



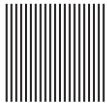
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The Invincible Character of Management Consulting Rhetoric: How One Blends Incommensurates while Keeping them Apart

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***Abstract.** As experts and fashion setters of the business community, management consultants have a strong position in modern society. We argue that the basis of this position is the size of the rhetorical space of legitimate arguments open to consultants. In legitimating their activities, consultants produce a great array of arguments based on two contradictory myths or master-ideas recurrent in the business discourse—the normative/pragmatic myth and the rationalistic myth. These two myths are in turn viewed as a variation of the deeply institutionalized western dichotomy of nature vs. culture. Although these myths officially are incommensurable, management consultants freely mix arguments based on both myths when translating organizational change. Herein lies the potential invincibility of the consultants' rhetoric—the possibility of transforming that which earlier was treated as 'objective' and given into something negotiable and changeable, and vice versa, thereby increasing the possibility of satisfying ever-changing and contradicting needs. **Key words.** management consulting; managerial myths; rhetoric; translation*



A Day in (Organizational) Life

The reengineering project in First Class TeleCom Ltd—a mobile phone operator—has been going on for about four months. The organization's main production process—setting up and maintaining the radio network—has been mapped and measured by a project group, and the next activity,



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according to the formalized method of the responsible consulting company, is the creative design of the processes of the future.

This event has been looked forward to by many of the people involved in the process to be redesigned. A rapid growth of the market in combination with further positive prospects has for some time created a very high workload for employees resulting in a stressful and frustrating working situation. The upcoming redesign event is the first possibility for those outside the project group to participate in and influence the future work processes towards a more rewarding work situation. But there is also some latent frustration and skepticism regarding the process. In the past, a number of similar efforts have been carried out, none of them leading to any improvements. A question that arises is—why would it work this time?

This is the setting for the two-day redesign event, taking place at a conference site outside Stockholm. The event begins with a plenary session. The 25 participants—a selection of key persons on different levels in the organization—sit around a u-shaped table in a large room. Three consultants sit at one end of the table. One (a bit older than the others) is Ben, the project manager.

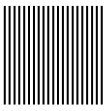
At 9 am sharp he rises and enters the stage. A nervousness is reflected in his somewhat impatient movements and way of talking. This is an important presentation. It is the first time since the ‘kick off’ of the project, that it is being delivered to a larger audience. Ben welcomes the participants and briefly introduces himself: ‘I am a consultant at Consulting Ltd. My specialty is BPR [Business Process Reengineering]. I have worked extensively with this method in the telecom industry.’ He also briefly introduces the two colleagues sitting at the end of the table. But the consulting team is not complete: ‘We are waiting for Alan, a portal figure and innovator concerning BPR.’

Ben suggests beginning the seminar with a brief introduction of the participants. After this has been completed, he remarks: ‘we clearly have a massive competence here today’. Thereafter, he leaves the floor to Ken, the CEO of the company.

‘There are many reasons why we are sitting here today. The triggering factor has been the rapid growth rate of the market. But why should we start working with BPR? I have worked a lot with process improvement, and I have failed many times, but then I heard a presentation by Alan and everything fell in place. I saw the mistakes we had made—we focused on the current situation instead of being creative.’

Following this introduction, the importance of the project is further stressed. ‘The high growth rate of the market demands a new way of working . . . The competitive situation for the company is getting harder; the years when the customers just came to us are over. Now we have to start working for our money . . . The reason for this project is that we want to become the best from our owners’, customers’ and employees’ perspective.’

After this presentation, Ben takes over the floor again: ‘I have something to tell you. I want to report what we have done in the project so far . . . We have worked in four steps, which is a quite typical approach in reengineering’, he says, showing a slide headed ‘Method for Implementation’, which depicts four project phases arranged in the form of steps from the lower left to the



upper right. The more detailed exploration of these phases, and the related activities occupy the group for some minutes. Thereafter, a sequence of transparencies is shown. They describe the overall situation of the company using well-known business concepts. The titles of the slides read 'Strategic Positioning' (the model presented under this title has strong similarities with the BCG [Boston Consulting Group] matrix), 'SWOT Analysis', 'Core Competencies', and 'Critical Success Factors'.

Legitimizing Consulting Activity

This short case illustrates a common situation in management consulting—a consultant presenting something (in this case the results of a process analysis) in order to convince the listeners that the presented activities will lead to a positive result and thus are something to put effort into. A number of such situations were observed during one author's six-month participant-observation study of the above reengineering process, during which all meetings between the consultant and members of First Class TeleCom Ltd were observed, and repeated interviews were carried out with both the involved consultants from a large, international consulting company and the members of the project group in the client company. This provided valuable insights into the workings of management consultants in practice as well as the project group members' perceptions of these actions.

The initially described situation depicting consultants' efforts to motivate the client's personnel to devote effort to a change process is by no means a unique situation. Ensuring the participation of the client is an ongoing activity in each consulting process, beginning with selling the project to management, followed by convincing the project group to participate, etc. Management consulting is thus an ongoing effort of convincing the client of one's usefulness and contribution (Clark and Salaman, 1996a; Sturdy, 1997). As the knowledge of management consultants is hard to evaluate and measure in an 'objective' or formal way, the legitimization of management consultants is to a large extent about constructing convincing narratives and giving authoritative performances (e.g. Starbuck, 1992; Alvesson, 1993; Clark and Salaman, 1996b).

