Corporate Ideology – Meanings and Contradictions for Middle Managers[1]

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This paper describes an investigation into corporate ideology and control and the responses of the 'middle managers' in a large engineering corporation. The paper explores the creation of meaning and values in the organization through a large-scale 'corporate values' programme aimed at 1500 middle managers, and asks to what extent the priorities of these managers match those of the organization, and whether the creation of meaning through an ideological values programme carries risks that have not been considered by the organization adopting this approach. The findings suggest six individual response types amongst the delegates on the programme: '*evangelists*', '*actors*', '*sceptics*', '*open cynics*', '*critical thinkers*' and '*untouched professionals*'. The influences upon these responses are considered, and a number of key factors identified as important in affecting perceptions of and response to the programme. The paper concludes that today more than ever, *corporate ideologies* are becoming an increasingly dominant influence on our organizations, causing mixed and confused responses amongst the middle managers who are required to disseminate these messages.

Introduction

This paper describes an investigation into corporate ideology and control and the responses of the 'middle managers' in a large engineering corporation. It is a longitudinal study of a large-scale 'organizational values' programme in a major UK-based corporation, Aeroco plc (a pseudonym) and of the 'middle managers'' responses to it. The starting point of this study was that middle managers today may frequently find themselves in tension with the ideological messages cascading from the 'top' of their organizations. These normative messages, which demand ever increasing performance, competitiveness and efficiency through a constant stream of 'fads' and initiatives, are clearly affecting the lives of the managers within them, yet few studies have investigated the impact of such programmes either on the organizations themselves or on the managers who work within them.

Anthony has referred to a 'managerial schizophrenia' (1994, p. 79) which occurs in organizations when corporate rhetoric directly conflicts with first-hand experience. He describes the 'fragility, the unreality' of the manager's role, since 'the manager must always *act*, in more sense than one' (ibid., p. 78). That middle managers are frequently expected to concur with and drive the behaviours which reflect the dominant normative ideologies of their corporations has been well documented (Jackall, 1988; Legge, 1995; Watson, 1994a). Less well-researched, however, are the ways in which these managers cope with the expectations and requirements imposed from above, both emotionally, and in terms of the behaviours they display and the values to which they subscribe. It is the direct experience and responses of a group of managers participating in a major 'corporate values' programme that is the focus of this paper.

Middle managers in tension with their organizations

> 'We have tended to underestimate the extent of human frailty and insecurity in the lives of managers.' (Watson, 1994a, p. 179)

Whilst this observation might evoke little in the way of surprise, there are as yet few studies which explore the significance of this 'angst' for organizations or for managers themselves. Watson goes on:

> 'Managers, it is assumed, are rational. Employees need to be shown that they belong and that they are important. Managers are given the responsibility for bringing this about. There is little question of their own insecurities and need for meaning being attended to, because they have to be seen as 'in control', as providing leadership, as knowing more about the work being done than those doing it know.' (Watson, 1994a, p. 179)

Much management research has focused on the discrepancy between the rationality of management rhetoric and the practical experience of managers (Agor, 1989; Mintzberg, 1973; Moss Kanter, 1977). Yet even these researchers appear to have overlooked Watson's implied observation that the managers of today's corporations may themselves be suffering from emotional dissonance and stress as a result of the situations in which they find themselves. On the one hand 'middle managers' are required to demonstrate their omnipotence and clear thinking to those below them. On the other they need to receive and respond to the constant and frequently changing demands of their superiors. Watson suggests that this 'double control problem' (1994b; Watson and Harris 1999) is one of the key reasons for managers' apparent ambivalence to management fads, and their 'fondness for trying to convince themselves and the world that they are "special people" through the use of the special language of bottom lines, learning curves, missions, process re-engineering and all the rest of the gruesome jargon of modern corporate-speak' (ibid., 1999, p. 17).

This struggle for credibility experienced by middle managers has also been noted by Nonaka (1995), who has expressed concern that they are held in such contempt in the West, and that so many popular American and European management theorists (e.g. Hammer and Champy, 1993; Peters and Waterman, 1982) have in recent years led organizations toward the 'panacea' of delayering, and thereby stripping our organizations of their middle management. He notes with concern that the term 'middle manager' in the West has become synonymous with 'backwardness', 'stagnation' and 'resistance to change'. Despite these trends and concerns, however, there has been little research conducted into the experience of being a manager in the middle of a large corporation, most studies focusing almost entirely on corporate or top management (e.g. Jackall, 1988; Mintzberg, 1973).

