

# Producing Core Values in an Australian Workplace: Language, literacy and identity

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HERMINE SCHEERES

## Introduction

Contemporary management and organisational learning discourses construct and locate organisations as increasingly globalised, flexible, and competitive against a backdrop of post-Fordist (Harvey, 1989) and post-industrial (Block, 1990) development. Organisations are described and analysed as global, national and local sites at one and the same time; as learning organisations where ongoing, formal and informal learning occurs; as places where traditional hierarchies are being dismantled and replaced or at least intersected by flattened hierarchies and work teams; and as sites where the world's economies are being redefined through restructuring, reengineering and reorganising (Drucker, 1993, Hammer and Champy, 1995, Peters and Waterman, 1982, Senge, 1990). Organisations are also developing as communities of practice which build common values and a culture emphasising social relationships (Wenger, 1998). There has been a shift away from viewing the workplace in technical or systems terms, to one that understands organisations as cultures in which people, their needs and desires, and their interpersonal relationships, play a central role (Drucker, 1993, Hammer and Champy, 1995, Schein, 1992, Whiteley, 1995).

One manifestation of this cultural turn is the emphasis being placed on the development of an organisation's core values and their subsequent embodiment by all employees. An important dimension of developing core values in this new work order, (Gee, Hull and Lankshear, 1996, Gee and Lankshear, 1995) is workers' identification with the organisation as a social community (Handy, 1995). When workers re-orient from, or add to, their traditional mode of doing their work by taking up new work order propositions, they are not merely engaged in 'gathering more skills'; they are negotiating new networks of both workers and processes. If they are successful in doing this, Handy claims, workers come to form a close-knit community of members, in contrast to their previous status as autonomous operators (see also Wenger, 1998). This is necessary, as Senge for example tells us, because 'the fundamental characteristic of the relatively unaligned team is wasted energy.

Individuals may work extraordinarily hard, but their efforts do not efficiently translate to team effort. By contrast, when a team becomes more aligned, a commonality of direction emerges, and individuals' energies harmonise. ... There is commonality of purpose, a shared vision, and an understanding of how to complement one another's efforts' (Senge, 1990: 234).

Community-forming is thus argued to be an essential ingredient of the contemporary workplace. It is part of Peters and Waterman's 1982 assessment that excellent companies made 'sure all employees were buying into their culture'. (Peters and Waterman, 1982: xix) . For Moss Kanter, (1997) workers have to claim ownership over the company's standards, values and impressions on its clients and customers. In this discourse, workers' creative engagement with the work ensures not only that they gain 'ownership' over their output, but also that they achieve close-knit relationships with co-workers. Thus, on the one hand workers need to be able to diversify the practical-organizational skills such that they can engage with the constantly changing nature of processes of production and exchange. On the other hand, they need to be able to 'work the social networks', and ensure they remain members of the evolving community of practice. What marks this kind of community, according to Peters and Waterman, is respect for the individual, a feature shared by excellent companies, and a concept that is one of the core values of many organisations. This mutual respect becomes possible thanks to

a plethora of structural devices, systems, styles and values all reinforcing one another so that the companies are truly unusual in their ability to achieve extraordinary results through ordinary people. (Peters and Waterman, 1982: 238/9, cited in du Gay 1996: 61)

For the knowledge worker, the multi-skilled or portfolio worker, communities of practice, excellence - the new work order - to become a reality, workers need to build continuous learning into their job and their organisation (Senge, 1990; Marsick & Watkins, 1999; Field with Ford, 1995). From now on, work 'demands continuous learning because it is constantly changing. . . . to obtain the improvement in productivity that the post-capitalist society now needs, the organisation has to become both a learning and a teaching organisation' (Drucker, 1993: 92).

This paper discusses how Arturo, a large manufacturing organisation in Australia, is attempting to reconstruct itself as a cultural site. It is a workplace of 900 employees where core values discourses sit alongside product discourses,

and both construct work practices that are rational and linear - production-line processes. Findings from ethnographic studies and discourse analysis of data from the workplace are used to discuss aspects of this workplace as a teaching and learning organisation, in particular, aspects connected with embodying its core values. Firstly, the paper focuses on the language of the core values themselves, exploring tensions involved in producing a common reading regarding what the values mean. Secondly, the paper turns to procedures and practices designed to ensure employees learn the core values. It tells a critical story of a training day where production-line workers are required to engage with complex literacy and numeracy activities. It further argues that opportunities for productive learning are lost or treated as disruptive in a learning context that becomes a contested site where participants struggle to (re)position themselves and have their voices heard.

