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**DEVELOPING AS A LEARNING
ORGANIZATION:
A HONG KONG CASE OF
SENSE GIVING AND
CAREER CONTRACTS**

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Acknowledgements: *The study was funded by City University of Hong Kong small scale research grant 9030607 and by the Research Grants Council, Hong Kong, Grant no. 904032. My thanks go to Ms. Sandy Suk-kwan Hui, Senior Research Assistant, Department of Building & Construction, City University of Hong Kong, who conducted and transcribed the interviews upon which this study is based.*

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DEVELOPING AS A LEARNING ORGANIZATION: A HONG KONG CASE OF SENSEGIVING AND CAREER CONTRACTS

ABSTRACT

I discuss a qualitative case study of a Hong Kong-based utility company where commercial imperatives drove, but also circumscribed, development toward 'Learning Organization' (LO) ideals. The case illuminates the paradox of promoting greater openness and creativity through top down sensegiving, as many managers and professionals participated in collective development towards LO ideals, but were seduced into what nearly became a propaganda trap. The case also highlights the importance of honouring psychological contracts, in that a covenant with the workforce, which leveraged the company's dominant industry position, restored an atmosphere of mutuality with a marginalized rump. Noting that the focal company may have been blessed with relatively munificent circumstances, I conclude by identifying four viability tasks that aspiring LOs may need to perform continually in order to forestall resentment and disillusion.

INTRODUCTION

How viable is the ‘Learning Organization’ (LO)? The overall aim of this paper is to identify the essential criteria that aspiring LOs must satisfy in order to remain viable. Material for analysis comes from a qualitative case study of a Hong Kong company, hereafter called ‘Tiger’, whose senior management adopted the LO concept as a strategic principle and retrospective legitimizing device for change-oriented programmes and policies throughout the 1990s. After defining a LO and declaring my position in relation to research teleology and ontology, I outline five ideal characteristics of the LO, derived from literature review. I then explain the case study data collection and analysis procedures, and assess Tiger’s development against the five LO criteria, noting apparent shortfalls and truncations, and raising questions of the desirability of some features of the company’s longer-term sustainability as a LO. Next, I examine the role of top-down sensegiving in Tiger’s progress as a LO, and identify how, while this was helpful in moving toward some LO ideals, over-reliance on it may have led, gently and seductively, to psychic imprisonment. After noting the important, complementary role played by a covenant between Tiger and its workforce, I argue that preventing psychological contract (PC) violation is a major challenge for LOs. I identify financial resourcefulness, buffering against stress, and prevention of dependency as key organizational tasks in maintaining the viability of PCs in developing LOs, along with the need to balance sensegiving with inquiry.

The Learning Organization Defined

A LO is an organization that expresses normative commitment to organizational learning (OL), and is good at it (Tsang 1997: 75). If that means being good at *all* types of OL, then given the many varieties of OL (Huber 1991; Dodgson 1993; Jones and Hendry 1994; Slater and Narver 1995; Easterby-Smith 1997; Easterby-Smith et al. 1998), attaining and sustaining ‘actual’ LO status would be an outstanding, even superhuman, collective achievement. Indeed, advocates such as Senge (1990a: 22), Pedler et al. (1991) and Marsick and Watkins (1999) imply this, and thus regard LO as a guiding vision for reaching out to rather than as an attainable end state. The concept of LO may likewise serve as an ideal type in organizational analysis, and that is the stance adopted here, i.e. that no organization is a pure LO, but that organizations differ in the extent to which they embrace particular LO attributes.

Learning Organization Teleology and Ontology

Issues of teleology concern the purposes of research, such as whether or not the LO is considered a politically and ethically neutral phenomenon (Easterby-Smith et al. 1998: 261-263). ‘Neutral’, positivist research would focus on the technicalities of how LOs develop and operate, and/or on their effectiveness in meeting other business objectives, such as profitability, and would not question the desirability of these other objectives. I do not regard the LO as a neutral concept —I see it as a ‘loaded’ one, and in the next subsection, I shall identify five emerging ideals in the LO literature. Ideals are the ingredients of ideology, a shared pattern of individual and collective meaning that has moral and motivational force (Coopey 1996: 381). I see the LO ideals *in themselves* as broadly desirable, and I use the Tiger case to show how, even within wider socio-economic ‘realities’ and imperatives as currently constructed, some progress may be made toward at least some of them. However, I also heed Coopey’s (1996) cogent argument that ideology deriving from LO concepts, in offering new prescriptions for consolidating managerial power and prerogatives under the guise of symbolic unity, becomes, less desirably, an instrument of domination and control. Therefore, in analyzing the Tiger case, I also note how LO ideals may be truncated while allowing ideological seductions to persist, and consider issues that if not satisfactorily resolved, threaten ultimate disillusionment and derailment.

