology is an American attempt to emulate Japanese management by developing a complex and all-encompassing relationship between the company and its employees, most notably in the practice of guaranteed employment in return for "loyalty."

This explanation, however, is not sufficient. The roots of Tech policies and associated practices are in the 1950s, and its current language and ideas appear to be derived largely from local traditions, from Emerson through the "company town" to the Human Relations approach to management. Current discourse is full of references to these sources, as in Sam Miller's reference to Douglas McGregor. When the groundwork for Tech's organizational ideology was laid, Japan was still reeling from its encounter with the products of Western rationality. Moreover, as Rohlen points out, Japanese managers seem equally obsessed with Western management and its perceived efficiency and rationality. This ironic reversal highlights the universal managerial quest for more control and the role of cultural arguments in this process. Others, it seems, are seen through the mediating lens of the perceived deficiencies of one's own way of life.



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