THE BUZZING OF THE WORKER BEES:
HIDDEN TRANSCRIPTS OF LITERATE RESISTANCE
TO EMPLOYEE COMMUNICATIONS IN A SOFTWARE CORPORATION

DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation investigates the ways in which a group of employees in the Research and Development division of a software corporation maintain their own dissident subculture in resistance to the culture-change efforts of upper management. In particular, it examines employees' uses of literacy in the construction of what James Scott would call a "hidden transcript of resistance."

Participant-observation and reading protocol methods were used during twenty days of observation between April and July of 1999. The researcher's role in the organization was that of employee-sponsored researcher/observer, but as the study progressed, her presence became slightly more participative. The research site was a U.S. software corporation in the throes of internal cultural conflict.

Results of the ethnographic analyses indicate that R&D employees feel betrayed and dominated in the wake of upper management's abandonment of the company's original core values, and that they have developed their own resistive subculture based on continued devotion to those values. The hidden transcript of the R&D subculture is symbolically rich and includes communally understood values, narratives, and keywords. The keywords of "dissonance," "chaos," and "ownership"
symbolize recurring themes in employee perceptions of their current working lives.

Self-sponsored literate practices are important elements of the hidden transcript these employees have created. Cartoons and other short texts that relate to real problems in the organization are circulated among employees and posted on cubicle walls. These literate fragments collectively represent a symbolic inversion of current power arrangements, an inversion that serves to build employee solidarity and reinforce membership in the dissident group.

Literate resistance is also apparent in employees’ skilled critical readings of written employee communications. Participants employed eighteen critical reading strategies as they evaluated the worth and credibility of an in-house epideictic text. The most prevalent critical reading strategy—and the one participants used most passionately--was that of weighing textual claims against their perceptions of the material realities of their daily working lives.
To my participants at Acme Technology, 
and to knowledge workers everywhere
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PREFACE

This dissertation presents a case study of knowledge workers at a private information technology corporation. In exchange for the access I needed to gather information for this study, the corporation asked that I not identify its name or geographical location, the names of any of its products, or information about any of its marketing strategies. I have followed those guidelines carefully. All product names, company names and personal names (except my own) in this report are pseudonyms. The corporation has not asked to review or edit my drafts and has agreed not to request access to my primary data. A copy of the access agreement that governed my data collection appears in Appendix A.
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

An assumption shared by most teachers and researchers in the field of Business Communication is that many of the problems afflicting business today derive from poor communication. If everyone in the business world would simply write and communicate well, the assumption goes, then all will actually be well: profits will go up, customers will get good service, employees will be happy and the working world in general will be an easier, happier place. I have no doubt that that is at least partly true. Many problems in the workplace, from minor irritations to major disasters, are caused by poor communication. Communication skills are teachable and I believe the world really would be a better place if people communicated more effectively with each other.

However, embedded within that assumption are several others. First, it subtly implies that what counts is the rhetorical skill of the communicator, not the content of the message. According to that assumption, any message will be received well as long as it is artfully crafted and carefully geared toward its intended audiences. Second, it implies that audiences are predictable, vulnerable and manipulable—that the degree to which a written or oral message is “effective” with its
audiences is primarily, if not exclusively, dependent on the degree to which the rhetors have adhered to the principles of good written or oral communication. Third, it implies that business rhetors are sincere, believing in the truth and goodness of their messages and practicing the craft of rhetoric in order to get those sincere messages across in the best possible way. In this vision, managers are tacitly characterized as powerful, yet just; prudent, yet honest; well-paid, yet generous with employees. Employees, by the same token, are tacitly characterized as predictable, rational beings who are sure to be persuaded if the message is crafted in the right way. Putting that observation in classical terms, *vir bonus*, the ancient ideal of the “good man [sic] speaking well,” is very much alive in Business Communication pedagogy and to a lesser extent in the research. Finally, the assumption implies that organizations are relatively stable as discursive spheres—that even though an organization may change, the rules of good communication will remain constant, like true north or a Bakhtinian “center” towards which communication values and practices will always reassuringly gravitate even as the organization evolves.

But some messages are just plain unacceptable to their audiences, no matter how well they are written or spoken. Some audiences have good reason to resist being persuaded. Some rhetors are disingenuous. And many organizations, especially today, are changing—and not always coherently. Brenton Faber has theorized that when a company is in the process of changing, there may be a gap between its internal culture and
the image it projects to the outside world. In those situations, bringing the external image and the internal culture into rhetorical harmony will help close the gap, stabilize the culture, and strengthen the organization to continue evolving through the next wave of change. But some organizations aren't even that coherent. What happens when, as is often the case, an organization has multiple internal cultures that are different from and in conflict with each other? How does that conflictedness complicate the organization as a rhetorical and discursive realm--especially when one of the cultures wields enormous power over the others, or when one set of values is profoundly distasteful to members of the organization who happen to hold other values?

This case study of a mid-sized information technology firm illustrates just such a culturally conflicted organization, taking what Tim Davis calls a "pro-worker" perspective on a cultural schism between employees and upper management and exploring the role of literacy in a particular subculture of employees who feel betrayed and overpowered. I will show how certain uses of literacy help these employees to construct what James Scott calls a "hidden transcript" of literate resistance to the values, decisions, pronouncements, and commands of upper management. Studies of rhetoric and literacy in unstable, problematic business environments such as this one are needed in order to complicate and ultimately enrich both pedagogy and research in Business Communication--and to provide for Rhetoric, Composition and Literacy
Studies a glimpse of the dissonant, multivalent, power-charged corporate environments into which some of our students are undoubtedly headed.

"Hidden Transcripts" and the Writings of James Scott

James Scott, whose writings inform this dissertation and who currently holds the Eugene Meyer Professorship of Political Science and Anthropology at Yale University, has studied asymmetrical power arrangements as an anthropologist would, by observing people(s). His extensive fieldwork in Asia studying peoples whose lives are dominated by others (e.g., colonizers, slavemasters, economic overlords) provided the foundation for *Weapons of the Weak* (1985), in which he documents in detail the many ways in which these subordinated peoples resist their oppressors. In *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (1990), he offers a broader study of the effects of domination and subordination across cultures and epochs. Scott defines “domination” as “an institutionalized arrangement for appropriating labor, goods and services from a subordinate population” (*Domination x*) in which the dominant have “great latitude for arbitrary or capricious behavior” (*Domination xi*) and subordinates are constantly aware that bad things could happen to them if they displeases their superiors.

Scott’s most important contribution, in terms of my study, is his observation that in domination situations, subordinates often have “a fairly extensive social existence outside the immediate control of the dominant”—and it is there, in those “sequestered settings,” where “a shared critique of
domination may develop” (*Domination* xi). That shared critique on the part of subordinates comprises what he calls the *hidden transcript*—the off-stage utterances and behaviors that subordinates reveal to each other, in private, when the dominant elites are not watching, listening, or otherwise monitoring their behavior.

The *hidden transcript* stands in contrast to the *public transcript*, which consists of the open, visible, public interactions between those who wield power and those over whom they wield it, in which both parties may “tacitly conspire in misrepresentation” (*Domination* 2). Because these public interactions require both sides to engage in *performance* in order to keep up appropriate appearances, “impression management” (Smith 159) is a key survival skill among both subordinates and members of the dominant elite. Yet the public transcript “generates considerable friction and can be sustained only by continuous efforts at reinforcement, maintenance, and adjustment” (45). That is accomplished chiefly by various forms of *concealment*: “euphemisms” conceal stark realities; “stigmas” function as negative euphemisms and serve to conceal the political content of nonconformist behavior; apparent “unanimity” conceals disagreements among the ruling elites.

Hidden transcripts, in contrast, consist of “discourse—gestures, speech, practices—that is ordinarily excluded from the public transcript of subordinates by the exercise of power” (*Domination* 27). The hidden transcript represents “the portion of the acrimonious dialogue that domination has driven off the immediate stage” (*Domination* 111). Hidden
transcripts are by nature subversive, running counter to the received views promulgated in the public transcript. Finally, hidden transcripts include resistive physical behaviors as well as communicative behaviors.

Resistance can be

enacted in a host of down-to-earth, low-profile stratagems designed to minimize appropriation. In the case of slaves, for example, those stratagems have typically included theft, pilfering, feigned ignorance, shirking or careless labor, foot-dragging, secret trade and production for sale, sabotage of crops, livestock, and machinery, arson, flight, and so on. In the case of peasants, poaching, squatting, illegal gleaning, delivery of inferior rents in kind, clearing clandestine fields, and defaults on feudal dues have been common stratagems. (Domination 188)

However, for this study, it is the communicative behaviors that interest me, not the physical behaviors.

Scott is not the only scholar ever to write about how people respond to domination. Most notably, Jack Brehm outlined in 1966 a theory of “psychological reactance,” postulating that when their freedom is in some way threatened, removed, or curtailed, people tend to re-assert their freedom in other ways, reacting against the curtailment (Brehm 2). The degree of reactance will vary depending on how severe the curtailment is, how important the curtailed behavior is to the individual, and how many freedoms are curtailed (Brehm 4-6). Scott harmonizes with Brehm in his assertion that the more severe the domination, the richer will be the hidden transcript, the more avidly subordinates will nourish it, and the more fiercely they will protect it.

One important element of many hidden transcripts is what Scott calls negation. Negation, in the most general sense, is "the safe articulation
of assertion, aggression and hostility that is thwarted by the on-stage power of the dominant" (120). Some instances of negation can be quite simple: for example, imagine a subordinate publicly deferring to authority by saying "Yes, Sir" or "Yes, Ma'am" to a powerful person, then turning around and taking those words back in some way, such as by grumbling under his or her breath to a fellow subordinate, when the powerful person cannot hear. The grumbling or taking-back works to "negate," or contradict, the outward show of deference that the subordinate had entered into the public transcript (the "Yes, Ma'am"). Simple though that example is, large numbers of simple moments like that can accumulate in the subordinates' culture, creating a layer of sotto voce communication that only subordinates can hear and fully understand. In my time at Acme, I saw and heard many such moments of negation, both oral and literate, and sensed that this activity is very important to Acme employees.

Negation, however, can also be quite complex. Scott presents the example of African-American slaves in ante-bellum America creating their own highly developed "autonomous slave religion" (Domination 116), which stressed emancipatory notions such as liberation, freedom, and the Promised Land—in opposition to the Christianity that the masters wanted them to adopt, which, of course, stressed submission, obedience, and hard work. Scott argues that the slaves' negation of the master's religion was rhetorically and theologically complex, a deft revision of the Christian texts, tropes and rhetorical moves that had been given them by whites. Slaves practiced and disseminated their resistive counter-religion in "hush
arbors,” quiet places where the masters could not hear--while continuing to show deference and submission in their outward, public behavior. Scott offers another example of complex negation in the religious practices of India’s Untouchables, who have reworked Hindu doctrine in complex ways that negate received ideology by undermining the foundations of caste hierarchy and raise their own status relative to members of allegedly higher castes (117). Yet the Untouchables, too, continued to “preserve the ritual avoidances and gestures of homage that are part and parcel of a caste order” (117). Although Acme employees cannot truly be compared with India’s Untouchables, they, too, preserve the gestures and rituals of homage to upper management while nurturing a serious and complex critique behind the scenes. We will see some of their complex critiques shortly, when we examine some items they have posted in their cubicles.

Scott’s choice of the word “negation” to describe this complex critical behavior is a bit awkward, since no amount of covert intellectual activity will literally remove, eradicate, or cancel out the dominant view. One might reasonably substitute other terms such as refuting, subverting, undercutting, undermining, resignifying, or turning upside down. Whichever terms one prefers, both of Scott’s examples above show subordinate groups maintaining a convincing show of outward deference while simultaneously nurturing a rich, complex hidden transcript among themselves. The hidden transcript works to undermine the hegemonic influence of received worldviews and value systems, writing over them as if on a palimpsest, superimposing ideas and constructions that are constructed by and work
in the interests of subordinates. That is the underlying theme of the two literate activities I will describe in this dissertation (posting short texts on cubicle walls, and "reading against" a document from upper management): the use of literate communication for re-working, re-signifying, or turning upside-down the practices, assumptions, doctrines and values of the dominant group. In my fieldwork in the organization, I observed literate negation going on in two specific sites: (1) employees' use of cubicle postings, or what Cezar Ornatowski called "wall decor," and (2) employees' use of critical reading strategies to "read against" a document from upper management. Both of these literate activities show a subordinate population contradicting the public transcript by articulating, under cover of disguise, the frustrations that provide emotional fuel for their construction of hidden transcripts.

Only two studies that I know of have applied Scott’s concept of hidden transcripts to the modern U.S. workplace. In her 1999 anthropology dissertation, *An Anthropological Investigation of Three Information Technology Firms Using James C. Scott's Theories Related to Everyday Forms of Resistance to Power*, Cynthia Smith applied Scott’s framework to three information technology companies and showed that “Scott’s conceptual framework provides a very robust approach to analyzing ethnographic data gathered in business settings," especially in combination with “sociolinguistic techniques emphasizing the use of figurative communication” (2). Alexandra Murphy used Scott’s theories in
1999 to describe the ways in which flight attendants at one airline resisted their airline’s abuses of power—such as, for example, its outrageous curtailments of their personal freedoms during off-duty time. Murphy found that “although employees may appear to comply fully with constraining organizational policies and meanings in public discourse, alternative meanings may be constructed in private” (499), which enable employees to “enact change within their social systems” (499). Murphy concluded that “although dominant organizational meanings may be present, other meanings can be formed in subtle everyday micropractices of resistance” (531). Though many people working in organizations (including many of my participants) believe that power is a function of hierarchical position, Murphy found that power is “exercised continually (by all organization members) through discursive acts that produce, reproduce, negotiate and resist organizational meanings” (531).

**Literacy in Context**

By inserting the word “literate” to create the phrase “hidden transcripts of literate resistance,” I mean simply to indicate that in this study, the researcher’s gaze has sought out and rested upon participants’ uses of written texts as one element in their ongoing construction and maintenance of hidden transcripts. Hidden transcripts are oral as well as literate, as we have just seen, and include nonsymbolic behaviors as well as symbolic communication. Chapter 3 can be read as a snapshot of the oral hidden transcript, and is placed in the first position because the
textual practices of my participants cannot be fully understood without listening first to what they say, to me and to each other. Having accomplished that in Chapter 3, I go on in Chapters 4 and 5 to describe two particular literate behaviors (Heath, *Labyrinths*). I do this descriptively, as a chronicler and interpreter, not evaluatively, as a measurer or a judge.

By researching and presenting my participants' literate behaviors in this way, I am locating my work in the increasingly blurry border zone between English Studies and Anthropology, yet also following a growing tradition of literacy researchers whose work investigates what Beth Daniell calls "little narratives" of literacy in context. Beverly Moss explains the role of context-based studies in the ongoing conversation about literacy:

> there is still much discussion and disagreement about definitions of literacy, but that discussion has, for the most part, moved away from "great divide" theories [of orality versus literacy] to a need to understand more about how literacy is learned and used in communities and institutions outside the mainstream. (2-3)

Moss' observation echoes that of Szwed, who suggested that in order to understand literacy, we must look at "the social context in which writing occurs, the participants (the writer and intended readers), the function the writer serves, and the motivation for writing" (14). Though mine is a study of literate behaviors other than writing, the same could be said of those as well. Szwed's and Moss' observations underscore the need for studies that help us understand how literacy is used in a specific nonacademic cultural contexts.
Literacy researchers have studied the relationship between literacy and context in a variety of nonacademic cultural settings. Most notably, Shirley Brice Heath spent ten years ethnographically exploring how literacy is used by adults and learned by children in three different neighborhoods located in the Piedmont Carolinas. The resulting book, *Ways with Words* (1983), presents thick, nuanced descriptions of culturally situated literacies and has had much influence in the field of Education as well as in English Studies. Other researchers followed Heath's tradition by exploring literacy in other settings. For example, Moss investigated the uses of literacy in African-American churches, finding "blurred boundaries between speech and writing" (176) and suggesting a model of literacy that differs in important ways from the essayist model we take for granted in the academy. Andrea Fishman studied literacy in an Amish community, finding that Amish understandings of literacy, too, are at odds with mainstream academic views; in particular, "the third-person-singular point of view assumed by an individual writer is foreign to the first-person-plural society" (37). Gail Weinstein-Shr investigated the uses of literacy in two communities of Hmong immigrants in Philadelphia, zeroing in on three adult individuals. She found that "differences [between the two communities] in literacy use both reflect and create differences in social relationships," and that the individuals who did the best job of surviving and succeeding in Philadelphia were those who stayed closely connected to the Hmong community while using literacy to create new social roles for themselves inside that community. These and other similar studies share
an underlying theme: that literacy and literate behaviors are culture-bound, reflecting and to an extent (re)creating the cultures of particular populations.

Research indicates that literacy and literate behaviors in workplaces are similarly culture-bound. Jennie Dautermann studied a group of nurses working collaboratively to revise the regulations governing their own work and make those regulations more accessible to their colleagues. Dautermann found that "composing community discourse in this setting required constant negotiation among the various specialty interests of the nursing community, as well as mediation among members of the writing group" (99), suggesting that "an intricate social balance is at work in the production of community discourse" (110). Jenny Cook-Gumperz also studied nurses’ uses of literacy, finding that “new technologies, and the literacy activities which are a part of their use, exert a considerable influence on nurses’ professional identities and the ways in which the profession is viewed” (317). Sylvia Hart-Landsberg and Stephen Reder studied literacy on a factory floor and found that the literacy practices of workers were both influenced and enabled by their culture of teamwork. Stephen Doheny-Farina investigated the collaborative writing of a group of software executives in an emerging organization, finding that the relationship between writing and the structure of the organization was mutually constitutive. Graham Smart studied the various writing genres used in a Canadian bank, finding that the genres reflected and embodied the epistemological assumptions of that particular banking organization,
serving as “scaffolds of community knowledge” (“Genre”). These and other studies show, once again, that the relationship between literate practice and cultural context is a very close one. Moreover, they suggest that organizational cultures have just as much influence on the literacy practices of organizational members as home cultures have on the literacy practices of resident members.

By focusing on how literacy functions within an organizational subculture that is arguably “dysempowered” and “dominated” (Chapter 3) by the power structures underlying their daily working lives, and by focusing on how members of the subculture use literacy in resistance to those structures, I am consciously taking what Daniel McLaughlin, C.H. Knoblauch, and Anderson and Irvine have called a “critical” perspective on literacy. Anderson and Irvine state that critical studies of literacy assume that social reality is constructed through social interaction and “focus on how current social constructions are the product of unequal social relations and conflicts of interest” (82). Emerging from this critical perspective is the notion of critical literacy, which has been defined in almost as many ways as has literacy itself, but most voices on the topic agree that it is reading in a way that goes beyond the surface meaning of a given text to decipher ideological messages between the lines, and/or writing in a way that works toward democratic social change. By gaining critical literacy in the composition classroom, it is argued, students will be empowered to critique the existing social order and ultimately change it. What those changes shall be, and whether they will be enacted through
literate critique or through direct action, are matters upon which
compositionists and literacy scholars do not widely agree. But many of
them do agree that critical literacy itself is the *sine qua non* of social
change—for “flawed institutions change only when the people who inhabit
them are transformed, when they can see differently” (Clifford 255).

A review of the literature indicates that despite an abundance of
type, there is a paucity of observational research taking critical
perspectives on literacy, especially in nonacademic workplaces. Porter,
Sullivan, Blythe, Grabill and Miles have recently (June 2000) argued that
Rhetoric and Composition Studies should broaden its mission beyond the
walls of the composition classroom towards “institutional critique as an
activist methodology for changing institutions” (610), but the institutional
critique they envision takes place within and around educational
institutions, and theirs is a call to action rather than a research report.
Glynda Hull (“Label”) investigated a literacy-related mishap in which
workers had been blamed for not reading labels correctly; she found that
contrary to the supervisors’ assumption that the workers’ supposed
illiteracy was at fault, a host of institutional factors had caused the
miscommunication. Though Hull does not investigate “critical literacy” per
se in these workers, her research takes a critical *perspective* on workplace
literacy, moving “beyond explanations that center on deficiency in
individuals and groups and toward broader based accounts that consider
institutional, social and cultural arrangements and the relationships and
practices they foster” (“Label,” 379). One study by a Rhetoric and
Composition researcher has shown that inner-city adults display critical literacy in their resistance to and manipulation of institutional discourse. In “Critical Literacy and Institutional Language” (1999), Ellen Cushman presents results of three years of activist ethnographic fieldwork in an inner-city community to reveal “how two adult women learned, transferred and evaluated their language practices in light of their interactions with institutional gatekeepers” (245). Cushman’s participants were private citizens dealing as clients with massive governmental bureaucracies such as the Departments of Social Services and Housing and Urban Development. While it could be argued that as clients, they were members of those organizations, it could also be argued that they were not, for they did not themselves participate in and partake of the internal cultures of those organizations as regular employees would. Certainly they stood in an appreciably different relationship to those organizations than did employees.

Some critical research on workplace discourse has been done by Organizational Communication scholars. For example, George Cheney did a qualitative study of “The Many Meanings of ‘Solidarity’” in a worker-cooperative, showing that terms such as “solidarity” can transform over time and “become detached from their former moorings” (78) and arguing that to study an organization over time entails examining the various meanings that an organization “holds” and “manages” (78). Anita Markham did a critical ethnography of how design workers experience ambiguous communication from management, finding that
even when organizational members were aware of contradictory and ambiguous communication practices by management, they were largely unaware of the extent to which their responses to the situation naturalized, reproduced, and strengthened a painfully experienced organizational system of control. (389)

Based on the critical research I have seen in Organizational Communication, and the workplace literacy research I have seen in my own discipline(s), I see a certain amount of cross-talk between the two strands, but the Organizational Communication scholars seem to be better at borrowing from us (especially from rhetorical theory) than we are at borrowing from them. As far as I know, there has been no research at all in Rhetoric, Composition and Literacy Studies on critical literacy as practiced by workers within organizations.

**Adult Reading in the Workplace**

Since both of the literate behaviors I describe in this dissertation involve reading, not composing, a review of the literature on adult reading, particularly adult reading in the workplace, will be helpful. Most of the adult reading research has been done by reading researchers in departments other than English (especially Cognitive Psychology), and therefore reflects disciplinary assumptions different from those current in English Studies. On the whole, adult reading is seen by most reading researchers as a cognitive phenomenon, divisible into three cognitive functions: comprehension, monitoring, and evaluation (Pressley and Afflerbach). Comprehension involves processing the information in the text to arrive at a reading that could be seen as more or less accurate.
Monitoring is the reader's efforts to assess his or her own progress through the text and make adjustments in his or her reading strategy, such as reading a certain passage again or switching to a different way of reading. Evaluation is a grab-bag category that includes all evaluative judgments the reader makes during and after the reading, from "cold" judgments such as assessing the quality of an argument to "hot" judgments such as liking or disliking the text or parts thereof (A. L. Brown, Bransford, Ferrarra and Campione).

Most of the adult reading literature focuses on comprehension and monitoring: very little focuses on evaluation. And most of the adult readers in this literature are college and graduate students reading texts that could be considered "academic" texts: essays, textbooks, and literature. For example, Haas and Flower in their well-known 1988 study, "Rhetorical Reading Strategies and the Construction of Meaning," used think-aloud protocols to investigate how first-year college students come to understand a passage from a textbook and how their reading strategies differ from those employed by graduate students. They found that the graduate students employ what the researchers call "rhetorical reading" to construct "a rich representation of text" (181) whereas first-year students took a "simple, information-exchange view" (182) of the reading process. Their study was replicated twice in 1999 by Richard Haswell et al., once with the same text and once with a different text on a topic more familiar to first-year students. They found that one reason why Haas and Flower's first-year students did not read rhetorically was that they were unfamiliar with
the subject matter of the text. Haswell et al.'s first-year participants were able to read more rhetorically when the topic of the passage was more familiar to them. Although Haswell et al. did make an additional finding that the more experienced readers did make more personal judgments of the text, both of these studies center on with comprehension—"the construction of meaning"—rather than on monitoring or evaluation.

When one looks for studies of adult reading in the workplace, one discovers an even smaller literature, even more weighted toward certain types of readers, and even more resolutely focused on comprehension as opposed to monitoring or evaluation. Most studies of adult reading in the workplace focus on low-skilled workers mastering (or failing to master) relatively simple reading tasks, such as interpreting written instructions or reading ingredient labels (Hull, "Hearing"). According to Hull, much of this literature operates on a "deficit" model that assumes that reading problems in the workplace must be traceable to some deficiency on the part of workers. Hull problematizes the deficit model and urges schools and workplaces to avoid thinking in terms of deficiencies because doing so leads them to overlook the creative and intellectual potential of worker populations ("Label" 408). Hull's scholarship works towards understanding and reconceiving what most people think of as functional literacies, as distinct from the highly skilled literacies that my participants display in their critical readings of a company text.

The literature on skilled reading in the workplace does display more of an interest in evaluation and monitoring in addition to comprehension,
but these studies take us out of the nonacademic workplace and back into
the academy, where we see academic workers (professors) giving skilled
readings of academic texts such as articles in scholarly journals. These
studies indicate that skilled readers make frequent evaluations of the
worth or credibility of what they are reading, based on their extensive
stores of knowledge related to the subject matter. For example, Charles
Bazerman found in 1985 that physicists made choices about what
professional literature to read and how to read it based on their schemata
of where knowledge in the field was going as well as on their own
intellectual interests. In the same year, Samuel S. Wineberg studied
historians reading an excerpt from a high school history text, finding that
they, in contrast to high school students, were finely attuned to the
“purposes, intentions and goals” (498) of the textbook authors as well as
the authors’ “assumptions, world views, and beliefs” (499). Davida
Charney found that even scientists read rhetorically—that is, in addition to
comprehending the various claims made within the text, they also
responded to the rhetorical strategies used in the text, analyzing and
critiquing rhetorical devices, and made frequent judgments of the text’s
credibility. Cheryl Geisler found in 1991 that philosophers reading
philosophy articles show a keen interest in the authorship of readings as
they critiqued the arguments presented within them. David Wyatt et al.,
who studied social scientists reading “professional articles that are
important to them” (49), found that “expert reading is both the cold
cognition emphasized in previous information-processing analyses and the
hot cognition emphasized by scholars of rhetoric who have studied professionals as they read” (49). Though skilled reading by working adults outside the academy may resemble in some ways the skilled reading done by academic workers in the academy, we do not know whether or how that is true because there has been no research on skilled reading in the nonacademic workplace.

**Audience**

Since this dissertation is an in-depth, ethnographic study of a particular group of corporate employees and how they construct and reconstruct communications they have received from upper management, it can be seen as a study of one particular audience. Previous work in the area of audience differs somewhat between the slightly overlapping disciplines of Rhetoric and Composition and Business and Technical Communication, but all of this work is undergirded and united by a definite focus on audience as perceived by the writer, and on helping students grapple with what it really means to “consider your audience”—a common piece of advice that is easier given than followed.

**“Audience” in Rhetoric and Composition**

Classical notions of audience imply that the audience is a passive entity that will surely be persuaded if the rhetor selects the best available means of persuasion. Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* and all of the other works from this period place the rhetor—the orator—at the center and discuss in great
detail the many ways of crafting a successful speech. His oft-quoted
definition of rhetoric as “the faculty of observing in any give case the
available means of persuasion” (Book I, as translated in Bizzell and
Herzberg’s *The Rhetorical Tradition*, 153) emphasizes the rhetor in act of
seeking and does not even mention the audience. The audience comes in
from the shadows in Book II, when Aristotle discusses ethical and pathetic
appeals and describes conditions under which the audience may have
certain emotional reactions (Bizzell and Herzberg 160-180). His
descriptions, however, cast the audience as a homogeneous group, a
predictable polis whose feelings can be manipulated rather easily by the
calculating rhetor.

In *The New Rhetoric*, an influential 1966 treatise on argumentation,
authors Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca place the rhetor at
the center and define audience broadly as “the ensemble of those whom
the speaker wishes to influence by his argumentation” (19). They also
posit the idea of a “universal audience” who can only be persuaded by the
very best argumentation, because the best argumentation rises above
particular interests and situations (31). Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca
agree with the classical teachers that “the orator is obliged to adapt himself
to his audience if he wishes to have any effect on it” (7); to that end, they
advocate learning about the audience’s role in society (e.g., job or social
position, 21) and the audience’s existing views on the subject at hand (24).
The entire treatise remains resolutely focused on rhetor and discourse
production, not audience and discourse reception. The same rhetor-
centric quality is seen in writing pedagogy since Perelman, where the emphasis is consistently placed on writers producing, not readers receiving. That emphasis may be entirely appropriate for the composition classroom, where writing and writers quite reasonably take center stage.

Still, it is worth pointing out that the conversation about audience centers on the writer even when it purports to be discussing audience—in particular, it centers on the student writer in the composition classroom trying to figure out how to “consider the audience” in their writing. When examined from the writer’s perspective, the concept of audience becomes ghostlike and elusive (Park 248), a problem that has troubled many in English Studies and inspired much discussion in the literature.

Walter Ong wrote in 1975 that writers “fictionalize” (11) their audiences, making them up while they write and adjusting their writing accordingly. Audiences fictionalize themselves as well, Ong asserts, for in reading a piece of writing, “a reader has to play the role in which the author has [implicitly] cast him” (“Audience,” 12). Both the writer and the reader, then, are envisioning a reading subject who may or may not resemble the actual reader, but to whom the writing is aimed—and both writer and reader have the expectation that the writer will direct and the reader will perform more or less as directed.

Douglas Park pointed out in 1982 that definitions of audience tend to move in two directions: “one toward actual people external to a text, the audience with whom the writer must accommodate; the other toward the text itself and the audience implied there, a set of suggested or evoked
attitudes, interests, reactions” (249). His own view of audience tends
toward the external, oriented toward the real reader actually reading--and
those readings, for Park, are influenced by the “contexts” to which readers
belong: “These contexts may be thought of as a set of overlapping
boundaries which together delineate the territory we identify as the
audience” (252).

Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford echoed Park’s outside the text/inside
the text categorization in their landmark essay, “Audience
Addressed/Audience Invoked: The Role of Audience in Composition Theory
and Pedagogy” (1984), in which they argue that it is not either/or, but
both/and, advocating “a synthesis of the perspectives we have termed
audience addressed, with its focus on the reader, and audience invoked,
with its focus on the writer” (167):

A full elaborated view of audience, then, must balance the
creativity of the writer with the different, but equally
important, creativity of the reader. It must account for a wide
and shifting range of roles for both addressed and invoked
audiences. (170)

Jack Selzer continued developing this influential line of thought, joining
Ede and Lunsford in their efforts “to subdue the meanings of audience for
the sake of teaching” (163-64) and extending their model with his own
three categories of audience. For Selzer, there is the reader who is
envisioned by the writer during composing (“the reader in the writer,” 164);
there is the reader who is implied by the use of certain textual cues (“the
reader in the text”) (165); and there are “real readers,” who “truly exist”
as both multiple and single audiences. Selzer concludes by calling for greater tolerance of complexity in our views of audience.

The conversation about audience has been taken into some interesting new directions lately by Michelle Baliff and Kay Halasek. Baliff draws our attention to gender, portraying the classical rhetor as "male," "active," "disseminating" and the classical audience as "female," "passive," "receiving." In the classical view, it is the male speaker's desire to speak that counts, not the female audience's desire to hear something. In that sense, the act of communication becomes almost like a heterosexual rape. As a solution to this problem, Baliff asks us to re-imagine the speaking act as a transgendered, hermaphroditic coupling in which both parties desire and both parties may resist. Translating this into pedagogy, she is arguing that we should pay more attention to the ways the audience can resist the speaker's desire, and teach our students to "speak as listeners," with a heightened sense that they may be misunderstood.

Kay Halasek views audience through a Bakhtinian and Volosinovian lens in her influential 1999 book, *A Pedagogy of Possibility: Bakhtinian Perspectives on Composition Studies*, Chapter 2 of which deals with "Audience, Addressivity, and Answerability." Halasek describes our understandings of audience as "conflicted" as we seek both to define audience in theory and help our students analyze audiences for the sake of their writing. The discipline, she says, has come to realize how powerful audience is in the construction of discourse—a belief that harmonizes with Bakhtin, who also grants the audience a great deal of
power, positing an “interactive and dialogic relationship” (53) that accounts for the audience’s power as well as for that of the writer. After claiming that both Selzer’s model and Ede and Lunsford’s model are too complicated to teach to students, Halasek articulates a Bakthin-inspired model of audience (a “plan”) that, frankly, appears even more complicated.

Halasek’s “projected audience” resembles “audience invoked” and Selzer’s “intended reader” (75); her “previous audience” represents others who have spoken on the topic at hand, to whom one’s own text is presumably a reply (76); her “immediate audience” is “that group of living readers in classrooms who work with one another on composing, revising, and editing their texts” (77). Halasek also posits a “textual audience” (78); a “public audience” (79); and an “evaluative audience” (80), which is the person or persons who judge the piece (e.g., teachers who grade, supervisors who demand revision).

Halasek’s proposal eloquently demonstrates that “audience” in Rhetoric and Composition is a very complicated matter. Audience is indeed “a floating signifier” (Reiff), like “author” and “text”:

> Once a stable referent, audience has become fractured into audiences, into a not-always-peaceable and too-often-fragmented kingdom of terms, complete with colorful relatives, feuding rivals, strange bedfellows, and new arrivals turning up every month. (Selzer 161)

The conversation surrounding “audience” in Rhetoric and Composition is persistently and increasingly complex, inhabited by an ever-increasing spirit population of imaginary readers and listeners who are “invoked,” of necessity, by those who venture to contribute new models.
“Audience” in Business and Technical Communication

A different set of ghosts inhabits the discussion of audience in Business and Technical Communication, in which audiences both addressed and invoked are differently described and differently valued. Business Communication has been praised (Gieselman) for its long-standing orientation toward analyzing the many types of real readers—such as managers, subordinates, customers, users, co-workers, and clients—that receive and respond to communications. As early as 1925, business communication textbooks included instructions for how to consider potential responses from the audience (Suchan and Dulek 29). Technical Communication as well has had a strong tradition of audience analysis, especially since Houp and Pearsall (1968) “brought audience analysis to the forefront for writers” by contributing the first heuristic-based system for analyzing the audiences of technical documents (Allen 53). Houp and Pearsall’s heuristic centered on determining as closely as possible the knowledge level of the audience, as indicated by his or her education, job responsibilities, and technical knowledge of the subject matter. They classify audiences into five basic groups: layman, executive, expert, technician, and operator. Though they admit that no audience is ever homogeneous, they provide quick sketches of those groups and suggest ways that writing can be tailored accordingly. An example of this tailoring can be seen in a series of articles written by Frank A. Brown, Jr., who described the workings of “biological clocks” in living organisms to readers
at different knowledge levels. One article appeared in the *Saturday Evening Post*, another in *Scientific American*, a third in *Science*, and a fourth in the scholarly journal *Biological Bulletin*. Each of these publications has an audience with a different level of knowledge, and Frank A. Brown tailored his presentation accordingly. (For a detailed description of how he did so, see Joos’ *The Five Clocks: A Linguistic Excursion into the Five Styles of English Language Usage*.)

Mathes and Stevenson continued the audience analysis tradition in the Technical Communication literature, pushing the notion of multiple audiences toward a fuller range of possible attitudes by recommending that writers keep in mind the *organizational roles* of their various audiences (*Designing Technical Reports* 32-50). They offered a distinction among primary, secondary and immediate audiences and suggested that primary audiences have more say over the success of the discourse than do secondary and immediate audiences. Their multiple-audience model and primary-audience emphasis has influenced many textbooks in Business and Technical Communication (Vince Brown, *Factors*, 36), as has research on multiple audiences. For example, Susan D. Kleimann did qualitative research on “The Complexity of Workplace Review,” in which she traced the progress of one document through numerous cycles of review, revision and re-presentation to a sequence of different internal audiences.

Research has since complicated these notions of audience by adding more possible audiences, both reflecting and stimulating intense scholarly interest in the multiplicity of audiences that are found in “real-life” writing.
situations. Yet most of this research, like most of the conversation in Rhetoric and Composition, has focused on writers’ concepts of audience, rather than on real live audiences. There may be a closer relationship between the two than there is in Rhetoric and Composition—it could be argued that when writers in the workplace think of their audiences, they are using their past experiences with real audiences to do so—but the research has for the most part endeavored to catalogue Seizer’s “audience in the writer.”

That emphasis can be seen in Thralls, Blyler and Ewald’s call for more research into writers’ representations of audience. They use the results of a small protocol study to generate questions about how writers see their audiences and argue that much more research is needed before we can really understand about writers’ awareness of readers as they compose (64). Vince Brown heeded that call, conducting an ethnographic case study of a group of report-writers. He found that a new type of audience, the “watchdog audience,” had an influence on their revision processes (“Persuasiveness”); his watchdog audience has now been incorporated into at least one Business Communication textbook (Locker, Business). Others have heeded the call as well, contributing to a goodly corpus of research on business writers’ senses of audience in general and multiple audiences in particular (Paradis, Dobrin and Miller; Brown and Herndl; Sommers; Spilka; Stalnaker).

Research has also complicated the notion of multiple audiences by pointing to new considerations that had previously been left out. Some of
this research has illustrated the ways in which writers rank their various audiences in order of importance. Elizabeth Huetman investigated a case wherein the primary audience happened to be external to the organization, finding that writers may actually be more concerned about the responses of their internal audiences even when the external audience is supposedly “primary.” Other studies have destabilized the verisimilitude of the various categories. Rachel Spilka, for example, found that “readers do not always ‘behave’ according to the stereotypes associated with their organizational roles” (“Studying” 218), and also that part of adapting a text to multiple audiences involves “considering readers in a way sensitive to the social or political features of the current rhetorical situation” (“Orality” 56, emphasis added).

Also relevant to audience in the Business and Technical Communication literatures are the fields’ respective assumptions about what constitutes “effectiveness” in communication. Kitty Locker says (personal conversation) that the archetypal situation in Technical Communication is the person trying to program his or her VCR. “Effectiveness” in a VCR manual boils down to comprehensibility and is manifested in the reader accomplishing the task correctly: if the reader programs the VCR, the document was effective. The notion of “effectiveness” in Technical Communication, then, is seen in behavioral terms—-not “Did they like the manual?” or “Did the manual open their eyes to some new concept or insight?”, but “Did they use the object correctly?”. The drive to learn about readability, comprehensibility and usability is
intensified by the fact that more than just blinking VCRs are at stake: health, safety, legality, even life itself can sometimes hinge upon how real live readers interpret and use technical documentation (see, for example, Paradis, and Smith and Shirk).

In Technical Communication, therefore, the audience research has often involved observing real readers as they try to read, understand and use specific documents—or if not directly observing them, at least recording something about their behavior after reading the document in question. For example, Reva Daniel did a study of Veterans’ Administration letters to veterans explaining technicalities regarding their benefits, in which she tracked the number of phone calls to the Administration from veterans asking for clarification of the letters. Daniel found that after the letter was revised in certain ways, the number of phone calls decreased significantly. Matchett and Ray made a similar finding when they studied revisions of IRS documents. Even document design can play a role in reader behavior in response to documents. LaGarce and Washburn studied the effects of two document design features (format and color) on rates of response to a mail-in survey, finding that a user-friendly format, and to a lesser degree color, had a positive effect on survey response rates.

Business Communication shares Technical Communication’s concern with readability and comprehension. Farris and Smelzer investigated “Schema Theory Compared to Text-Centered Theory as an Explanation for the Readers’ Understanding of a Business Message,” and Stevens, Stevens and Stevens have explored the relative efficacy of the
Cloze procedure and readability formulas in “Measuring the Readability of Business Writing.” However, in Business Communication there appears in general to be a greater concern with effective persuasion than with effective exposition. In Business Communication, the archetypal situation can be seen (according to Kitty Locker, personal conversation) as the employee receiving a memo asking employees to please turn the lights out when the last person leaves the room. There is almost no question whether a memo stating “please turn the lights off when you are the last to leave” is comprehensible (although to be really accurate, one would have to say that would depend on the population being addressed: an ESL population, or a non-memo-reading population, would not comprehend). The question, then, in Business Communication’s view of audience, is not “Do they understand the message?” but “Will they comply with the directive?” “Effectiveness,” then, in Business Communication, is often equated with compliance.

Accordingly, there has been research on “compliance-gaining strategies.” Sullivan, Albrecht and Taylor studied how managers choose which compliance-gaining strategies to use in communicating with subordinates, finding that “the types of resistance offered by subordinates” (331) had the most influence on their choices. LaMude and Scudder investigated the compliance-gaining strategies used by managers with “Type A” personalities, finding that regardless of whether the managers were in blue-collar or white-collar occupational groups, they chose “anti-social” strategies in their efforts to get employees to comply. David and
Barker applied compliance-gaining theory to memos from managers to subordinates, finding that compliance-gaining theory explains the memos more fully and accurately than does “sales theory,” which underlies conventional wisdom on negative messages.

Even when the word “compliance” is not used, compliance is tacitly present as a prime desideratum throughout the Business Communication research on audience. A growing number of studies that investigate the effects of specific textual features or “message characteristics” on readers, to confirm or complicate traditional lore in Business Communication pedagogy. For example, Brockman and Belanger found no empirical evidence justifying the use of the qualities known as “positive emphasis” and “you-attitude” in business writing. Shelby and Reinsch, however, found otherwise, using stimulus-response theory to analyze businesspeople’s responses to memos. They found that both positive emphasis and you-attitude did have a positive effect on reader responses (319), and explained the difference between their findings and those of Brockman and Belanger in methodological terms (319). Locker found in 1999 (“Factors”) that contrary to textbook lore on negative messages, “buffers” do not have a significant effect on readers’ responses to negative message letters and that strong efforts to “resell” the recipient on a positive image of the organization were counterproductive. Based on previous research and her own study, Locker recommends that negative or “bad news” letters begin with the reason for refusal (5).
In these and most other studies in Business Communication, the
response of the reading audience is characterized in the simplest, most
quantifiable terms, such as the number of surveys returned, or Likert-scale
indices measuring reader perceptions along binary continua. The study of
reader response in Business Communication is further stymied, it has
been argued, by “(1) Confusion over critical terminology. (2) Poor
heuristics for assessing readers. (3) Oversimplified and therefore
unintentionally deceptive cases,” and “(4) Misleading message clarification
system” (Suchan and Dulek 30). Overall, the discussion of audience in the
Business and Technical Communication literature is pervaded by
individualistic and psychological conceptions of audience and behavioristic
conceptions of response. There has been little qualitative or ethnographic
research exploring local socio-cultural influences on audience response (for
example, how shared values held by a specific group of employees can
inform their readings of a document) or on affective, temporal dimensions
of reading response.

**Employee Communication**

Because this dissertation concerns employee perceptions of their
workplace and of management’s efforts to communicate with them, it will
be helpful to review the literature on this type of communication in
organizations. In the corporate world, it is known as “employee
communication,” which is generally understood as an organization’s efforts
to distribute information and representations of itself to employees. This is
typically done through in-house publications of various kinds, promotional materials such as posters and flyers, corporate intranets, and in-person oral communication such as training sessions, new employee orientations, and “town hall” meetings such as those Andrea Williams describes in her dissertation (in progress). In most corporations, the employee communication department is typically located within Corporate Communications, the larger department that oversees the many ways the organization represents itself to its various constituencies, which in addition to employees also include stockholders, customers, and the local community.

According to Paul Argenti, one of the preeminent scholarly voices on this topic, “Corporate communications practitioners agree that communicating with employees is the single most important component of the corporate communications function” (Argenti, “Introduction,” 197). Communicating to and with employees is highly rhetorical and can involve complex decision-making concerning how to construct just the right representations for the moment, based on current organizational conditions. Yet employee communications is “an area generally neglected in both the academic and practitioner literature” (Argenti, “Introduction,” 197). Most of the literature I found was located in one journal, Communication World, which is published by the International Association for Business Communication (not to be confused with the Association for Business Communication). Communication World seems to be oriented towards practitioners located in corporate communication departments.
However, it also has some features of a scholarly journal: some of the contributors are prominent consultants and/or PhD-ed scholars, having written book-length works on the subject, and some articles present the results of research. A review of *Communication World* since 1990 reveals ten articles that address the following recurring themes: articulating the important of employee communication, trends in employee communication practice, and guidelines for what constitutes good employee communication.

The first theme, “articulating the importance of employee communication,” is addressed twice in the 1990s by Michael Brandon, who argued in 1995 that the shift from physical work to knowledge work is making individual employees more valuable to their organizations. For that reason and others, employee communication is becoming an extension of senior management’s leadership, having gone “from nice to necessity” (“Nice”). In 1997, Brandon traced the evolution of employee communication, especially in-house publications, through three stages, from the “birthdays, babies and ball scores” of yesteryear to today’s focus on “challenge, change and commitment” (“Three B’s,” 18). Employee communication has the potential, he argues, to become “the marketer of management strategy to employees” (“Three B’s,” 21).

The theme of “trends in employee communication” is addressed by several authors during this period. Robert A. Parker describes changes in the realm of in-house publications, such as more publications, but smaller budgets for them, and increasingly computerized methods of production.
Also important seems to be re-assessing the value of in-house publications. Patrick Williams questions whether they are even necessary, giving a checklist of ten points for communication practitioners to think about as they judge whether their own in-house publications are truly necessary. A necessary publication “shares the organization’s plans in a coherent way,” “shows how the organization meets the needs of customers and shareholders,” “clarifies and advances the organization’s culture,” “aligns readers’ interests and management’s goals,” and “is tailored to its specific audience,” among other things (32-33). David B. Freeland writes about the influence of peer-to-peer communication between employees, and Chester Burger writes about understanding and dealing with employee skepticism and anger in the wake of the layoffs in the 1980s and early ‘90s. Overall, these writers seem to be addressing issues of destabilization of the way things used to be. Publication methods are changing, the work environment is changing, employees are changing, and the role of the employee communication function is changing.

The question “what constitutes good employee communication?” is addressed by multiple authors as well. Brandon advises that employee communication always be connected to corporate goals (“Three B’s”); Brandon also advises that employee communication specialists get to know the employee audience (“Nice”). The largest number of pieces on this topic address the closely related issues of honesty and respectfulness toward employees. Gary M. Stern urges practitioners to be candid with employees; he is echoed by Burger, who argues that bad news cannot be suppressed
for long anyway, so one might as well be honest with employees, and Barry House, who advocates taking a respectful, honest attitude in employee communication.

The scholarly literature on employee communication seems to focus on systems of employee communication rather than nuances of management-employee rhetoric. Many scholars and practitioners see employee communication as a “function” (Argenti, Corporate) and debate the proper place of the “employee communication function” in an organization, asking what must be a perennial question: “In which department should it be housed?” (Argenti, “Strategic”). Others focus on technologies of employee communication, discussing the merits and drawbacks of high-tech delivery methods such as in-house corporate Intranets and information kiosks strategically placed in employee work areas. The scholarly literature on employee communication generally centers on processes, systems and technologies rather than on discourse, rhetoric, dialectic, and substantive issues impacting management-employee rapport.

Where the literature on employee communication does focus on the response of the employee audience, that response is most often characterized in behavioral terms: did the employees do what management wanted them to do? Apparently it is a major, ongoing challenge for employee communicators to persuade employees to comply with behavioral directives--hence, “effectiveness” in employee communication is often equated with compliance, which is seen here, as it is in Business.
Communication, as measurable behaviors on the part of employees (such as numbers of hours worked, percentage of employees utilizing a certain program or facility, or numbers of accidents avoided).

One study, however, probes employee responses to in-house publications in a way similar to the way I do in Chapter 5. James R. DiSanza and Connie Bullis studied a group of U.S. Forest Service employees reading and responding to an employee newsletter. DiSanza and Bullis focus their study on these employees’ identification responses to an internal publication, based on George Cheney’s taxonomy of organizational identification (“Rhetoric”). They start by describing Tompkins’ and Cheney’s theory of “unobtrusive control,” which postulates that by encouraging employees to identify with the organization and its values, management can influence, or unobtrusively control, their behavior. Identification can be “induced” in numerous communicative ways (including certain textual characteristics); employees respond to those inducements in “micromoments” (350) of listening or reading. The researchers first analyzed a Forest Service employee newsletter to locate and describe its identification inducements using Cheney’s organizational identification taxonomy. Then they did “focused interviews” with 51 employees, selected to represent the whole organization, in order to determine the employees’ responses to the identification inducements. Employee responses were put on cards and sorted by multiple researchers into emerging themes. DiSanza and Bullis found that employees had a variety of responses to the newsletter: some showed “nonidentification,”
some showed “textual identification,” some showed “contextual identification,” and some showed “disidentification,” primarily based on their personal work experiences not matching the claims that were advanced in the text. What those experiences might have been, and exactly how they differed from the representations in the newsletter, were not explored.

**Organizational Culture**

Organizational culture has been variously defined, but Kilmann, Saxton and Scerpa provide a serviceable basic definition:

> culture is to the organization what personality is to the individual--a hidden, yet unifying theme that provides meaning, direction, and mobilization. . . . Operationally, culture is defined as shared philosophies, ideologies, values, beliefs, assumptions, and norms. These are seldom written down and discussed, but they are learned by living in the organization and becoming part of it. (ix)

The concept of organizational culture gained prominence in the scholarly fields of Management, Organizational Behavior, and Organizational Communication in the early 1980s (Schein 17, Schultz 6) and quickly gained currency in the business world, as a new way of understanding organizations and human behavior within them and perhaps as a backlash against mechanistic paradigms of organizational life (Schultz 5).

A number of paradigms were posited for what defines an organization’s culture, each of which has its own practical application as a heuristic for studying and understanding the cultures of specific organizations. According to Majken Schultz, these paradigms can be
organized into three main categories based on their underlying assumptions: rationalist, functionalist and symbolist. Rationalist approaches treat the organization as “a means to efficient achievement” and organizational culture as “a tool for achieving organizational ends” (14). Functionalist approaches see the organization almost as a biological organism, in which culture is a “natural system” that helps the organization carry out its “necessary functions” and adapt for survival in a changing environment (14). Symbolism sees the organization as “a human system which expresses complex patterns of symbolic actions” and regards organizational culture as “a pattern of socially constructed symbols and meanings” (14).

The writings of Edgar Schein provide an oft-cited example of a functionalist paradigm of culture. Schein defines the culture of a given organization as “the total of the collective or shared learning of that unit as it develops its capacity to survive in its external environment and manage its own internal affairs” (19)—using metaphors that are very “biological.” Schein even lays out the phases of an organization’s life (like those of an organism) and lists the differing functions that culture serves at each point.

The best-known example of a symbolist perspective on organizational culture is provided by Deal and Kennedy, whose popular 1982 book defined an organizational culture’s key elements as business environment, values, heroes [sic], rites and rituals, and cultural network (13-15). Only “business environment” connotes functionalism; the rest of the elements
are decidedly symbolic in nature, depending to a large extent on language and interpretation for their meaning and existence. To Deal and Kennedy's list, I would add *villains* (the opposite of heroes and heroines) and *keywords*—two additional elements of the symbolic universe of the workers I studied. Although my interest in keywords grows out of their definite presence in my data, I am also pleased to note that the concept is supported by George Cheney's research, described earlier, on changing meanings of the word "solidarity" in a worker co-op ("Meanings").

I gravitate toward symbolism because symbolist perspectives focus on *language*—my interest in which no doubt reflects and advances my disciplinary orientation as a student of Rhetoric, Composition and Literacy Studies. In addition, symbolism reflects my own increasingly postmodern understanding of the relationship between language and reality: although I continue to find some tenets of postmodernism problematic, I have come to agree that "language does not interpret an already-experienced, understood reality; rather, language is constitutive of understanding" (Mumby 95, following Gadamer 345). Kenneth Burke made the same point in 1966 in his landmark essay, "Terministic Screens": "Even if any given terminology is a reflection of reality, by its very nature as a terminology it must be a selection of reality; and to this extent it must function as a deflection of reality" (45).

As the literature on organizational culture developed, it became more self-complicated, calling into question some of its own theories from the recent past. For example, if at first it was believed that an organization
has only one culture (Davis 163), that belief was soon challenged by the observation that most organizations have multiple cultures. In a *Harvard Business Review* article from 1996, Rob Goffee and Gareth Jones assert that

One of the great errors of the recent literature on corporate culture has been to assume that organizations are homogeneous. Just as one organization differs from another, so do units within them. For example, the R&D division of a pharmaceutical company may differ markedly from the manufacturing division... In addition, there are often hierarchical differences within a single company: senior managers may display an entirely different culture from middle managers, and different still from blue-collar workers. (Goffee and Jones 137)

That perception had been voiced a decade earlier in the scholarly literature by Tim Davis, who argued that the study of Organizational Culture is incomplete without taking into account the culture of lower-level workers (164). Davis outlined and explicated a range of possible differences between manager-cultures and worker-cultures, explaining that

while management may have an obvious interest in new ideas that can improve performance, such ideas often receive a different reception at the lower levels of the organization. One reason for this is that frequently an entirely different culture exists at the lower levels." (163)

According to Davis, researchers can study lower-level cultures “from a normative, pro-management perspective, or from a radical, pro-worker perspective” (164). The radical perspective borrows its orientation from Karl Marx and others. Radical researchers, according to Davis, assume and understand that

workers in nonmanagerial jobs frequently do not accept their underprivileged status willingly. An uneasy status often exists between the managers and the managed. Those in nonmanagerial jobs find it difficult to accept the justice of a
system in which managers have superior pay, prestige, and privilege as well as the power to tell them what to do. This produces a sense of resentment, which is heightened by the often monotonous, routine, and dull nature of many lower-level jobs. (165)

It could be argued that our shift from a manufacturing economy to a service and information economy has made many low-level jobs far less “dull” than they used to be and not quite so “routine,” but still, as we will see in Chapters 3, 4 and 5, it remains true, sometimes painfully so, that “an uneasy status often exists between the managers and the managed.” Though I do not claim to be a “radical” per se, I do take what Davis would agree is a radical perspective on organizational culture, as the following chapters will show.

Organizational culture experts have also questioned some facile assumptions underlying the conversation. One such assumption is that if an organization has a culture, that culture can be changed, “in the same way that a new cooling system or a compensation plan is installed” (Wilkins and Patterson 263). Wilkins and Patterson challenge that model, articulating reasons why it is difficult to change a culture (including that it takes time to develop or change a culture, and that people don't want to change). T.J. and Sandar Larkin agree, complicating the further assumption that if management wants to change an organization’s values, all it has to do is state what the new values shall be, and voila, the new values will be adopted. Larkin and Larkin emphasize behavior over communication, advising management to “stop communicating values”
(209) because “values are not something you communicate; values are something you do” (210).

