

Miriam Salzer-Morling (1995)

Identity as a
Sense of Organization?

"Hi, welcome to IKEA. Here at IKEA we're like a big family...Now we have some 230 employees, and the average age is 27-28...So we're a young group. A team!"

I am at the Personnel Department on my first day in a Swedish IKEA home-furnishing store. Entering the small tiny office I get an enthusiastic greeting. Rapidly I get an account of "who and how we are". And during my stay people all the time continue to define to me what this company is all about.

As all new employees I got a binder "We at IKEA". The binder is white with a drawing of two red-dressed IKEA co-workers on the front; the male co-worker holding his arm in a sort of protective way around the girl. On the inside of the binder I am welcomed by IKEA's Swedish Service Office, who has produced the cover: "Welcome! I hope that you soon, very soon, will feel that you are one of the team..."

In the binder there is also a four-colored copy of an IKEA ad. Beneath the headline, "IKEA's Soul", there is a picture of a billowing verdant field where a long stone fence stretches up towards the dark green forest by the horizon. A stone fence, the text below explains, that is IKEA's backbone. A stone fence that makes IKEA a different company. A stone fence that symbolizes IKEA's origins from Småland in the South of Sweden. "We have a soul" the IKEA ad proudly states, as if the company had a distinguishing corporate personality. Later on I found this stonefence-ad translated, enlarged and framed, decorating a number of walls throughout the "IKEA-world". As an official symbol of the corporate soul which you are supposed to be embraced by as you join the "IKEA family".

Along with the cover I got my set of IKEA clothes: a red shirt, a red sweater, a blue skirt, and a pair of blue trousers. As soon as I started to wear my new IKEA uniform, something surprising happened; everyone I met in the store said "hello"! People I had never seen before said "hi" with a friendly smile where ever I went during my month-long stay in the store. I did not only look like as if I was one of them, sometimes I even felt being a member of their "IKEA family".

During my study within the "IKEA-world" I continuously ran into Ikeans (they sometimes call themselves that, giving me associations to some creatures from outer space: Ikeans...Martians...) discussing and defining what made their organization unique. Relating and enacting what their organization was all about. I met people who spend large amounts of time and efforts on incorporating people into the official corporate soul, but also people who were making sense of their local IKEA sphere, far away from the Smålandish stone fence.

A Quest for Identities...

In the last decades there has been a growing interest in the "identities" of organizations and companies. Corporate "identity", "personality", "character", and "soul", have become recent buzz words for denoting an organization's unique features or the organizational "self".

According to various authors, our postmodern era is characterized by a search for identities. As traditional values are dissolved, societies become increasingly fragmentarized, national identities are blurred, etc., new meanings and "sheet anchors" are searched for (see e.g. Lasch, 1984; Gidlund & Sörlin, 1993; Alvesson, 1990; Berg, 1989). The "identity crisis" of our time. Individuals and groups of individuals in nations, organizations, societies, etc., ask themselves "who are we?". It is a quest for identities. A quest for defining who one is.

Modern business corporations also seem to be increasingly concerned with their identities. People in companies dwell into introspective reflections on who they are. To define what the company is and what it stands for has become a managerial concern and an issue of social engineering efforts.

Corporate identities have also become marketing goods. People in companies use various communications efforts for selling the corporate soul on the marketplace. To create a positive image. The management of impressions, directed towards external publics, has been identified as a means of creating an existence and position at the "corporate vanity fairs" (see Berg, 1989; Alvesson & Berg; 1988, Alvesson, 1990).

The present managerial preoccupation with corporate identities and images can be understood as management's

endeavour for controlling and co-ordinating complex corporations. In a time where companies are characterized by loose structures, internationalization, networks and lack of clear organizational boundaries, the co-ordination and definition of companies have become more problematic. The idea of a corporate identity is the idea of a sense of sharing that will hold the complex company together. In a great deal of the management literature as well in the writings on international business, the often suggested solution for holding the complex (international) company together, is "to have a strong unifying corporate identity (or culture)" (see e.g. Martinez & Jarillo, 1989; Prahalad & Doz, 1987; Hedlund, 1986; Bartlett & Ghoshal, 1987; Olins, 1989; Garbett, 1988).