Questions of ontology concern the nature and status of reality afforded to OL, and hence to LOs (Easterby-Smith et al. 1998: 263-266). The five LO ideals set out in the next subsection subsume many different layers in an overall texture of organizing, including group structures, inter-group processes, information systems and flows, strategic positioning and direction, and cultural identity formation. To focus narrowly on surface measurables, such as learning curves in relation to productivity and efficiency, and/or learning technologies such as computer-based conferencing systems and decision support systems, would be to neglect the role of deeper, and less tangible, layers in the overall design and functioning of the LO. The ontological miscellany, complexity and depth that I believe characterizes the LO rule out a rationally objective approach to establishing what is entailed in becoming a LO and developing as one. Thus, while I infer some practical lessons from Tiger about how an

organization might achieve shared advances, the supporting data consists of detected shifts in the balance of socially and culturally negotiated meanings and perceptions, rather than hard, objectively measured, realities.

Ideals of the Learning Organization

I have aggregated LO attributes from diverging literatures (Easterby-Smith et al. 1998) into five broad ideals described below. I refer also to more general phenomena, such as communities of practice (CsOP) and psychological contracts (PCs).

Ideal 1: Organization-wide free flows of ideas, know-how, identity and spirit

CsOP may be regarded as basic sources of collective learning and development at work (Brown and Duguid 1996: 14), and hence the building blocks of LOs. Within CsOP, practices, meanings and capabilities co-evolve through storytelling (Orr 1996), improvisation (Brown and Duguid 1991: 41-44) and informed, informal dialogue among peers (Liedtka 1999: 7). As novices acquire skills and techniques through progressive exposure to hands-on practice, they are also socialized into grass-roots worldviews of the work and its wider contribution. CsOP therefore deliver a situated curriculum (Lave and Wenger 1991), covering the cognitive, psychomotor and affective domains (Bloom et al. 1971). Members build up a sense of occupational identity and affinity with others performing the same tasks, even if those others operate beyond their immediate work group (Czarniawska 1997: 479). In LOs, construed as communities of CsOP (Brown and Duguid 1991: 53), collective affinity extends to groups performing different kinds of work. While in most business organizations, the shared but tough-minded objectives that characterize solidarity tend to conflict with the friendlier pursuit of sociability among members (Goffee and Jones 1996: 145-6), the business cultures of LOs are communal, characterized both by solidarity and by sociability. The communal cultures of LOs encourage cross-functional teamwork, innovation, synergy and sharing. Barriers to flows of ideas, know-how and co-operation are somehow removed, allowing and encouraging interconnection and interchange between diverse CsOP. One metaphor to represent the informational infrastructure supporting these flows is 'hypertext organization' (Nonaka and Takeuchi 1995; Nonaka and Konno 1998). Specialist knowledge is not guarded jealously, but instead is shared across disciplines, giving rise to multiple reinterpretations and stimulating

creativity, not deference to the fixed truth of expert dictat (Huber 1991: 89-90). Relationships between different occupational groups are characterized by cross-functional humility (McGill et al. 1992: 11) not negative occupational stereotyping (Workman and Freeburg 1997).

Ideal 2: Ongoing collective transformation and self-improvement

Strategy-makers in LOs adopt open-minded, outward-looking approaches, such as scenario planning (de Geus 1988) and preparational planning (Cunningham 1984), anticipating potential hardship and allowing long-term provision for human resource redeployment and multi-skilling. LOs thereby re-position themselves in terms of services or products delivered, technologies and expertise employed, and markets served, without jettisoning staff (de Geus 1997: 55). LOs address the needs of all members as stakeholders, so that shared destiny connects collective-level transformative or double-loop learning, marked by changes in market position, organization structures, business processes or work practices, with transformative learning by individual employees. A LO thus ‘facilitates the development of all its members, *and* continuously transforms itself’ (Pedler et al. 1989: 2). There is similar connection between collective and individual incremental improvement or single-loop learning. As the standard of what the LO collectively produces and delivers rises with the expectations of outside stakeholders, employees’ capabilities and performance progressively improve (Lessem 1991; Anderson et al. 1994: 488).

Ideal 3: Dispersed learning leadership, climate creation and facilitation

Learning leadership takes place at all levels in LOs (Senge 1990b: 13; Tichy 1997). Strategy-making leaders encourage enquiry into the contextual trends, patterns and dynamics in which the organization is embedded. They expose and gently confront implicit assumptions and mental models (Senge 1990b: 12-15). Leaders in line management and supervisory positions build learning climates conducive to experimentation and experience sharing (Senge 1997). They act as instructors, coaches, co-learners and models for learning, supporting, encouraging and facilitating learning and development rather than exerting unilateral command and control (Megginson 1988; Marquardt 1996: 106-108). They give space and resources to staff to work things out for themselves, pose thought-provoking questions, talk things through, work things out together, provide and solicit feedback, explain the bigger picture, and use analogies and examples when giving explanations (Ellinger and Bostrom 1999). Role models also include employees without formal line authority.