### **The Core Values**

As a crucial part of continuous learning in the workplace (a subset of the call for lifelong learning), employees are expected to broaden a technical-instrumental view of work to include a further communication-focused, and in this case, ethical, view of work. At Arturo, the organisation's core values are printed, laminated, translated into workers' first languages, and pinned up around the factory walls and meeting rooms. They are quoted by employees and appear in company newsletters. Most importantly, mandatory training sessions are held in order that employees understand, learn and incorporate these values into their ways of 'being' a worker. (du Gay, 1996, Gee, Hull & Lankshear, 1996). Practices around core values are an integral part of a process of the increasing textualisation of the workplace where workers are required to engage with a range of language and literacy demands that are new to them. (Darville, 1995, Jackson, 2000, Iedema and Scheeres, forthcoming). Organisational values are in keeping with the notion of the workplace as a community of practice, and with Drucker's assertion that 'today we have to go beyond the information-based organization to the responsibility-based organization' (Drucker, 1993: 107).

The core values Arturo have decided on as central to their 'new' organisational culture are Integrity, Excellence, Co-operation Reliability and Responsiveness, Change and Respect. Together they project the kinds of identities Arturo is striving for. They provide an interesting example of the restructuring of businesses, or perhaps, the public texts of businesses, integrating a focus on people as well as on products as they bring together

discourses of business, community and the individual. After all, the core business of the organisation is to manufacture their products maintaining a competitive advantage. References to 'standards', 'performance' and 'business activities' are interspersed with references to 'individual behaviour' and 'social responsibilities to our people and the communities'. Even the core values headings demonstrate this mix: the attributes 'Integrity' and 'Respect' are printed alongside the more business-oriented 'Excellence' and 'Change':

## **Our Core Values**

### **Integrity**

We see integrity as paramount in Arturo. Our business activities and individual behaviours must be conducted with integrity at all times and in all relationships

### **Excellence - A results orientation**

The highest level of performance in everything that we do is the Arturo standard. We measure ourselves against the worlds best and must continuously strive to achieve that level of performance.

### **Co-operation, Reliability & Responsiveness**

We recognise that it is through co-operation, internally and externally, that we can achieve mutual goals. We must react quickly and be dependable in fulfilling our commitments.

### **Change - Initiate & Embrace**

In a world of change, we must initiate and embrace better ways to do things. Our people need to apply their creativity and have the encouragement and resources to ensure sound ideas are accepted and implemented.

### **Respect - the individual and the community**

We must consider and fulfil our wider social responsibilities to our people and the communities in which we operate. We must treat all others as we would like to be treated.

(Company Document 1)

## **Understanding The Core Values**

The 'achievement' of these core values pre-empts a number of attitudes and behaviours. The headings inscribe states of being to strive towards but they appear abstract and intangible. The short texts that follow each heading attempt to define and at the same time explain the values in terms of obligated behaviours. The explanations are constructed as generalisations, that is, as global

statements outlining how to attain the core values. Within each explanation there is a shift from statements to commands with the use of 'must'. At the same time the core values are 'our' values and 'we' are working towards attaining them. This use of personal pronouns is a way of creating inclusiveness, and in so doing implies equality and a breaking down of hierarchical barriers. The core values belong to all of us at Arturo and we all 'see', 'recognise' and 'consider' aspects of them and act on them together.

Thus, the language of the core values makes explicit a tension between the obligation constructed by 'must' and the inclusiveness suggested by the pronouns 'our' and 'we'. Questions such as 'Who is constructing the commands?' lead to 'Who is really included in 'we'?' and to the overall question 'Who developed and inscribed the core values in the first place?' Not surprisingly, it is management (managers?) who thought up the core values, textualised them on glossy pages enshrined on factory walls, and as eye-catching handouts for employees. Consequently, the 'we' who 'must' think, feel and act in particular ways are the receivers of the texts, the workers. Perhaps there is an assumption that management is already imbued with these attitudes and behaviours.