In much of the literature it is generally assumed that there is a company-wide identity that unifies organizational members. In international, complex corporations, where activities and individuals are spread over vast geographical areas and people are separated by space and time, the assumption is that a corporate identity would integrate organizational members across borders. It is the idea of a supra-identity that would transcend the differences of local spheres and create a sense of sharing and togetherness that would unify people in the company regardless of loci and level. The question is, however, if we really can talk about organizational identity as such a unifying sense of sharing?

Identity as a Sense of Organization

In the study of organizations there have been various metaphors that have assigned organizations with human properties. Talking about organizational identities, spirits, brains, emotions and souls are just a few of examples of such anthropomorphic approaches. The organization is depicted as an actor, a reified entity that act, feel and think as some kind of aggregated "super-person".

However, in my view, organizations are no supra individual machines or organisms that lead a life of their own. Organizations are no concrete, static or tangible phenomena. To me, organizations are made up of thinking and acting human beings, who constantly are interacting and creating meanings; meanings that make up the "organizational reality". As socially constructed realities, the "thing" that we call organizations are in fact superimposed structures which "rest as much in the heads and minds of their members as they do in a concrete set of rules and relations" (Morgan, 1986).

The organization, or rather organizing, is a constant process of creating and recreating meanings - of making sense of the world. As individuals interpret and define their reality in interaction with others, collective understandings and shared views might develop. The organization can then be understood as a system of shared meanings (Smircich, 1983b), where meanings are intersubjectively negotiated (Louis, 1983). Organizing is an on-going process, where "organizations are in the business of making sense" (Weick, 1979).

Thus, I do not think that organizations have identities. Rather, organizational identity can be used as a metaphor for how people in organizations in the process of sense-making define what their organization "is all about" (c.f. Albert & Whetten, 1985). Just as an individual defines himself as having a self distinguishable from others' selves, people in organizations might define themselves as a group. It is a self-reflective issue of defining "who are we?". Organizational identity can then be understood as a collective self-view. It implies that organizational members might hold a view of "who are we" as a group; a definition of the organizational "self" in terms of the group's character and distinctiveness. Organizational identity is thus how organizational members define and view the organization. In the process of sense-making people construct a sense of organization.

When organizational members make sense of the organization and its activities, they might construct a collective self-view which is expressed and reflected in various symbols. In metaphors such as "We're like a big family" or "We're fighting competition", organizational members define themselves as a group and express the image of themselves in the world.

Sense-making in international, complex organizations takes place in different national contexts. Organizing thus involves creating and maintaining a sense of organization across national and cultural boundaries. The shared symbols and meanings that are supposed to make up an organizational identity are established communicatively through social interaction. But in large organizations sense-making through direct social interaction is impeded by space and time. Thus, if a sense of organization is to be upheld, other processes for communicating must be at work. How can then organizational members create and sustain a sense of organization in complex, geographically dispersed companies? How does organizational identity become constructed across borders?

A Global Identity...

No matter where you visit an IKEA store, they look pretty much the same. The first time I came to an IKEA store outside Sweden it felt like coming home. IKEA, as a concept company, is in many aspects a rather standardized

company. There are several central solutions that are sent out from Ölmhult to the periphery. The layout of the stores, the self-service concept, the catalogue, the product range, the "philosophy" (in terms of Ingvar Kamprad's testament and a few central policies on, for example, the human resource idea), are centrally constructed and defined symbols that are transmitted all over the "IKEA-world". Wherever you see IKEA, you are struck by the homogeneity. The stores, the offices, the products, the uniforms, etc., look very much the same either you are in Ölmhult or Toronto.

And there are also various conscious efforts made within the company for creating homogeneity, for constructing a sense of sharing that transcends borders. "Cultural technology", such as different modes of transportation and electronic communication, has made it possible to communicate across borders and to create global meanings. Because, as Hannerz (1989) states: "only if interactions are tied to particular spaces is culture likewise so."

"We're like a big family..."

"IKEA is this kind of company where we should help each other. It's more like a family, sort of speaking...When you're new I think it can be difficult, there are some that come here...but you know, IKEA shapes you. IKEA is like a poison. It just gets that way, you know."

Gunnel, an IKEA co-worker in the Swedish store.

Often, the Ikeans describe their company as "a big family". And various activities and ceremonies contribute to and reinforce the slogan. Even though IKEA is a large widespread company with some 20,000 employees in more than 20 countries, the "family" is supposed to embrace everyone. At some places even the subcontracted cleaners are considered to be part of the family.