The Business and Technical Communication research is seldom about organizational culture, but it often involves organizational culture. One line of research in that regard concerns itself with how newcomers to an organization learn the organizational culture and adjust their communication practices accordingly. For example, Aviva Freedman and Christine Adam in their well-known article research the process of “Learning to Write Professionally: ‘Situated Learning’ and the Transition from University to Professional Discourse.” Comparing novice learning processes inside and outside the academy, they found that “when students move from the university to the workplace, they not only have to learn new genres but they need to learn new ways to learn those genres” (395, see also Larson). Jean Ann Lutz describes “the stages, means, and effects of socialization” as well as “the influence of corporate culture and socialization on writers” in her well-known article, “Writers in Organizations and How They Learn the Image: Theory, Research and Implications.” Kitty Locker (“Collaborative Team”) showed what can happen when a person fails to learn the communication norms accepted in an organization; her study of an unsuccessful collaborative team revealed that the inadequate socialization of one of the team’s members had contributed to the team’s failure to produce an acceptable document.

Another line of research takes a broader organizational perspective, looking at the effects of organizational culture on organizational norms for
communication both internal and external. For example, Freed and Broadhead found that two consulting firms had different internal cultures which created different norms for writing proposals to clients. Suchan and Colucci found that messages prepared according to the guidelines for so-called “high-impact” upon readers do not necessarily have so high an impact when they are sent within an organization that for whatever reasons has a strong cultural tradition favoring “low-impact” writing. Graham Smart investigated “Storytelling in a Central Bank,” finding that a narrative known as “the monetary-policy story” functioned as “an important site for intersubjectivity” among bank employees. Dorothy Winsor examined the processes an engineer went through in the revision of a technical report and found that those processes were “strongly affected by the degree to which his company has previously accepted the claims he makes as given or knowledge” (270), the creation and sanctioning of received knowledge being one aspect of an organizational culture. Sam Racine looked at discourse practices among managers and employees in a manufacturing firm, finding that both groups used language “to create boundaries of exclusion and inclusion” (167) in various organizational subcultures. And Orlikowsky and Yates found that the “genre structure” of one organization “revealed a rich and varied array of communicative practices that members shaped and changed in response to community norms” (541).

Overall, it would be safe to say that the concept of organizational culture is not new to Business and Technical Communication and has had
a notable influence on some of the research, particularly in the areas of genre and newcomer socialization. However, there remains a shortage of ethno-oriented qualitative studies of how organizational culture informs and affects the reception (and for that matter, the production) of employee communication.

**Research Questions**

Assuming an unstable, exploitive, conflicted organization in which culture is very different “at the bottom” from “at the top” . . .

- What values, stories, and recurring themes characterize the employee subculture “at the bottom” of Acme Technology? How do these employees feel, as a group, and why do they feel that way?

- What roles do texts play in the hidden transcript of Acme employees? How do the values, stories and recurring themes of the employee subculture manifest themselves in these texts?

- How do employees evaluate the credibility of written communications from management? How do the values, stories and recurring themes of the employee subculture influence their readings?

**Significance**

This study contributes to our knowledge in six ways. First, it may be the first study, from an English Studies perspective, of critical literacy as practiced by corporate employees. Second, it differs from other studies of rhetoric and literacy in workplace settings because (a) it investigates a conflicted organizational setting rife with management-employee conflict, and (b) James Scott’s theories are employed as the main analytical
framework, a framework that has not been used before in Rhetoric, Composition and Literacy Studies.

Third, this study makes a contribution to the conversation about “audience” and “effectiveness” in Business and Technical Communication. By ethnographically exploring an employee subculture before looking at an individual piece of top-down communication, it situates the individual text within a context of larger, ongoing rhetorical and material exchanges between management and employees. That allows us to see how great an impact the larger ongoing exchange has upon employee reception of (and, by extension, compliance with) the individual text.

Fourth, my characterization of “response” to documents differs from that in the Business and Technical Communication Literature. My research design casts response not in behavioral terms but in affective, cultural, rhetorical terms, more like the way scholars in Rhetoric, Composition and even Literary Studies see response—a fluid, subjective, “hot” experience (A.L. Brown et al., David Wyatt et al.) that draws upon all of the reader’s thoughts and feelings. By exploring the qualitative nuances of employees’ evaluative responses, it values those nuances in a way that problematizes the lack of employee voices in Business and Technical Communication literature and reflects my disciplinary orientation as a researcher in Rhetoric, Composition and Literacy Studies.

By the same token, fifth, it contributes to our knowledge of skilled reading by adults in their workplaces. Current research on skilled reading in the workplace has only examined academic workers reading academic
texts; this may be the first study involving corporate workers reading corporate texts. Moreover, the current research conceives the reading act as a solo interpretive performance in which the organizational context plays little if any role. This study adds the preliminary step of examining the organizational culture connecting the readers (and their readings) to each other, showing that organizational context can play a very significant role in the interpretation of workplace texts.

Finally, sixth, this study contributes to the literature on employee communication in a changing corporate world. By employing Scott's notion of hidden transcripts in my analysis of the employee culture, I am politicizing the question of how employees respond to employee communication and situating those readings in a web of company-specific power relations. By examining how employees respond to a text moment by moment, I am building upon DiSanza and Bullis' study, which claims to be the first to examine "micromoments" of reading response among employees. By examining employee responses to a text that asks only for mental and emotional compliance, not behavioral compliance, this study moves employee communication into a more politicized arena involving discourse about values, assumptions and cultural locations within the organization.
CHAPTER 2
SETTING AND METHODS

The research design for this study was multi-modal, incorporating several methods of data collection and analysis into what Brenda Brueggemann has called an “ethno-oriented case study” (62). The “case” I studied was one employee subculture within Acme Technology’s Research and Development (R&D) department, supplemented by several participants from outside the realm of R&D. Since my task was first to understand this subculture in its own terms, I began the study as an ethnography, although I was aware that a “real” ethnography would take more time in the field than was available to me. While in the field, an opportunity to do reading protocols came up and I took advantage of it as well.

Because most of the methods used in this case study are also used in ethnography, and because the culture of the organization plays a major role in my findings, it is a little tempting to represent this as an “ethnographic case study.” However, I resist that designation out of respect for ethnographies and ethnographers of literacy, for there are four major differences between ethnography and other forms of qualitative case study research. Ethnography per se (1) requires the researcher to spend months and months in the field; (2) asks as its primary research question,
"What's going on here?"; (3) encourages the researcher to refrain from asking participants to do things that are highly unusual in that culture; and (4) leads to a write-up that consists primarily of "thick description" (Geertz 6). This case study is not an ethnography because (1) I only spent five weeks in the field, (2) I asked several specific research questions in addition to "what's going on here?", (3) I did ask participants to do things that are highly unusual in that culture (such as give reading protocols), and (4) the dissertation will contain a good amount of thick description but will not consist primarily of thick description. As an ethno-oriented case study, it shares a number of methods with ethnography, but is driven by a methodology that is not strictly ethnographic.

**The Setting: Acme Technology**

Acme Technology is a mid-sized software company located in Codeville, a city located in the continental United States. It was founded in the late 1970s by a software developer named Melvin Rice, who had invented a new type of software to perform some of the complex internal transactions that are carried out in large-scale businesses such as banks and major corporations. Other products were created later on for other customers and are still being created today, but in the beginning, Acme products were created for and used by large corporations. Since then, the company has gone through three major changes: it has grown from a few dozen to almost two thousand employees, it has sprouted new divisions, and it has gone through a major cultural shift that is still in progress.
Figure 1, below, shows a diagram (also known as an “organizational chart”) of the whole company at the time I was there. The structure of the company has been altered a bit in order to preserve the company’s anonymity—there may be more or fewer departments than are indicated below, and they may be differently named—but the chart remains true to the spirit, if not the letter, of how the company is organized. Acme Technology is divided into six separate “organizations”: R&D, Customer Support, Human Resources, Information Systems, Sales, and Solutions. Note that the six organizations are connected only to themselves and to the President. They are drawn that way because some participants mentioned their perceptions that the organizations feel very separate from each other. The boxes serve as place markers to indicate ranks within the hierarchy and do not convey information about the numbers of people occupying each rank. Reading downward, the ranks under President are Vice-President, Associate Vice-President, Director, Manager, and Worker. All of those ranks contain sub-ranks representing different statuses and pay scales. For example, a Director can be promoted without being made an AVP by being made a Senior Director. As a Senior Director, she would be that much closer to AVP, and she would certainly get a raise, but her office, responsibilities and job description might go substantially unchanged. Those sub-ranks have not been included in this very simple chart, for the sake of clarity. Likewise, the categories “manager” and “worker” have been strategically oversimplified in the chart; in reality, there are many different types of managers and workers.
Figure 1. Organizational Chart of Acme Technology

The headquarters of Acme Technology take up three floors of a double-chambered upscale office building in Codeville, shaped approximately like a figure 8. R&D, Testing, Documentation and some of Customer Support are located on the second floor; Finances, Marketing, Accounting, Payroll, upper management and the rest of Customer Support are located on the third floor; and training facilities, executive conference rooms, product demonstration rooms, and Human Resources reside on the
fourth floor. Any member of the general public can enter the building and use the elevators, but in order to leave the elevator lobby of any floor and enter a work area, one must swipe a laminated passcard through an electronic card reader that unlocks a set of double doors. Visitors must wear a temporary visitor’s tag and be accompanied at all times by an employee escort. (I was issued my own temporary passcard, as if I were a consultant or other type of vendor.)

Swiping one’s card and entering the second floor work area, where I spent most of my time, one emerges through the double doors into what seems like endless corridors of gray fabric walls. The walls are about six feet high, with an additional six feet or so of airspace between them and the ceiling. These walls form individual work areas called cubicles or “cubes,” which because of their economy and flexibility are widely used across corporate America. The gray walls seem almost impenetrable as one walks down the main corridors, but openings here and there reveal that they are grouped in warrens, with their openings clustered along smaller corridors. Each cube has a number (e.g. 204-C) and a sliding nameplate by its entrance; the name can be changed but the number cannot. A typical cube is about nine feet square and has an L-shaped desk along the perimeter of two walls, sliding cupboards above for storage, and a computer workstation at the corner of the L. Except for the personal decorating that people do in their own cubicles, most cubes look exactly alike.
That makes it rather difficult to navigate. Trying to find someone’s cube in a different section is like moving through a gray fabric labyrinth, making turn after turn, poking into cube after cube, with none of the faces belonging to the person you are looking for. The most prominent geographical landmark is the curved white wall at the center of each tower, surrounding the central elevator core. The white wall contains general-use facilities for employees such as kitchenettes, printers, photocopy machines, conference rooms, and restrooms. But the white walls are only so helpful, because they look just about the same all the way around. Framed prints break up the curving white surfaces every twenty feet or so, but the prints are all vague abstractions looking very much alike. Moreover, there are really two sets of white walls, because the building is shaped like a figure 8. The center of the 8, where the two towers come together between their two centers, is called “the hub” by employees, but the complete lack of directional cues in the hub makes it difficult to decide which way to go. Acme Technology is, in short, a very confusing place. It took me two weeks of full-time presence on the site to learn how to determine which side of the figure eight I was on and distinguish one cubicle warren from another.

Most of the work activity takes place inside the cubes and consists chiefly of computer-based activities such as code-writing, program-running, bug-finding, database-updating, and manual-writing. However, it also involves a great deal of communication between co-workers, either in person, by email, or over the phone. Meetings are frequent, especially for
managers, and are held in the many small, medium and large conference rooms scattered throughout the floor. Conference rooms are real rooms, not cubicles, each of which contains a white table, chairs, a telephone, a whiteboard with dry-erase markers, and a smooth black three-legged teleconferencing device known as “The Box,” squatting futuristically in the center of the table. The Box allows people who are not physically present to attend meetings by telephone.

Many of my participants were low-level employees in the R&D department, where the software is actually developed and produced. The R&D department is located on the second floor, along with some people working for other departments, such as Customer Support and Solutions. I recruited some of those individuals to join my pool of participants, in order to get a variety of perspectives on the Acme culture and find out whether my R&D participants are unusual in their views of the company. A few participants worked on other floors, but the vast majority worked on the second floor.

It is important to point out that members of upper management spend practically no time at all on the second floor. The President has a large cubicle there, but he lives and works in another state and is so physically distant that some workers joke that he is not a person at all but a “web object.” The Vice Presidents and AVPs are located on higher floors and almost never visit the second floor. Melvin, the owner, does have his office on the second floor, but many participants mentioned that he is physically as well as mentally distant and in my entire time on the second
floor, during which I passed by the closed door of Melvin's office many times, I never caught a single glimpse of him. The second floor, then, is used almost exclusively by non-upper-management employees: workers, managers and Directors.

I started collecting data on April 26, 1999 and finished on July 2, 1999, spending a total of 20 full days on the site. On most days, I started collecting data between 8 and 9 a.m. and gathered data continuously until sometime between 6 and 9 p.m. I estimate that my average time spent per on-site day was nine hours; if that is true, then I spent a total of 180 hours gathering data.

**How I Gained Access--and What Kind of Access I Gained**

I was first introduced to Acme Technology by my friend Brenda, who works at Acme as the line manager of a team of workers known as the Packaging group. Brenda and I have always enjoyed talking about our work lives, so ever since she was hired at Acme in 1995, she has been telling me stories about Acme and the challenges she faces in her job. Although this has been a fairly regular topic of conversation between us, it did not occur to either of us until the summer of 1998 that Acme might be a good research site for my dissertation. Our first attempt (in September of 1998) to persuade Acme to grant me access failed, but our second attempt (in March of 1999) was successful. The difference between the two attempts is important: in our first attempt, Brenda asked permission from upper management, whereas in the second attempt, she worked with a
friend behind the scenes in Human Resources (HR) to craft an access agreement that was perfectly genuine and legal, but which did not require the knowledge or permission of upper management. The friend in HR left the company during the period of my fieldwork.

The agreement I made with Acme (see Appendix A) placed me under the supervision of Brenda while on-site and gave her the responsibility of ensuring that no information that could be considered "sensitive" or "proprietary" (e.g., information about marketing strategies or technical information about products) would be included in my study. Acme promised not request access to my tapes, fieldnotes or other raw data. The agreement was silent about Acme's access to my write-ups: in order to avoid any obligation to seek Acme's approval on my work, I simply did not include an approval clause in the first draft of the access agreement. To my relief, Brenda's friend in HR did not include one either. As a result, I am under no legal obligation to show this write-up to anyone at Acme other than Brenda. Of course, dissertations are a matter of public record; if someone at Acme or elsewhere wanted to read this, he or she would have only to make a phone call to University Microfilms and purchase a copy. Alternatively, he or she might wait a year to two and look up the abstract in Dissertation Abstracts International, or perhaps visit the library of The Ohio State University and locate it in the stacks. But none of those scenarios seems likely. I make that point because the slightly unusual nature of my access agreement made it important to keep upper management from becoming aware of the study. I cannot absolutely prevent that from
happening, but by not giving upper management a copy, I have at least made it difficult for the wrong people to see it.

My access agreement had profound influences on the research, both positive and limiting. On the positive side, the fact that upper management was unaware of my presence pleased most of my participants, perhaps because (as I discovered during fieldwork) the rapport between employees and upper management at Acme is very poor, bordering on the adversarial. That made many employees eager to participate, which constituted a major boon for the study. In addition, though not all of my participants may have trusted me completely, they might not have trusted me at all had my presence been known to upper management or had I been obligated to share my findings with upper management. Moreover, my first attempt at gaining access failed; that indicates that without going “undercover,” so to speak, I might not have been able to conduct the study at all. In those respects, the unusual access agreement was a tremendous help to the study.

In two respects, however, it was limiting. The most serious limitation was that I was unable to explore how upper management views the phenomena and situations that I observed. For example, the voice of Melvin Rice himself, the owner of the company, is absent from this dissertation. There is considerable uncertainty in R&D, I discovered, about how Melvin views the changes the workers have seen and endured and what his own role in those changes may have been. That uncertainty will remain unresolved: where Melvin’s voice might have entered, there is only
silence. Another limitation made itself felt after I left the field: the heightened importance of confidentiality required Brenda and me to spend time and energy resolving numerous dilemmas about whether or not to reveal this or that specific detail in the final text. That process was somewhat stressful for both of us, for there was much at stake on both sides. I look forward to working under more relaxed conditions when I conduct other studies in the future.

Participants and Participant Selection

Initially, I had one key informant: Brenda, the line manager of a group of workers called the Packaging group. The term “line manager” comes from early 20th-century manufacturing, when goods were produced on assembly lines (the Taylorist model of industrial production) and a “line manager” or “supervisor” oversaw assembly line workers. Although there is no physical assembly line at Acme, software production is sequential and line managers are responsible for overseeing and coordinating the work done by their respective teams of software workers. Brenda, then, is the lowest level of manager, interacting directly with non-managerial workers.

In the September 1998 round of above-board access negotiations, Brenda introduced me to her good friend Jackie, who was at that time a nonmanagerial worker in another department. Jackie became my second key informant, and by the time the fieldwork was complete, she had been promoted to a managerial position. As the fieldwork progressed, I came
into contact with many other individuals and people grew accustomed to my presence. As a result, I moved about with increasing freedom and my pool of potential participants became quite large. “Snowball sampling” (Patton 276) was my primary technique for recruiting participants from that pool: I simply asked my existing participants, “Whom else should I talk to?” and followed the leads I was given. On the advice my dissertation directors, I also sought out several participants from outside R&D, in addition to Jackie, asking R&D participants, “Do you know anyone in [department]?”. Overall, then, my sampling strategy was “opportunistic”:

Unlike experimental designs, qualitative inquiry designs can include new sampling strategies to take advantage of unforeseen opportunities after fieldwork has begun. Being open to following wherever the data lead is a primary strength of qualitative strategies in research. This permits the sample to emerge during fieldwork. When observing, it is not possible to capture everything. It is, therefore, necessary to make decisions about which activities to observe, which people to observe and interview, and what time periods will be selected to collect data. These decisions cannot all be made in advance. The purposeful sampling strategies discussed above often depend on some knowledge of the setting being studied. Opportunistic sampling takes advantage of whatever unfolds as it unfolds. (Patton 179)

Throughout the study, I was careful not to take advantage of opportunities that might lead to upper management discovering my presence. I tried to be alert to participants’ instincts and consulted Brenda frequently about whether or not a potential participant could be trusted. Avoiding upper management was an overarching concern that governed my use of snowball and opportunistic sampling.
I did, however, include some managers as participants. Allow me now to discuss the rather facile distinction I have made up to this point between “management” and “employees.” There are at least four types of managers at Acme: those who manage people (such as Brenda), those who manage projects (such as Terri), those who manage functions (such as Jackie in her new position), and those who oversee the company as a whole. Although the first three are “management” in the strictest sense, they all consider themselves to be different from and subordinate to upper management, which oversees the company as a whole. The real distinction, then, which I will draw from here on, is not between management and employees, but between upper management and everybody else, a large and varied group that I will call either employees or subordinates. Subordinates consist of line workers (a.k.a. “staff”), line managers, Directors, and all other managerial ranks below the rank of Assistant Vice President (AVP). I drew a line at the AVP level (because that is where my participants draw their own line) and was careful not to cross it as I sought out management voices for inclusion in the study.

That being established, I can now reveal where my participants are located in the organization. Figure 2, below, shows where my participants are located in the organizational chart. Each dot represents a person. The largest group of participants, including my key informant Brenda, work in the “Packaging group,” described below. Other assorted participants worked elsewhere in R&D as well as in Customer Support and other departments. The relationship between R&D and Customer Support is,
culturally speaking, a close one. R&D developers write the software itself, Documentation (a part of R&D) writes about the software in user manuals and help screens, and Customer Support representatives clarify both the software and the documentation over the phone when customers call in with problems. All three groups deal with the technical features of the products, so they share an interest in and concern for product quality. This unites them as allied coworkers, as does the fact that most of them work on the second floor.
The Packaging Group

The Packaging group occupies an interesting position within the R&D department. To understand that position, it is necessary to understand how software is produced. Software programs are written in "code," or computer language. The code of the program itself is called the "product code." But one cannot simply thrust the product code itself into a computer and expect it to start working. The product code must first be adapted for use in whatever specific type of computer will be hosting it, much like WordPerfect has been adapted for use in both IBM and Macintosh computers. That adaptation requires a second layer of code, called the "packaging code," which must be "wrapped around" the product code. In addition, a third layer of code called the "install code" is required in order for the recipient's computer to understand how to install the software. The layers must be added in strict chronological sequence: first the product developers write the product code; then the product code is delivered to the Packaging group, which writes the packaging code; then the Packaging group hands it over to the Install group, which writes the install code. Finally, the Install group sends all of the code back to the Packaging group, which arranges all of it on CD so as to produce the "master CD" of the product. Only then can the product be reproduced and sold to customers.

So: the Packaging group is a team of eleven software developers who write the packaging code for all of Acme's products and who "spin" the master CDs. Their position is a difficult one because very often the
product developers will take their time writing the product code, handing it over to Brenda very late and requiring her and her team to scramble like crazy to meet the release deadline. (The Install group, likewise, is under similar pressure, although as it happens, none of my participants worked in that group.) Although Packaging is part of R&D, some people outside of R&D use the term “R&D” to signify product code developers. Jackie, for example, explains that the Packaging group is part of what could be seen as a cluster of groups who are often scapegoated when a deadline is not met:

right now Brenda’s group, the Install group, and the documentation group are all made out to be the scapegoats of the company. They’re all the people who are the problems. Install is a “problem.” They’re all the problem children. And if you think in a family system, usually the problem child is the scapegoat. I know enough to know that’s just bullshit. The company as a group kind of has chosen to have them be the bad problem, the problem child. (Tape 6, April 28, 1999)

That situation places additional pressure on Brenda and her team, because they must not only exist in a perpetual state of “rush” (being, as they are, at the end of the assembly line), but also do what they can to counteract the perception that they are the problem. Interestingly, the Packaging group may be in some ways a partner in its own scapegoating:

Jackie: Brenda’s group right now, and the Install group, actually, to me, take on way too much responsibility for you know, “You have to get this product out.” They get under incredible deadlines, incredible pressures, and, you know, why can’t they just say, “Fuck it, you guys didn’t tell me soon enough? Too bad, you didn’t get on the schedule soon enough. NO. So what if it’s late? Just no.”

Paula: Why don’t they say that?
Jackie: Because of the pressure. They think they should. It’s the old system. They have tried it once or twice, and then the Director gets all the shit phone calls from R&D, “You didn’t get our product out, it’s all your fault.” “Well no, you didn’t get it to us in time.” See, R&D has all the power. (Tape 6, April 28, 1999)

In most software companies, R&D is the prestige department, as reflected not only in salaries but also in funding and resources (PFN32, October 29, 2000). At Acme, that was true at one time, but is not so true today (as we will see in Chapter 3). R&D employees no longer receive the funding and resources that they used to enjoy, and the Packaging group in particular sometimes feels singled out for scapegoating and poor treatment. However, Packaging is part of R&D and definitely a part of that cluster of workers (developers, technical writers, customer support representatives) that share an interest in and concerns about product quality.

**Thumbnail Sketches of Participants**

The following “thumbnail sketches” describe each participant by age, race or ethnicity, job or department, and level of participation. Their sexes are implied in their pseudonyms, which are true to gender in all cases. Some participants gave much more of their time to the project than others, or participated in different ways. The following number scheme will be used as shorthand to indicate specific ways of contributing to the study:

1. Allowed me to observe, take notes on, and/or tape record him or her in work activities or social exchanges.
2. Gave me an open-ended interview.
3. Gave me a reading protocol.
(4) Contributed in some other way, such as showing me documents, giving me an additional reading protocol, introducing me to people, or letting me photocopy items from their cubicle walls.

(5) Served as one of five readers of the dissertation manuscript.

Those numbers will be used below in my descriptions of the participants as a quick way of indicating their levels of participation. Only participants who are quoted will be described; many individuals crossed my field of vision and in that way contributed traces of data, but played no active role in participating. Tables 1, 2 and 3 below display the names, ages, races and levels of participation of all participants quoted in this study, grouped by location in the organization.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Packaging Group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>name</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brenda</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thomas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Esperanza</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matthew</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mark</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luke</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manny</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jack</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Participants in the Packaging Group
Table 2. Participants in Close Proximity to the Packaging Group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>name</th>
<th>position</th>
<th>age</th>
<th>race</th>
<th>participation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gwen</td>
<td>Brenda’s mgr, R&amp;D</td>
<td>40s</td>
<td>white</td>
<td>1, 2, 3, 4, 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samuel</td>
<td>manager, R&amp;D</td>
<td>50s</td>
<td>white</td>
<td>1, 2, 3, 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terri</td>
<td>manager, R&amp;D</td>
<td>30s</td>
<td>white</td>
<td>1, 2, 3, 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abe</td>
<td>worker, R&amp;D</td>
<td>50s</td>
<td>white</td>
<td>1, 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ann</td>
<td>manager, Doc</td>
<td>40s</td>
<td>white</td>
<td>1, 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daphne</td>
<td>worker, Doc</td>
<td>40s</td>
<td>white</td>
<td>2, 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cleo</td>
<td>worker, Support</td>
<td>30s</td>
<td>Af-Am</td>
<td>2, 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deborah</td>
<td>worker, Support</td>
<td>30s</td>
<td>white</td>
<td>2, 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cathy</td>
<td>worker, Support</td>
<td>40s</td>
<td>white</td>
<td>2, 3, 4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. Other Participants Elsewhere in the Company

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>name</th>
<th>position</th>
<th>age</th>
<th>race</th>
<th>participation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jackie</td>
<td>mgr, Project Office</td>
<td>30s</td>
<td>white</td>
<td>1, 2, 3, 4, 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amanda</td>
<td>mgr, Marketing</td>
<td>40s</td>
<td>Af-Am</td>
<td>1, 2, 3, 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elliott</td>
<td>mgr, Marketing</td>
<td>40s</td>
<td>white</td>
<td>2, 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maria</td>
<td>mgr, Payroll</td>
<td>30s</td>
<td>Latina</td>
<td>2, 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ronald</td>
<td>mgr, Communications</td>
<td>30s</td>
<td>Af-Am</td>
<td>2, 3, 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mavis</td>
<td>worker, HR</td>
<td>40s</td>
<td>white</td>
<td>2, 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lori</td>
<td>worker, Info Systems</td>
<td>30s</td>
<td>white</td>
<td>2, 3, 4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

My use of the word “manager” in the tables is deliberately vague, for as we have seen, the real distinction at Acme is that between upper management and everybody else. Some of my participants were managers of some kind, but none of them held the rank of AVP or above, and drawing fine distinctions between types and levels of managers below the rank of AVP does not yield any more meaning for the study. The only fine distinction
that matters at all is that Gwen is Brenda’s manager: that constitutes a reporting relationship and is therefore worth mentioning. No reporting relationships exist among participants other than those which have already been revealed: Brenda manages the Packaging group, and Gwen manages Brenda (and other first-level managers).

One final note: several other individuals who are not listed here allowed me to photocopy items from their cubicle walls, items that make up the data pool for Chapter 4. Because that was my only contact with them--popping into their cubicles and asking if I could please copy some of their wall decor--and because I have not quoted them in this write-up, I have not listed them in the tables of participants.

**Researcher Roles**

I played four main roles in this study: Brenda’s friend; low-key, nonthreatening observer; academic researcher; and eventually what I call the role of “community scribe.” In some ways those roles could be read as “phases” in the research--for example, I started out as Brenda’s friend and did not become the community scribe until late in the fieldwork--but in truth, I almost never played only one role. The four roles I describe below constituted a repertoire of shifting subject positions which recombined themselves in various ways around me, depending on the situation.
Brenda’s Friend

The first time participants ever heard of me at all was as Brenda’s friend Paula: Brenda told the Packaging group in April of 1999 that her good friend, an academic researcher, would be coming to Acme to study communication. Brenda and I have been friends since 1990, when we met in a local department store where she was working and I was shopping. Our friendship has steadily grown closer over the years; today, we know each other extremely well and belong to each other’s innermost circles of closest friends. This project deepened our friendship even further because it gave us front-row seats, so to speak, on each other’s work lives. Had I not been Brenda’s friend, I would not even have known about Acme Technology, much less gained access to the organization for research. Moreover, had Brenda not persuaded her co-workers that I was honest and trustworthy, and had she not been perceived as honest and trustworthy herself, her co-workers probably would have either declined to participate or participated with less candor.

Low-Key, Non-Threatening Observer

While negotiating my access to Acme, Brenda and I decided that even though my presence would certainly have some effect on the scenes I would observe, it would be best for me to remain at the “observer” or “onlooker” end of the participant-observer spectrum (Patton 217). One reason for this was practical and came from me: I foresaw that as a novice qualitative researcher, and as a person completely unfamiliar with the
computer technology industry, it would be all I could do just to gather as much data as possible in the short time that I had, much less gather data while also actively participating in company activities. Assuming any participative role whatsoever in R&D would have placed me on a very steep learning curve in order to perform my participative role adequately--and I was already on a steep curve in learning to conduct naturalistic inquiry. Another reason, more important to Brenda, was that since upper management did not know about my presence, it was important that I not to call attention to myself and assume as low a profile as possible.

Brenda conferred with Jackie at length about how to make me look as low-key and non-threatening as possible, so as to smooth my entry into the culture and avoid raising any red flags that might bring my presence to the attention of upper management. They decided I should dress in dark solid colors with no scarves or accessories and never speak in meetings. Obeying that dress and behavioral code would mark me in the culture as a low-key, non-threatening outsider, perhaps a consultant of some kind. I complied with all of their suggestions, purchasing new clothing in order to achieve the look they recommended and allowing Brenda and Jackie to govern as much as possible about how I behaved and represented myself in the field. On my first day, Brenda took me to the Security office and got me an ID tag which enhanced the “consultant” look and allowed me to click myself through the locked security doors without being escorted. It was important to work these matters out very early in the study, because Brenda and Jackie knew that just by virtue of following them around, I
would be seen by many people. "Costuming" me as a low-key consultant type would reduce the need for my presence to be explained. To many people at Acme, then, that is all I ever was: a low-key, non-threatening observer in the company of Brenda or Jackie.

**Academic Researcher**

Brenda and Jackie decided between themselves that when they did introduce me, they would describe me as "Paula Foster, an academic researcher studying business communication." The phrase "academic researcher" was important because (they explained) people would then perceive me as safe: if I were represented as a "technical researcher," apparently a more dangerous sort of character, more attention would be drawn to my presence and I would not get the same level of cooperation. It was important to them, as well, that their description of me be literally true. Brenda and Jackie are honest people who do not like to lie. That I really was an academic researcher studying business communication helped them feel comfortable about introducing me.

In the first few days of the fieldwork, when Brenda and Jackie did most of the introducing, I noticed some interesting reactions to the phrase "academic researcher studying business communication." People did appear to relax and drop their guard when they heard that I was only an "academic" researcher (as Brenda and Jackie had predicted), but the introduction also had another effect that I did not expect. When people heard that I was there to study "business communication," sometimes they
would look at me, look at my introducer, and burst out laughing. Here is a
series of two such introductions, happening within minutes of each other:

Jackie introduces me to Daniel (nice cool hands) and explains
that I am an academic researcher studying business
communication. He laughs, looking at Jackie, and wishes me
luck. They discuss the situation surrounding a certain
product, then walk together over to a small conference room
in order to consult with Yvonne. Jackie introduces me to
Yvonne as an academic researcher. Yvonne asks, “What are
you studying?” I say, “business communication.” Yvonne
laughs loudly and locks eyes with Daniel, who is also
laughing. (RF15, April 28, 1999)

That exchange was typical: time and again, people would laugh because I
was there to study, of all things, business communication. I did not write
fieldnotes about every introduction, so I cannot state exactly how many
people laughed and/or made lighthearted remarks, but impressionistically,
I would say that about half of the people to whom I was introduced either
laughed or had some other amused reaction when they heard what I was
there to study. The only individual who did not visibly relax upon hearing
the phrase “academic researcher” and who saw no humor at all in the fact
that I was studying business communication was a twenty-something
newcomer whose newness was so glaring that even I picked up on it: he
dressed much too formally, carried a shiny new briefcase, and displayed an
almost comically earnest manner (RF16, April 28, 1999).

Today I read the laughter as meaningful. As we will see in the
following chapters, many Acme subordinates feel that Acme is in some
ways a textbook example of how not to communicate.

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Community Scribe

When participants started to sense that I was genuinely interested in their perspectives, even their negative ones, and that I really could be trusted, they started participating with an eagerness that I did not expect. The more time I spent on the site, the more people relaxed with me, and the more certain participants appeared to want to show me things. Participants collected documents for me, explained things to me, bent rules for me, readily agreed to interviews, and expressed interest in my findings. In interviews and protocols, most participants seemed completely candid, appearing to enjoy telling me about their views and their experiences at Acme. Not all participants showed an equally keen interest, but the enthusiastic ones lost no opportunity to accept me into their circle and share with me their opinions of how things are, and are done, at Acme. Several individuals commented that being interviewed about culture and communication at Acme was “interesting,” “a pleasure,” or “much more fun than normal work.” And it seemed very important to many of them that I was there to listen to them, not to upper management. The fact that twenty-six pressured people working in a tense, stressful, rush-rush atmosphere all elected to step out of their cubes and spend a portion of their work and/or personal time talking to me, suggests that they placed a very high value on the chance to share and articulate their opinions.

It was also important to them that I was “safe”—in other words, that I could be trusted not to repeat their words to upper management. Later in the study, when people other than Brenda and Jackie started introducing
me around, they would use the “academic researcher” introduction, but
would often add some kind of assurance that I was “safe.” In those cases,
only after the new person was convinced that I was safe did he or she agree
to participate. For example, here is a fieldnote about my introduction to
Mavis in Human Resources, right after the standard introduction and the
additional assurance that I was “safe”:

[Potential participant Mavis] wanted to know, was this official,
Acme-sponsored research? I said, “No. I do have a written
agreement with HR, but upper management does not know
I'm here and that's OK with me.” She brightened at that
and said, “Good.” Then she wanted to know who in HR had
made the agreement; I told her, “[person’s name].” She said
“Oh, [person’s name]. She’s not here anymore.” I said, “I
know. That’s why my access is so tenuous. All the more
reason to keep it low-key.” Mavis nodded in understanding
and agreed to be interviewed at 3pm that day. (RF98, July 2,
1999)

The fact that my safeness seemed to matter a great deal to participants
confirms my impression that the reason people participated at all, and so
generously, was precisely because I was safe. Had I been an emissary of
upper management, or had I been in any sort of reporting relationship to
an unsafe person, people either would not have participated, or would have
watered down their opinions, “sanitizing” them as the workers did when
they first heard “The Plan” (see Chapter 4). Some of my participants may
not have trusted me completely, but because most people saw me as safe, I
was treated like a trusted scribe for the subordinate community, a visiting
sympathizer who could be told anything.

In addition to talking to me, participants may have been listening to
me as well (in fact, they still are: five of them are currently serving as
readers of this manuscript). Several participants expressed interest in my findings, asking me while I was still in the field what was I seeing, what was I finding out? In most cases, I said I didn't know yet what my findings would be because I was still gathering data and had not yet analyzed it. That reply was perfectly true and satisfied everyone who asked. Still, their eagerness to know only intensified during the course of the fieldwork. Participant requests to know what I was seeing may have grown, as some claimed, out of “simple curiosity,” but I would argue that curiosity is never disinterested, never entirely “simple.” Those who asked for little peeks into my findings explained in various ways (when I asked) that they were curious to see how a researcher—or, as Gwen put it, “an objective, professional person” such as myself (Tape 34, July 2, 1999)—would represent their culture and their situation. Gwen said that she wanted to hear my findings in order to “confirm or revise” her own understandings; Brenda used the scraps of information I gave her to shed light on specific things that she had been wondering about; John was “refreshed” to have someone take such an interest in his views and looked forward to reading the final product because he felt that somehow it might make the world a better place. Participants who showed curiosity about my writings looked to my study, then, as if to a mirror, to catch a glimpse of themselves and their community of subordinates reflected back through the looking-glass of a researcher-cum-community scribe.
Methods of Data Collection

Data were gathered in the field by means of ethnographic observation, open-ended interviews, modified reading protocols, and document and artifact collection. After the field, additional data were gathered from ongoing written and oral communication with the five participant-readers (Brenda, Jackie, John, Gwen and Luke).

Ethnographic Observation

My overall modus operandi for most of the study was to “go with the flow.” exerting as little control as possible over my physical location, other than to stay with one or the other of my key informants (especially in the beginning). I went where I was taken, took what I was given, met those to whom I was introduced, gave full attention to the events that took place in my presence, and recorded as much as possible in writing, using a notepad and/or my laptop computer. In a few situations, I was permitted by those present to make audio recordings of work events.

Open-Ended Interviews

Participants who took me up on my invitation to interview them were taken to the location of their choice (most often one of three or four small, empty conference rooms available in the building). Two of the twenty-five interviewees declined to be audiotaped; in those cases I took handwritten notes instead. My list of questions and their exact wording evolved somewhat during the course of the study as the issues became
clearer and my interviewing skills improved, but all interviewees were asked first about their experiences at Acme and their perceptions of the Acme culture. The interviews lasted between 20 and 90 minutes, depending on the loquacity of each participant, but most interviews lasted between 30 and 45 minutes.

**Modified Reading Protocols**

I selected an in-house essay on Acme culture that was located in a company publication called "Recreating Acme," and invited people who had given me open-ended interviews to grant me another piece of their time for what I called a "reading activity." (At first I used the term "reading protocol," but the word "protocol" required so much explanation that I decided to drop it.) Twenty of the twenty-five interviewees agreed to participate. Each of the twenty protocol participants was taken, at the appointed time, to a location of his or her choice. He or she was then shown an official company publication entitled "Recreating Acme" (described in Chapter 5) and led to a three-page essay within the document, entitled "What Is the Acme Culture?". Each participant was asked to read this short essay aloud while narrating his or her thoughts, interpretations, and responses. In some cases, I probed participant responses by asking facilitative questions such as "What are you thinking now?" My protocol technique resembles Haas and Flower's technique of "in-process probing," but differs from it in important ways. Haas and Flower always asked the same exact question ("How do you interpret the
text now?"; I allowed my questions and my wording to be more flexible, based on the social dynamic of the moment. Haas and Flower always asked their question at the same nine points in the text; I timed my questioning according to the participant's demeanor. I did use in-process probing, but I used it in a more flexible, socially attuned way. The chief advantage of being flexible was that I was able to ensure a relative high comfort level for participants. A disadvantage was that no two protocols turned out exactly alike, which made analyzing the data a bit more challenging.

**Document and Artifact Collection**

During the fieldwork, ten participants gave me copies of internal Acme documents that they found interesting. I accepted everything I was offered and tried to note down the reasons why each document was brought to my attention. Most of the collected documents are not mentioned in this manuscript, but one of them I selected as the text used in the reading protocols. I also collected cartoons and short texts (which can be seen as artifacts) from people's cubicle walls. These are analyzed in Chapter 4.

**Ongoing Communication after Leaving the Field**

After leaving the field, I continued my long-standing friendship with Brenda and we continued to talk about Acme. In some of our conversations I asked questions pertinent to the study, the answers to
which I wrote down as post-field notes. In other conversations, Brenda volunteered information that I did not ask for but which was also relevant to the study, which I also wrote down. And of course Brenda served as one of my five participant-readers. I also had a small amount of phone and email contact with the other four participant-readers (Jackie, John, Gwen and Luke) at various times between July 1999 and November 2000, especially between May and October of 2000 when I started sending them chapter drafts to read.

**Total Corpus of Data**

In all, those methods of data-gathering yielded the following corpus of data:

- *Contemporaneous fieldnotes*, in which I described as precisely as possible events and conversations as they occurred. These fieldnotes were written in longhand on standard yellow notepads. In the text, they are referred to by the pad number and the approximate date (e.g., “Pad 1, April 28, 1999”).

- *Reflective fieldnotes*, in which I both described and reflected upon events and conversations after the fact. These fieldnotes were written on my laptop computer either immediately after the event or, in other cases, a day or several days later. I always noted the amount of time that had passed between the event itself and my writing of the reflective fieldnote. In the text, reflective fieldnotes are cited by number and date (e.g., “RF38, June 18, 1999”).

- *Audiotapes of open-ended interviews*, supported in some cases by handwritten notes. Two interview participants declined to be taped. In the text, these are cited by tape number and date (e.g., “Tape 19, June 24, 1999”).

- *Audiotapes of reading protocols*, supported by handwritten notes. In the text, these are cited by tape number and date (e.g., “Tape 35, July 2, 1999”).

- *Audiotapes of work events in progress*. Only meetings and events wherein all individuals present had given permission for me to do so
were taped. In the text, these are cited by tape number and date (e.g., “Tape 8, June 14, 1999”).

- *The “Recreating Acme” document*, a booklet which was used for the modified reading protocols and which is described at length in Chapter 5. In the text, as explained in Chapter 5, the whole booklet is referred to as the “protocol document” and the essay within it that was used for the protocols is referred to as the “protocol text.”

- *Other documents*, such as the documents participants read through in their additional reading protocols. In the text, these are cited by document number (e.g., “D46”).

- *Cartoons and short texts from cubicle walls*, which are described and analyzed in Chapter 4. In the text, these are cited by document number (e.g., “D35”).

- *Post-Field Notes* jotted down from conversations or emailed to me after I left the field. In the text, these are referred to by post-field note number and date (e.g., “PFN12, August 23, 2000”).

**Stresses and Challenges During Data Collection**

I have already mentioned the need to keep my presence low-key in order to avoid being noticed by upper management. That was stressful, although the stress was somewhat reduced by the physical absence of upper management and by some participants’ obvious enjoyment of my presence and the situation. One source of stress that was never relieved, however, was the difficulty of pretending to be a quiet, low-key person for eight, nine, even ten hours a day. Anyone who knows me will agree that my personality is neither quiet nor low-key. Assuming a quiet, low-key persona for the duration of this study required more energy than I anticipated. However, I did manage to do it, and came to a new appreciation of the amazing things one can learn when one quietly watches and listens.
Another challenge in the fieldwork involved mastering techniques for gathering and recording qualitative data. For example, taking fieldnotes in longhand presented a technical problem: because I was writing whole words and full sentences, I found it impossible to keep up, especially in meetings with more than two people present. After a few days, I purchased a pamphlet called *Instant Speed Writing* (R.G. Wyatt), which describes a simple system of alphabetic (not symbolic) shorthand that was originally designed for lawyers. By learning this method and combining it with a few symbols I created, I became a much better notetaker. Other technical challenges centered on creating labeling systems for organizing the data and using those systems consistently.

By far the greatest challenge during fieldwork was the relentless pace I imposed on myself for my data collection. Because Acme Technology is located too far away from Columbus Ohio to drive, I was not able to make dozens of short visits to the site over a long period of time, as most qualitative researchers do. Instead, I had to fly to the site, gather data intensively for a limited period of time, then go home. I made two trips: a one-week trip in April, 1999, and a four-week trip in June and early July, 1999. The limited time that I had in which to gather data put me in the pressured position of having to gather as much data as possible in a very short time. As a result, during every day of the fieldwork, I felt torn between conflicting imperatives: to observe, but also to write. To gather more data, but also to stay focused on the right *kinds* of data. Those conflicting imperatives, combined with the challenge I described above of
constantly restraining my talkative personality, made the field experience challenging, exhilarating, but exhausting. In the future, I look forward to exploring local organizations so that I can schedule more short visits over longer periods of time.

Methods of Data Analysis

I employed six methods in analyzing the data from this study. They are listed below in chronological order, although some methods were used recursively, especially in the last five months as I drafted and revised the manuscript.

1) Listening/Transcribing/Memoing of Audiotapes

My first step on returning from the field was to listen to all of the audiotapes and write short summaries of everything that was on each tape. That process constituted the first analytical “pass” over the audio data and resulted in “tentative ideas about categories and relationships” (Maxwell 78), as well as a list of tape contents. As each insight occurred, I wrote it down and reflected on it, creating a series of analytical memos which I later re-read.

Also, importantly, I formed opinions about which portions of each tape needed to be transcribed. I chose to transcribe the reading protocols first: because the protocol text was a description of the Acme culture, participants’ comments in response to it contained rich data on how they
perceived the Acme culture, and I wanted my own evolving understanding to be informed by participant understandings.

Once located on the tapes, the protocols were transcribed by two professional transcribers in the Columbus area. After receiving the transcribed protocols, I proofread them while listening again to the tapes in order to correct transcriber errors. This constituted the second pass over the protocol data, a pass that allowed me to continue absorbing the data. The second pass also exposed me for the third time to each participant’s voice and tone, allowing me to make minute adjustments in the text to capture each person’s delivery. (My first exposure to their voices, of course, had been in person, during the actual protocols.) In the final edited transcriptions, I made no effort to capture pronunciation, but other than that, participant utterances are recorded verbatim. I used dashes to indicate pauses so that in the final write-up I could use ellipses to indicate elisions. I used punctuation to mirror as best I could the tone of each utterance, although in a few cases, when participant intonations were a bit garbled or did not provide appropriate punctuation cues, I used punctuation to make participants appear a little more coherent or grammatically correct in print than they sounded on tape. I generally included place-marker words like “uh,” “um,” “y’know,” although in a few places I reduced their number in order to make the participant look better in print. Both of those last two decisions—to clean up people’s grammar with punctuation and to manicure away a few of the superfluous “ums”—were made at the urging of Brenda, who felt that including every last
nuance of certain utterances shed an unflattering light on those participants and would be embarrassing to them if they were to read themselves in print. I disagreed, but was able to find a compromise position that satisfied both of us: eliminate some of the “ums,” and use punctuation to clarify people’s grammar. In no case did I ever change any actual words.

I then did a third pass to prepare the protocols for analysis in a qualitative data analysis program (described below). This involved a series of word-processing tasks such as changing the file type, changing the margin widths, achieving consistent spacing between utterances, etc., then leading the texts into the analysis program. At first, these tasks seemed rather mindless—I did not realize I was “analyzing” until I noticed that I was once again seeing more things in the data and having more insights. Every pass over the data made them sink into my mind more deeply and invited links and patterns to emerge.

2) Descriptive Coding of Reading Protocols

After those three initial passes over the protocol data, I finally did my first coding pass, using the software program described below. The first coding pass was very descriptive: I singled out each individual response to the protocol text and described the mental or cognitive operation the participant was performing in that response, using gerund clauses such as, “bringing in knowledge of the software industry.” I made a point of using low-inference descriptors in this first coding pass in order to make sure my
emerging perceptions of participant reading strategies were well-grounded in the data. Because I flew so low over the data, so to speak, this first coding pass resulted in over one hundred codes--far too many to constitute a finished taxonomy. But it was a crucial step in the analysis.

3) Code Definition and Preliminary Reduction

I then wrote definitions of all one hundred plus codes, locating opportunities to combine two or more codes into one and thereby reduce the length of the code list. This process reduced the list to about sixty codes. Each time two codes were merged into one, I revised the resulting code definition accordingly.

4) Interpretive Code Reduction

This step involved manually organizing the codes into categories by printing out the code list, slicing it with scissors into tiny strips of paper (one strip per code), laying the strips on a large flat surface, and moving the strips around with my fingers to experiment with different groupings. The groupings that resulted from this process represented the largest interpretive leap in my analysis to that point and resulted in a list of 30 reading strategies in three categories. I wrote a new definition for each of the 30 codes.
5) Application, Discussion and Revision of Codes

At that point, I hired two graduate students from the English department to help me refine the code list by applying it to portions of the data. Using the same data analysis software I had used for my first coding pass, they attempted to apply codes to one protocol at a time, after which we would discuss the ambiguities and problems that came up for them in the process. Through a week-long, recursive process of application, discussion, and revision, we reduced the original list of 30 reading strategies in three categories to eighteen strategies in four categories. After we all felt the list was usable, I applied the codes myself to the entire corpus of protocol data. The results of that analysis are presented and discussed in Chapter 5.

6) Interpretive Coding Using Analytical Frameworks

Having analyzed the protocol data and developed a tentative terministic screen, I then went back to the non-protocol data and did a complete listening pass to annotate the tape contents in finer detail than I had achieved before. Some portions I transcribed, others I marked for professional transcription, but for the most part I took notes, using a foot-pedal transcribing machine and Word 6. Hearing the ethnographic data again complicated my terministic screen and enriched it with a huge influx of additional data.

At that point I was ready to pinpoint recurring themes in the culture of my participants by making a list of key terms (which I later called
"keywords") and coding the entire corpus of ethnographic and protocol data as it pertained to each theme—in other words, I read everything over and marked passages that related to each of the keywords. I included the protocol data in this pass of interpretive coding because they, too, contained quotations pertaining to the keywords. This first full pass of interpretive coding showed me that three of the themes I had tentatively identified were indeed strongly present throughout the data: dissonance, chaos, and ownership. Not all participants used those exact keywords; the concepts were teased out based on other similar words as well (for example, some participants spoke of mixed messages, which I bundled in with dissonance). But a number of participants did use the actual keywords; “ownership” and “chaos” in particular seemed to be in frequent daily use among employees. The three cultural themes are illustrated and discussed in Chapter 3.

A second full pass of interpretive coding was used to piece together a narrative thread I saw in the data: the history of the company as understood by participants. That narrative is presented and discussed in Chapter 3 as “The Story of Acme.” Since the narrative centers on the changing values of Acme Technology, it yielded data about company values as well as company history.

My search for keywords, values, and narratives represents a selective application of Deal and Kennedy’s analytical framework for describing organizational cultures. I applied other analytical frameworks as well in additional coding passes, each time either applying a new
framework or searching for a particular topic (such as, how participants view Melvin). The most important analytical framework I applied came from the writings of James Scott, a political scientist whose work concerns the psychological dynamics of domination and subordination. I also used Kane and Montgomery’s framework for studying “dysempowerment” among workers to identify conditions at Acme that would create an environment ripe for worker dysempowerment.

**Use of Computer Software to Analyze Data**

Many of these analytic procedures were carried out with the assistance of a computer program called Atlas.ti (version 4.1). Much like a word-processing program, which provides a space for the writer to generate, store, and revise text, Atlas.ti provides the qualitative researcher with a space in which to code, memo, and perform other analytic operations on a corpus of qualitative data. Some qualitative researchers, particularly in English Studies, feel that qualitative analysis, like literary analysis, simply cannot be done by computers. That is absolutely true. Computers cannot analyze data: only researchers can. This type of software does not perform analytic operations, it merely provides a workshop-like space in which they can be performed by the researcher.

Each data analysis program does have its own genesis in the analytical framework preferred by its developers. I chose Atlas.ti over other programs because it is based on Grounded Theory methodology (Glaser and Strauss). Although I have not employed Grounded Theory in the
strictest sense, my analysis has been highly inductive (induction being the main engine of Grounded Theory), and I have consciously sought to “ground” my conclusions in specific bits of data. Atlas.ti is also visually appealing and fairly easy to learn.

Stresses and Challenges in the Data Analysis

The dominant concern for me throughout the analysis has been a common one among qualitative researchers: simply to resist my own temptation to reach premature conclusions. I worked against that tendency by working as systematically as possible and by reminding myself often to generate multiple hypotheses, seek out disconfirming evidence, and resist premature analytic closure.

Another challenge in the analysis was to find the right role for reliability testing in this study. When I first hired my two independent coders, I expected that the three of us would apply the codes to the whole corpus of protocol data, after which I would do some simple calculations and hope for good numbers showing that my own coding had been reliable. But only portions of that process took place. I had underestimated the difficulty, for the coders, of stepping into my intellectual shoes to apply codes I had created, to protocols they had never seen before, about a text they had not read, in an organization they had never heard of. I had also underestimated the applicability of some of my codes! It took the entire week just to refine the code list to the point where they felt comfortable using it. At first I was upset by what I perceived as a terrible setback, but
then I came to see that the application/discussion/revision process was actually extremely valuable in its own right and constituted an appropriate role for reliability testing in this study. Applying and discussing the codes with my two hired coders enriched my analysis with fresh perspectives and complicated it with unanticipated questions. I feel good about what we accomplished and have a more realistic understanding now of what reliability testing can and cannot accomplish---under what circumstances---in qualitative research.

**Validity**

While qualitative research is seldom evaluated according to the scientific trinity of validity, reliability and generalizability (at least not by qualitative researchers), the qualitative research community does have standards for validity and does demand that its members adhere to those standards. Although it could be argued that the terms “accuracy” and “validity” signal an inappropriate persistence of positivist thinking in qualitative research, my personal position is that these constructs are valuable for, if nothing else, their heuristic power. The act of interrogating one's own work according to qualitative standards of validity prompts the researcher to articulate particular aspects of her research processes—aspects that might go unexamined if such standards were not being used. Her discipline benefits as well, by extension, as communities of researchers deliberate together the processes by which community knowledge shall, and shall not, be produced and evaluated. Articulating, debating and
abiding by community standards of validity, especially when those standards are contested, is to my mind a form of disciplinary introspection that bears good ethical and intellectual fruit.

Since this study is designed to produce descriptive and interpretive knowledge, it will be held to community standards of descriptive and interpretive validity. Descriptive validity is the extent to which the fieldnotes and the final report are seen as accurate; it is “the factual accuracy of the account as reported by the qualitative researcher” (Johnson 284). Interpretive validity has to do with the representation of emic understandings; it is “the degree to which the research participants’ viewpoints, thoughts, feelings, intentions, and experiences are accurately understood by the researcher and portrayed in the research report” (Johnson 285).

**Descriptive Validity**

Regarding descriptive validity, this study can be challenged on one ground: since I was the only investigator, readers have to take my word for it that these things really happened. One way of addressing that challenge would have been to build investigator triangulation into the research design—to collaborate with one or more other researchers so that more than one person would be taking fieldnotes at all times, or even at different times. But it is highly unusual to have multiple investigators in dissertation research (at least in the Humanities), and the delicate nature of my access agreement would have made it impossible for anyone but me
to gain access to Acme. A second and more doable strategy, however, is to make use of "member-checking" (Lincoln and Guba) on the original fieldnotes. While still in the field, I showed portions of the fieldnotes to participants and asked them to suggest revisions or additions where the observations seemed to be "off." Their positive responses to my fieldnotes indicated to me that I was recording things accurately enough to satisfy participants.

A second strategy for boosting descriptive validity is to articulate the biases and influences that shaped my observations in the site and the choices I made in the process of gathering data. I will articulate those biases in the Researcher Bias section.

**Interpretive Validity**

There are two potential grounds for challenge to the interpretive validity of my study. One is the possibility that the researcher has reached premature analytic closure. Resisting premature analytic closure requires more effort for some researchers than for others. To guard against that danger, I was careful to use low-inference descriptors in my early coding passes, sticking very close to the primary data. After the early passes, I ascended to higher levels of inference slowly and systematically, focusing on participant understandings and actively seeking out discrepant data.