Judging from the rapid growth of the management consulting industry (in Sweden, it increased its billings by 35 percent between 1994 and 1996 [*Konsultguiden*, 1995, 1997]) consultants are quite successful in this endeavor of convincing, i.e. legitimating their activities. In parallel with the increasing popularity of management consultants, management knowledge in the form of management fads such as BPR has also increased its popularity and plays, as illustrated in the introductory case, an important role in the consultant's arsenal of arguments. But what are the foundations of the concept-driven consultants' success in legitimating their actions, what is the rhetorical space of possible arguments

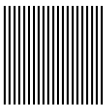


available to them in legitimating their activities, and what is the role of formalized management concepts, such as BPR, in this?

These questions elaborate on a growing body of research focusing on management knowledge, the interest for which was fueled by Huczynski's 1993 publication on *Management Gurus*. Related to his work, several studies have elaborated different aspects of management concepts such as their production (Furusten, 1995; Sturdy, 1997), sale (Clark and Salaman, 1996a, 1996b; Clark, 1995; Sturdy, 1997), as well as their application (Czarniawska and Sevón, 1996; Watson, 1994), and the reasons of appeal to managers of management knowledge (Grint, 1994; Furusten, 1995; Huczynski, 1993). In most of this work, management knowledge in the form of concepts, methods as well as tools (such as BPR) are closely linked to management consultants as they are involved in producing as well as selling them.

The above mentioned studies, in contrast to the rationalistic claims of much management knowledge, underline the symbolic, non-rationalistic functions of management knowledge and management consultants' activities. Departing from this line of research, we combine these views by focusing on the *interrelation* between the rational and the symbolic aspects of management knowledge and management consultancy. We argue that consultants in their attempts to appear to be knowledgeable combine both these 'rational' and 'irrational' positions when convincing clients of their expertise.

As indicated in the introductory case study, our main interest is in the rhetorical resources available to consultants who base their services on well-defined management concepts. To appeal to clients and hopefully convince them of the importance of the knowledge they offer, consultants' arguments usually combine novelty with familiarity (e.g. Grint, 1994; Czarniawska and Joerges, 1996; Huczynski, 1993). As argued by these authors, the plausibility and legitimacy of the 'new' knowledge offered is dependent on how well it resonates with the *Zeitgeist*. Czarniawska and Joerges (1996) speak of 'master-ideas' which serve as a 'focus for fashions and build a bridge between the passing fashion and a lasting institution' (p. 36). Using the introductory case as an illustrative example, which we return to throughout our more general argument, the exploration of this issue reveals that consultants in their rhetorical strategies rely on two underlying master-ideas (Czarniawska and Joerges, 1996), or myths, representing two sides of a cherished western dichotomy—that of nature vs. culture. The poles of this dichotomy are most often seen as incommensurable, but, as will be shown, they are freely mixed in practice. Based on a framework presented by Latour (1993), we will in this article show how this mixing is possible, and argue that it is an important prerequisite for the consultant's legitimization, as it greatly enlarges their rhetorical space, allowing them to 'do almost anything and its opposite' (Latour, 1993: 38).



As illustrated in the introductory case, the range of allies (Callon, 1986; Latour, 1987) called upon by the consultants to support their arguments is large and diverse ranging from extraordinary persons and earlier experience to formalized models and methods. These 'generic symbols of expertise' (Starbuck, 1992: 731) are important in convincing clients of the value of their services. A look at the above case reveals a large number of allies inferring their legitimacy from different master-ideas. The first set of allies includes people and their experience and (to a large extent tacit) knowledge. When Ben refers to Alan as 'a portal figure and innovator concerning BPR', or when he starts off the presentation with a reference to his own experience in the telecom industry, it is in order to communicate the consultants' ability to design an approach and a solution that is tailored to the specific situation. The same emphasis on personal ingenuity, creativity and experience is reflected in the CEO's description of the almost religious revelation concerning how to carry out change, when he 'heard a presentation by Alan'. Note that it is not the method that is credited, but rather the presentation by Alan.

This group of allies, focusing on specific, experience-based knowledge, gets its force from the assumption that standardized procedures or solutions will not lead to success. Instead, each situation is seen as unique, requiring its own tailor-made approach and solution, at each moment suggesting something of a 'muddling through' approach (for an example of this strain of argumentation see Schön, 1983).

A second set of allies is represented by the method and the formalized models referred to in several instances—both explicitly and implicitly. When Ben presents the 'Method for Implementation' as a four-phase model with a number of sub-steps in each phase, claiming it to be a 'quite typical approach in reengineering', this highlights the standardization, as well as the sequential orderliness of the change process. Naturally the process is assumed to lead to an improved situation, which is reflected in the graphical depiction of the process from the lower left to the upper right. The legitimating basis for these allies is an assumption about the superiority of rational, i.e. structured, well-tested, pre-planned processes and procedures.

The label BPR, as well as the reference to Alan as an 'innovator concerning BPR' represent a third set of allies. The message, that the project is on the edge of what is considered 'modern management', is repeatedly conveyed to the participants. Not only is the latest method (BPR) used, but it is implemented by an 'innovator' of this method. This focus on novelty derives its legitimacy and motivating power from a taken-for-granted assumption that new ideas are better than old ideas. This myth about the cumulative development of knowledge is well established in our western culture, the central assumption being that new management models or techniques replacing old models are more effective, and better suited, for solving contemporary problems facing organiz-



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ations. In short, management fashion is considered to be both *rational* and *progressive* (Abrahamson, 1996).

A fourth set of arguments used to legitimate the project is focused on the existence of a stable, well-established and tested approach. When naming the approach used as ‘quite typical’, as well as when focusing on the thorough experience of the consultants, Ben conveys the message that this is by no means the first time they have carried out this kind of project. They know what they are doing. Underlying the legitimating power of this message is a skepticism in practice against the never-ending stream of new concepts for change (Huczynski, 1993; Watson, 1994).