The core values and their brief explanations consist of generalisations open to a range of cultural and individual interpretations. Further clarification is attempted by attaching bullet-pointed lists of 'behaviours that reinforce our values' and 'behaviours that are not tolerated' to each core value. The behaviours are presented as a series of self-evident 'doings' or actions to be taken. For example, a positive behaviour is 'sticking to commitments or renegotiating them,' while its counterpart negative behaviour is listed as 'forgetting or putting aside agreed commitments.' Each 'doing' is in the present, continuous tense as they are all to be practised as ongoing activities. The activities are not sequential or ordered in any particular way. There is a sense of accumulation, that the goal will be achieved as long as all the behaviours are learnt / unlearned and as long as the balance is kept up. The full text of the core value, 'Respect' below, illustrates this:

**Respect - The Individual and The Community**

We must consider and fulfil our wider social responsibilities to our people and the communities in which we operate. We must treat all others as we would like to be treated.

### **Behaviours That Reinforce Our Values**

Treating people as individuals and being receptive to them and their ideas

Accepting that not all people have the same background (e.g. education, sexual preference, religion) and valuing the differences

Listening carefully to other views and opinions

Maintaining a safe and pleasant workplace

Being environmentally and socially responsible

Balancing your personal, family, social and business demands

### **Behaviours That Are Not Tolerated**

Ignoring the contribution others can make

Acting in isolation on issues that affect others

Participating in or allowing discrimination or harassment of any kind

Tolerating or participating in substance abuse of any kind

Creating power-bases based on the withholding of knowledge, freedoms, ego or status

(Company Document 1)

Much of the core values text consists of abstract language, culturally-contextualised, colloquial expressions, plus the occasions of archaic vocabulary like 'feudalism' above. Together, these conspire to keep the core values situated in the realms texts to be quoted and promoted, but without the kind of comprehension that leads easily to strategies and actions. In order to ensure awareness and understanding, and to devise strategies and actions a management edict announced that everyone must undergo core values training - that is 'everyone' from middle management to production line worker.

### **'Learning' The Core Values**

A consulting company was engaged to conduct the core values training off site. It was well known amongst employees that this particular organisation was chosen because the directors/managers of the consulting company enjoyed close, personal relationships with the managers of Arturo. Making contractual arrangements with friends without any tendering or application processes, suggests to Arturo employees that this is a 'normal' way of doing business. It is particularly interesting that in this instance the favoured consultants were in fact teaching core values such as integrity.

On the training day I attended, approximately 20 workers were bussed from Arturo to a conference complex about five kilometres away. The day began at 8 am exactly and concluded at 4.30. There were 17 participants from across

the organisation plus myself, and one trainer, Colin. The day was opened by the managing director of production who emphasised that the company was 'about people,' and that the core values were a cornerstone of the new Arturo.

Colin outlined the day's program and handed out the 50 page workshop manual in its ring-bound folder. A look through the manual revealed page after page of numbered or bulleted points; a range of activities often with score sheets; definitions or short statements; and some computer-generated graphics. The layout of the pages was dominated by the use of bold, boxes and capitalisation. The manual followed, I would argue, a fairly typical training manual genre in structure; style of presentation and tone. The content consisted of a combination of 'general' information such as how to speak up assertively and points for positive communication, interspersed with company-specific information regarding the core values, and training activities tailored to fit Arturo.

The manual inscribes the managing director of production's message that the core values are important to Arturo. This key issue is located in the early pages and provides the frame for the activities and discussions focussing on each of the five values:

### **The importance of the values**

Arturo has identified a set of Core Values which are essential to maintaining a competitive advantage over other manufacturers. (Core Values Workshop manual p6)

With this statement the values are embedded in the principal discourse of business: competition. What is clear is that ultimately the core values are important to the core business of the organisation, that is, 'maintaining a competitive advantage'.

The training day was filled with group activities and tasks that were organised like mini-competitions. For example, groups of three or four were each given one of the core values to focus on with the following instructions:

#### **CORE VALUE MATCH UP EXERCISE**

##### **STAGE 1**

- 1 Form a group around your core value page
- 2 Empty the contents of the stage 1 envelope
- 3 Working together separate the items and place them on the sheet under the right headings

**BEHAVIOUR THAT WILL REINFORCE OUR VALUES & BEHAVIOURS THAT ARE NOT TOLERATED**

- 4 Time how long it took to complete the task
  - 5 Refer to your Core Value document and score your effort as one point for every one you got correctly under the proper heading
  - 6 Make a note how you worked as a team
  - 7 Fill in the score sheet
- (Core Values Workshop manual p17)

The emphasis was on getting the tasks completed quickly and getting the right answers. Groups were encouraged to compete against one another, albeit in a friendly way. This was the main motivating strategy and it was one that mirrored the plant manager's belief on the factory floor that the best (and only?) way to ensure the teams succeed in fixing problems is to set their projects up as if they were in competition with each other. Both scenarios fit with the prevalent 'competitive advantage' discourse.

