

Meaning From Media

The Silence of the Lambs: Organizational Culture and Politics

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This learning support uses an extract from the Academy Award® winning *Silence of the Lambs* to both exemplify an integrated organizational culture and, conversely, organizational obstacles toward goal attainment from political maneuvering by organizational actors.



Purpose

To facilitate the development of understanding organizational identity and organizational politics in a classroom or learning group-based scenario.

Objective

Each member of the class or learning group is able to identify elements of an idealized, integrated organizational culture, to recognize micro-political tactics, and to understand how these tactics are used to obscure or enhance initiative in organizations.

Set-up

This learning design can be utilized when teaching concepts of organizational culture and identification to undergraduate students or newly appointed managers. It uses a well-known modern classic, Jonathan Demmes' version of Thomas Harris' best-selling novel *The Silence of the Lambs*. The thriller is well known, and its utilization in a learning environment provides welcome opportunities for organizational newcomers, or undergraduate students, who may not previously have been exposed to cultural or political issues in organizations, to consider these subjects.

Context

The opening sequence of the film shows a young trainee agent, Clarice Starling, played by Jodie Foster, running the assault course at the FBI Academy. She is summonsed from the course to the office of the Director of Behavioral Science, Jack Crawford. The camera follows her through the corridors of the Academy until she reaches his office. This sequence of the film portrays the culture of the FBI academy as integrated, physically active, hierarchical, intellectually reflective, and professional.

Forum Articles

From this short sequence, a number of cultural clues about the identity of the organization and the expected behaviors of its members emerges.

Parallel

The class or group should be encouraged to distill the following elements of the organizational culture from the sequence.

- Values
- Roles
- Norms
- Behaviors
- Environment
- Gender relationships
- Power distance and relationships

Debrief

Note participants' feedback under above headings (or other ones that they might supply themselves) on flipcharts.

- Ask, "Based on this sequence, how would you describe the culture of the FBI?"
- Ask, "How do these compare to organizations in which you have worked, or know of?"

Development

Throughout the movie, the FBI is portrayed as possessing an integrated professional bureaucracy culture that utilizes knowledge resources from a wide range of knowledge repositories, including traditional media libraries and both internal and external experts. There are, however, a number of incidences, where micro-political tactics are used by individual organizational actors to enact various gains in pursuing their relations. Two of these include:

- Crawford misleads Starling about his motivations regarding her initial interview with Hannibal Lecter. He utilizes Starling's lack of knowledge about his motivations to enact an introduction to this key, but problematic, source of specialized knowledge
- Crawford creates a diversion on the grounds of Starling's gender to distract a local police

force with the aim of garnering further information.

Experience

It can prove difficult to find examples from cinema that are both well known and offer opportunities for exploring complex, and sometimes nebulous, concepts such as organizational culture and politics.

Inexperienced actors' experiences of these are often widely dispersed. The utilization of a well-known and highly regarded popular thriller offers a common ground to participants for reference that enables a clear discussion of this concept which are often hampered by vagueness and varying definitions.

Participants find the utilization of the Silence of the Lambs interesting in that they are encouraged to look at a film that is an old-favorite of many, in a new light. Studies and reviews of the film usually focus on the quality of script, direction, and characterization. This approach advocates seeking out the strong role that the character of the FBI plays in the movie.

There are two important caveats to be observed in using the sequences mentioned above.

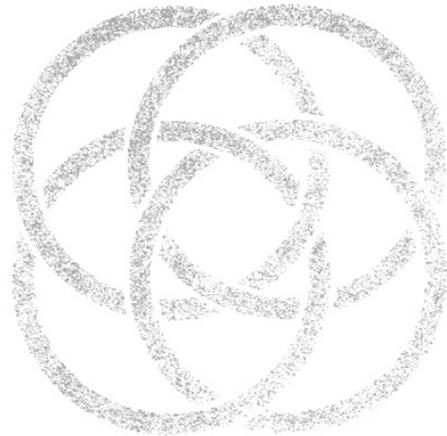
1. The film is quite gruesome in parts. Towards the end of the introductory sequence, Starling is faced with a wall of graphic pictures of murder victims. It is important that this *is not* shown as it has the potential to upset individuals based on their culture, personal histories, etc.
2. It is also important to anchor the discussion around the issues of micro-politics and culture in organizational settings, and not let it descend into a discussion of the movie in general.

Meaning from Media Submissions

Please submit what you have experienced as an impactful learning design using media to reinforce group-shared meaning. Send it as with other Forum articles to the Forum Editor at forum@odjournal.org. The submission guidelines follow:

- Provide up to a 75-word biography as well as a good quality electronic (jpg) photograph of the author.
- Keep the length of your submission to fewer than 6 double-spaced pages.
- Use a 12-point, Times New Roman font.
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