Finally, when motivating the importance of the change process, two sets of arguments are used. The first focuses on the competitive forces requiring change. The credibility of this argument is based on the taken-for-granted assumption of the ‘market’ as the engine of business development. The faith of a specific company is seen as to a large extent determined by external factors. All management can do about it is to adapt.

The second argument, ‘we want to become the best’, reveals a more positive picture, highlighting the freedom of action and importance of management, ‘we don’t *have* to be best—we *want* to be best’. This argument derives its legitimacy from the cherished ‘leadership myth’ (Huczynski, 1993; Furusten, 1995) which establishes the leader as the brain and nerve center of the organization determining what it is going to do.

At this point, it should have become obvious that the set of allies identified above, as well as their underlying legitimating assumptions can be seen as contradictory. The different voices suggest that the change process is orderly and possible to plan but requires constant adaptation. The participants are motivated by the fact that they are going to take part in a process that uses a radical new method, at the same time as it represents a well-tested approach, of which the consultants have ample experience. The need for change is derived from strong external pressures but also the free will of management. The allies as well as their legitimization bases identified above are summarized and grouped in Table 1.

Grouped this way (Table 1) a pattern arises. The legitimization bases in the two different columns represent instances of two deeply rooted master-ideas (Czarniawska and Joerges, 1996), or myths, in business rhetoric—we chose to label them the ‘rationality’ myth and the ‘normative/pragmatic’ myth. These myths are often seen as incommensurable. Consequently, the above-observed mixing raises an interesting question—how is this blending possible? Before focusing this question, we will in the following section further explore the above identified master-ideas, showing their importance and generality in the larger management discourse.

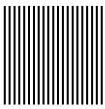


Table 1. A Summary of Observed Legitimization Bases

The rationality myth	The normative/pragmatic myth
<i>Ally</i> Structured method <i>Legitimization base</i> Knowledge is general. Rational 'scientific' procedures are superior	<i>Ally</i> Individuals and their experience <i>Legitimization base</i> Knowledge is local. It has to be adapted to each specific situation
<i>Ally</i> BPR—the latest approach <i>Legitimization base</i> Knowledge development is cumulative. New knowledge is better	<i>Ally</i> 'An established and tested approach' <i>Legitimization base</i> Common sense and experience should guide practice. Fear of fads
<i>Ally</i> Market/environment <i>Legitimization base</i> Development is determined by general laws. Management is reactive	<i>Ally</i> Leadership/free will <i>Legitimization base</i> Development is complex and ambiguous—but it can be changed. Management is proactive

Two Basic Managerial Myths

When studying the managerial discourse, at least two central and opposing myths or master-ideas (Czarniawska and Joerges, 1996) can be identified, which legitimize most managerial practices, and therefore are central to the work of consultants. Variations of these myths have already been touched upon in the introduction. These two myths have a long history emanating from both sides of some central western dichotomies such as: thought vs. action, theory vs. practice, objective vs. relative, nature vs. culture. Usually, the left side of each dichotomy (thought, theory, objective, nature) is considered more legitimate in an expert society praising truth and rationality, but, as we will show, the right side of each dichotomy (action, practice, relative, culture) supports an equally cherished myth in the discourses on management.

The Rationality Myth—Men of Reason

The belief in experts and their techniques is firmly anchored in the modern belief in rationality. In our culture 'the notions of "science", "rationality", "objectivity", and "truth" are bound up with one another' (Rorty, 1987: 38). Knowledge is power, and formalized knowledge is praised as the only legitimate form of knowledge, offering hard and objective truth in correspondence to reality. The claim to fame for the expert is that they possess a stock of scientific knowledge universally



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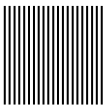
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applicable to different situations. Universal and abstract 'truths' in the shape of models guarantee applicability and rationality. One central and typical expert is *the manager* (MacIntyre, 1985). As a *character* the manager embodies such cherished values as instrumentality, efficiency and rationality.

The myth of rationality is deeply institutionalized (Meyer and Rowan, 1991; Strang and Meyer, 1994; Brunsson and Olsen, 1993), and one of the central myths in the business domain. Consequently, in the management literature, the manager is often depicted as the 'thinker' of an organization, expected to be in control of, and hence responsible for, the organization's success or failure (Huczynski, 1993; Furusten, 1995; Mintzberg, 1975). The manager's decision-making is seen as rational and scientific, i.e. based on facts. The leadership approach described is a 'based-on-knowledge—not-force' approach (Huczynski, 1993: 193), in line with the underlying assumption of harmony. In this rationalistic view, power seldom becomes an issue, because scientific knowledge, being objective, stands above interests and ideologies.

But sometimes even *the manager* needs help to control and change the organization. This is when management consultants make their entry, offering 'tools for producing control (in a form of meaning), which is needed for collective action' (Czarniawska-Joerges et al., 1990). These management models, methods and tools, offered by consultants, play an important role in the reproduction of this rationality myth as they help to construct an image of a relatively simple, logical and predictable world, where action variables as well as their possible manipulations, are clearly identified (Hatchuel and Weil, 1995). Hereby, management models, methods and tools fulfill important managerial needs. One of the main problems of managers is the uncertainty and ambiguity of the world in which they manage, another the problem of control in this complex environment. In both these aspects, management models with their simplicity and orderliness offer a cure. By disentangling the complex reality, they make it easier for managers to grasp their day-to-day situations, increase their status and present a feeling of control (Huczynski, 1993; Watson, 1994).

Management concepts thus give managers a feeling of rationality, and, perhaps more important, ways to express and present rationality to others. In their attempts to do so, it seems to be important to appear modern and to bring progress to organizations. One way to do this is to follow management fashions, supplied among others by management consultants. But in doing so, it is important to note that the ever appearing new techniques and models, replacing the older ones, are usually not written off as 'mere fashion', because they are considered, and promoted as, both rational and progressive, offering universal solutions to universal problems (Abrahamson, 1996). To be modern, then, in the business context is not to give in to such trivial matters as vanity or other esthetic inclinations, but rather to express responsibility, and



seriousness, by adhering to models which are considered progressive and rational.