Many co-workers at IKEA state that interacting on a first-name basis and knowing everybody working in the store is something they believe is special or typical for IKEA and which is part of the "family-thing".

And maybe the family metaphor makes it easier to understand why all traditional family festivities are so thoroughly celebrated at IKEA. Birthdays, weddings, Lucia Day, Midsummer, and Christmas. I do not think I have ever celebrated so many birthdays as during my year with IKEA. But the most important celebration is Christmas (isn't it in all families?). In each IKEA store there is a special Christmas gathering up in the restaurant, where the employees have a Christmas meal and get Christmas gifts from IKEA. Throughout the last years they have been given outdoor barbecues, skis, bicycles, etc. In Ölmhult, the small Swedish town where IKEA was founded and many of the corporate functions still are situated, the family has grown so big that the Christmas party has to be performed in the huge central warehouse outside Ölmhult. This is a giant happening where a couple of thousand Ikeans from Ölmhult are seated on large wooden working tables, being served Christmas rice pudding from fork lifts, and listening to the founder Ingvar Kamprad giving a speech, and then everybody get their gifts from the company.

In the IKEA family, Ingvar Kamprad is the unquestioned "Daddy". It is a rather patriarchal family. A "Mother" of the company is hard to find. Funny enough, it seems as the larger geographical distance from Sweden, the more distant relationship the Ikeans have with Kamprad. If Kamprad is called "Daddy" in the Swedish stores, in France he is referred to as "Papi" (grandfather), and in Canada he is seldom mentioned.

The family-metaphor is a part of the pronounced sense of we-ness within IKEA. People often refer to the group, talking about "we" and "us". IKEA is the collective. The uniforms and the conformist casual tie-less dressing style, which is typical in the "IKEA-world", mould the individual into a collective "we".

Several managerial efforts are made to keep the members in the "family" and to promote the "family spirit". Celebrations, Christmas gifts, and the distribution of myths and stories about the "family" is a part of the fabrication of meanings. "If you don't fit in - you quit", many IKEA managers often say, and several stories witness of how newcomers who do not fit in are rather quickly pushed out of the family. But once a member of the family, you tend to stick to the "fold", the story goes.

The family metaphor appears to be a rather recurrent symbol in business corporations (see e.g. Roderick, 1991; Martin, 1992; Kunda, 1992). Often this metaphor is launched and promoted by the "fabricators of meaning" in companies, as an official definition of the "self" that emphasizes unity and community. By using the pronoun "we", people construct a feeling that there is a common view. The one who says "we" tends to assume that his or her definition of reality coincides with the group's (see e.g. Kleppesjö, 1993). At the same time as the use of "we" creates a "we-group", it also excludes those who are not a part of the "we", i.e. the "others". Such categorisations make distinctions between insiders and outsiders, between us and them. The use of the collective "we" also subordinates the individual to the collective. As a part of fabrication of meanings in companies, managers promote a sense of we-ness, downplaying the individual and divergent views in favour of the unified collective.

The inclusions and exclusion process is realized by staging a difference between insiders and outsiders. "This is how we

do things around here". "We don't do like the others". IKEA's corporate saga can be understood as such a symbol that creates a feeling of a distinctive and coherent self which is clearly different from other organizations.

The Fabrication of Meanings

IKEA's saga is a somewhat glorified story about a company that ever since it started in the 1940's has challenged the conventional. The saga depicts IKEA as a company that is different. A company that has used unconventional solutions; a company that not only sells furniture but has a social mission of creating a "better world". IKEA's paths from Ölmhult to a successful conquest of the world are dressed in the expressive language of an organization which all the way long had to fight the outside world, to question the normal and challenge the establishment. The outside world became the "others", and the saga and other stories and myths reproduce the feeling of a distinctive self that is clearly different from "they", i.e. all who are not Ikeans (c.f. Ramanantsoa & Battaglia, 1991).

At IKEA, the corporate saga has even been written down in a "corporate history book" (The Future is Filled with Opportunities), which is handed out to all co-workers as they start working for the company. A glorious "from-rags-to-riches" story vividly told and illustrated with authentic pictures from IKEA's past.

This production and reproduction of myths and stories can be characterized as a sort of "fabrication of meanings" (see Salzer, 1994). Even though sense-making is an interactive process, constantly going on at all levels in the organization, in companies we can find special "culture-makers" (c.f. Ehn & Lofgren, 1982, about "the active shaping of cultures", and Kunda, 1992, in describing "the culture of culture management"). Some possess the cultural power for picking up symbols and giving them officially approved significations. They are the fabricators of meaning.

