



Spinning on Symbolism: Taking More Than One Story Seriously

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Tell your boss about an important decision. Tell your subordinate. Tell a never-to-be-seen-again seatmate on a long flight to Chicago. Tell your daughter. Tell your father. Tell your lover. Tell the kid you always wished you could beat in high school. Tell the stranger who walks into your office with a questionnaire.

We all know that our experience is so complex that one story cannot begin to encompass it. We all know that no one listener knows us well enough, knows the situation well enough, or cares enough, to understand all the stories we can tell. An important value of the interpretive approach to organizational symbolism is that it can take our many stories seriously.

The field of organizational studies is making great strides. It is becoming much more sophisticated methodologically. It is drawing on rapidly expanding work in outside fields, such as cognitive psychology. Many of these influences on the field are rationalistic. They assume there is one story to discover. A value of interpretive studies is that they serve, not as an alternative, but as a counterweight to these influences.

The study of organizational symbolism can draw upon the virtues of natural language and art, in contrast to the virtues of mathematics and models. It can recognize the inherently ambiguous. It can leave room for multiple meanings, multiple interpretations. Though this is not to say that just any interpretation will do. The challenge is to find interpretations that are recognized as valid, despite the gap that exists between the experience of one individual and that of any other.

To rise to the challenge we must rely primarily on ourselves. Our task is to encounter as much of the range and depth of human experience as possible, so that we can hear the stories we are told, interpret the behavior we observe. That, in my opinion, is the pleasure of studying organizational symbolism, and its greatest value as a field of study. This is an area that denies the ivory tower as a primary field of residence. But just observing organizations will not do either. This field sends us to our experience, as workers and leaders, as children and parents, as strangers and intimates. It asks us to read novels as well as memos, to observe cell behavior as well as subordinate behavior.

To deepen our interpretive ability, to make it resonate with the experience of others, we must deepen our own experience. In the process we will begin to be able to convey the complexity of organizations. ■