However, these attempts to establish different fashions as progressive and rational are not automatically successful. Even if the proponents emphasize the rationality of the ideas or models, they always run the risk that the antagonists still may call it 'mere fashion'. Watson (1994) even argues that *the double-control aspect* of all managerial work creates the setting in which managers will both use, and complain about and try to resist, frequent new fashionable management ideas and models.

Management consultants play an important role in the creation and diffusion of management theories, methods and models, as well as in the reproduction of the rationality myth. In the introductory case, it was shown how a complex change process was ordered into four distinct, sequential phases with a number of sub-activities. That this was valued by the participants (i.e. had legitimating power) is illustrated by quotations from the project group members.

Erik (project member) Knowing that there is a method is important for me. I would have had difficulties accepting someone, who couldn't present a tested and widely accepted approach as a basis for his actions . . .

Lisa (project member) The ideas have existed in the organization for a long time, but we lacked BPR's powerful tools.

The popularity of general knowledge and universal solutions is also reflected in other studies of the work of management consultants. In studies of public organizations, Sahlin-Andersson (1996) observed that the generality of management knowledge was emphasized by the consultant. When the consultant presented his main ideas in the state-operated collector authority, he emphasized that he had no knowledge of how the organization operated but that he had worked extensively with efficient industrial companies, thereby assuming, and leading the audience to believe, that the models applied in industrial organizations are more or less universally applicable.

The use of general theories, methods and tools in the construction of easily understandable problems and their solutions is also described by Bloomfield and Vurdubakis (1994), who studied the production of IT consulting reports. They found that the consultants, in constructing the problem and its solutions, rely on the above-mentioned management models and their elements. These represent legitimate building blocks in the process of translating the clients' 'messy' problem situation into a clearly defined and unambiguous one.

The possibly disorderly problem of IT management is made tractable through the imposition of a textual order as embodied in the techniques of project management . . . It [IT] becomes the means through which a calculating subject (management) can know, posit, and instrument organizational activities. Ideally such activities are to be controlled 'at a distance'—that is, without



centralization and the inflexibilities it entails, so as to ensure conformity with business objectives. (Bloomfield and Vurdubakis, 1994: 468, 469)

The Normative/Pragmatic Myth—Men of Action

Alvesson (1993) argues that although formal theoretical knowledge has prestige and status in our societies and is often used by knowledge-intensive firms to legitimize their practices there are other ways in which they legitimize their contribution. Instead of ‘knowledge-focusing’ rhetoric, the author identified legitimating discourses stressing more subjective orientations. Advertising people studied by the author, for example, stressed their personal qualities, that they are creative, emotional, and esthetic. Similarly, computer consultants downplayed their technical expertise while stressing personal qualities.

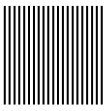
In the case of management consultants—another example of knowledge workers—similar patterns can be observed. In the introductory case, besides the rationality myth, we identified a second myth underlying the legitimization activities of management consultants. It is the myth which is expressed in the saying ‘action speaks louder than words’, and which in the above case is illustrated by the consultant’s focus on experience and personal characteristics. This myth, which we choose to call the normative/pragmatic myth, opposes central parts of the rationality myth. The normative myth challenges the view of the manager as a rational decision-maker. Instead, other aspects of management, or more correctly leadership, are emphasized.

According to this normative/pragmatic myth, managers are not considered to be experts in the rationalistic way. They are not supposed to be distanced and analytical, diagnosing the system with the help of scientific/technical models. As a consequence, academic or theoretical knowledge is usually devalued in discourses based on this myth, echoing how the ideal of the prototypical man of action was described in America in the 19th century.

Those who wrote about the ideal of true manhood agreed that the speculative person was impractical, usually inefficient, and seldom active. Cultivated men were said to be effeminate and too sentimental to get along in the real man’s world. (Dubbart, 1979: 30)

Given this ideal, ‘[t]he best education, then, was self-education, “natural wisdom”, based on experience’ (Dubbart, 1979: 31). The idea of the self-made man is a variation of this theme and is a central idea in the modern, bourgeois, ideology (Lindqvist, 1996), in which every individual is expected to do their best, and to realize their full potential. This ideal can be traced back to the 18th century, where a growing middle class generated discourses about merit, with the message: you are what you make of yourself.

This is still a central and recurrent theme in the management discourses, observable in management literature (Huczynski, 1993), leaders’ autobiographies (Lindqvist, 1996), and business magazines (Berglund



and Löwstedt, 1993). The chain of argument usually goes like this: merit always prevails over privilege; management knowledge is often contrasted with scientific, theoretically informed knowledge, which is regarded with suspicion by managers; and a persons' track record and 'hands-on' experience is regarded as more important than expertise in general management skills acquired through extensive education.

Another version of the normative/pragmatic myth is the stress of the uniqueness of the specific situation. It is often argued that the complexities and difficulties, the constant flux and transformations facing managers, make the application of rational and universal models difficult. Peters and Waterman's *In Search of Excellence* (1982), one of the most popular management books of the 1980s, legitimizes the anti-logical, pro-intuitive aspects of managerial work. The management literature discussing corporate culture is filled with religious and magical metaphors of the leader stressing the less rational sides of the organization, emphasizing the role of ceremonies, rituals, sagas, and legends (to mention only a few), in creating a system of shared values in the organization. This system of shared values in the organization is often presented as a guarantee for collective action, as well as something that will create and maintain enthusiasm among the employees.

