

INTERPRETING ORGANIZATIONAL TEXTS

by

Manfred KETS DE VRIES*
Danny MILLER**

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* Manfred KETS DE VRIES, INSEAD, Fontainebleau, France

** Danny MILLER, McGill University, Faculty of Management and
Ecole des Hautes Etudes Commerciales, Montreal, Canada

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Manfred F.R. Kets de Vries *

Danny Miller **

- * Professor, The European Institute of Business Administration (INSEAD), Fontainebleau, France
- ** Associate Professor, McGill University Faculty of Management and Ecole des Hautes Etudes Commerciales, Montreal, Canada

The mere observing of a thing is no use whatsoever. Observing turns into beholding, beholding into thinking, thinking into establishing connections, so that one may say that every attentive glance we cast on the world is an act of theorizing ...

Goethe

In one of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's detective stories Dr. Watson decides to teach Sherlock Holmes a lesson in humility by challenging him to what he believes is an impossible task. He hands Sherlock Holmes a watch and asks him about the character of the owner, Watson's late brother.

[Your brother] was a man of untidy habits - very untidy and careless. He was left with good prospects, but he threw away his chances, ... and finally, taking to drink, he died.

Watson reacts with great surprise and asks if it was mere guess work to which Sherlock Holmes replies:

No, no, I never guess... What seems strange to you is only so because you do not follow my train of thought or observe the small facts on which large inferences may depend. For example, I began by stating that your brother was careless. When you observe the lower part of that watch case, you notice that it is not only dented in two places, but it is cut and marked all over from the habit of keeping other hard objects, such as coins or keys, in the same pocket. Surely, it is no great feat to assume that a man who treats a fifty-guinea watch so cavalierly must be a careless man. Neither is it a very far-fetched inference that a man who inherits one article of such value is pretty well provided for in other respects ...

... look at the innerplate which contains the keyhole. Look at the thousands of scratches all around the hole - marks where the key has slipped. What sober man's key could have

scored those grooves? But you will never see a drunkard's watch without them. He winds it at night, and he leaves these traces of his unsteady hand. Where is the mystery in all this? (Conan Doyle, 1930, pp. 91-93)

READING THE SIGNS

To some extent we are all like Sherlock Holmes, detectives, trying to decipher and interpret what is happening in the world. We are constantly bombarded with different kinds of information. Sometimes we understand its meaning, sometimes we are at a loss, and often we don't even realize that an important piece of evidence is being presented. In every situation - the study of organizations is no exception - our task is to make sense of things, to get behind the surface and disclose the underlying significance. Inevitably, we engage in interpretive acts. Sherlock Holmes is a fictional translator of signs; he had the ability to explain the significance of whatever signs could be found on the watch. In a sense he transformed the watch into a "text" - a critical incident, entity, or story which can be read only if one is "literate" enough. If scholars of organizations and managers want to make sense out of their world they must pay attention to such texts. They need to interpret the way these stories unfold; to assemble their fragments into a coherent whole. They have to find the hidden meanings, consequences and motives behind acts, decisions and social behavior.

In studying organizations we can "interpret their texts" through the analysis of managerial statements, writings and observable behavior (Zaleznik & Kets de Vries, 1984). The text implicit in a specific strategic decision, or the choice of a particular interpersonal style or type of organizational structure can also be scrutinized. It is useful to be alert to the underlying themes, the meanings behind the metaphors of managers, the reasons for the selection of certain words and the implication of certain activities (Martin, 1982; Barley, 1983; Riley, 1983). This can help scholars and managers to recognize the crucial orientations and assumptions that influence organizational culture, strategy and structure; an important step towards understanding, diagnosis and therapy. In this paper our emphasis will be on the analysis of leaders and their effects. We have found the personalities of the founders and senior executives to be of key importance in the creation of organization culture, strategy and structure (Kets de Vries & Miller, 1984b). Although this is our point of departure, the analysis of organizational texts pertains equally to more sociological and anthropological views of organizations.

