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The reluctant rhetorician: senior managers as rhetoricians in a strategic change context

Reluctant
rhetorician

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper explores strategic change communication, framed by the idea that managers can be viewed as rhetoricians. The purpose of this paper is to present and discuss senior managers' subjective experiences of rhetorical aspects of change management.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper draws on a case study from ABB Sweden (a power and automation technology company). In-depth interviews with senior managers, with vast experience of change management, constitute the empirical source.

Findings – The most important finding is the managers' overall reluctance towards rhetoric. According to the managers in this study, a rhetorician is an over-enthusiastic person who “waves his arms when speaking”. To master the art of rhetoric is not believed to be of particular importance when managing strategic change.

Research limitations/implications – Senior managers' potentially negative attitude concerning rhetoric should be taken into account when researchers situate change management within a rhetorical frame.

Practical implications – Given the large interest in “efficient” communication, generally managers should be encouraged to overcome their reluctance towards rhetoric to improve their ability to “manage meaning” constructively.

Originality/value – This paper contributes to change management communication insofar as it gives voice to the individual manager. This voice indicates; in a time when rhetoric, storytelling, and charismatic leadership are making ground; that the understanding of rhetoric is much more limited than the general impression might suggest.

Keywords Organizational change, Communication, Rhetoric, Senior managers, Sweden

Paper type Case study

Introduction

Concerning organizational change, Finstad (1998) argues that change is conditional to the “explicitness of the rhetorical elements in the situation”, and accordingly suggests rhetoric as a fruitful perspective for understanding the phenomenon of change. However, conventional research on management communication and strategic change is short of references to rhetoric.

Management communication as a research field has its roots in business communication, but has emerged beyond business writing and speaking to embrace further aspects of communication, for example, interpersonal communication (Feingold, 1987). In this respect, Hartelius and Browning (2008) underscore that a manager and a classical orator in many respects face the same challenges.

Still, the existing literature on management communication seems to reveal an inclination for communication, generally and on an organizational level. In-depth



studies of how senior managers acquire commitment to strategies are very rare (Jarzabkowski and Sillince, 2007). This is a serious limitation for advanced understanding of management communication, at least if we leave the mainstream normative literature and turn to the growing strategy-as-practice research field (Johnson *et al.*, 2007).

This paper represents an answer to the call for further empirical studies of rhetorical aspects of management communication, in a strategic change context. Interviews with senior managers in ABB Sweden constitute the empirical source. Two topics will be highlighted:

- (1) The perceived role of communication when managing strategic change.
- (2) Senior managers' views of their own roles as rhetorician.

The purpose is to present and discuss senior managers' subjective experiences of rhetoric in strategic change. A knowledge contribution will be offered mainly to the fields of management communication and change management.

Theoretical framework

The ability to initiate, plan, and carry out change is so valuable in our time that successful change managers become mythic heroes as champions of change (Nadler, 1998, p. 7). However, Mintzberg (1994) emphasizes that strategic plans are hardly ever carried out to the last letter. For this reason, it is more fruitful to recognize strategy work and strategic change as something emergent. By and large, strategy work is to some extent about planning and implementation of plans, but it is also about power distribution, myths, rewards, self-actualisation, and other less rational expressions (Mason, 1994).

Weick (2001) suggests that management of organizational change should be understood as a sense-making process, with a bounded rationality and rather short of consensus concerning cause-effect relations. Weick argues that meaning emerges from action, not the other way around. In our context of strategic change, when we have done "managerial things", we might look back and label these actions "strategy". In any respect, a change plan, clearly expressed or not, will be an excuse to get us going, and in this momentum we learn and make meaning. Hence, "when you are confused, any old strategic plan will do" (Weick, 2001, p. 346). What then is a real change, based on a rational planning process with causal relations between intention and outcome, is practically impossible to determine.

If a manager wants to accomplish strategic change (that is, create the impression of strategic change), he/she per definition will have to persuade people. As Smircich and Morgan (1982) underscore, leadership is "the process whereby one or more individuals succeed in attempting to frame and define the reality of others".

So, managers are meaning-makers (Smircich and Morgan, 1982; Weick, 2001). In this perspective, managers are also enactors of the environment (Smircich and Stubbart, 1985), symbol manipulators (Peters, 1978), storytellers (Adamson *et al.*, 2006), and managers are rhetoricians (Hughes, 1996).

The list of manager labels could be longer still, but the last notion of a manager as a rhetorician, or rhetor, is well motivated in this paper where we focus on rhetorical aspects of change management.

According to Quintilian (2001), rhetoric should not be reduced to mere persuasion. Rhetoric is a reliable companion for the rhetorician. If rhetoric in itself is good or evil is not a major issue. Rhetoric is simply “useful” for the good man (Quintilian, *Inst. Or.* 2.16.11). But what has a contemporary senior manager to say about the rhetorical aspects of strategic change? His or her subjective thoughts on communication and rhetoric have not been explored. Thus, a serious inquiry, bringing out the personal voice of the manager/rhetorician, needs to be carried out in order to better understand management communication and strategic change.