In line with the focus on organizational culture and the symbolic aspects of organizations, Clark and Salaman (1996b) argue that management gurus can be seen as witchdoctors. Their performances of persuasion have more to do with magical thought than providing clients with rational models for problem-solving:

At the heart of the performance there lies a concern for, and emphasis on, the irrational, emotional and symbolic aspects of organization. Such a focus is not only the key to understanding management gurus—it is also the key to the guru's success. (Clark and Salaman, 1996b: 104)

Several of these gurus are proponents of the widely spread *ethos of enterprise* (du Gay, 1994a, 1994b) in which discourses are generated against bureaucracy and rationalist systems. In opposition to the bureaucratic manager, the charismatic leader is celebrated. This 'organic, aesthetic, "entrepreneur"' (du Gay, 1994b: 136) with his personal involvement is motivating and inspiring employees, leading them 'to the promised land of "self-realization"' (du Gay, 1994b: 136).

The normative myth is further reproduced by the rhetorical style used in much of the popular management literature. The argumentation is often personal, and the evidence supporting the argument is drawn from the authors' own experiences, rather than based on a scientific analysis (Furusten, 1995). In other words, 'trust me I was there' is a common argument.

Schön (1983) further elaborates the assumption central in the normative/pragmatic myth, i.e. that the complexity of reality makes the application of formalized theories and models problematic. He questions



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the applicability of a technical rationality in the work of 'practitioners'. The instrumental use of different kinds of formalized models and approaches in practice is according to Schön (1983) most often impossible, as the encountered situations are too complex for the application of a technical rationality. Practitioners initially often lack a clear understanding of what the actual problem is. All that exists is a diffuse feeling that something is wrong. The practitioner, according to Schön, thus has to begin with a problem-setting activity, where the situation is defined and the problem pinned down. In this activity, technical knowledge, for example, in the form of formalized management techniques, is not very helpful; instead, experience and intuition are praised as central bases for action.

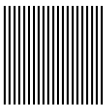
Returning to our initial example, the pragmatic/normative myth is manifested in the consultant's emphasis on his own and others' personal experience and merits, highlighting the fact that the knowledge needed for success is not some general, impersonal method but rather a specific, mainly tacit, ability to react to the contingencies of each situation. This view is not confined to the situation of the consultant presenting his approach, but is also spread among project group members. It is also reflected in the consultants' self-perception.

Turning to the project group members, they identified the consultant's experience as a main success factor in the change process. When asked about the main contribution of the consultant, a recurring response from the project group members was that he directed the process, avoiding pitfalls and irrelevant discussions, and ensuring that nothing important was missed. In digging deeper into the project group members' perceptions of the basis of this ability of guiding the process, they named the consultant's personal experience:

Project member 3 Ben knows from experience how to steer in order to accomplish something. Without somebody directing the process, it is easy to get caught in checking details . . .

Project member 2 The consultant steered a lot. This can be both good and bad. The consultant has experience of how to succeed.

Looking finally at the consultant's self-perception, several studies show that their belief in methods as guides for action is relatively limited. In his study of IT consultants, Stolterman (1991) found that most consultants never said that they exactly followed their detailed methods for systems development, proposing a rational approach from analysis to solution. They based their actions on a methodology, but emphasized the importance of adapting the approach to the specific consulting situation. Activities almost always had to be omitted, added or altered in order to fit the approach perceived as most suitable in the specific situation, they claimed. The basis of this adaptation was said to be the consultant's own experience.



A similar pattern emerged in a study on the availability and use of methods in large management consulting organizations (Werr et al., 1997). Detailed methods for carrying out change processes existed in all the studied companies, but the interviewed consultants all strongly emphasized that it is impossible to apply the methodologies in a rigid way. They have to be adapted to the specific situation and, again, this adaptation was described as an experience-based, largely intuitive, process. Approaches cannot be followed explicitly, the argument goes. The real world is more complex than the world of models, so these have to be changed to fit the specific situation (Fristedt, 1995; Stolterman, 1991). The knowledge needed to tackle this kind of process is described as local and specific. Hereby the individual consultant, with his specific experience, is established as essential for success. He is established as an 'obligatory passage point' (Bloomfield and Best, 1992; Callon, 1986; Latour, 1987).

The Two Management Myths—Two Sides of a Central Dichotomy

The above presentation of two central myths in the organizational discourses complements the short analysis of the introductory case. This elaboration reveals that the legitimating bases listed in Table 1 are just a limited sub-set of a number of instances of these two rich managerial master-ideas. The more detailed analysis of these master-ideas also shows their generality and central position in our modern society.

As has been indicated above, these two myths are most often seen as incommensurable. According to Barley and Kunda (1992) the myths are two opposite sides of a dichotomy. They define separate ontological zones. Consequently they cannot be blended or synthesized 'because cultural dualisms are ontologically incompatible, they can never be resolved even by the most cunning theory. All one can expect is to cope with the incommensurates' (Barley and Kunda, 1992: 386). The way the business community has coped with the incommensurates is, according to the authors, temporal segregation. This, according to Barley and Kunda, explains why the managerial discourses over time oscillate between the two opposite tenors. Either the rational tenor is prevalent in the managerial discourses during a period, or the normative. They cannot coexist or be mixed, it is argued.