We shall briefly discuss the roots and modes of the analysis of text as it can be found in the fields of cultural anthropology, psychoanalysis and hermeneutics. We will emphasize their methodological similarities in spite of the fact that these traditions vary greatly in theme and context. The focus will be on the psychoanalytic interpretive procedure which will be used on

actual managerial situations to illustrate their applications. Some common rules are then derived for analyzing managerial texts.

ANTHROPOLOGICAL ROOTS

In many empirical attempts to study organizations there has been a lack of scientific imagination; a tendency to overlook so much of the real data. The intrinsic richness is lost. We are left with rather superficial descriptions that neglect the underlying factors that could explain managerial and organizational behavior. We are reminded of a comment ascribed to Thoreau: "It is not worth it to go round the world to count cats in Zanzibar".

To counter this trend, anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973) advocates the search for deep underlying structures while remaining firmly in touch with reality. He urges that we go beyond the obvious and superficial. Geertz distinguishes between "thin description" and "thick description", borrowing the notions of Gilbert Ryle. The first approach typifies traditional studies that concentrate on narrow observables and a simple relating of facts. Thick description, however, is interpretive. Like literary criticism it involves an iterative process of analysis that seeks out the basic significance of events. It searches for a theme that can explain a myriad of facts. It is, in Geertz's words, "guessing at meanings, assessing the guesses and drawing explanatory conclusions from the better guesses" (1973, p. 20).

Such an approach involves the study of "text"; the analysis of "a multiplicity of complex conceptual structures, many of them superimposed or knotted into one another, which are at once, strange, irregular, and inexplicit, and which we must continue somehow first to grasp and then to render" (Geertz, 1973, p. 10). "Texts" can be viewed as groupings of interrelated elements, all types of data that contain messages and themes that can be systematized. In decoding texts significance is extracted from the interrelated factual, cognitive and affective units that make them up and are themselves constructed out of similar units representing experiences. The observer in his or her search for meaning becomes like a translator and cryptographer, transforming different levels of understanding.

Lévi-Strauss's (1955) structural analysis method represents quite a different interpretative tradition. It employs an elaborate coding scheme to study cultural myths. According to Lévi-Strauss, the function of myths is to exhibit publicly, through a disguise, ordinary paradoxes. Although its basic meaning may become embodied in different forms, each myth will be expressed in a common structural message which often centers around the dialectic of opposition, mediation and transformation; it will resemble a series of texts all realizing the same essence. Lévi-Strauss takes the constituent units of myths to be mythemes; the phrases or minimal sentences, which, because of their position in the context, describe an important relationship between the different

aspects, incidents and characters of the tale. These are viewed as gross constituent units, bundles of relations between mythic elements. Mythemes are determined by the principles of all structural analysis: economy of explanation, unity of solution and the possibility of restructuring the whole from only a fragment. The meaning of the narrative is given by the specific form and purpose of the discovered relationship between the bundles of mythic elements (Lévi-Strauss, 1955, 1969).

PSYCHOANALYTIC AND HERMENEUTIC CONTRIBUTIONS

Too often, anthropologists have ignored the affective dimensions of text and its historical sources. Things are not studied over time. The work of hermeneutics in psychoanalysis avoids these omissions (Zaleznik & Kets de Vries, 1984). For Freud the semantics of desire became the basis for understanding a text. Freud developed a theory aimed at revealing the messages hidden in manifest statements and the desires implicit in these messages. He wished to understand the resistances against expressing these desires to better comprehend the patient's basic fears and needs. His early work on dreams is illustrative. Freud was trying to solve the riddle of dreams; to discover the hidden logic of its processes. He claimed in his magnum opus The Interpretation of Dreams (1900) that:

The dream-work is only the first to be discovered of a whole series of unconscious, hidden psychical processes, responsible for the generation of hysterical symptoms, of

phobias, obsessions and delusions. Condensation and, above all, displacement are invariable characteristics of these other processes as well .., (1900, p. 671).