The more serious ground on which the study's interpretive validity could be challenged would center on the degree to which participants are satisfied by how they and their workplace are represented in the final
manuscript. That would include the question of whether participant voices and perspectives have been represented accurately, and also the broader question of whether my conclusions make sense and seem reasonable to participants. To build this type of interpretive validity into my research design, I have used member-checking on the manuscript itself. Long after I left the field, Brenda and I selected five participants (one of whom was Brenda herself) to ask to serve as critical readers of this manuscript. All five agreed to do so, yielding the following group of readers: Brenda, Luke, John, Gwen, and Jackie. As each body chapter was drafted, I mailed five copies to Brenda, who distributed them in plain envelopes to the five readers and coached them on how to read and respond. She asked them (at my request) to read for factual and interpretive accuracy, jotting down in the margins whatever comments they felt were necessary to keep my observations accurate and my interpretations sound. Some of the chapter drafts have not yet been returned as this dissertation goes to press, but the comments that I have received indicate that participants approve of many (not all) of my interpretations and are especially intrigued by my application of Scott’s theories to their workplace. In places where readers disagreed with my interpretation or added complicating information, I either changed my interpretation or added their comments alongside my own, as I promised them I would do.
Other Validity Features

Other features of the research design that enhance the validity of the study include:

- *Methods triangulation*. The data were gathered using multiple methods, with complimentary strengths and weaknesses.

- *Data Triangulation*. The same questions were asked of all participants in the open-ended interviews, and in the modified reading protocols, all read the same text under approximately the same conditions. In those ways, the same types of data were obtained from multiple informants.

- *Low-inference descriptors* in the final write-up. I revealed a great amount of actual data in this manuscript in order to support my interpretations abundantly and meticulously. I used verbatim quotes whenever possible and included in all data citations references to the exact place in the data where each quotation can be found.

- *Intensive professional review*. The questions posed by my committee members served as an important balancing influence. My committee interrogated my suppositions and pressed for ever more rigor in my analytic and writing processes.

While my findings do not represent the only set of conclusions that could possibly have been reached, my use of these strategies for building descriptive and interpretive validity does give me a credible claim to being a valid and usable truth that accurately reflects participant experiences as readers and writers at Acme.

**Researcher Bias**

In any piece of qualitative research, the biases held by the principal investigator play a significant role in shaping the research process and the resulting manuscript. The researcher’s job is not to free herself of all
biases, for that would be impossible, but rather to make those biases visible and to articulate how they informed the research. Below are my own biases as I now understand them.

**Not Having Worked in a Corporate Environment**

The most pervasive bias that I brought to the scene was arguably the fact that I had never worked in a corporate environment myself. Brenda pointed this bias out to me when we discussed a draft of this chapter; otherwise, I still would not have seen it. The fact that I had never held an office job had a profound effect on what I did and did not see in the site. According to Brenda, I had “no innate understandings about reporting structure, divisions of labor, and pecking orders [among peers].” My naïveté regarding what she called “pecking orders” was especially glaring to her. She explained that within work groups, there is often one person who functions as the “alpha dog” of the group, with other group members taking other positions in the social hierarchy and everybody knowing who occupies what position. My lack of corporate experience made me blind to those pecking orders: “You treated everyone as equal without understanding that everybody else didn’t treat each other as equal” (N30, October 27, 2000). That is true: in my data gathering and even in the analysis, I treated everyone’s views as equally valid and equally important. I did not give more weight to one person’s words than to another’s. If any individuals are quoted more often than others in the manuscript, it is
because those individuals were more articulate or somehow gave better "sound bites"--not because they were the alpha-dogs of their social groups.

My corporate inexperience was both harmful and helpful to the research. It could be argued that I missed at least one entire level of the emic perceptions that I set out to collect and understand: the fact that I was blind to social pecking orders made me unable to use that knowledge as I developed and nuanced my findings. On the other hand, one can best observe and write about that which looks strange or different compared to one's usual environment. To me, almost everything looked strange at Acme Technology. The cubicles, the conference rooms, the documents people were reading on their computer screens--everything was fresh and new to me, and I wrote about it as if I had been airlifted into some bizarre world that bore little resemblance to my own. Moreover, my lack of corporate experience allowed me to see certain other things that participants were not seeing. Much as Brenda noticed that I was not seeing reporting relationships and pecking orders, I noticed that she was not seeing other things, such as the role of language and symbolic communication in constructing the culture of which she was a part. Overall, then, while there is no question that my lack of corporate experience did profoundly affect the way I perceived and interpreted Acme technology, one cannot say that my perceptions and interpretations are invalid as a result.
My Naive Assumptions about Power

Closely related to my lack of corporate experience are my naive assumptions about power in organizational life. I entered the site assuming that upper management has all the power, which it exerts over employees, who are comparatively powerless. Employees can either comply with directives, resist them, or some mixture of the two. I saw resistance as a vertical phenomenon, with those lower in the hierarchy necessarily resisting those in higher positions and the directives that come down from on high.

Those naive views were supported, or at least not complicated, by the reading I had done on critical literacy. The professional literature on that topic tends to be heavily influenced by Marxist social theory, creating and valorizing a working class reading subject who learns to read against a vague, monolithic, oppressive “Other.” The oppressive Other is not named, but my clear impression was that the Other equals the powers that be, and that those powers work to constrict the ability of less-powerful groups to control their own lives and pursue their own happiness on an equal footing with the rest of the population. The “powers that be” may or not be actual people—they can just as easily be values, assumptions, ideas, or ideologies—but in either case, they are assumed in this literature to be white, male, wealthy, and capitalist—therefore sexist, racist, omnipotent, and conservative.

The research was affected by those preconceptions on my part. The most profound manifestation of those preconceptions may be my selection
of the works of James Scott as my main analytic lens. As we saw in Chapter 1, Scott studies resistance among subordinate peoples living in the grips of severe domination, far more severe than the “domination” I witnessed at Acme. It would be folly to suggest that a qualitative researcher should not use any analytic lens at all--I had to use something--but my choice of the James Scott domination/resistance lens in particular was unquestionably propelled by my own twin beliefs that upper management was a dominating force at Acme and that Acme employees were in some ways resisting domination.

Fortunately, Scott’s ideas happened to work well as an interpretive framework: I can now agree with Cynthia Smith from first-hand experience that Scott’s framework provides a “robust” way to look at corporate life. In addition, my views of domination and resistance at Acme were seriously complicated by some of my participants. While many participants shared my view that upper management has the power (as indicated by their responses to my interview question, “Who has the power at Acme?”), two participants said things that directly or indirectly contradicted that view. When asked who has the power at Acme, Mark said without hesitation that the employees have the power. In another context, Brenda said that upper management tends to forget that “a corporation is its employees” (Tape 25, June 28, 1999). Those two statements echoed through my thinking while I was on-site (and afterwards). In addition, I observed the wide latitude that Acme employees have regarding the ways they do their work--and the tremendous amount of money that is spent on efforts to motivate
employees and persuade them to work harder, longer, and smarter. That input led me to my current position that power in organizations, like knowledge, is distributed. Upper management does have certain kinds of power, including the particularly important power to control company-owned resources as well as skim off profits and prevent employees from sharing in them. But employees have the power to change the way they do their work. They can choose to work well or poorly, fast or slowly, toward or away from company goals. They can even choose not to work at all. If all or most employees were to stop working, the whole company would grind to a halt. No software would be produced, no profits would be made, nothing would move forward towards any goal. Employee behavior therefore has an enormous impact on the company. That is why upper management work so hard to communicate, however awkwardly, with employees and persuade them to work this way or that way. Brenda and Mark, then, are quite right: the company is its employees, and employees do have a lot of power.

Another way my naive assumptions affected the research was that while I was in the field, I was too ready to valorize the resisters and their acts of resistance and demonize those holding high positions in the hierarchy. I found myself attracted to individuals whom I perceived as angry or resistive, gathering more data from them than from others whom I perceived as passive or compliant (ergo less worth studying). In one sense, that is a perfectly reasonable bias for someone who is looking specifically for critical literacy (as I was when I started this project): if a researcher is
investigating a certain phenomenon, naturally she is justified in looking for it. However, as I gathered and analyzed the data, my valorization of workers and demonization of management were increasingly called into question. Participant Jackie was especially helpful in that regard because she repeatedly invited me to complicate my views by showing me situations and circumstances that contradicted them. For example, she pointed out to me on several occasions that while it is true that upper management sometimes makes unreasonable demands on R&D workers, it is also true that R&D workers (specifically certain groups of developers) make unreasonable demands as well, pushing for special privileges and exerting inappropriate levels of influence on the software-production process. That inappropriate influence creates hardship for other workers involved in the process, whose concerns and practical needs are implicitly and pragmatically trivialized. So it isn’t only upper management that can be accused of dominating or exploiting workers. Sometimes workers dominate workers.

My assumptions were also complicated by some reflecting I did on the inherent “goodness” or “badness” of the company itself. My naive assumption had been that any large corporation is a vaguely malevolent entity that is likely to damage the environment, exploit the workforce, hoard the profits, and God only knows what else. That assumption led me to validate automatically the perspectives of workers and distrust the words of upper management. My validation of employee perspectives is not in itself a problem, for in ethno-oriented research, it is crucially important
to reproduce emic understandings as accurately as possible before proceeding to higher levels of abstraction and etic interpretation. However, my sincere impulse to validate the perspectives of workers led me, ironically, to a new appreciation for the positive value of the company. It is true that Acme workers have reason to complain about disrespect and ill-treatment, but on the other hand, Acme pays quite well for the industry. Many employees are therefore content to work there despite the stress and exploitation they perceive in the Acme environment. At the risk of stating the obvious, the high salaries that Acme pays enable Acme workers to live in relative comfort, support their families, and plan for their retirements. Employees value their incomes. It was therefore unfair and inaccurate of me to assume that corporations are entirely malevolent entities exerting only bad influences on society.

In short, my naive, simplistic assumptions about power in organizations did affect the research, but on the other hand, they were also complicated and problematized by my exposure to actual workers in an actual company.

**My Previous Friendship with Brenda**

Although I think of my data collection as beginning on the day I physically arrived on the site in April, 1999, or more accurately on the day when Brenda and I started negotiating my access agreement a few weeks earlier, my interpretations of what I saw and heard were probably influenced by having heard about the company second-hand from Brenda.
ever since she first got hired at Acme in 1995. My friendship with Brenda, which began in 1990, has always involved talking about our work lives. When she first started working at Acme, it was a matter of great importance to her, so naturally, we talked about her experiences there a good deal, with her telling me stories about things that had happened and me asking questions in an attempt to clarify the many elements that I found puzzling or mysterious (being a complete stranger to the computer industry). I never wrote any of our conversations down, not being in "researcher" mode at the time, but I did develop an idea of what Acme was like before beginning the study, and that could be construed as a form of researcher bias. Our conversations did not give me a very clear idea of exactly what Brenda's job was, but they did give me the impression that her job was extremely stressful, that the company was very demanding, and that upper management sometimes ran the company in ways that made it difficult for her to do her work. Acme seemed to me like a very strange and confusing place. On the other hand, I also understood that Brenda felt well-paid, liked the challenge of meeting high expectations, and very much enjoyed working with such interesting, intelligent people. All of those impressions came with me when I entered the field.

My friendship with Brenda also came with me into the field. As Brenda's friend, I was in frequent daily contact with Brenda, which gave me both motive and opportunity to run things by her and make sure that what I was seeing matched her perceptions. I also did this with other participants, especially Jackie and John, and I have been careful
throughout to include, value and strive to understand the perceptions of all of my participants. But Brenda was my home base throughout the project. Our friendship gave us a mutual commitment to helping each other and trusting each other’s perceptions; our access agreement gave us a mutual responsibility to make sure I abided by the confidentiality guidelines that had been established. Brenda strove to get me the access I needed, I strove to operate within her guidelines so that she would feel safe, and we both strove to check in with each other on an informal, personal, ongoing basis. Although I have worked hard to include many other voices in this study, and believe I have succeeded in doing so, it remains true that all of my findings were influenced by Brenda’s perceptions and beliefs, including her perceptions of upper management as a somewhat inscrutable group of semi-competent executives who either do not know how their decisions affect employees, or do not care.

The fact that many of Brenda’s views were abundantly corroborated by other participants, however, helps mitigate the downside of my pro-Brenda bias, ensuring that even if the research has been deeply influenced by her views, at least her views are demonstrably in line with those of her co-workers.

**Race, Class, Gender, and Sexual Orientation**

My ways of seeing, wondering, querying and knowing are all deeply influenced by my personal identity as a white woman from an affluent upper-middle-class background. I will discuss class first because that is
where I see the strongest and clearest influences. My class experience has imprinted me with a certain set of assumptions about how life is supposed to be and what a person is entitled to expect from his or her job. For example, I assume that most people desire and expect to receive some sort of personal meaning from their work, because I have been raised to believe that one's identity is constructed, to a great extent, by what one does for a living. That is an extremely upper-middle-class belief that leads me to valorize the quest for meaning, vision, and mission in the workplace rather than just the quest for income and other material benefits. A working-class researcher might have had difficulty conducting the same study because (at the risk of essentializing) he or she might feel that these people who make seventy, eighty, ninety thousand dollars a year have nothing to complain about—or, alternatively, that nothing that happens “at work” could possibly be important enough to affect a person’s dignity or identity, especially when the salaries are so high. In that sense, my class both enables and influences my research.

My gender and heterosexuality probably had some effect on the research as well. They were pluses, if anything, in the field. The culture of Acme Technology is very male-identified; one female participant told me that women’s ideas are not taken as seriously as men’s ideas. If that is true, then the study benefited from my femaleness, because some people may have been less suspicious of my intentions and/or less intimidated by the potential seriousness of my work. Another effect of my gender was that two male participants may have been more willing to talk to me and donate
time to the study because they found me attractive and enjoyed flirting with me. I enjoyed them too and probably collected a little extra data on them as a result. Yet it cannot be said that had I not been a heterosexual female, no attractions would have developed. In that case, the potential for personal attraction would have merely shifted from one set of candidates to another. Sexual orientation is therefore a non-issue.

My race may have had some impact on the study as well: as I spent time at Acme, I noticed that I was surprised and impressed by the number of people of color who were working there and apparently having successful careers. I wrote a reflective fieldnote about that, in which I explored the question of why I found that so surprising. The answer had to do with a stereotype I was embarrassed to discover I held: that people of color either toil away in low-paying, low-skilled jobs or shine in high-profile professional jobs such as athlete, actor, musician, politician, professor, preacher, or military officer. Because I had never worked in a corporate environment myself, I had never seen people of color holding regular middle-class office jobs. How that stereotype affected my data collection and analysis is unclear, but I do recall one moment in the field. One day, I was given a choice about inviting this person or that person to become a participant. I chose to the person of color because I wanted more participants of color in my sample.
Research and Professional Agendas

I identify as a researcher of literacy and communication in workplace contexts. I conduct that research from what Tim Davis calls a "pro-worker" perspective—that is, valuing and caring about the perceptions and communicative behaviors of non-managerial and low-managerial workers. My politics are liberal, my research style is ethnographic, and although my graduate education has all taken place in English departments, I view my disciplinary location as somewhere in the rather odd-looking space bordered by English Studies, Anthropology, Organizational Communication, and Business Communication. My career ambitions are quasi-academic and quasi-practitioner: I plan to start a consulting practice that will use my research and teaching abilities in nonacademic environments. I have a deep desire to bring the full weight of my academic knowledge to bear on my practical work and professionalize the field of communication consulting (as evidenced by my activities in the Association of Professional Communication Consultants)—yet also to import as much information as I can from the nonacademic world into the academy (as evidenced by my recruitment of practitioners to speak at the Association for Business Communication conference and my creation of a national listserv on nonacademic careers for Humanities MA and PhDs). This project has clarified those identities for me and has emerged, to a great extent, from their intersection.
CHAPTER 3:  
CULTURE, CHANGE AND BETRAYAL IN ACME R&D

The notion of “organizational culture” gained prominence in the scholarly field of organizational communication in the early 1980s (Schein 17) and quickly gained currency in the business world. It still has currency today: since the business world as a whole is changing at an increasingly rapid pace, individual companies must change as well, and scholars and practitioners have come to believe that an essential aspect of changing any company is changing its internal culture.

Yet according to Wilkins and Patterson, to say “we’re going to change now”--and actually to change--are very different things. Many culture-change efforts fail, for a variety of reasons. First of all, it takes time to develop a culture; therefore, it will also take time to change it. Secondly, people often do not want their cultures to change. Finally, most change efforts begin with upper management asking the questions, “where do we need to be going strategically as an organization, where are we now, and how can we close the gap between the two?” That heuristic assumes that culture can be controlled and changed by management--that “culture can be installed in the same way that a new cooling system or a compensation plan is installed” (Wilkins and Patterson 263). It also assumes that a
company has only one culture that is understood in the same way by people at all hierarchical levels within the organization. Tim Davis points out that this assumption is rarely true. Often the culture is very different in lower levels of the hierarchy from how it is in the upper levels:

while management may have an obvious interest in new ideas that can improve performance, such ideas often receive a different reception at the lower levels of the organization. One reason for this is that frequently an entirely different culture exists at the lower levels. (163)

Those lower-level cultures can be studied "from a normative, pro-management perspective, or from a radical, pro-worker perspective" (164).

In this chapter, I will present the results of a short-term, pro-worker ethno-oriented case study of the internal culture of Acme Technology—an organization that was going through intense cultural upheaval in the wake of upper management's deliberate attempts to "recreate" the Acme culture. I will describe the Acme culture as it is perceived and understood by workers and low-level managers in the R&D department and argue that R&D workers, feeling betrayed by the recent changes, have developed a resistant subculture based on sincere allegiance to a set of values that management has abandoned.

The Story of Acme: A Window onto "Worker Bee" Culture

Deal and Kennedy take a symbolic perspective on organizational culture, defining its key elements as values, rituals, ceremonies, heroes and heroines, priests and priestesses, and stories. To that list I add villains and keywords. Although one could exhaustively describe every one of those
elements in turn as they can be seen in the employee culture at Acme, I shall focus here on stories--more accurately, on one story--because contained within that story are many of the elements in Deal and Kennedy's list. "The Story of Acme," as I call it, is rich with explicit and implicit references to values, ceremonies, heroes, priests, and villains. It also captures what I perceive as the feelings of grief, betrayal, nostalgia, and anger that many of the "worker bees" in R&D feel. The term "worker bee" is not derogatory among low-level employees: several participants self-identified as worker-bees, and did so with pride. The term is not specific to Acme, or even to the software industry (Locker, "What"). At Acme, the term represents the people who do the real work:

In software companies in general, there's a concept that there is real work and there's unreal work. There's worker bees and there's management. The products we produce are software products. The people who produce that software are often called "worker bees," that's called the real work. What the rest of us do is something else. Some people recognize that management makes it possible for quote worker bees to do their work. A lot of technical people would view [management work] as completely irrelevant to what they do. (Gwen, Tape 34, July 2, 1999)

In any case, "The Story of Acme" presents the history of the company from a decidedly "worker bee" point of view. This rich narrative provides a wealth of information about how Acme employees perceive the company and its current leadership--perceptions which, in turn, have a strong influence on how they perceive communications from management. After recounting the Story of Acme, I will describe the keywords of the employee subculture.
The narrative you are about to read is not, of course, objective, nor is it intended to be. It is constructed from participant accounts and reflects participant understandings. Had my participants been located elsewhere in the organization, had other individuals elected to participate, or for that matter had the study been done by another researcher with other interests, the story might have come out differently. However, as I explained in Chapter 2, I have made an effort to triangulate participant accounts by comparing them with each other, searching for discrepancies and asking for clarification. I also shared the chapter with five participant readers, who verified and/or corrected my representations. All of the readers’ suggestions have been adopted. Finally, I cross-checked participant accounts against company press releases and articles on Acme Technology from business and trade journals. While those articles and press releases do not discuss the internal culture of the organization, it is nonetheless reassuring that the information they contained did not contradict anything I observed or my participants told me. What I observed during my fieldwork on the inside was at least factually, if not tonally, consistent with what the company revealed to the public. For example, if employees had told me that Acme was not creating any new products, but press releases for that period had announced the creation of five new products, then that would not have been consistent and would have cast serious doubt on the veracity of participant testimony. But such is not the case here. There are no such contradictions. It is safe to say, then, that while this narrative does not and cannot present the whole story in a way
that would satisfy every conceivable stakeholder, it is at least a plausible
version of the story that reflects participant understandings without
contradicting published reports.

**Part I: “When It Really Existed in Our Hearts and Souls” (1984-94)**

Acme was founded in the late 1970s by Melvin Rice, a young but
brilliant software developer who had invented a new kind of business
software. He started the company based on that first product which he
himself had created, hiring the best people he could find to build on his
work. Early in the company’s history, around 1984, Melvin Rice
introduced “the RICE principles”: Respect, integrity, Customers, and
Excellence. Melvin proclaimed at that time that these were to be the core
values of the company, and his employees adopted them readily—a process
that was aided tremendously by the fact that these values were already
strongly present in the culture. “Excellence” was the most important of all
because although not unique to Acme—many companies were caught up in
the quest for “excellence” in the 1980s—it was central to Acme’s identity at
that time. Acme products were considered the finest of their kind in the
world. That degree of technical excellence was made possible by the
quality work of first-rate software developers, whom Melvin had made a
point of hiring. (I refer to Melvin and other executives by their first names
because my participants do, and also to avoid potential confusion between
Rice the man and RICE the principles.) To be a developer at Acme
Technology in that period was a mark of great prestige in the software
world. That prestige helped to attract skilled employees and helped
distinguish Acme from other software companies:

I think the old Acme culture had a, was based on technical
excellence, top-of-the-line people, treating the people like they
were the top of the line and the assumption was that everyone
was the top of the line. And that was our main differentiator.
(Samuel, Tape 32, July 1, 1999)

Excellence, then, was central to both the internal culture and the external
image of Acme as an organization. According to John, Acme was known as
a “bastion of technical expertise” (Tape 9, June 18, 1999; Tape 16, June
23, 1999).

Respect for the individual employee and for his or her achievements
went along with the value for Excellence, which was visibly rewarded in
ways that made employees feel respected. The most basic form of respect
was the generous compensation package enjoyed by employees. Hours
were long, but salaries were high for the industry and raises were
substantial. One longtime employee who participated in this study recalled
that his first annual raise back in 1985 was fifteen percent, his second was
thirteen, and his third was twelve (RF76). Those would be big raises in any
industry. At least as important as salaries, however, was the personal,
individual recognition employees used to get when they had done
something especially good: “See, some of us go back to a time when every
little accomplishment we did, Melvin would come out and put a bottle of
champagne on your desk and say ‘Congratulations. I really like what you
did” (Tape 15, June 23, 1999). As the company grew and it became more
difficult to recognize individuals, “project-based awards” were instituted.
If you completed a project and put in the long, hard hours and did an exceptionally good job, you would get an award for having done so. An excellent award, a commendation award, a night on the town award. And each one of those came with a check. So you also got a bonus with the award. And it was generally presented in a group all-hands meeting . . . in front of all of your peers. (Tape 24, June 25, 1999)

Deal and Kennedy would say that the all-hands meetings at which awards were bestowed were ceremonies, providing “visible and potent examples of what the company stands for” (15). In all, workers perceived Acme Technology as a place where individual achievements were recognized, respected and applauded.

Respect was also shown in the form of listening. Melvin and his management team would listen to employees about what it would take to get a certain job done, or how it should be done, or in many cases even what should be done: what products should be developed, what modifications should be made to existing products, etc. Suggestions from employees were frequently adopted, and employees had a good deal of input into what they were working on and with whom they were working.

Abundant opportunities for education and career development reflected the emphasis on both excellence and respect. As the technology advanced, so too did the need for training, and in the early stages of the company’s history, “we used to be very training, education, employee-development oriented” (Tape 32, July 1, 1999). Manny, a longtime employee, says that “my first four years here [1987-91], you got two Guides or Shares and one class, or two classes and one Share or Guide. Automatic. You just applied for it and went” (Tape 19, June 24, 1999).
("Guides" and "Shares" are types of technical training.) Cleo was sent through college by the company (Tape 32, July 1, 1999). Career development was widely available to all levels of employees; participants have told me that if someone had an interest in something or a desire to work towards a certain goal, the company would make those opportunities open up for him or her. One of my participants is an especially good example of an employee whose career was well-developed by the company: with nothing more than a high school diploma, he was first employed in the mailroom in 1984. From there, he was given opportunities to pursue his interests, moving from the mailroom to customer support, where he got some training and experience as a technician. After taking some computer science classes at a local community college, he was invited to join R&D and is now a productive member of a respected software development team.

The relationship between respect and excellence, then, was close and mutually reinforcing: Acme hired "top-of-the-line people" and showed respect for them by treating them as top of the line, or by educating them so that they would become top of the line. The respect, in turn, motivated employees to become even more excellent, to be the best that they could be. As a result, Acme had excellent products, excellent employees, excellent retention rates and a well-deserved reputation as a place where excellence was central to the culture.

The respectful, achievement-oriented atmosphere at Acme contributed to a sense of "pride" (Tape 20, June 24, 1999) that people felt
about working there. It also engendered a genuine personal commitment to the RICE principles on the part of many employees; there was a sense of communal praxis centered on shared ideals. That the employees liked and believed in the RICE principles is shown by their practice during that period of giving a peer recognition award called the RICE award, which was bestowed monthly by employees on whichever of their peers had best exemplified the RICE principles in that particular month. This came to my attention in a meeting involving the entire Packaging group, one of whom had been a recipient of the RICE award. It was generally agreed in this meeting that the RICE award, when it existed, had been a peer recognition award (Tape 19, June 24, 1999). It was given out at monthly gatherings to which everyone at Headquarters was invited (Tape 35, July 2, 1999). There would be food at these well-attended gatherings and Melvin or some other highly placed individual would emcee, often making a speech about the RICE principles (Tape 35, July 2, 1999). Receiving the RICE award was a mark of honor in the Acme culture, because living up to the RICE principles was something everybody cared about.

Some employees internalized the RICE principles even more deeply, imbuing them with almost religious significance. For example, Mark, a longtime employee, testified with emotion that “I think I’m a throw-over--John, a few other people are throw-overs from when it really existed in our hearts and souls. And we carried it through” (Tape 17, June 23, 1999, emphasis his). Mark referred to the idea of getting back to the RICE principles as “getting back to the Bible again” (Tape 17, June 23, 1999,
emphasis his), back to the principles and guidelines that he and others have found perennially valuable and helpful. John explained to me that the RICE principles invoke in the minds of longtime employees "a notion of the enthusiasm for the shared effort we have in order to make Acme products really quality products" (Tape 17, June 23, 1999).

The enthusiasm of Acme employees in that time period recalls the enthusiasm Tracy Kidder describes in his narrative of a group of computer hardware engineers in the late 1970s (The Soul of a New Machine): Kidder tells the story of the design and creation of a new minicomputer at Data General, a narrative that is entirely driven by the sense of creativity, importance and intense excitement of the engineers. "At some companies" in the late 1970s, he says,

Executives might make the final decisions about what would be produced, but engineers would provide most of the ideas for new products. After all, engineers were people who really knew the state of the art and who were therefore best equipped to prophesy changes in it. At Data General, an engineer could play such an important role. (27)

So it was at Acme Technology, which was founded about the same time as Data General and whose "birth" and growth, like that of Data General, were driven almost entirely by the excitement and creativity of (software) engineers working on the cutting edge of (software) technology. The fealty of longtime employees towards the RICE principles is closely related to their devotion to technical excellence itself--a devotion which may be characteristic of good technicians and which could certainly create an especially strong sense of shared effort among Acme employees.
The sense of shared effort was solidified by social events outside regular working hours, according to Cleo, a twelve-year employee:

People really cared about each other because we would do activities after work and we'd do softball or bowling where people could leave the office. They could relax and they could have fun and you could see that everyone's human. You know, maybe someone's going to strike out or maybe, you know, they'll hit a home run and everyone's out there cheering. And it really allows you to develop strong relationships and you meet people that you may not otherwise have met because maybe they're in another department or whatever, but by coming together after work to do these little, you know, events, you develop friendships and it made you work together--it's not like you and your boss will work together, it's like, no, I don't mind working with her because, you know, we played softball and we're on the same team and she cheered for me. (Tape 32, July 1, 1999)

The social events added an extracurricular dimension to this sense of community and shared effort among employees across various levels of the company.

Lest I paint too rosy a picture here, I should also say that even though the RICE principles were readily and sincerely adopted because they fit well with the existing culture of the company and inspired favorable working conditions, all of the principles cannot have been practiced flawlessly one hundred percent of the time. Each of the RICE principles can, in its own way, be difficult to maintain in the pragmatic crunch of daily working life. For example, employees outside of R&D may not have been as well "Respected" as those within R&D, with some developers viewing their jobs as more important than other types of jobs (Tape 17, June 23, 1999) and with developers as a group wielding too much power over other types of Acme employees (Tape 5, April 28, 1999): one
participant confided that Acme had been "R&D-centric" for too long (Tape 3, April 26, 1999).

The company’s "Integrity" may have been challenged on occasions when opportunities may have come up, as they often will in business, to increase profits by engaging in some type of unethical or quasi-ethical practice. It would strain the reader's credulity for me to assert that the ethical path was definitely chosen every time; I don't know that for a fact and neither do my participants. Perhaps the easiest of the RICE principles to problematize is that of "Customers" (which, as Brenda observes, isn't a principle at all, but a concrete mass noun that "doesn't really fit" with the other three terms, Tape 25, June 28, 1999). According to participants, in the early days of Acme, software developers, not customers, decided what products should be made and what their technical specifications should be. Acme's products were at that time unique, so that customers had to use Acme products in their existing forms no matter what the customers' particular needs might have been. That gave Acme the advantage of not having to adjust its products to fit customer requirements. Because of that advantage, because of the wide knowledge gap between customers and Acme developers, and because of the "hot-shot computer jock" ideal (Tape 24, June 25, 1999) that is part of software-developer culture, focusing on customers has historically been a challenge for Acme and remains a challenge today. Excellence may have been threatened at times by the need to get a product shipped out to a customer by a certain date. The tension between perfecting the product and getting it shipped to the
customer is endemic to the software industry and was likely experienced at Acme as well, even back then in what employees perceive as the good old days. We must remember, too, that all of us have a tendency to improve upon the past as we form our long-term memories (see especially Adams).

However, all that being said, my participants collectively affirm that on the whole, the RICE principles were practiced at Acme, and did permeate daily life of the company from 1984 until about 1995. Acme cannot have been a perfect working environment, but there is considerable evidence to suggest that it was a great place to work. Salaries were high, the RICE principles were practiced at all levels of the company, and employee culture, at least in R&D, was permeated with feelings of pride, enthusiasm and shared commitment. Acme was known for the technical expertise of its employees; there was “desire” to work there and those who did took “pride” in their work (Tape 19, June 24, 1999).

Abraham H. Maslow’s famous “hierarchy of needs” yields a helpful perspective on the Edenic vision of the Story of Acme, Part I. Kitty Locker (Business) identifies the needs of people working in organizations and maps them onto the five levels of Maslow’s hierarchy. The bottom tier of physical is met by safe working conditions and earning enough to pay for basic food, clothing, shelter and medical care. The second tier, which Maslow terms “safety and security,” can be met when employees are treated fairly, earn enough for a comfortable standard of living, understand the reasons for actions by supervisors, and experience working conditions that are not only safe but pleasant. Maslow’s third tier, “love and belonging,” includes
such organizational needs as enjoying working with one's co-workers, conforming to a group's norms, feeling needed, feeling loyal to the organization, cooperating with other people on a project, and promoting the welfare of a group one identifies with or cares about. The fourth tier, "esteem and recognition," can be met in an organization by having status symbols, being promoted or gaining authority, being publicly recognized for achievements, and having a good personal and organizational reputation. The topmost fifth tier, "self-actualization," can be met in an organization by using one's talents and abilities, finding solutions to problems, feeling pride and self-respect, and serving humanity. The Story of Acme, Part I, suggests that R&D employees in the early days of Acme were in the enviable position of having jobs that met all of their needs: obviously their first- and second-level needs were met, but so, too, were their needs for "love and belonging," "esteem and recognition," and "self-actualization." One can easily see, then, why these employees feel so nostalgic about how things used to be--and why they felt, and still feel, so betrayed by what happened next.

**Part II: “Going Corporate” and the Death (or Not) of RICE**

(1994-99)

By 1994, Acme Technology had grown to about 1,600 employees (N9). That made it hard for Melvin to continue running the company himself, because Melvin's expertise lay in software development, not in
running large corporations. According to Eliott, a mid-level manager who
knows Melvin well,

I think he realizes that he needs . . . to have the other side, he
needs a counter balance to his visionary and not-so-business-
operational-savvy ways. So he tends to bring in people like [the
current President], who are very bottom-line, business-process
oriented, or business-cut-and-dried kind of oriented to act out
the other side for him, which allows him to focus on the other
side. (Tape 20, June 24, 1999)

In addition, Melvin had reportedly been convinced by friends at IBM to add
a new line of products quite different from his original line (N9). Melvin
wanted to do it, but didn’t have the technical expertise in that type of
product to run the new division himself, so in early 1995 he hired one of
the IBM people, Ralph DeVito, to coordinate the creation of the new
products and to run the new division.

According to employees who were there at the time, despite the good
impression that Ralph had obviously made upon Melvin, he was not a good
fit with the organization because he either did not understand or did not
believe in the RICE principles and as a result did not practice them. For
example, he was not devoted to excellence: he cut production schedules
short and tried to eliminate the Testing group entirely (the Testing group
tests the products before they are shipped). Considering how deeply the
employees valued technical excellence and how much pride they took in
their work, it is not surprising that employees would feel disrespected, even
insulted, by those practices. Brenda has heard that Ralph disrespected
them even further by humiliating some of them publicly for writing what he
deemed to be bad code, when under the rushed working conditions
(inadequate time, no testing) he had created, it would have been impossible to write good code. Luke relayed to me that “It’s like he said to us, ‘You can’t test this,’ and then said, ‘This is shit’” (N9). Brenda was not a member of the organization at that time, but people have told her that Ralph lied to employees and even to Melvin about the status of products (N9), which in a way violates all four principles. As a result of these anti-RICE behaviors (so the story goes), Ralph was removed in late 1995 and Melvin took the reins once again while searching for Ralph’s replacement.

Yet even in his short tenure, Ralph had left indelible marks on the company and its culture, poisoning the rapport between management and employees and weakening the company’s commitment to the RICE principles. On a purely pragmatic level, starting the new division entailed hiring “at least 100” (N9) new employees. That represented a doubling of the population in R&D. Because Ralph did not believe in the RICE principles, the new employees were not trained in them or even told about them, except informally by other employees. So, while Acme used to be more or less unified by one set of well-accepted core values, by 1995, when Ralph left, there were at least two major sub-cultures co-existing uneasily within the ranks of R&D and other employees: the old-timers who remained devoted to the RICE principles, and the newer hires who held a variety of values and did not even know about the RICE principles. Moreover, the resentment Ralph engendered among R&D employees by weakening product quality continued to smolder even while I was there in mid-1999: a participant finally revealed to me months after the fieldwork
ended that R&D employees have tacitly agreed amongst themselves to strike the words “Ralph DeVito” from their vocabularies. No one speaks that name, ever. That agreement is apparently well-maintained, for the name Ralph DeVito never came up in my fieldwork. The first time I learned about him at all, with or without his name, was months later, while socializing with a participant in a private location miles away from Acme headquarters. Ralph DeVito appears to be a villain in the worker culture of Acme R&D.

In 1996, Melvin hired Bill Sayles to replace Ralph. Bill had previously been President of one of the largest technology corporations in the world, a company known within the technology industry for its rigorously hierarchical culture and its strong emphasis on sales and speed-to-market. It soon became apparent to employees (to their great disappointment) that Bill, like Ralph before him, did not value the RICE principles. Bill introduced himself to employees in a speech in which he told everyone that he wanted to “reconsider” (some workers said “dump”) the RICE principles (Tape 17, June 23, 1999; Tape 20, June 24, 1999), replacing them with his own values. Very few participants remember what those values were, and those who do remember give conflicting reports. That employees do not even remember Bill’s stated values shows how unsuccessful Bill was at communicating them—and/or how successful the workers have been at maintaining their own values instead. Ralph DeVito’s name has been erased from their collective lexicon, and the content of Bill’s speech has been erased from their collective memory.
What made Bill’s message that day especially offensive to longtime employees (and this they remember) was the way Bill delivered his message. He strode in and simply told employees, in an authoritative way, what the new values were going to be, without showing interest in or respect for the values already held by his audience. That approach might have been successful in a hierarchical environment like Sayles’ old company, where managers were expected to command and employees to obey. At Acme, however, Melvin had previously consulted R&D employees on many technical decisions (N9), and encouraged them to participate in the shaping of the culture, at least from their point of view. To the Acme audience, therefore, the speech came across as a bossy, disrespectful affront, a declaration of war on the existing culture and the latest in a series of humiliating events and circumstances.

The company changed under Bill’s leadership, despite employees’ desire for it not to change, or at least to retain its core values. The following sections describe changes in the size and structure of the company, changes in work processes, changes in the reward structure, changes in employee communications, and the slow, painful death (perhaps) of the RICE principles.

Changes in Size and Structure. Under Bill’s leadership, the company definitely grew in terms of gross annual revenue. The company had hit the hundred-million-per-year mark sometime in the early ’90s, but Bill pushed the earnings envelope to the maximum possible extent, making each “goal”
or “target” more ambitious than the last. When one thinks of “goals” that a company could conceivably have, one might also include non-monetary goals such as “twenty percent fewer complaints from customers,” or “improving community relations.” It seems that Bill uses it to mean a dollar amount of revenue over a certain time period. Bill’s usage of the word “goal” suggests that he believes the only goals worth working towards are monetary goals.

The company also grew in terms of number of employees: Bill hired a large number of salespeople, started another new division, and increased the number of managers. The influx of new managers made the company much more “vertical” in structure—as Abe, a nineteen-year veteran, observed, “we have more layers of management than we ever had” (Tape 24, June 25, 1999)—but not necessarily more efficient. Abe speculates,

> I think to some degree the company’s vision, based on Bill Sayles’ coming in, was ‘Hey, we’re going to be a billion dollar company and I need this management structure in place,’ based on his past experience of where he came from, from a huge conglomerate like [name of Bill’s old company]. This is the kind of structure he needs in order to grow the organization under him. It all sounds good and well from the standpoint of organizing your management team and then filling it in, but I don’t effectively see it work here in terms of accomplishing what they wanted. (Tape 24, June 25, 1999, emphasis in original)

Abe’s observation is consistent with statements from other participants, many of whom, both newcomers and old-timers, perceive a huge vertical distance between themselves and upper management, a distance that both epitomizes and exacerbates many of the problems employees experience in working at Acme.
Changes in Work Processes. Because Bill placed a high value on speed-to-market, work processes were accelerated (again) and quality control short-circuited (again) in order to crank out more products in less time. Deadlines for shipping were set by upper management without consulting the developers, with the result that product quality went down and employee frustration went up. Manny testified, “When I first came here, we had a release base that had [only] twelve PTFs [fixes] over the entire life of the release” (Tape 12, June 21, 1999). In the Bill Sayles period, in contrast, a typical release might have over a hundred PTFs, because “Now, the first thing they say is, can we ship it today? And the second thing is, well, the customer expects problems; they don’t care” (Tape 12, June 21, 1999). Upper management placed a tremendous amount of pressure on employees to meet ever more unrealistic release dates by “going FCS,” or shipping a product to its very first customer. Yet paradoxically, the company gave R&D employees less and less support for making those dates. Mavis from HR concurs: “the expectations are very high and the tools to perform are very poor--and every year the controls get tighter and tighter” (Tape 35, July 2, 1999). Budgets for training, staffing and equipment were tightened to an unprecedented extent: employees were placed on projects without being given the necessary training, the increased workload was not alleviated by the addition of more workers, and funding for equipment purchases and repairs was “cut off at the knees” (Tape 9, June 18, 1999).
Moreover, budget money was re-distributed according to an accounting paradigm that had not been used at Acme before: each department was viewed as an “organization” in its own right, with overhead and customers and profits (or no profits, as the case may be). “They think in terms of columns here,” says Jackie, “like Consulting and Services has their own Excel spreadsheet and they keep track of their products and services. Customer Support will keep track of their calls and what they need,” but if someone wanted to “make a master report” of how much money each product or service actually made in a given time period, it would not be possible (Tape 3, April 26, 1999). The departments that obviously bring in revenue (such as the Sales department) now started receiving more financial support in the form of staffing, equipment, training, and rewards than did those which appeared to the executives to drain revenue from the company (including R&D, Customer Support, and Human Resources). In the words of one participant, “The non-revenue-producing departments here at Acme are not considered important, even HR, because they don’t generate a revenue” (Tape 35, July 2, 1999). Brenda links the shortage of equipment in R&D to this way of thinking and struggles to understand the logic:

R&D asks for certain things to do their jobs. Equipment is one of them. It’s a computer company. We should have computers to work with. It’s a basic. And we fight for them, to get them. Because R&D itself is not a revenue-generating area. It’s an expense-draining area. It’s the way business is done and—I don’t understand it because I’m not business-focused. But the way business is done, areas that drain don’t get heavy expenses allowed to them. Cause they are expenses in and of themselves. (Tape 9, June 18, 1999)
One can easily see why R&D employees would be frustrated and baffled by the new accounting paradigm—because without R&D, the company would not have attained success in the first place. It is widely believed within Acme that most of the company’s annual revenues throughout the 1990s were provided by the older products that were created in the 1970s, known to Acme insiders as “the legacy products.” Many of those who believe that (and I did not meet anyone who disbelieved it) believe the figure to be as high as 87%; Jackie says she knows for a fact that it is 80%. In light of that fact, one can see why developing new products might be seen by upper management as an expense: if the new products aren’t making nearly as much money as are the existing products, then perhaps it is not a good investment to develop new products. On the other hand, one can also see why R&D employees would chafe under that lack of investment and believe themselves entitled to satisfactory working conditions and satisfactory equipment: R&D created the products that to this day keep the entire company afloat, and is now attempting to create new products that could potentially allow the company to reach its ambitious new goals. As one participant wrote to me in an email, “How you can view (and treat) the people who actually manufacture the products and services you sell as ‘overhead’ is beyond me!” (PFN 9, May 15, 2000).

Another important change in work processes was the establishment of a standard, company-wide process for how Acme conceives, plans and develops new products. In the early days, the market for big-business software had just opened up, and Acme dominated it. Almost any product
Acme put out would sell well, because there were no other products like them. In the mid-1980s, however, competitors started to pop up (Tape 9, June 18, 1999) and the market became more complex. Those factors, combined with the ballooning size of Acme Technology and the failure of some new products to perform well in the market, created a greater need for careful planning and market research prior to the writing of the actual software code. In response to that need, a new process was created, called Check Point Review (CPR). (That acronym is of course pseudonymous, having been chosen by Brenda for its connotation of desperate efforts to save a life.) In CPR, each product had to go through five discrete stages: Program Plan (Stage I), Project Plan (Stage II), Corporate Commit (Stage III), FCS ("first customer ship," Stage IV), and Post-Launch Review (Stage V), only one of which, Stage IV, involved developers' writing the code. Products were "promoted" to the next stage only when specific conditions had been met. The advent of CPR was, and still is, controversial within the company--it helped some employees a great deal, while others found it threatening or thought it "an overly managed obstacle course that causes more pain than good" (Tape 20, June 24, 1999). But one can hardly argue that a company of that size should continue developing products without adequate planning or market research. Its proponents now say that while CPR is not a perfect process, it is a lot better than no process.

Changes in Reward Structures. In the Bill Sayles period, salaries remained high for the industry, but the non-salary rewards were basically taken
away. Profit-sharing was eliminated, many of the employee awards (most notably the RICE award) were eliminated, bonuses were restructured in a way that favored high-level managers, and employee raises were calculated according to a new method called the “Variable Pay” program. In the Variable Pay program, employees were guaranteed only a minimal annual raise (2%) until and unless the company not only met but exceeded its goal that year for annual gross earnings. The amount of variable pay each employee would get would also be tied to his or her individual performance rating, as well as to the company’s overall performance. One participant explained it succinctly:

It’s a program based on a matrix, where the corporation has goals and you have goals. So at review time, at the end of the year, your corporation score determines what row you’re in. And your individual review, based on your achievement of your goals, tell you what column you’re in. And that intersection tells you what percent of variable pay you get. [Tape 20, June 24, 1999]

At first glance, this plan may seem reasonable. However, each year’s corporate goal was set by upper management--and set unrealistically. The company did well throughout the mid- and late ‘90s, but not once since the establishment of Variable Pay has the company meet its stated goals. The net result, predictably, has been year after year of zero variable pay for employees. It appeared as though the Variable Pay program was “designed not to pay out” [Tape 24, June 25, 1999].
Changes in Employee Communication. In their efforts to communicate with employees, Bill Sayles and his team continued to use the same authoritative, commanding style with employees that Bill had adopted in his introductory speech, which created a very different rhetorical atmosphere than had existed under Melvin. Participants report a marked increase in the number of company-wide one-way “broadcast memos” emailed to everyone in the company, and a corresponding decrease in two-way communication between employees and upper management.

Employees were alienated by the condescension and impersonality of these communiqués, especially by management’s ubiquitous use of the opener “Dear Acme Associates,” which had not been used before. The word “associate” means “a member of an organization with less privilege”--“That’s what [we] don’t like” (Tape 10, June 18, 1999). “Associate” was perceived by employees as having the same impersonal, low-prestige connotations as “Attention all K-mart shoppers” (Tape 15, June 23, 1999). Yet the word continues to be used.

As far as I know, Bill and his team did not take steps to determine how the messages were perceived by their intended audiences and did not make any noticeable adjustments. Nor did they investigate employee responses to the “internal promotions” they introduced into the Acme environment--posters, leaflets, booklets, and general-distribution emails that resembled advertising in that they were manipulative in intent (trying to persuade workers to donate more discretionary time to the company) and conveyed messages that were highly biased towards the interests of
upper management. These internal promotions were perceived by R&D employees as condescending and disrespectful, partly because they carved out for the reader a certain credulous, obedient subjectivity that did not at all match how these highly intelligent employees perceived themselves, and partly because the messages all seemed to boil down to one basic request: work harder for less money.

The increase in impersonal broadcast communications and the advent of internal promotions together represented a notable shift in the rhetorical atmosphere within the company. In the old days, both management and employees valued logical appeals and granted high levels of ethos to people who used those appeals well. Pathos had never been particularly useful in this context as a rhetorical appeal on its own, but the fact that heartstrings did vibrate in response to satisfying logical and ethical exchanges is evidenced by the nostalgia and devotion that many longtime employees felt and still feel towards the RICE principles. Under Bill Sayles, in contrast, upper management neglected logical appeals, a big mistake with an audience of technicians (Tape 17, June 23, 1999), and appealed instead to employees' supposedly high degree of respect and affection for upper management and for the project of making Acme a billion dollar mega-company, despite the fact that the employees themselves had been cut off from participating in the profits thanks to Variable Pay.

Interpreting these changes in light of the literature on employee communication, we see that Bill and his team practiced a traditional, "top-
down” style of employee communication stressing written messages (both print and electronic) coming down from on high. Though opinions differ on what constitutes a good employee communication program, most scholars and practitioners would agree that the traditional, top-down style is ineffective. Peter Drucker pointed out in 1974 that “top-down communication alone does not work because it is the employees’ perceptions that determine the outcome of the communication process” (490-93); Roger D’Aprix agrees that “[employee] perceptions are the ones that finally count” (36). Drucker called for two-way communication between employees and management—a call that has resonated not only in the scholarly literature, but among practitioners as well. For example, one practitioner says in an interview that “You cannot design internal communications, programs, or processes that are one-way. That is not the way to succeed at all because you have got to feed on feedback” (quoted in Argenti 311). Patrick Johnson, senior consultant at a strategic consulting firm, thinks of employee communication as “total relationship management”; “it starts out by recognizing that the most important audience . . . is the workforce” (quoted in Argenti 314). By those standards, Bill and his team did a poor job of communicating with employees.

**The Death (or Not) of RICE**

Many of the changes described above, taken together, demonstrate that by 1999, the RICE principles were no longer the core values of Acme
as an organization: the practices and decisions of upper management no
longer reflected them or moved the organization towards them, and many
employees are not even told about them as part of their orientation. When
asked about the current values of Acme as an organization, most
participants did mention the RICE principles, but very few said that the
RICE principles were still central to the culture: they were most often
described as the “old” values, or long-lost, “dead” ideals. One ten-year
employee portrayed the cultural shift in this way: RICE had been

    a really nice idea, but it seems like the bottom dollar is now
    really the goal. And all the rest of that is kind of like a front.
    Like we really want to, we care about our customers, we care
    about our employees, but that’s kind of a front. Really they
    care about the bottom dollar. (Tape 26, June 28, 1999)

At a meeting of the Packaging group in which the goal was to discuss the
results of a recent Employee Survey, the group discussed the current status
of the RICE principles:

Brenda:     Do we want to even touch the “RICE is practiced at
            Acme” one, which is the lowest score in that category?
Manny:      [Pointedly] RICE is dead.
Mark:        Respect Is Completely Eradicated.
Manny:      Why don’t we place absinthe and flowers on the water
            for him.
Thomas:     We need to speak up for RICE and help him.
            (Tape 19, June 24, 1999)

Manny’s use of death and grieving imagery recalls Terence Deal’s argument
that major cultural changes in an organization ought to be marked by
some kind of ceremony—as when AT&T workers held a “wake” for the
company (when it divested in the early 1980s) at which they brought out a small coffin with the words “Ma Bell” written on its side (Deal 295). Acme workers were given no rite of passage, no ceremony to herald the end of an era. Their grief, then, remains unresolved. They grieve for RICE almost as if they are grieving for a person.

And, in a way, they are. Melvin, some participants believe, has changed. As Jackie wrote to me after reading this chapter, the “Story of Acme” as it was told to me

understates Melvin’s role in two ways. First, he knows and condones what Bill does. Second, in the background, he is playing in his R&D sandbox spending over $80 million. Any other public software company would have fired him [Melvin] and the company would have folded/died. . . . Melvin, too, is not interested in quality at this point. He has made his millions in real estate now. The company is a playground. He doesn’t have the integrity either.

But only Jackie and John openly stated to me that they think Melvin no longer embodies the RICE principles. A greater number of participants said that even though the company has changed, Melvin himself still believes in the RICE principles or “still has RICE in his heart” (Tape 17, June 23, 1999). Whether he does or does not is irrelevant: the point is that it seems to me that most participants want to believe that Melvin still has RICE in his heart. That is why so few of them blame him for the negative changes that have taken place. They certainly have RICE in their own hearts or else they would not be wanting to “place absinthe and flowers on the water for him” (Tape 19, June 24, 1999).

Participants tell me that an anonymous letter that was sent to Bill Sayles around 1997, asking “What ever happened to the RICE principles?
Don't we believe in them anymore?” Partly because of that letter, upper management finally saw how devoted employees were to the RICE principles, and attempted in 1998-99 to “bring them back,” to reclaim (with a twist) the values that had been central to the Acme culture for so long. Upper management put out several internal promotions arguing that the RICE principles were indeed Acme’s core values, only now they were being “recreated” along with the rest of the company. For example, the notion of “speed-to-market” was grafted onto the principle of Excellence as a “new extension” of this core value. But employees were not convinced: because management’s actions did not change, employees saw through the insincerity of management’s purported re-commitment to the RICE principles, disagreed that speed-to-market went hand in hand with excellence, and perceived the entire internal promotion as “lip service only.” Matthew puts it this way:

Matthew: The common guy doing the job used to have a pride of the product he sold. That is gone, that is dead. And it’s gone for a number of very concise decisions that were made over the last five years at the upper level of the company. And as those decisions get made, the people at the bottom tend to get very disillusioned, the pride disappears, and the honesty, which is getting the job done, is gone. Communication becomes dishonest, no one is held in the loop anymore for understanding where this company is going and why it’s going there. And so on. That used to be, when I joined the company, that was all there. Tremendous pride. And great value. That’s where the RICE thing actually [hails] from. It goes back about fifteen years, maybe more. That’s gone, it’s all gone.

Paula: Despite management’s efforts to bring RICE back?

Matthew: The more they try, the more they fail.

Paula: Why is that?
Matthew: You can’t bring back a principle in name only, without some tangible manifestation. . . . It’s a lot like a relationship: you either live it or you don’t. You can’t pretend. The whole notion of RICE is, I mean think about it: integrity. You can’t preach integrity, you have to practice it. End of story. You can’t pretend to have pride in the product line; you either have it or you don’t. Management can’t bring it back as such. It has been driven from the building by virtue of their decisions. (Tape 21, June 24, 1999)

That quotation exemplifies the tone taken by many participants when discussing the RICE principles. Some say it with more bitterness, some with less, but the general consensus is that “RICE is dead” (Tape 19, June 24, 1999).

However, the feeling with which that sentiment was uttered, and the resonance that it has for the employees I studied, suggests, ironically, that the RICE principles are not dead. They may not be practiced by upper management, but longtime employees and some of their newer colleagues keep them alive as part of a dissident employee subculture in R&D. Employees who believed in the RICE principles continue practicing them as best they could and continue to evaluate management’s words and actions in light of them. Cleo, a twelve-year employee, delineates two different value systems— that of upper management versus that of the employees:

Cleo: I think right now, the company has gone through a transition over the past five years or so. I think right now the primary value is on money, revenues and positioning the company in a certain way. And I’m not sure if that is to make it an attractive acquisition target or if it’s just to fill the pockets of all in power. So the values of senior management, I would say, are probably selfish: you know, “what can I do for me?” I think the values of the worker bees, the employees, probably such as myself and the levels below, are more loyal: trying to make the company a better place so that we can all be
happy in our jobs and, you know, live happily ever after. So I think that there's two distinct sets of values. (Tape 32, July 1, 1999)

Cleo's assessment that there are two sets of values seems to me an accurate one: upper management does not value the RICE principles, but the employees who do, really do, and take their work seriously in accordance with the principles. In that sense, the RICE principles are not dead. They have merely retreated to a different domain. Instead of occupying the entire culture, they now occupy only the realm of the "worker bee."

This split between employee values and upper management values has been noted by organizational behavior scholar Tim Davis, who observes that "while management may have an obvious interest in new ideas that can improve performance, such ideas often receive a different reception at the lower levels of the organization. One reason for this is that frequently an entirely different culture exists at the lower levels" (163). Some of the organizational culture literature still assumes a monocultural model (163), but Davis argues that the study of organizational culture is incomplete without taking into account the culture of lower-level workers (164).