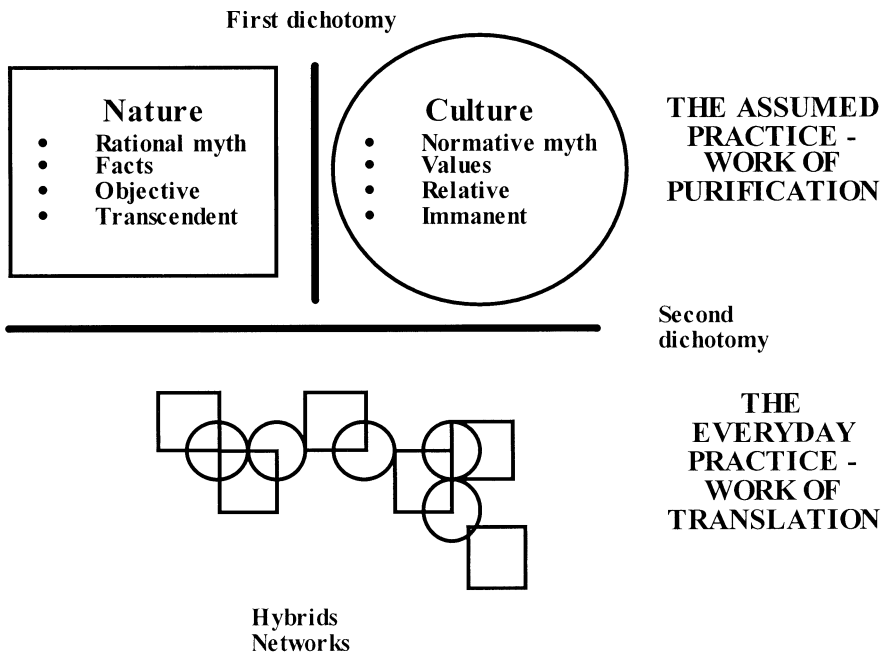
This position is hard to accept given our above observations, where the parallel existence of both myths was observed. In legitimating their practice, consultants freely mixed arguments based on both myths, describing the change process as both orderly and predictable, as well as chaotic and too complex to plan, etc. Mixing the two myths, which are most often treated as incommensurate, is thus repeatedly observed in practice. The remaining part of this paper focuses on explaining how this is possible, as well as spelling out some of the consequences of this mixing of incommensurates.



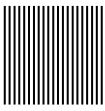
Invincibility through Blending the Incommensurates while Keeping them Apart

Inspired by Latour's (1993) arguments of the modern constitution, we argue that it is possible to blend incommensurates, just because we work so hard in trying to keep them apart. This paradoxical statement demands some elaboration. The modern constitution making this paradox possible consists of two dichotomies which are considered separately. The activities of the first dichotomy we have already discussed at some length while we have only hinted at the activities of the second. The first dichotomy between nature and culture is created through practices of *purification* which creates these two entirely distinct ontological zones. On the one hand, we have the nature side, which is the objective and transcendent side, consisting of non-humans; on the other, we have the culture side, which is relative, immanent and consisting of humans. These two opposites correspond to the two above-discussed myths. The rationality myth claiming that objective and universal knowledge is possible is clearly linked to the nature side of the dichotomy while the pragmatic myth emphasizing that knowledge is local and relative, and that humans create the world they live in, is clearly linked to the culture side of the first dichotomy (Figure 1).

Figure 1. The Modern Constitution—Purification and Translation



Source Adapted from Latour, 1993: 11.



At the same time another set of practices 'by "translation", creates mixtures between entirely new types of beings, hybrids of nature and culture' (Latour, 1993: 10). According to Latour, these two practices of purification and translation, separated by the second dichotomy, presuppose each other. The work of purification, in which hybrids of nature and culture are critically examined, and order restored through the separation of that which belongs to nature and that which belongs to culture, clearly depends on the creation of hybrids, otherwise purification would be pointless. Similarly, through the work of purification, new distinctions are made which open up possibilities for the work of translation where new hybrids can be created. The distinct artifacts or definitions thus created through purification become resources in practices of translation in which new mixtures, new hybrids, are created.

Linking back to our introductory case, what is observed in terms of Latour's framework is the creation of hybrids in order to motivate the participants of the seminar. In this endeavor, as we have shown above, the consultants draw on a number of different allies based on different sides of the ontological demarcation line. The same pattern is readily observable in the management discourse more generally, e.g. management fashions. In discourses describing and justifying universal solutions to universal problems supposedly delivered by the latest management model, emotional arguments of different kinds are freely blended with a more scientific prose (Abrahamson, 1996). The somewhat evangelist discourse justifying these models is given a scientific grounding, usually provided from business schools. This grounding 'often gives solution discourse a patina of rationality' (Abrahamson, 1996: 129). A similar observation is made by Hatchuel and Weil (1995) who view management techniques as 'rational myths', where the rational aspects point towards the controllability of the organizational system and the mythical aspects towards the motivational power of management techniques.

These two examples show how incommensurates are blended. Culture arguments are blended with nature arguments. Still, the blending is not always made on equal terms. Usually, dichotomies of various kinds are hierarchical as well, in the sense that one side is considered superior to the other, in a given context, while in another context the opposite may hold true. Sometimes, this hierarchical order is imported into the creation of new hybrids. This is the case in the previous two examples describing the character of management techniques. Although the blending of the incommensurates is admitted, the nature side seems to provide the strongest and most valued arguments. In other words, in these examples, culture is naturalized.

If we return to the short case in the introduction of this article, we find an example of the reversed process, when something given and 'objective' is transformed to something negotiable and changeable. In short, an example in which nature is culturalized. In stressing the importance of the BPR project, Ken the CEO argues:



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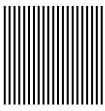
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[t]he high growth rate of the market demands a new way of working . . . The competitive situation for the company is getting harder; the years when the customers just came to us are over. Now we have to start working for our money.