I argue in this paper that the middle-management experience is demonstrably different in nature from corporate management, and should therefore be studied separately. Furthermore I contend that the continuity of middle managers' adherence (or apparent adherence) to the values imposed on them from the top may be tenuous and that their willingness to 'play the game' is often contingent upon one of three factors:

i)   fear of being 'deviant' and the subsequent consequences, thus leading to a preference for 'play-acting' or 'surface acting' (Goffman, 1959; Hochschild, 1983; Mangham, 1986; Mangham and Overington, 1983, 1987);
ii) the temporary ability of the individual to internalize the values and beliefs required by the corporate ideology, thus leading at least for a time to a type of 'brain-washing' of the nature found in a religious sect, or in Hochschild's (1983) term 'deep acting';
iii) the desire to belong and to find a 'self identity' which results from the loss of community in today's society (Lasch, 1979; Novak, 1982; Riesman, 1950).

At least two previous studies have indicated that it is possible for organizations to push their employees 'too far' in the required acceptance of their corporate ideologies (Hochschild, 1983; Smith, 1990) . Both of these studies revealed that beyond a certain point, 'resigned behavioural compliance' (Ogbonna and Wilkinson, 1990) transmuted to rebellion, confirming the fragility of the current balance of power in organizations, in which arguably least power is vested in the middle. Organizations relying heavily on normative cultures as a means of motivation and control

may, therefore, be in danger of causing stress, confusion and even of provoking a backlash amongst middle managers as a result of the intensification of the demands which they are making on their behaviours and emotions.

The 'empty shrine' and the search for meaning in organizations

The quest for meaning in today's western society and the hope of finding it in the workplace, have clearly been well documented, but perhaps nowhere more vividly than by Michael Novak (1982), who suggests that there is a spiritual and existential void in modern life in the West today which many are seeking to fill. In documenting today's liberal western societies he states:

> 'Many regard the emptiness at the heart of pluralism as a flaw. Its consequences among individuals are looked upon as illnesses: anomie, alienation, loneliness, despair, loss of meaning etc. . . . at the spiritual core there is an empty shrine.' (Novak, 1982, pp. 52–53)

Other writers on the 'detraditionalization' (Heelas, Lash and Morris, 1996) of late or post-modern times have also observed noteworthy changes in the way that we live our lives and create our identities (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1996; Bellah *et al.*, 1985; Fairclough, 1992; Goss, 1996) and the despair created by the loss of social meaning through family and community and the consequent hunger for 'the momentary illusion of personal well-being, health and psychic security' which, says Lasch, is only secured through 'the attentions of others' or 'an admiring audience' (Lasch, 1979).

It might then be contended that it is this quest for meaning in today's society which has made concepts such as *empowerment, self-managed teams*, and other work-based participation philosophies such attractive 'tools' to those with power in organizations, and which has made these initiatives so easy to introduce to the workforce, marketed internally under the guise of the ideology of becoming 'world class' organizations and thereby appearing to fulfill 'the function of providing a sense of identity, or Being, to participants whose identity is in question' (Schwarz, 1987).

This raises a number of questions, all of which have underpinned this study: If, in our western capitalist society, a genuine loss of community has taken place; if individualization taken to its extreme has separated people from their own sense of identity; if we are now no more nor less than market driven commodities or 'human resources' driven to view all human activity in terms of our relations with the 'market', and if the 'empty shrine' has indeed driven organizational man and woman to seek sanctuary and spiritual communion in the heart of their companies, what are the implications for our middle managers and the organizations in which they work? Are these organizations, as suggested by Roberts (1995), contributing to the further undermining of human identity and true spirituality? Are they turning themselves into 'totalitarian' organizations which 'define people's happiness for them' (Schwarz, 1987)? Or are they, as senior managers have argued, providing a sense of meaning for their employees through pride and empowerment in their work? This study attempts to understand how the middle managers in Aeroco respond to and attempt to make sense of, the meanings and contradictions of the company's espoused corporate ideology as it is packaged and promoted through a major change programme labelled 'Worldclass'.

Corporate ideology – its meanings and contradictions for management

Ideology as a construct often simultaneously carries multiple meanings. It is, for example, used as a derogatory or *pejorative* term when applied to organizations, often implying various forms of tyranny through domination and control. Equally though, the concept is commonly used by ethnographers in its *descriptive* form to understand the values and beliefs at the heart of cultures. Geuss (1981) also adds a *positive* interpretation of the construct, when ideology is seen as meeting the deep-rooted needs of individuals or societies, in the same way that religions provide a focus for meaning. Geertz (1973), however, warns that even the purest ideological stream can soon become polluted and become a 'pretty dirty river'. Ideological thought, he suggests, can rapidly create dependency for those who subscribe to it.