In fairness, it must be said that not all of the changes under Bill Sayles look bad from every point of view. For example, no one can fault the President of a company for trying to grow the company and increase profits, though one may find fault with the methods by which he sought to do that. Also, it would be very hard for a company to grow that large without some kind of "growing pains" (Tape 15, June 23, 1999) and an
emerging sense among employees and managers alike that the company is "going corporate" (Tape 26, June 28, 1999). Going corporate usually entails a number of the changes being experienced by Acme employees: a decrease in personal contact between lower-level employees and upper management, an increase in bureaucratic red tape, and more and greater disconnects between what makes sense to employees and what makes sense to management. Moreover, some participants tell me that some of the changes Bill instituted at Acme were also experienced in other software companies in the same time period. For example, speed-to-market came to the fore in many companies as it became clear that the best way to get good market share was to be the first to come out with a certain type of product. It takes time to write good code--time during which the window for selling the product may slam shut (Tape 26, June 28, 1999; Tape 31, June 30, 1999; Tape 34, July 2, 1999).

However, none of that takes away from the emic validity of employee perceptions--and whether or not they are objectively valid, I argue that they are still worth gathering and attending to. According to participants, Acme in 1999 was a very troubled workplace, bearing only traces of resemblance to the Acme they originally knew and roiling with conflict between employees and upper management. The new executives communicated downwards in a way that completely disregarded the values, voices and potential responses of the employee audience, particularly the R&D audience, and did not allow for significant two-way dialogue. By pushing employees to produce poor quality technology at a breakneck pace, by
favoring some departments over others, by attempting to jettison the RICE principles, and by communicating in a condescending and ineffective way, Bill and his upper management team may have made the changes much harder on employees than was necessary, creating a dark, dysfunctional, Dilbertian atmosphere in which the work has, for many, lost a great deal of its meaning. Employees in R&D, still smoldering from the indignities of the Ralph DeVito period, became disillusioned and angered all over again by Bill and his bossy, disrespectful, “salesy” (Tape 17, June 23, 1999) approach, especially by his campaign to “recreate” a culture that from the employees’ points of view did not need to be recreated.

**Keywords in the Culture of Acme R&D:**

**Dissonance, Chaos, and Ownership**

Three recurring themes circulated daily in the R&D employee subculture during the time I was there: dissonance, chaos, and ownership. Those concepts can be seen twisting and swirling throughout the entire corpus of data. We need to examine these recurring themes in some detail because they are important features in the cultural landscape of R&D worker bees--important in their own right, but also because they will be seen recurring again in Chapters 4 and 5.

**Dissonance**

Participants were acutely sensitive to disconnects between what is stated and what is observed. Analyzing the many examples of dissonance
in my data, I found that it seems to fall into three main categories: stated rules not being enforced, stated expectations not being materially supported, and stated realities not matching the realities perceived by participants.

Stated Rules Not Being Enforced. Samuel, a mid-level manager, points out that there is a mixed message about following the rules and not following the rules, which has been a point of frustration for some people. In other words, there are messages saying, follow the procedures and there are messages saying, get results whatever you have to do. And so there is, and both are honored. So that's--at least in R&D, that's been sort of an issue. (Tape 21, June 24, 1999)

The best example of the first type of mixed message, stated rules not being enforced, lies in the company's handling of Check Point Review (CPR). On the one hand, upper management says that all products must go through this step-by-step process and no product will be promoted unless it meets the stated criteria for promotion. On the other hand, the question of whether a product has or has not met the criteria is not treated as a yes-no question. There are degrees of yes and no for each individual criterion, in the form of the traffic light colors green, yellow and red. Green signifies that a criterion has definitely been met, yellow signifies that it is being worked on and has almost been met, and red signifies that it is far from having been met. If there are, say, five criteria for a product to go from Stage II to Stage III, that product might be brought to the table (literally--these decisions are made around a big table, in “CPR meetings” every

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Thursday) with two greens, two yellows and a red. According to my observations in CPR meetings, such a product could still be promoted (a.k.a. given “green” status to move to the next stage); there seem to be no clear guidelines about what maximum numbers of yellows or reds are permissible. In addition, even when a product’s promotability seems highly questionable, it can still be promoted anyway by means of “executive exception”: the product’s manager goes to a VP and gets him or her to promote the product, overriding CPR in the headlong rush to release the product and start earning revenue.

Promotion decisions are made (in name, at least) by Jackie, a key informant for this study. The pressure on Jackie to promote products regardless of their readiness is intense, and it is communicated nonverbally as well as verbally. For example, in the large white conference room where CPR meetings take place, a large poster about six feet tall dominates the main wall. The image is divided into two vertical halves: the left side is a photograph of a long white rocket shooting upward through a bank of clouds, powered from beneath by fire and smoke. On the right is a series of words in huge yellow block letters on a dark background, stacked vertically like this:

LIFT OFF...
WE
HAVE
LIFT OFF!
POINT
AND
SHOOT
GOES
FCS!
“FCS” means “First Customer Ship”—the hotly desired moment when a product is released to its first wave of paying customers and the revenues start rolling in. As I said in my fieldnotes,

The poster looks incredibly white and male to me. Its phallicentrism is so blatant I wonder whether it may be a joke. Near the top of the poster, overlaid on top of it, is an ordinary round-faced wall clock, the only clock in the room, which has been hung at the exact dividing point between the left and right halves of the poster. If you want to look at the clock, you have to look at the poster. (RF16, April 28, 1999)

Now that I have analyzed all of the data, I believe the poster is not a joke: it sends a strong message likening the release of a product to a technophilic orgasm (a male orgasm, of course) and reminding everyone in the CPR meeting to feel enthusiastic about “going FCS.” The poster presents classic male-identified symbols of power—the rocket blasting into the air, the words “point and shoot”—thereby associating “going FCS” with the display and enjoyment of power.

For another example, during my fieldwork, a certain product reached a point where the executives wanted to release it. Testing said no go; Training said no go; Packaging said no go; but the VP in charge of the product wanted it released anyway. When the Thursday came around for that product to be considered, I noticed something different on the second floor: an unusual number of people happened to be wearing green and dropping by Jackie’s cubicle or waving to her in the hallways. When Jackie and I arrived in the CPR meeting room, we saw that green balloons had been tied to Jackie’s chair and a number of people had arrived early, some of them wearing green. When the meeting began, the conversation
proceeded in a manner that was, on the surface, absolutely normal; nobody said anything different or explicitly acknowledged that this meeting was special (at least not that I could tell). But the nonverbal signals were observably different. Several individuals were wearing green; the green balloons hung in the air, bobbing gently with Jackie’s movements; people’s body positions were more upright and alert than I had noticed in earlier meetings; and there was a definite edge of tension in the air, a not-entirely-unpleasant feeling of anticipation mingled with uncertainty. About fifteen minutes into the meeting, while the other products were being discussed, the woman in charge of the product in question burst in late, making a silent but attention-grabbing entrance in her bright green suit and carrying two homemade cakes with green frosting. The meeting continued without interruption, again with only nonverbal elements differing from those of the other CPR meetings I attended: the tension, the body language, the balloons, the green clothing, the cake. When the product in question was discussed and greenlighted, the only verbal acknowledgment was a soft “yayyy” from someone at the table, but nonverbally, a lot of things happened: the body positions relaxed, the tension dissipated, the cake was silently served, and several people left the room even though the meeting was still going on (Pad 3, June 23, 1999).

As CPR manager, Jackie is well-positioned to comment on the dissonance surrounding CPR. It had not been an easy decision for her to promote that product; on the way to the building that morning, she had told me how frustrated she felt that she was essentially powerless to resist
the pressure to release products. In another conversation she explained to me that she is told by upper management to enforce the CPR paradigm—managing CPR is her entire job—but upper management does not back up her decisions. She says it is as if her management says to her, “This is what we want you to do, but we’re not going to give you any support or authority or power” (Tape 4, April 27, 1999). Nor, for that matter, any money: when she was promoted to this position in 1999, she was not given a raise. Interestingly, she also points out that it isn’t only upper management who disregards CPR; it is also, sometimes, certain developers in R&D:

People like to think certain things are rewarded, but if a developer wants to go develop something in a corner, it’s okay, it’s not stopped. . . . When there are no consequences for not doing it, it’s kind of a double message. Have a plan, pass CPR, but on the other hand, you can get away with not going through CPR. (Tape 4, April 27, 1999)

Looking at upper management’s practices of issuing executive exemptions and allowing favored developers to avoid the process entirely, the CPR manager has come to believe that “they want the appearance [of a process], not necessarily the content” (Tape 4, April 27, 1999). That makes CPR a major and highly visible source of dissonance within the company, a locus where stated rules are not enforced.

Employees as well, even in R&D, perceive the wishy-washiness of CPR and wish it were followed more strictly. In a private meeting between Brenda and her staff, someone said that CPR is “the only quality process we have that gives us any rules or stringent requirements,” and the staff collectively expressed a desire for CPR to be enforced. In the words of one
staffer, "You don't have to raise the bar. Just enforce it. Just stop making rules that everybody plays to get around. Which is what the game is at Acme. We make the rules and everybody tries to circumvent them." (Tape 19, June 24, 1999). There may be other examples of stated rules not being enforced, but the CPR issue was highly salient while I was there and seems to capture the essence of the problem as perceived by participants.

*Stated Expectations Not Being Materially Supported.* In an earlier section I described how difficult it was to get hold of the material resources that are needed to produce at the rate that is demanded by upper management: I quoted a participant saying that "expectations are very high and the tools to perform are very poor" (Tape 35, July 2, 1999). That issue came up again and again in my time at Acme, many times a day in dozens of separate events, almost all of which were avidly discussed in the employee subculture. Some of these discussion topics involved material support—namely equipment, training, person-power and above all, *time*—which are needed but not given. For example, Cathy, a Customer Service representative, has trouble getting her documents printed because none of the departments on that floor will take financial responsibility for fixing a printer:

Instead of ten printers for every cubicle, now it's one printer for forty people. And if the printer breaks, five departments have to try and justify who's going to pay to fix the printer. And none of the managers want to take it out of their budget, so the printer sits there. This literally happened. The printer sat there broken for two months, because no manager wanted to put in their budget to get the printer fixed. They said, you know you try to get something printed and you can't, and the PC's are not, we're not allowed to "change the PC's" because
they're really owned by the network department and we're supposed to call the help line and have them come down. But if you call the help line, you can't get through. (Tape 23, June 25, 1999)

The same parsimony often extends to the resource of "time" as well. In a meeting between the Packaging group and Gwen, their Director (higher than a line manager but not part of upper management), Gwen urged the team to be patient because the complicated project ahead of them will take time to complete. The team responded:

John: We know that it takes time. The question is, does senior management know that it takes time?

Thomas: When it comes down to the final push, will they be willing to give that time?

John: Yeah, are they gonna back their—is senior management—I'm talking about AVPs and above—are they willing to put their money where their mouth is? You see, it's very nice that they prophesy to me through internal promotions that I should be engaged in the relentless pursuit of quality, but if they don't give me the means to help the company get there, they're just full of hot air. (Tape 22, June 25, 1999)

Brenda, the line manager of that team, remarked in a different context about a particularly onerous deadline, "Perhaps the company says this is an important thing, but really, it is not giving me the oomph behind it that I need to make it happen. It's laying its success on me without giving me the tools I need to succeed" (Tape 8, June 15, 1999).

*Stated Realities Not Matching Realities Observed by Workers.* Upper management in its top-down communications tends to make declarative statements about how things are at Acme—what this or that thing is, how
the company is doing, where it's going, what upper management wants, what is valued, etc.—while employees observe evidence that the real truth is something else. John used the phrase "cognitive dissonance" to describe this phenomenon, explaining that "cognitive dissonance is when what people are saying to you conflicts directly with what you observe around you" (Tape 9, June 18, 1999). Although he does not use the term correctly—"cognitive dissonance" per se is more accurately understood as an unpleasant feeling of tension between conflicting desires or motivations in an individual (see Festinger; Brehm and Cohen 3-7)—his observation that what upper management says conflicts with what employees observe is borne out by the data.

For example, employees are frequently told that there's no money for this or that expenditure (equipment, training, etc.). However, in daily working life they see the company spending large amounts of money on seemingly less-urgent things (such as trips to Hawaii, golf at Pebble Beach, free laptop computers for high-ranking executives who are prospective customers, etc.)—and they note the contradiction: "People are saying, we're struggling under the burden of having to run tight and thin. But there's all this money being spent in areas that seem to be really inconsequential" (Tape 8, June 14, 1999). One particularly colorful illustration of dissonance occurred in my first few days on the site and shall serve as an illustration. The "Spirit of Acme" campaign, with its brightly colored posters on the walls, also generated a greeting card that was distributed to all employees' mailboxes. The greeting card was cut in the shape of a
Hawaiian shirt, its outside printed in brightly colored tropical motifs much like a glossy version of a real Hawaiian shirt. Each card had a different tropical motif; there must have been eight or ten different styles. The cards opened out from the front in both directions, like real shirts would open, and contained a message urging employees to volunteer for the “Spirit of Acme” program (an extracurricular teamwork project) by turning their form in before a certain date. One of my participants, Brenda the line manager, had previously worked in print advertising and knew from looking at the cards that they would have been quite expensive to produce, costing possibly tens of thousands of dollars, if all employees in the entire company had received them. Yet her own request for a $1,500 hard drive upgrade for her group’s server, desperately needed in order for to produce CDs for sale, had been denied. Here she shows me the card and explains to me its significance to her:

Brenda: See that poster on the wall?
Paula: Yeah.
Paula: Uh huh.
Brenda: Those posters are all over the place. I’m sure you’ve seen them.
Paula: Oh I have.
Brenda: [Showing me a stack of cards she had collected] These little, I don’t even know what to call them. They’re little cards.
Paula: (Looking through them) Yeah.
Brenda: They came in the mail. Everybody got one.
Paula: Yeah.

Brenda: I took a look at them and I went, wow, these are expensive. Then I looked at what they said, and they said, hey it’s almost time’s up, got to get your Spirit of Acme thing in. Now they already sent around an e-mail soliciting that, and a reminder note. After, of course, a series of emails that said, please let’s cut down on email traffic. So now we’ve got additional email traffic and we went and paid for these internal rah-rah-rahs.

Paula: Uh huh.

Brenda: But I can’t get $1,500 for hard drives for my server, to cut CDs. So I’m taking this little pile to my boss, and I’m going to ask her to send them to her boss, who I’m going to ask to send to his boss so he can find out why we spent money on that and not my hard drives. (Tape 8, June 14, 1999)

The same Hawaiian shirt incident was also reported to me on the same day by John, a member of Brenda’s staff and the participant who had explained “cognitive dissonance” to me earlier:

It’s very interesting watching it. You get all this internal promotion that tells you one set of messages, while you sit and watch and see a whole bunch of other activities going on. And you say, “What’s that?” And people say, “That? You didn’t see anything. That wasn’t really going on.” It’s like these funny little things [showing me a card]. We’ve been told that there’s no money to spend in the company, and yet everybody gets a little Hawaiian shirt card today that says why we should enroll for their Spirit of Acme program, which is about groups of people getting together to think of new programs to help Acme make more money. Look at this [showing me both sides]. No money. I’ve seen at least ten different designs of this. No money, but they can print up what, I guess 500, 1000 of these. And this is, how much does it cost? My manager can’t get $1,500 authorized for a new server she needs for additional space for packaging product that the company wants to ship as a deliverable. But they can print up this to say, come play in pool Acme because it’s so much fun to be with your colleagues in Hawaii. (Tape 8, June 14, 1999)
Both of these participants, and the others who discussed the cards that day, saw the incongruity between the tight-spending regimen that the company was supposedly on and the generous spending on glossy internal promotions—promotions that simply repeated the same content over and over.

A key form of dissonance at Acme is the incongruity between the company’s stated values and its real values. This incongruity was aptly described by Abe, a longtime employee, in an open-ended interview, when I asked about Acme’s values:

Paula: What are Acme’s values?
Abe: The ones that are espoused, or the ones that you figure out?
Paula: The ones you figure out.
Abe: The company has this RICE principle that is espoused. And I’m not sure if you know what that represents. Respect for the individual, Integrity, Customer-focus, and Excellence. You quickly find out that there’s lip service given to a lot of principles and values when that’s not the reality. I think the culture that Melvin would like to have doesn’t flow down. I used to believe that he personally believed them. And yet, on a number of occasions, I question that he was practicing his own stated principles. So what values do we have? [Laughs] I think the only value I can see, if you want to consider it a value, is the company deems making its dates that are arbitrarily set valuable.

Paula: On what basis do you make that determination?
Abe: Because that’s the way this company’s driven. Without any planning, someone picks a date and says, we gotta make that.
Many other participants mentioned the same schism: that the company's stated values are not its real values. This disjunction is particularly true when it comes to the most important value in the old Acme culture—the value for Excellence, also known as quality: "They talk about quality being important, but what's really important is getting it out of the door on time. Defects can be caught and fixed later, it's true, but customers complain there are too many fixes" (Tape 10, June 18, 1999). Every time management claims to value excellence or quality, but then makes decisions that work against excellence, the dissonance is noted by employees and widens the rhetorical gap between them and upper management.

Certainly not every participant felt that the company's stated values were not its real values. Three participants out of twenty-six testified that they believed the RICE principles were still the core values of the organization, and a fourth, interestingly, changed his claim depending on the rhetorical situation in which he was speaking. Still, twenty-three out of twenty-six sounded the same or similar notes, pointing out to me and each other the many ways in which upper management makes claims about reality (such as, "X is valued at Acme") that are contradicted by everyday observations.

That widespread perception of dissonance explains the prevalence of a certain metaphor in the Acme culture: "The Emperor's New Clothes." Gwen chose it as her metaphor for Acme:

Gwen: The common [metaphor] used at Acme, which is amazingly accurate, is the fairytale, "The Emperor's New Clothes." When I first came to Acme, someone
told me that working at Acme was like that, and I hadn’t read the fairy tale since I was a kid, and I thought that’s very strange. But having since read the fairy tale, it actually makes a lot of sense. And that is actually probably a pretty good metaphor for Acme.

Paula: How does that make so much sense?

Gwen: There is in Acme culture, probably at each level of management, a desire to believe a set of things whether they match with reality or not. And they really don’t want anyone to come and tell them that the Emperor’s not wearing any clothes. And the Emperor in this case is not like the head of the company, the emperor is every layer of management. I mean, each layer of management has their own set of myths, and they really don’t want their myths broken.

In addition to demonstrating the keyword dissonance, Gwen’s explanation calls into question the assumption that only upper management has blinders on and only upper management promotes dissonance. If all levels of management have myths that they do not want to seek broken, then dissonance is an even more pervasive theme in the culture than was initially apparent to me. Moreover, taking a pro-management perspective for a moment, it could be said that employees promote dissonance as well, because they are the ones who are voluntarily clinging to the RICE principles even though upper management has clearly abandoned them. Perhaps locating the source of the dissonance is itself a political act; perhaps the place where one locates the dissonance is the place where one locates the culpability for things not making sense.

In any case, dissonance is abundant in the Acme environment and is discussed by employees very frequently, in all of its varieties. It makes sense that employees would discuss the dissonance they perceive because
it has been argued that the natural human impulse to resolve dissonance can be what drives us to write or speak in the first place. Lauer, Montague, Lunsford and Emig argued in a 1981 college composition textbook that dissonance is a “starting point” for writing (21); writers, in their view, are “questioners” (21), who start by tuning in to the questions that arise when your expectations and your values are challenged, when the image of the world you grew up with does not fit the world you meet.

For example, if your two values of equal opportunity and job security clash with your employer’s discrimination against women, you can ignore one of the values and remain uncomfortable. Or you can engage in a writing process to resolve your tension and even to change your work situation. . . . A starting point, then, is a sense of dissonance, a gap, between your present way of looking at things and whatever challenges that view. (21)

These authors are concerned mostly with writing, but I would say that their argument applies to speaking as well: when people experience dissonance, they are likely to resolve or make sense of that dissonance through conversation with others.

There is an important difference, though, between the scenario posited by these textbook authors and the dissonance I observed at Acme. The authors assume that the perceiving subjects are young, inexperienced college students, and that dissonance is most likely a tension between what I thought before (the world-views they inherited from their families) and what I see now (the new experiences these young people are now having, out in the world). My Acme participants experience different types of dissonance. For example, when upper management tells employees that there is no money to spend, then spends money on expensive gew-gaws
like the Hawaiian shirt cards, that creates dissonance between *what management wants me to think* and *what I really think*, based on *what I have seen*. Acme employees resolve that dissonance by talking about it among themselves, “making sense” of the dissonance in ways that preserve and strengthen their shared world-views.

**Chaos**

Another cultural theme very prominent in the data is the notion of *chaos* (including related concepts such as confusion, craziness, and melee). The meaning of the word “chaos” was known and understood by all of my participants, who referred to it in conversations with each other almost as a physical thing that was constantly present and visible to all. Nobody ever asked “what chaos?” or which part of the chaos was being referred to at the moment. Chaos comes across in the data as an omnipresent evil force, a bete noir which must be contained at all costs but which is let out of its cage several times a day by the apparently nonsensical decisions of upper management. Participants spoke of “containing” the chaos, “managing” the chaos, “decreasing” the chaos, and “channeling” the chaos, and refused to do anything that would “create” or “increase” the chaos.

Some of the chaos is caused by poor product quality. For example, chaos figured prominently in Thomas’ description of one particular product, which was not well-planned and which required a lot of “fix-packs” (CDs with replacement code free of the errors in the original code):

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Even though we knew at the time that if we [released a certain poorly designed product], it would cause chaos, we released it in the hope that few people would use it so the
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chaos would be easily manageable. There are now—I just promoted seven more fix-packs. We’re getting close to four hundred [fix-packs]. The chaos is no longer manageable. (Tape 24, June 25, 1999)

He was telling me this in order to illustrate how far Acme’s quality standards had fallen, but in doing so he also provided insight into the theme of chaos. Chaos in this case appears to refer to the extra work that is created by things not being done right in the first place—work that must be done in addition to the normal workload.

In another case, Brenda and Manny discussed chaos in a one-on-one meeting which they allowed me to observe and tape. They had just gone over the technical impossibility of something upper management had asked them to do, when Brenda relayed a message to Moe (and all of her staff) from Gwen:

   Brenda: Gwen has asked me to relay—to acknowledge that we are neck deep in chaos, that it’s not going to stop for a while, and you’re just giving me the baseline for what it’s going to be on.

   Moe: You cannot put seven pounds of shit in a five-pound box. I don’t care how hard you try. (Tape 12, June 21, 1999)

Brenda portrays chaos to Moe as a neck-deep river of muck that must be waded through. She acknowledges to Moe that they are indeed swimming in it, and thanks him for shedding light on the technical reasons why the river exists—the “baseline” fissure from which the river emerges. Moe’s reply signals that he agrees with her and underscores (in an indelicate way) what they both already know: that the feat upper management has asked them to accomplish is physically impossible. Hence, the chaos. Later,
Brenda explained to me Manny's frustration: he keeps trying to solve the problems, but is repeatedly prevented from doing so, after which it becomes a question not of solving the problem but of "managing the chaos by doing the things he's being asked to do as best he can. And he's very frustrated. Because he knows how to solve the problem" (Tape 12, June 21, 1999).

Some participants even used chaos as their metaphor for the entire company. Abe the old-timer puts it this way:

Paula: If you had to pick a metaphor to describe Acme, what metaphor would you use? What metaphor comes to mind when you think of Acme?

Abe: [Laughs] When I think of Acme, the only thing that tends to come to mind is chaos. I don't know if you'd call that a metaphor for it or not, but—

Paula: What kind of chaos is it?

Abe: What kind. You mean there's more than one kind of chaos?

Paula: I just want to understand how you see it. What does "chaos" mean to you?

Abe: Uncontrolled unplanned activity that just drives things. It's reaction versus any pre-planning. "Pro-active" I guess would be the counterpart of reactive.

Others used different metaphors, but many of these represented chaos even when the person did not use the word "chaos." For example, Thomas likened the company to

an extremely inept marching band. People running into each other, pushing each other over, can't see the conductor. We've managed to get through some songs and have them sound pretty much like the way they should. But it's comically inept compared to what it could be. (Tape 24, June 25, 1999)
Deborah, a customer support representative, borrowed the metaphor of "cart before the horse":

Well, I didn't come up with this metaphor, but it kind of fits. I think it's like the cart before the horse type of thing. It feels like a lot of times we'll get edicts will come down [saying] we're going to do this now. And so now everybody is doing the same thing but we don't have any procedures, we don't know how we're supposed to do it... . So it seems like they give you edicts that come down before they figured out if it would work, figured out what the procedures are, who would be responsible for it. And then they spend the next six or nine months catching up, writing the procedures and that type of thing. So I think they try to do things too quickly. (Tape 26, June 28, 1999)

In the next example, Matthew uses the metaphor "chicken on the grill," ties that image to chaos, ties the chaos to constant changes in the product line, and explains how his work group is in a special position to appreciate the extent of the chaos:

Paula: What might be a metaphor for how you see Acme?

Matthew: Chicken on the grill.

Paula: Can you explain that?

Matthew: There's an awful lot of pressure in this company as a whole. People can get very tense, the chaos seems to be never-ending and an awful lot of people get very disillusioned just trying to fulfill their normal everyday role.

Paula: How is that like a chicken on the grill?

Matthew: Hot and sweaty. I don't know, I'm not suggesting it's a good metaphor, it's just the first one that came to mind. If I needed a metaphor for my role--

Paula: You could give me that too, that would be fine. Any metaphors that occur to you are fine.

Matthew: Myself, this group, what we do--like being a school teacher, trying to maintain calm and order during a
fire drill or a school for shape shifters. I look forward to seeing that describing this place. It's very difficult. We're one of the few [work groups] whose job is to try and put everything on the straight and the narrow despite all the running around.

Paula: Shape shifters, what's a shape shifter?

Matthew: It used to be when this company, unlike so many others back in the '60s and '70s, got into the business of software, you could clearly define what the product was. Although if you're not a technical person, that might seem like kind of an over-assumption. But from my perspective, you could define the product, it was made up out of these parts, it did this job, it ran over there and was sold to those people that used it for that purpose. We no longer have a product that we sell, we have a varying number of products and they change on a weekly basis. What composes those products is anyone's guess because it changes month in and month out as people dream up new creative ways of selling software to customers. Even if the customer already has it, we’ll find a new way to give it a new name, a new twist, and sell it to them. The parts that make up the product, they change all the time. It's a very nebulous, ever-changing thing and one of our jobs is to try and nail it down, to find it, create it, print it, ship it. So therefore we deal with every development group in the organization, every marketing group, every solutions group, every manager. We're the middle and all the chaos comes to us and we have to try and channel it, to do something viable that we can sell. (Tape 20, June 24, 1999)

Though only twelve of my participants (less than half) were in that particular work group “in the middle,” many participants mentioned chaos or a related concept at some point or other. On that basis alone, chaos would have emerged as a significant theme.

However, I also had a number of chances to observe chaos in action, as I spent time on the inside observing everyday activities. An example of that would be the ongoing efforts of several participants to create a
computerized database to keep track of where each product was in its progress through the production pipeline, a project which Brenda said was "the most controversial thing going on right now" in R&D (RF50, June 21, 1999). This database was urgently needed, because as Matthew explained above, Acme products had multiplied in number--over three hundred "products" (items for sale) were available 1999 (Tape 3, April 26, 1999). Yet most "products" were really recombinations of individual programs, confusingly combined into "suites" or "packages" for the purpose of selling it. Most readers will be familiar with the idea of combining several software applications together into one suite; an example of this would be Microsoft Office, which often comes together with Power Point, Excel, and Word. Acme products can be thought of as "suites" of Acme software programs. The complexity of the product line lay not in the individual applications, but in the dizzying array of combinations, each of which was given a different name. The complexity got so extreme that a special database was needed just to keep track of the many suites, exactly what each suite contained, and the status of each suite in the CPR pipeline.

One can see why the Packaging Group (not to mention the Install Group) would be put in a difficult position by all of these combinations: it is very difficult to keep track of the shifting combinations of programs and figure out exactly what should be packaged onto each CD. That is why Brenda was eager to push for a product status tracking database and got involved in its construction.
Yet its construction was anything but straightforward. In meeting
after meeting, I observed that the process of creating this database was
repeatedly slowed down by what appeared to be a strong gravitational pull
towards chaos. Participants explained to me that the chaos surrounding
the database project started long before I arrived in the field, when upper
management set a deadline that employees felt was unrealistic (December
1999). Then suddenly, just before I arrived, upper management pulled the
deadline six months closer, to June 1999 (the very month I was there).
Meanwhile, the people working on the project had a lot of trouble getting
certain crucial pieces of technical information, such as what physical
hardware would be used to house the database and in what computer
language the database would be written. Without that information,
nothing could really be done except the conceptual side of the work, which
itself was plagued by chaos. But even the conceptual chaos was difficult to
address without the technical information. The project team asked and
asked for the information, fruitlessly while I was there, yet continued to
receive urgent exhortations from management to get the database done as
soon as possible. Management completely redefined the project while I
was there, and the five formal meetings I attended on this subject devolved
into struggles to define certain key terms, such as "product" and "product
code" (because different people at different levels in the company used
those terms in different ways), and to keep track of the ever-changing
technical parameters. Adding to the confusion was management's practice
of frequently changing the roster of people involved in the project, taking
some people off and putting other people on, sometimes for no good reason anyone I talked to could think of. That constant turnover required the more experienced team members to explain the history of the project over and over again to the newer members, which not only took time, but also took more time than it had to because many of the people brought in by upper management did not have the technical expertise to understand the project (Tape 4, April 27, 1999).

In all, during the three years since the database project was originally launched, upper management has radically redefined the project three times, reset its technical parameters twice, and made changes in the team six times. The project eventually “fizzled by default” because of those difficulties and now remains dormant. As of this writing, “People know it’s there and still want to work on it, but we have no support--resources, personnel, et cetera--to put any time or bodies into the project” (Brenda, PFN23, October 17, 2000). Brenda attempted to resurrect the project in early October of 2000, but amusingly, it took two weeks for the intranet department just to find the work that had been done. Consequently, the database is still only partially complete, and participants confirm that there is still no way for anyone to track the status of products as they go through the pipeline. One might be tempted to pin at least some of the blame for this major chunk of chaos on employee incompetence within the team, but according to participants, it is the pervasive, insistent presence of chaos in the environment that works to trip up the work and frustrate those who attempt to determine the contours of what needs to be done. Though it

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may be unfair to lay 100% of the blame for this squarely on upper management, it does seem (at least to the worker bees) as though most of the chaos descends from above, like random lightning bolts ruining employees’ best efforts to do quality work and keep their projects organized. I find it ironic that the whole purpose of the database project was to reduce the chaos—but the project was consumed by the chaos it had been created to control.

Ownership

The final theme in the employee culture of Acme pops up many times a day, figuring strongly in work processes at almost every juncture. “Ownership” in this culture means “responsibility for doing.” In almost every formal and informal meeting I attended, the question of ownership was brought up either explicitly, implicitly, or both. Acme employees are constantly engaged in negotiating and socially constructing who was, is, or shall now be responsible for what—from quotidian matters such as who will do what portions of a specific project, to larger, company-wide issues such as which levels of management bears what responsibilities in the process of creating new products.

As an example of the former, I offer an excerpt from my fieldnotes, in which I describe a meeting called the “3 o’clock scrub.” These meetings happen more or less every day and are designed to keep track of all of the technical errors, or “show stoppers,” that have been found in a given piece of software.
The meeting begins with Miranda handing out the “scrub sheet,” a thick document, Xeroxed and stapled. Miranda is the leader of the meeting, a primly attractive young woman (28? 32?) in a slightly awkward suit. Miranda is straight-faced and her tone could be described as serious, uptight, all business. Everyone takes a copy of the scrub sheet (Brenda slips one to me), which is entitled “99T3 Show Stopper Report for 4/26/99.” Oriented horizontally on regular white letter-size paper, it is essentially a table of one-line entries, each line consisting of indecipherable technical information: assorted letters, numbers, characters and a few actual English words. Fortunately, Brenda has already told me what it is: each line represents an error that has been found in one of the CDs. The document contains line after line of technical errors: 743, to be exact. At 36 errors per page, the document is twenty-three pages long. A typical “problem description” reads, “DIDAT G349 TY377 $W8502 APPLY PRODUCT FRGISUJL OUT OF SPACE.” (It’s moments like this when I realize, again, that clarity is in the eyes of the beholder.)

The meeting is centered on Miranda and the document. Everyone’s eyes are mostly trained on the document, and the voice that speaks most often is Miranda’s. She controls who speaks by inviting one person at a time to report on the errors that are under their purview. Everyone turns to the page where that person’s name is, and the person reports on each item in sequence. The conversation pattern, then, is a series of briskly paced two-way exchanges between Miranda and one person at a time, during which some or all of the following items are discussed and negotiated:

-- the severity of the error (from “sev 5,” the least severe, to “sev 1,” extremely severe)
-- the accuracy of the information on the document
-- who “owns” the error
-- the sufficiency of actions that have been taken so far
-- the next step(s) that should be taken

When one person’s errors have been discussed, she moves to the next person and invites him to report on each of his errors. (The male pronoun is correct here because everyone besides Brenda, Miranda and me is male.) (RF8, April 26, 1999)

As I was writing that fieldnote, I reflected that the meeting was

both technical and rhetorical. It is technical in that technical information is being relayed. It is rhetorical, however, in that the way the information is relayed, and to some extent the
information itself, appears calculated to persuade Miranda and the others that the speaker is on top of it, the problems should not be worried about, and the product will indeed be ready on time. (RF8, April 26, 1999)

Ownership, then, is closely connected to *ethos* in this culture: one wants to be sure that one is perceived as competent and capable of handling the problems that one “owns.” The anxiety inherent in that situation was perceptible to me, but not overwhelmingly so; I felt that there was some tension in the room, but did not understand or appreciate it until Thomas described to me how he had experienced scrub meetings when he attended them the previous year:

Thomas: What bugs me about the corporate culture is all the blaming that goes on. ‘Cause if you miss the date, you get beat up. Have you been to one of the 3 o’clock scrub meetings?

Paula: Yes I have.

Thomas: Aren’t those things nightmarish?

Paula: Why do you think they’re nightmarish?

Thomas: Because everyone’s like OK, now your turn in the fire. And they put all the [line] managers in the fire and grill them. Well why is your problem so important that we should include it [in the next fix-pack]? You may have been to a few good ones. They can get pretty nasty. “Why are you delaying our GA because you’ve got this problem? Shouldn’t you have fixed it before? Why should we let you get it out?” They were like that last year. I’ve heard they’ve calmed down. Maybe. (Tape 24, June 25, 1999)

Although Jackie commented after reading this chapter that Thomas’ view “seems overdramatic,” his explanation still helps me to appreciate the tension that I perceived only dimly as an outsider when I was there: it was the anxiety of *ownership*.

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The ownership theme comes through in the rest of the data as well. In the meetings I attended, no matter what the topic, a good portion of the conversation centered on assigning and negotiating ownership. I was also told (although I did not observe this) that in larger meetings between staff and upper management, if a problem is being discussed and an employee offers a solution, the executive running the meeting typically says to that person, with enthusiasm, “Great. You own it!” At that point, other employees might snicker, because it would have happened again: the person proposing the good idea would have succeeded only in boxing herself or himself into the undesirable position of “owning” all of the work it would take to put the idea in place—with no real support from management (PFN12, August 23, 2000).

The theme of ownership is also visible in the issue of naming. John observed that very often “some problem becomes indelibly wedded with a person’s name,” especially when that person is the one to have pointed out the problem. John told me the story of “the Jason problem,” which wasn’t Jason’s fault at all; rather he was the one to have brought it to the attention of upper management (Tape 10, June 18, 1999). Another participant, Daphne the technical writer, recounted an incident when she had pointed out a serious problem on a CD. Instead of getting praised for pointing it out, her name was sent up to Melvin with the comment that “Daphne is holding up the CD.” This got her into trouble and she felt terribly burned by it: that was the only time she had ever gotten into trouble here, ever, and she has made sure since then never to point out
problems unless she is absolutely sure that the people in the room are safe. Now she just says, “Everything’s okay,” no matter what (RF89, June 30, 1999).

By the same token, workers often have the impulse to name one or more members of upper management as the cause of a problem, although they do not generally do so in public because it is taboo for a worker to ask for or call out the names of the executives who are responsible for something. But sometimes taboos get broken. Brenda related to me an instance when she unwittingly broke that rule by asking for the name of the executive responsible for signing a terribly unrealistic contract:

Brenda excitedly relayed what she perceived as a very amusing story about the Starship project. She had had a Starship meeting at 7am that morning, in which the Starship team (which included herself), painfully aware that the deadline was impossible to meet, desperately tried to get any one of three desirable things: 1) an extension of the deadline, 2) more resources, or 3) a simplification of the product by dropping as many functionalities as possible. The high-ranking person at that meeting, a VP, said “no” to all three, on the grounds that the company had signed a contract promising the product by a certain date. Brenda amusingly related that because it was only 7 in the morning and she wasn’t thinking straight, she actually came out and asked the question, “Who signed that contract?” Surprised by her own boldness, she told me incredulously, “I said it in that tone of voice, too: who signed that contract? And the VP actually answered me. He said the name. Everyone was quiet for a few seconds after that.” (RF61, June 22, 1999)

From these and other instances involving naming, I conclude that naming is akin to blaming, and blaming is a form of assigning ownership. My sense of these situations is that by naming the problem after a person, it is easier for management to write it off by scapegoating the person instead of
dealing with the problem. The same may work in reverse: perhaps by labeling a problem as having come from upper management, worker bees can write it off, so to speak, and not deal with it. But worker bees do not have the same freedom as upper management does to disregard problems which they perceive as inconvenient.

A key locus for the negotiation of ownership, at what participants call the “corporate level,” is the CPR process I described earlier, which as I said is rife with struggle and controversy. Jackie explained to me that the way the process is currently written, the stages are described by function, not by department, which means the roles and responsibilities of each department are not clear and there is no clear ownership of who is supposed to do what in the development of a product. That is especially true at the level of the Business Units (not the same as organizations or departments) and the executives who run them (who are considered part of upper management). The Business Unit executives are called Business Unit Managers, or BUMs (I am not making that acronym up. The BUMs insisted on the BUM. acronym, against the advice of lower-level managers). BUMs are responsible for planning individual products and also “programs” or lines of products. The CPR process requires those plans to be written out on paper, with the writing being used as a record. But as Jackie says,

this is a big, big resistance point at Acme, because if you plan a project and you don’t deliver the project—the more you plan and put it down on paper, the more you are held accountable to what you put on paper. So people don’t want to write anything down. So when we do program planning, a lot of the BUMs will not forecast what they think they can make with their product, ’cause if they forecast, that means they are
accountable to those numbers. So there’s massive resistance on that. So anything from about Stage III back is like swimming upstream to get people to do, because when you write things down, written down, you’re accountable for it. If you just talk about it, you can go, “I didn’t really say I thought this product would make a million. You didn’t understand me. I was thinking a million over five years, not this year. What were you thinking? Of course this product can’t make a million this year.” So a major issue going on here is an accountability issue. And that’s the difficulty of getting a lot of the CPR systems in place. (Tape 3, April 26, 1999)

Accountability is closely related to ownership, for it is the immediate consequence of ownership, the moment when one has to answer for one’s performance and persuade others that one has done good work.

Accountability is “who’s responsible for what” (Tape 6, April 28, 1999). This participant was in the process of revising the CPR documents to make the “roles and responsibilities clear by department”--an act that apparently has tremendous political ramifications in this cultural climate. Making the ownership clear would require departments and BUMs to communicate more across departmental boundaries, which has the potential to increase accountability: “if [the departments] have to talk to each other, [they’re] also exposed more, in a sense. . . . There’s more of an accountability for what both sides are doing” (Tape 6, April 28, 1999). That, in turn, has the potential to expose BUMs and other powerful people to critiques that are currently deflected by a certain mystique surrounding their high positions, and also by the scapegoating of other groups. As Jackie explains it,

Right now Brenda’s group, the Install group, and the Documentation group are all made out to be the scapegoats of the company. They’re all the people who are the problems . . . Part of what I’m doing is . . . introducing [the idea] that actually they’re doing a great job . . . and creating a positive cycle for them, by moving the [focus] back up to the planning
areas, which are the VPs, who generally don't plan much and are starting to do it more, and the Director level. (Tape 6, April 28, 1999)

If she succeeds in making this change, "it will become highly obvious that the problems lie at that level. This is really the core issue going on here" (Tape 6, April 28, 1999).

Ownership, then, is a hot potato. It leads to accountability, and accountability entails responsibility, communication and exposure. That this drama is playing out at the systemic, institutional level as well as the individual-employee level shows just how central the theme of "ownership" is to the Acme culture. It is in different moments negotiated, avoided, taken on, and rejected, at every level of the hierarchy.

**Connections among Dissonance, Chaos and Ownership**

Though I have teased these three concepts apart in my analysis, in my experience of daily life at Acme R&D I saw that they are closely connected, feeding into each other in curious ways. For example, a refusal to claim ownership might very easily contribute to the dissonance (as in, "we want this done, but we won't specify who will do it") as well as create chaos (as in, "who is supposed to be doing it?"). Chaos, in turn, can only be controlled by the assignment of ownership. Chaos and ownership, then, are interdependent and inversely proportional. The drive to avoid ownership is a major source of the chaos, yet the chaos itself demands that ownership be negotiated and (re)assigned. Dissonance contributes to the chaos as well, because two of its aspects *(stated rules not being enforced*
and stated expectations not being materially supported; actually cause chaos (extra work, scrambling, running around), and the third (stated realities not matching realities observed by workers) contributes significantly to workers' overall sense that Acme is a very bizarre place where things don't make sense. That sense is especially strong with regard to the dissonance between the company's stated values and its real values—for values are, in Deal and Kennedy's view, the "core" of an organizational culture. The presence of dissonance at such a profound and important level of the culture—at the level of core values—causes chaos at a deeper level, much deeper than just the "procedural" chaos that results from switching team members or moving deadlines. For employees to be confused about what the organization's values really are is for them to feel perpetually uncertain about how to make the large and small decisions that will define their performance in the eyes of management. My participants are not "confused" per se—they know what the organization's values are, and they know what their own values are—but the two sets of values are very different, and the dissonance between them serves only to emphasize the chaotic or "schizophrenic" quality (Tape 34, July 2, 1999) of working at Acme.

**Betrayal, Dysempowerment and Domination in Acme R&D**

Underneath the everyday talk and activity surrounding dissonance, chaos and ownership, I sensed, particularly among longtime employees, feelings of betrayal. What feeds this sense of betrayal among R&D
workers? Why has the cultural change at Acme had such an intensely negative effect on those “at the bottom” (Davis)? I would argue that one element of the betrayal they feel is a sense of loss—the idyllic work environment that Acme used to be, has been taken away. Let us return for a moment to Maslow’s hierarchy of needs: physical needs, safety and security, love and belonging, esteem and recognition, and finally, at the top, self-actualization. Whereas in Part I of the Story of Acme, we can see or surmise that all five levels had been met in the old days of Acme, reading Part II and the keywords of the current Acme culture (as I observed it in the spring and summer of 1999) suggests that far fewer of the employees’ needs are now being met. Consider the top-level need of self-actualization. Some employees still do feel that they are finding solutions to problems and using their talents and abilities. I do not know whether they feel they are serving humanity (I didn’t ask), but we have seen that “the pride is gone” (Matthew) from the work, and their ability to use their talents and abilities to the fullest is compromised daily by the constant presence of chaos, which as I said earlier frustrates many of the workers’ attempts to gain enough control over their work to complete their projects well.

Some fourth-level needs are still being met—it is still true that Acme developers can develop good personal reputations among their peers (for example, I heard one developer refer to another as a “wizard”), and a small number of them do get publicly recognized for their achievements (Brenda, for example, has won the “Acme Innovator” award for her performance as a
line manager). But the cessation of the RICE award removed a major
source of highly-valued peer recognition. Brenda, a four-year employee,
did not even know about the RICE award until her staff mentioned it in a
meeting:

John: See, what’s really interesting about the RICE award is--

Brenda: There’s a RICE award?

John: There was a RICE award. Matthew was the last
recipient of it.

Jack: It’s true.

John: It was a monthly award that was a peer recognition
award--


John: --and they killed it because they were the new boys
and they had to spray all over the fire hydrant and say
we are the source of power and when they were forced
because of the dissatisfaction of the employees to
reinstitute it, they did not reinstitute it as a peer
recognition award.

Brenda: Does it exist now?

Matthew: It’s back in a new form.

Brenda: And what form is that?

Matthew: Well, that was one of the mistakes made by Tom
Hendershot [the new VP of Human Resources]. Instead
of trying to reinstate a peer recognition program, they
had a raffle--


Matthew: --and just raffled it off to whomever’s name came out of
the basket.

Brenda: That’s, that’s what the parking spaces are.

Matthew: Yes indeed.
Brenda: OK. [Writing it down as a grievance] Parking spaces are raffled off.

Matthew: No, I mean the notion of “RICE” was given to whomever’s name came out of the basket.

John: In other words, they pre-selected possible names, then you put on your blindfold and reached into the hat.

Matthew: Actually I’m happy to say I wasn’t even involved. [Everyone laughs out loud.] I merely witnessed the whole thing. (Tape 19, June 24, 1999)

The fact that Matthew, a longtime employee and past recipient of the RICE peer recognition award, is happy that he wasn’t even involved indicates how angry and alienated R&D workers feel that something that met an important need and on which they had placed a high value—recognition from their peers—has been taken away. And the fact that the group laughed about Matthew’s non-involvement suggests that in today’s worker bee culture, one gets more respect from one’s peers by not participating in the new incarnation of the RICE award. Their fourth-level need for public recognition is no longer being met.

The same is true when we look at the third and second levels of Maslow’s hierarchy: at least one item on each level used to be fulfilled before, but is not fulfilled now. On the third level of “love and belonging,” the need that is no longer met is the need to feel loyal to the company. Some employees do still feel loyal, but less enthusiastically so. As I said earlier, annual turnover at Acme is between 22 and 25% a year (according to Mavis in HR), over 60% higher than the national average of 15%. The second-level needs, too, are less well-met, with notable failures in the areas of “being treated fairly” and “understanding the reasons for actions by
supervisors.” Only at the lowest level, that of basic human needs, are all of their needs still being met. Though many (most) people in this unfair world have even fewer of their needs met than Acme workers do, going from all needs being met to only some needs being met can be a big let-down, a “demotion” of sorts that while not visible, is, to these workers, painful.

What deepens their pain, and the resulting resentment, may be their puzzlement and disappointment about what has happened to Melvin. I did not witness any participants discussing this with each other, but several of them confided to me that R&D workers, as a class, have a special relationship with Melvin. Some workers still feel “warm and fuzzy” about him and still believe that he is the same benevolent, caring patriarch that he always was; others believe that he has changed and is no longer so benevolent or caring. In Deal and Kennedy’s terms, Melvin would be called the hero of worker bee culture; or perhaps, since several participants mentioned the words “father” or “patriarch” in their remarks to me, a “hero-patriarch” (gender implications noted). He created the company and supportively oversaw daily affairs in R&D, he was seen by R&D employees as sort of a “father figure” who “set the standard for excellence” and gave generous rewards for good performance. Melvin was admired by his employees, and in the beginning, as we have seen, he treated them very well. Their achievements were recognized, they were trained in any new skill they wanted to learn, they were promoted appropriately, and above all, they felt that Melvin, who created the RICE principles, had the Integrity to show Respect for their Excellence. Melvin created the RICE principles; he
practiced them himself; as a result, his employees loved both Rice the man and RICE the principles.

And that is why they grieve today. They have lost their father figure. (The patriarchal imagery participants used to describe Melvin suggests that their sense of loss is heavily gendered.) And the company they used to love has lost the principles that were created by him, practiced by him and named after him. As Luke observes, “in a private ownership company like this . . . the whole company reflects the personality of its owner” (Tape 28, June 29, 1999). If that is true, the fact that the company has changed so much must mean that Melvin has changed and no longer cares about his worker bees as he once did. Here is Deborah:

it seemed to me that Melvin was a much more caring person and now that he's kind of broke himself as a CEO role or whatever, he's given like Bill Sayles up to President and stuff. I mean I don't know--he's the CEO and Bill Sayles is the President, but the diversions of a lot of that responsibility--I don't know if he's aware of what goes on or you know these other people are making, doing all these Variable Pay and this that and the other, or if it really is him saying, oh yeah that's a good idea and that's a good idea. And you know, finding ways to cut expenses and cut money from us and keep more money for him. You know, it's hard to feel trust when you know he's, you know he's made Forbes Magazine. He had four hundred million dollars worth. And he screws us out of Variable Pay for a lousy 3%, when he cut our salary raises from, you know, like 4 or 5% to 2%. I mean how can you feel like he cares about you when something like that goes down? (Tape 26, June 28, 1999)

John is under no illusions about whether Melvin cares or not:

People of course always imagine that they have a relationship with their superior. I'm of course liberated from that. Melvin Rice does not know my name. When Melvin Rice is sitting with his vice Presidents and using the word "we", the pronoun "we," he's not thinking about John. I'm very clear about that.
That's okay, he doesn't have to. I'm your servant. (Tape 17, June 23, 1999)

Whether Melvin cares in his heart or not, my data do not reveal, since I did not speak to Melvin. But the worker bees in R&D feel that he does not—which represents, to them, a dramatic turnabout from the good old days when he did. They feel, in short, betrayed.

"Dysempowerment" among the Worker Bees

"Dysempowered" might be another word for how R&D employees feel. In 1998, Kathleen Kane and Kathleen Montgomery surveyed the recent literature on employee reactions to events and messages in the workplace. They found that when events or messages were perceived by workers as respectful, honest, courteous and caring, workers responded with feelings of trust, commitment, and emotional involvement with the company and their roles within it. When events and messages were interpreted as dishonest, disrespectful, and uncaring, workers felt that their dignity had been affronted. Dysempowerment is Kane and Montgomery's term for the process by which workers come to feel that their dignity has been affronted by events or messages in the workplace. Based on evidence from the literature, Kane and Montgomery predict that six specific conditions, alone or in combination, increase the potential for dysempowerment. I see three of the six as strongly present in the Acme environment.
1) The greater the number of “negative polluting events,” the greater the potential for disempowerment (266). Acme workers have felt disrespected time and again for five years, ever since Ralph eliminated product testing and humiliated worker bees by insinuating that their work was no good. Polluting events continue to accumulate under Bill Sayles, as if written on an endless scroll, and few of their grievances have ever been adequately addressed.

2) “The stronger [workers’] generalized norm of consideration for others . . . the greater the potential for disempowerment” (267). Acme workers, at least those who practice the RICE principles, are extremely considerate of each other, a stance that was at first modeled by their hero-patriarch Melvin. Respect and integrity permeates their interactions with each other, even to an extent defining who is and who is not a part of the dissident worker bee group. Their norms of consideration, then, are very strong--as is their disgust at the inconsiderate behavior and communication of current upper management.

3) The stronger the history of considerate interactions, the greater the potential for disempowerment (267). “The Story of Acme” shows how strong the history is in this case; almost every participant contributed something to that narrative, and none of my five readers have questioned its importance or its veracity. Many comments throughout the data are “before” and “after” statements, contrasting an earlier time with how things
are today. That indicates to me that the history of considerate interactions is very strong and very strongly “present” in the minds of Acme workers.

Although the concept of dysempowerment is useful, I would like to distance myself from Kane and Montgomery’s spin on dysempowerment—through their word choices, they imply that dysempowerment is a disease, an “impairment” that spreads by what they call “interpretive contagion.” What they see as a negative thing, interpretive contagion, I see as a positive thing, more like solidarity, mutual support, and community-building. Still, their notion of dysempowerment has some explanatory power for illuminating why Acme workers seem to feel so very betrayed and offended by their current working conditions.

“Domination” as Perceived by Participants

James Scott presents a theory that I argue has even more explanatory power in this instance. Scott, a political scientist turned anthropologist, writes about *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* in subjugated populations such as Malaysian rice paddy workers. He describes the power dynamics that ensue in domination situations and opens the door to his theories being applied to the American workplace by suggesting that *to the extent that a given set of conditions resembles real domination*, the power dynamics he describes will be visible. Scott presents several phenomena as characteristic of domination situations. Key among these are the appropriation of goods, labor and services against subordinates’ will; great latitude for arbitrary, capricious behavior on the
part of the superior; and the presence of public and hidden transcripts that
diverge sharply from one another. Based on the data I collected at Acme
Technology, I argue that all three of those phenomena can be seen there in
some form. The first two will be discussed now; the third, public and
hidden transcripts, will be discussed at greater length in Chapter 4. (It is
important to note, again, that the following argument is anchored in how
my participants perceive their working conditions; others working at Acme
might have different experiences and might disagree with this portrayal.)

*Appropriation of goods, labor and services against subordinates’ will.*

Though it cannot be said that Acme employees are forced to work against
their will, and though some developers “love to work overtime for the
reward of Melvin’s attention on their work” (Jackie), many participants
report “not getting the payoffs” (Tape 4, April 27, 1999) for the amount of
work they are doing, despite the presence of bonus programs such as
Variable Pay. Cleo puts it this way:

> I don’t really feel that for the amount of energy that they’re
requesting that I put in, that I get an equivalent payoff. So I
guess I don’t really believe in the bonus system and all that
other wonderful stuff. As good as it may sound, it’s kind of
dangling the carrot that you’ll never get. But all the while
telling you, oh you should be happy, look at all the wonderful
things that we’re doing for you. (Tape 32, July 1, 1999)

One good example of a demand for employees to contribute more labor
than they are paid for is a practice known as “77-day wars.” Old-timer Abe
explains,

> We create these charades that we call 77-day wars [in which]
people are asked to work 6, 7 days a week, you know, 10
hours a day. There have been a couple of those. Makes no
sense to me when you come right down to it. People go the extra mile, and in the end, it’s like, for what? You miss the date anyway, more often than not, and so they’re kind of, “Well, then it really couldn’t have been that important.” (Tape 24, June 25, 1999)

Gwen, a more recent hire, remembers a 77-day war that took place in 1998. Watch the imagery she uses:

Gwen: We had a case a year ago where we had what was called the 77-day war and everyone was charged to go on this um, death walk to meet the 77-day war.

Paula: Death walk?