Method

A case study of strategic change communication in ABB Sweden, conducted in 2003, constitutes the empirical source of this paper. ABB is one of the world’s leading companies in power and automation technologies. The company operates in around 100 countries and employs 120,000 people. ABB Sweden employs 8,700. The Swedish headquarters are situated in Västerås. The main reason for choosing ABB was the author’s personal network within the company, gained as an external marketing consultant. This personal network opened doors to senior managers, doors that are usually closed for researchers.

When research involves a wide range of “soft” data, as in this interpretive study of human communication, a qualitative methodology should be favoured. In-depth interviewing was the preferred method because it provides the researcher with well-grounded and multi-faceted descriptions of everyday events (Malhotra and Birks, 2007).

The following managers were interviewed: a former chief executive officer of ABB group, a Head of Group Function Human Resources Sweden, a Head of Group Function Corporate Communications Sweden, three senior managers responsible for different business areas in ABB Sweden, and one internal senior management consultant. Two of the interviewed managers were women, and six were men. The author was informed by his personal contacts within ABB that these eight managers had considerable experience of strategic change.

The interviews were conducted in Västerås, in Swedish, and lasted between 45 and 120 minutes. All the interviews started with a general question: “what importance has communication when managing strategic change?” and then evolved into semi-structured conversations regarding strategic change, communication, and rhetoric.

The interviews were transcribed, interpreted, sorted, and re-interpreted in order to produce a concentrated and yet rich description of the interviews. The analysis was based on inductive logic and drew on recommendations by Glaser and Strauss (1967).

The interpreting and sorting generated nine overlapping themes concerning strategic change and/or rhetoric:

- (1) The importance of communication.
- (2) Strategy as practice.
- (3) Today’s strategy.
- (4) Management of strategic change.
- (5) Rational and emotional rhetoric.
- (6) Strategy as discourse.

- (7) Metaphors and stories.
- (8) Managers as rhetoricians.
- (9) Support for rhetorical improvement.

Elaborating each theme would be beyond the ambition of this paper. Instead, a number of illustrative quotes will be presented in “Findings” section. They will be quotes mainly from themes one, four, five, and eight that are positively related to the two questions introduced earlier: what is the role of communication when managing strategic change? How does a senior manager view his or her own rhetorical practice?

Findings

Communication is important, sort of

All the interviewed managers expressed the idea that communication is “immensely important” when managing change. Communication is often seen as a “resource” or “tool” utilized by the manager. There were also numerous comments emphasizing that communication is ineffective without content, as if a clear separation could be made between form and content. “Just communication” only creates frustration:

Communication is of course, very important. But, the strategy must be good and relevant in itself. We have the problem that strategy never gets past the surface. It does not influence our work.

The problem experienced in change communication was to formulate a coherent message and then “reach out”. The suggested solution to the problem was to be intelligible, set measurable objectives and present your intention in a strategic plan.

Several different corporate slogans have been used in ABB over the years, supported by substantial investments in marketing communication. When asked how company slogans were integrated in the managers’ personal change communication, they all answered that no deliberate connection was made. Managers did not co-operate to any extent with the communication department to create stories and metaphors which would be useful when managing strategic change.

We are squareish engineers, motivated primarily by logic

“Honest” and “plain” communication based on rational argumentation was believed to be absolutely necessary for accomplishing strategic change. But, strategic change also involved emotions:

When beginning a strategic change, it feels positive even if the profit from the change can’t be seen. But emotions will cool off, and become neutral, and then negative. The risk is that people give up on emotional grounds just when the change starts to pay off. Then you throw in new managers, starting new change projects, following the same pattern. People will sway between hope and despair, and changes will never be implemented.

To avoid this emotional dead-end situation, managers distributed only small pieces of highly relevant information:

You have to break down big changes into small parts. Otherwise it’s difficult to get everybody to understand. Engineers are [...] it sounds like they are a bit stupid, but they are the total opposite. Even so, they want to understand what a change means to them

as individuals. If we are about to cut twenty percent of the cost, they want to know what that means. Will I have to use one pencil less every year, or what?

A rhetorician is someone who waves his arms and fire off one-liners

We don't talk about rhetoric. But we talk a lot about communicative leadership and operation development.

When asking the managers to articulate their own role as a "rhetorician", the managers answered rather unwillingly:

I have never regarded myself as a [...] rhetorician. I have no clear picture of rhetoric. But I like to do presentations. I like to work with people, and I think I'm rather good at it.