These conflicting interpretations are equally applicable in an organizational context. Anthony (1977, p. 3) for example, clearly sees 'ideologies of management' in the *pejorative* sense as a device to

defend or disguise the authority of those in whose interest work is 'controlled', thus to 'support authority' and to control and subordinate by 'influencing the sentiments and actions of others'. Watson (1994a), however, also notes the *positive* capacity for corporate ideology to offer a legitimate defence against 'existential angst', demonstrating how myths relating to organizational quality, excellence and infallibility can be adopted by managers as a mechanism for creating a feeling of security for the managers within them.

Both of these interpretations potentially offer different and important readings of the Aeroco programme. In its positive form the 'Worldclass' programme might be seen as a provider of meaning to the managers of Aeroco through the stories, myths and legends which accompany it. In its pejorative form, however, the 'Worldclass' ideology can be interpreted as an 'iron cage' for the managers of Aeroco, trapping them and cajoling them with increasing demands for devotion and commitment, and potentially leading to stress, burnout and role dissonance (Hochschild, 1983; Newton, 1995; Scase and Goffee, 1989; Smith, 1990). The following sections offer a narrative of how the Aeroco managers themselves appeared to make sense of the experience of the 'Worldclass' programme, and how they created meaning and dealt with the contradictions implicit in this dominant corporate ideology.

Managing meaning and ideology in Aeroco plc

The research study

A single case study was chosen for the research as my aim was to combine participant observation during the five modules of the 'Worldclass' programme with in-depth interviews with a sample of the target audience, both at the beginning and at the end of the programme. 56 in-depth interviews were carried out across eight business units and 14 sites, over a period of 18 months. In addition, I observed and conducted informal interviews with a further 21 participants during the first three modules of the programme. The total number of delegates interviewed was 77, approximately 5% of the target population.

Following Hochschild (1983) and Gergen (1985) the research was rooted in the social constructionist paradigm, focusing on the process of social exchange amongst the managers and their shared constructions of meaning and knowledge . This paper focuses specifically on the managers' initial responses to the launch of the new corporate values and the associated 'Worldclass' programme.

The five corporate values at the heart of the programme were labelled 'Innovation and Technology'; 'People'; 'Customers'; 'Partnerships' and 'Performance'. When interviewed, the vast majority of interviewees could cite all the values, some convincingly and others with the assistance of a checklist. The respondents were asked for their views on the five values themselves, and their appropriateness for the company. Surprisingly, this question provoked both low interest and very little contention. Phrases such as 'Does it matter what they are?'; 'not surprising'; 'pretty obvious'; 'Fine'; 'it's not rocket science is it?' were very common and dominated the vast majority of responses. Some criticized the values as being 'committee values'; 'lacking passion'; 'just another catch phrase' or more strongly as being essentially 'meaningless'. Some showed a degree of confusion about the intended meaning of some of the values with comments like 'What does performance mean? I don't know! You've caught me!' not being unusual. An equally small number praised the values as 'very appealing'; 'they seem to encompass everything'.

However, both critics and enthusiasts were rare, with the majority accepting the *sense* of the list without feeling very strongly about the values or having given them much serious thought. Some of these went on to point out that 'it is the *commitment*' (to the values) 'not the *content* which is important'.

The hope and fears of the middle managers

One of the most striking findings to have emerged from this phase of the research was the enormous level of hope which was felt throughout the organization at the start of the Worldclass programme. Most of the managers interviewed remembered the problems encountered by their businesses and Aeroco as a whole in the early 1990s. Many had lost large numbers of colleagues through redundancies and closures; and even those who had joined more recently had heard the stories of these times.

After years of 'initiatives' being launched at business-unit level, the vast majority of which were deemed by their perpetrators and recipients at best to have left only traces of their messages in the organizations and at worst to have failed, there was no doubt that the 'Worldclass' programme was widely seen as 'something different'. The message from the Chief Executive and his team that 'this is not another initiative' had been heard by all, and accepted with anticipation and hope by many. A common response was to be 'pleased to be part of it'; 'keen to be an integral part of a greater Aeroco' and 'encouragement that it is happening'. One manager summed up this sentiment, declaring the programme to be 'a jolly good thing'!

The need to develop a common culture across Aeroco was surprisingly widely accepted: 'we need a culture of involvement', and the Board's commitment to developing this had been well accepted, largely, it seems, as a result of the personal appearances at the launch events by the Chief Executive and other influential Board members. The declarations: 'I was impressed by the time devoted by the senior people'; 'very impressed by the efforts the team had gone to . . . a real big splash'; 'there is a lot of positive lead from the top'; 'they are a very dynamic bunch' or put more colloquially 'we now have clear direction from the adults' (a commonly-used Aeroco term for the senior management!) were expressed in almost every interview.