Gwen: Well, I say that because in the beginning of this war it was declared we would take casualties. Well, the casualties had to be ourselves. I mean--so we met the date, we won the war. Didn’t go anywhere. We created a whole release that really nobody even cared about having. Didn’t make money for Acme. Didn’t sell. Field wasn’t excited about it. But we marched people through a death march for no reason. (Tape 34, July 2, 1999)

Gwen’s use of violent, warlike imagery is inspired by management’s use of that imagery, but her use of the metaphor “death walk” or “death march” invokes the horrors of World War II and other major conflicts of the twentieth century. John also uses violent, extreme imagery when describing the push from upper management for harder and harder work. Here he comments on the internal-promotion slogan, “Drive Execution”:

“Drive Execution.” That just, I cannot tell you how that makes my neck tingle. I just get excited about it, you know, just, wow, ‘Das arbeit macht man frei.’ And there it is, ‘Drive Execution.’ This means beat the living crap out of yourself so we make more money. Because they don’t share it. There’s no trickle down here. They talk trickle-down, but there’s no trickle-down. (Tape 15, June 23, 1999)
John echoes Gwen’s use of World War II metaphors with his own use of a distinctly World War II slogan, *Das Arbeiten Macht Man Frei*, which was forged in wrought iron on the entry gate of the Auschwitz concentration camp. Though it would be inappropriate to suggest that the domination Acme workers feel is the equivalent of that experienced by victims of the Holocaust or others who were forced into actual death marches, the fact that these are the metaphors that they chose is itself significant. Both John and Gwen, like most of my participants, are “baby boomers,” born between 1945 and 1965. They reached into the collective unconscious of their generation, retrieving some of the most horror-inducing metaphors they know in order to describe their feelings about the pressure at Acme, metaphors involving extreme cases of appropriation of labor against a population’s will. Some people may be better at saying “no” than others, but the pressure is always there to work more and more.

That pressure is definitely exerted by upper management, which seems to have quite a lot of freedom to raise its expectations. For example, take the Spirit of Acme campaign I mentioned earlier, in which posters, emails and greeting cards exhorted employees to volunteer to join special teams. Spirit of Acme teams would then work extra hours on their own time brainstorming together new ways to help the company increase its profits. The payoff for this extra work would be a one-week trip to Hawaii—for one team. The campaign had an even darker side: after the deadline had passed for volunteering, some employees who had elected not to volunteer received memos saying, “Thank you for volunteering” and telling them to which Spirit
of Acme team they had been assigned. That, to me, crosses the line from persuasion to coercion. By tying employee workloads and pay scales to management's desires, wishes and expectations--rather than to mutually negotiated and re-negotiated agreements--management appropriates discretionary effort from employees, and in so doing, creates a power dynamic that resembles Scott's description of domination and resistance.

*Great Latitude for Arbitrary, Capricious Behavior.* Upper management's freedom to raise its expectations points to a major area of similarity between the terrible situations Scott describes and the milder version of domination that I see in operation at Acme. Upper management does have great latitude for arbitrary, capricious behavior--a latitude that is not mirrored by equal degrees of employee freedom. More often, employee freedom and empowerment are *curtailed* by the caprice of upper management. Think back to the theme of "chaos" in employee culture. Employees spend much of their time scrambling to keep up with the ever-changing wishes of upper management. Upper management follows fads in the computer industry, changes direction like a weathercock, starts new programs and then drops them, without appreciating (or caring about)

the ramifications and chaos that it creates sometimes in constantly changing the way we do things. I mean things are constantly changing. That's the one thing you can expect around here, the one sure thing you can depend on, is that whatever is going on today, it's going to change tomorrow. Change is constant. And that itself is what contributes to the chaos that I mentioned. If it's always changing, how the hell do you plan for that? You plan by the seat of your pants ... You can't depend on anything being the same way from one day to the next. (Tape 24, June 25, 1999)
The latitude for caprice on the part of dominant elites may be wider here than it is in other corporations, because Acme Technology is a sole proprietorship, owned entirely by Melvin Rice. That means “direction can be set and can be turned by one individual” (Tape 22, June 25, 1999).

There is a board, but the board is advisory only and has no real authority over Melvin’s choicemaking. If there were shareholders, they would have a voice in the running of the company and Melvin and the rest of upper management would be accountable to them. But here there are no shareholders—or, put another way, there is exactly one “share” of Acme equity, and exactly one “shareholder”: Melvin Rice.

That one individual, in addition to the many good things he probably also does, creates chaos for his employees (perhaps unknowingly) by changing on a whim the direction of projects and of the company as a whole. According to one longtime employee, the chaos “can be tied right back to Melvin in that he tends to follow what’s going on in the industry” (Tape 24, June 25, 1999). The enormous latitude that Melvin has to rule by caprice comes across loud and clear in participant responses to the interview question, “Who has the power at Acme?” Deborah’s response is representative:

Deborah: The owner. I think he decides what he wants to do and then everybody else goes along with it.

Paula: So how would you define power? What is power to you?

Deborah: I guess it’s the ability to make decisions, the person that can make the decisions. And in this case, because it’s a company that’s privately held, you know, whatever he decides really goes even if it’s maybe not the right
decision. Maybe if it's too visionary and not founded in reality. The company just merrily marches that way because that's what he wants everybody to do. (Tape 26, June 28, 1999)

Most participants defined power in approximately that way—as the ability to decide what others are going to do—and most said that Melvin has all, or almost all, or the power. Brenda made that statement and also touched on Melvin's relationship to Bill Sayles:

Paula: Who really has the power in this company?

Brenda: Melvin still retains that power, because Melvin can walk in and—because he's the owner. It's a privately held group. Melvin can walk in and say “we're not doing this anymore,” and it's not going to happen. Done. That's the real power—the power to start and stop the projects and focus them into the market or pull them from the market. It's still Melvin's. Now he defers a great deal of that to Bill, but he has the ultimate say. (Tape 9, June 18, 1999)

That Melvin does rule, and rules capriciously, is underscored by Abe, a longtime employee, who testifies,

if there’s any source of power in this company, it’s the owner. He has the sole dictate to do whatever he feels like doing, with any whim of his that he has. I have seen that happen. I've seen him choose to spend millions of dollars down this drain, versus that one. And people go marching along. As a matter of fact, to the extent that the executives who would report to him . . . I would think they would come back and advise him or respond to those things he’s saying in a way that would make him maybe reconsider or realize what he’s asking to be done. [But that] isn’t done here. (Tape 24, June 25, 1999)

The same participant goes on to explain that the nature of the institution as a privately held company is not entirely a bad thing:

It being a private company has its pros and cons, versus being a publicly held company, in the way things are run. I mean, you're not beholden to shareholders, you're not driven merely by profit, and that's one thing: that Melvin has not
been driven by money per se as an end in itself. Most public companies tend to be. Melvin is driven more by an ideal or a vision that he has of where he wants to fit into society or into life and what he wants to accomplish. I think he just realized that money provides a means to that end. And so he’s made decisions not necessarily based on the financial end of it, because that’s where he thought he wanted to go. That’s kind of neat. Although by the very nature, you have these whims that you go down this path that don’t make any sense to someone like me. (Tape 24, June 25, 1999)

Other participants take a more cynical view of Melvin’s motives, referring to the company as Melvin’s “playground” (Tape 5, April 28, 1999; Tape 8, June 14, 1999) or “the sandbox” (Tape 10, June 18, 1999; Tape 20, June 24, 1999; Tape 31, June 30, 1999): “I think he likes to dabble in the technology, he likes to play in the sandbox of what’s new” (Tape 20, June 24, 1999).

Whatever the motives of Melvin and Bill, and whatever arrangement they have made for sharing the power, it is abundantly clear in the data that upper management as a whole, including Melvin, has great latitude for arbitrary, capricious behavior. That type of behavior affects the company at the institutional level, such as in the way CPR is (and is not) enforced--

[Melvin] can do whatever scheduling he wants with it, ‘cause he owns the company. There’s no board of, you know, like a board that tells him what to do--nothing like a public owned company. It’s privately owned, so it’s a very different set-up. (Tape 3, April 26, 1999)

--and also affects the daily lives of lower-level managers and front-line employees. That upper management’s expectations are “not rooted in reality” (Tape 9, June 18, 1999)--an observation made at some point by most participants--creates untold chaos for the workers. The product status database project illustrates that nicely: employees were originally
given a year to complete the project, already difficult, but suddenly, for reasons unclear to participants, the time was cut short to 6 months by “the powers that be” (Tape 6, April 28, 1999). Other examples abound but are too technical to be worth explaining. In all of these examples, the underlying problem is constant: management wants X completed by a certain date, but it is physically impossible to do X in that amount of time.

Even the goals for the company as a whole are widely perceived as unrealistic and arbitrary. In 1999, the company’s main goal was to reach $340 million in revenue, which was higher than the revenue figure for 1998. But that goal appeared not to take into account the fact that 1999 was “essentially a nine-month year” (Tape 6, April 28, 1999) due to the Y2K problem: “This is the Y2K year. Nobody’s going to buy anything after, what, August? They’re totally screwing down and making sure their stuff doesn’t blow up” (Tape 15, June 23, 1999). Here is how one participant described employee reactions to the goal of $340 million, which was announced in an all-hands meeting:

Everybody just sat there and shook their heads, and went, “you’ve got to be kidding. This is as unrealistic as we’ve seen it.” So what’s happened is there’s a lot of apathy about the ability to make the goal, and that turns into other things, which is, deadlines get missed. When you hear the scuttlebutt, that’s the underlying tone. (Tape 6, April 28, 1999)

The participant’s description of employee reactions harmonizes with other examples in the data. Although one outlier did believe that “we’re going to hit that number” (Tape 15, June 23, 1999), and more than one noted that the goal of $340 million was, if nothing else, at least consistent with upper
management’s suspected ambition to be a Fortune 500 company within the next few years (Tape 15, June 23, 1999), most participants’ reactions were along the lines of this one:

Just watch how—we’re really going to make our numbers, $340,000,000. And you’re watching what’s really happening and the numbers coming up. Well we didn’t quite make our first quarter. And we didn’t make our second quarter number. And then it’s this great tragedy and drama. But it’s no surprise to the people who work here. We don’t even know where they came up with the number. Somebody must have been feeling enthusiastic about something, you know. “I know we can make 340, I saw it on TV!”

My participants and I have little or no knowledge of the decision-making process behind the setting of annual revenue goals at Acme. In that sense, we are not in a good position to criticize. However, my participants have the benefit of years of experience working at Acme. They have noted each year’s goals and watched the company either meet them or not. They talk with friends in all corners of the computer industry and are generally aware of industry trends and special phenomena (such as Y2K) that are likely to affect revenues. Given that high level of insider knowledge, it carries a lot of weight that a large majority of participants expressed skepticism about the reachability of the $340 million goal. And their skepticism has proven to be correct: Acme did not, in the end, reach its goal for 1999 (PFN14, August 25, 2000).

The repeated failure of the company to meet its stated goals—or rather, the repeated setting of unrealistic goals—is “demoralizing” (PFN21, September 20, 2000) to employees and contributes to their unhappiness. It also robs them of what they perceive as their fair share of the company’s
earnings. When the revenue goals are not met, upper management still gets bonuses, but employees get low bonuses or no bonuses at all. In 1997 and 1998, for example, Acme had its biggest revenues ever—but the corporate goals were not met, so employee bonuses were down (Tape 4, April 27, 1999). One year the goals were almost met, but employees were still denied their “Variable Pay”:

So meanwhile, here they made all this money and I just felt like, you know, they had their goals, and they made 92% of their goal. Actually they made over 105% of their goals in the U.S., but Europe or Asia was having problems, so they made less. And I just felt like, well, they got 92% of their profits, and I’m sure that people in higher up [positions] have got bonuses based on that. But Variable Pay—you know, I would have settled for 92% of my Variable Pay, but I got nothing. . . . They could have done something with the numbers and said, well you know we did so well, we’re going to give you so much of the variable pay. But they didn’t. And that made it clear to me that they don’t care about employees as much as they used to. (Tape 26, June 28, 1999)

One of my more highly placed participants, Eliott, confirmed that observation, sharing with me his own analysis of the situation:

The reason I think [variable pay] is good is that I think it helps focus the organization on what the organization is trying to do. So that part of it is a good idea. There is a shared risk. Parts of it that I’m not too crazy about are, I don’t think there’s a shared reward, namely that the better the company does, the reward is not equally shared. It’s a privately owned company, you know, and all that. And I think it’s sort of a mixed bag because the people who are on the receiving end of the results aren’t always on the deciding end of what the goals will be and what the process will be to achieve them. So there’s sort of a myth of common interest there in a sense. It’s like taxation without representation at some level. This is not a democracy, this company, obviously, so some of those problems are reflected in variable pay. (Tape 20, June 24, 1999)

It can be argued, then, that while all companies want to do well and earn good revenues, the setting of unrealistic revenue goals at Acme can be seen
as a form of arbitrary, capricious behavior, for which upper management apparently has great latitude. By linking employee compensation to overall revenue goals, and then setting those goals out of reach, management manages to avoid sharing the profits with employees, while keeping its own bonuses intact. That is another reason why employees, as a class, feel angry and betrayed.

**Conclusion**

We have listened to the rosy-hued “Story of Acme”; we have walked briefly alongside our group of participants in a post-change cultural landscape of dissonance, chaos and ownership; and we have looked at their feelings of betrayal through several different perspectives, one grounded in psychology (Maslow), one in organizational behavior (Kane and Montgomery), and one in political science (Scott). We have seen that though these workers are still individuals with their own diverse opinions and perspectives, they and others at Acme Technology have formed a dissident subculture that does not follow management’s cultural directives, choosing instead to deepen their existing allegiance to the “old” core values of the company.

These data confirm Wilkins and Patterson’s finding that it is very difficult to change the culture of an organization, partly because it takes time to develop a culture (268), and “people don’t usually want their cultures to change” (270). Wilkins and Patterson state that “Most efforts to change a culture begin with the question, ‘where do we need to be going
strategically as an organization?"," where are we now, and what can we do
to close that gap. That model, they say, assumes and implies that culture
can be controlled and changed by management. They ask, “can openness
and candor be ‘driven’ or forced into an organization? . . . We think not”
(264-65). My participants “think not” as well: upper management can
attempt to drive them or force them to adopt new values (such as speed-to-
market) which, in turn (it is hoped), will lead them to change their behavior
in company-sanctioned ways, but the driving and forcing has only
succeeded in widening the gap between the management culture at the top
and the employee culture “at the bottom” (Davis).

My portrait of that culture puts flesh onto Davis’ finding that “while
management may have an obvious interest in new ideas that can improve
performance, such ideas often receive a different reception at the lower
levels of the organization. One reason for this is that frequently an entirely
different culture exists at the lower levels” (163). This chapter has shown
how such an entirely different culture came to exist at Acme Technology,
yielding thick description (Geertz) of a case in which (as Davis contends is
possible) a dissident subculture at a low hierarchical level has developed
feelings of solidarity or group cohesion against other groups such as
management (166). The workers in R&D have a fully developed
subculture, complete with its own values, stories, ceremonies, heroes,
villains and keywords. They feel betrayed, dysempowered, even to an
extent dominated by their treatment at the hands of upper management.
Taken together, those elements form the backdrop against which all rhetoric from management is bound to be read and interpreted.
CHAPTER 4
HIDDEN TRANSCRIPTS OF LITERATE RESISTANCE, PART I:
THE WRITING ON THE WALL

As I suggest in Chapters 1 and 3, James Scott’s writings on domination and resistance provide one of several lenses through which the employee subculture in Acme R&D can be interpreted, for Acme employees, in several ways, do feel “dominated” by upper management. In particular, Scott’s notion of public and hidden transcripts is useful for studying how these employees strengthen their own dissident subculture by circulating literate critiques of those in power. In this chapter, I will describe the hidden transcripts constructed by the Acme employees I studied, focusing in particular on their uses of literacy to construct them. I will argue that by engaging in a certain self-sponsored literate activity—posting items on cubicle walls—these employees were adding to and enriching their hidden transcript. In that transcript, they refine and disseminate their individual and collective perceptions of and responses to the powers the be at Acme, inscribing them onto what I see as murals, so to speak, of community knowledge and group memory. That knowledge and those memories reflect the major cultural themes I identified in Chapter 3 (dissonance, chaos and ownership) and strengthen employees’ sense of
solidarity. Cubicle walls provide “safe” social spaces in which upper management can be surreptitiously but powerfully critiqued.

Only two studies that I know of have applied Scott’s concept of hidden transcripts to the modern U.S. workplace. Cynthia Smith, in her 1999 anthropology dissertation, applied Scott’s framework to three large technology companies and showed that “Scott’s conceptual framework provides a very robust approach to analyzing ethnographic data gathered in business settings,” especially in combination with “sociolinguistic techniques emphasizing the use of figurative communication” (2).

Alexandra Murphy used Scott’s theories in 1999 to describe the ways in which flight attendants resisted their airline’s abuses of power (such as, for example, its outrageous curtailments of their personal freedoms during off-duty time). Murphy found that “although employees may appear to comply fully with constraining organizational policies and meanings in public discourse, alternative meanings may be constructed in private” (499), which enable employees to “enact change within their social systems” (499). Murphy concluded that “although dominant organizational meanings may be present, other meanings can be formed in subtle everyday micropractices of resistance” (531). Though many people in organizations believe that some people have more power than others by virtue of their positions, Murphy found that power is “exercised continually (by all organization members) through discursive acts that produce, reproduce, negotiate and resist organizational meanings” (531). In this chapter, I will add to that small corpus of research by showing how my
participants use self-sponsored literate activities to resist organizational meanings by constructing, enriching, and recording their own values despite pressure from upper management to adopt other values.

This chapter also makes a significant contribution to our knowledge about the uses of literate humor in the workplace. Only one work I have encountered addresses the subject of employees’ uses of cubicle postings (which are often humorous): in a 1996 article on the need for consultants to think of themselves as ethnographers, Cezar Ornatowski very briefly discusses what he calls “wall decor” and argues that cartoons and short texts that one sees tacked up on employees’ walls can provide excellent clues about problems within the organization. Another work treats the uses of humor by workers: Kitty Locker (“Humor”) found that a group of factory workers used humorous writing as a way of (unsuccessfully) bidding for more power in the organization and (successfully) building solidarity among themselves. This chapter confirms Ornatowski’s anecdotal observation that wall decor contains substantive critiques of the organization, confirms Locker’s finding about the role of humor in worker solidarity, examines both findings in a new organizational context (Acme R&D), and suggests that disaffected employees engage in self-sponsored literate activity (humorous or no) to construct, enrich and maintain a hidden transcript in which management’s values, practices and statements can be critiqued without fear of reprisal.
No Safe Places, Only Safe People:

"Patrolledness" and "Authorization" in Acme Social Spaces

Before one can explore negation in any specific context, one must first identify the various social sites available to members of the subordinate group and determine which sites are "sequestered"—i.e., protected from monitoring or interference by members of the dominant group, and therefore "safe" (an important word that will show up again). Scott proposes "a continuum of social sites ranged according to how heavily or lightly they are patrolled by dominant elites" (*Domination* 120, my emphasis). I noticed differing levels of "patrolledness" (his term) at Acme: some social sites seemed completely "unpatrolled," others seemed "heavily patrolled," but the majority seemed "semi-patrolled," or patrolled to some middling degree. However, what seemed to affect people's behavior the most at Acme was not simply how heavily a space was patrolled, but who was doing the "patrolling": some individuals are known to employees as "safe," while many others are assumed to be varying degrees of unsafe. I will use the term safeness to describe that quality, for "safety" has connotations of physical safety and protection from bodily harm, which are not relevant to what I am describing. I learned by observing participants interacting with me and with each other that although a person's safeness is partly determined by his or her rank within the hierarchy (higher ranks being less safe than lower ranks), what really influences the perceived safeness of an individual is the perceived likelihood that he or she may endanger employees in some way, such as by revealing sensitive

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information to the wrong people, by misrepresenting the way someone has
done his or her work, or by pinning blame for some problem on an
undeserving individual or group. The last example in particular reflects
the cultural theme of ownership that I described in Chapter 3: since
ownership is a hot potato, it is considered good cooperative behavior to
help others not be saddled with the potato, and bad behavior to make the
potato fall into someone else’s lap.

The likelihood that an individual will make the blame fall unfairly
into a co-worker’s lap can only be determined by observing the person’s
behavior over long periods of time. For example, if an individual
(regardless of rank) does things that endanger in some way the status of
one or more employees, that person will immediately be labeled “unsafe.”
Once that label has been applied, it takes a very long time to rub it off and
have it replaced with a label saying “safe.” If, on the other hand, a person
has always protected his or her fellow employees, then he or she will be
considered “safe.” This may happen quickly or slowly, depending on a
variety of factors, but again, if the person ever behaves in an unsafe way,
he or she could lose his or her status as safe. Safeness is also constructed
by the degree to which a person’s words match his or her behavior. If his
or her words do not match his or her actions, then he or she will be
perceived as unsafe, whereas if the two match up well, then he or she will
eventually be perceived as safe. The Acme employees I studied examined
the behavior of others constantly, including that of their peers, searching
for signs of dishonesty. Their search for dishonesty (or rather, for honesty)
connects back to the cultural theme of dissonance that I described in Chapter 3—in an atmosphere rife with ironic disconnects between words and behavior, these employees frequently use consonance, the opposite of dissonance, to distinguish those who are safe from those who are unsafe. Therefore, although rank is an ingredient of safeness, it is not the deciding factor. Employees who have not shown that they can be trusted are considered unsafe, and managers who have shown that they can be trusted (e.g., Jackie, Brenda) are considered safe.

So, while Scott equates “sequestered” with “unpatrolled,” my data suggest that the two are not the same: it is a matter of who is doing the patrolling. The distinction between safe and unsafe people is more significant, at least to Acme employees, than that between the presence and absence of management (at lower levels of management). The perceived safeness of individuals must therefore be taken into account when locating “sequestered social sites” at Acme and gauging how sequestered they are. That is important to know because without an accurate overview of the various social sites available to Acme employees, we cannot fully appreciate the strategic complexity of how and where they choose to weave their hidden transcripts. And to be accurate, one must include site-specific cultural information that colors the way social sites are read by the people who use them.

For example, it would be easy to assume that public places such as restrooms, elevators, and the building’s parking lot are unsafe, unsequestered places. They are open to anyone, right? Ergo they are
heavily patrolled. But in truth, mapping the notion of safeness on to these social sites gives a more complex picture of sites that *shift* in meaning depending on who is present. Restroom, elevators, and the Acme parking lot are decidedly *unsequestered* when unsafe people are present, for the acoustics are so bouncy that all utterances can and will be heard by anyone in the area. However, they can also be experienced as *sequestered* in moments when only safe people are present. That was eloquently illustrated to me when Brenda and Jackie took me into the second floor ladies’ room to discuss a confidential matter concerning the study. They looked under the walls of the stalls to make sure no one else was present; having assured themselves of that, they proceeded to have an extremely candid conversation with me that ended abruptly when someone else entered the restroom.

Likewise, meetings between employees and managers can be varying degrees of sequestered or unsequestered, depending on how safe the manager is perceived to be. Consider the “Employee Feedback” and “one-on-one” meetings I observed between Brenda and her staff. In the Employee Feedback Meeting, Brenda’s entire workgroup (like all Acme workgroups) was asked to get together and discuss the results of the 1999 Acme Employee Survey (an annual event). The purpose of the meeting was for Brenda to solicit feedback from her staff on why certain items received such low scores. Since Brenda was required to put that feedback into writing and send it up the management chain, starting with Gwen and going all the way up to the top, one would have to say that this meeting
was definitely patrolled. However, Brenda is, without a doubt, safe. For
five years now, ever since she was originally hired at Acme, she has
behaved respectfully, considerately, and above all, truthfully towards all her
staff and coworkers. Time and again, her actions have matched her words.
As a result, she has an unusually collegial and trusting relationship with
her staff, and her meetings with them, although technically patrolled
because Brenda is a manager, are sequestered: only safe people are
present, so everyone is free to be completely candid. One-on-ones are even
more sequestered, for in these meetings (held every month between Brenda
and each individual she manages), only two individuals are present
(Brenda and the staff member) and neither is asked to report to anyone on
what is said. Other sequestered social spaces would include lunches and
private gatherings away from the Acme building: generally speaking, the
farther away from Acme, the safer employees feel.

Some social spaces are very obviously heavily patrolled. It was easy
to see, for example, that a meeting I attended between high-level executives
and all R&D employees (called the “Quarterly Communication Meeting”)
was heavily patrolled: several highly placed individuals were present, some
as speakers and more in the audience. The employees behaved
accordingly: although a few assertive audience members (including John
and Thomas) did ask questions and initiate dialogue, there was very little
communication among members of the audience. Much like the social
dynamic in traditional lecture-style classrooms, the dynamic here was
absolutely presenter-centered; the most that audience members could do
to make meanings of their own was to exchange meaningful “looks” with each other, with a few in the back rows engaging in brief moments of whispering. Heavily patrolled social spaces, then, can be defined as gatherings or locations where unsafe people are definitely present and definitely paying attention.

*Semi-patrolled* spaces, in contrast, are harder to pin down. More ambiguous, shifting more often, they exhibit some vulnerability to patrolling, but also some degree of safeness. For example, I attended a “Roundtable” meeting of front-line employees (Brenda’s staff), their line manager (Brenda), and their middle manager (Gwen, who is Brenda’s immediate boss). On the one hand, Brenda is perceived as absolutely safe, and Gwen is perceived as fairly safe, for she, too, behaves very well towards her staff (which includes several work teams besides Brenda’s) and is known to sympathize with employee perspectives. However, Gwen is of higher rank than Brenda and therefore under more pressure to ally herself with upper management.

It is worth noting that Gwen feels uncomfortable in that position, because it requires her to do a “delicate balancing act” between the side of her that vowed at one time never to be “one of those managers” who lie to their people, and the side of her that wants to succeed at her job and please her supervisors (Tape 34, July 2, 1999). Sometimes she hides in her cubicle because she just can’t do the balancing act right then. The balancing act is especially difficult at Acme because of, once again, the *dissonance* between what upper management says and what it does:
Gwen: Well, for example, we set a date for our product to go out. We don’t ask the people who have to do the work what will it take you to do to meet that work. We give them a date, we tell them to meet it, and we ignore whatever they go through to have to meet it. We sometimes have groups that work 7 days a week for 4 months at a time. And those people are under stress, they have health problems, their outside relationships, their personal lives suffer because of all of this. And management tends to ignore that. Quite a bit.

Paula: Why do they ignore that?

Gwen: Because what we reward, and what management is rewarded for, is meeting dates . . . You do not get rewarded at Acme for being a good people manager or for taking care of your people. You get rewarded at Acme for meeting dates, and no one asks you how you did it. They don’t ask you if you compromised quality to meet the dates. They don’t ask you if you worked people unreasonably to meet the dates. You get rewarded for meeting the dates. We remain totally date-driven, and no matter what else we say—we may say we’re quality-driven, that we care about quality. We may say we respect and care about our employees. We may say our employees are our greatest assets. But we don’t behave that way. (Tape 34, July 2, 1999)

So, while Gwen does occupy a moderately high managerial rank and is in that respect unsafe, the dissonance truly bothers her and everyone on her staff knows it. In that respect she qualifies as safe. The Roundtable I observed, then, would be heavily patrolled, but semi-sequestered: the patroller in this case happens to be a sympathetic person who sees, experiences and detests the same dissonances that anger employees. But the reporting relationships present in a given gathering are always present and never irrelevant: middle managers, even nice ones like Gwen, do report
upward in the hierarchy to individuals who may be perceived by employees as very close to upper management.

One last thing to consider when categorizing the social spaces available to a given subordinate population, is the degree to which a given space, event or gathering has been *authorized*—that is, created, sponsored or legitimated—by the dominant elites. The heavily patrolled meetings I described above shall serve, as well, to exemplify *highly authorized* gatherings: they were called into existence ("author"-ized) by upper management, and they serve upper management’s purposes. But not all highly authorized gatherings are heavily patrolled, or even patrolled at all. Brenda’s one-on-ones with her staff, for example, are mandated by company policy and are therefore highly authorized, even though because Brenda herself is safe, they are sequestered. *Semi-authorized* social spaces would include places and situations where employees are authorized (permitted, allowed) to come and go as they please. *Unauthorized* social spaces at Acme are very few in number, but they include lunches, private gatherings, and strangely enough, participating in this study, as I will argue at length below. The key difference, then, between unauthorized, semi-authorized and highly authorized social sites is the degree of autonomy employees have to decide whether or not to be there.

Participation in highly authorized activities is mandatory; participation in unauthorized activities is completely, one hundred percent voluntary.

Table 4, below, displays the Acme social sites I just described in a way that takes both patrolledness and authorization into account. This
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Heavily Patrolled</th>
<th>Authorized</th>
<th>Semi-Authorized</th>
<th>Unauthorized</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• “R&amp;D Meeting”</td>
<td>• Elevators with unsafe people</td>
<td>(no examples)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• CPR meetings</td>
<td>• Shared spaces on Acme floors (hallways, corridors, kitchens)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• 3:00 Scrub</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Semi- or Lightly Patrolled</th>
<th>Authorized</th>
<th>Semi-Authorized</th>
<th>Unauthorized</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• “Roundtable” meeting with Brenda, Gwen and staff</td>
<td>• Cubicle meetings</td>
<td>• Lunches in the building</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• “Employee Feedback Mtg” with Brenda</td>
<td>• Cubicle walls (posted items like cartoons, slogans, etc.)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• “One-on-Ones” between Brenda and her staff</td>
<td></td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Unpatrolled</th>
<th>Authorized</th>
<th>Semi-Authorized</th>
<th>Unauthorized</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• “Employee Feedback Mtg” with Brenda</td>
<td>• Restrooms, elevators, etc. with only safe people present</td>
<td>• Lunches or private gatherings away from the building</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• “One-on-Ones” between Brenda and her staff</td>
<td></td>
<td>• participating in this study</td>
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Table 4. Patrolledness and Authorization in Acme Social Spaces

matrix is valuable because it enables us to organize our understanding of the social spaces available to Acme employees, which in turn allows us to ask questions about how employees construct hidden transcripts in this type of space versus that type of space. The vertical placement of each item within its box is significant: items located higher within each box are more heavily patrolled, and those located lower within each box are more
lightly patrolled. Reading down within each column, one can see some of the nuances and variations I perceived in levels of patrolledness at Acme. In determining where to place each social space within the matrix, I took into account both its physical location (some spots are by nature less patrolled than others) and the type of social activity taking place (some gatherings are more authorized than others). The degrees of patrolledness and authorization perceived in a given social site help to determine how sequestered it is: the more authorized and especially the more patrolled a given site is, the less likely that employees will perceive it as sequestered (or, as participants put it, “safe”). There are, of course, many more social spaces at Acme than the small selection displayed above. The ones I selected are the ones that I observed and included at some point in this dissertation.

We will now explore cubicle walls on the second floor, in order to examine how employees engage in a low-key economy of literate message-passing, circulating among themselves short written texts and cartoons that help them value, validate, and remember their collective experiences. Cubicle walls merit in-depth attention for two reasons: because I noticed unauthorized, employee-driven literate activity going on there, and as I explain below, because cubicle walls are both private and public, their literate contents both hidden and not hidden—an ambiguous half-state that allows us to appreciate the subtlety with which Acme employees use what Scott calls “the arts of political disguise” (Domination 136).
Cubicle Walls and the Special Role of Dilbert

Second floor cubicles are curious places. On the one hand, upper management is almost never around on the second floor. Very few members of the upper management team work at the headquarters building in Codeville; many of them live and work in other cities across the country. Bill Sayles does have his own extra-large cubicle on the second floor, and a secretary there as well, but since he himself lives and works thousands of miles away, he is almost never physically present at the Codeville headquarters. The only upper management person who is physically present would be Melvin, the owner, who has his office on the second floor (“he likes to be close to the developers,” RF10, April 26, 1999). But in my four weeks on that floor, during which I passed his door many times, I did not catch a single glimpse of Melvin. R&D employees do not see him very often either: many participants commented to me that Melvin had distanced himself lately from everyday goings on in R&D (see especially Tape 26, June 28, 1999; Tape 28, June 29, 1999; Tape 32, July 1, 1999; and Tape 35, July 2, 1999). Moreover, unlike other members of upper management, Melvin is actually missed: one longtime employee in particular waxed nostalgic about the era when Melvin used to be involved in a hands-on way with almost every project in R&D (Tape 15, June 23, 1999), and another more recent hire commented to me that many R&D employees see Melvin as a sort of “benevolent father figure” (Tape 5, April 28, 1999). So, if we define “upper management” the way participants do, as “AVP and above” (see Chapter 2), and if we exclude Melvin, whose
relationship with R&D workers is unique anyway, second floor cubicles are virtually free of patrolling by upper management.

On the other hand, cubicles offer practically no privacy at all. They have no doors or ceilings, and the walls provide almost no sound insulation, requiring cubicle workers either to keep their voices very low, or accept the fact that whatever they say can and will be heard by all of their neighbors. In those respects, cubicles are vulnerable to surveillance by anyone, including, in theory, upper management (should they ever bother). Second-floor cubicles, then, are *semi-patrolled* spaces. They are also *semi-authorized*. They would not exist if Acme had not created ("author"-ized) them, and they are given to Acme employees with the explicit instruction that this is the place where they shall do their individual work. But management is not so minutely controlling that every inch of the cubicle has one and only one authorized use. Each employee is free to use his or her cube pretty much as he or she sees fit. Some employees alter the configuration of their cubes, such as moving the desk from here to there, or removing a wall panel so as to catch a glimpse of sunlight. The walls in particular seem to be appropriable for any use at all. Some cubicle walls have dry-erase whiteboards mounted on them, but those cubicles tend to belong to people in the management chain. The typical worker bee cubicle has blank walls--walls where he or she can post items at will, according to his or her own tastes (within legal boundaries) and more important, with or without management's permission.
Cubicle Postings

In my time at Acme, I observed (and, towards the end, was recruited to participate in) what could be called “self-sponsored literate activity” (my phrase) on cubicle walls. Though Acme workers are very busy, often working under terrible deadlines, they still take the time to collect images, quotations and/or cartoons that relate to their work environments. Also known as “wall decor” (Ornatowsky 454), these collections are posted on employees’ cubicle walls, and any employee who visits a given cubicle is welcome, even invited, to look at the occupant’s postings. When a visitor likes a posting, he or she is generally permitted to photocopy it. Cubicle postings are reproduced, passed around, talked about, written upon, posted on other people’s walls and given as gifts. Some employees even go so far as to post things on other people’s walls without their knowledge or permission, as a way of signifying with or upon the occupant. Perhaps a certain posting might reflect something in the work environment that affects both the giver and the receiver; the gift of such a posting would underscore the connection between the giver and receiver as two people united by their common experience. Other postings might “signify upon” (Gates) the receiver, making fun of him or her by representing his or her actions in a comical way, “like, this is you” (Tape 24, June 25, 1999).

Cubicle walls constitute an important backdrop for literate exchange among employees. Taken together, the cubicle walls of a given group of employees can be seen as a community bulletin board, a sort of mural of community knowledge, beliefs and values. Members of employee
communities are free to read, write and “negate” as they choose on this mural. The postings themselves, being only cartoons and scraps of paper, may seem trivial or inconsequential, but my data suggest that they are valid and valuable indicators of what employees are thinking and talking about among themselves—which, in turn, makes them important elements of the hidden transcript. By posting cartoons and short texts on their own and other peoples’ walls, employees vent their frustration, disseminate their views, make sense of their shared experiences, weave webs of literate connection with other employees, remind themselves of beliefs or values that are important to them, and inject their own versions of the honest truth into what they experience as an increasingly dishonest, irony-soaked, “mendacious” (Tape 19, June 24, 1999) rhetorical atmosphere. Cubicle postings offer a rich record, then, of employees’ values, concerns, perspectives, and responses to events in their environment.

Cubicle postings in general can be divided into two categories: items that have mainly personal significance, such as family photos or private inspirational sayings, and items that have what I call communal significance, such as cartoons or quotations that comment on the work environment. Some personal-significance items are so meaningful to their owners that they are carried around from job to job for years, tacked up time after time in each cubicle or workspace the owner occupies. For example, Brenda’s wall includes an unattributed quotation that reminds her of her cherished belief that “It’s not what you do, but how you do it” (Tape 7, April 30, 1999; D44). That aphorism helps her remember to make
sure that even the simplest, most trivial of her work behaviors should reflect her personal values. Brenda has taken this scrap of paper with her to every job she has ever had (Tape 7, April 30, 1999). But it is the items with communal significance that shed the most light on the shared ruminations of Acme employees.

Some of these communally significant items relate to specific jobs or job categories, articulating values held in common by groups of employees who either do similar jobs or whose work is influenced by similar values. For example, technical writers tend to post more sayings about writing, reading and words. Technical writers, software developers and software testers often post aphorisms or sayings about excellence or quality, such as “Consistently Good” and “Quality workmanship can never be rushed” (Pad 3, June 23, 1999). Those phrases and others like them reflect these groups’ strong devotion to the “Excellence” principle of RICE, a value that used to be a hallmark of Acme Technology but which is now held dear only by small communities of practice within the company (see Chapter 3). Despite the efforts of senior management to “dump” the RICE principles, and despite increasing pressure to rush the software delivery cycle and release poor-quality products for the sake of “making the date,” these workers persist in valuing “excellence” or “quality,” strengthening their devotion to excellence and quality by the use of excellence-themed cubicle postings. I would argue that the sayings that workers post have an effect on their minute-by-minute practice: to the extent that one is a “reflective practitioner” (Schon), one’s practice is bound to be infused and informed by
the saying(s) and/or principles to which one looks for inspiration and guidance.

By posting such sayings on the interior walls of their cubicles, then, where all visitors will see them and where the occupants themselves will see them many times a day, these workers are disseminating their views about quality, signaling their membership in quality-oriented communities of practice, and reminding or encouraging themselves to steer their work towards quality at all times and resist the company’s strong tendency to sacrifice quality for speed to market. They are, in short, “negating” and “resisting” the current company ideology that quality doesn’t matter, speed is good and more speed is better.

Another interesting example of cubicle postings reflecting the occupant’s job is the collection of postings displayed by Jackie, the CPR manager. Jackie has even gone so far as to post some of them on the outside of her cube, in such an attention-getting eye-level spot that they “snagged” (RF10, April 26, 1999) my attention the first time she led me there:

- “The level of thinking that got us into this mess is not the level of thinking that will get us out. --Einstein”

- “Insanity is doing the same thing in the same way and expecting different results” (unattributed)

- “All organizations are perfectly designed to get the results they get” (unattributed) (RF10, April 26, 1999; also Pad 1, April 26, 1999)

A theme emerges from her choice of sayings: in order for things to improve, profound systemic changes are necessary. That statement reflects her
official job, which is to make sure all products are carefully shepherded through the CPR process (Program Plan, Project Plan, Corporate Commit, FCS, Post-Launch Review) that I described in Chapter 3 (Tape 3, April 26, 1999; Tape 4, April 27, 1999; Tape 5, April 28, 1999). It also reflects her values and her long-standing interest in systems theory (Tape 27, June 28, 1999). In addition, it announces her own subversive agenda for resisting at least some of upper management's (ab)uses of power. As we saw in Chapter 3, although upper management says it wants all products to go through CPR, in practice, it routinely circumvents CPR in order to release products as quickly as possible. In other words, its stated values do not match its real values (dissonance again). Jackie's agenda as CPR manager is to make Acme's stated values its real values, persuading the departments that are involved in producing products to embrace CPR in practice as well as in theory. That involves "making the responsibilities clear by department" (Tape 4, April 27, 1999)--in other words, clarifying ownership, a very dangerous thing to do in the Acme culture, for when ownership is clarified, accountability will follow, and the real weakness in the system--upper management--will be exposed.

Jackie's vision is subversive because a clarification of ownership is exactly what some factions in upper management do not want to happen. The Acme culture is pervaded, top to bottom, by a desire to avoid ownership--or, more complexly, to claim retroactive ownership of projects that turned out well, while avoiding ownership for projects or initiatives that did not or may not go well. To change the way a company plans and
develops its products is complex and difficult to begin with, but when the changes happen to hit major “hot buttons” in the company’s culture (such as, for Acme, *ownership*), and especially when they have the potential, if enacted, to make high-ranking executives lose face, the proposed changes become *subversive*, or threatening to the existing power structure. Jackie’s postings broadly hint that the organization itself will have to be redesigned, turned upside down, in order to get better results. In that sense, they “negate” a number of positions that upper management publicly takes: that everything is fine just the way it is, that Acme is a well-designed company that follows good work processes and responds intelligently to changes in the market, yet also, paradoxically, that doing things right is not really important when speed to market is at stake.

Though Jackie puts her subversive agenda right out there for all to see, literally on the outside of her cubicle, she knows that only worker bees and low-level managers are likely to see her postings or take the time to read them. If an upper manager were by some fluke to read them, doing so might stimulate some actual thought about the issues surrounding CPR. But she knows that upper management is unlikely to see them, much less read them. Her real audience, then, is herself and her colleagues. By posting these sayings so prominently, Jackie makes them available to other employees, while also reminding herself of her own core beliefs—beliefs that run decidedly counter to some of upper management’s beliefs.
Other postings with communal significance relate not to a specific job, mission, or agenda, but to the company as a whole, or to corporate life in general. Some of these postings offer simple derision:

... at that moment a tall man I had seen before walked up to us with a Xeroxed joke: “If assholes could fly, this would be an airport.” To which [participant] responded, “Better not show that to too many people, or they’ll think you’re coming in for a landing.” We all laughed. (RF53, June 21, 1999)

The claim that this workplace is populated by horrible people may not have much intellectual depth, but at least it works as a form of venting, and venting is a legitimate aspect of the hidden transcript. Other global critiques are more complex. For example, one participant passed around a *Wall Street Journal* article he had copied from the Technical Writing area, a posting that had clearly been copied many times. It describes a technology company whose founders recently doled out enormous bonuses to all employees, as “an expression of [our] ‘we’re in it together’ family culture” (D37). He passed this item around right after a meeting in which the hated Variable Pay had been discussed. The piece itself refutes Acme management’s unspoken but abundantly demonstrated belief that profits are for upper management, not for employees, and the timing of the exchange served to highlight the contrast between the other, more generous company and Acme (RF76, June 24, 1999).

Other cubicle postings are less topical, but in some ways even more powerful. The following anonymous piece called “The Plan,” shown below in Figure 3, was pointed out to me as “the best” of all cubicle postings (Pad
The Plan

In the beginning was the Plan.

And then came the Assumptions.

And the Plan was without substance.

And the Assumptions were without form.

And darkness was upon the faces of the workers.

And they spoke among themselves saying,
"It is a crock of shit, and it stinks."

And the workers went unto their Supervisors and said,
"It is a pail of dung, and none may abide the odor thereof."

And the Supervisors went unto their Managers, saying,
"It is a container of excrement, and it is very strong,
such that none may abide by it."

And the Managers went unto their Directors, saying,
"It is a vessel of fertilizer, and none may abide its strength."

And the Directors spoke among themselves, saying to one another,
"It contains that which aids plant growth, and it is very strong."

And the Directors went to the Vice Presidents, saying unto them,
"It promotes growth, and it is very powerful."

And the Vice-Presidents went unto the President, saying unto him,
"This new Plan will actively promote the growth and
vigor of the company, with powerful effects."

And the President looked upon the Plan, and saw that it was good.

And the Plan became Policy.

And that is how Shit happens.

Figure 3. "The Plan" (Cubicle Posting)
3, June 29, 1999). Drawing upon the best-known book of the Bible for theme, style, diction and narrative structure, “The Plan” speaks against upper management’s decisions, pronouncements and policies (and therefore its values) by deconstructing the process by which those choices are made and validated. The piece implicitly argues that high-level decisions are often faulty because they are based on two faulty assumptions: that management knows what is physically possible for workers to do, and that feedback coming up from below is perfectly candid. Darkness is on the faces of the workers because (a) they have not been consulted about how to accomplish the goal (a frequent occurrence at Acme), and (b) they are so low in the hierarchy that they must do as they are told, even when what they are told to do is impractical, inefficient or doesn’t make sense (also true of Acme). The Plan has different consequences for the workers than it does for upper management (as plans do at Acme): upper management may be held accountable some day, in theory, for any bad results, but they will always have more methods available to them for wriggling out of that accountability (an Acme pastime)—and until then, while the outcome is still uncertain, upper management enjoys complete freedom from doing the “real work” (Tape 34, July 2, 1999). Workers, in contrast, by virtue of their low position in the hierarchy, must implement The Plan and endure its practical everyday consequences: long hours, mucked-up production processes, and frustrating work conditions. In short, “shit” will happen, and most of it will end up sticking to the employees.
Another way to say that would be, *chaos* will be created, and the employees are the ones who will have to cope with it. Chaos, as we have seen, is a major theme in the working lives of Acme employees. They spend so much of their time holding chaos at bay, or drowning in it when it cannot be held at bay, that one can easily understand why they would ask the teleological questions, “Where does the chaos come from? Why does it exist?” No matter where the chaos comes from, when it does come, the employees feel as though they have no control at all over anything they are working on (Tape 19, June 24, 1999). And if they do not have control, then surely someone must. The two-word sentence “shit happens” is curiously agentive and agentless: grammatically speaking, “shit” is the subject and “happens” is an intransitive verb, suggesting on the surface that shit (or chaos) is the agent causing itself to happen. But pragmatically speaking, neither shit nor chaos can “happen” without being *caused* to happen. Acme workers do not believe that chaos just magically “appears” in their lives, like a live spirit or self-perpetuating entity. They pin the chaos on upper management, whose decisions, as “The Plan” suggests, are the root cause of the chaos.

The second faulty assumption—that communication from below is transparent—misleads everyone in the hierarchy, not just upper management, to believe what their subordinates have said. That would be good practice if the speakers at each level *were* being candid. But of course they were not. Every level, including the workers, softened its expression of the bad news, in this case literally sanitizing it, in order to
maintain a certain level of politeness. In their 1987 treatise on linguistic
politeness, Brown and Levinson argue that communicators in all cultures
(with some variations) attempt to reduce the threat embodied in any "face-
threatening act" (15-17). They do this by employing a variety of "politeness
strategies" (Hagge and Kostelnick 318) according to three situational
factors: (1) the "social distance" between the speaker and the listener based
on how much contact they normally have, (2) the amount of power the
listener has over the speaker, and (3) the severity of the threat implied by
the fact-threatening act (Brown and Levinson 15-17, 76-84). All three
factors can be seen at work in "The Plan." It would be hard to say how
much social distance exists between each level within the imaginary
organization depicted in "The Plan," for that can only be determined
company by company through careful ethnographic observation. But given
the large number of hierarchical levels between the workers and the
President, it would be safe to say there is probably a significant social
distance between those on levels more than one rung apart, with the
greatest distance of all separating those at the bottom from those at the
top. That large of a social distance would naturally increase people's
tendency to employee politeness strategies. It would also be safe to say
that each group has a great deal of power over the group immediately
beneath it (except the workers, who presumably have no one underneath
them). That, too, would increase the need for politeness. Finally, the Plan
itself is apparently so terrible that giving honest feedback about it (e.g., "It
is a crock of shit, and it stinks") would indeed lead to a drastic loss of face

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on the part of upper management. All three of Brown and Levinson's conditions, then, are present in "The Plan," causing a chain of euphemistic (mis)communications that disconnect the highest and lowest levels of the company from each other.

That chain of miscommunication also suggests that not only the President is being critiqued here: euphemism itself takes a hit as well, as does the power differential that gives rise to it. Brown and Levinson write of "social distance" and "power" as if they just neutrally exist; when we try for a moment to make these things "strange," instead of accepting them as natural and inevitable, then we see that the excessive politeness that causes each group of employees to soften the message as they send it upwards is a symptom of the disease of domination.

Indeed, euphemism is a key term in Scott’s discussion of concealment, which he says must be employed in domination situations in order for the public transcript to be maintained. The public transcript "generates considerable friction and can be sustained only by continuous efforts at reinforcement, maintenance, and adjustment" (45). That maintenance is accomplished, in part, by various forms of concealment: euphemisms conceal stark realities, and unanimity, more apparent than real, conceals disagreements among the ruling elites. "The Plan" illustrates those phenomena by showing each group euphemizing its message for apparently unanimous presentation to the next highest group. It could be argued that if only these groups had refrained from euphemizing and/or had not presented such apparently unified fronts, then stark realities
would not have been concealed, the Plan would not have become policy, shit would not have happened, and chaos would not have ensued.

The final line of “The Plan” suggests that the piece could be seen as an employee-centered answer to the question, “Why does shit happen?”—or, recalling Chapter 3, “Where does the chaos come from?” The use of the Book of Genesis as a rhetorical model for explaining where the chaos comes from implicitly and cleverly suggests that chaos is so pervasive in corporate life that to ask where the chaos comes from is almost like asking how the world itself was created. By using well-known literary and rhetorical devices to construct a tongue-in-cheek creation myth, the unknown author(s) of this document paint an inverted portrait of corporate life, much like the “world-upside-down” drawings and prints that were popular in Europe during the early age of print. Scott explains:

> Enormously popular throughout Europe, especially after the advent of printing in the sixteenth century made them accessible to the lower classes, these prints depicted a topsy-turvy world in which all normal relations and hierarchies were inverted. Mice ate cats, children spanked parents, the hare snared the hunter, the cart pulled the horse, fishermen were pulled from the water by fish, the wife beat the husband, fish flew in the air, and so on in seemingly endless profusion. By and large each of these broadsheets, standard items in the sacks of colporteurs, reversed a customary relationship of hierarchy or predation or both. *(Domination* 167)

Though “The Plan” does not present a reversal of dominant and subordinate behaviors—the workers are not shown firing the President, nor is the President shown groveling to workers for his paycheck—it does symbolically invert the assumption, common in business and *de rigeur* in
hierarchical companies such as Acme, that upper management has
authority because it knows what it is doing. That represents, to me, a
"negation" of the dominant epistemology. The criteria by which
management "saw" (or, one could say, knew) that the Plan was good, which
include the advice of his Vice-presidents plus whatever evaluative criteria
the President may himself possess, are revealed as foolish, the opposite of
wise. The argument is that worker knowledge (i.e., practitioner knowledge,
common sense, or technical know-how) is in fact superior to management
knowledge. To argue that indirectly, through a piece of literature such as
"The Plan," is to practice what Scott calls symbolic inversion by using art to
turn upside-down the practices, assumptions, and the entire knowledge-
base of the dominant group, replacing it with a representation of an
inverted world that is centered on the practical knowledge and common
sense of employees. It is to posit a world in which, to continue the piece's
Biblical motif, "professing themselves to be wise, [upper management]
became fools" (Romans 1:22).

The Special Role of Dilbert

The comic strip Dilbert plays a special role in the hidden transcripts
of Acme employees. Dilbert is authored by Scott Adams, who "worked in a
cubicle for seventeen years" (Adams 4), during ten of which he worked with
programmers and technician-types, to whom he refers collectively as
"engineers" (171). His creation Dilbert, for those who may not know, is a
white male engineer, slightly dorky-looking with his nondescriptive clothing,
unstyled hair, thick glasses, pocket protector, and tie that won’t lie flat. Dilbert works in a software company, has a powerful but incompetent pointy-haired boss, and represents what Acme employees might say is the typical “worker bee”: the sincere, knowledgeable technician who tries hard to do a good job, but is repeatedly thwarted and victimized by the nonsensical decisions and incorrigible power-tripping of management. In the words of one participant, Dilbert is “this kind of nondescript ordinary guy trying to get his job done in the face of a great deal of administrative and managerial insanity. You know, people saying ‘Go thatta way’ [crossing his arms and pointing in two different directions]” (Tape 16, June 23, 1999).

The antagonist in the strip is the pointy-haired manager, who in a severe but rhetorically effective oversimplification is offered as a representative of all levels of management. (One participant expressed amused envy that Dilbert has “only one boss—that must be nice.” The manager, with occasional help from a consultant or a middle-manager, exerts undue and inappropriate control over Dilbert’s daily life by virtue not of the manager’s intelligence or superior competence, but rather by the power vested in him by his place in the hierarchy. Adams argues in his books that whereas it used to be that good workers would rise to the level of their incompetence (The Peter Principle), now we are living under “the Dilbert Principle,” which mandates that “incompetent workers are promoted directly to management without ever passing through the temporary competence stage” (12). Without intelligence or competence, the
pointy-haired boss seems intent simply on *ruling*, on displaying his power by depriving Dilbert of what he (like most people) needs to maintain his self-esteem: decent working conditions, decent pay, the freedom to use his skills and abilities without huge amounts of interference—and above all, *dignity*. The strip regularly features moments when Dilbert must endure some kind of affront to his dignity.

In my earliest conversations with participants, when they were first learning that I had come to study not only communication but also the underground employee culture of R&D, several individuals brought up the topic of Dilbert and asked if I had ever read the strip (e.g., Tape 2, April 26, 1999; Tape 4, April 27, 1999; RF14, April 28, 1999). Every person who asked me that question asked it with a tone of heightened interest, altering the pitch and/or volume of his or her voice and watching my face intently for my response. That, plus the prevalence of the cartoons in people's cubicles (20-25% of all second-floor cubicles have at least one Dilbert posted, a percentage that goes up when only R&D cubicles are included), led me to add a Dilbert question to my open-ended interviews. I phrased the question approximately like this: “I see a lot of Dilbert cartoons up on the walls. What is the significance of Dilbert in this culture?”

With all twenty-six participants I interviewed, that question provoked an immediate, confident, non-tentative response, whether positive or negative. Five responses were neutral to negative. One developer claimed not to know why people had Dilbert cartoons in their cubicles, two others claimed not to be attracted to the strip, and two
managers voiced negative opinions of Dilbert because they believe it encourages people to “look for the negative in things” (Tape 22, June 25, 1999), finding it “mean-spirited,” “cutting,” and “harsh” (Tape 29, June 30, 1999). My initial perception while gathering data was that those two negative opinions were the most extreme views I heard about Dilbert, but in processing the data later on, I realized that an equally extreme view on the other end had been contributed by a pro-Dilbert person, who said the strip is not scathing enough. If I had the skills of being a cartoonist, I would take it even to the next level of scathing. It’s almost too much of a middle-class reflection on the middle class technology. I think he has a point of view that’s good, and that really brings out real issues. But I can see pushing it one step further with the cynicism. (Tape 5, April 28, 1999)

Opinions, then, can be said to vary widely: some employees feel the strip is too scathing, others feel it is not scathing enough--but the fact that everyone has an opinion of Dilbert is significant, suggesting that Dilbert is known to everyone, a celebrity of sorts in the employee culture of Acme Technology.

Elliot, a moderately high-level manager, reaches beyond the value judgments to speculate about the epistemological underpinnings of the strip:

Elliot: [Dilbert is posted in cubicles for] the same reason that Dilbert cartoons are at every technical, computing or software company on the face of the earth. Generally all techies will look down on the management of the company because they know a certain truth they believe, and they don’t understand why those other people function over there. Dilbert represents that. But if you go to another level of analysis, Dilbert is really satirizing both groups,
because a lot of Dilbert cartoons are such clear-headed, typical engineer, blinders on, not seeing the broader universe, that people just identify with it.