The socialization of individuals, for instance, is regarded as an important task for those involved in the "management of human resources". Managers and leaders in companies strive to make newcomers sharing the organizational reality or identity as defined by managers (c.f. Garsten, 1991). In organizations we find people whose purpose is to make culture; to fabricate meanings. As Berger & Luckman (1967) points out, the division of labour in any society leads to a state where some people are freed from "hunting and forging weapons", and can be totally dedicated to the "fabrication of myths". For example, the Department of Human Resources and the Marketing Departments in corporations are often involved in the explicit shaping and forming of the "organizational world", both to insiders and outsiders through the use of slogans, policies, handbooks, training seminars, etc. The role of these persons is to promote and spread certain symbols and meanings.

Since the mid 70's, managers at IKEA have rather consciously tried to promote the official definitions of the "corporate soul". There are several efforts made for nourishing and promoting the "special IKEA spirit". In 1976, Ingvar Kamprad wrote his "testament of a furniture dealer". A document of nine "theses" describing the company philosophy. The reason for writing down this document was that Kamprad was afraid that the company, which had evolved out of his and his closest friends' work, was starting to "losing its heart".

As IKEA had grown rapidly and employed new people with different backgrounds, new perspectives and ideas entered the company. Not everyone working in the company could be born in Ölmhult! Hence, certain conscious measures have been taken to safeguard the cultural hegemony. In the booklet "The future is filled with opportunities", Kamprad says clearly what he wants: "IKEA does not just want to win your brain. IKEA also wants to win your heart."

IKEA in Ölmhult arranges a special training seminar called "IKEA Way" as a week-long seminar for IKEA managers from all over the world. During this week IKEA managers are brought into Ölmhult for a total immersion into Swedish, Smölandish and IKEA's culture. Staying at IKEA's own hotel, IKEA Inn, with all rooms furnished with IKEA furniture, eating the special meatballs and salmon at IKEA's restaurant, having a snack in IKEA's bar, and visiting various IKEA functions in the village. And lectures are given on IKEA's history, the corporate philosophy, the human resource idea, etc. On the last day of the intense week, there is a small ceremony at which the participants receive a pin which is a miniature IKEA insert key. This is a token of having become an "IKEA ambassador"; a culture bearer with a licence to spread "IKEA's soul" in his or her own organization. Some 350 IKEA ambassadors are today acting as missionaries around the world, and in all IKEA stores there are regularly "Mini-IKEA Way" seminars for all the co-workers.

Various activities are constantly arranged on a corporate level in order to spread the IKEA spirit and maintain a corporate identity. By selective recruitment, introductory classes, IKEA Way seminars, co-worker handbooks, etc., IKEA managers strive to "keep the family together". Pre-defined interpretations from the top are transmitted to co-workers, reinforcing an overall sense of organization.

"When the Centre Speaks, the Periphery Listens..."

IKEA has since the 70's experienced a rapid internationalization under a Swedish banner, teaching not only its

customers in various countries to furnish their homes in a Scandinavian style, but also its employees to say "tu", to fly tourist class, to eat meatballs, and even to speak Swedish.

Starting in Switzerland, IKEA worked its way into the European markets as "the impossible furniture store from Sweden". IKEA was promoted as typically Swedish, with blue-yellow stores, Swedish product names, "Möbelfakta", Swedish food in the restaurants, and cheerful mooses and vikings in the advertisements. Slogans, such as "Ils sont fous ces suédois", and "Das unmögliche Möbelhaus aus Schweden", launched IKEA as a Swedish, different, crazy and unconventional retailer.

These were the wild and crazy years when Kamprad's boys, the young generation of new managers in the 70's travelled from Älmhult out to the world to build up IKEA in Europe. They came to expand the IKEA world; entrepreneurs in the Kamprad spirit of working, who were "doers" and acted in the "just do it" approach that IKEA has nourished as its special way of doing business.

Today, many of these "doers" are to be found in high positions at the corporate headquarters or as country managers in different countries. They form an informal network of managers which in many ways constitutes the "core" of IKEA. They know each other, they have worked together, and they have connections with managers on high levels throughout the IKEA Group. They call themselves "the bombers' crew".