There was a significant number of people who went further, seeing the programme not only as desirable, but as fundamental to the company's continuity: 'We need it *desperately*'; 'we are *crying out* for leadership'. Even the enormous speculation amongst this group about the total cost of the 'Worldclass' programme (the most common rumour being £14m), whilst criticized by many as extravagant, also nevertheless served to endorse the view that the Board must be committed to the values. Overall there was great hope that the 'Worldclass' programme would provide a route to increasing success for Aeroco; and as one respondent said of the 'People' module: 'If people mean what they said on the module, it *will* make a difference'.

Most of the fears expressed about the 'Worldclass' programme related to the high expectations raised at the launch of the programme, and the possibility that these expectations would not be met. One of the greatest concerns was whether the programme would be sustainable in the event of the Chief Executive moving on. It was clearly seen as the Chief Executive's programme (despite efforts to counter this), and there was a widespread belief that without his leadership the 'Worldclass' programme would quietly disappear.

A second and related fear concerned the continuity of the messages when managers were confronted with business 'realities': 'when the pressure is on people revert to tried and tested methods'; 'there's not always time to be visionary with the sharks snapping at your heels'; and 'After three or four modules will we be tired of it?'.

There was general concern about how the company would communicate the values to the next level of managers below the 1500 group, with few managers seeing it as being their own responsibility to communicate to their subordinates, and most waiting for some announcement about a 'roll-out'. 'It's having a lot of impact on us managers, but we're not doing enough for the lower levels'; 'Has it been thought all the way through? Is it too big? The flow down is important'; 'it won't work unless it's effectively cascaded down'.

Various concerns about the 'isolationist attitudes' of various professional groups were also raised, although these were not confined in their attacks to any one group, though those 'at the sharp end', for example, in production – 'manufacturing are very task driven' – and those in engineering were the most frequently accused of being 'in their silos', unwilling to see problems from a broader company perspective.

Unsurprisingly there was an enormous amount of attention paid by the middle managers to the attitudes and behaviours of the members of the senior-management group above them. In particular they were looking for role modeling of 'Worldclass' behaviour, and evidence of the contrary was having significant repercussions, with stories of *non*-'Worldclass' behaviour spreading quickly throughout the company.

Many quotations from the interviews endorse this as a major issue: 'John has the same warts now despite all the programmes the senior group have been through. So have many of them. It is surprising how few have left'; 'if there had been some "higher paid help" here I wouldn't have said it!' (another term of endearment referring to senior management!) On a well-known senior manager: 'He's frightening. He's a scary guy';

'That will go down well when they get the feedback!'; 'They are prima donnas!'; 'He's vicious'; 'only three out of eight of our top management are committed'; 'They cannot say "do as I say not as I do"': 'Have *they* bought into the values? I genuinely believe they have *not*.'

Finally there was a small minority of more fundamental critics, who expressed not only doubts about continuity and commitment, but also about the real intentions of those in power. One person expressed his belief that the 'Worldclass' programme accreditation process was a clandestine selection process to allow the company to identify candidates for redundancy.

A typology of responses to the 'Worldclass' programme

Early on in the research it occurred to me that the *individual* responses to 'Worldclass' could be divided up into six categories or 'ideal types' which I labelled: 'critical thinkers', 'untouched professionals', 'evangelists', 'open cynics', 'sceptics' and 'actors'. I had not preconceived these categories, indeed some of the categories, particularly the evangelists and the untouched professionals, were wholly unexpected, and the labels themselves were only added after the categories had clearly emerged. In order to avoid reifying these constructs, however, I have avoided labelling individuals or attempting to quantify the number of responses falling into each 'ideal type'. The fluid nature of the declared responses to the programme, the situated nature of these responses and the artificial boundaries implied by these types meant that I could use them only as a process for structuring my thinking. As such though, they were helpful.

Figure 1 plots these response types along the two dimensions of critical/uncritical and committed/uncommitted.

The critical thinkers

Those exhibiting this response type during the interviews and workshops were a small group of highly committed, yet constantly questioning individuals. They encouraged debate, and challenged upwardly without fear, yet were never cynical. They had confidence to speak freely, and behaved in a manner which was congruent with
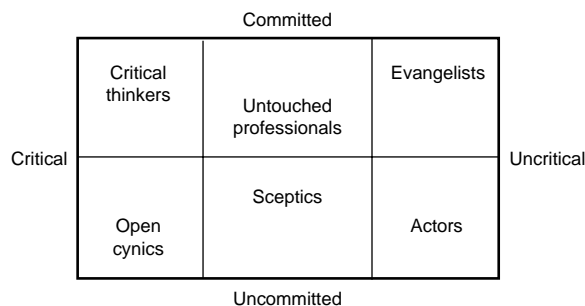

Figure 1. Typology of individual managers' responses to the Worldclass programme

their own beliefs. Those manifesting these characteristics tended to be well-educated, favouring a leadership style of involvement and participation. They were unafraid to deviate from the 'party line', yet were passionately committed to the organization. Their openness and ability to be reflective indicated self-confidence and depth of understanding, and their discussions were handled with an intellectual curiosity often lacking in the wider population of Aeroco managers.