Lévi-Strauss's analysis of chains of phrases, minimal sentences and metaphors in myths is similar to Freud's study of condensation and displacement in dream-work. In condensation many ideas or allied experiences are compressed into a single thought or word; in displacement emotions are transferred from the original idea to which they are attached to other ideas. The themes and symbols that result from an individual's continuing subjective experience create an evolving series of "signifiers". This latter term originates with de Saussure (1915) who distinguished between a sound image or its graphic equivalent (signifier) and its concept or meaning, the signified. The process of displacement and condensation and the influence of social forces, cause certain signifiers to come to be preferred over others. These become manifest and recurrent in social interactions. What was initially a purely subjective experience becomes a text more readily open to interpretation by others, particularly in a clinical setting. Thus, like the structural anthropologist, the psychoanalyst becomes a code-breaker or interpreter. He "listens with the third ear", searching for hidden meanings in texts and looking for unconscious ideas and fantasies that underlie manifest experience.

Psychoanalysis as an interpretive science is often taken as the exemplary model of hermeneutics (Ricoeur, 1970, 1981; Apel, 1972; Radnitzky, 1973; Steele, 1979; Leavy, 1980). The term hermeneutic

comes from the classical Greek verb Hermeneuein, to interpret. In ancient Greece the priest at the Delphi oracle was called Hermeneios. The Greek god Hermes, the messenger of Zeus, was credited with "transmitting what is beyond human understanding into a form that human intelligence can grasp" (Palmer, 1969, p.13). Given this lofty origin it is not surprising that hermeneutics was originally confined to biblical exegesis and later applied to the systematic interpretation of the meaning behind myths and symbols. Modern hermeneutic thought, however, is concerned with the nature of human understanding, especially the task of interpreting texts.

In the psychoanalytic setting, a hermeneutic analysis strives to recreate or reexperience the thought of the creator of the text. It is, at least in principle, possible to enter into a dialogue. Since we realize that the text is created by a person, our understanding of the text will deepen if we reexperience the author's thoughts and check our empathic understanding (Watson, 1976; Lacan, 1978; Devereux, 1978; Levine, 1980). To do this, there is an effort to understand the individual's past, to examine his personal history for clues regarding his current behavior.

A major device for understanding the meaning of text in a psychoanalytic setting is the interpretation of transference (Greenson, 1967; Racker, 1968; Gill, 1982; Kets de Vries & Miller, 1984). Briefly stated, transference is a process whereby in the

present attitudes are repeated which developed earlier in life. Instead of remembering the past we often misunderstand the present in terms of the past and relive it through our actions. Thus the transference reactions that appear in the psychoanalytic dialogue can be considered as additional text, confirming or disconfirming other textual information about the person. It provides clues about the person's past and facilitates the recognition of fundamental themes and important defenses since these will often be acted out when the patient reacts to the analyst as though he were a key figure from the past.

SYNOPSIS

Before going on to an analysis of managerial texts it might be useful to summarize some of the key themes in the literature. First, there is a search for central themes in apparently unstructured processes. The patterns, ideas or sentiments that surface recurrently often appear to explain many consequences. We find the notions of compression and underlying structure - the idea that much surface complexity can be explained by an underlying organizing theme that is more basic and fundamental and that serves to organize the surface phenomena. This was suggested by Geertz (1973, 1983), Lévi Strauss (1955, 1969), and the proponents of hermeneutics.

Second, there is a search for elements that have not only logical

centrality, but deep, perhaps unconscious, emotional significance (see Freud, 1900, 1920; Lacan 1978; and Greenson, 1967). The affective components motivating a text may be crucial to its decoding. These components are best understood by some form of "historical" analysis. Finding out about the individual actors, their pasts and their current modes of interaction - transferential and otherwise - may disclose aspects of their key aspirations, goals and fears and explain their behavior. This involves dialogue.

Third, the literature emphasizes a process of discovery rather than a single stab at explanation. Initial interpretations must be tested against reality as it is perceived by others. Predictions are made - at least informally - using initial insights and these are compared to what actually happens, or are tested to determine if they can explain other parts of the text. Interpretation is a dynamic, iterative and interactive phenomenon that may bring insights but rarely provides any final, unitary "solutions". This gives way to tentative conjectures or explanations that are made more concrete and operational and checked against other aspects of the situation or future events (Palmer, 1969; Radnitzky, 1973). Hence the importance of dialogue, reformulation, historical analysis, tentative explanation and modification.