At first, external pressures are emphasized, and these are of an ‘objective’ kind (i.e. the laws of the market). So far, this story is a rather deterministic story demanding reaction and adaptation, but as revealed in the end of the argument and by the framing of the meeting as a whole as a ‘creative design of the processes of the future’, it ends with a more positive conclusion of more active or even proactive responses. We can do something to make a difference, we can create our world seems to be the message. In short, the given world of external pressures demanding somewhat passive or reactive adaptation is transformed and revealed to be changeable through proactive and creative actions.

In the practice of translation, the world is thus described and acted upon from a less ontologically secured standpoint. The particularities of the situation are taken into account and universal claims of different kinds are recreated to fit the particular situation—the universal is transformed into something local, and vice versa. Problems and solutions are created in an interactive process of translation rather than being discovered, or delivered intact by experts. In this process of sensemaking, narratives are constructed to make the changes of the organization intelligible, and plausible—the universal is mixed with the particular, facts mixed with values, ostensive definitions turned into performative ones (Latour, 1986).

The second dichotomy is the dichotomy between these two practices—the work of purification and the work of translation (mediation) (see Figure 1). This is the hidden dichotomy. Officially, the first dichotomy (nature vs. culture) is thought of as our guarantee of modernity, explaining our culture’s success and progress compared to other cultures. As argued by Latour (1993: 41): ‘The link between the work of purification and the work of mediation has given birth to the moderns, but they credit only the former with their success.’ In other words, we are constantly involved in practices of translation, which we presume to be practices of purification. There are at least two reasons for this belief. First, during the ongoing flow of interactions in organizations, we constantly create hybrids through our practices of translation. But, when we distance ourselves and reflect over our, and others’, activities, we speak of them in retrospect, ordering them in a manner which is consistent with the first dichotomy. This retrospective rationalization or sensemaking has as an important goal: the ‘feeling of order, clarity, and rationality . . . which means that once this feeling is achieved, further retrospective processing stops’ (Weick, 1995: 29). Consequently, the deeply institutionalized dichotomy between nature and culture, and the long row of related dichotomies, is reproduced when our messy activities of translation are



again neatly ordered into proper categories, given proper causes, through the acts of retrospective reflection.

Second, when our illegitimate creation of hybrids is discovered, when the ongoing process of translations is disturbed, a lot of work is usually put in to repair the situation and return to a working consensus in which practices of purification once again are assumed. There are several institutional procedures through which actors ‘find ways to assure one another that they jointly inhabit a “shared world”’ (Heritage, 1984: 212). This ‘shared world’ is a world in which facts are separable from values, nature separable from culture, expert consultants separable from process consultants . . . in short, a world in which practices of purification are assumed to be the rule rather than the exception.

Because of these shifts of practices, of which we are usually unaware, the modern Constitution allows us to do almost anything: ‘Because it believes in the total separation of humans and non-humans, and because it simultaneously cancels out this separation, the Constitution has made the moderns invincible’ (Latour, 1993: 37). It is possible ‘to do anything—and its opposite’ (Latour, 1993: 38).

The Unseen Dichotomy—A Basis for Management Consulting

Having established a theoretical understanding of how the mixing of myths as legitimating bases is possible, it remains to point out some of the basic implications of this practice.

The simultaneous validity of both the nature and the culture side of the arguments in consulting gives management consulting a quite strong position when defending its practice. Drawing on arguments from the nature side of the dichotomy (rationality myth), consultants can (and do as shown above) argue for a superior objective knowledge contained in models and methods. These are argued to present a condensation of a large amount of knowledge, previously tested in numerous places. That this is an argument having a strong legitimating power in relation to the project group members has been exemplified above. At the same time, an abstract and structured method also makes the change easier to grasp. Both potential problems and solutions are presented in an orderly manner, so that both become nearly self-evident. Ken’s experience, where ‘everything fell in place’ after having heard a presentation of the method by Alan, is illustrative of this point. Methods thus reproduce a picture of organizational change as an orderly process possible to control.

But, simultaneously, consultants can also claim, now drawing on arguments from the culture side of the dichotomy (normative/pragmatic myth), that the models *per se* are meaningless without an experienced consultant supporting their use. Even the most detailed method can never take into account all the potential contingencies meeting the method’s user in practice. The seeming simplicity of the problem thus requires the active participation of the consultants. As shown above, the project group members view the consultants’ experience as an important



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success factor in the change process. The consultants thus present universal models, at the same time emphasizing that these can be applied only by specific persons with unique experience. Through this rhetorical move, the consultants establish themselves as an 'obligatory passage point' (Callon, 1986; Latour, 1987).

The above exemplified simultaneous validity of the two basic myths, drawing their legitimacy from each of the sides of the dichotomy nature-culture, is also reflected in the consultants' relation to their methods. In some instances, they are described as important success factors; in others, their usability is questioned and the need for a more local, experience-based approach is argued for. These different views are not clearly separated by the consultants, and can often coexist in the same argument as illustrated by the following quotations from interviews on management consultants' use of methods.

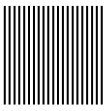
Consultant 1 The method is for us very much a point of reference, but you can't put a method in the hands of an inexperienced consultant and thereby achieve successful projects. But they make the consultant more professional, and make him learn faster than without anything. But one should not become a slave under the method, but it is still important.

Consultant 2 The design and presentation of a proposal is partly depending on the individual. It differs from partner to partner how they want to present this, but the content is mainly standardized, but it is still adapted to the individual, the client and the specific situation.

Concluding from the above, arguments from both the nature and the culture side of the dichotomy are freely mixed—not only in the consultant's official presentations (as has been shown in the introductory case), but also in the client's view of the consultant's contribution, as well as in the consultant's self-perception.

Change is thus—using the rational myth as legitimization base—depicted as rational and controllable, at the same time as—now switching to the normative/pragmatic myth for legitimization—its idiosyncratic aspects are highlighted putting the method's validity into question and instead highlighting the consultant with his experience as a key success factor. The argument conveyed is 'Change is simple, but only we can make it happen'.