Ideal 4: Open dialogue engaging multiple perspectives

Dialogue in LOs ranges from deeply contemplative self-questioning (Bohm 1990: 11; Cayer 1997) to the ‘hallways’, where people share first-hand insights, experiences and observations, consider ideas on merit rather than on the basis of seniority or affiliation, and avoid monologues (Dixon 1997). LOs entertain multiple stories and perspectives (Boje 1994), house conversation, dialogue and debate, and aim for creative problem solving, rather than passive acceptance of solutions (Isaacs 1993; Schein 1993). Members may criticize policies without fear of reprisal or reprimand (Barrett 1995). If ‘shared mental models’ (Senge 1990a) emerge, they do so naturally, rather than being imposed.

Ideal 5: Protean career contracts

Psychological contracts (PCs) are implied expectations and obligations in exchange relationships between employees and employing organizations (Anderson and Schalk 1998: 638), and may be construed either as individual or as collective phenomena (Anderson and Schalk 1998: 639). For individuals, a PC is ‘a person’s beliefs regarding the terms of his or her exchange relationship with another’ (Rousseau, 1998: 668). At collective levels, PCs represent norms about bilateral employment relationships. Since the mid-1980s, these have placed less emphasis on security, continuity and loyalty, and more emphasis on employability, instrumentality and transactional exchange (Hiltrop 1995; Anderson and Schalk 1998: 642; Sparrow and Cooper 1998). In terms of responsibility for career management, the trend has been away from dependency at one extreme, and towards ‘free agent’ contracts at the other.

LOs seek to establish ‘protean’ career contracts as a third way alternative (Hall and Moss 1998: 35). These are long-term partnerships, which retain a relational element, where LOs provide access to knowledge-rich environments, encourage developmental relationships among colleagues, and support continuous personal growth and competence enhancement. Employees, in return, accept exposure to appropriate challenges, and strive to maintain good performance, avoid obsolescence and remain employable. Protean career contracts are reflected in individual level PCs, with employees realizing that the job is not theirs as of right, and that maintaining the relationship with their employer requires them to be flexible, ready to move through various assignments requiring new abilities.

METHODOLOGY AND COMPANY BACKGROUND

Learning Organization Epistemology

Questions of epistemology concern preferred methods of enquiry into OL/LO (Easterby-Smith et al. 1998: 266-267) and are informed by teleological and ontological positions. In terms of teleology, my aim was to understand how the development of LOs may be guided and facilitated, and to identify potential hazards such as the truncation and distortion of LO ideals during practical application. In terms of ontology, I assumed that multiple, socially constructed layers of reality, meanings, and behavioural dynamics, would emerge and be negotiated in the development of LOs. These considerations did not rule out the inclusion of OL measurement instruments (e.g. Leitch et al. 1996; Bontis and Crossan 1999) as part of a mixed qualitative-quantitative research design (Creswell 1994), although the match between available instruments and the LO ideals emerging in the wider literature is unclear. The promise of ‘measurement’ of LO progress might have attracted the participation of more host organizations seeking quick feedback. From the outset, I was concerned, however, that formal instrumentation would be seen by host organizations as an easy way out of the more time consuming business of explaining the historical unfolding of meanings, intentions, experiences and events.

Finding and Focusing on Tiger

I had initially envisaged a multiple case study approach involving up to six Hong Kong Chinese companies that had attempted to make progress toward LO ideals, aiming to discover what had facilitated their progress and what difficulties they had encountered, and possibly overcome. Locally run Chinese companies were preferable to subsidiaries of foreign-run ones, in order to be in a position to get closer to the heart of LOs, rather than being confined to the periphery. I believed also that Chinese organizations might yield fresh insights into the development of LOs, because of different cultural assumptions both from the West and from Japan (Hong 1999), where most prior research and theorizing in the LO has been conducted. While I anticipated that relatively high emphasis on collectivism and Confucian dynamism (Hofstede and Bond 1988) in Hong Kong might favour the development of LOs, prior

experience of qualitative research in Hong Kong had already revealed some reluctance among Chinese companies to open themselves to in-depth social psychological investigation. In the absence of high level ‘connections’, I therefore decided to cast the net widely. More than 800 companies employing upwards of 100 people in Hong Kong were initially contacted by letter, asking if they would be willing to host at least half a dozen qualitative interviews. Tiger was among three companies agreeing to join the study, but turned out to be the only company that was both Chinese-run and claiming to have made deliberate efforts to develop toward LO ideals (not necessarily corresponding exactly to the ideal types set out above). Tiger’s management showed interest in the research, agreed to host more interviews than had initially been envisaged, and provided material that was, in the judgement of the researchers, sufficiently deep, rich and engaging to stand as a single case study.