To illustrate the process of interpretation we shall present

several examples of actual managerial texts taken from our consulting experiences. These are of necessity disguised, incomplete and somewhat cryptic. We shall then offer some tentative interpretations, just to give readers a feeling for the process.

MANAGERIAL TEXTS: TWO CASE STUDIES

Orion Corporation

We start with a very simple example of a firm we worked closely with. The president of a medium-size company in the consumer goods industry in Canada decided to embark on a major expansion and modernization program. His efforts resulted in quadrupling the size of his relatively underutilized production plant, thus requiring much more equipment and business. The new facilities were located in a rundown section of town. The tangible result of the expansion was an eight-story square building which stood out among the decayed apartments and shabby little shops. The building became something of a costly albatross that drained the firm of much-needed capital. In erecting it the president of the company seemed to be making some kind of statement. For the organizational detective the question is how to make sense of it.

At one level, we can look at the president's decision to expand as constructive; he was not only modernizing the company but also

upgrading the neighborhood. His decision can also be seen as a vote of confidence in the future of the economy and in his own ability to make the expansion a success. But are these explanations sufficient? Are we getting the whole story?

To get other pieces of the puzzle in place it may be useful to enlarge the story and take a number of contextual factors into consideration. In trying to obtain a better understanding of the significance of this decision we found that the president's initiative ran counter to the wishes of all his executives, his outside advisers and even his family. Moreover, the decision was made at a time when most of his competitors were moving into offshore manufacturing or were starting operations in other parts of the country to avoid the high minimum wage in the province and the restrictive language legislation instituted by the political party in power.

Knowing all this, why did the president engage in such a seemingly irrational act? Why didn't he listen to anybody? Why did he go ahead even under such adverse business conditions? Certainly our first conjectures were far from complete and required more data gathering. The remarks of some competitors were revealing. They joked that the president suffered from an "edifice complex"; that he enjoyed showing off to the people in the neighborhood. The question of why he may have consciously or otherwise felt such a need remained unanswered. We needed still more contextual

information.

When we examined the personal history of the president we found that his relationships with authority figures were always fraught with conflict. Interviews disclosed his dominance by a rather overbearing and controlling mother who made him feel insignificant. It seems the president had come to Canada as a refugee without any means. He had to start all over again, as his previous education and experience were of little value. At the time, he lived in a small apartment not far away from his present new manufacturing facilities. He told of how hard it had been to hold a job and how others used to see him as a failure. His life at that time reinforced his previous feelings of insignificance. It increased his need to demonstrate that he amounted to something. Given his difficulties in fitting into a more structured situation, he eventually started his own firm. Through hard work and ingenuity he had built the company to its present size.

We inferred from the text - the interviews with the president, his executives, and his customers - that the president was still not satisfied with his accomplishments - that he needed more glory, more attention. To boost a shaky sense of self-esteem he felt he must be noticed. Perhaps this is why he made a "dramatic statement" by building a monument, a tangible symbol of his success in the world. Seeing this decision in the context of his

overall life history makes the irrational act of constructing a building and expanding at this inopportune time and place more understandable. This was where he had suffered many of his setbacks and disappointments, this was where he had to show people what he had become.

Usually it is not possible to know exactly why executives will behave in particular ways. But sometimes their acts can be viewed as a form of remembering. As indicated earlier, they will repeat important themes from the past. This is exceedingly useful when reading a text. In looking for thematic unity in the interpretation of text, we can try to "match patterns"; to find a correspondence between an unusual act and earlier events in the person's or organization's history. Such similarity often means there is a connection.

As an epilogue to this simple text we should add that this act almost bankrupted the company. With the high costs of operating the new facilities the drain on resources was great. Consequently, the executive group began to forget the business they were really in and became obsessed with problems of how to "fill" the building, and to keep the machinery running. This resulted in many ill-fated ventures and accelerated an already rapidly deteriorating financial situation.

This deceptively simple text of an expansion program turned out to

be only the tip of the proverbial iceberg. And we probably have only started to make sense of it. The text contains many themes. In this case the unifying thread appears to be an executive's grandiose ambitions and desire for applause. His dramatic style can be interpreted as a compensatory effort to combat a low sense of self-esteem deriving from childhood. And it reverberated throughout the organization. The president wanted to be surrounded by an admiring, "mirroring" audience. Why this need became so pressing at this particular point remains unanswered.