Untouched professionals

This response type was quite common throughout the 'Worldclass' population. Those demonstrating these traits were relatively committed to the company, although by virtue of a professional qualification or expertise they were aware of their market value and many said that they would be willing to move for a more favourable offer. Their involvement with Aeroco was often therefore of a more calculative than moral nature (Etzioni, 1961). Their response to 'Worldclass' tended to be that it was an excellent idea, but that it did not concern or affect them personally in their own job.

Evangelists

Those exhibiting these traits were also small in number, but they exhibited a devotion to Aeroco and 'Worldclass' bordering on religious fervour. There was an element of blind faith in their relationship with Aeroco. They also tended to be managers who worked long hours, often to the detriment of family life, as Aeroco seemed to provide the meaning in their lives. Managers manifesting these traits preferred not to question the company line. One manager in this group

even declared: 'I would die for Aeroco. I live and breathe the company'.

Open cynics

Those who manifested openly cynical behaviour were also a small group. There were few who were willing to openly declare their cynicism about 'Worldclass', and their belief that it was simply a manipulative tool, designed as a mechanism of control. However, such managers did of course exist. They were often long-serving, and some spoke of disappointment in their careers, which had left them bitter or resentful. However, this was not always the case. There were also a few in this group who also demonstrated characteristics of the untouched professionals group by exhibiting an arrogance and confidence that they were so valuable to the company that they could afford to be openly cynical without fear. Some took the view that the company needed them more than they needed the company. They tended to be seen as rebellious at the modules, and often disruptive and disconcerting to others.

Sceptics

There were many managers who exhibited sceptical behaviour. These managers were openly committed to their jobs and to their local site management, but sceptical about the value of the 'Worldclass' programme its chances of success, or the sincerity of Aeroco's senior management. They tended to conform whenever they were exposed, preferring not to stand out from the crowd, but were openly sceptical amongst their peer group and often with their subordinates.

Actors

Most of the sceptics acknowledged that they had to 'play the game' some of the time, but the difference with those manifesting this behaviour was that they seemed to be acting *most* of the time. Many of these managers acknowledged that they were driven to these behaviours by insecurity or distrust. Like those demonstrating evangelistic behaviours, the 'actors' appeared uncritical in their thinking, preferring the route of *resigned behavioural compliance* whilst at work. They showed little emotional or moral involvement with the company, making it a policy to

survive in what they perceived to be a ruthless political climate. These managers were most likely to 'let their masks slip' when in the company of a manager playing the role of open cynic. Clearly this group was the hardest to identify, and skill was required in the research process. The most clear evidence emerged, however, through frequent examples of self-contradiction during the course of an interview or across different conversations. In addition it appeared in sweeping assertions which could not be substantiated after deeper probing.

It is important to reinforce the point made earlier that I did not see these as discrete groups, but as convenient labels to aid understanding of the differing responses to the programme. Some managers were found to manifest a number of different responses along the continuums of critical/uncritical and committed/uncommitted over a period of time, acknowledging the influence of a range of factors, some of which will be discussed below.

Influences on response types

Age, length of service, profession and gender

Two factors which I had felt important to investigate in assessing the responses to the 'Worldclass' programme were *age* and *length of service*. There was a less clear-cut pattern found amongst specific age groups than might have been expected. Certainly, there were hardened cynics amongst the group nearing retiring age; but there were also many of this age group who welcomed change and showed a real commitment to 'Worldclass'. Whilst some admitted to 'acting', others were exhibiting signs of strong loyalty and commitment to the values, and had opted to actively role model these to their teams.

Equally, amongst the younger population there was a mixed response. There were, however, a higher number of 'critical thinkers' amongst this population – i.e. those who had reflected deeply on the real implications of a culture change programme like 'Worldclass' – whereas the older population contained more managers following through 'blind faith', those who have been labelled the evangelists. The younger group appeared to contain an approximately equal number of 'actors', – those who for political and career reasons were opting to 'play the game'.

Length of service correlated very highly with age in Aeroco. There were many very long servers, which partially explains the long memories and deep-rooted prejudices discussed above. Very little 'new blood' had been recruited at this level for many years, and consequently it was a rather insular population. There was evidence that where outsiders had been introduced, they tended to be very receptive to 'Worldclass', often because they had already experienced similar programmes in previous companies. The critical-thinker population was, however, drawn as much from those who had worked their way up though the organization as from those who had recently joined; and there were both evangelists and actors who had been recruited from other companies. The untouched professionals usually tended to have experienced other companies during their careers, though this was not always the case. They were found in all age groups of this population.