Company Background

Tiger was founded in 1862 as Hong Kong’s first utility company, under colonial British management. By 1999, the directorate, management and labour force (total headcount just over 2,200) were all Hong Kong Chinese, and Tiger was quoted on the Hong Kong stock exchange. The chairman was a Hong Kong Chinese business tycoon, representing a minority shareholding of just over 30%. The last expatriate had left in May 1997, after ten years as managing director, and his successor, Mr. X, had joined Tiger in 1992 as general manager of marketing and customer service. Interviewees regarded Tiger as essentially Chinese, albeit less ‘traditionally’ Chinese than some other locally run Hong Kong companies.

Tiger enjoyed 10% compound growth during the decade-long reign of the last expatriate managing director, but in anticipation of market saturation and plateauing of demand, headcount expansion slowed, and from the early 1990s, cost reduction and efficiency savings efforts began in earnest, with headcount falling from 1995 onwards. Total quality management (TQM) was introduced in 1992, and business process re-engineering (BPR) in 1996. These programmes were largely run by Tiger itself rather than by external consultants. TQM featured quality circles, training in creativity and problem solving, and cross-functional team projects commissioned by top management. Under BPR, 95% of Tiger’s activities were redesigned as 12 business processes, supported by organization-wide adoption of SAP.

On taking over as managing director, Mr. X re-emphasized the need for Tiger to innovate, diversify, reduce costs, add value, raise productivity, improve market responsiveness and strengthen customer service. He arranged meetings of the top 30 managers, spaced over five weekends in mid 1997, to formulate a five-year business strategy. Impressed by Senge's (1990a) ideas, he brought in a LO consultant for a short period to guide the meetings. The top management team formally adopted the aim of becoming a LO, a concept that they saw as a thematic link between TQM, BPR, and the adoption of SAP, a total information systems integration package.

Research Questions

Emerging research questions included the following: To what extent did respondents regard Tiger as having the characteristics of a LO? How was organizational movement, if any, toward LO ideals manifest in company culture and in employees' behaviour? What had the leadership done to facilitate any such movement? How had others facilitated? What stories and images were there of Tiger's movement toward being a LO, and how were these used to maintain momentum? What HRM policies had been adopted in conjunction with movement toward LO ideals, and how were these made attractive or acceptable to employees? In terms of PCs, how did employees construe the relationship between their own learning, development and fate, and the corresponding aspects of the organization? What was the role of Chinese cultural norms in supporting or hindering collective movement toward LO ideals?

Data Gathering and Checking

A Hong Kong Chinese MBA graduate, with several years of business experience, and trained in qualitative interviewing skills (Weiss 1994, Kvale 1996), conducted 34 semi-structured interviews with 25 members of Tiger, all Hong Kong Chinese, between April 1998 and April 1999. The author helped with four of these. Interviews lasted between 45 and 120 minutes, and were tape recorded and transcribed. A colleague checked some early transcripts and confirmed that they were full and accurate. The interviewees concerned checked all quotations included in this paper.

Table 1 gives details of the respondents. It appeared that no one declined or was refused permission to be interviewed. One semi-structured interview with each respondent loosely followed an interview guide based on Marquardt and Reynold's (1994) broad conception of the LO, but intended to be sufficiently open-ended to gather whatever the respondents them-

Table 1
Interviewees at Tiger

| | | Those Interviewed | | |
|-----------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|------|-------|
| | | Twice | Once | Total |
| | | No. | No. | No. |
| Age | 25-29 | 0 | 3 | 3 |
| | 30-34 | 4 | 8 | 12 |
| | 35-39 | 3 | 4 | 7 |
| | 40-45 | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| | 46-49 | 1 | 1 | 2 |
| Gender | Male | 9 | 11 | 20 |
| | Female | 0 | 5 | 5 |
| Years of service | 1-5 | 2 | 5 | 7 |
| | 6-10 | 2 | 6 | 8 |
| | 11-15 | 2 | 4 | 6 |
| | 16-20 | 3 | 0 | 3 |
| | Over 20 | 0 | 1 | 1 |
| Years in current post | Under 1 | 0 | 5 | 5 |
| | 1 | 7 | 1 | 8 |
| | 2 | 1 | 4 | 5 |
| | 3 | 0 | 2 | 2 |
| | 4 | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| | 5 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| | 6 | 0 | 1 | 1 |
| How began at Tiger | Senior entrant | 2 | 2 | 4 |
| | Graduate trainee | 6 | 4 | 10 |
| | Junior | 1 | 10 | 11 |
| Function | Operations ² | 3 | 5 | 8 |
| | Marketing ³ | 2 | 5 | 7 |
| | Finance ⁴ | 2 | 1 | 3 |
| | Information ⁵ | 2 | 1 | 3 |
| | Other | 0 | 3 | 3 |
| | General | 0 | 1 | 1 |
| Position | Managing director | 0 | 1 | 1 |