Let us now turn to a more complex organizational example. One common way of starting an analysis is by looking at an organization through the eyes of a newcomer. Whatever the exact role of the newcomer - newly hired executive, researcher, or consultant - each involves interpretation and making sense of an unstructured situation. Some thematic unity is sought to understand the organization. In going through this process the question becomes what should one be watchful for? How will one be able to weave the miscellaneous events into an interpreted and integrated tapestry? The reader is invited to look for the themes in the following disguised case study taken from our consulting experiences. (The interpretive passages are inserted in the text and are single-spaced).

Roland and Stone Inc.

John Bursk was vice president of wholesale sales at Roland and Stone, Inc. a manufacturer, wholesaler and retailer of high-priced men's shoes. He had been hired for his present job in the spring of 1982 by Jim Shields, the senior vice president marketing. The company had a fine manufacturing plant on which its reputation for quality had been built. But spiraling costs in the domestic shoe industry and shifts in consumer preferences from high-quality to high-fashion items forced the company to start importing shoes. Since the death of its two founders, the firm had been managed by members of the Roland family. The company went public in 1970 but the Roland family still held 38 percent of the stock, enough to confer effective control.

Bursk had been a successful salesman of high-priced jewelry in the New York area. He was alerted to the firm through an advertisement in the Wall Street Journal. Although Roland and Stone was an entirely different kind of business, the position of vice president and general manager for wholesale sales seemed to Bursk an opportunity to expand his managerial abilities and exploit his sales experience. After one telephone conversation with Jim Shields, the senior vice president of marketing, Bursk visited the home office for an interview with Shields and Jeremy Maxwell, the company's consultant. He thought it strange that he did not meet any of the other officers at the time. His request to do so was short-circuited by Shields who noted that the managers were "not available and in any case a discussion with

members of other departments would not be very helpful". He indicated a distaste for some of his colleagues without mentioning any names. Shields also said that Bursk could meet President George Roland after he began work. No explanation was given.

Perhaps his secretive, and hurried hiring should have given Bursk some idea of the disorganized situation he was getting into. It was an early indication of the climate of suspicion and distrust at Roland and Stone.

Jim Shields explained the current setup of the company and its evolution from a manufacturer of quality shoes to a merchandiser of more fashionable retail and wholesale lines. His hope was that importing would restore profits for Roland and Stone. Between 1976, when George Roland became the president, and 1980, net income after taxes had stayed approximately at around \$400,000. In 1980 net income dropped, and in the following years the company sustained ever-increasing losses. Sales remained constant at around \$18 million through 1982. The sales for 1983 fell by 20 per cent and a loss of \$250,000 was incurred.

When Jim Shields called back to offer Bursk the vice president's position he proposed a salary that approximated Bursk's present income. But the job seemed to present exactly the kind of challenge that Bursk wanted. His first responsibility would be to coordinate the efforts of the wholesale sales force of 15 people and to assist Jim Shields in promoting and strengthening the product lines, and developing new sales tools.

In his first few weeks at Roland and Stone it became obvious to John Bursk that there was very little communication between Jim Shields, Phil Tomey, vice president outlet stores, Howard Stern, vice president retail stores, and the president. Both Shields and Stern were hired after George Roland had become president (Exhibit 1 shows the organization chart).

President George Roland learned the business by working as his bullying father's assistant. He came into the company only reluctantly and at his father's insistence. Interviews with Roland suggested that childhood experiences with his domineering parents made him a shy, introverted, and detached manager who preferred technology to people and contemplation to socializing. In his very rare conversations with his managers Roland would talk longingly of in his younger days as an Air Force flight instructor. He speculated frequently on how things could have been had he pursued a military career. Indeed, he was something of an expert on World War I flying aces and incessantly read books on military strategy. His heroes were Clausewitz, Napoleon and Liddel-Hart.