For those who--I believe a lot of programmers really at heart have a black and white view of the universe, and that's what they like about being involved with computers because essentially, if you get right down to it, there's finally a black and white answer for everything. It's a one or it's a zero. And gray is only a construct: it can't be broken down into constituent parts. Those with a higher tolerance for ambiguity, who end up more perhaps good at being managers or on the marketing side and things like that, probably see life more as shades of gray. And there's always an inevitable conflict between the two groups.

Paula: So do you think that Dilbert presents a black and white world, then?

Eliott: No, I don't think Dilbert presents a black and white world. I think he's actually dealing with a lot of shades of gray. But you know he tends to simplify it for the purposes of his audience. (Tape 33, July 1, 1999)

Whether or not one agrees with Elliot's opinion that Dilbert has been "simplified" by Scott Adams to reach its audience of engineers, or with his equally problematic stance that programmers all think alike and have a "black and white view of the universe," my data do show that this manager is right about some things: Dilbert does appeal to many (not all) technical workers at Acme, and many (not all) Acme technicians do have a skeptical attitude towards the actions and motives of upper management, an attitude that is reflected quite well in the strip. Most responses (22 out of twenty-six) were favorable towards Dilbert: participants pronounced the strip "true" (Tape 5, April 28, 1999; Tape 26, June 28, 1999), "real," (Tape 5, April 28, 1999; Tape 24, June 25, 1999), "reality" (Tape 24, June 25,
1999), or “metaphors for what’s going on in our work space” (Tape 28, June 29, 1999). The strip seems to be important to Acme employees, because it captures for them the gestalt of what it’s really like to work at Acme, at least in R&D.

Some participants stated that Dilbert represents corporate life in general and bears no special resemblance to Acme (e.g., “It has nothing to do with Acme. It’s every company in every industry,” Tape 20, June 24, 1999). Indeed, many of the cartoons I copied from people’s cubicles do depict situations and problems that seem to be inherent in corporate life, apart from any particular industry, such as the overabundance of managers and shortage of workers (D69, D79); the unpleasant working conditions such as cramped cubicles (D73); the general dumbness and disconnectedness of management (D68, D69, D71, D79, D82); and the fact that credit seems to rise to the top of the management pyramid while blame inevitably flows downward (D71, D72, D74, D83). In that sense, the Dilbert character serves as a modern-day corporate Everyman (gendered though that metaphor is), struggling against the familiar characters and obstacles that have become the archetypes of corporate America.

Others, like Deborah the customer support representative, see a closer connection, noting that Dilbert’s company is a software company, just like Acme:

Well, it’s really funny because Dilbert works in a software company, and it’s like a caricature. It’s distorted a little bit, it’s a little bit to the extreme, but essentially they’re true. Things like the management not having a clue what’s going on and the worker bee doing all that they can and more all this time, and they’re taken for granted. (Tape 26, June 28, 1999)
That Dilbert works in a software company is beyond doubt, for the strip contains many references to software products and processes. I saw and copied cartoons about user-friendliness, program testing, beta-testing, and many other terms/situations/issues that I saw at Acme, and which are probably experienced by most software workers (or, as one participant calls them, “knowledge workers,” Tape 16, June 23, 1999). Acme workers, then, being knowledge workers, would naturally “relate to it. I think they see a lot of the irony or humor, if you will, that kind of comes through that as something they experience in our own environment here. I mean, people can kind of say, ‘Yeah.’” (Tape 24, June 25, 1999). In contrast to how they read (or don’t read) the official company literature, Acme employees read the Dilbert strip avidly because in it they see their own struggles brought to center stage and fairly represented. In the company literature, employees are cast as little more than props in someone else’s drama, whereas in Dilbert, they are cast as protagonists in an employee-centered drama. That represents a symbolic inversion of the “normal” order of things in the business world, especially in a hierarchical company such as Acme, where upper management typically assumes the dominant position of the hero-subject, the self-designated agent of change, the all-important protagonist in the Story of Acme.

Acme employees’ perception that the strip is about themselves is enhanced by the fact that the events and situations Adams depicts in his strip bear a surprisingly close resemblance to events that have recently taken place at Acme. This customer support person explained, “There’s so
much here that is very similar.... A lot of it is very close to what happens here. It’ll be in the cartoon and then someone will bring it in and say, well this just happened here (Tape 24, June 25, 1999). The cartoons relate to something that is going on, usually. They usually, like there was a time when we put out a lot of beta products that just completely failed, and so there was a Dilbert cartoon that was very popular that talked about the failure of beta products. So things that are relevant, working conditions, they’re metaphors of what’s going on in our work space. (Tape 28, June 29, 1999)

I did find that beta-testing cartoon posted in a cubicle. Other cartoons I found also bore strong resemblance to situations and problems I knew about at Acme, picking up on several issues that are prominent in the backstage talk of Acme employees.

- The pointy-haired manager moves a project due date up by a month. The employee responds, “Every time it looks like I’ll reach an objective, you move it! What does this prove about my performance?” The manager responds, “It proves I’m better at setting objectives than you are at reaching them” (D71).

The moving up of project due dates is a frequent occurrence at Acme, and the manager’s self-serving response to the employee’s very good question recalls the many comments I heard about arbitrariness on the part of upper management. That arbitrariness is especially evident in the Variable Pay program, wherein upper management deliberately sets goals in such a way as to reduce the likelihood that employees will meet them. Variable pay and the moving up of project deadlines create dissonance at Acme: upper management says it wants to reach its goals and share the profits with employees, but in truth, it sets the goals out of reach so that it does not have to share with employees. Upper management says it wants to
make quality products, but in truth, as Gwen explained earlier in this chapter, what it really cares about is accelerating the production process so as to meet the ever-shortening dates.

- The manager tells Dilbert that the company needs to “eliminate a few steps in order to hit the market window. I think we can get rid of market research and technical testing. They’re basically overhead.” The manager signs off on the changes, saying, “Gone! Now we’ll hit the window!” To which Dilbert mutters, “Like a bird” (D75).

The reader may recall an important turning point in the Story of Acme (Chapter 3) when Ralph DeVito completely appalled R&D employees by eliminating Testing, then accusing them of making bad products. Testing is a necessary phase of the software development process. To expect developers to produce good code without Testing is outrageous and ultimately backfires on--guess who--the developers and other employees, who will undoubtedly be called upon to remedy the many problems that customers will complain about. Hence Dilbert’s sigh, “like a bird.” He senses the impending disaster while the manager sees only the immediate goal of hitting the market window. The conflict between quality and speed to market is not specific to Acme, but it is very much a linchpin issue in the employee culture, a theoretical debate which has practical consequences and which actively engages the minds of many employees. By showing Dilbert’s response to the manager’s hit-the-window-at-all-costs philosophy, and by portraying Dilbert as the central character rather than the manager, the cartoon captures the frustration many Acme employees feel about scrambling to hit market windows, and asserts the pro-quality view in counterpoint to the dominant view.
• Dilbert meets with his manager for his annual performance review. The 
manager tells him that while his performance was good, he won’t be 
getting a bonus this year, because he worked on projects that were not 
considered important. Dilbert says, “I worked on the tasks you 
assigned. What’s that say about your performance?” The manager 
says, “It’s excellent. I get a bonus for keeping salaries low.” Dilbert 
responds, “Have you ever seen any literature on workplace violence?”

This cartoon was posted in the cube of a woman who felt she had been 
cheated out of pay raises and promotions for exactly that reason: that she 
had been railroaded by her manager into working on less-visible, less-
important projects. Her experience was far from unique at Acme; the issue 
of “high-visibility” projects came up a number of times, always with the 
same thrust: that working on high-visibility projects is considered a form of 
reward. A byproduct of this reward system is that employees are subtly 
separated into classes--those who are visible, those who are not--and the 
mechanisms behind those differentiations are hard to divine. One question 
we could ask is, visible to whom? Once again, it is upper management 
whose perceptions count: to be visible to upper management is to be 
visible, period, whereas to be visible only to one’s fellow employees is not to 
be visible at all.

These cartoons and others all relate to specific issues and problems 
I observed in my time at Acme: the moving up of project deadlines without 
input from employees, the arbitrary changing of standards for employee 
success, the elimination of testing and market research for the sake of 
speedy product release, management being paid for keeping employee 
salaries low, high-profile projects paying more than other projects, and
management self-centeredness. Employees perceive a high level of correspondence between what appears in the strip and what they experience every day on the job. (That theme will emerge again in Chapter 5, where participants are seen evaluating the credibility of a piece of official employee communication that was published internally by upper management. Participants showed a keen sensitivity to irony, to disconnects between the reality they experience and the pseudo-reality that is portrayed in official documents.)

What really sets Dilbert cartoons apart, however, from other relevant cubicle postings is that they are actually, to an extent, *co-authored* by real employees. That possibility began to emerge for me when several participants shared with me their private belief that someone at Acme is feeding information to Scott Adams. Here is Brenda in one of our earliest interviews:

Brenda: Have you ever read Dilbert?
Paula: I've seen it a few times. Why do you ask?
Brenda: Because people suspect in this company that someone is feeding Scott Adams his material from us. Too many of the cartoons have not only been coincidental but the timing has been uncanny.
Paula: Really?
Brenda: Yeah.
Paula: Do they really seriously suspect?
Brenda: You know, these are not people who are necessarily prone to wild hypotheses & accusations—although they do like their Dilbert—but I have to agree that some of the timing of some of the cartoons has been extraordinarily coincidental. And not a bit too, like,
“Gee, that’s a terrible coincidence, how did they manage that?” (Tape 2, April 26, 1999)

A certain individual in the Testing group (part of R&D) happens to be in a good position to observe that phenomenon, for his wall seems to be a magnet for cubicle postings from other employees. He was not an actual participant, but he revealed to me a similar suspicion: according to him, “Something happens, then one or two weeks later, it shows up in a cartoon and somebody puts it up here” (Pad 3, June 29, 1999). Thomas echoed it as well, confiding to me with impish delight,

Thomas: Dilbert works here! [laughing] I know it!

Paula: How do you know it?

Thomas: Um. the cartoon itself, and the cartoon TV show itself, present a world that is comically surreal. And yet it’s amazing how often certain phrases or turns of events that happen reflect stuff that’s happened here. (Tape 24, June 25, 1999)

Even moderately high-level managers note a close correspondence. Here is Gwen in our interview:

Paula: What significance does Dilbert have for Acme?

Gwen: It is Acme.

Paula: It literally is Acme?

Gwen: Absolutely. [Pause.] It’s also most software companies. I mean, Acme’s not unique in this. I think that’s one reason Dilbert is so absolutely popular, is because it describes a lot of people’s reality, and certainly in high-tech, it captures the essence of what high-tech companies are like. But it is—there are times where I have been convinced that someone at Acme is feeding information to Scott Adams, because the cartoons hit home. And they’re so close. They come within a week or two of something happening here and they are so close, it’s almost identical. So you have to wonder. I have no
idea if someone's really feeding information to Scott Adams, but sometimes it sure looks like it. (Tape 34, July 2, 1999)

Gwen showed me as an example a Dilbert cartoon lampooning the CPR process. Dilbert sits in a conference room with his boss and several coworkers, where he reports to the pointy-haired boss about the status of a product: "The project status is 'yellow light.' In user tests we found that the product locks up every twelve seconds. The interface is incomprehensible and the manual is pure fiction. I think it's clear what we need to do." To which the boss says, "Ship it and hope that somebody writes a 'Dummies' book about it?" Though all software companies are under pressure to release products before they are ready, and all of them must have some kind of delivery process in place to guide product development, participants told me that Acme is the only company in the industry to use traffic-light colors (red, yellow and green) as a way of denoting product statuses: therefore, it is not entirely unreasonable for them (and us) to believe that the term may have been leaked to Adams by a current or previous Acme employee.

We might suspect that the resemblance between terms and events in the strip and terms and events at Acme, although at times eerily close, might still be coincidental, for many corporations operate in similar ways, especially corporations within the same industry. Just because a cartoon appears two weeks after the same thing takes place at Acme does not mean that the cartoon was suggested by Acme employee (post hoc, ergo propter hoc), even when Acme employees think that it was. But the timing of the
cartoons' appearances and the close resemblance between cartoon events and Acme events are highly salient to my participants and figured prominently in their statements to me. For example, John says he has some Dilbert cartoons that exactly illustrate circumstances that I’ve experienced here. One of them, the pointy-haired boss says “It is not enough that we serve the customer, we must ‘delight’ the customer.” That came out about two weeks after Acme started a campaign internal promotion to “delight the customer.” They still, you can still find that information around in different places where the objective is to delight the customer. And it was right in Dilbert. (Tape 16, June 23, 1999; D70)

Acme is not the only corporation to have promoted the idea of delighting the customer—a search for the word “delight” in ABI-Inform reveals at least twenty articles in the business literature about delighting the customer, beginning with a 1988 article which may be the first introduction of the idea (Chandler) and developing into a flurry of articles that peaks in the mid-1990s. But by the same token, that fact does not allow us to conclude that no one at Acme wrote to Adams about Acme’s internal promotion about delighting the customer, or that his cartoons do not respond to emails from Acme employees. A few moments later in the interview, John identified himself as one of several Acme employees who contribute information to Adams:

There have been people like myself who have sent information to Scott Adams. He has an email address [right on the cartoons]. I remember once when Bill Sayles issued an email claiming that he had designated all R&D folks as “thought leaders.” I thought that was really—I’m a thought leader. I sent it on to Scott Adams as I’m sure some other people did. And you know, within a month or so, there was a thing about being “thought leaders” in the Dilbert thing, so it was kind of fun. There's a great deal of reciprocity
between the knowledge worker community and Mr. Adams.
(Tape 16, June 23, 1999)

What interests me about this confession is not the identity of the mole(s),
but John's notion of reciprocity, that members of the knowledge worker
community feed specific anecdotes to Adams which Adams then puts into
the strip. Adams claims to receive "at least two hundred emails a day,
mostly from people who are complaining about their own clueless
managers" (Adams 11). We cannot know what percentage of those emails
come from knowledge workers per se, but considering the wide appeal of
the Dilbert strip, it would not be surprising if other worker communities
also felt a certain reciprocity with Adams.

It could be argued that there is nothing remarkable about that
reciprocity at all: he's a cartoonist, people like his strip, they contribute
ideas, and so what? The "so what" becomes clear when we view the activity
through Scott's lens of hidden transcripts, as a literate exchange between
fellow subordinates in a sequestered social space. Adams' email address
acts as a sequestered (cyber) space where corporate employees can negate
as much as they like about their experiences in the belly of the beast. By
listening to these people (of whom Adams was one himself just a few years
ago) and incorporating their experiences and backstage talk into his strip,
Adams acts as a mouthpiece for thousands of corporate worker
communities, especially for communities of knowledge workers. Although
he draws the Dilbert character with no mouth, suggesting that Dilbert (like
most corporate employees) has no voice, Adams' strip provides a voice for

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real corporate employees. Dilbert is like a pen-and-ink puppet through whose mouth voiceless employees can safely speak.

Participant comments confirm that interpretation. “People have the feeling that they have no control and that the wrong people are making the decisions for them. They put the cartoons up in order to somehow “voice their rebellion” (Pad 3, June 29, 1999); “It’s safer to have Dilbert and have a chuckle to yourself or a chuckle between friends, than telling your CEO in the survey, you guys are idiots” (Tape 32, July 1, 1999). The survey she refers to is the annual Employee Survey, which is done at many corporations and which I refer to at greater length in Chapter 3. John expands:

There have been times when my colleagues and I have read Dilberts and started to laugh, and then wanted to cry, because we really just came out of a meeting in which exactly the same thing happened. So there is humor and pathos in Dilbert for the community--because you can’t stand up and say, “My boss is an asshole, they just did these things.” But you can put up the Dilbert cartoon that talks about the very same set of circumstances. And then of course it’s neutral, very neutral, as a result. You can’t be accused of being the bad person pointing out that the emperor has no clothes, or things like that, because Dilbert supposedly doesn’t know. (Tape 16, June 23, 1999)

John confirmed that explanation on another day when he said, “I don’t need Dilbert cartoons because I have a voice” (Pad 3, June 30, 1999). So, because Dilbert voices employee opinions and responses that are typically repressed or marginalized by those in power, and because in many cases the plots and dialogue have been literally written by employees, Dilbert cartoons can be seen as part of the hidden transcript that is constructed by knowledge workers in Acme R&D. In co-authoring the cartoons with
Scott Adams, employees help create literate and visual representations of themselves, their co-workers, and the problems that they experience--representations that then circulate in local employee cultures and are open to re-interpretation in local terms (e.g., "This is you"). By portraying corporate life from the perspective of the worker bee, by making visible that which management would prefer to keep invisible, by 'making strange' that which has been naturalized in corporate life, these cartoons work to negate the public transcript of upper management.

Like other cubicle postings, Dilbert cartoons are photocopied, passed around, posted on people's walls, and given as gifts. Many of the Dilberts I saw had been photocopied multiple times; very few were on the original newsprint. Unlike other cubicle postings, however, Dilberts seem to be surrounded with a thicker layer of oral and literate meta-discourse--discourse about the cartoons. Some of the Dilberts I collected were signed --e.g., "To Patsy, from Joe"--and a few had short comments written on them from the giver to the recipient. Employees relate Dilbert and his co-workers to specific employees at Acme and the pointy-haired manager to specific members of upper management, talking about the cartoons in casual conversation. Abe, a nineteen-year veteran, said,

Abe: I've seen people actually associate names with some of the characters or aspects from time to time. So I mean, you know, there's—

Paula: Names, you mean like names of people?

Abe: Names of the individuals here. They probably tend to be people in the chain of management. In some cases, they're just playing games with a friend of theirs or something, like, "Here, this is you—ha ha ha" [chuckles].

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Paula: You mean people actually write those names in on the cartoons and put them on the wall, or they just do it in conversation?

Abe: More so in conversation. I think I've only seen a couple of times when they actually wrote the name in and posted it. And that was more, just workers, people they work with, kind of thing. They don't tend to put—I mean, I think they would probably consider it career-limiting to some degree if they put senior management's names on it and posted it as such [chuckles]. (Tape 24, June 25, 1999)

Even when the cartoons do not reflect specific events that have taken place at Acme, employees add to them a layer of Acme-specific significance, talking about the cartoons and sometimes writing in the names of specific colleagues. The fact that employees talk about and write upon the cartoons suggests that they weave Dilbert cartoons into the hidden transcript more often, and more prominently, than they do other types of cubicle postings. That is one respect in which Dilbert plays a "special role" in the hidden transcript of R&D employees: Adams' strip has been adopted more widely and is more actively talked about in the self-sponsored literate lives of Acme employees than any other single source of cubicle postings.

Moreover, the fact that it would be "career-limiting" (an Acme euphemism) to inscribe onto the cartoons specific names from the dominant caste underscores the potency of Adams' critique and reflects the power asymmetry between employees and upper management.

Euphemisms serve to conceal "stark realities" --in this case, the stark reality is that to criticize management directly would be to halt the forward progress of one's career, for in the domination power dynamic,
subordinates may not speak that which the dominant elite decides is unspeakable. Dilbert cartoons are definitely funny, but beyond being funny, they offer a critique of power that serves to shore up worker dignity and turn aspects of the corporate world upside down, hinting at revenge fantasies (an important element of hidden transcripts, according to Scott) and at the very least representing, in words and pictures, that which has no representation in corporate discourse: the knowledge, perspectives, voices, and values of the worker bees. That makes them subversive—for in domination situations, the dominant elites place themselves and their own subjectivities at the center, pushing those of the subordinates to the margin, indeed off the paper entirely. Dilbert cartoons are subversive because they gather those disregarded perspectives and make them not only visible but central, (re)present the status quo, again, in an employee-centered way. It would be hard to claim that some Dilbert cartoons are more “subversive” than others, but the key to the subversive power of Dilbert lies in Adams’ ability to galvanize the group consciousness of employees and symbolically invert the usual order of things, placing employees in the center and management on the periphery.

Not all employees would necessarily agree that Dilbert cartoons are “subversive”—a strong word—or “threatening” to upper management, but some surely would. For example, I met one individual with an especially impressive collection of Dilberts. Noticing this, I stopped in and introduced myself, telling her who I was and asking if I could please photocopy her Dilberts. She instantly tensed up and asked me a series of
questions about what I was doing and who I worked for. Her skittishness surprised me; I still remember the rabbit-in-the-headlights expression on her face, and how strange it felt to be perceived as one of “them.” I did manage to convince her without too much difficulty that I was not in any way connected to upper management, after which she relaxed and finally did let me copy her postings, but still, the fact that she thought that I might harm her in some way if I were to copy her Dilberts suggests that at least some second-floor workers perceive cubicle postings as highly subversive. Even if her fearful stance was anomalous (which it seems to be; nobody else had that reaction), the fact that employees would hesitate to scribble upper management names on Dilbert cartoons (as Abe said) suggests that the strip is tacitly understood to have some subversive power, enough to make upper management “limit” the scribbler’s career.

Cubicle postings, then, can be read as an element of the hidden transcript that employees at Acme R&D have constructed. Taken together, the cubicle postings on the second floor of Acme Technology headquarters represent a chorus of employee voices that are normally marginalized and repressed by the power arrangements that surround them. Ornatowski argued, based on anecdotal evidence, that what he called “wall decor” can sometimes provide clues about genuine problems within an organization. This study plumbs deeper into Ornatowski’s insight, adding a new layer of interpretation as to why the finding may be true: according to Scott, in all situations where the power dynamic resembles domination, members of the subordinate group(s) will create a hidden transcript in which to voice
their critiques of the power arrangements surrounding them. The hidden transcript gives voice to “the portion of the acrimonious dialogue that domination has driven off the immediate stage” (Domination 111). In the case of corporate employees, or at least in the case of knowledge workers at Acme R&D, cubicle postings are an important part of that hidden transcript.

What makes hidden transcripts worth studying, for me, is that they provide thick, nuanced, analyzable information about what the subordinate population is thinking and talking about. The topics of conversation that show up in the hidden transcript, and the statements that are made, relate to genuine problems that subordinates consider to be important and thereby prefigure the focal points for any minor or major uprising that may some day occur. The substance of the hidden transcript is therefore much like the proverbial “writing on the wall”: they are surreptitious scrawlings that represent the true thoughts and feelings of the oppressed. Focusing specifically on self-sponsored literacies and their role in the construction of that transcript makes the resemblance all the more clear: in the case of cubicle walls at Acme, the (literal) writing on the (literal) wall can be read as the “(proverbial) writing on the (proverbial) wall.”

**Hidden in Plain Sight: Disguising the Hidden Transcript**

It is important to remember my earlier assertion that second floor cubicles are *semi-sequestered* spaces. As I explained earlier in this section, cubicles are vulnerable to patrolling by unsafe people. The subversive
messages posted on cubicle walls can be seen by anyone passing by--yet there the messages are, blithely displayed for anyone to see. That paradox can be read in a number of ways. One might say the employees are being foolish, risking their job security by posting messages that might be offensive to management. One might also say that the messages themselves are really not so offensive or subversive after all and pose no real danger either to the workers or to the current power arrangement. I would argue that both of those statements are, in a way, true--the employees are taking a certain risk (though hard to measure), yet the risk seems minimal considering how trivial the matter appears to be. More interesting, however, is the nuanced explanation of this paradox provided, once again, by Scott. In his chapter on "Voice Under Domination," Scott writes that members of subordinate groups want their voices to be publicly heard, yet they also have a legitimate need to protect themselves. To make themselves heard while also protecting themselves, they use what he calls "the arts of political disguise," which allow them to insinuate their own counter-hegemonic messages into the public transcript while at the same time shielding themselves from reprisals.

The arts of political disguise include "elementary forms of disguise" (138) such as disguising the messenger (anonymity) and disguising the seriousness of the message (another form of euphemism). They also include more complex strategies involving "collective representations of culture" (156): for example, trickster tales, symbolic inversions, and folk narratives with more than one meaning. In this section I will shed light on
the paradox that cubicle postings are "hidden in plain sight" by briefly
describing how euphemism, anonymity and collective representations of
culture figure in the coyly rebellious display of cubicle postings.

_Euphemism: Disguising the Seriousness of the Message._ Knowledge workers
at Acme in 1999 were required by the nature of their jobs to employ a wide
variety of print and electronic literacies on paper and screen (mostly
screen). In addition to the obvious need to use email, Acme employees also
need to read and write on an extremely complex intranet system. An
intranet is similar to the world wide web in that it contains clusters of
readable files, or “sites,” that are linked to each other, but different in that
it is physically located on the Acme server, not on the Internet, and
therefore can only be accessed from within the Acme computer network.
The intranet contains reams of company-specific databases and templates,
which looked incredibly complex to me when I attempted to read and
understand them on participants’ computers. These databases and
templates can be devilishly difficult to design, as we saw in the case of the
PSTD project (Chapter 3). The literacies that are prized by the company,
then (indeed, by the entire computer technology industry) could be called
high-tech literacies using high-tech media, such as reading, updating and
redesigning intranet databases and writing software in complex computer
languages. Low-tech literacies such as reading, collecting and juxtaposing
cartoons and brief quotations are of no value whatsoever to the company
and so are completely ignored. Acme employees’ use of low-tech media in a
low-tech way (mere scraps of paper, merely thumbtacked to a wall) can therefore be read as a form of euphemism, for they disguise the seriousness of the message. Staying low-tech allows employees to give their self-sponsored literate activity a low profile, disguising its importance, if not its prevalence.

The humorous nature of many cubicle postings, cartoons in particular, serves as another form of euphemistic disguise, providing employees with a graceful “out” should anyone ever confront them about the content of their postings. Humor is usually not taken seriously: one can always say, “Hey, it was only a joke.” But humor is by nature derisive. Plato believed that laughter always involves malice and therefore signals “a pain in the soul” (Republic, V, 452 and Philebus 48-52). Aristotle agreed that laughter is basically a form of derision (Rhetoric, II, 12), and Hobbes followed with his classic statement that laughter results from “observing the imperfections of other men” (Leviathan, chapter 6). Ethologist Karl Lorenz even went a step further, asserting that laughter is a form of controlled aggression (293-97). The humorous nature of cubicle postings serves as a form of euphemistic disguise because our generally non-serious view of humor masks the serious, even aggressive critique contained within. The fact that cubicle postings are very often funny and consist in part of cartoons “disguise[s] the message just enough to skirt retaliation” (Domination 152)—which is the purpose of euphemism.
Anonymity: Disguising the Messenger. Almost all second floor employees have one or more items posted on their cubicle walls. I did not search for cubicles that have no postings at all, but impressionistically, it looked to me as if every cube had at least one or two things tacked up on at least one of its walls. It would be highly unusual for an Acme employee to have blank walls. That fact serves as a form of disguise through anonymity—for the behavior is so common that one could easily disavow personal responsibility by saying, “everybody does it.” Scott says that “vulnerable groups express their hidden aspirations in public in a way that both enables them to avoid individual responsibility and aligns them with some higher power whose express commands they are merely following” (148). The excuse of “everybody does it” can be read as a disavowal of personal responsibility, for it implies that one is simply obeying a silent command from “everybody” to do what “everybody” does.

More significantly, by posting quotes and cartoons that are either anonymously authored or authored by distant Others who do not work at Acme (e.g., Einstein, Lao-Tsu, Scott Adams), employees are using anonymity to disguise the fact that the printed messages they post represent, in fact, their own voices. Acme employees select and collect certain postings because they agree with the messages they contain—but by selecting messages that were written by others, either by famous individuals or by “anonymous,” they are able to disavow ownership, which as we saw in Chapter 3, is a major theme in the Acme culture. Ownership leads to accountability, and accountability leads to blame; disavowals of
ownership are therefore strategic and self-protective. By merely *selecting* rather than *authoring* their cubicle postings, Acme employees deflect whatever blame or censure might arise if someone were to "call them out" and make them own up to such pointed critiques.

*Collective Representations of Culture*. We have already examined two examples of collective cultural representation in our survey of cubicle postings at Acme: "The Plan" and "Dilbert." "Dilbert" stands for all employees in all corporations; that metonymic effect is inherently obvious and was even mentioned to me by several participants. Though Dilbert and the surrounding characters can be--and are--likened to specific individuals at Acme, a Dilbert-posting employee can always claim (when confronted) that his or her posted cartoons represent corporate life in general and are not intended as a criticism specifically of Acme. Likewise "The Plan"--as a vague (though accurate) description of *corporate* culture, it escapes scrutiny as a serious critique of the *Acme* culture.

Hidden transcripts at Acme, then, are hidden in plain sight. Acme employees want their voices to be heard, yet they are also concerned about protecting themselves--so they practice "the arts of political disguise" as a cover for their cogent critiques. I recall an anecdote about Scotland Yard deciding that the safest way to transport a certain enormously valuable gemstone to the British Museum was to send it through the regular mail in a plain brown package. The very commonness and anonymity of the package provided excellent camouflage for the priceless gem contained
within. Cubicle postings, likewise, may be commonplace, ambiguously authored, and apparently trivial, but their very commonness, anonymity and triviality can be read as a form of camouflage, distracting the casual observer from the serious content that they can and do express.

**Conclusion**

I have argued, first of all, that cubicle postings with communal significance can be productively read as part of the *hidden transcript* of Acme employees. Acme employees display and exchange cubicle postings, including but not limited to Dilbert cartoons, partly because this activity provides a safe way for them critique company power arrangements and negate received company doctrines without fear of reprisal. The activity is *safe* because employees disguise the seriousness of their critiques under cover of euphemism and anonymity, yet also *subversive* because the critiques are pointed, potent, and relevant. These findings confirm Locker's finding that employees sometimes use written humor to build group solidarity; they also confirm the anecdotal findings of Cezar Ornatowski, who noticed that employees' wall decor provides clues to genuine problems going on within their organization. By viewing employees' self-sponsored literate activity through the lens of hidden transcripts, I have politicized employee literacies and offered a new theoretical explanation as to why employees use wall decor in the first place and how their cubicle postings critique company power arrangements.
CHAPTER 5
HIDDEN TRANSCRIPTS OF LITERATE RESISTANCE, PART II:
READING BY THE LIGHT OF EXPERIENCE

This final portion of my study was designed to investigate to what extent and in what ways a group of (mostly) disaffected, disempowered employees "read against" an authoritative text that had been published internally by upper management--i.e., whether and how they read the text "critically," and what their responses were like. By conducting reading protocols on this document with eighteen participants and then inductively describing, cataloging and categorizing the reading strategies that the participants employed, I found that regardless of whether participants viewed the document favorably or unfavorably, they all evaluated its quality and credibility based on how closely it matched their own personal experiences of working in the company.

The text in question, described in more detail below, is the second of a special annual series of in-house publications and had been distributed to Acme employees a year or two before I arrived on the site. "In-house publications" typically include company newsletters, employee orientation brochures, program promotions, and some intranet websites (which in some companies have replaced the company newsletter). Many in-house
publications are “routine”: they come out at regular intervals and can be seen as fixtures in the generic firmament of the organization; others are “nonroutine,” meaning they are specially published on an as-needed basis to serve specific, timely purposes. The purpose of most in-house publications, both routine and nonroutine, is to broadcast messages from upper management to all company employees—messages which are often both informative and persuasive at the same time. For example, a brochure about a new employee wellness program might inform employees about the program, but its goal is to persuade them to participate in it (i.e., to change their current behaviors). However, some persuasive messages have less to do with controlling employee behaviors and more to do with inducing desired states of mind, such as contentment, pride, enthusiasm, motivation, or other forms of “identification” with the organization (Cheney, “Rhetoric”). Those publications are extremely value-laden and bear a strong resemblance to what Aristotle would have called epideictic discourse, which attempts to consolidate community values by praising or blaming a person, group or institution based on past deeds and/or traits of character. Epideictic discourse is concerned with pleasing or inspiring the audience rather than persuading it to accept a proposition (Corbett 29) or take specific action. The text that participants read for me would stand as a modern-day example of corporate epideixis: a “public display” of praise for the character traits, so to speak, of the Acme culture (Respect, Integrity, Customers, Excellence).
This portion of my study contributes to Rhetoric, Composition and Literacy Studies by beginning to fill a void in the scholarship on critical literacies: despite an abundance of theory, there is a paucity of observation-based research on what critical literacy might look like outside the classroom. The research is particularly thin when it comes to the question of whether and in what ways critical literacy is practiced by mature adults in the workplace. The reading research, too, especially the research on skilled or expert reading, focuses primarily on academic readers in academic settings; that which is conducted outside the academy often focuses on relatively low-skilled readers, exploring (using cognitivist methods) their processes of comprehension, not evaluation. One would think the subject of business reading might be of interest to Business Communication researchers, but perhaps as a symptom of the rather odd disconnect between the two fields (Allen), Business Communication has not yet borrowed the concept of “critical literacy” or even “critical reading” from Composition Studies. Some scholars in Organizational Communication have taken critical perspectives on employee communications (e.g., Cheney, DiSanza and Bullis, McPhee and Tompkins, Mumby), and Organizational Communication as a field does see itself rooted partly in Rhetoric (Redding), but few if any studies have examined in depth the ways in which an employee audience responds to an in-house publication from the overtly rhetorical perspective of Rhetoric, Composition and Literacy Studies.
The closest work to my own is that of organizational communication researchers DiSanza and Bullis, who studied a group of U.S. Forest Service employees reading and responding to an employee newsletter. Those who experienced "disidentification" with the newsletter often had that feeling because what the newsletter said did not match their own personal experiences as Forest Service employees. My finding that Acme employees evaluated a somewhat similar text according to how well it matched their own personal experiences of working at Acme confirms that finding, extends it to another group of employees in a different type of organization, and "thickens" it by giving a detailed, nuanced picture of how a group of (mostly) disaffected employees "read against" an official company publication. It also sheds new light on a way of reading that our discipline has called "critical literacy" and raises questions about to what extent we as a field have thought through that concept.

**The Protocol Document**

The text used in the protocols was a three-page, 886-word essay located in an attractive booklet entitled "Recreating Acme: The Inside View: Employee Perspectives on their Changing Roles Across the Company" (hereafter referred to as "the booklet"). It is dated 1997 but several participants told me it was distributed in early 1998. The 31-page booklet is the second in an annual series of booklets that started in early 1997; one participant recalled a memo in which Bill Sayles announced to employees the imminent arrival of the first booklet, saying that it had

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"humorous illustrations" to help employees understand it. True enough, the booklet is bound with card stock and illustrated with both color drawings and black and white photos of actual Acme employees.

The cover has a pastel-hued cartoon under the title, showing five people in the center of the page looking off at and talking about an object that we cannot see, which is located past the lower left corner of the booklet. The most prominent individual, a white male, is looking at the unseen object through a giant foreshortened telescope. The word "Acme" is visible to us in the telescope's lens, suggesting that the object being examined is Acme. The other individuals (two white women, one white man, and one light-skinned black man), are grouped around him; they appear to looking at and talking about the same unseen object at which the telescope man is peering.

Inside, the booklet begins with a one-page letter from Bili Sayles, the President, stating that Acme employees help create value for the customer and inviting the reader to "meet these special people." Following the letter is a table of contents, listing ten short pieces two to four pages in length, none of which have bylines. The print is not overly large at about 10-point, but the margins are wide and almost every page of the booklet has an illustration of some kind, either a photo of an employee or a pastel-hued cartoon done in the same style as the one on the cover.

There is room for speculation about the intended audience of this booklet. According to Ronald, an employee in the department that produced and distributed the booklet, it was distributed only to employees.
That it was indeed distributed to employees is evidenced by the fact that almost all participants recognized the booklet when I first showed it to them. It seems likely, though, that the booklet was also intended for an audience of outsiders. Consider, for example, the illustration on the front cover. The five individuals are clearly looking at the company from afar. Only one of them is looking very closely, and he is so far away that he must use a telescope to do so. The telescope man and his companions all sport identical jerseys, indicating they are all on the same team, but they can hardly be on the Acme team if they are looking at the company from such a great distance. The four companions are surveying the scene much like real estate buyers might survey a piece of land: a man and a woman are gesturing toward it and talking about it, a woman is having an idea about it (signified by a yellow light bulb over her head), and a man is framing it with his hands as if envisioning a future structure or preparing to take a photograph. The overall impression made by this visual argument is that these people are a team of outsiders eagerly appraising Acme for possible purchase. Some participants suspect the same, based on their knowledge of how such documents typically circulate (“This could easily fall into the hands of somebody outside the company”) and on the content of the booklet (“I just think they’re trying to write something that looks good for um somebody else, not for necessarily the employees here even, maybe”). Further support for that suspicion is provided by the widespread and highly credible rumor that the company was being positioned for sale to a public company.
It can be concluded, then, that the booklet was crafted for at least two audiences: high-level executives from larger companies (i.e., potential buyers), and Acme employees. If that is true, then the primary purposes of the document were (1) to market the company by “educating” potential buyers about desirable features of Acme, and (2) to reproduce company-sanctioned beliefs and behaviors among employees by publishing and promoting the official spin on company reality.

The Protocol Text: “What Is the Acme Culture?”

Near the end of the booklet is the three-page essay I selected for the reading protocols, entitled “What Is the Acme Culture? The RICE Principles Guide Us as the Behavior, Rituals and Values that Define Us Evolves [sic].” That title, though grammatically flawed, sums up the thesis of the piece: that Acme has a strong, healthy culture based on company-wide acceptance of the RICE principles. Each of the four RICE principles has its own section and is defined in turn by means of quotations from actual employees, which supposedly illustrate how the RICE principles can be seen in action. “Respect” is exemplified by certain material rewards that some Acme employees receive (e.g., free mouse pads and trips to Hawaii), as well as by (the text asserts) a pleasant working atmosphere and by the racial and national diversity of Acme employees. “Integrity” is equated with hard-workingness in employees and trustiness among managers. “Customers,” the text argues, are served by Acme’s ability to get products out quickly, and by the new “services group” which sells consulting

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services. Finally, "Excellence" is traced back to Melvin and related to management's ability to speak extemporaneously. The piece concludes with a final employee quote that serves as a peroration: "Under the guiding philosophy of the RICE principles . . . Acme has an incredible level of energy and excitement that we can harness as our culture evolves" (ellipsis in original).

The protocol text conforms to some of the general precepts of good business communication, but not to most of them. For example, aside from the one grammatical error in the subtitle, it has a fairly high level of "correctness" throughout and in my judgment is written adequately well (no better) at the sentence level. It is visually appealing due to good layout, good use of color, and attractive photographs of Acme employees. It is abundantly stocked with "positive emphasis" (Locker, Business)--to a fault, though, because it whitewashes serious problems and, as Thomas puts it, "appears dishonest on the surface because it's all positive." Its authors may have been shooting for a form of "you-attitude" (Locker, Business) when they chose to build the piece around employee quotations--since "employees" were the audience, perhaps they figured that using quotes from employees would make employees feel like they themselves were being foregrounded. But the overall effect is quite the opposite: the text uses "I" quotes to present a "we" universe that purports to include the reader, but fails to include the critical, skeptical readers who are present in the audience. In addition, the four key terms are defined by example, which can work at times if the examples are well-chosen, but here the
examples are not well-chosen. Finally, an essential quality of all good business communication is that it somehow builds goodwill (Locker, Business). While some readers may feel more goodwill towards Acme after reading this text (we will meet one), my data will suggest that given the entirety of the rhetorical situation, those readers are few and far between.

The essay and the booklet in which it is located may be somewhat atypical compared to the types of texts that corporate employees most frequently encounter. Not many of those everyday texts are intended for both internal and external audiences; not many could be described as "essays" in the traditional sense; and while many workplace texts are persuasive as well as informative, most are fairly direct about it, explicitly stating what behavioral changes are desired. This text, in contrast, is an essay that merely describes a world--the happy internal world of Acme Technology. By describing that world in a certain way, using pasted-together testimonies from real employees, it attempts to convince the rest of the employees that the Acme world really is that way. Like epideictic oratory, this text asks for no behavioral change, gives no technical information, and requires nothing of the reader other than agreement and identification. Also like epideictic oratory, this text is organized by what could be called the "qualities of character" of the institution being praised. It is divided into four sections in order to discuss each of the four RICE principles in turn, which complies with the advice of the Rhetorica ad Herrenium that "the division itself should point out what we intend to
praise or censure, with the topics of character being used throughout the speech” (Murphy 118).

The protocol text is additionally interesting because despite its apparent straightforwardness as an epideictic text, it becomes much more rhetorically complex when viewed through the lens of the rhetorical situation at Acme. As we learned in Chapter 3, relations between upper management and Acme employees (at least in R&D) had already deteriorated badly by the time this booklet was published. Upper management had dumped the RICE principles in word and in deed, and employees had been thoroughly appalled by the changes that had come to pass within the company. Participants tell me that this text, then, was a “backpedal” which upper management hoped would smooth over the conflict over RICE and convince employees that the RICE principles are still “the bedrock of our culture.” What upper management did not do, however, according to participants, was actually readopt the RICE principles. Upper management continued to treat employees dismissively (not practicing Respect); they continued to be dishonest with employees and other constituents (not having a high level of Integrity); they continued to reduce Customer Support staff and find new ways of deflecting blame (ownership) for technical problems onto the customer (not valuing Customers), and they continued to sacrifice quality for speed to market (not striving for Excellence). As a result, employees perceive the protocol text and all other pro-RICE literature as “lip service” and remain unconvinced that upper management actually believes what it is saying.
In other words, the text "invokes" (Ede and Lunsford) an audience of happy, credulous employees playing "the believing game" (Elbow), but at least one of the audiences that it actually "addressed"—my group of participants—consisted mostly of unhappy, skeptical employees playing "the doubting game." The text asserts that the RICE principles are the "bedrock" of the Acme culture—which I would argue is a true statement, depending on which employees you ask—but its real persuasive goal may have been to convince employees that upper management believes in the RICE principles and everything is once again "hunky-dory" (Tape 24, June 25, 1999). We have a unique situation, then: here we have an employee audience that already believes in the core values of the organization, being asked by professional rhetors to believe that those core values are held by upper management as well. Imagine the following scenario in ancient Greece: a rhetor gives a public display lecture before a large audience, praising a person or institution for exemplifying a set of values that the rhetor pretends to hold but does not actually hold. The possibility that epideictic oratory might ever be insincere is not addressed by the classical rhetoricians, but even if it were not possible in ancient Greece, the essay "What Is the Acme Culture" suggests that it may be possible today.

This type of rhetorical situation is not addressed in any of the organizational communication literature I have consulted. Textbooks on organizational communication usually assume that the upper management's stated values are its real values: that when upper management says, "here, believe in these values," it is inviting employees
to enter with itself into a community of like-minded believers. That belief
has its roots in George Cheney’s theory of unobtrusive control, which
Conrad and Poole paraphrase as follows in their popular organizational
communication textbook: “if employees can be persuaded to accept the
beliefs and values of upper management, they can be counted on to make
the same kinds of decisions that upper management would make” (Conrad
and Poole 120). Unobtrusive control is particularly important in
“knowledge-intensive” companies because the nature of the work makes
direct, “obtrusive” control difficult to establish and maintain (Deetz 185).

It may be true that holding upper management’s values will in
together guide employees to behave in ways desired by upper management--
but the protocol text and the situation at Acme raises the question of what
happens when employees sincerely hold management’s stated values, but
management only pretends to hold them. That question complicates the
theory of unobtrusive control, or at least its application:

some symbolic acts, and some interpretations of various
symbolic acts, may create a depiction of the organizational
culture that is consistent with the values and beliefs that
management would prefer that employees accept. In these
cases, symbolism functions as a powerful mode of
organizational motivation and control. But, other acts, and
other interpretations, may be irrelevant to the preferences of
management; still others may oppose or resist the preferred
set of values, beliefs, and patterns of action. In these cases
organizational symbolism may actually reduce managerial
control and may “motivate” employees to act in ways that are
not preferred by management. (Conrad and Poole 121)

It is not clear in this quotation who is doing the “acting,” but in the case of
Acme, if we view the protocol text as a symbolic act, we can see that its
argument in favor of the RICE principles is “irrelevant to the [genuine] preferences of management” in a way that ultimately “reduces managerial control” and widens the rhetorical and social chasm between upper management and employees.

I chose to use “What Is the Acme Culture?” for this study because since no one has studied critical literacy or critical reading among adults in the workplace, it makes sense to start with a document that is likely to be read critically by participants. Also, it was significant to me that the booklet was a gift from a participant, who found it a particularly heinous example of disingenuousness on the part of upper management. I selected the essay on Acme culture because that subject is equally accessible to all Acme employees (other than brand new employees, and I did not invite brand new employees to participate), which allows me to follow Haswell et al.’s recommendation that the topic of a reading protocol text be equally accessible to all participants. Finally, the fact that it purports to describe the Acme culture allows me to develop my own understanding of how credible it is or isn’t, based on participant views of the culture and on my own ethnographic data.

Conditions Under Which Protocols Were Conducted

The twenty-six participants who gave open-ended interviews were invited to participate in an optional “reading activity,” in which they would be asked to read a document and narrate their inner thoughts as they read. Of the twenty-six interview participants, 20 agreed to do the reading.
activity; 18 of the 20 agreed to be taped, and it is these 18 individuals whose protocols constitute the data corpus for this chapter. Eleven of the eighteen were female and seven were male; thirteen were white and five were people of color. Their ages ranged from early 30s to mid-50s and they had been employed at Acme anywhere from two to seventeen years.

Fourteen participants worked in Research and Development or the closely related department of Customer Support, but four were in other areas: one in Payroll, one in Human Resources, one in Communications, and one in Information Systems. Seven of my participants were in the management chain--five project managers and two people managers--but all seven were safely below the rank of AVP. The other eleven participants were nonmanagerial employees such as technicians, developers, technical writers, and customer support representatives. All worked in the same building at company headquarters in Codeville.

At the start of each protocol, I asked the participant to select a safe and comfortable location. Two chose off-site locations (a restaurant and a private dwelling), three chose semi-public areas in company headquarters (a waiting room, an employee break room, and an indoor balcony area separated from the cubicle clusters by a glass wall), but thirteen, a clear majority, chose one of the many conference rooms located within the Acme building. These rooms vary in size (small, medium and large) but are all fully enclosed, with floor-to-ceiling walls and real doors that actually shut, making them much more private than cubicles. Inside each of these rooms is a table with a small black teleconferencing unit in the center, turned off

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and inert. The walls are mostly bare except for the ubiquitous clock and whiteboard; some have an Acme poster or two on the walls.

After settling with the participant at the table, I would ask the participant’s permission to tape record the reading activity, restating the confidentiality agreement and explaining that I and my transcribers would be the only people to listen to the tape. After securing the participant’s permission, answering his or her questions, and turning on the tape recorder, I would bring out the booklet and ask if the participant had seen it before. Most had. I would then point out the “Acme Culture” essay; leaf through its three pages to show the beginning, middle and end; hand it to the participant; and instruct him or her to read the document from start to finish, stopping at any point to share with me his or her thoughts in response to the text. In each case, I explained that while it would be better for the research if the participant were to read aloud, those who preferred to read silently would be permitted to do so. Seven read aloud and eleven chose to read silently.

While the participants were reading and narrating their thoughts, I played a flexible role, ranging from passive listening to active probing. My choice of when to be passive and when to be more active depended on the flow of information coming from each participant. With those who spoke and shared freely, giving lots of information, I mostly just nodded my head and made little supportive interjections such as “Uh-huh,” “Really?” or “Mmmm.” With those who were less loquacious, I was more active, breaking long silences by asking where they were in the text and what they
were thinking about it. I also looked for nonverbal signals such as facial expressions or nonverbal sounds and mined those moments by asking exploratory questions, such as, "You’re smiling. What are you thinking?" "What made you say ‘Pffft’?" I chose not to take written notes at all, with any participants, because I wanted each person to feel intently listened to, and also because I suspected participants might feel more self-conscious if they saw me scribbling away while they were reading and speaking.

As a result of those choices on my part, almost all participants seemed to feel reasonably comfortable during the exercise and seemed to give full, candid answers to all of my questions, even when the conversation moved into sensitive topics. Some participants even reported enjoying the activity (e.g., “This is much more fun than work”).

**Critical Reading Strategies Practiced by Participants**

Careful analysis with the help of two independent coders revealed that these participants employed eighteen critical reading strategies as they evaluated and responded to this text. In Table 5 below, these strategies have been grouped into four major categories: *weighing claims against perceived realities, examining the author(s), examining the construction of arguments, and evaluating the document’s overall effectiveness*. The first pass of inductive analysis originally identified 96 strategies, but to prevent the taxonomy from being too sensitive, I chose to eliminate those which were not used by at least three participants and/or which could not be subsumed into another category. Thus, while my
1. **WEIGHING CLAIMS AGAINST PERCEIVED REALITIES**

such as...

1.1 how things really are, or were, at Acme (277)
1.2 the allocation of money and material resources at Acme (44)
1.3 an ongoing stream of internal Acme communications (98)
1.4 knowledge of business and/or the software industry (59)
1.5 the reader’s own life or work experiences, outside of Acme (25)

2. **EXAMINING THE AUTHOR(S)**

such as by...

2.1 identifying author or speaker by name, job, department, or location (27)
2.2 assessing author’s or speaker’s knowledge, intelligence, or competence (22)
2.3 describing author’s or speaker’s values, motives, worldview (43)

3. **EXAMINING THE CONSTRUCTION OF ARGUMENTS**

(at the paragraph level or below)

for example...

3.1 summarizing a particular claim (20)
3.2 noting or critiquing definitions (41)
3.3 assessing the logical support for a claim (38)
3.4 noting how quotations or sources may have been selected (27)
3.5 noting or critiquing style, phrasing, or word choice (22)
3.6 noting or critiquing visual arguments (7)
3.7 imagining local revisions (3)

4. **EVALUATING THE DOCUMENT’S OVERALL EFFECTIVENESS**

(at the global or discourse level)

such as by...

4.1 stating and critiquing the thesis and/or overall purpose of the text (34)
4.2 assessing the value, quality or overall effectiveness of the document (67)
4.3 imagining global revisions (7)

Table 5: Critical Reading Strategies Practiced by Participants
analysis started with an overly fine-grained “first pass,” it evolved through several cycles of application, discussion and revision into the taxonomy we see in the Table 5.

The most striking result, to me, is that participants very clearly favored strategies in the first category: Weighing Claims against Perceived Realities. Only one strategy from that category, weighing claims against one’s own life or work experience outside of Acme, was not among the five most popular strategies. All participants, regardless of how favorably or unfavorably they viewed the text, showed a remarkable alertness to consonance and dissonance—to correspondences and disconnects between the Acme culture as presented in the text and the Acme they experience in their daily working lives. As one might predict after reading Chapter 3, they were keenly sensitive to dissonance, which is a major theme in the employee culture of Acme R&D. Although participants were very different from each other and came from a variety of backgrounds, every one of them chose to hold the text up to the light of experience, evaluating its credibility based on how well it matched up with their own everyday perceptions.

That major finding confirms DiSanza and Bullis’ peripheral finding that employees who experience “disidentification” with a company publication (i.e., who respond negatively to the document and do not “identify” with it) sometimes have that negative response because their experiences in the organization do not match what the text is saying. However, because most of DiSanza and Bullis’ participants identified with and had positive feelings about the newsletter they were shown, and
because the study as a whole was designed to catalogue identification responses, not disidentification responses, according to a pre-existing identification taxonomy, DiSanza and Bullis were able only to note the small number of disidentification responses they received, without describing them in-depth. Moreover, because their study focused on how employees responded to an entire issue of the organization’s newsletter, they were not able to observe employees reading and responding to a single article, blow-by-blow, from start to finish. Their study was the first to examine employee responses to “identification inducements” in a routine in-house publication (350); mine is the first to examine in depth the critical reading strategies of (mostly) disaffected employees as they read through a single article within a nonroutine, epideictic, in-house publication.

Judging from the total number of times each strategy was used by participants, the five most popular strategies were:

1. Weighing claims against perceptions of how things really are, or were, at Acme (277 occurrences, used by 18 participants)
2. Weighing claims against perceptions of an ongoing stream of internal Acme communications (98 occurrences, used by 18 participants)
3. Assessing the value, quality or overall effectiveness of the text (67 occurrences, used by 15 participants)
4. Weighing claims against knowledge of business or the software industry (59 occurrences, used by 16 participants)
5. Weighing claims against perceptions of the allocation of money and material resources at Acme (44 occurrences, used by 15 participants)

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As we can see from the parenthetical numbers in Table 2, four of the five most popular strategies fall into the first category, “Weighing Claims against Perceived Realities.” The one top-five strategy from a different major category was assessing the value, quality or overall effectiveness of the text, with 67 uses. That strategy was originally placed in the “overall effectiveness” category because at the time I was also interested in the extent to which employees made local as opposed to global critiques. However, reviewing participant remarks reveals that the vast majority of their global assessments were based on the degree to which the document’s overall vision matched with the participant’s overall experience. When seen in that light, all of the top five strategies involve employees comparing the text to their own personal experiences and perceptions of working at Acme.

Below are examples from the data, presented to illustrate each of the five most popular critical reading strategies. Many of the examples contain a line or two from the essay “What Is the Acme Culture?” as well as the participant’s response to those lines. I have distinguished between the participant’s words and the text’s words by placing quotation marks around words from the text. Participant and researcher utterances have no quotation marks around them.
Weighing Claims Against Perceptions of How Things Really Are, or Were, at Acme

The single most popular strategy by far, used by all participants a total of 277 times, was “weighing claims against how things really are, or were, at Acme.” A brief pass over the many places where this code was used reveals that “how things are or were” encompasses a wide variety of perceptions about the company and its culture, including (but not limited to) how work typically gets done, how specific people interact with others and would probably respond in a given situation, how decisions are made and what motives tend to drive them, how the company has changed, how employees see the culture, and what problems the company is facing.

For example, this participant reads the title of the piece in light of her perceptions of how work typically gets done:

Jackie: Okay, “What is the Acme culture.” So this is of course what marketing communications wants me to think about the Acme culture. That sort of the President and the owner and other people have looked at, but not really, because what they did was probably rammed through to get it done on time to be distributed, so that they would meet their quotas to be able to get their bonuses. So that’s the first thought I have [laughs]. (Tape 27, June 28, 1999)

Jackie has seen how people in those positions work at Acme, so she immediately maps that onto the document as she reads it.

Another participant, a relative newcomer with just under three years of time at Acme, holds the text up to the light of what she has perceived about different seniority groups in the Acme culture:

Amanda: “Everyone at Acme is important.” It’s funny: at Acme, there’s like this gap. There’s people that have been here, I’m even one of those people, been here less than
three years. And then it seems to jump to ten years and then like fourteen and over.

Paula: Hm.