"Our network...it's that group...they who maybe were in some corner of Germany, building up the operations there, and now one of them is perhaps in France, someone else is in Älmhult, and so on. So if I want something in the organization, I rather contact someone in my network instead of calling the formal manager for that...It's like a Bombers' Crew, you know, have you read about that?"

Krister, a corporate IKEA manager.

As a strong and widespread network of managers, who constantly switch positions within the Group, this group has become an important transmitter of meanings in the "IKEA-world". Being "Kamprad's boys", they bring the official values and meanings from the centre (Älmhult) to the periphery. They spread the myths, stories and definitions of IKEA as an unconventional, informal and different company.

Another group which has an influential role in transmitting meanings within the "IKEA-world" is the group of decorators. The decorators at IKEA form a rather homogeneous group within the company. Regardless of location, they often share a similar background with formal training at the same kind of schools. Their role is to create "IKEA-mössa" room-settings in the stores and in the catalogues. And their idea of what is an "IKEA-mössa" room-setting seems to coincide either you are in Älmhult or in Paris. Just like the "bombers' crew", they travel a lot, often participating in the build-up of new stores, thereby coming to spread the "concept" and the "IKEA-style" of the stores.

Hence, as IKEA has expanded and become established on foreign markets, meanings and symbols have been exported from Älmhult out to the other outlets in the "IKEA-world". IKEA, being a very "culture-conscious" company, is highly involved in the fabrication of meanings and the conscious transmission of perspectives. Älmhult has become the centre not only for designing IKEA's product range of home furnishing articles, but also the ideational centre for designing "the corporate soul". From Älmhult there is a constant export of meanings out to the "IKEA-world".

In this sense, the flows of meanings have been asymmetrical, where the centre is the giver, and the periphery the taker of meaning and meaningful form. "When the centre speaks, the periphery listens..." (Hannerz, 1989).

The strive for a global identity has been a process of fabricating meanings in the centre and exporting meanings to the periphery. The central managers at IKEA, being "sense-givers" (see Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991), have in the endeavour for homogenizing meanings defined and spread "what IKEA is all about" throughout the "IKEA-world". Managers have tried to guide local sense-making and create global sets of meanings that will ensure global homogeneity. There is a form of "cultural imperialism" in this flow of meaning, or as Van Maanen & Laurent (1993) put it; the company strives to "replicate itself wherever it goes".

"Everyday life as an organizer of cultural experience must compete with more distant sources of cultural experience who organizers seek to spread as widely as possible. The culture-conscious MNC systematically replicates itself wherever it goes, given its willingness to invest in such a project, by pounding away on those who work in its subsidiary units."

Van Maanen & Laurent, 1993 (p.281).

Due to the global flow of meanings, within IKEA we can see various sets of meanings and a sense of sharing that appear to transcend geographical and cultural borders. The descriptions of IKEA as an unconventional, informal and different company reappear at many different sites. And the family metaphor and the "special Swedish style", are recurrent traits in many Ickeans collective self-view. People at IKEA are not only legally kept together in a complex

corporate structure, but regardless of where you are they also refer to themselves as being a part of IKEA. Still, however, the "IKEA" stands for many different things in different settings. It is a label, a name, under which we can find several meanings.

...and Local Identities

At the same time as there appear to be strong forces towards globalization of meanings, we can also find a heterogenization of meanings. In any organization we can probably see various differentiating forces. The division of work, hierarchical structures, organizing around different tasks and functions, geographical location, etc., all contribute to a heterogenization. In complex organizations it is hardly the rule that "all members face the same problem, everyone communicates and all share a common set of understandings" (Van Maanen & Barley, 1985). Thus locally shared meanings might create local identities.

"To us IKEA is IKEA Canada"

So far I have talked about IKEA almost as if it was "one organization", and of a sense of "we-ness" on an overall level. As if there was one self-view, embraced by everyone. And maybe that was my naive view of IKEA as I started my "journey" in the "IKEA-world". Bengt, an IKEA-manager in Canada, abruptly alerted me:

"You talk about IKEA all the time, as if there was somebody somewhere knowing everything and making decisions. As some omnipotent 'IKEA'. But IKEA is us, we who work right here...to us IKEA is IKEA Canada. I don't know what's going on in Europe or in the rest of the IKEA-world..."

And throughout my study within IKEA it became clear to me that there was not one sense of sharing. Rather, each local setting or each local sphere tend to be a "breeding ground" where shared meanings develop (c.f. Louis, 1985).