On the few occasions that Bursk had contact with the president he seemed quite aloof and even absent minded. A memo that Bursk once sent him about a possible change in a major supplier had never been answered. George Roland was rarely in his office. In fact, his associations with other officers of the company appeared to be

limited to occasional lunchtime meetings.

Roland and Stone seems to be a typical example of what Kets de Vries & Miller (1984a, 1984b, 1986) have called a detached, schizoid firm. The aloof leadership style of the president reverberates throughout his organization. George Roland, displays indecisiveness and disinterest; he seems removed from day-to-day operations. His behavior seems to have created an organizational culture in which second tier gamesmen are allowed to run wild.

One of the first things John Bursk noted when he took over the wholesale sales force and examined the accounts was the large proportion of independent dealers who ordered only from one to ten pairs of shoes a year, a far cry from the 200-400 pair orders that Jim Shields had said were the backbone of the business.

Bursk was skeptical about the effects of contract manufacturing on Roland and Stone's product quality image. The main suppliers of fashion shoes were a number of contract manufacturers and a buying cartel in Italy. Product quality was uneven and unpredictable, and delivery from suppliers had been unsatisfactory. The combination of poor deliveries and rapid style changes led to inventory shortages, which inevitably hurt the company's reputation for customer service. Market share fell. Shields evolved an elaborate justification for the status quo, however, cautioning Bursk to refrain from ever bringing these matters to the attention of the president or the other executives.

Reporting procedures at Roland and Stone were so informal that Bursk felt thwarted in communicating his ideas. Shields, the

senior vice president for marketing to whom he reported, had no purchasing experience. He spent a lot of time at trade shows, and preferred to rely on his own intuition about styles rather than on industry statistics (he himself had been an award-winning stylist). Shields also seemed lukewarm about what Bursk had to tell him about new styles or the success of new product lines or the products of competitors. When there was an important decision to be made, Bursk noted that Shields would try individually to get the ear of the president, taking care not to let any other managers know about his intentions. He noticed, however, that George Roland was rarely available. His detached, vague style did not encourage communication.

In the warehouse operations, Bursk found a lack of any reporting arrangement between management and employees. Offices and warehouse were in the same building complex, but communication between them was all by pneumatic tube or telephone.

Each store manager seemed to have complete control over his store, but Bursk discovered in discussions with retail store managers that they were not informed of the monthly profit and loss statements computed by the accounting department.

Diligent environmental scanning is absent in this company; the focus of the information system is internal. Losses, stagnating sales, changing market trends, inroads by competitors are ignored or rationalized. Personal ambitions and catering to the top managers' desires hold sway. Barriers impede the flow of information, rendering specific functions ignorant of crucial concerns. Information is used mainly as a power resource; even

the store managers don't know how well they are doing.

A number of uncooperative and independent fiefdoms exists in this company. For example, the salesforce is highly independent, acting on its own in a rather large territory. There are minimal, uncertain or contested reporting relationships; there is a lack of communication.

When Bursk raised some of the issues concerning retail store operations during a lunch meeting with Howard Stern, he was astonished at Stern's angry reaction. He wasn't responsible, he said, and referred repeatedly to "those secrecy mongers". Bursk himself had discovered a kind of "bunker mentality" between the three sales divisions of the company. The reluctance to share information and arrive at coordinated action was striking.

If an issue came to a vote during one of the monthly executive committee meetings, Phil Tomey and Ed Clark would nearly always vote against a proposal backed by Howard Stern. Jim Shields was less predictable while George Roland - if he was present - would waver between the different factions and plead for more time to consider things. The proponents of the various proposals might make excellent arguments. In fact, the better the arguments, the faster the others would drive the issue to a vote to ensure defeat of the motion. Poor, transparently political proposals were, however, discussed ad nauseum so that their antagonists could seize debating points in the presence of George Roland.

We can see that strategy is insular, internally focused and vacillates according to who gets the ear of George Roland. Only piecemeal changes occur. An overall strategic theme does not

exist as strategy resides in the parochial considerations of shifting coalitions of managers of outlet discount stores, retail stores and wholesale sales, each trying to advance their pet projects. The interests of one group of managers, however salutary, are often neutralized or severely blunted by the other groups.