Amanda: And the people that have been here a really long time say that they see that the company has changed. And the newcomers coming in seeing this, we don't know what it was like before unless we talk to one of the old-timers. So this is true, the way it says here is, this is true. But what this used to mean five or ten years ago and what it means today are different. (Tape 29, June 30, 1999)

As a relative newcomer, Amanda is in a good position to appreciate the differences between the various seniority groups (as I am calling them) at Acme, and she uses those perceptions to complicate the idea that the text must be either true or false. "Respect," for example, might have meant a certain set of things fifteen years ago, but those things are no longer done at Acme. How the RICE principles were expressed back then is not the way they are expressed today. Because Amanda was not here fifteen years ago, or even five years ago, she is able to read the text in light of her own relatively recent experience, while knowing that others would arrive at different interpretations based on their own different experiences.

Samuel reads the piece in light of his experience with specific people and types of people at Acme, finding the text to be inaccurate in its representations of what certain people might really say:

Samuel: This is difficult because this is so obviously a propaganda piece and it calls into question so much, so I'm not sure--

Paula: How do you know it's a propaganda piece?

Samuel: I would never--Oh, for example, Tom Hendershot, VP of Human Resources, he says, "a set of values,
behaviors and rituals that define us." I have difficulty seeing Tom making a statement like that.

Paula: Because you know Tom?

Samuel: Yes. "[Culture is] how we act, what we believe in and the precedents and policies that we follow." I'll go with that. Okay. Maybe I should--well, I'll read quietly. I'll jump in.

Paula: That's fine, there's no need to worry about noise. I mean it's fine if you want to read it aloud. It's just fine. Or silently, either way.

[Pause while he reads silently]

Samuel: Okay, okay. Well, this: "Acting as a reporter, Hendershot has been interviewing Acme managers around the world on the topic of culture. He found that our culture is strongly rooted in our principles with respect to integrity and customers." That is--dubious to me, that that would be the result of an objective interview process.

Paula: Hm, why is that dubious to you?

Samuel: Well when I've interviewed Acme managers, frankly they don't say that. I think we would answer that in meetings or probably with an interview with Tom Hendershot, who may answer that. But I don't know that that's the general sense that our culture is strongly rooted in that. (Tape 26, June 28, 1999)

Samuel's perception, along with many others, relates to the major cultural theme of dissonance, the disconnect between what people say and what they do. Lori picks up on the dissonance as well, focusing her attention on her perceptions of upper management's efforts to change the culture of Acme while still conducting business as usual:

Lori: "Acting as a reporter of sorts, Hendershot has been interviewing Acme managers around the world on the topic of culture." What a waste of time. [Laughs]

Paula: Why, why do you say that?

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Lori: On the topic of culture? I don't know, it's um--Unless you are going to commit a great deal of, unless you're going to commit whatever it takes to change the culture, because it's probably the hardest thing to change, because it's people's nature, really, that you're changing--why go in and go through this effort if you're not going to commit to it?

Paula: How do you know they're not going to commit to it?

Lori: I've seen it.

Paula: What have you seen?

Lori: Ah, we've been, you know, this talk about culture comes out, but there are no great changes and what Acme is committed to is producing our product, supporting our customers, ah, and moving forward, and what a lot of our executives are committed to is, um--those same things for the benefit of their own egos, pockets, etc. That's what drives it. (Tape 34, July 2, 1999)

What drives a culture, then, is the culture, to Lori, and those drivers are more evident in what gets done and how it gets done than in any amount of verbiage about what the culture is like and how it is going to change.

Two particular aspects of "how things really are" (as perceived by participants) deserve special consideration: what I came to call an "ongoing stream" of internal Acme communication, and the allocation of money and material resources at Acme. I singled those out because they were mentioned more often than other specific aspects of Acme reality, and also because they appear to be particularly revealing of how critical literacy looks when practiced in the workplace. The "ongoing stream" category will be discussed next because it was the second most popular strategy; the
“money and material resources” category will be discussed last in the section because it was the fifth most popular strategy.

**Weighing Claims against Perceptions of an Ongoing Stream of Internal Acme Communications**

This was the number two most popular reading strategy practiced by participants. All eighteen participants made remarks that situated the booklet in relation to what I came to see as an “ongoing stream” of formal and informal communication within Acme. This ongoing stream constitutes another element of the internal company reality against perceptions of which textual claims are weighed by critical workplace readers. “Formal communications” include memos, meetings, important emails, internal promotions, et cetera; “informal communications” include lower-stakes transactions such as casual emails and unsupervised conversations. Every participant at some point compared a claim in the text with other claims that had been made in previous communications from management and/or to what he or she had heard in meetings and conversations in the headquarters building, and/or attempted to determine the date when the booklet came out. Attempting to determine the date of distribution is relevant here because participants who did this seemed to want to locate the booklet in their own “Story of Acme” narratives, which had been socially constructed already through casual conversations.

The most obvious and relevant form of previous communication would be other communications that had, like this one, been sent from
upper management to all employees. Samuel mentions the opening speech
given by new President Bill Sayles upon his accession in 1996:

Samuel: “Celebrating our RICE principles.” Of course, it’s hard
not to remember the fact that in one of his first public
meetings here, one of the first things that Bill Sayles
had to say was that we were going to reconsider the
RICE principles [laughs].

Paula: When was that?

Samuel: Right when he started.

Paula: When did he start?

Samuel: Three years ago.

Paula: Oh, and so you remember that, and which sentence
really stands out to you here?

Samuel: “As our re-invention progresses, these are the things
we don’t want to change as individuals and as a
company.” This is one of the first things he wanted to
change. (Tape 26, June 28, 1999)

Samuel was not the only person to mention that speech. Other
participants remember it too, contrasting it and the changes that followed
with the very different message conveyed by the essay.

Previous print communications are remembered as well:

John: “These are the building blocks, the foundations of our
re-creation.” That’s horse manure. When you look at
the first book, you will see no discussion of the RICE
principles at all, if I remember correctly. (Tape 17,
June 23, 1999)

John is referring to the first booklet, which came out in 1997; the
“Recreating Acme” booklet came out the following year. Juxtaposing
previous messages in the company voice with this one reveals a huge gap
between what “they” said before and what “they” are saying now, according to John’s perceptions.

A similar gap obtains between what upper management says and what middle and lower management communicates in the more quotidian exchanges of everyday working life:

Cathy: Um, I think that’s a fallacy.
Paula: What?
Cathy: [Our culture is] “Strongly rooted in the RICE principles.” I don’t know if I should digress now, but--
Paula: Yes, please explain why you think it’s a fallacy.
Cathy: The reason I think that is because ever since I’ve been here, three years, I’ve had eight managers and not one of them has discussed this.
Paula: Mmmm.
Cathy: Not one. I’ve heard it being talked about from different meetings where they said “we’ve got to talk about it.” HR didn’t talk to me about it. Um, none of the managers I’ve had have talked about it, other than a slight reference to oh, yeah, that’s the Acme thing. So you can tell right away that they’re not supporting it. I mean it’s not something that’s promoted. We get posters on it and we get things in our little mailbox on it, but [laughing] the managers don’t promote it. (Tape 23, June 25, 1999)

Samuel perceives the same phenomenon but sees it from a higher level in the company hierarchy:

Samuel: Yes, Acme is “a company where the individual counts,” and there is probably less than average amount of back-stabbing and failure to cooperate here compared to other companies, I would guess. At the same time, there is a mixed message about following the rules and not following the rules, which has been a point of frustration for some people. In other words, there are messages saying, follow the procedures and there are
messages saying, get results whatever you have to do. And so there is—and both are honored. So that's—at least in R&D, that's been sort of an issue. (Tape 26, June 28, 1999)

Samuel's higher position allows him to see that he is not the only one who is getting mixed messages; conflicted communication is a problem that affects the whole R&D department. His awareness and interpretation of that problem enables him to critique the credibility of a textual claim.

The credibility gap between previous communications and this one is also evident as participants are spurred by the text to remember meetings and casual conversations:

Brenda: “Speed of execution is paramount to meet the changing needs of our industry.” This is a *hotly* debated topic. I don't know how they can just say that.

Paula: Really?

Brenda: “And it's driving everyone to reach for new milestones” --and drink, for that matter [laughs].

Paula: How do you know it's a hotly debated topic?

Brenda: Because I'm constantly in meetings where people talk about this subject and everyone's got a different opinion.

Paula: About speed of execution?

Brenda: Speed of execution, speed to market.

Paula: Some people think it's good and some people think it's bad?

Brenda: Yeah, that's right. And everybody has their reasons and everybody's reasons are different and I'm willing to talk to people that have good reasons. Some people do.

Paula: So this author is, by phrasing it that way, doing what?

Brenda: He is capturing one part of the argument. “Speed of execution is paramount to meet the changing needs of
our industry.” Certainly not everybody holds that opinion. (Tape 25, June 28, 1999)

Here the reader has pointed out a fact that had been conveniently deselected by the author(s) of the document: many members of the organization disagree with upper management's belief that speed of execution is paramount.

Another way of situating the text in an ongoing stream of previous messages is attempting to determine the date when the booklet was distributed. One participant did this in an especially interesting way: after reading the claim that we need to keep holding on to the RICE principles as the company evolves, he imagined a time when a textual claim would have been true, based on the stories he has heard about company history:

Thomas: It's true that we need to do this, but it doesn't acknowledge that we sort of already blew it a little bit. We could have moved--this would have been a great paragraph in 1993. It's like, “okay we're going to grow a lot now and as we grow we've got to remember to hold on to these principles.” Someone in 1994, 1995 and 1996 was forgetting this.

Paula: And how do you know that they were forgetting that?

Thomas: Well I hear, and maybe--since I wasn't here, I don't know. But I hear about Acme as a smaller shop and it was like, the RICE principles. I mean you could write this and you could take it without a grain of salt. But that wasn't true in 1995 and 1996.

Paula: Because you were here then? You've been here--


Paula: Ninety-four, right. So you don't remember a time when this would have been an absolutely true piece? In your personal experience?
Thomas: Yes, but I could see that we were, I saw the slipping going on. I think I came in right on the cusp of something. I was on the Forward team, starting up the BQ project, and the company was still a lot smaller than it is now, maybe 800 people. And I could see the slipping going on, I think.

Paula: What did the slipping look like?

Thomas: Um, people would talk about—people would talk about --how to treat people, how to treat our products, um, how to treat our customers in terms of what we did as R&D, which has a lot to do with our quality processes. And they started getting shot down more. And everything became about the dates. (Tape 24, June 25, 1999)

Thomas points out that the text does not take into account the recent history of the company, using two kinds of evidence for this counterclaim: his perception of what the company was like before he arrived (which he learned from his coworkers), and a long series of meetings and transactions that he himself witnessed. By pointing out that the text might have been valid at a particular point in time, but is not valid now, Thomas is not just situating but re-situating the text in relation to the ongoing stream of formal and informal communications that he has received.

These and many other quotations from participants suggest a strong tendency for participants to interpret the booklet in relation to a context made up of other communications, be they formal or informal. They hear rumors about such-and-such, they hear talk about thus-and-so in meetings, coworkers tell them about how it used to be, then they get back to their desks and receive X message from management. Taken together, the perceived totality of all communications in the Acme workplace (and probably others as well) constitutes, I argue, a form of workplace
intertextuality. This intertextuality has a fluid, temporal quality as it is experienced by employees, like a chronological river of texts and utterances.

The phrase “ongoing stream,” then, is appropriate: every communication is part of an ongoing stream of perceived messages, swirling through time in a company-specific world. The way Acme employees read any given message from management is pervasively informed by everything else they have read and heard in that workplace, especially in the most recent time period but even including the distant past. One reason why the “Recreating Acme” booklet was so spectacularly unsuccessful with the employees was because it did not take previous communications into account. The booklet has a certain decontextualized arrogance about it, as if implicitly presenting itself as a free-standing text that ostensibly serves as the reader’s sole source of information about how the company does business. That may have been a reasonable assumption with regard to an audience of outsiders or brand new employees, but clearly that was not how it was perceived by these medium- and long-term employees.

Assessing the Value, Quality or Overall Effectiveness of the Text

Fifteen out of eighteen participants evaluated the overall effectiveness of the document without being explicitly prompted to do so. Their evaluations were mostly negative, as you have seen, although some participants did evaluate it positively, which I will show and discuss later
in this chapter. One revealing window on their overall perceptions of the
document is not revealed by the protocol data: many times when I would
first show the document to a participant, he or she would make some kind
of a face, sometimes subtle, sometimes not. One person had an
immediate, almost visceral reaction:

Paula: Um, I would like to show you, you may have already
seen this, you recognize it.

Brenda: [Gasp] The “Re-Creating Acme” brochure! [Covers eyes
with both hands] Get it away from me!

Paula: Why do you react that way?

Brenda: Because I hate the thing, I hate the way they put it
together.

Paula: Why?

Brenda: Um, because pictures are supposed to help you
decipher words and the pictures themselves are almost
impossible to decipher. And it just is--it's a
propaganda piece and everyone knows it. And it's hard
to read and it's hard to understand and it's---boring. I
hate these. (Tape 25, June 28, 1999)

Brenda’s use of the word “propaganda” was not unique. We heard Samuel
use it in a previous section; now here is Eliott, simultaneously defining
“propaganda” and (without saying it) the theory of unobtrusive control:

Eliott: The whole piece is a piece of propaganda. It's not an
analysis of the culture, it's a spin of the culture, to try
and present an idealized view of it without recognizing
some of the realities.

Paula: Why would they put out a piece like that? If it's not
an analysis, and it's just a spin, why would they do
that spin?

Eliott: To try and create an emotional response that leads to a
kind of behavior they wish from the employees.
Paula: Hmm. And how do you identify this as a piece of propaganda? What is the, what are the tip-offs for you?

Eliott: What are the tip-offs? [Laughs] It's signed by the President! (Tape 33, July 1, 1999)

I did not ask Eliott if he was aware of the theory of unobtrusive control, but he just said it in a nutshell: by putting out pieces like this, upper management hopes to create an emotional response that will elicit desired behaviors among employees (such as, for example, working extra hard, spending discretionary time on company projects, and above all, staying with the company). His last remark, that the piece is recognizable as propaganda because “it’s signed by the President,” is hard to interpret definitively: it could mean that any piece of employee communication that has been signed by the President of any company is probably “propaganda” designed to induce some kind of emotional reaction; alternatively, it could be a comment on Sayles himself, that he is such a “salesy kind of guy” (John, Tape 16, June 23, 1999) that everything that bears his imprimatur is going to be pervaded by the “salesy” perspective. Whatever the case, by identifying it as propaganda, as “spin,” Eliott is making a negative assessment of the text’s overall effectiveness.

Brenda waxes more thoughtful later in her protocol, as she makes an overall assessment by explaining why the document is useless to her as a people manager:

Brenda: As a manager I read this and I think, boy I wish that there was more to this, I wish this had more oomph that I could really get behind and, you know, try to motivate my staff with. But this stuff is impossible to understand and--I mean, it doesn't talk about what excellence is. What is excellence? It doesn't talk about
what respect is. None of these comments really talk to me about what respect is. Respecting the people's intelligence. You know, respecting that they have lives outside of work. You know, respecting that they come and do a job because they've agreed to do that. And that they will pretty much do what they're asked to do, and respecting their needs in that agreement. I mean, integrity? You know, integrity, honesty and ethics. Those are really difficult. I mean when you look at integrity, honesty and ethics and you think, people go to school and spend years discussing and then trying to understand what integrity, honesty and ethics is. But here I've got four para--not even four paragraphs and it's supposed to really give me something to talk about. That's why I come back to my feeling that either you walk in to a situation--you grew up with it, you walk into a situation with it, you figure out for yourself that it's what you want, so you've adopted it. Or you don't have it. And this one and a half page discussion certainly isn't going to instill it in me. (Tape 25, June 28, 1999)

Brenda points out the shallowness of the essay, the lack of substantive discussion of the values that are supposedly central to the Acme culture.

She also uses her perceptions of how people generally are and how unlikely it is that individual employees will adopt the official company values if they do not already hold those values themselves.

Luke also points out the lack of substantive discussion, bringing in his perceptions of the actions of upper management and noting the lack of substantial discussion in the Acme work environment as well:

Luke: The whole article is about the RICE principles, it's all it's talking about. I mean its title is "Acme culture." Um . . . They've been giving these things lip service for a long time. But the biggest thing, most people find these things in conflict with the actions of upper management. You know, integrity and respect--they lie to us. They're known to lie, and many of their lies are well known. So these things seem a little hypocritical. The thing is that these RICE principles, all they ever do is lecture us occasionally about them. Like this article. There's never any program to discuss what respect is
and what we're doing to achieve it. You know, there's never any such thing going on. Or integrity at Acme, there's never any company initiative to promote the RICE ideas except to publish articles like this. And to stand up in front of people and say that they're important. There's never any attempt to be examples for us to emulate and there's never any attempt to develop processes in ways that help people understand what they mean--

Paula: Hm.

Luke: --and what they are, you know, and to see concrete examples of it here. I mean I've been here twelve years and we've had RICE principles. The most concrete thing they've ever done, and they've done this twice, is give us little pins that say RICE. I have two of them, one from this year and one from ten years ago. So um, it just seems hypocritical to me when I see these.

(Tape 28, June 29, 1999)

Luke’s response repeats the “ongoing stream” phenomenon I described earlier: he perceives the essay, overall, as hypocritical because its message has not been consistently integrated into the ongoing stream of everyday communications at Acme. Moreover, the message of the essay contrasts with the actions of upper management, whom Luke perceives as preaching integrity while lying to employees—who lecture employees occasionally but do not back those lectures up with concrete behaviors.

Luke’s use of the word “lecture” is appropriate, because another serious problem with the overall text as assessed by participants is its condescending tone, which may result from a “trickle-down” paradigm of management-to-employee communication and its failure to address each segment of the employee audience. Ronald, a communications manager, puts it this way:

Ronald: I have a history with this document, so it's probably not fair.
Paula: Oh do you? What is your history with the document?

Ronald: Well, our group created it. Um--I think when it came out, I think this was the second one, when the first one came out, I don't think most people, it was different so, it was very new to Acme--this type of, this type of document, in and of itself, and I don't think most people believed it.

Paula: Why do you think they didn't believe it?

Ronald: Uh, I think it talked down, it talked down at them. It didn't talk to them. I mean, I read this right here. "Progress report." I mean, "we hired a new VP," we "interviewed corporate management." Well, culture is everyone. Did anyone talk to any employees? They looked at--they "talked to managers around the world on the topic of culture." Well, managers don't--I think Acme focuses a lot on talking to managers. I don't think Acme focuses a lot on talking to non-managers. Workers. (Tape 34, July 2, 1999)

Ronald has that perception despite the fact that the essay is almost entirely constructed out of employee quotes, because Ronald sees through the calculated use of employee testimony: the piece does have a condescending tone overall and there is considerable evidence in the text that the piece is biased in many ways towards managers. In making that observation, Ronald has ferreted out a possible aspect of upper management's ideology: workers are to be talked at rather than talked to.

A few moments later, he underscores the lack of two-way dialogue between upper management and employees, pointing out the lack of substance as well:

Ronald: I don't think it says that much. I think it says a lot, but it doesn't. I think it's a lot that doesn't say much. I think it doesn't really speak to the individual. I think it was, in my mind, put together to say, "Here," you know, "Here's where we're going," but no one ever sat down with the group and talked to them about it. I
think when these came out, and as we went through our re-creation, I think again it was the core management team meets with the managers, who then are to meet with their employees. But there's a disconnect between, you know, instead of, you know, it's like when you played the game as a child, you know, you sit in a circle and you pass the message along. By the time, you know, you read the message at the end and is it the same message? I don't think it is. And I think that's what happens with documents like this, ah, that the message is not--I think there's something in here, but it's not what, it's not clear to employees. This a lot for an employee to absorb, I think. A lot to ask them to absorb, particularly at a time of change. I mean, it's a nice piece, it's beautifully done, but I just don't think it was the ah--I think there were probably better ways to communicate this information. (Tape 34, July 2, 1999)

If I may be forgiven for staying with one participant for so long, I would like to share one more excerpt from Ronald, who naturally had a lot to say about the document's overall effectiveness and his perceptions of a problematic lack of dialogue between upper management and workers, because he was a member of the communications department. Here he contributes important information about what happened, and didn't happen, after the booklet was published. According to Ronald, upper management did no follow-up to find out how the document was perceived, and many of the recipients just tossed it into their garbage cans.

Ronald: There was never any follow-up to asking employees, "Well, what do you think about it?" I think that would have been important because a lot of these, I know a lot of people didn't find these particularly, particularly useful. And I think there needed to--there should have been follow-up to say, "Well, was this a useful vehicle for you to understand where Acme is going?" And that didn't happen. I mean, there are a lot of things here that I don't think people necessarily cared about and so I just don't--just reading it, I don't think that anyone would grasp, particularly for employees, I don't think
they would grasp what Acme was going after. I think it was a hard document to expect them to understand.

Paula: You think they couldn’t understand it? Like, intellectually?

Ronald: Oh, not intellectually, just to absorb, just to say, to give a snapshot of here’s where we’re going, here’s where Acme is going. I don’t think this document would do that for them. I think it was a very diff--I mean, a very hard document. I understood because I, um, I live it everyday, but to talk to people who, to talk to people in other departments who don’t necessarily have the same uh, I guess, the same uh, perspective that I do. We found a lot of these, if you went to the mailroom, you found a lot of these in the trash can the day they were issued, and it was like that was, to me, a measure of, well, either they were not reaching them right or something, but that was the big thing that we saw. And to me that would have, I mean I would have gone back and when I saw that, if I were a manager, I would have gone back and said, “Well, let’s do a survey and see what did they like or what they didn’t like about it. Why were there so many of them just tossed out immediately?” (Tape 34, July 2, 1999)

Ronald is in a position to know that no follow-up survey was done to find out how employees reacted—eloquent testimony in itself that upper management, for whatever reason, did not care how employees responded.

Even Ronald’s perspective, however, is of course idiosyncratic and not entirely objective. For example, based on what he said in the reading protocol, he may perceive employees as a homogeneous group, having similar opinions and similar reactions to the text. Luke complicates that opinion in some detail by describing the “salesy” worldview he sees at work in the text and explaining why he thinks the text does not succeed with the technicians in its audience:

Luke: Basically it’s the sales mentality, you know, the can-do mentality, which works great in sales, and works
terrible in technology. A real good indicator of someone who is going to fail in developing technology is someone who has a strong can-do attitude.

Paula: Mmm.

Luke: You see that it's real positive in sales and it's deadly in technology development.

Paula: Hm. Why is that?

Luke: Because it's not the kind of attitude that produces good technology.

Paula: What is the attitude that produces good technology?

Luke: Um, one of process. Understanding process and the value of the process. The steps you have to go through to get the product. Um, it's not a, you can't convince a computer with your excited attitude to perform correctly, you know?

Paula: Computers are immune to hype, aren't they?

Luke: Yeah, exactly. You've got to go through the process and it's very difficult for a lot of people to understand--even people in the field, especially people who work in sales--that you have to go through a certain process. That um, yeah, you have to go through certain steps and certain processes in order to do it. And um, a can-do attitude often--well, a belief that a can-do attitude will give you a good product will often make you skip the proper steps in the process because your attitude is so positive and you think that's what does it.

Paula: Mmm.

Luke: It's really, it's really good. It's actually a really good mark, I've seen it a lot. Someone comes in with a lot of enthusiasm, we're going to do this, we're going to get this done, and rah, rah, rah. And it's almost inevitably a sign of technological failure. You need a much different attitude.

Paula: So how does that knowledge that you just explained to me color your reading of this particular piece?

Luke: Well because I saw this, I saw nothing about that in here basically.
Paula: Nothing about--


Paula: Process.

Luke: I mean this is not about--well process should be part of the Acme culture, you know? (Tape 28, June 29, 1999)

If technical excellence is the result of a careful, methodical process and cannot be achieved by taking shortcuts, then the question of how to define excellence takes on pivotal importance for the Acme culture: either we (as Acme employees) strive for excellence in the software, or we strive for excellence in sales and speed to market. Those two types of excellence are known to work against each other in the technology industry in general, and exist in perpetual tension in many technology companies. Luke’s comments show that that dynamic is being reproduced here at Acme, and the sales-oriented management team has not found (and perhaps not even looked for) a way to speak across the sales/technology divide and reach the technicians.

Since most of my participants were in the R&D-Documentation-Support cluster, the culture of which is centered on technology and technicians, most of them were not helped, impressed, inspired, or even spoken to by the “What Is Acme Culture” essay and the booklet surrounding it--despite the fact that many of them truly believe in and deeply miss the RICE principles. People threw it away (as evidenced by the many copies that were found in the same day’s trash), ignored it (“It’s kind of like when I originally read it, I said, ‘Yeah yeah yeah right.’ I didn’t really
pay much attention"), even used it as an object of ridicule ("I saved the
suite of them because they have been fabulous entertainment for me").

Weighing Claims against Knowledge of Business and/or the Software
Industry

Many readers (16 out of 18) contrasted claims in the booklet with
things they already knew about the software industry or business in
general. For example, John uses his business knowledge to see through
the disingenuousness of a claim:

John: "Respect, everyone at Acme is important." Yes, well
you know, you don't have to be a rocket scientist to
know that a business is not a charity. They don't hire
people because they're feeling sorry for them or want to
help out. They have work that needs to be done, and
that's what this is really about. What he would say, I'm
talking from first-person experience, is that every job
that has to be done here is important. And that's, you
know, that's really true.

Paula: That every job is important?

John: Yes, I know there's a hierarchy among technicians
about what jobs are important, and I've done a number
of different kind of jobs, and I assure you that they all
have to be done. (Tape 17, June 23, 1999)

Brenda holds a theoretical position about what a constitutes a corporation,
and uses it to unpack the ideology implicit in another claim:

Brenda: "Integrity is a two way street between Acme and its
employees." Now see, there's a separating line right
there. Acme is its employees.

Paula: Mmmmm.

Brenda: Corporations fail to recognize that over and over again.
(Tape 25, June 28, 1999)
That theoretical position stands in stark contrast to the text's implied position that "a corporation is separate from its employees"; by pointing this out, Brenda is identifying an ideology behind what is actually said in the text, and talking back to it.

Another reader contrasts her discovery that Acme does not have written job descriptions with what she believes a company should do:

Cathy: A company is supposed to have a job description. Otherwise, how do you--how are you able to work employees, get them to do their job, have them have a good understanding of what they're supposed to do every day? How are you supposed to counsel an employee if they're not doing what they supposed to be doing, if you don't have any guideline? It's like driving on a freeway without lines. Where are people going to drive if they don't have a line to drive on? I mean that's why they've got lanes on the freeway.

[Both of us laugh]

Paula: So how does all of that color your reading of this page?

Cathy: Well this has to do with all the principles and customer satisfaction. I don't, to me it's all built, it's all building blocks. If you don't have--how can you achieve customer satisfaction if people don't know what their job is and they're not doing it? If they're not being cultured properly or educated or trained? (Tape 35, July 2, 1999)

As a member of the Customer Service department, Cathy is in a position to have first-hand perceptions of the impact of not having job descriptions and appropriate employee education upon customer satisfaction.

One reader demonstrated unusual rhetorical savvy in her analysis of how the piece gets its message across:
Cleo: “Culture is a difficult concept to grasp. Tom Hendershot, Vice President of Human Resources, sees it as the valu--as the set of values, behaviors and rituals that define us. It's how we act, what we believe in and the practices and policies we follow. In short, culture is a type of umbrella over the entire company.”

Paula: You're smiling. Why are you smiling?

Cleo: Because I--my belief is that companies manipulate people. But they do it subconsciously where people don't believe they're being manipulated. And people do that, too. Here he has set, he has set the definition so that as people read this, they will think, Acme is a good company because--or, or they will at least start to buy into--um--it's a good thing. You know, it's almost like it's setting the stage of, Okay, this is, that's good. Okay, what are Acme's values, behaviors or whatever. “Acting”--I'm smiling because [laughs] I think it's great the way--I don't think a lot of people dissect all of this. I think they read it and think, “Oh, okay, that's good. Yeah, that's good. You know, we're a good company. I'm going to work hard because we're a good company,” without thinking about all the other things. “What he's found is that our culture is strongly rooted in the RICE principles--respect, integrity, customers and excellence. These are the building blocks, the foundation of our recreation, but we are discovering new extensions of these values as we transform into an agile responsive organization.”

Paula: You're smiling again.

Cleo: “People are talking with great enthusiasm about teamwork, network and speed of execution and the value of our diverse workforce.” It's weird, 'cause I don't, I wasn't conscious that I was smiling. But it's, it's almost like you're subconsciously implanting these things into the psyche of the reader because you're saying respect, integrity, customers, excellence--this is what we stand for, these are the building blocks of Acme. We are re-creating ourself on these blocks. And here you say, We're going to be agile, responsive so that if a customer goes into a red-light, a hot situation where we need you to work around the clock, it's okay because we're a responsive organization and we're agile so we can do this. Um, there's teamwork, so we all work together, you know, for the benefit of the company and for the benefit of the customer. Um,
speed of execution. Our workforce is diverse so you'll see all different colors or cultures or whatever. And you gotta go, "Yeah, that's good, you know, diversity, yeah, that's good." [Laughs] (Tape 32, July 1, 1999)

Cleo almost admires the way the text insinuates itself "subconsciously" into the minds of readers, even though she herself consciously disagrees with most of what the text says. Her business training, which includes both thirteen years at Acme and a recent MBA from a local university, leads her to connect the rhetoric of the text with the rhetoric of employee communication in general. This is, to her, how things are in the business world in general: businesses manipulate their employees.

Participants also brought in insider knowledge of the software industry. For example, in critiquing a claim about "diversity" at Acme, Gwen comments on the demographics of this company versus those of other software companies:

Gwen: On paper, we have a commitment to respecting a great deal of diversity in this company, okay? That's good. But when you walk around and you really look at organizations, we don't have a great deal of diversity. For example, this is not the first software company I've worked at. This software company, if you take the programmers here, we have the smallest number of women programmers percentage-wise of any company I've ever been involved in. There are lots of good women programmers out there. We do not hire them. We do not recruit them. We do not hire them.

Paula: How do you know that?

Gwen: 'Cause they're not here.

Paula: 'Cause they're not here. So there's no possibility that you could be recruiting and not finding? Or finding and not hiring?
Gwen: Not in this industry. There are too many good women out there.

Paula: Hm.

Gwen: And we have entire programming groups where there's not a single woman programmer in the group.

Paula: Brenda's group, for example, although I don't know if Esperanza is a programmer, but--

Gwen: Well, she's not, but you're right. She's the only female. If you look in the Install group, we have one. Uh, we have, we have groups that have none. Uh, usually in most software companies I've worked in [this geographical area], roughly 40% of the programming staff were female. Now we have a much higher representation of women in management than we do in the programming staff. We probably have 20% women in management, but most of them didn't come from programming backgrounds. We, we are very heavily oriented toward having women in support roles, like Customer Support and that's where we pull the managers from.

Paula: Where does that come from?

Gwen: Well, I believe that this culture remains as, even though we're committed on paper to diversity, I don't believe the people who really run this company are committed to diversity. (Tape 34, July 2, 1999)

A person not knowing that women are plentiful in the software industry but are not plentiful at Acme would read the claim that Acme is a place where diversity is honored and have no ammunition with which to disagree; this reader, however, has years of experience in the software industry, which provides a storehouse of information and perceptions with which to counter the text.

Eliott also uses his experience in the technology industry to see through a phony implication in the text:
Eliott: “On top of that, we have the hundred percent club for sales people that shows appreciation and drives them to achieve.” Well, you know what a hundred percent club is? It’s an industry generic term.

Paula: is it?

Eliott: Yeah, yeah. All major technical companies have what they call hundred percent clubs. And what that means is that for those sales people that would achieve a hundred percent or more of their quota, that they send them to Hawaii for a week, for recognition by their peers and lots of free booze. And just enough meetings and education to still make it tax deductible for the company.

Paula: Aha.

Eliott: So that’s, you know, what they call “club,” not just in software or hardware, you could find this even in many other industries. (Tape 33, July 1, 1999)

The text implies that Acme is special because it has a 100% Club for salespeople; Eliott uses his knowledge of standard practices in the technology industry to contradict that implication.

Some readers bring to their readings special knowledge of the technical processes involved in making software. Thomas problematizes a text’s claim that product quality is an important feature of the Acme culture. “GA” stands for “general availability” and “full GA CD” signifies releasing a product (on CD) to all customers. “Regressing” is postponing the repair of a problem in the software until the next time that product is released.

Thomas: We were so bad at quality in 1997, that we put out a full GA CD of our main product suite every month. We were doing--and we picked up some problems and regressed others. And so we had to do it again. And we did it like January, February, March, April, May,
Every month we were putting out a new CD of our product.

Paula: And what's remarkable about that to you?

Thomas: One month is too short to be a software delivery cycle. (Tape 24, June 25, 1999)

Thomas uses his knowledge of how software is made to poke a hole in the text's credibility.

Jackie does the same thing on a broader level, fusing technical knowledge with industry knowledge to make an informed critique of the controversial claim that speed of execution is crucially important. First, a few necessary definitions. A “mainframe” is a type of enormous computer used by large businesses. Neither its hardware or its software are upgraded very often because upgrades are very expensive and also very “invasive”--meaning when a mainframe computer or its software gets upgraded, the system is profoundly affected, with other things needing to be changed as well. “Middleware” allows mainframes to talk to each other and is also not upgraded very frequently. “Distributed” products, in contrast, are intended for the individual user, are not invasive, and are upgraded or replaced relatively frequently. Now the excerpt:

Jackie: “Speed of execution is paramount to meet the changing needs of our industry and it’s driving everyone to reach for new milestones.” This is not true in my view. I think um---In Acme we have many Business Units. One business unit is the mainframe unit. I think speed of execution is not an issue [for the mainframe unit]. We have stable customers. What we have to do is provide good maintenance. But the maintenance to develop it takes time. It’s like if you’re building a Mercedes, you have to take the time for each part. Then you have the middleware, which again is not a real competitive market. They have to do quality
products, but it doesn't have to be great quality, because in the mainframe business, you have the mainframe software. It's used in hospitals or airports and banks, huge international banks. So it's very important that it's really high quality. The middleware, it's important there's quality, but not as important because it's not used in critical systems, it's used for transactions.

Paula: Ohhh.

Jackie: And then in the distributed world, the key is the speed to market, because of the competition to come out with similar new products. But you don't have to have high quality. That's why Microsoft can get away with shit sometimes. Because they, what they have to do is be first; they don't have to be the best.

Paula: Right, they just have to be first. Wow.

Jackie: ... So this is hype. They're always pushing, pushing, let's have speed to market. It's basically in the Business Unit Manager level. At the VP, Director level, they don't even think that way. That's what they say to people, or what the corporate hype is more, because I mean this document can easily fall into the hands of people outside the company. But in the way that they do business, they are aware of those distinctions and they think in terms of those distinctions. So again, it really depends on what business unit you're talking to. And speed to market is not the issue with me. [We in the mainframe unit] already have all [our] customers. (Tape 27, June 28, 1999)

Jackie uses her knowledge of the company, the industry and the software to unpack the text's value-laden claim that speed of execution is extremely important. She also states her perception that even upper management does not necessarily believe what it is saying in this text: if "they are aware of those distinctions and think in terms of those distinctions," then they cannot also believe that speed of execution is important for every employee in every unit of the company to pursue.
The foregoing examples show that these critical workplace readers use their knowledge of the software industry and business as a whole to resist the text through its own factual inaccuracies and skewed implications. The eighteen readers used this strategy a total of fifty-eight times, making it the fourth most popular method of problematizing the text. The popularity of this strategy suggests that knowledge of the business one happens to be in, plus general business knowledge, constitute an important aspect of “observed reality” and provide grist for an informed critique of the official “spin” on company reality.

**Weighing Claims against Perceptions of the Allocation of Money and Material Resources at Acme**

Fifteen out of eighteen participants made some reference to how they perceive the allocation of money and material resources, using this strategy a total of 44 times and making it number five in frequency of the eighteen critical reading strategies I observed. “Money” in this case refers to salaries, bonuses, benefits, and other forms of financial remuneration for individual employees, and also to the ways money is configured in the organization as a whole: budgeting, expenditures, revenue goals, etc. “Material resources” are tangible things that cost money but are not themselves money, such as space, equipment, personnel, and training. Taken together, these things speak volumes about what upper management actually values, as distinct from what upper management says it values. If the text says, “X is valued at Acme,” but one has
repeatedly found that there isn't enough money in the budget for X, or that one's cubicle is not big enough for X, or that X somehow never actually gets distributed, then obviously X is not valued at Acme, at least not in the reader's department.

Brenda: "The work atmosphere is an intangible element of respect for the employee." The work atmosphere--

[pause]

Paula: Why are you stopping on that?

Brenda: I want to read it again because the sentence is just like a non-sequitur. "The work atmosphere is an intangible element of respect for the employee." [Pause.] I don't think that's true. I don't think they pay attention to the work atmosphere enough to show respect. They don't ask us what size cubes we need, they don't ergonomically deal with them; in fact, I would disagree with that for the most part. (Tape 25, June 28, 1999)

In reading against the authoritative text, this participant constructs a definition of the term "work atmosphere" that is really more like "work environment," hinging on the physical surroundings in which work gets done. Then she weighs the textual claim (that the company shows its respect for employees in the "work atmosphere") against her own physical surroundings and finds that reality does not match up with what she believes the text is saying. That she may have misunderstood the word "intangible" takes nothing away from the fact that she is weighing the claim (as she understands it) against her own experiences as Acme, trusting her own experiences and perceptions more than the text.
Cathy also comments on the allocation of money and material resources, this time focusing on the unequal distribution of resources and the inadequacy of the equipment used in her department.

Cathy: It says on top “we have 100% club for sales positions--shows appreciation--.” Yes, they spend a lot of money on the sales people. The sales people, they have um, I don’t know how many trips a year they have--but all we hear about afterwards, is after the fact that they went to Hawaii for two weeks, or they went to Aruba for two weeks, or the Bahamas or whatever. And they spend a lot of money on the promotion of the sales people.

Paula: What does that make you think?

Cathy: Well it’s interesting because uh they’re telling, the word that we get is that there’s not enough money for this department to get training on the products, but they’re spending millions sending the sales people to Hawaii and I’m like--[laughs incredulously]--There’s people here that I know here that don’t have PCs that function on their job. Their PC will malfunction because there’s not enough memory in it for them to do their job. And management says there’s no money in the budget, but they’re spending millions going to Aruba and stuff on the sales people and the like. A little bit lopsided. I know that that happens in a lot of companies, but I don’t know, I don’t like that. (Tape 25, June 28, 1999)

This reader, too, reads the physical work environment surrounding herself and her coworkers, noting a disconnect between what management says and what it does and pointing out the company’s unequal material investment across departments. That theme that is echoed by other readers as well:

Deborah: Oh, it’s interesting, “everybody is important at Acme” and the first thing they talk about [in the text] is the sales people, who’s really obviously, who’s really important because you know they go to the 100% Club and everything. You know, this is really getting to be a sales driven company. You know, that’s, they don’t talk about the other people here [in the text]. Yeah, I
mean it's clear that the sales people are the most important people.

Paula: And it's clear because you see them going to these trips and stuff?

Deborah: Well and they pour money into the sales area. And they're always hiring, you know there could be a freeze every place else, but they'll hire sales people. (Tape 26, June 28, 1999)

In that passage, Deborah moves beyond “not liking” the way the company invests in different departments, to a broader interpretation of comparative spending in the organization as a whole, drawing conclusions from her observations about which groups of people seem to be valued more than others in this company. Mavis has access to more information:

Mavis: For a company that is not in debt at all, we have no money.

Paula: How do you know we're not in debt at all?

Mavis: Oh, they've told us. Unless they're lying.

Paula: Unless they're lying.

Mavis: They don't have a debt. Whatever they do, they have the cash flow for. Um--but yet, you know, there are tight controls on expenses. And every year the controls get tighter and tighter.

Paula: And you know that because--

Mavis: Um, they communicate it.

[turned tape over]

Paula: So, you say they communicate it to you in the form of email? They'll send you an email and it'll say--what?

Mavis: They'll tell us where we are at the particular time of the year against budget, against actuals, against target. And they sent out emails saying, you know, we have to keep our expenses down, no unnecessary traveling and
you know, to the company at large. But then you see other departments traveling and going to seminars and going for training and doing all kinds of things that cost money.

Paula: What departments get to do all that stuff?
Mavis: A lot of the revenue-producing departments.
Paula: Like sales?
Mavis: Mm hmm.
Paula: That’s the only one I’ve heard of getting to do these fun things.
Mavis: Yeah. The non-revenue-producing departments here at Acme are not considered important. Even HR, because they don’t generate a revenue. (Tape 35, July 2, 1999)

Mavis explains her perceptions of why certain departments are valued—the values behind the values, if you will. It may not be surprising to the reader to learn that this corporation places a high value on revenues—don’t all corporations want to make money? The answer is yes, but Acme’s perceived assumption that each department is an entity unto itself, separate and separable from the others, represents a specific theoretical position that while fairly common in the business world today is by no means universal: other paradigms of organizational anatomy (my term) also exist and are also influential. Moreover, even if we take that paradigm for granted, valuing the revenues produced by some departments does not entail de-valuing other departments by underfunding them. The assumption that departments are separate “organizations” (that’s what Acme calls them), and that each organization should receive monies in accordance with how much money it earns for the company, is a piece of
the dominant ideology at Acme--a piece that Mavis identifies and articulates, in contrast to what the authoritative text would like her to believe.

Individual salaries, raises and bonuses are additional material realities against perceptions of which textual claims were often compared by participants, as can be seen in the following long but rich response. The reader will recall from Chapter 3 that “Variable Pay” is a system of calculating pay raises, whereby employees are promised an X percent raise, but only if the company earns a certain amount of revenue by a specific date, which it never does.

Deborah: It seemed to me that Melvin was a much more caring person--I mean I don’t know--he’s the CEO and Bill Sayles is the President, but--I don’t know if he’s aware of what goes on--if these other people are making--doing all these Variable Pay and this that and the other, or if it really is him saying, oh yeah that’s a good idea and that’s a good idea. And you know, finding ways to cut expenses and cut money from us and keep more money for him. You know, it’s hard to feel trust when you know he’s, you know he’s made Forbes magazine. He had four hundred million dollars worth. And he screws us out of Variable Pay for a lousy 3%, when he cut our salary raises from, you know, like 4 or 5% to 2%. I mean how can you feel like he cares about you when something like that goes down? You know, we have--We lost a head count, somebody resigned; they won’t let us replace it. And then this year they made a huge goal and they want to make $340,000,000 in revenue. Well this is the Y2K year. They already said last year they were projecting a flat year for this year, but now when this year’s goal comes in, they project $340,000,000, which was above what they made last year, above last year, and they didn’t make their goals last year. So it’s like, oh yeah, they really want to give us that variable pay don’t they. You know, it’s like we’ll just make it so far out of the picture that there’s no way we can reach that. And then you know, if they say okay, 2% is now the amount of raise that you’re going get, well where’s the incentive to work
really hard? You know if everybody's going to get 2% and we see that the target is $340,000,000 in this year that should be flat and people probably aren't going to do any buying and selling, you know buying products, after maybe June or whatever. Where's the incentive for people to work harder? You know, if I work harder, am I going to get a bigger raise at the end of the year? No, they said raises are 2% now. If we do better, is it going to sell? This year, I don't think it matters how much each individual works, I don't think they're going to do a lot of sales this year. So it's really kind of crazy to turn around [in this booklet] and say, oh, yeah we care about our customers and oh we care about our employees and we have integrity. [Laughs] It's like kind of a little crazy. [Tape 26, June 28, 1999]

John makes the same point more pithily:

John: You ought to know that there have been programs here that promised financial remuneration and in three years running they've never delivered. And all the employees are pretty sensitive, that that's the, uh what do you call that stuff, the "variable pay" program. As I like to tell my management, my variable pay has been constant. [Gestures "double zero" with both thumbs and index fingers.]

Paula: Zero.

John: Goose eggs. So these [booklets] are very good. (Tape 16, June 23, 1999)

John’s sense of irony and may be sharper than those of his coworkers, as evidenced by his use of sarcasm here and elsewhere, but he gets right to the point: upper management’s credibility is seriously damaged by their failure to pay workers as promised. Upper management’s perceived failure to live up to its promises casts an unflattering light on all top-down communications in the eyes of employees, but especially on rosy-hued epideictic texts such as the "Recreating Acme" booklet, which posit and
praise an idealized institution that bears little resemblance to the real Acme as currently perceived by employees.

A picture emerged as I saw and recorded each mention of the material--a picture of the Acme rhetorical domain as a *material*, almost *physical* space, with a shifting topography of investments, expenditures, budgets, material objects, and salaries (all as perceived by employees). Rhetorical moves are made with that perceived material landscape underfoot at all times--and the landscape itself provides evidence for arguments and counterarguments. In any case, at the very least, participant comments do clearly indicate that their perceptions of the allocation of money and material resources constitute a highly credible source of information for them on what upper management really values. I believe that is probably true of other companies as well: the flow of money and material resources can be "read" for clues to the values and ideologies that are held by the dominant group, and is therefore a key lens through which company ideology can be identified and articulated. By the same token, in a healthier company, where upper management is truthful with employees and backs up its stated values with appropriate investments of material resources, the perceived material landscape would provide evidence that *strengthens* the credibility of the official company literature. But in this company, where the perceived material landscape clearly contradicts what upper management says, it serves instead as a practically inexhaustible source of evidence to the contrary, which is used by critically
literate employees to puncture the too-sanguine surface of any too-sanguine text.

**Experience as Substance for Critique**

Taken together, all five of the most popular critical reading strategies practiced by these employees at this company have one thing in common: they all boil down to using one’s experience as an employee of the company to critique problematic claims. Although the third most popular strategy, “assessing the value, quality or overall effectiveness of the text,” falls into a different major category (“Evaluating the document overall”), it could just as well migrate to the first major category, “Weighing claims against perceived realities,” because these readers used their experience to inform their perceptions of reality and used those perceptions to evaluate the whole text, just as they did to evaluate individual claims. The five most popular strategies suggest that daily working life can itself be seen as a “text”--a truly authoritative text that while not objective or universal, is still “read” and interpreted every day by employees, yielding perceptions against which all other texts are judged. Mavis says this outright when she explains to me how she evaluates the credibility of any document:

Mavis: If I think it’s totally off the wall like this document is, doesn’t really reflect what I experience here, then I take it with a grain of salt and I take it from the source.

Paula: Oh, you mean the person who wrote it?

Mavis: Upper management, you know. What they’re trying to communicate, what they’re trying to say, what they’d like everybody to feel.
Paula: And how do you know what they would like everybody to feel?

Mavis: It's in here.

Paula: There it is?

Mavis: There it is, like a light. (Tape 35, July 2, 1999)

If a written text does not match the experience of the reader, then that reader (sometimes physically) discards the written text in favor of the text of experience, recognizing that the agenda emanating from the text is "interested" (in the Kantian sense) and comes from a specific authorial source: in this case, upper management.

On the one hand, this is no great revelation. Of course working adults read official company texts in light of what they have experienced at work. Indeed, if a working adult were to accept and believe every message that comes from upper management, or for that matter from anyone, despite what he or she has learned from experience, then we (English teachers) would probably judge that person as rather odd, certainly less intelligent than those who actively seek out the disconnects between texts and daily reality. However, it is one thing to say, "of course people weigh texts against their own experiences," and another to describe exactly how they do it and show that process in action. These data represent a step towards a fuller understanding of critical workplace reading.

The top five critical reading strategies reveal the texture of what these people perceive to be true, and of how they use those perceptions to resist the hegemonic undertow of a propagandic text. Moreover, noting that the common ingredient at the core of the top five strategies is insider
knowledge, we can speculate that in this workplace and perhaps in others, insider knowledge may be what motivates and equips employees to read critically. An outsider or a brand new employee would have no way of leveling a substantial critique against this text. Having no evidence to the contrary, such readers would be more likely to perceive the text as non-fiction—or perhaps as generic propaganda which they are ill-equipped, at present, to rebut. That suggests, in turn, that workplace readers should be seen as expert readers in a specific knowledge domain. What makes them experts is their experience and the resulting perceptions, and what makes them critically literate is not their ability to read and manipulate written text alone, but rather their ability to read the text of their own experience and ferret out in their encounters with written texts the gaps, fissures and disconnects through which dominant ideologies can be made visible.

**Positive and Conflicted Responses**

It is important in qualitative research to seek out disconfirming examples of one's evolving theories, to value and embrace the data that one might prefer, at times, to sweep under the rug. In the early stages of my analysis, I felt a bit awkward about the fact that not everybody had a negative response to the protocol text. Of the eighteen protocol participants, thirteen made at least one comment that could be interpreted as positive, either about the text as a whole or (much more often) about a specific claim or statement within the text. Those thirteen participants made a total of 51 positive comments. However, only six of the thirteen
made more than three positive comments, only three expressed much
*feeling* behind their significant numbers of positive responses, and only one
person had an almost entirely positive response to the text.

That person, Maria in Payroll, seems to be somewhat of an anomaly
among protocol participants: she agreed, quietly but with feeling, with
almost everything the text said. For example, here are some excerpts from
her protocol:

Maria: One thing that comes to mind [when I read this] is the
RICE principles.

Paula: What makes you think that?

Maria: Right here--

Paula: Right there where it says them, okay.

Maria: And that’s something that in every meeting is
emphasized. Customer service is part of that. Um, I
mentioned some other key factors that are included in
the principles. That’s something that we do try to
follow in our area. And it states here that it’s the
“building blocks,” the actual “foundation.” I believe
that.

Paula: You do?

Maria: Yeah.

Paula: Okay.

[Pause while Maria reads. The text then mentions
“teamwork.”]

Maria: The teamwork, that’s really important, especially in our
little department. [Pause] And again, that’s part of—it
starts here where it says, “the individual and team
pursuit of excellence.”

Paula: How does that phrase strike you?

Maria: Um, that that’s what we strive for in everything
that we do.
Paula: You guys in payroll?

Maria: Yes. And I also feel that um, the rest of the organization is also striving for that as well. (Tape 35, July 2, 1999)

She agrees that “everyone at Acme is important”: “I definitely feel that way or I wouldn’t have been here all these years.” Later, she resonates even more strongly with another statement:

Maria: It also states here that “individuals count and are counted upon,” and that their “achievements are recognized.”

Paula: Do you feel that’s true?

Maria: I feel that’s true. Yes.

Paula: On what basis do you feel that’s true?

Maria: On a personal level, only because I’ve been here so long and I know where I started. And through my efforts, hard work, the commitment that I’ve shown, um, our organization--and when I say that I mean Human Resources, Payroll, Benefits, that whole organization--those achievements have been recognized and I’ve been allowed to grow.

Paula: Where did you start in this company?

Maria: Well, I started in payroll, but I started what you can probably call the bottom, as far as data entry and um, slowly moving up. Now I manage the department. But also I’ve expressed the interest in getting more involved in the systems end, so--and they’re allowing me to pursue that. (Tape 35, July 2, 1999)

Maria’s explications suggest that even positive responses to this text may be governed by the degree to which the words match the reader’s experience: fortunately for her, her experience at Acme has obviously matched up extremely well with the idealized representation of Acme that
the text sets forth. She did make a couple of negative comments, one about the company not really being as ethnically diverse as the text says and the other about some employees not behaving well towards payroll, but neither of these were uttered emphatically or with any particular bitterness.

The other twelve readers who had positive responses also based their comments on their personal experiences within the company. For example, here is Terri, whose personality, background and current job are all very different from Maria’s, but whose wholehearted agreements with the text, though fewer in number, are just as sincere:

Terri: “Employees are committed to integrity, honesty and ethics.” That’s so true. I don’t think I’ve ever worked at a company where people cared so much about what they do. I mean people will stay late to try to get their job done. They will check things over and over again to make sure they did the right job. I think people are really committed to this company. So--I think it’s a very true statement. (Tape 31, June 30, 1999)

The fact that Terri unproblematically equates “integrity, honesty and ethics” with being committed to doing good work for the company could inspire a whole different discussion, but still, for her, given her personal beliefs, the statement rings true because it matches up with her own experiences at Acme.

Maria, Terri, and also Mark (whose voice we will hear shortly) were the most positive readers of the protocol text, judging from both the number of positive remarks they made and the fervor with which they made them. However, it is important to point out that in arriving at my original count of 51 positive remarks made by 13 individuals, I defined
“positive comments” extremely broadly, to include everything from Maria’s statements of quiet conviction and Terri’s intense, almost fiery agreements with portions of the text, all the way down to the faintest, most grudging expressions of anything even remotely positive, no matter how trivial. Even a simple “that’s true” counted as a positive comment, because it signals agreement with the text. Examples from the “faint and grudging” end of the scale would include this off-hand compliment from Ronald in Communications:

Ronald: I mean, it’s a nice piece, it’s beautifully done, but I just don’t think it was the ah, I think there were probably better ways to communicate this information. (Tape 34, July 2, 1999)

It is telling that this positive comment, which was not uttered with much enthusiasm, was preceded and followed, like so many other positive comments, by negative comments. That suggests that some participants may have made a conscious effort to be as fair and generous as possible in their assessments of the text, trying to say at least something positive, but unable to be positive overall. Mavis, for example, devotes a little more time than Ronald to developing her praise (partly because I probed), but she reaches the same conclusion as Ronald in the end:

Mavis: Yeah, this is all a bunch of nice stuff. There are a lot of good people here at Acme who really work hard and really want to make a difference. Umm--

Paula: When you say this is all a bunch of nice “stuff,” what do you mean?

Maria: Well, it’s all worded very nicely, and the communication was probably developed by a communication company, an expert at getting you know um, good things down on paper so that everybody in the
company will kind of say, "Oh wow, this is a great place to work."

Paula: Is that how people have responded to this?

Mavis: Oh, I don't think so. I don't think so. (Tape 35, July 2, 1999)

A slightly different example of a low-end positive remark would be this one from Brenda. She is reading in the "Integrity" section, which gives employee testimony that "integrity" is important in the Acme culture.

Brenda: "Don Behrens . . . defines it in this example: 'If I'm traveling for Acme, and I forget to get a receipt from a cabdriver, I can still submit one that I've written.'” Hm. He's talking about integrity. "Acme demonstrates this respect and trust in us." I don't know if that's true, but it's an interesting statement. If it is true, that's nice to know.

Paula: You mean about the taxicab receipts?

Brenda: Yeah, uh huh.

Paula: That you too can submit taxicab receipts?

Brenda: That I could if I forgot one.

Paula: If you forgot one?