The managers turned out to be very suspicious about "rhetoric":

When we have several people sitting in the room, we can't have one person standing up and waving his arms, and being [...] rhetorical. [...] Some sound very persuasive, at least until you think about what they are actually saying. A person with one-liners does not always have the best ideas.

All the managers were remarkably reluctant to use the word "rhetoric" or "rhetorician". By and large, it was difficult to have them talk about rhetoric or persuasion at all. "Communicator" was the term used on the rare occasions when the managers actually explicitly referred to their own roles as practitioners of communication.

Discussion

One finding in this study of management communication and rhetoric was the logistic view of communication. The manager expected messages to be transferred from sender to receiver, not co-created. Keywords are precision and efficiency.

The theoretical foundation for this transactional view of human communication can be traced to the cybernetic perspective of information, formulated by Shannon and Weaver (1949) in the *Mathematical Theory of Communication*. The Shannon and Weaver transactional and technical model of communication has very little to say about the meaning of the message, or its effect on the receiver. The same seems to go for the ABB managers. The challenge they experienced was basically to find the correct distribution for different messages. Formulation of sophisticated messages, and analyses of the different meanings the receiver might create, appeared to be of minor interest. In the terms of Grant *et al.* (2005), the managers are more interested in demonstrating the "hard" actuality of the change than the "soft" rhetoric.

In a way, this approach to communication restricts the rhetorical duties of a manager, since managers only acknowledge their role as unbiased initiators or carriers of messages, not active meaning makers. We can make a comparison with classical rhetoric where the orator had three duties to accomplish regarding his audience: *docere* instruct his listeners, *movere* stir their emotions and *delectare* give them pleasure (Cicero, *Br.* 185; Quintilian, *Inst. Or.* 3.5.2). Turning to ABB, when asked about strategic change communication, the managers to some extent recognized *docere* as an overall communication duty. *Delectare* might become necessary, but was not recommended. *Movere* was not an issue for the managers in this study.

Managers were without exception recommended to be honest, low-voiced, unsophisticated, listening, competent, and natural. On the other hand, when the

managers portrayed their own communication practice they accentuated enthusiasm, passion, swiftness, philanthropy, self-distance, irony, and self-confidence.

Nevertheless, being regarded as charismatic and rhetorical is not without complication in an organization like ABB. In ABB, the word “rhetoric” gives rise to rather negative connotations, for example, exaggerated, expressive, emotional, superficial, and provocative. Making your message “artful” would be equivalent to manipulating it, and then you *per se* have abandoned the straightforward, simple and honest approach to communication the managers celebrate. As they perceive it, rhetoric and “honest communication” are incompatible.

In this perspective, it is understandable that the managers felt uncomfortable when they had to talk about their rhetorical practice. However, no contemporary study has indicated that senior managers hold such a negative attitude concerning rhetoric, and particularly their own rhetorical practice, as this study suggests.

Conclusion

The overall purpose of this paper is to bring forth new understanding of managers’ experiences of the communicative practice when outlining, implementing and making sense of strategic change. In-depth interviews with senior managers in ABB Sweden constituted the empirical setting. Two questions were raised:

- (1) What role does communication have when managing strategic change?
- (2) What are senior managers’ views of their own roles as a rhetorician?

To answer the first question: the managers in this study undoubtedly considered communication very important when managing strategic change. Communication was seen as a logistic challenge. Strategy formulation by senior management was believed to come first, and then communication was called for to transfer strategy to the rest of the company, with precision and accuracy. Communication was referred to as “the tool to get people to understand what change is about”.

To accomplish strategic change, a manager must perform “plain natural communication” to appeal to engineers in ABB. Altogether, you win sympathy when criticizing “lack of planning”, or “strategic change without direction”, or “action without measurement”.

To deliberately target emotions in change communication was not recommended by the managers in this study. You might capture your audience momentarily, but break the implicit rule of simplicity and straightforward communication. This finding illuminates the second issue in this study; being a rhetorician. Furthermore, senior managers in ABB talked about rhetoric only unwillingly. When asked “how do you use rhetoric in change management” they replied, at best, in general terms of communication. Using rhetoric is “is not how we do it in ABB”. Consequently, rhetoric is not the supporting companion for an ABB senior manager, as Quintilian suggests that rhetoric is for the classical orator.

As this is a relatively limited study of eight senior managers in one company, one should be careful not to take the conclusions too far. Even so, this paper contributes to management communication and change management insofar as it explicitly gives voice to the individual manager. And this voice tells us, at a time when rhetoric, storytelling and charismatic leadership are making ground, that the understanding

and acceptance of rhetoric is perhaps much more limited than the general impression might suggest.

Finally, a somewhat personal comment from the author of this paper: given the large interest in “efficient” communication in business, senior managers’ lack of enthusiasm concerning rhetoric is not only surprising, it is stupid. Really, what else other than a comprehensive well-tried normative theory of “management of meaning” does a manager need?

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