The influence of membership of a function seemed to play a much smaller role in a manager's response to 'Worldclass' than the influence of his or her site or business unit. Whilst manufacturing people frequently complained of the difficulties of taking time off the job for the 'Worldclass' programme, the strength of this feeling varied considerably across business units. Membership of a professional group, however, did seem to have a stronger influence in some areas as discussed above. There was often a strong relationship between possessing a valuable expertise or qualification and feeling detached or untouched by the 'Worldclass' programme, or indeed any corporate programmes or initiatives. This tendency was common amongst accountants and lawyers (and consequently prevalent in Head Office); as well as amongst scientists (prevalent at the company's Research Centre) and sales and marketing professionals. They felt that programmes of this nature were not directed at them, and this belief was often reinforced by the behaviours and responses of the senior managers to whom they reported, giving them the message that they need not take 'Worldclass' too seriously.

The influence of gender on responses would have been a very interesting one to explore had the sample of women interviewed in the population been large enough to establish whether any trends existed. However, only four women managers were interviewed: one was highly evangelistic; one sceptical; one was thinking critically and one was openly cynical. Even within this small group, therefore, significant diversity emerged, suggesting that whilst gender was undoubtedly influencing the emotional relationship between an individual and her organization, neither women nor men seemed to be restricted to any particular response type.

Organization culture and politics

It became clear early on in the research that the Aeroco business units, many of which had had to fight hard for survival through the difficult years of the late 1980s and early 1990s, had also been particularly prone to the ubiquitous 'initiative' over the previous decade. This was unsurprising given the severe threats that the businesses had encountered, and the apparently infallible and all embracing solutions being offered by the consultants who had jumped on an increasingly popular bandwagon of culture-change initiatives. Aeroco had been no different from many other companies in this respect, and the different business units had each experimented with and discarded a series of fads in turn, disappointed that each did not in the end offer the panacea that was promised. However, the legacy of these initiatives was still strong, and their memory still very vivid, resulting in a variety of responses to the new programme.

First, as might be expected there was considerable initiative fatigue evident in many parts of the business. Indeed the term 'initiative fatigue' was widely used by the interviewees, and was a familiar concept to many. 'At one time we had two hundred initiatives running – just in our business unit'; 'They've seen two hundred and thirty seven initiatives already, two hundred and thirty six of which have failed'. It was equally clear that in the briefing about the 'Worldclass' programme and the values, the Board had frequently stressed the distinction between the deep-rooted, values-driven nature of the 'Worldclass' programme and the quick-fix initiatives of the past. 'Worldclass', it was stressed, was here to stay and not to be perceived as another initiative. There was evidence that this message was being heard, and many were taking it seriously: ''Worldclass' should be a philosophy not an initiative', although poor coordination between business units and Head Office, and the introduction of this programme when others were still running

did appear to be causing some unnecessary and frustrating duplications: 'I've done 360° feedback about five times. It's a nightmare!'.

The exercise of uncovering past initiatives during the interviews, and testing out the respondents' memories of these was both fascinating and revealing. Most managers could remember the *labels* attached to these. Many, however, could not say what the initials stood for any more, although most people could hesitantly explain the general ethos of each of the initiatives they had encountered. Some of these initiatives, for example, *PROSPER*, had been introduced into a number of the businesses; often because they had been championed by a senior manager who had then moved and taken the philosophy with him. Others, such as 'The Blackburn Journey' were business, or in this case, site specific. Irrespective of their global or local nature, however, it soon became clear, that those initiatives which were readily associated with a strong and charismatic leader were those which were the most memorable, and which the respondents tended to associate with success.

Questions were asked to ascertain the impact of previous initiatives on the willingness and ability of managers to accept, absorb and live the 'Worldclass' values. There was some evidence of cynicism and confusion: 'People think "yet another initiative"! Is it going to come to anything? What's it got to do with me?'; 'There was a bit of confusion aligning "Worldclass" to *PROSPER* during the interim phase'. However, confusion and cynicism were less widely encountered than had been expected. Interestingly, the converse seemed to be true: that those business units which had encountered the most initiatives, and could therefore have been expected to have been the most 'fatigued' by these initiatives tended to be the *most* receptive to 'Worldclass', and the *most* willing to accept the messages and values at its core.

This is an interesting finding, as it runs counter to Pascale's (1990) claim of organizations suffering from initiative fatigue. Indeed, the evidence of this research suggests that organizations which have encountered change through serial initiatives may as a result be *more* receptive (and not less so as Pascale might suggest) to anything new (such as the 'Worldclass' programme) and might even indicate that 'fad fatigue' may in some cases give way to 'fad addiction'. This tentative finding will be the focus of further research.