² Includes engineering and maintenance

³ Includes sales, customer service, product development

⁴ Includes accounts, contracts

⁵ Includes business analysis

| | | | |
|----------------------|---|---|---|
| Direct report to MD | 2 | 0 | 2 |
| Third tier manager | 3 | 0 | 3 |
| Fourth tier manager | 4 | 1 | 5 |
| Senior professional | 0 | 8 | 8 |
| Supervisor | 0 | 2 | 2 |
| Professional/officer | 0 | 4 | 4 |

selves regarded as relevant to the process of developing as a LO. Respondents were also encouraged to explain the history of Tiger's development as a LO, as they had seen and experienced it. Towards the end of the interview, eight of the eleven managers were asked whether they thought Tiger was a LO (a combination of interviewer oversight and shortage of time excluded the other three). A slightly different wrapping up procedure was used with the 14 professionals, supervisors and officers, who were asked to rate on a scale of 1-10, the extent to which they thought that Tiger was a LO. In answering, respondents were encouraged to use, and subsequently explain, their own criteria of what a LO was, but before answering, around 6 or 7 of the 25 respondents asked for clarification of what was meant by a LO. These respondents were shown a list of definitions that had been prepared for that contingency (see Appendix). No consistent pattern of difference between their comments or ratings and those of other respondents was noticed.

Nine middle and senior managers, all male, were re-interviewed a year after the initial interviews. These follow up interviews tracked how planned organizational changes had been implemented and how change programmes were being sustained, and probed the company's handling of a critical incident in January 1999, reported in the local media, that had tested Tiger's crisis management capabilities. Additional data sources included informal discussions with Tiger's training and development manager in March 1998 and November 2000. In October 1998, a half-day TQM team presentation contest, watched by around 300 employees, was observed, and there were informal conversations with two senior managers. Documentary material about Tiger's TQM and BPR programmes was obtained. Working papers about the findings were circulated to respondents, the only challenge coming from Mr. X, the managing director, on a specific point concerning workloads.

FINDINGS

Summative Assessments

Five of the eight managers who were directly asked if Tiger was a LO, stated firmly (i.e. ‘sure’, ‘definitely’, ‘absolutely’) that it was a LO, while the other three were tentative (i.e. ‘believing’ or ‘thinking’) when stating that Tiger was one. Among the 14 senior officers, officers and supervisors who rated Tiger as a LO on a single scale of 1-10, scores ranged from 5.5 to 9.5, with two scores of less than 7 and a mean rating of 7.8. These rough summative assessments suggest that while there was room for further development, the label LO was not seen as inappropriate for Tiger.

Qualitative Impressions of Progress Toward Learning Organization Ideals

Correspondence between definitions provided by interviewees, and the ideal criteria portrayed above was sometimes loose. For example, LOs were said to be:

‘...Highly dynamic, providing equal opportunities to employees and investing in their training and development.’ (Mr. E).

‘...(one that) tries to learn and to catch up with the market place and the competition to be the no. 1 in the shortest period of time’ (Ms. T).

Notwithstanding looseness and diversity in interviewees’ LO definitions, interview content, comprising qualitative descriptions and illustrations, indicated that features matching elements of the five LO ideals emerged in the 1990s. I consider them next.

Ideal 1: Organization-wide free flows of ideas, know how, identity and spirit

There were signs of a turning towards, perhaps even movement towards, ideal 1. New information technology appeared to have removed systemic barriers to this ideal. Email and Intranet became the norm in 1998, and a major phase of SAP was successfully implemented just before, in January 1999, a major crisis, stemming from consumers’ misuse of a product, tested the speed and accuracy of information flow:

‘Ten years ago, I don’t think Tiger could have handled the situation this well. Information on affected customers would not have been available so readily and so accurately, and we might have made very inaccurate estimates. The public would have lost all faith in us. In the past, we would have had to look into all the files and records. Now we just press a few buttons to get it.’ (Mr. D, second interview).

Tiger’s day to day operations had become more communal. For example:

‘Departmental compartmentalization has been eliminated. People are more willing and open to give you information, whereas before they would say that they needed to ask for the permission of their boss.’ (Mr. B, second interview).

Behaviour during the crisis reflected this emerging communal climate. One fifth of the workforce mobilized full time to handle the eight-day crisis, some not going home for three days. Interviewees noted employees’ dedication, and the absence of hostile finger pointing during and after the crisis. Tiger was described as having been, prior to the mid 1990s, conservative, risk-averse, preoccupied with turf, exclusively engineering-minded, cramped by ‘traditionally Chinese’ concern for face-saving, and populated by autocratic bosses and obedient subordinates. Interviewees indicated that these traits had generally faded, but that Tiger remained sticky in terms of generation and flows of ideas and know how.