The core values contain difficult and unusual vocabulary as well as various colloquial expressions and Colin selected a few of these to explain. However, there was no exercise or opportunity to explore participants' understanding of the core values texts. Difficulties with the exercises were, at least in part, due to lack of understanding of both particular words and concepts. Considerable time was spent asking every group what mistakes they had made, rather than investigating why people may have experienced problems with the tasks. Understanding seemed to be equated with number of correct answers.

The trainer referred to the importance of teamwork during each of the activities. Each group was called a team and there were numerous references to 'working together' to complete certain steps in the tasks. Again, there was no exploration of how people worked together, or a chance for individuals to reflect on how they participated. Rather, there was a cline to fill in on the score sheet where everyone rated their team's performance:

Terrible						Terrific
(Unproductive)	1	2	3	4	5	(Productive)
Argumentative						Cooperation
Bossy						Respect
Unpleasant						Fun
No focus						Focus

(Core Values Workshop manual p19)



The relationship of all of this to the core values remained implicit and/or tenuous for me and I believe for most participants in the workshop. What was very explicit and did grab attention was the page that carried only the following message:

"YOU MAY BE ASKED TO DESCRIBE A CORE VALUE AT ANY TIME DURING THE PROGRAM !!!!!!"  
(Core Values Workshop manual)

### **Disrupting The Dot Points**

Throughout the day, people did, on the whole, participate in the activities, though it often seemed that completing the task was the main goal for workers and consultant alike. However, on two occasions participants' voices rose with issues and concerns that deviated from the normative processes that constructed what was possible in any session.

The first point of departure was in the middle of one 'major' activity asking participants to compile a list of five areas 'where Arturo is really "good" and 5 areas where Arturo is "not so good."' Training opportunities, cultural acceptance and advanced technology were the prominent 'good' things, while shortage of parts, communication up and down, and poor working conditions headed the 'not so good' list. As coloured dots were being allocated to items to reduce the list, one participant tentatively broached the ethical issue of promoting, or being involved in, the gaming industry and suggested this was a problem, and a 'not so good' Arturo activity. Another person joined in by asking whether Arturo gave money to help addicted gamblers, and suggested there should be a legal obligation to do so. Colin's opportunity to open up a discussion that had come from one of the process workers rather than the consultant's manual or Arturo's management was ignored. He curtailed the discussion by suggesting everyone had a choice regarding where they might work, as he hastily turned to the next calculation.

The second interruption occurred towards the end of the day in the middle of a 'pep' talk by the trainer. Colin had earlier praised Arturo for their development of core values to underpin and humanise the workings of an industrial company. He described this as 'risky' and 'very forward looking'. Now he was emphasising personal obligations and responsibilities, as 'it is up to each one of you' to extend and enhance the core values, thereby improving the things Arturo is good at, and decreasing the things Arturo is not so good at. As he was speaking, one participant suddenly called out that 'in Arturo you are not allowed to speak .... No-one can open his (sic) mouth in Arturo. If you do you

are moved to another section.' A space had been created for further voices to be heard. One woman stated 'I'm a little bit scared to say something,' and another man gave an example of someone who spoke up and 'on Monday morning he wasn't there.' An animated discussion quickly developed where one after another employee talked about the fear that stopped them from speaking out. One specific example citing personal experience of the consequences of criticism came from the person sitting next to me. He explained how he had felt secure in his on site English class where learners were encouraged to talk about problems and complaints. However, someone else in the class passed on the complaints to 'his boss,' and the complainer was punished by being moved to a less desirable position the following day.

These unexpected outbursts may have been in the minds of the speakers when they were asked to list good/not so good things. Perhaps they were even there from the time the core values were first read out at the beginning of the day. In any case, the issue raised here by a number of the participants and reinforced by the body language and assent of others present indicated that there was much more exploration of core values needed amongst this workshop group, and possibly throughout Arturo.