One of the first things that struck me as I came to IKEA in Canada was that the IKEA people there seemed to have reinterpreted what I thought was the "right" IKEA concept. Whereas IKEA in Sweden (and in the rest of Europe) has been built up around the idea of "mechanical selling", where the customer should be able to handle his purchase without any help from the "redshirts", Ikeans in Canada kept talking about IKEA as the mecca of "Customer service".

People I worked with in the Swedish IKEA store talked most of the time about the products, and "taking care of the products". Ikeans in Canada on the other hand defined their mission as "taking care of the customers". And everywhere on the walls and billboards in the staff areas there are big signs with commanding messages: "You are just about to meet the most important person in your life - our customer!", and "Our customers are really important - they make paydays happen!" So, before you go out on the "stage" in the store, put on your smile and make the customer happy! Out in the store, most co-workers almost stand at attention as soon as a customer approaches: "Yes sir, what can I do for you?". Far away from the attitude in the Swedish store where customers almost were looked upon as a disturbance in the delicate work of taking care of the products.

There is even a special customer service award in the store. Each month an employee is elected "the best customer service employee" and is awarded a watch and an golden inscription on a wood panel by the staff lunch room. All this "gold and wood" did to me stick out as symbols very distant from the Swedish "IKEA-måssighet" of being cost-conscious and not profiling the individual.

In a dialogue with Joanne and Doug at the IKEA-at-Work department I got their account of IKEA's philosophy. Which in North America appeared to signify customer service:

Doug: When you're hired here they explain the policies, the philosophy, the different things that are written in stone and you have to bend in to these rules...you wear your uniforms, you have to put the read stuff on, that's the policy.

Joanne: And the IKEA philosophy is "the customer is always right". And IKEA truly lives by that rule...that's retail! That's the way it works in retail.

Doug: Yeah, in a word IKEA for me means SERVICE. That's what it means to me. And low prices. As our return policy - we're in the lead. I heard someone who actually brought in a car tire to an IKEA store, he obviously went to the wrong place, and he wanted to return the tire, and we don't sell car tires, but we gave him money back, just to keep him happy. That's real service, you know.

Everything at IKEA Canada is customer service. The "no-nonsense return policy" is a part of the customer orientation. Within a month you get your money back. Even if it's a car tire! (By the way, the story about the car tire appears to be

a common and widespread myth within the retail business, being used as a story in various retail companies).

Geographical Differentiation

As discussed above, the sense of "we-ness" creates certain in- and out-groups. It constructs a feeling of "we" and "them". However, borders are not only drawn on an overall level between what is IKEA and "the outside world", i.e. what is not IKEA. Within a corporation we can also find borders between different groups.

The most obvious example of different groups that express their own self-view are the outlets in different countries. "To us IKEA is IKEA Canada". People at IKEA outlets in different countries come to create and share a world of their own. IKEA Canada is not the same thing as IKEA Sweden. Having few face-to-face contacts with the rest of the "IKEA-world", IKEA to Ickeans in Canada is IKEA Canada. And the same goes for France and for Sweden.

Customer service in Canada is one example of such a geographical differentiation of meanings. The predilection for order, formal policies, clear responsibilities, are other meanings that I found characterizing IKEA in Canada. Whereas many of the myths and stories that circulate within IKEA in Sweden bear witness of a definition of the "self" as being crazy, unconventional and "just-do-it", Ickeans in Canada more often talk about themselves in terms of "professional". Many Canadian IKEA managers held that the Swedish "naive farm-boy attitude" dressed in the tie-less jeans-and-rolled-up-sleeves approach was not considered to be serious on the Canadian market. So, "professional" has become the key-word.

When Ickeans in France describe their organization, their descriptions are very much characterized by a questioning of the "official identity". To many of them, "going the French way" has led to a deviation from what they perceive as the "IKEA-culture". "IKEA is becoming more like the others" was a common description during my stay in the French IKEA store. The family metaphor, for instance, was constantly questioned:

"When you start here, they tell you that it's like a big family...yeah, they told me that it was a big family, but ehhm, to me, it's not a family anymore, as it was before. It's just what they say, but really, it isn't..."
Eric, a co-worker in a French IKEA-store.