Ideal 2: Ongoing collective transformation and self-improvement

There were signs of some truncated movement towards ideal 2. At a strategic level, conceptions of corporate identity or ‘the business we are in’ had widened, and traditional expertise had been applied to new fields. Also it appeared that on the whole, employees had been treated more as stakeholders than as expendable and disposable factors of production. Since 1995, Tiger had introduced new products beyond its traditional base that had overtaken competitors’ established models to become market leaders. Achieving these breakthroughs had meant challenging and disconfirming consumers’ (and employees’) stereotypes about the limitations of Tiger’s core technology, and that, in turn, had entailed the recognition, building up, and harnessing of hitherto undervalued marketing expertise. Another development was the setting up in mid-1998 of a wholly owned subsidiary [‘Outlet’ (pseudonym)], a vertical extension of core business. Outlet began business by supplying projects for Tiger that had

previously gone to other contractors, then built up a wider clientele. According to interviewees, Outlet was created in order to re-deploy those displaced by BPR, and also housed volunteer seconded-out staff at various levels of seniority.

That there had also been some progress at operational levels toward ideal 2 (I shall consider the limitations shortly) was suggested by interviewees' accounts of their own involvement in BPR and TQM projects. BPR at Tiger had relied from the outset on internal expertise, as an engineering-dominated company, Tiger may have been able to counterbalance the danger of autopoietic inward-lookingness (Miller 1993), by having two relative 'outsiders' as change leaders. Mr. X and Mr. A, steeped, respectively, in marketing and information systems, and both with extensive experience of USA blue chip companies, provided counterpoint to collective self-transformation work by long-serving insiders. Initially 25 high-performing staff were seconded full time to work as change agents in cross-functional BPR teams, and by May 1998, there were 100 full time change agents. Managers spoke of the challenge, development and achievement associated with change agent roles. Their empowerment was seen not to be at others' expense, for no one lost their livelihood as a result of BPR, and the re-engineering was performed under a 'veil of ignorance' (Rawls 1971: 12-17), such that change agents did not know what positions they would fill within the reengineered structures. Substantial numbers of Tiger's staff were actively involved in TQM: by August 2000, around 35% were members of ongoing TQM teams, and another 5-10% were former members. In 1999 alone, 54 completed TQM projects were calculated by the company to have contributed \$HK 13 million to Tiger's balance sheet. Participation in TQM, highest among professionals and lowest among workmen and technicians, was often associated with reports of development for individuals. For example:

'We learned to use data to support our points and designed questionnaires to get data from customers. I paid more attention to other teams' projects and became more aware of what the company is doing.' (Ms. V)

Ad hoc cases were also mentioned where individual knowledge acquisition had driven organizational improvement. There was, for example, a story of transfer to a new unit:

'At first, the workmen felt I was very troublesome because I asked such a lot of questions. If they could convincingly explain the reasons, I let them continue do it that way, but I checked out the rationale by reading technical books. After 3 years, by early 1998, our

unit had changed completely, and the department head said that we were now one of the best. He asked other units to take us as a role model and learn from us. I told my workmen immediately about his praise.’ (Mr. S.)

Progress toward *ideal 2* at operational levels had been limited, however, by the imposition of change in a largely top-down, paternalistic manner, as in the above example. Arrangements and plans developed by the BPR project teams had been mass communicated downward. Also, in line with characterizations of TQM as intrusive and ‘panoptic’ (Townley 1998), a TQM project had imposed surveillance-based performance monitoring onto customer service hotline staff. League tables charted the percentage of telephone calls completed within target time, and calls were tape-recorded, with one tape chosen each month for evaluation by supervisors, who gave individual feedback to staff. Top performers received trophies and coupons and their names appeared in a roll of honour. An officer claimed, nonetheless, that these impositions were accepted and supported by staff, implying that there was a shared belief that the interests and needs of Tiger and its employees essentially coincided or were compatible, i.e. a unitary view of labour relations (Fox 1974).

‘The charts are a positive means to encourage us to increase our competitiveness. Everyone takes the results seriously and reflects on her own behaviour to find out why she is lagging behind. The top winner this year sits very close to me. I observe her, and I am impressed by her performance. I ask for her opinions and learn from her. She tells me how to talk to the customers in a better way. At first, I was afraid of the tape recording. Later, I discovered that it protects us as a proof of our work. They listen to my attitudes, efficiency or accuracy of information, and whether I have made any mistakes. A positive way to look at this scheme is that it lets us review the things that are less satisfactory and helps us improve them. Our colleagues value the results a lot.’ (Ms. T).

Ideal 3: Dispersed Learning Leadership, Climate Creation and Facilitation

Interviewees implied that Tiger had moved toward ideal 3. Most managers portrayed their own leadership (and that of their own immediate superior) as facilitative, coaching-oriented, caring and developmental. For example, Mr. A, director of Tiger’s TQM and BPR programmes, saw himself as a learning leader, not as a hatchet man or ‘Hammer-man’ (compare Willmott 1994: 41-44).

‘I have to be careful about confrontational situations, I have to be more tactful and say the truth in a more polished, factual, and less personal way. In a lot of cases, if I know that I can’t sell an idea in one go, I have to do it in gradual stages, like slow cooking.’ (Mr. A)

A subordinate observed:

‘Mr. A encourages the (IT) staff to think creatively, and to improve our service continuously. I see him as a catalyst. For example, he will highlight the critical issues of certain industry information and pass the information to us for our information.’ (Mr. J).