Colin again wanted to move on. By looking anxiously at his watch and turning pages of the manual he made it clear that he needed to get through the day's program. His initial responses and involvement in the discussion demonstrated that he did recognise that what was happening was important in terms of practices in the workplace, in particular what was being exposed regarding power and social relations. However, the prescriptive and linear structure of the training program demanded adherence to set activities. He brought closure to the episode by announcing 'Arturo is having a two day workshop for managers and supervisors and everything from here is going to that workshop' - an unsatisfactory resolution.

For me the difference between the engagement of the workshop members during these short disruptions and their participation in previous activities was palpable. These were bottom-up issues born from personal experiences. While the workshop manual purported to relate closely to Arturo's workers, and while most did do the tasks presented by the trainer, the training was all top down and /or de-personalised by the reliance on strict linear progression and arithmetic methods of getting, for example, the 'three agreed main points.'

### **Conclusion: Learning and Commitment**

The dominant voices during the training I attended were the (spoken and written) voices of the consultants acting for the management of Arturo. The space for other voices was limited - constrained by the rigorous and bounded structure of the activities. The top down nature of the manual, plus the task-time spent on tallies, in particular moving from individual to small group to whole group scores and agreements, positions the participants as passive followers of procedures. Opportunities to be more self-directed, for example in a problem-solving task to be carried out after the training day, are still tightly structured and highly routinised. Nevertheless, during this training day, resistances surfaced as participants attempted to take up different speaker positions as they challenged the company's ethical stance and the consensual results of the "good things / bad things" activity. The attempts to open up spaces for different kinds of learning and the foregrounding of different kinds of worker identities were subjugated by the power of the training text and trainer talk (Lather, 1991, Scheeres and Solomon, 2000, Stronach and MacLure, 1997).

From the point of view of the consultant, the training program is geared to lead towards the final activity: for each participant to create a written text outlining future practices that would demonstrate commitment to the core values. His job is then completed. For Arturo, the proof of success is more complex as management wants to 'see' the commitment in action - the commitment practices taken into the work environment. However, unlike the program's other tasks, here there is no structured follow up procedure. How seriously then is the commitment (and commitment text) taken by participants likely to be? If there has been nothing open-ended or reflective without being pulled into shape by well worn training techniques, then what are the chances that commitments will be textualised, let alone practised, after participants have been bussed back to the production site? When the production manager cries that he 'can't understand why [the workers] don't take [the core values] more seriously,' and when he draws attention to the complicated logistics and expense of the training, he ignores, or is oblivious to, how autonomy and agency may be recognised and played out in these programs and in the workplace generally.

The process of learning the core values at Arturo centres on the training program and on a belief that every individual worker has a responsibility to attend and participate in the training. That the core values have been devised by management and handed down the line with no discussion or debate integral to their development remains unquestioned and unproblematised. Management

expects that everyone should have developed a clear understanding of what the values are in terms of the behaviours that reinforce them and behaviours that are not tolerated, and through this understanding decided on their own practices to achieve the values. Thus, there is an assumption that the core values are agreed, that is, that by handing them around the factory, by referring to them in company talks and documents, and, importantly, by doing the training program, the values will be assimilated into the newly emerging 'beings' of the employees. (du Gay, 1996) But the core values can't be talked or trained into existence. The juxtaposition of learning and training in this workplace (and in this paper) and require further interrogation. An exploration of the implications of the 'cultural turn' in organisational learning and management literature needs to be understood to some extent in terms of worker identity (du Gay 1996; Hall & du Gay 1996; Gee, Hull & Lankshear 1996). What is now expected, indeed what is essential to being a competent worker is an ability to 'invent our selves' (Rose 1996), or to re-invent ourselves as a different kind of 'organizational self,' and this entails much more than training days and training manuals.

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## Notes for Contributors

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References in the text should give the author's name and year of publication (with page numbers if necessary) in the following style:

'Co-production can be defined as the "degree of overlap between two sets of participants – regular producers and consumers" The resultant overlap represents joint production of outcomes' (Brudney and England, 1983, cited in Wirth, 1991:79).

Please observe the following conventions:

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Language and Literacy. Her research interests include the relationship between spoken and written language in educational contexts; literacy development of mother tongue and second language learners; the role of classroom talk in constructing curriculum knowledge; and more recently in the implications of current policy developments for ESL education in Australia.

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