Shifting between these two practices—the practice of purification and the practice of translation—without fully recognizing the shifts, is thus what makes management consulting rhetoric so effective. Following Latour (1993), the ways in which formalized models are enacted make them almost invincible, because the misrecognized separation between the two practices makes it possible to legitimately perform anything. In the translation process, arguments are drawn from the two different ontological zones when needed, although the blending of them, all in good faith, is seldom fully recognized. When structure and hard facts are demanded, the formal model is for the moment treated as given. When adaptation to the unique situation is needed, the model, a moment ago



unquestioned and given, is adapted or sometimes more or less discarded.

The continued blurring of this dichotomy between nature and culture, and the simultaneous belief that it is intact, is thus essential for the consultant's legitimacy as an expert in the current form. The arguments drawn, and mixed, from the two ontological zones satisfy symbolic needs and motivate changes by, in different ways, claiming: 'we can do something'. The 'nature' arguments supply givens, and create determinacy in a supposedly ever-changing world, whereas the 'culture' arguments emphasize the constructive roles of people. By transforming that which is immanent into something transcendent, and vice versa, any translation becomes possible. Acknowledging the continued blurring of the boundary between nature and culture in the creation of hybrids is in nobody's interest, as it would lead to a questioning of the cherished myth of organizations' rationality and controllability, and of the idea of the freedom of human beings to create the world they live in.

Needless to say, the success of the rhetorical moves is never guaranteed. As observed by Sturdy (1997) and Watson (1994), managers are far from docile clients uncritically accepting the management knowledge offered by consultants. Still, managers do consume this type of knowledge—and use similar arguments drawing from both sides of the dichotomy when trying to convince other people within their organization about the advantages or necessities of the changes they propagate. Our ambition has been to show how two central and incommensurate myths or master-ideas are combined in consultants' practices of persuasion. Given that these two master-ideas are deeply rooted blueprints they allow for variations of discourses over the underlying theme. Consequently, which variations of the rational myth and the normative/pragmatic myth that will eventually catch on and become accepted as legitimate is dependent on how well they resonate with the local context. Business process reengineering for example, as argued by Grint (1994), resonates well with the *Zeitgeist* in the US, and it is there that it has been most successful.

Conclusions

In our argument throughout the paper we have used management consultants as an example of how organizational change is translated with the help of formalized models of change. We argue that the formalized character of these models explains why they seem to be so attractive for organizations. They legitimize organizational change because 'the modern system gives great cultural credence to abstract and universalistic ideas of a rationalistic sort' (Meyer, 1996: 247). Still, we argue that these models are a necessary, but not a sufficient, condition for understanding the popularity, and use, of consultants. Only when combined with arguments from the culture side of the dichotomy do the models have the potential to become truly invincible. It is this *combination* of nature—



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culture, otherhood–actorhood (Meyer, 1996), rational–normative and the misrecognition of these combinations that open up an enormous range of possibilities to translate organizational change.

Consequently, we agree with Czarniawska-Joerges et al. (1990) in their description of consultants as Sophists who ‘act on the assumption that human institutions are artificial, conventional, and created by people themselves. Like Sophists, they teach managers how they may have the most influence on affairs both in speed and in action’ (Czarniawska-Joerges et al., 1990: 243). But, as good Sophists, they do not discard the arguments of their antagonists, the self-claimed Purists, rather they put them to creative use. Facts become values, threats become opportunities, externally determined situations become negotiable and open for individual choices, and vice versa.

Ending this article, it is important to state that our aim has not been to show how consultants mislead buyers of their services, or mystify change processes through elegant rhetorical moves. On the contrary, shifting from practices of translation to practices of purification, and vice versa, is something we are all involved in—consultants just happen to be a good example living in the worlds between academia and practice.

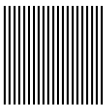
Looking at ourselves, perhaps contrary to the common view, we as academics are also shifting between these two practices. Usually academics are considered to be *Purists* mainly involved in practices of purification, ordering the world into distinct categories in order to clean up the mess created by all too pragmatic practitioners. This view is strengthened by all our internal battles of purification, in which the *Cartesian anxiety* (Bernstein, 1983) forces us to take a stand, while accusing other researchers for ‘mixed discourses’ of various kinds. Still, the only reason that these battles can legitimately continue is that we ourselves, as academics, do a good job supplying ourselves with hybrids looking for purification.

The same argument is valid for practitioners as well. They are not only *Pragmatists* creating an ever-increasing amount of hybrids. The practices of purification are not only activities for experts.

Understood in a sufficiently wide sense, the topic of fact and value is a topic which is of concern to everyone. In this respect it differs sharply from many philosophical questions . . . The view that there is no fact of the matter as to whether or not things are good or bad or better or worse, etc. has, in a sense, become *institutionalized*. (Putnam, 1981: 127–8, author’s original emphasis)

The nature–culture dichotomy, of which facts–values is a variation, is a taken-for-granted dichotomy in everyday life. Separating facts from values is an activity of purification that is constantly taking place within organizations. Convincing others that your antagonist is expressing mere opinions, whereas you deliver the facts of the matter, is sometimes an effective rhetorical strategy.

To conclude, we are all Pragmatic Purists, or to paraphrase Baudrillard (1988: 162): *Everything is translation and nothing but translation. They*



wanted us to believe that everything was purification. When translating organizational change, some might pretend to be only Purists, and others only Pragmatists. Still, the combination of the two stances, something which is clear in the work of management consultants, opens up far more possibilities to interpret and translate organizational ideas into action.

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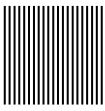
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