Even from this brief excerpt of text the themes of secrecy, political fighting, fragmentation, conflict, indecision, and leaderlessness become apparent. The individual events paint a picture of a syndrome that broadly characterizes Roland and Stone, helps to explain its myriad symptoms, and may be germane to its poor performance. It seems likely that the leadership vacuum created fragmentation, which gave rise to conflict and politicizing. This in turn made for a climate of secrecy, thwarted collaboration, and thereby precluded the emergence of a unified, responsive strategy.

RULES OF INTERPRETATION

In closing, it may be useful to propose a number of tentative rules for interpreting text. We can start with the rule of thematic unity. When we read a text we try to shape the different observations into an interconnected, cohesive unit. We have seen from our two case examples that we are looking for communality among the various themes (Spence, 1981). In our first case example, thematic unity centered around the need for grandiosity and applause, while in our lengthy case example the intricacies of the interplay of a detached leadership style and a fragmented, politicized "schizoid" organization became the central focus.

Kets de Vries and Miller (1984), and Miller and Friesen (1984) have highlighted the extent to which a number of common themes underlie the structural and strategic inadequacies of failing

organizations. It seemed remarkable that so many symptoms could be explained and subsumed by a given theme that encompassed so much of what was wrong with the organization. In most cases, the themes were not very subtle or hidden.

Secondly, in interpreting text we are engaged in pattern matching. We are searching for structural parallels, looking for a "fit" between present day events and earlier incidents in the history of an individual or organization. We are looking for revealing repetition (Geertz 1973). Pattern matching is based on the tendency among each of us to become entangled in "displacements in time". Instead of remembering the past we may misunderstand the present in terms of the past and relive it through our actions. We often react to significant others or important situations as if these were figures or incidents from the past (Greenson, 1967). What might have been an appropriate reaction at one time now turns out to be transparently anachronistic. An example of pattern matching is found in our first illustration: in the inappropriate construction of the massive building. By noticing this information we were alerted to the manager's concerns about his self worth and how his need to be noticed repeats itself. In the Roland and Stone case we saw how detachment and politization coincided. The president's personal style of keeping distant may, in his youth, have been a sound protective reaction against his domineering parents. It probably was safer for him to not commit himself. What had once been very prudent behavior became very

dysfunctional in an organizational setting.

Thirdly, interpretation can be guided by the rule of psychological urgency (Freud 1920; Lacan, 1978). The assumption behind this rule is that somewhere in the text it is always possible to identify the most pressing problem or problems. In our first example, we can guess that the feeling of being insignificant combined with the wish for grandiosity were the catalysts leading to the decision to expand. This concern will probably continue to pulsate through the company. In Roland and Stone the president's wish to withdraw and the power-hungry second tier managers' lack of concern of what would be beneficial to the total company are at the core of the difficulties. It is important, then, to pay attention to the persistence, enthusiasm, regularity, pervasiveness, and emotion surrounding decisions, interactions and pronouncements.