IKEA has for the French Ickeans, traditionally been standing for a certain furniture style: modern and trendy. But as the product range has been broadened, with more "adult" and classical furniture, there is a fear of losing what is considered to be IKEA's uniqueness in France. Co-workers often describe IKEA as gradually going more "the French way".

Just as there are varying meanings within IKEA on what IKEA stands for, the meaning of the company on the market also varies. On an overall level, IKEA is often viewed as a "funny, youthful and different" home furnishing company: an image very similar to the "fun and crazy" company promoted in IKEA's ad and store activities. But while in Sweden IKEA has become a sort of institution; a self-clear and not too exciting part of the Swedish "folkhem", in France the company is regarded as something very trendy and modern, while in Canada for many people IKEA is perhaps too modern and exotic for their more traditional "brownish" taste. The images, constituting a sort of mirror for the self-view (see e.g. Christensen, 1991; Salzer, 1994), vary across nations, thereby contributing to and confirming the varying local self-views.

Thus, it can be understood as symbols and meanings in the company are constructed and interpreted in light of the geographical area. "French" meanings and "Swedish" meanings differ in this sense.

Local Spheres of Meaning

However, we need not to draw borders between nations to find differences in meanings and varying self-views. Each local world within the company - a store, an office, a department, etc. - are settings where face-to-face contacts are frequent, thus enabling organizational members to meet and interact.

In the stores, for example it was often shown to me how the physical distance between those working upstairs and those working downstairs, created different characterizations of themselves. "They who work upstairs are different - they think they are little bit finer than us..." And in each store they talk about themselves as a unique IKEA store. "We're not like the Stockholm store - they are not like us. They don't have the same spirit, they're too big". It appears as if the local store constitute the definition of what IKEA is. The local store becomes the local world where meanings are created and recreated.

Within IKEA there is also a vertical differentiation of meanings. Different hierarchical levels might share specific views of the organization, and various positions and categories in organizations are assigned various meanings. Those who I have called the fabricators of meanings, i.e. many of the central corporate managers in Ölmhult, are those who construct and spread the for-public-consumption identity; the official definition of the "self". They share a set of meanings which

becomes constructed on management meetings, in writing down policies and guidelines, etc.

However, local spheres of meaning need not be geographical. Thus, "local" is not necessarily a term for belonging to a certain geographical place, but rather it can be a certain sphere of meanings independent of physical location.

It can be said that the "bombers' crew" constitute such a local sphere which is not tied to a particular space or room. The decorators within IKEA can be understood as another sphere of meanings. Furthermore, the business can be a sphere, as for example in Canada where "retail" often is referred to as the logic which gives IKEA's activities and events meaning.

The nation, the industry, the profession, the department, etc., can then be understood as different local spheres in which organizational meanings become created. And these spheres are a part of organizational members' self-views; of how they define themselves as a group. "We're a retail company", "We're Swedish", "We're the bombers' crew", etc., are all examples of how the local spheres are used as definitions of the "self".

Within big organizations there are likely to be many such different identities, where organizational members are related to several spheres at the same time. Hence, organizational meanings seem to vary across borders, where the creation, negotiation and interpretation of various symbols take place within different spheres.

"Glocal" Meaning Systems?

As has been argued above, in large, complex organizations we can find both a homogenization and a heterogenization of meanings. As organizational members make sense in various local spheres, locally shared meanings make up local identities.

Still, "cultural technology" allows sense-making to take place across borders. With new means of communication, people in organizations can come to interact and share global definitions of the organizational self, and the fabricators of meaning actively promote an all-embracing definition of the organization in order to offset heterogenization.

Multiple Identities

Thus, I think that in the process of organizing two processes can be identified as co-existing and counter-acting all the time: the heterogenization and homogenization of meanings, and the search for constructing local and global identities. Meanings become heterogenized and homogenized

While in the area of cross-cultural management, culture and meanings are considered to be always local, the focus on corporate culture as a means of control in the international business literature depicts culture as something that can be exported as a global glue. Those who study culture as being local, tend to ignore the power aspects by which flows of meaning are shaped and homogenized (see e.g. Hofstede, 1991; Laurent, 1986). The global view on culture on the other hand tends to neglect the local spheres and the mutual part of sense-making (see e.g. Bartlett & Ghoshal, 1987; Hedlund, 1986).