There also appeared to be a relationship between those businesses which had been 'closest to the edge' (i.e. experiencing mass reductions in size or threat of closure) and a *high* level of acceptance of the 'Worldclass' programme. Those parts of the business which had been secure and relatively unthreatened during the economic recession or which had been protected by the company tended to be less accepting in general. It was not clear whether it was the experienced need for change which made a business unit's managers receptive to change, or whether it was familiarity with change 'initiatives' which made 'Worldclass' more acceptable. It is likely, however, that the two factors were linked.

The most common thread to emerge consistently from the respondents was that Aeroco had been and was still perceived as a 'blame culture'. The language of this culture was strong and illustrated by the following: 'We are risk averse'; 'we are blamed for failure'; 'intolerant of failure'; 'in a fear culture it is difficult to protest'; 'people gauge their audience before they say things'. 'We're not lions we're donkeys'; 'people say all the right things'. Linked to this was evidence of strong spending controls and at times excessive bureaucracy. There was talk of 'levels of disapproval'; 'We have to flatten the organization – get rid of the form with the fifteen signatures' and an interesting quote: 'It is easier to have sex with the cleaner than to get authorisation to spend!'.

There was a strong feeling that in this blame culture, it was arrogance and machismo that was rewarded. 'Wimps will get fired'. 'We publicize failure. It is well-known throughout the organization who did it and what happened to them'. There was also a strong prevailing belief that it was considered weak to express fear or doubt: 'One of the biggest embarrassments in Aeroco is to ask for help. It is seen as a failure'. An associated dominant feature of Aeroco culture was the strong task orientation which was leading to the constant need for action, to the detriment of reflection: 'We are a totally task-focused organization'; 'we could even be accused of making innovation and technology a task!'.

The cultural components of control, fear, blame, machismo and task orientation all led to some doubts and scepticism about the wisdom of personally adopting the messages of creativity and innovation which were communicated at the innovation and technology module: 'Look at John

Smith! He was bounced for being too radical'; 'In Aeroco a free spirit would be stifled. He wouldn't want to join'. In Aeroco, politics clearly played an enormous role in every day managerial life. Being adopted as a protégé by a powerful senior manager could subsequently result in multiple career moves as the mentor himself was promoted. In the case of almost all the successful managers in the research, particularly those who had moved across business units, their moves had happened in this way. 'Fiefdoms', 'power barons', and 'Machiavellian power play' were all accepted in Aeroco's language and understood. 'Mafias' within the company were also widely accepted as a daily part of organizational life. A long-serving manager told in his interview of the factions in his business unit at senior level: 'Bill fosters "yes" men. Those who follow him are known as the "six pack"' (there were six of them).

Most of those interviewed were astute enough to know how to protect themselves and what behaviours were rewarded in their businesses. It had become clear to most of them that it would be 'Worldclass' behaviour that would be rewarded in future, although some were still looking for some indisputable evidence of this, for example, in the form of some firings for non-'Worldclass' behaviour within the senior-management group. Surprised that this had not yet happened, they nevertheless took comfort from the lateral moves of a number of apparently non-'Worldclass' managers to be replaced by the new breed of 'much-more "Worldclass" managers'. When asked about what it meant to be 'Worldclass' the definitions varied little: 'a manager who doesn't shout', 'listens', 'involves his staff', 'communicates', 'shares information and collaborates with others' were all symbols of a 'Worldclass' manager – generally behaviours encompassed by the 'People' value.

Chastizing colleagues for non-'Worldclass' behaviour had already become an agreeable and low-risk way to point out unacceptable, or anti-social behaviour, and particularly to rebuke behaviour which showed a parochial or aggressive approach. The discourse of 'Worldclass' was becoming used in various ways: 'People are now citing "Worldclass" behaviour slightly tongue-in-cheek to deal with the issues of cooperation' (often across business units); 'It is creeping in . . . it's a bit of a mickey take but with a degree of seriousness'; 'It's used cynically at times but the fact is it *is* used'. In some business units the 'tongue-in-cheek' element smoothed the process and enabled managers to cover their embarrassment at using the corporate language as ammunition. In more 'advanced' business units with a higher acceptance of the 'Worldclass' values, the language was used more directly and seriously, without the need for flippancy. There was, however, considerable evidence of these managers (and their superiors) 'acting out' the expected parts, and evidencing 'resigned behavioural compliance': 'Many are mimicking the change'; 'People have to say they're committed'; 'You keep your head down'; 'You do what your manager wants you to do'; 'We had a good time. Nobody refused to engage. One person – an accountant – nearly did, but he stuck at it *and played his part*'.