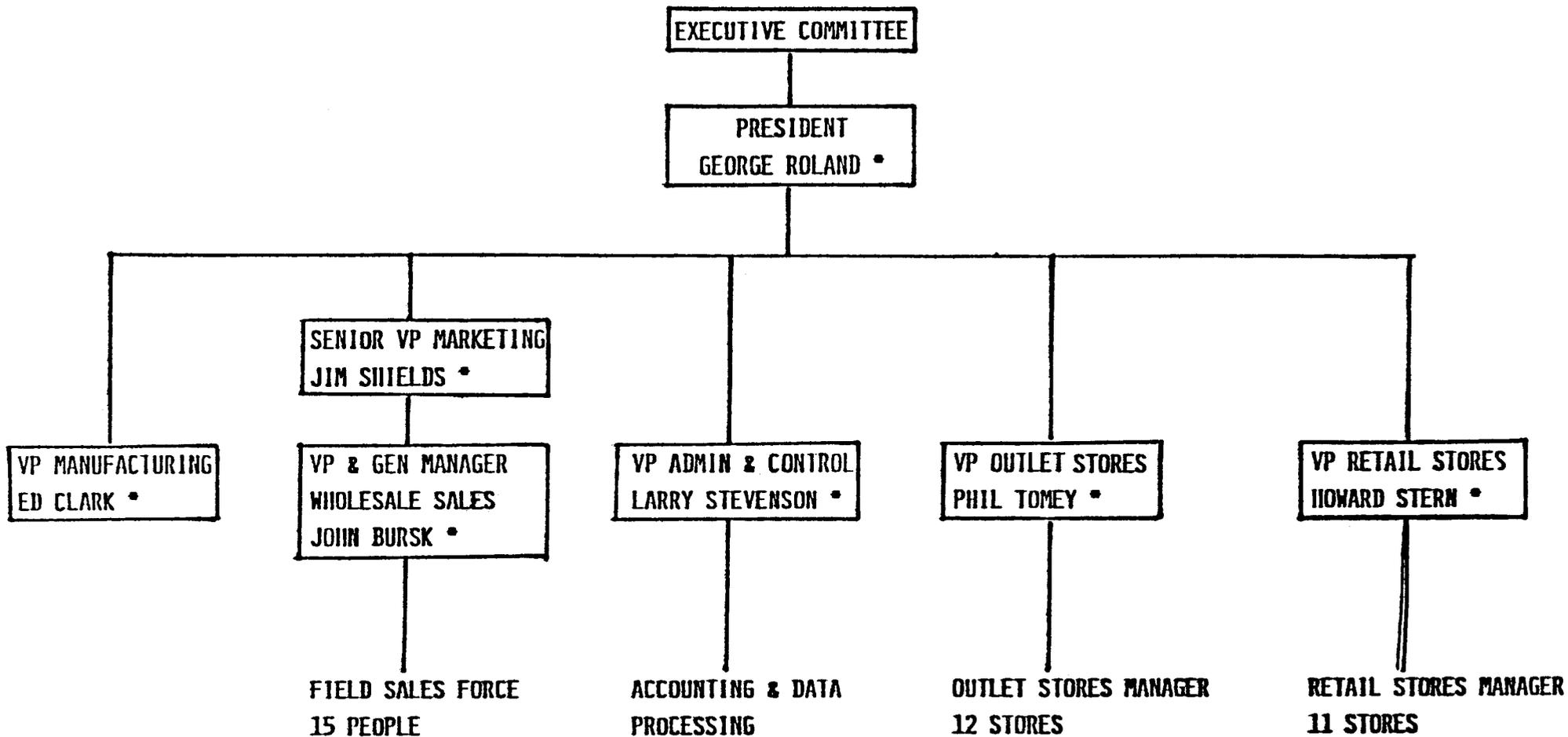
Finally, we have the rule of multiple function. Depending on the psychological urgency of the matter at hand, a part of the text can have more than one meaning and can be looked at from many different points of view (Waelder, 1936). Sometimes, organizational resistances and defensive processes stand out. At other times the key dynamics may be related to how organizational participants manage aggression or affectionate bonds. To complicate matters even further, these issues may all play a concurrent role and occur at the individual, group and

organizational level (Geertz, 1973, 1983; Zaleznik & Kets de Vries, 1984). It is thus necessary to seek out meaning at multiple levels, to determine the individual as well as the organizational roots and consequences of actions and decisions.

CONCLUDING COMMENT

Interpretation is at the center of organizational work. Researchers and managers are inevitably involved in a continual dialogue with other actors in the organization. They must search for basic themes and configurations in a "text", finding meaning in what at first glance seems random or insignificant. Text, as we have indicated, has to be viewed in context for true decoding to take place. In this process knowledge of the rules of interpretation is imperative. Thematic unity, pattern matching, psychological urgency and multiple function are useful clues in the search for continuity and connection. They disclose patterns that can be woven into a unified gestalt - revealing a matrix of interconnected themes that help to explain the dynamics of organizations.

EXHIBIT 1
ORGANIZATION CHART (SIMPLIFIED)



* DESIGNATES MEMBERSHIP OF EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

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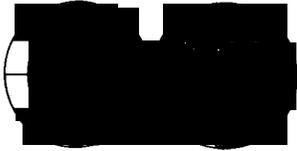
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