I think, however, that in understanding sense-making and the construction of organizational identity across borders, we must embrace both the local and the global flows of meaning in organizations. I would argue that there is a constant interaction between the homogenization process, with the fabrication of meanings from the centre, and the heterogenization process, with locally constructed meanings. Pre-defined meanings from the top are interpreted, rejected or adopted at all levels of the organization. And "new" meanings are also created locally, in local spheres of meaning.

There are certain centres and peripheries in a hierarchical relationship in the creation and distribution of meanings in organizations. Over time, however, in the international organization, this centre-peripheral relationship becomes less clear (see Forsgren, 1990). IKEA, for instance, is no longer a "pure Swedish" company. Meanings from entities abroad begin to mix with the Swedish hegemony. Even though IKEA still has a very "Swedish style", the other countries within the IKEA Group are now beginning to make their voices heard. IKEA is becoming more international. The direction of the flows of meaning within the Group changes. New identities evolve.

At IKEA, customer service in North America and the widening of the product range towards a more international taste, appear as impulses from the periphery that change the self-definition in the centre. There is "Carl Larsson with a touch of Provence". "Ismhult" "doers" combined with North American "professionalism". Etc... In an IKEA Way seminar I attended in Ismhult, an American IKEA manager concluded after a week of total immersion into Swedish culture:

"We talk a lot about IKEA's culture as being Sweden, Småland...But another part of the IKEA culture is the international part...that we, people from all over the world meet and interact...we mix together and create something."

Organizations can thus be said to consist of many systems of meanings, constantly created and recreated in interaction between individuals in different spheres. In a world where flows of meaning can transcend cultural and geographical borders, meanings are increasingly mixed. And the relations between centre and periphery change. There are no mere givers and no mere takers.

Are there any "pure" forms of global or local systems of meaning? Is there one sense of organization? In the complex organization, operating in various local spheres, maybe organizational identity is best understood as an array of meaning systems, where different views of the "self" meet and interact; some being global and some local, and still others are "glocal" as a synthesis of both?

The Organization as an Arbitrary Boundary

How can we then account for local organizational identities and systems of meanings within the organizational borders? In the identification of the simultaneous processes of homogenization and heterogenization of meanings, and the recognition of identities that are not purely organizational (as national and occupational spheres of meaning), there is a need for linking the organization as a sphere of meanings to other local spheres.

Whereas the common approach in the field of organizational culture and identity has been to look at the organization as a culture (or sphere) of its own, or as a micro-representation of the national culture, I think there is a need for seeing the organization not as a unitary whole, but rather as an arbitrary boundary around various spheres of meaning.

Instead of looking at organizations as unitary wholes or as a set of subcultures within the organizational borders, I would rather see the organization as being merely an arbitrary boundary encapsulating various spheres of meaning. Some of these spheres might be organizational in that they are made up of essentially organizational meanings; e.g. meanings that are considered to be "IKEA-specific", while other spheres of meaning are rooted outside the specific organization; being merely manifested in various forms within the organizational borders.

In the organization various spheres of meanings are co-existing and mixing. The boundaries between different spheres of meanings or collections of spheres can then be seen as the arbitrary borders we stage in constructing collective self-views, i.e. identities.

In the figure below I have tried to visualize my reasoning with the organization as a triangle, constituting an arbitrary boundary within and around a set of spheres of meaning (the ellipses).

The Organization as an Arbitrary Boundary

In this view, then, the organization can be viewed as one possible identity; i.e. one way of distinguishing the group from another. By constructing an identity, people come to share an understanding of themselves as being a group; it provides them with a sense of organization. However, having the organization as a focal point is merely one way of approaching different spheres of meaning. Within the organizational border there are thus various spheres of meanings and various group views; there are multiple identities. And different local spheres overlap and are nested within each other.

This way of describing organizations, also shows the spheres of meaning that are external to the organization. "French" meanings, "retail" meanings, etc., are meanings that can be found in the "external world" and in many other organizations. Organizations are in this sense importers and exporters of meaning. People entering organizations bring in new views and perspectives, belonging to other spheres of meaning. The environment and the organization blend into each other, and the business organization can hardly be understood as a closed world with purely organizational meanings, which seems to have been the implicit consequence in many descriptions of organizational culture.

Within the organizational borders, the different spheres of meaning meet and mix, coming to create "organizational meanings". People, interacting with each other, make sense, and we tend to draw borders around various settings in which people make sense. Still, sense-making goes beyond borders and the boundaries between different local spheres can be seen as arbitrary.

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