One manager admitted to having been briefed to this effect by his business unit prior to attendance at the 'Worldclass' programme: 'We were told what the party line should be . . . that we should reinforce the initiatives taking place here!' Other quotations support this evidence: 'My MD says he supports it but I've heard that before'; 'I'll be the good soldier. I'm a company man and I'll still be a company man despite the difficulties with it'; '. . . so I decided to buy in'; 'Yeah – if I was interviewed for a another job I'm sure I'd talk about it'. In some ways it was remarkable how fast this language had been assimilated into the business. Certainly in some business units the research found that it was already part of the managers' every-day business language and used without cynicism.

Another aspect of Aeroco's culture which played a major role in influencing views and beliefs was the role of the hero. Many stories told by the managers suggested that heroes had long played an important part of organizational life in Aeroco. Every business unit seemed to have had its own heroes, and each was described almost lovingly as though he were a nurturing parent or older relative. This was summed up by a tender though jocular reference to a main Board member as 'Uncle George'. Leaders most respected were those who 'led from the front', and were considered 'inspirational', 'charismatic' and 'forward-thinking'. The implications of this finding for the 'Worldclass' programme were that role modelling behaviours were very important for the embedding of values into the business units. It was

notable in the business units with the strongest leaders that these leaders were highly influential in setting the pace and extent to which 'World-class' was integrated into the business unit. In business units with strong leaders who preached a more local or parochial message, or who demonstrated more maverick tendencies, the enthusiasm for 'Worldclass' was weaker than in the business units where the values had been unconditionally adopted by the MD. This is not perhaps surprising as the message being communicated in the business units with maverick-style leaders was one of local superiority, the feeling of being 'ahead of the game' and not feeling the same need as others for the corporate wide programme unless it could be adapted to meet local needs.

Stories were found to be extremely powerful influencers of the '1500 group'. (Abravanel, 1983; Pondy, 1983; Wilkins, 1983). What was once a highly-dispersed loose federation of businesses was now moving toward a cohesive and integrated corporation. Stories about 'Worldclass' were numerous and appear to have travelled to all corners of the UK through the newly-formed informal networks arising through participation at the modules. Two such stories were about speakers at 'Worldclass' events becoming irritated by questions from the floor, and inadvertently displaying what was perceived as 'un-"Worldclass" behaviour' by shouting or losing patience. These travelled round the company within days of the event with embellishments being added at each telling. Sometimes the stories even had different characters playing the lead role. Nevertheless it was evident that there was truth at the heart of each story and that the 'reverting-to-type' behaviours exhibited by members of the senior management '130 group' were extremely damaging to the success of the programme.

Conclusion

This paper has set out to demonstrate the complexity and dangers of organizations engaging in programmes which seek to control managerial behaviours for economic purpose, without attending to the emotion and perceptions of those to whom these messages are directed. Promoted by many as a panacea to resolve all corporate problems, cultural change programmes such as the 'Worldclass' programme at Aeroco have been attempted by all but a few large organizations, many like Aeroco spending millions of pounds in an endeavour that they become more than simply fads. As has been illustrated, the outcomes of the 'Worldclass' programme can never be measurable in the way the company had hoped. The programme undoubtedly had a profound effect on the self-identities of those managers involved, but the long-term impact of it on them or on the organization can neither be controlled nor predicted.

The narratives of the managers have indicated that the repercussions and responses to this ideological programme are much more complex than can be slotted neatly into a debate between humanists desiring to create the conditions for empowerment; and critical theorists seeking to expose the tyranny of organizations wishing to 'govern the soul' (Barker, 1993; Rose, 1989; Sievers, 1986; Willmott, 1993). Certainly both readings of the Aeroco case are possible, and the narratives of the managers were found to encompass both. However, much more was also found to be occurring. The shaping and reshaping of self-identity was constantly being enacted; the continual monitoring of each other's behaviours and reactions indicated the importance of belongingness to these managers; and the critical comments about those above them demonstrated their sense of disappointment on finding that their senior managers were no more infallible than themselves.

This paper has been about the meanings and contradictions experienced by a group of middle managers experiencing a corporate-change programme. It has confirmed that much of the existing literature, both mainstream and critical, tends to underplay the complex and individual nature of managers' responses to such programmes, and overlooks the unique situation in which the middle managers in these corporations find themselves. These findings suggest a strong need for further research into the experiences of middle managers during these change programmes. In particular, there is now an urgent need to focus on the legacy left by these ideological programmes after the initial impetus and momentum has died down, and the corporate managers who initiated them move on to new strategic challenges. What happens then to the identities of these middle managers? Even in Aeroco this haunting question remains unanswered.

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