Brenda: My integrity. If I had lost it [the receipt], but I really did take it [the cab ride], I could put it on the expense sheet, but probably have to, you know, explain myself, but it would probably be allowed, which is nice. Some companies are really hard-line about that. (Tape 25, June 28, 1999)

That was the only positive thing Brenda said about the text in her entire protocol. Brenda is more enthusiastic than Ronald or Mavis--she seems genuinely glad to know that she can claim a cab ride without showing a genuine receipt--but her comment relates to only a tiny fragment of the text, not to the text's overall message or quality.
Clearly, then, just because a reader makes one, two, even several positive comments does not mean that he or she responded positively to the text overall. Many comments that I counted as “positive” were positive only in the narrowest, most literal sense, in real life coming across as neutral, ambivalent, or even rather negative. Consider this example of a positive comment that is tinged immediately afterward with a negative comment. This is John as he reads a paragraph about diversity:

John: “... huge pool of talent--staff from over 25 countries speaking over 30 languages.” This is really true. “Representing every race, color.” You don’t mind if the help are black, do you? (Tape 17, June 23, 1999)

Though John, as we have seen, can be quite biting in his sarcasm, the mixing of positive with negative responses was very common among the thirteen individuals who made positive comments. Of the 51 positive responses, only 16 were passionately, unambivalently positive: 12 were neutral agreements with the text and 23 were decidedly mixed.

Mixed comments are particularly interesting because they show these readers having complex responses to the text, bringing their experiences and expert knowledge of the internal workings of the company to bear on their interpretations and viewing statements from a variety of angles. For example, here is Terri, making an enthusiastically positive comment about the overall thesis of the piece, but following it up with a barrage of examples to the contrary:

Paula: So, overall, as you read this piece, do you feel that--how credible do you feel this, this piece is overall? I mean, do you feel that it's, that the stuff that is said in here is basically true?
Terri: Oh, yeah, I think it’s very true. I think it’s extremely true. Except that maybe this one I have a little problem with. “Everyone at Acme is important.” I don’t think that’s true. I think they want it to be true. But I think they have a lot of work to do. I don’t think they make people feel that way. I think there are select people who feel that way. And if they’ve done something great, then their manager loves them. But—and there are a few people who make everybody feel that way. But I think as a rule we don’t do that. I think we think we say that more than we do it. And people say, “Well, people aren’t leaving Acme.” People aren’t leaving Acme ‘cause Acme pays them well. People put up with a lot of stuff here, I think. I think there’s some inept management and that might be part of where it comes from. And I’m talking about all levels. I’m not just talking upper level. I’m talking first line, second line, to VP level. I think Acme management has a lot—I think we have a very weak management staff. And I think maybe that’s part of the problem here. (Tape 31, June 30, 1999)

Terri’s entire protocol had that ambivalent quality. She expressed what appeared to be sincere enthusiasm about certain things about the company—its reputation for technical excellence, the importance of Melvin who “sets the standard for excellence,” the value of the RICE principles—but each burst of enthusiasm was followed by a much longer speech about the company’s flaws, problems, and failures.

Arguably the most interesting positive or ambivalent response came from Mark, a longtime employee. Mark does not examine any specific claims and does not critique the text itself at all; rather, he gives an extremely brief summary and explains at length the purpose of the text. Using narrative as his primary organizing strategy, he tells stories in order to set up the rhetorical situation for me and build a sense of the exigence that gave rise to the document. Mark’s reading is complex and
fascinatingly ambivalent. Throughout his protocol, Mark returns as often as possible to what I felt was his “home base” tone of upbeat warmth towards the company and towards upper management. Yet he juxtaposes his positive comments with darker observations that seem to fill him with concern. In moments when he praises or justifies the actions of Acme management, he speaks with a positive, upbeat, sincere tone that indicates a high level of identification with the company, yet when he tells stories about events that have been noticed and valued by employees, his tone is just as sympathetic towards the employees.

Mark’s ambivalence is best shown by means of an extended excerpt from his protocol. The excerpt starts right after he reads the first paragraph of the essay, which mentions that Tom Hendershot has just been hired as the new VP of Human Resources.

Mark: This guy Tom Hendershot, that I’ve been mentioning his name, he’s our new head of Human Resources. [With enthusiasm:] When I read that paragraph, it’s just saying that he came in, headed up our Resources Department, and the RICE principles now are the forefront again here in our company. [With a tinge of concern:] I will say for the last eight years, we kind of lost sight of RICE principles. Employee, integrity, all of this, and [with relief:] I’m going to blame that strictly on growing pains. Trying to become this big company, this mainframe giant out here. Uh, we saw people on the edge a couple years; [with a tinge of anger:] we saw employees fired at the drop of a hat. We went through a cultural kind of revolt kind of sense of saying. [With pleasure at being able to make sense of the text] So what I see in this [text] now is if you noticed, it devoted two, three pages to that. We’ve received those two booklets John and I showed you.

Paula: Uh huh.

Mark: It’s this whole new recreating now of the RICE principles, that Melvin started fifteen years ago. We
*did go away from it. We became a top heavy management, um—we just went through growing pains, I’m going to call it. But I think the reason now it is put out here for us to see, like [with fervor:] “E, the individual and team pursuit of excellence. Few of us think of Acme culture without thinking of our reputation for technical excellence.” *Excellence.* “It’s what we take pride in, it permeates every layer of our work day.” [Proudly, with pleasure:] They’re taking the time now to re-educate us on the RICE principles.*

[portion deleted for brevity]

**Paula:** [Summarizing Mark] So when you read this, this sounds to you, if I’m hearing you correctly, this sounds to you like a return to values that used to be ingrained and that aren’t any more and that were good and are now coming back?

**Mark:** [With pleasure:] And are now coming back, exactly. And they found out I think that it wasn’t the easiest thing to do, either, because [a bit dismissively] you can let the Dilbert thing settle in and it gets hard then to make people think, well maybe this place is a good place. Like old-timers sitting around here, they’re pretty cynical these days, a few of them. [With happy conviction:] But they still have RICE in their heart, or they wouldn’t be sitting there day in and day out and loving what they’re doing. And putting so much pride in being correct and accurate, you know what I’m saying? It’s uh, just *without a doubt.* [With approbation:] But we *need* this, need an example.

[With a conspiratorial air:] A kid just got fired here and it was the strangest way to get fired because he was downstairs in P1, our kind of warehouse basement down there where you park too. He was going to his car, two guys in Facilities were in our storage room and they said, um, “Robert, come here.” Robert walked over there and they said, “we were told to throw this stuff out, do you want one of these T-shirts?” He said, “Uh, yeah.” He took it. [With a trace of anger:] It just so happened a security chief upstairs saw him and fired him.

**Paula:** Saw the guy--

**Mark:** For taking--

**Paula:** A shirt that he had been offered?
Mark: [With anger:] That he had been offered. The guy was here fourteen years, and um--

Paula: What is the significance of that story for you?

Mark: [As if explaining the mystery:] Well this is how we were told, this is how we were told. An example was set to let everybody know, no matter how much experience or time on the job you have here, nothing--there are rules to be followed at Acme and you don't take anything. [Warmly:] I think truly and honestly from my heart, since you're truly and honest here with your survey, [with relief and understanding] that this was done because of our recent rash of theft of hardware and software around here. We went through [sic] for the last few years, that's why we're getting the hell out of this place too [meaning the building itself]. It's pretty, glitzy and all that, but it's so insecure as far as the security thing. We've had fifty laptops, 100 PCs disappear out of here. Now I know a lot of stuff could be internal too, but [darker:] I think it's a backlash of that, firing the old security chief, that they iet Robert be an example to people. It kind of shook everybody up. People refused to put little Acme stuff on their desks, as a revolt. They took all our little Acme stuff down, went through a little thing for a while. [Cheering up again:] Robert is doing fine though. Robert is with another company, and as you know, [he's] got the credentials, he got a raise. [Sadly:] He just misses Acme 'cause he was here fourteen years and all his buddies are here. But um, so I kind of forget why I brought that up, but yeah, so I think now [indicating the text] that's why we have to go back to the Bible again. [With upbeat determination:] To kind of put it on an even keel again and make the employees feel good again. You know, because we do have. [Conspiratorially:] We had a guy in Springfield today quit. Top guy in development for GST, our main products. His name is Tom Hammond and he just couldn't make it anymore. [With understanding:] He's tired of going through bureaucratic red tape. So he gave it up. [Upbeat again:] But we still have the Abes, and you know, kind of like we ain't lost or nothing, just hate to see a good guy like that go. But "everyone at Acme is important. R. Respect." You know, [with compassion] they try, they try real hard.

Paula: Who's they? Who tries?
Mark: With an air of mystery] The powers that be, I call it. The hallways. [With frankness and a tinge of anger:] But I still have seen incidents of people getting very tough on people that maybe they shouldn’t have. Maybe they didn’t have to, maybe the tack that they used was wrong. [With relief:] But, like in our society that we live in, it’s kind of hard to go by those rules too. Look at it. It’s pretty mad out there. I think this [text] is a guideline for finding that hippie in your own head.

Paula: That hippie in your own head?

Mark: Yeah. And getting through this with as few wounds as you can. Because [deadly serious] this environment is not like entertainment. Corporate [headquarters] is--kind of tough in that respect. It can be so callous, so, you know, “You’re just a number.” It can. I think these [ideas in the text] are ways for people to constantly know that it’s not. Not if you live these ways and react these ways, you know? It’s like [with upbeat determination] they can’t get me down. I’m not taking nothing from them. So I’m just happy go lucky, skippy every day. (Tape 17, June 23, 1999)

What interests me about Mark’s response is his resilient desire to make sense of the text, of upper management’s actions, and of the changes that have occurred in Acme since he was first hired in 1985 (about the same time the RICE principles were created and enthusiastically adopted).

Though troubled by some events that he has witnessed and heard about, he expends much energy justifying the actions of upper management and explain why the document was needed. Also interesting is the fact that his remarks in the tape-recorded protocol differed dramatically in tone and substance from other remarks I heard him make in other contexts.

Perhaps Mark presented a favorable response on tape because he was not entirely sure that it would be “safe” to criticize the document under those
circumstances. In any event, Mark values his job a great deal and feels grateful to Acme for bringing him up from the mailroom through a succession of better and better jobs into his current position as a developer. One might easily understand why he might be reluctant to criticize. The same might be true for Maria, who was also promoted up from a low-level job to her current supervisory position. Yet even Mark, for all his efforts to portray the document in a positive light, blended criticism in with his explanations in such a way that it is hard to tease the two apart.

Even the most passionately positive responses, then, were mixed. All three individuals who had significant positive responses to the document had at least one negative responses to it as well. Maria questioned the company’s commitment to diversity; Terri questioned the claim that “everyone at Acme is important” and also whether Acme’s reputation for technical excellence is as good now as it was in the past; Amanda pointed out that many employees would not view the text as true, based on their own experiences within the company.

What we learn from this small chorus of positive and ambivalent voices is that even when these employees agree with the document and/or have favorable responses to it, those favorable assessments hinge on the act of comparing the claims in the text with their own experiences at Acme. When the claims matched the readers’ experiences, they had favorable responses. The same was true of their unfavorable responses, which in four out of five cases came out when a claim in the text did not match
realty. In the case of Mark, it could be said that the text both does and
does not match his experience at Acme--he has personally been well taken
care of, in his judgment, but he has seen others treated not so well. I
listened to Mark’s protocol several times because in many moments it was
truly unclear to me where his sympathies were--which begs the question,
is it really either/or? Do employees have to “side” either with employees or
with upper management? Is Mark’s reading “uncritical” because he insists
on being upbeat and loyal towards Acme? Or is it “critical” because he
“seeks out gaps, fissures and disconnects” between the epideictic
incantations of the text and his own troubling observations? Are “critical”
and “positive” mutually exclusive?

Reflections on Race, Gender, Class, Education,
and Length of Employment at Acme

Although this study was not designed to generate findings about
how participants’ critical readings reflect or interact with race, ethnicity,
gender, class, education level, or length of employment at Acme, I indulged
in a bit of speculative probing in those areas to identify possible blind spots
in this study and generate questions for future research. I started by
counting the number of critical reading strategies that had been employed
by each participant and gathering what information I could about each
participant’s race or ethnicity, sex, class, education, and length of time at
the company. I then performed a series of calculations on the data--
calculations which were admittedly a bit ham-fisted, but which
nonetheless did give me a way to enter the data looking for potential problems and complications in those areas. The fact that not all participants read the text aloud muddied the waters, because a participant’s ability to utilize Category 3 (“Examining the Construction of Arguments at the Paragraph Level or Below”) was strongly influenced by his or her choice of whether or not to read the text aloud: those who did read the text aloud engaged more often and more critically with paragraph-level claims and constructions than those who did not. I therefore decided to eliminate Category 3 from my calculations.

Two variables were treated as binaries: race or ethnicity and gender. To handle race or ethnicity, I created two categories (“white participants” and “participants of color”) because there were only five participants of color in the entire sample of protocol participants (four African-Americans and one Latina—“Latina” being technically an ethnicity, not a race) and I wanted to create categories that would be populated by more than one individual. Gender was treated as a binary as well (even though members of the Intersex movement have argued that there are more than two sexes): participants were separated into males and females. The other characteristics were handled by creating multiple categories.

In the first round of calculations for each demographic category, I simply counted the number of critical reading strategies that had been practiced by each participant in each category and averaged them, arriving at an average number of strategies employed by those within each of the demographic categories. However, in the process of counting, adding and
averaging, I noticed that the number of critical reading strategies practiced by each participant did not always align with my own subjective impressions of how “critically literate” each participant’s performance had been. The individuals whom I perceived as the most critically literate did not always impress me by employing greater numbers of critical reading strategies: sometimes they had employed them more deftly, more articulately, or in more precise or sophisticated ways than had their co-workers. So, I came up with a new term—“critical agility”—which included

- The apparent intensity and agility of the person’s blow-by-blow intellectual engagement with the text
- The exactitude with which the person parsed and critiqued claims
- The sophistication and appropriateness of the person’s vocabulary
- The person’s ability to develop complex ideas and articulate them fully and explicitly, without giving up and
- The person’s ability to bring in other ideas or theories from outside the realm of Acme and use them to elucidate the text.

Without attempting to rank participants themselves as individuals on a linear scale of critical agility (a fool’s errand) I focused simply on the performances they had given in the audiotaped reading protocols. I applied one of four labels to each participant—low, moderate, high, or very high—reflecting my own admittedly subjective judgment of how critically agile I felt his or her performance on that day had been.
My judgments were not scientific in any way, shape or form. I have neither the right, the skill, nor frankly the arrogance to make authoritative judgments of how critically literate or agile a person is or isn’t, especially when my discipline has not yet arrived at a clear, operationalized definition of what critical literacy is. My evaluations of participants’ critical agility are personal perceptions only, probably saying more about me than about my participants. I do, however, stand by them as perceptions, and will go ahead and use them as a way to explore my findings on additional levels, seeking problems, questions and complications rather than definitive answers.

Reflections on Race/Ethnicity and Gender

According to my inductive and interpretive coding, the five participants of color employed an average of 6.4 strategies; according to my own subjective evaluation of their critical agility levels, they were labeled high (1) moderate (3) and low (1). White participants, on the other hand, employed an average of 8.2 strategies and were labeled as very high (3), high (5), and moderate (5). Those results, unscientific though they are, make me wonder to what extent my own perceptions are influenced, even pre-determined, by my own race and gender. That white participants appeared (to me) to read more critically than participants of color suggests that my inductive and interpretive coding passes were probably influenced to a large and largely unexamined degree by my own identity as a white person. The critical reading strategies I was able to see may be so
culturally “white” that of course they would be practiced more frequently by white participants. A researcher of color might have seen entirely different strategies at work in the data, thereby creating different codes and producing a different final list of critical reading strategies.

Calculating in the same way for gender, we get similarly disturbing results: the men employed an average of 8.2 critical reading strategies and were labeled very high (2), high (3) and moderate (2) in their critical agility, whereas women employed an average of 7.3 critical reading strategies and were labeled as very high (1), high (3) and moderate (6) in their critical agility. Note that the gender difference in critical agility lies in the number of individuals receiving each label: the bell curve peaks at “high” for men and “moderate” for women. That suggests not that (these) men read more critically than (these) women, but rather that I apparently perceived the men as more critically agile, as a group, than the women. It is possible, then, that my own understanding of what constitutes critical reading is to an extent male-identified, despite the fact that I am a woman.

Reflections on Education Level and Class

To explore any possible relationships between participant’s critical reading abilities and their levels of education, I created seven education-level categories:

(1) high school only
(2) some college
(3) graduated college

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(4) some graduate school
(5) completed Master's degree
(6) some PhD work
(7) completed PhD

Almost all participants responded to my queries for this information (only one person did not respond). When the information had been gathered, levels 1 and 7 were revealed to be empty sets: everyone had at least some college, and no one had completed a PhD degree. Table 6, below, shows the interaction between education level and number of critical reading strategies utilized by participants.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th># participants</th>
<th>Avg # strategies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2: some college</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3: college grad</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4: some grad sch</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5: Master's degree</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6: Master's plus</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6. Critical Reading Strategies by Level of Education

Based on these calculations with this group of individuals, there seems to be only the vaguest, wispiest correlation between their levels of education and the number of critical reading strategies they employed in their audiotaped readings. One might expect a steady rise in numbers of strategies employed as the education levels go up, but that seems not to be borne out in these data.

Table 7, below, shows the relationship between levels of education and critical agility.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Levels of education</th>
<th># participants</th>
<th>Levels of Critical Agility</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2: some college</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1 low, 3 moderate, 1 high, 1 very high</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3: college grad</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3 high</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4: some grad sch</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2 moderate, 1 high, 1 very high</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5: Master’s degree</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>moderate, high</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6: Master’s plus</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>moderate, very high</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 7: Perceived Critical Agility by Level of Education

Remembering that my critical agility evaluations are highly subjective, we can hold that caveat in our minds while also speculating that education level may have even less bearing on critical agility (as I perceive it) than it appeared to have on the number of strategies participants employed. Look in particular at the lowest and highest levels of education. The least educated group of participants displayed the full range of agility levels, and two of them (the “high” and the “very high”) were in my estimation among the most skilled, most agile critical readers of the entire group. Only one of the most educated participants gave what I would call an “extremely agile” performance—and one of my least well-educated participants gave a performance that bordered, in my opinion, on the virtuoso. Another, more tightly controlled study would have to be conducted, in which each educational category holds the same (larger) number of participants, in order to make sure those results are not idiosyncratic to this population.

Class was difficult to explore because before exploring it, one must first define it, and with class, that is not an easy thing to do. When people state their own class levels, they tend to self-identify in any number of
ungovernable ways, including factors such as annual income, level of education, and ownership of land or means of production. I made an executive decision, then, to define class by the simplest, most accessible indicator I know: the number of generations in the participant’s family to have attended college.

All but two participants said they belonged either to the second or third generation of college-goers in their families. Mapping those self-reports onto the average number of critical reading strategies employed, we get the following results:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th># Generations</th>
<th># Participants</th>
<th>Avg. # Strategies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>two generations</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>three generations</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 8: Critical Reading Strategies by Class (As Defined)

In Table 8, we see more of a correlation—participants whose grandparents attended college used more critical reading strategies than did those whose parents had been in the first family generation to attend college. If generations attending college is at least a somewhat meaningful indicator of class level, then my findings may to an extent reflect my own class identity as a member of a fourth family generation to have attended college.

Returning to my subjective judgments of critical agility, we can see in Table 9, below, how agility interacts with number of family generations to have attended college. Table 9 weakly disconfirms the results shown in Table 8: there seems to be a slightly smaller correlation between number of
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th># Generations</th>
<th># Participants</th>
<th>Levels of Critical Agility</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>two generations</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1 low, 2 moderate, 4 high, 1 very high</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>three generations</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4 moderate, 1 high, 2 very high</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 9. Perceived Critical Agility by Class (As Defined)

generations to have attended college and what I am calling critical agility.
Five out of eight two-generation participants (slightly more than half) gave
readings that were perceived as “high” or “very high,” in critical agility,
while three out of seven (slightly less than half) of the three-generation
participants were perceived as “high” or “very high.” What had appeared to
be a mild correlation evaporates when calculated differently.

It is difficult to explore class without also touching again on race.
For example, at least two of the participants who gave generally positive
readings (I am thinking of Mark and Esperanza, although Esperanza was
not an official participant because she did not want to be taped) were
participants of color who reported to me that they had had jobs in the past
that were not nearly as good as the jobs they have now at Acme. Mark, an
African-American, had been a musician, which he enjoyed but which gave
him no steady paycheck and no job security; at Acme, he has received
good, steady pay, promotions, and education that he probably would not
otherwise have obtained. Esperanza, a Latina, had worked in a
manufacturing plant where the work was dirty and she was not treated
well; at Acme, she works in a clean environment where her co-workers are

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committed to treating each other with respect. Cleo and Ronald are also people of color, but from middle-class backgrounds, and their readings were as negative and cynical as most participants'. Although we are talking about a very small number of people here, these reflections point to the possibility that my ways of seeing—not only seeing critical reading ability but also seeing the Acme workplace itself—may be heavily influenced by my own identity as a member of the upper middle class. It may be that Cleo and Ronald, by virtue of their own middle-class backgrounds, use literacy in ways that are not better or more sophisticated, but simply more middle class than the reading strategies practiced by the other participants of color.

It is additionally interesting to note that none of the positive readings were given by participants who were “high” or “very high” in critical agility. Those who disagreed in the most places, and in the most sophisticated, articulate ways, were those who got the “very high” ratings for critical agility. That could suggest two things: either I personally place a higher value on dissent than on assent, which would lead me to judge those who disagree with the text to be more critically agile than those who tend to agree—or, if my judgments are accurate, then to read critically is essentially to read negatively, disagreeing in as many places as possible. With such a small sample, and only one researcher, we cannot really know.

In any case, as many scholars have pointed out, it can be difficult to talk about race, class and gender in isolation because they are very hard to tease apart. The critical reading strategies I identified, and perhaps even
the notion of critical reading to begin with, are probably raced, classed and
gendered in ways for which I have clearly not been able to control. That in
itself is worth knowing, as I will explain in Chapter 6.

**Reflections on Length of Time at the Company**

Length of time at the company was measured in years and ranged
from three to nineteen. Though one might expect the longer-term
employees to have more negative responses to the text, or at least for
positive responses to be more common among newcomers, Table 12 below
shows that not to be the case. Dividing participants into categories of
length of employment at Acme (3 years, 4-7 years, 8-11 years, and 12

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th># years at Acme</th>
<th>n</th>
<th># strategies</th>
<th>agility levels</th>
<th>overall tenor of response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>moderate</td>
<td>negative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
<td>moderate</td>
<td>positive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>high</td>
<td>negative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>8</td>
<td>high</td>
<td>negative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
<td>moderate</td>
<td>positive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>10</td>
<td>very high</td>
<td>negative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8-11</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>low</td>
<td>positive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>11</td>
<td>very high</td>
<td>negative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>9</td>
<td>moderate</td>
<td>negative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>11</td>
<td>very high</td>
<td>negative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
<td>high</td>
<td>negative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 and over</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>high</td>
<td>negative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>9</td>
<td>high</td>
<td>negative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
<td>moderate</td>
<td>positive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>9</td>
<td>high</td>
<td>negative</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 10. Critical Reading by Length of Employment at Acme
years or more) we see that there was at least one “positive” overall response to the text in almost every category. Again, a larger, more controlled study would have to be done in order to confirm that finding, but based on these data, it looks as though length of time at the company is not a reliable predictor of positive or negative response to the text, nor does it seem to have any particular effect on the number of strategies employed in the readings, or on my own impressions of each participant’s critical agility. This surprises me somewhat, because it seems logical to suspect that the longer an employee has been around in an organization, the more experiences he or she would have, and the more ammunition, therefore, with which to give a critical reading. But that may still be true: in order to explore that question, we would have to repeat the study with some participants being real newcomers—having been employed, say, for three months or less.

It troubles me that these numerical explorations show that some of my own perceptions support stereotypical notions of who reads “critically” and who does not. Perhaps the reflective findings I have revealed in this section can be read as evidence that this entire study is informed by my own whiteness, middle class privilege, and male-identified thought patterns. That possibility does not necessarily render this research utterly invalid; after all, I did not set out to explore the relationships between critical reading ability and race, class, and gender. Rather, the possibility serves as a set of pointers toward other studies that could also to be done
by other researchers whose ways of seeing are informed by different cultural assumptions (as I will argue in Chapter 6).

However, at least one of my reflective findings does not support a stereotypical assumption. One might want to assume (especially if one is an educator) that education levels would correspond closely to critical reading ability. According to this study, however, the correspondence is rather weak. Why? What accounts for the fact that some participants with advanced degrees employed smaller numbers of critical reading strategies, while others having only a little bit of college were voraciously critical? Would it be reasonable to suggest that the very act of “engaging with texts” is viewed more positively in families and households that have a long history of valuing higher education? Literacy scholars continue to debate aspects of the “literacy myth” (Graff), such as the idea that the more advanced literacies that an individual accumulates, the more likely it is that he or she will have a successful career and therefore a successful life. Do these results suggest that perhaps there is a “classroom education myth” as well—that the more classroom education one has, the more literacies and critical thinking skills one will necessarily develop? It is possible that this may be yet another spot where my own personal assumptions and values may have affected the research: while I appreciate the level of discourse in which highly educated people can engage, I truly do not believe that intelligence and critical agility are necessarily directly proportional to one’s level of education.
Conclusion

In this chapter, I have catalogued the critical reading strategies employed by one group of eighteen employees working in a software company in the Western U. S. as they read and evaluate the credibility of an in-house epideictic text. Taking note of how often each strategy was used, we have seen that the five most popular strategies share a strong thread of commonality: they all involve the reader holding the text up to the light of his or her own personal experiences working in that company. We have seen that even those employees who evaluated the text positively did so because the text was consonant with their experiences as Acme workers. Those who were ambivalent towards the text, likewise, were ambivalent because they had mixed or conflicting experiences of working at the company.

In other words, working adults (at least at Acme R&D) do read critically, comparing the words in the text to what they have experienced in the company. Everything an Acme employee might know or believe about the company, whether factually true or not, could conceivably contribute to the storehouse of domain-specific knowledge with which he or she might evaluate an internal company document. Employees with negative experiences in the company are a particularly tough audience, instantly rejecting any statement that does not match their experience.

In addition, we have also tentatively explored the issues of race, sex, class, education and length of time at the company to see how they interact with critical reading ability and with my own perceptions of what I very
subjectively call participants’ “critical agility.” Although this study was not
designed to generate knowledge about those descriptors, we have
discovered that when the research findings are probed for their influence,
the descriptors (especially race, gender and class) ferret out possible blind
spots in the research and identify areas for future exploration.
CHAPTER 6
CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Acme Technology is a changed and changing organization. In the mid-1990s, after an initial period of growth and cultural stability (late 1970s to 1994), it was suddenly put through massive changes in leadership, size, work processes, budgeting paradigms, employee compensation, employee communication, and above all, in the core values that used to define the company’s identity: Respect, Integrity, Customers, and Excellence (the RICE principles). R&D workers as a group feel angry and betrayed by the changes: fewer of their needs are being met (Maslow), they have been collectively “dysempowered” by a long series of “polluting events” (Kane and Montgomery), and they behave and see themselves, to an extent, as a subordinate population ruled by a dominant elite. In resistance to the unfair treatment they feel they have received, these workers have developed a dissident subculture based on a communal narrative of the company’s history, communal devotion to the RICE principles, and a communal “terministic screen” (Burke) through which they perceive and make sense of the current situation (key terms being dissonance, chaos and ownership).

Their feelings of betrayal and anger are worsened by several factors: (1) their own belief that their needs had been spectacularly well-met in the
early stages of the company’s history; (2) the fact that the old values had at one time been explicitly articulated and practiced at all levels of the company; (3) the fact that the new pay system is widely perceived as designed to minimize payments to workers while maximizing payments to high-level managers; and (4) the fact that they had been close to Melvin in the early days and had admired him as a father figure--one who has now distanced himself from the majority of his R&D employees and appears to have broken his personal commitment to the RICE principles. Taken together, those elements have a profound influence on how these employees, as an audience, perceive, interpret, make sense of, and respond to all communications from management.

This study has confirmed Wilkins and Patterson’s finding that it is very difficult to change the culture of an organization, because changing a culture takes time and because people often don’t want to change. It also confirms their assertion that high-level managers are wrong when they think they can just command a culture to change, echoing and elaborating on Davis’ finding that the culture of low-level employees is often very different from the culture as management sees it. As Davis points out, management’s ideas often get a very different reception “at the bottom” of the organization than at the top. This chapter has shown how that dynamic plays out in a specific organization, yielding thick description (Geertz) of a case in which (as Davis contends is possible) a dissident subculture at a low hierarchical level has developed feelings of solidarity or group cohesion against upper management. The workers in R&D have a
fully developed subculture, complete with its own values, stories, ceremonies, heroes, villains and keywords. The internal cultural conflict at Acme has complicated the organization as a discursive realm by predisposing at least one employee subculture to receive communications in a highly skeptical way. It has sharpened the analytical scalpels of those employees, heightening their sensitivity to dissonance and bringing “critique” to the center of their culture as the normative rhetorical stance.

Literacy plays an important role in their critical practice, functioning as a low-profile medium in which one can safely make and exchange resistive statements. By posting and exchanging cartoons (especially Dilbert cartoons) and other short texts that were authored by other people, they disseminate potent critiques of upper management and the new culture, inscribing those critiques onto what I see as murals of community knowledge and group memory. They do this in a way that reflects the three keywords of their subculture (dissonance, chaos, ownership) disguises the seriousness of their criticism; the art of disguise lets them voice their critiques while also protecting themselves from reprisal by the dominant elites. The cubicle postings themselves reflect and refigure the major cultural themes that were identified in Chapter 3 (dissonance, chaos and ownership) and serve to strengthen solidarity among employees. This self-sponsored literate activity provides a safe way for them to critique company power arrangements and “negate” received company doctrines without fear of reprisal.
That finding confirms and explicates Cezar Ornatowski’s anecdotal hunch that “wall decor” can reflect employee comments on real problems in the organization. It also confirms Kitty Locker’s unpublished 1994 finding that low-level workers use written humor as a means of building solidarity among themselves—yet extends this finding into a different industry, a different type of worker population, and a different organizational context. It also suggests that one aspect of critical literacy in the workplace may involve not only the composition of new texts and the interpretation of organizational texts, but also the critical selection and strategic circulation of extra-organizational texts.

Another aspect of critical literacy in the workplace may involve utilizing the knowledge, themes and shared understandings of the subculture in which one is located as lenses through which to interpret organizational texts. The major cultural themes of dissonance, chaos and ownership were woven throughout participant readings of an epideictic text from upper management. This study identified eighteen critical reading strategies in four major categories: weighing claims against perceived realities, evaluating the author, evaluating claims at the paragraph level or below, and evaluating the text’s overall effectiveness. The clearest finding is that whether participants viewed the document favorably, unfavorably, or somewhere in-between, they all weighed it and claims within it against their own personal experiences of working at Acme. Those who were ambivalent towards the text, likewise, were ambivalent because they had mixed or conflicting experiences of working at the company. Those
experiences include many aspects of organizational life, but especially their perceptions of what I call an “ongoing stream” of previous communications, and their perceptions of the allocation of money and material resources. Adults in the workplace read, in short, by the light of experience. Participants who evaluated the text positively did so because the text was consonant with their personal experience and perceptions as Acme workers.

Judging from these data, the process of “seeing through” or “reading against” a text, which is the central trope of critical literacy, involves bringing one’s total store of insider perceptions about one’s organization to bear upon a text, searching, as the literature says, for “gaps, fissures and disconnects” between what the text says and what the reader perceives to be true. Some of these gaps and fissures are simple factual inaccuracies; others involve “spin,” or rhetorical choices that have been made by the author(s) in order to represent company reality in a certain way. Working adults--at least knowledge workers at Acme--are alert to those spins and quick to pounce on disconnects between the received representation and how they themselves perceive and interpret reality. Brand-new newcomers to an organization might be less able and perhaps less motivated to critique company discourse, having accumulated less personal experience with and inside information about the company, but workers with a long history of negative experiences in the company can be a very tough audience, instantly rejecting any statement that does not match their experience. This study suggests that the text of experience is more valid,
and more valued, than written text in the perceptions of working adults. If a given text conflicts with what an employee has experienced, she will disbelieve the text and place her trust in what she has experienced.

These findings make a contribution to the research on skilled reading in the workplace. The reading research in general, especially the research on skilled or expert reading, focuses primarily on academic readers in academic settings; reading research conducted outside the academy often focuses on relatively low-skilled readers, exploring (using cognitivist methods) their processes of comprehension, not evaluation. This may be the first study of the moment-to-moment reading responses of corporate employees to an in-house epideictic text. Participants read the text in their own individual ways, but all of them made frequent judgments of the worth and credibility of what they were reading, like Charney’s scientists and David Wyatt et al.’s sociologists. They weighed claims against their observations of the Acme environment—especially an ongoing stream of previous communications, and the allocation of money and material resources—and against their knowledge of business in general and the software industry in particular. Their readings were anything but cool and detached: they were hot, involved and informed.

Some scholars in Organizational Communication have taken critical perspectives on employee communication (Cheney, Bullis, DiSanza, Tompkins, McPhee), and Organizational Communication as a field does see itself rooted partly in Rhetorical Theory (Redding), but few if any studies have examined in depth the ways in which an employee audience responds
to an in-house publication from the overtly rhetorical perspective of Rhetoric, Composition and Literacy Studies. DiSanza and Bullis studied a group of U.S. Forest Service employees reading and responding to an employee newsletter; they found that those who experienced "disidentification" with the newsletter often had that feeling because what the newsletter said did not match their own personal experiences as Forest Service employees. My finding that Acme employees evaluated a somewhat similar text according to how well it matched their own personal experiences of working at Acme confirms that finding, extends it to another group of employees in a different type of organization, and "thickens" it by giving a detailed, nuanced picture of how a group of (mostly) disaffected employees "read against" an official company publication.

An additional finding from this research is that Scott’s theory of domination and resistance gives us new ways to talk about rhetorics, literacies and literatures among subordinate populations--and a new reason to believe that perhaps the subaltern can speak after all (Spivak). In particular, his notion of public and hidden transcripts provide a way to understand and talk about the subaltern rhetorical response--the suppressed utterances that are saved for later while the manicured, presentable, deferential speech rolls trippingly off the tongue. Cynthia Smith showed that Scott’s ideas provide a "very robust" framework that anthropologists can use to analyze organizational life. This study suggests that Scott’s theories about domination and resistance can be helpful to scholars in Rhetoric and Composition as well as they explore language use.
in organizations and other social contexts. They would also be of use to researchers in Business and Technical Communication with an interest in how institutional power dynamics affect communication in organizations.

**Questions for Research**

Although the findings from this qualitative case study cannot be generalized to other populations in other workplaces, they raise provocative questions for future research to answer. We might, for example, wish to return to Acme and replicate the study in other departments. Do workers in, say, the Sales department feel as subordinated as do knowledge workers in R&D? We know a lot about how Acme R&D workers perceive Sales workers; how do Sales workers perceive R&D workers? What discourses shape their perceptions of each other, and of upper management? We might also want to find out whether the findings hold true and how they vary in other software companies, other industries, or other types of organization (e.g., bigger, smaller, not-for-profit). With any group of employees in any organization, we might ask the same question: what internal cultural factors influence employee perceptions of and responses to communications from management? What critical skills do they bring to bear in their readings of these communications? We might also want to conduct longitudinal studies to explore the role of secondary and college education in the acquisition of critical reading skills. What role does college education play (or not play) in the reading done by adults in the workplace? How well do college composition classes prepare students
to be critical readers not just in general, but within the specific institutional contexts that will shape their daily lives?

In addition, it would be very interesting to study critical *writing* in organizations (or perhaps I should say “composing,” for it could be argued that my participants’ uses of written texts count as writing). Is composing ever used to “push back” against injustice or abuses of power in the workplace? Who does this, how, why, and with what results? How do employees and low-level managers manipulate discourse conventions in order to advance their own agendas and defend their own interests?

Although this study was not designed to probe issues of race, gender and class, my speculative numerical probing in Chapter 5 does generate some questions regarding the many ways in which those markers interact with workplace rhetorics and literacies—questions that can only be answered by research designed to foreground race, gender, or class at every stage in the process. More qualitative studies like this one, done by other researchers, would shed additional light on what my reflections suggest is a very complex subject: the ability of differently raced, classed and gendered working adults to make sense of, position themselves in relation to, and ultimately critique the discourses that surround them in their daily working lives. For example, Acme Technology is permeated with signs and symbols of white male middle class power (remember, for example, the rocket launch poster in the CPR room). In an organization that is woman-owned and woman-identified, would we see images of female sexuality and female power subtly coercing men to emulate feminine
modes of expression and decision-making? How would male employees read employee communications in that type of organization? Similar questions could be asked about non-white organizational environments or individuals. For example, how might an employee’s race and class affect his or her perceptions of work and workplace texts? Might individuals who have had less-privileged backgrounds tend to interpret employee communications differently than their more privileged co-workers, playing play “the believing game” rather than “the doubting game” (Elbow)? If so, what accounts for those differences, and what else might be at play in their readings that I am not even seeing?

Equally important, this study also raises questions about how race and/or ethnicity, sex, and class (along with education level and length of time spent working at the company) interact with the ways critical reading ability is measured and described by researchers. Though my study was not really designed to elicit information about race, gender or class, probing the numbers across groups as I did in Chapter 5 gives the suspiciously simplistic impression that that whites use more critical reading strategies than do people of color, and that men use more critical reading strategies with more critical agility than women do. That erroneous impression raises red flags for me about the extent to which my own race, gender and class have influenced the research design and the assumptions and questions that drive the research to begin with. Everything about this study may have been inadvertently raced, gendered and classed by virtue of my own subject position as an educated upper-
middle-class white woman. How did my own race, gender and class shape what I was able to observe and how I interpreted what I observed? For example, when I was coding the reading protocols, how did my own raced, gendered and classed assumptions about what constitutes a “critical” move influence my inductive coding? I am sure that it did: researchers from other backgrounds would probably operate on different assumptions, picking up on critical nuances that went sailing past my head and valuing other aspects of the very interesting readings that participants gave. Perhaps a researcher who has been steeped in the rhetorics and literacies of, say, an African-American community would find other things in the protocol data and would induce an entirely different set of codes that would make the readers of color look more “critically agile” than the white readers. Such is the nature of qualitative research--the researcher herself as perceiving subject is always an inextricable part of the findings she reports. I say that not to inoculate myself and my research from scrutiny but to encourage myself and other qualitative researchers to search ever more actively for the often invisible influences of our own subject positions on our research designs. That influence cannot be eradicated, but it can at least be articulated, not just at the end of the research, but throughout the entire process. I will strive to do this more effectively in future projects.

**Implications for Pedagogy**

For Business Communication instructors and course directors, the implications center on two issues: ethics and context. For composition
instructors, the implications center on the definition and acquisition of
critical literacy.

**Implications for Business Communication Pedagogy**

Business Communication textbooks are often pervaded by a certain set of assumptions about the working world. They posit a middle-class writing subject (the student in some future job) whose main goal is to “get ahead” as an individual by putting a good face on the company in external transactions and on him- or herself in internal transactions. They posit an organization that is founded on good principles and sticks to them in times of change and stress. They posit an upper management team that has good intentions and makes good judgments. They posit, in short, an idealized corporate world in which good communication is capable of solving all problems and in which upper management cares about making meritorious decisions and building goodwill both internally, with employees, and externally, with customers. While I have no doubt that many corporations do answer that description (and bravo to them), my findings suggest that at least one corporation does not. The popularity of the Dilbert comic strip suggests that other corporations, too, practice the same types of disrespect and abuse of power that I witnessed at Acme.

That widespread reality raises some serious questions for Business Communication instructors and course directors about *ethics*. In what ways might it be inappropriate—and appropriate—to posit such an idealized, clean, ethical business world in the classroom?
On the one hand, it may work in our favor as Business Communication instructors to “go with the flow” of students’ own desires to succeed in the business world, assuming along with them that the business world is a good place to be. Protecting our students from the dark side of the business world may be more conducive to their learning processes than acknowledging it and inviting it into the room with us. On the other hand, to pretend that the business world is not plagued by ethical difficulties is simply unrealistic and does not serve students as well, as citizens, as we want to serve them. What might be the consequences, for students, of “putting up and shutting up” versus speaking out in some way in an attempt to change the unjust practices they observe?

There has to be a way to address the fact that students will undoubtedly encounter unfairness, dishonesty, and abuses of power in the workplace, especially since those phenomena are apparently so pervasive. I think it is part of our responsibility as teachers to encourage students to do some serious thinking about those issues before they enter the maelstrom of actual work. As Kate Ronald argues, our courses may provide the only opportunities for real reflection that students will have before diving into the hurly-burly of the working world. While I do not agree with Ronald that personal writing should be central to the Business Communication class, this study has shown me the importance and potential value of reflection and critique as well as practice in the Business Communication classroom. Assignments ought to provide opportunities for reflection upon and critique of the communication skills that students
are at the same time learning—and student efforts to think reflectively and critically ought to be valued as part of the grade for each assignment.

Andrea Lunsford uses a technique in her composition classes that might also be helpful as we try to envision a critical-reflective business communication classroom: she has students write a “memo” to her about each assignment, which they turn in along with each of their drafts. In this memo, students answer a series of questions from the instructor such as, “What do you like best about this piece? Which is your favorite sentence and why? What about this draft are you still uncomfortable with?” This practice, which I observed when I taught with her in 1997, is consonant with her and Robert Connors’ advice in The New St. Martin’s Handbook that students learn to think and talk metacognitively about their writing (see especially their words to students on pages I-1 through I-11). Other instructors will probably want to ask other questions, and Business Communication instructors might want to ask different questions from those posed by composition instructors. For example, I might ask my own students questions along the lines of, “What ethical questions came up for you as you worked on this document? What scenarios can you envision in which this document might not solve the problem? What other influences, besides this document, might affect how my audience responds?”

Whatever specific choices an instructor makes, the point I am making is that Lunsford’s memo technique can provide just the sort of opportunity to promote not only metacognition but also the reflection and critique that I am calling for in the Business Communication classroom. The questions
one asks of one's students can help them prepare to cope in their own ways, both as *communicators* and as *audiences*, with unfairness, dishonesty, and abuses of power in the workplace.

Another implication for the teaching of Business Communication centers on the influence of *context* on communication within organizations. My study reminds us that organizations and their cultures (which some would say are the same thing) will inevitably form the backdrop for most of the actual business and technical communication that students are likely to do after they leave our classrooms. It suggests that real writers writing actual business documents and real readers responding to those documents are probably strongly influenced by organizational allegiances and collective identities that are important to them. Business Communication instructors should therefore reconsider the individualistic paradigms underlying their textbooks' discussions of writing, reading and audience analysis. Kitty Locker's best-selling textbook (*Business*) contains good information about analyzing organizational cultures, but it and other business communication textbooks would benefit from a more complex view of organizational culture, including the insight that *multiple* internal cultures probably exist and may be in conflict with each other. This study shows that internal cultural conflicts complicate the organization as a discursive realm, adding "wild card" ingredients to certain rhetorical situations in the workplace, which the textbooks do not anticipate very well. Those wild card ingredients, when present, can have major effects on how a given message will be received by its audience(s)—who are not, as we
have seen, rational individuals responding predictably to stimuli contained within messages, but members of overlapping cultural groups and carriers of socially constructed knowledge—knowledge that already occupies a central position in their frame of mind as they read and interpret workplace texts.

On the other hand, the Business Communication course is already crowded with too many specific topics to address in a frustratingly limited period of time. If we are now to incorporate cultural context as well as general principles into the heart of our curriculum, we might reasonably despair of ever being able to teach such an over-complicated subject, and students might be tempted to avoid taking Business Communication classes altogether, because if context is everything, then why not just skip the class and learn on the job? My solution to this problem (wishful thinking though it may be) is to add a second semester course to the Business Communication curriculum, centered on students doing internships in real organizations. The logistics would have to be worked out, of course, but in a perfect world, I would like to see a two-semester sequence: the first course would resemble the current course, focusing on general principles (which, though subject to alteration in specific organizational cultures, remain perennially useful), and the second course would center on observation of those principles at work (or not at work) in real organizations. Perhaps second-semester students could do mini-ethnographies, in which they collect small amounts of ethnographic data.
and analyze those data to see how the general principles they learned in the first semester play out in actual organizational contexts.

Whatever instructors decide to do in their own classrooms about ethics and context, this study has made me yearn for better ways of balancing the imperative to teach general principles with the equally pressing (to me) imperative to question, complicate, and problematize those principles so that students will have a better leg up on the deeper questions, both ethical and contextual, that are bound to emerge in the actual workplace.

Questions for Composition Pedagogy

This study raises questions about to what extent scholars in our discipline have thought through the concept of critical literacy and the role(s) that we envision for critical literacy in our students’ post-college lives. My findings in Chapter 5 suggest that we have more thinking to do about our definitions of critical literacy and how we believe it is acquired.

What critical literacy is. Critical literacy as variously defined in the literature is both a behavior and an attitude. On the one hand, it is a behavior: it is "practic[ing] reading and writing in ways that enhance the quest for democratic emancipation, for empowerment of the subordinated, the marginalized Other" (Lankshear and McLaren xviii). If that is how we define critical literacy, then my participants are critically literate, for by weighing the protocol text against their everyday experiences at Acme, they
are enhancing group solidarity, which Scott argues is an essential step before any overt change effort can take place.

On the other hand, many scholars who write about critical literacy imply that it is more than just a behavior, it is an *attitude*, a way of seeing the world, akin to “critical consciousness,” Freire’s notion of *conscientiza*, and feminist notions of “strong” or “resistant” reading. It is an enlightened mental state in which the reader approaches texts “critically,” that is, with the intent and ability to examine “the political and cultural assumptions underlying” them (McLaren). That is the view that my study calls into question. First of all, how does one define “political” and “cultural”? I believe that the assumptions underlying workplace texts, including the protocol text, are both political and cultural. To disagree with that would be to imbue the words “political” and “cultural” with very specific meanings that work to valorize some discourses over others and reinscribe traditional views of workplace discourse as instrumental and therefore politically inert.

Secondly, while it is always important to seek out *emic* perceptions of the behaviors and phenomena we observe, conducting this study has made me very uncomfortable with the prospect of granting or withholding a merit badge (as in, “I hereby pronounce you critically literate”) based on the degree to which a person has adopted a certain *subjectivity* that may be privileged in some quarters of my discipline. Whether we are looking in our classrooms for the “bourgeois subjectivity” that Sharon Crowley accuses the first-year composition industry of reproducing, looking in the
workplace for the radicalized "working class" subjectivity that Ira Shor values, or looking somewhere else for another subjectivity, the question must be asked, why are we looking for this? Who benefits when we find it? To what extent is the researcher's own personal dramas reflected in the research? This is not to imply that research ought to be impersonal and not reflect the researcher's own personal issues--just that the relationship between the two ought to be examined and articulated, for the intersections have much to teach us as a field.

*How critical literacy is acquired.* Educators might want to believe that one's critical reading ability goes up as one accumulates more academic education. According to this study, however, the correspondence is rather weak. Some of the least educated participants gave the most critically agile readings. Why? What accounts for the fact that some participants with advanced degrees employed smaller numbers of critical reading strategies, while others having only a little bit of college used more strategies? Literacy scholars continue to debate the "literacy myth" (Graff): that the more advanced literacies that an individual accumulates, the more likely it is that he or she will have a successful career and therefore a successful life. Do these results suggest that perhaps there is a "classroom education myth" as well--that the more classroom education one has, the more literacies and critical thinking skills one will necessarily develop?

As a result of this research, I now believe that people are likely to develop their own culturally appropriate versions of critical literacy just by
virtue of living life. People's exposure to what they perceive as the realities of life create storehouses of personal knowledge, which they use as evidence for evaluating the credibility of what they read and hear. However, that is not to devalue the roles that classroom education can play in that process. The extent to which reading and writing assignments draw upon the student's personal knowledge and experience and help him or her use that knowledge and experience to produce and make sense of written discourse is the extent to which education can play a facilitative role in the acquisition of critical literacy.

Implications for Practitioners

This study has the following implications for middle- and high-level managers and for employee communication specialists.

For Middle and Upper Management

This study supports Wilkins and Patterson’s assertion that the culture of an organization cannot be just replaced. It shows that a culture is very hard to change, especially

- when the old values had previously been articulated and sincerely adopted by employees
- without appropriate “cultural transition” ceremonies
- without including employees in the process of navigating the seas of change, and above all,
- when employees are not likely to benefit from the changes.
Brenda captured this implication when she said, “Acme is its employees. Corporations fail to recognize that over and over again” (Tape 25, June 28, 1999). A culture might be *dragged* in new directions by dint of changing work processes, redistributing material resources, and an influx of new employees, but if the leadership wants existing employees to stay actively on board and be enthusiastic partners in change, it must include employees in the process from start to finish and make sure there is serious incentive for them to go along with the changes. Better yet, invite them to *co-create* the change program, so that some of their own hopes and desires can be built into the program.

An excellent and inexpensive way to start would be to do qualitative research on what the culture is really like “at the bottom” (Davis). Hire a researcher who will “study up” rather than down, playing a participative role when possible and placing high value on the employees’ own culture. Deal and Kennedy’s symbolist definition of culture might be used as an analytical framework, but at the very least the research should focus on values, stories and keywords, as I have done here, because they seem to form a good “short list” of most-revealing items. Even a month-long study, done by the right person or people, can yield a treasure trove of information about the cultural resources (values, stories, keywords) the organization already *has*. If it were possible to conduct such a study when commissioned by management—which it may not be—then the resulting knowledge could serve as common ground and starting points for serious
discussion between management and employees about what needs to change and why.

For example, had the knowledge I generated in my study of Acme been sought out early in the change process, upper management may have realized that it had a good thing in the RICE principles. A dialogue could have been initiated about what “excellence” means in today’s business environment and how it is changing. Luke called for that in his reading protocol, wishing for better ways of identifying “excellence” in a company and letting people, letting employees identify and understand what it is. They do it in very patronizing ways, like having awards. Let’s give awards to people. That means somebody is rewarding you for doing something they consider excellent, but it hasn’t defined excellence.

Paula: Mmm-hmm.

Luke: You know--

Paula: Very process oriented things like you just said?


Paula: That means, you know, they’re focusing on bestowal of a designation of excellence.


Paula: And I heard what you said about developing a process and you’re now saying, talking about defining it.

Luke: Excellence again, yeah that could be a process. The development of the definition of excellence in Acme should come up, from the bottom.

Paula: That would be interesting, wouldn’t that be interesting?

Luke: [Pointedly] Yes, wouldn’t it. (Tape 28, June 29, 1999) 357
Peter Drucker, Roger D'Aprix and others have called for two-way communication between management and employees, but my suggestion here is somewhat different. I am suggesting that high-level managers who want to change their organization's culture will save an enormous amount of time, money and lost goodwill by taking inventory of the culture(s) that currently exist at the lowest levels, then identifying which elements of the existing culture might already be aligned or alignable with the new, desired directions. A little qualitative research followed by substantive two-way discussion of key cultural elements can prevent other companies from becoming like Acme Technology: a company with 22-25% annual turnaround (Tape 35, July 2, 1999) and a resistive, alienated workforce.

Implications for Employee Communication Specialists

If nothing else, this study shows that employees read official texts in light of their personal experiences working for the company. Those experiences include everything that has happened before and all messages that have previously been sent. Employees have long memories and short patience for what they call "propaganda." Employee audiences do not somehow suspend their disbelief or forget about the past when reading new messages from upper management. Au contraire, they make a point of remembering as they compare what the text says with what they have experienced.

Knowledge workers may be especially intelligent and especially inclined to read texts skeptically. As John and Mark explain,
John: In order to do this kind of work, you have to have better analytical abilities than most people. So you're going to be able to sort the good potatoes from the bad potatoes. And when somebody's handing you a lot of bad potatoes and saying they're great potatoes, you look and say, "These are bad potatoes." You don't think there's something wrong with you. So we have been managed by this fellow's team as if we were a bunch of burger-flippers at McDonalds.


John: Knuckleheads. And not that those people aren't wonderful too--

Mark: [Overlapping] --aren't wonderful too, but I mean give us a little more credit. (Tape 15, June 23, 1999)

I suspect, however, that most employees are more intelligent and more "critically agile" than employee communication specialists may realize--and more influenced by the values and meanings the circulate within their own local subcultures.

My suggestion above for high-level managers, that they take the time to learn about the employee subcultures within the organization, applies to employee communication specialists as well. Though the relationship between the internal communication team and the management team may be complex, my study suggests that employee communication specialists may be in a good position to serve as advocates of employee audiences when discussing employee communication with management. Employee communication specialists can be the ones to propose and push for the qualitative research I recommend above; with the right training and educational background, and with the right way of representing the research to employees, they can even be the ones to conduct the research.
That would yield important insights for the communicator's own practice, and would also take the communicator out from behind the text and place him or her in direct contact with employees.

The final implication for employee communication specialists—and for management as well—is that words alone cannot bring about substantive changes in the culture or values of an organization. T.J. and Sandar Larkin argue that change should never be communicated in the company newsletter (117) because "if it's not face-to-face, it's not communication" (86), and management should "stop communicating values" (209) because "values are not something you communicate; values are something you do" (210). This study validates their perspective and implies that no mere text can bring about change in an organization. Even a text that conforms to current wisdom on how to write for employees will fail if its words do not match that which employees have observed and experienced.
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APPENDIX A: Access Agreement

Dear Ms. Foster,

Thank you for your interest in Acme as a site for communication research. We hereby grant you permission to spend as much time as you need in our Codeville corporate office, gathering data on the communication practices of our employee, Brenda Williams, and some of her co-workers and staff, as she deems appropriate. We understand that you are looking for a particular type of literacy in the workplace, and that you will be gathering data in the following ways:

1. direct observation and note-taking
   (including accompanying Ms. Williams to meetings and other events)
2. confidential interviews (audiotaped or not, at the interviewee's discretion)
3. reading and analyzing print and electronic documents

To facilitate your research, please use cost center 954000 to which employees' time can be charged. That will make it easier for you to gain their cooperation for brief interviews during work time.

Moreover, because we agree with you that employee protection is important, we promise never to request access to your raw data (fieldnotes, audiotapes, transcriptions of interviews, etc.). We hope that promise helps our employees feel safe talking to you about their communication practices.

However, we impose the following limitations on your research:

1. you will use pseudonyms in all future write-ups, both for the organization as a whole and for the individuals involved in your study.
2. you will not reveal any information that Brenda Williams, our representative, considers sensitive or proprietary.
3. you will not take any documents off-site.

If you accept those conditions, then you are free to conduct your research anytime, as arranged in advance with our representative Brenda Williams.

Best,
[signature]

cc: Geena Braddock, HR