Mr. X would not have disputed these characterizations of Mr. A, who joined Tiger from another industry in 1997, but he gave a different perspective on other managers:

‘The blocking stones are the senior and middle managers. We have a group of very bureaucratic managers from the past. They resisted changing. Their mindset is quite simple: “We have been doing this for the last 30 years, it is doing well. Why should we change?”’ (Mr. X).

Mr. X and Mr. A were seen to have pushed firmly and uncomfortably in necessary and appropriate directions. Their leadership styles may not have embraced dialogically based learning facilitation (Freire 1972), but were not seen as disempowering. Mr. X saw himself, and was seen by others, as a role model, learning designer and development facilitator. His approach to spreading leadership could be said to entail ‘cloning’, i.e. duplicating organizational goals within individuals, a normalized form of capillary power (Covaleski et al. 1998), perhaps even Confucian self-cultivation (Ivanhoe 1993), rather than more anarchic or democratic processes. He promoted, gave cash prizes to, and otherwise recognized those who were creative or proactive, and aimed to sponsor leadership at all levels. He was supported by some middle managers, who ran a club for potential high fliers, set up in April 1998. By November 2000, the 51 selected club members participated in working groups on role modelling, training and development, and strategy dissemination. The club also organized an outstanding employee competition for non-members.

Mr. X envisaged that a developmental climate should cascade down the organization. In insisting that the duties of heads of department included both self-development and the facilitation of others’ development, he might have encroached upon departmental territory,

but he was not seen to infringe any rights. Mr. X wanted to instill in the 28 heads of department (a) an understanding of the business, (b) openness to criticism, (c) empathy with customers' needs and circumstances, (d) creativity and new product orientation, and (e) urgency and will to succeed. To these ends, he set challenges for them and observed how each of them responded. For example, he arranged a skill competition (which he won), in order to 'make them better understand how the customers use the products', and was planning another competition on selling:

'They will be out there facing the customers and they will realize how little they know about our products and how they are used' (Mr. X).

Managers expected that Mr. X would at any time, in a private setting, test their grasp of current developments in their field, and would reject unclear explanations or illogical arguments. Some were said to be apprehensive about confrontation on issues, and even to resent it. The prevailing view, however, was that Mr. X had the right to require all managers to keep up to date and to focus on changing the status quo, and that in asserting this right, he was effectively mobilizing organizational learning:

'Mr. X is very devoted to learning and is interested in understanding the details of your work and how you are doing. You must constantly update yourself and keep abreast of your work, otherwise, you can't answer his questions and he will know more than you do.' (Mr. F).

'The important force behind the change is that the big boss (Mr. X) is open to discuss issues with all people. So people dare not use their old style.' (Mr. B, second interview)

Ideal 4: Open dialogue engaging multiple perspectives

The impression given, as with ideal 1, was more of turning toward than stepping toward ideal 4, although without direct observation of events, this assessment is tentative. As I shall show later, Tiger's reliance on top-down sensegiving or meaning management (Gioia and Chitipeddi 1991: 442) may have served to discourage critical inquiry beyond the frame set by management. TQM and BPR entailed collective problem solving activity that was task-bounded, rational and calculative, rather than Bohmian dialogue in the sense of holding governing values and assumptions open to question. Nonetheless, 'hallway' experience

sharing was mentioned in this reference to TQM meetings attended by top managers and workmen:

‘Everyone is free to share his or her concerns, feelings and suggestions. It is a channel for sharing experiences so as to alert others to potential difficulties and mistakes. For example, some colleagues said that it was very difficult to establish the problem statement. Some managers offered actual problems to stimulate people’s thinking about problem definitions.’ (Mr. R).

Managers who took part in the strategic planning workshops in mid 1997 implied that these had constituted movement toward *ideal 4*, saying that their ideas had made a difference and that these had been openly shared and collectively developed within a relatively non-authoritarian framework. One said:

‘Mr. X just stepped aside and acted as a coach. All the ideas basically came from and were worked out by the department managers. The consultants and Mr. X helped out with the screening of the ideas. Communication was very important: upward, downward and horizontally. We worked well in these workshops. We communicated with each other in a friendly, open atmosphere.’ (Mr. I.)

Ideal 5: Protean career contracts

Interviewees’ accounts suggested that Tiger had made substantial progress toward ideal 5. The management promised that there would be no layoffs for ‘competent employees’. However, I shall show that in practice, this LO ideal turned out to be disturbing to some employees. PCs at Tiger prior to the mid 1990s were portrayed as dependency-oriented, offering security in exchange for obedience, loyalty and technical proficiency. By late 1998, PCs appeared to fit the ‘protean’ pattern, offering continuous employment in return for harder work, greater flexibility, wider responsibilities, and greater readiness to learn. For middle managers, this meant accepting coaching duties, collaborative problem solving, cross-functionality, market-orientation, non-routine assignments and postings to unfamiliar contexts. For most employees, it meant subjection to higher customer service standards, tighter performance surveillance, multi-skilling, and technical updating. Unofficially, it also meant longer hours (Mr. X disputed this).

The changes in PCs implied that obsolescence threats would no longer tend to be associated with progression up career hierarchies (Pazy 1990), but would instead arise from new technology, reorganization and pressures for continuous improvement. Most interviewees appeared to assume that these extra demands reflected Capitalist ‘realities’, and to perceive that it was their personal responsibility to meet company standards, a stance termed ‘technocratic informality’ by Willmott (1993: 523). Some staff, for example, volunteered to join SAP rehearsals on Sundays, in order to gain experience and offer opinions. A manager commented:

‘Everyone may need to change his or her position. How to survive in a LO or in this society? You have to upgrade yourself constantly.’ (Mr. I, second interview)

Managers appeared confident that they could keep up by taking advantage of formal development programmes and abundant ad hoc discovery learning opportunities. For example, those taking up BPR change agent roles were supported by personal development programmes with budgets of \$HK10,000 each, on top of internally provided training. Most interviewees indicated that Tiger was providing reasonable means, such as ad-hoc coaching and retraining programmes, to help the great majority of junior employees to adapt. Not everyone, however, felt on top of the situation:

‘I feel inadequate in the company environment. I feel that my knowledge is inadequate for the job. As you learn more, you feel that you are more inadequate.’ (Mr. U).

As implementation of BPR proceeded, displaced staff went into a ‘pool’, pending retraining and matching to new posts. Pooled staff faced dismissal if they declined more than three offers of redeployment or if they were judged incompetent in new posts. Some were said to have become demoralized after repeated failure to be redeployed. Others had returned to the pool under ‘last in first out’ norms when their new departments were restructured and downsized. Some staff were redeployed to less pivotal positions (albeit with protected pay), and some labourers feared exposure to new physical hazards. While no interviewee reported that there had been any dismissals for incompetence, the pool was associated with stigma, limbo, insecurity and threats to self-efficacy. Tiger’s promise of no layoffs for the competent (how defined?) weighed on pool members’ minds, as one’s ability to adapt, and the timeliness and quality of retraining, were crucial unknowns

‘My feeling at the time was “Why me, not someone else?” I heard some people could not sleep for several months because they did not know if they could adapt to their new department. They had doubts and fears.’ (Mr. U).

While Tiger’s BPR programme appeared to have had a substantial effect on PCs, a meltdown in the regional economy (Aybar and Milman 1999) also had a considerable impact. The management’s promise of no layoffs was reaffirmed, and guarantees were added that unlike other companies, there would be no cuts in wages or salaries, and no increases in prices. Any questions regarding how long the covenant could be sustained were overshadowed by a wave of relief and gratitude:

Table 2: Tiger's Progress Toward LO Ideals

| LO Ideals | Signs of Tiger's Perceived Development | Facilitating Factors or Enabling Processes | Signs of Shortfalls or Truncations | Issues |
|------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Ideal 1 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Less defensiveness - Emerging communal climate | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Use of new technology to inform cross-functional decision making - LO as expedient orienting concept | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Sticky in terms of generation & flow of ideas and know-how | |
| Ideal 2 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Wider business identity - 'Breakthrough' products - Strategic developments seek collective good - Members develop operational transformations while engaging in self development | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Appointment of loyal 'outsiders' at the highest levels - Seductive learning cycles in relation to BPR & TQM projects | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Imposed examination & methods - Panoptic monitoring - Mass communication downward of restructuring blueprints | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Do assumptions of the unitary view conflict with a stakeholder approach? - Can panopticons be treated as temporary scaffolding? |
| Ideal 3 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Managers see themselves and their superiors as learning leaders | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Top management seen as role models of learning leadership - Visionary & 'human scale' leadership at the top - Drama & storytelling | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Dependence on Mr. X's leadership & imposed curriculum - Mr. X sees managers as novices in terms of learning leadership | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Does cloning harmfully restrict the natural variation of learning leadership styles? |
| Ideal 4 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Non-authoritarian sharing of strategy ideas at the apex - Hallway meetings on TQM | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 'Helping' by Mr. X and consultants | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Unclear depth & extent of inquiry - Little questioning of assumptions about what a LO is - Seduction into beliefs, rather than their suspension | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Do the possible over-emphases on sensegiving and calculative rationality overshadow critical enquiry, inhibit dialogue, and lead to psychic imprisonment? |
| Ideal 5 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Bilateral commitment to the 'no layoffs for the competent' covenant - Attitude of 'technocratic informality' by some staff | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Ample training budgets - Financial strength during macroeconomic meltdown - Relational obligations as a wider cultural resource | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - High anxiety, and low self-esteem among some staff - The covenant is a hostage to fortune | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - How competent is 'competent'? - What happens if employees fall behind? - How to buffer against stress & burnout? - What happens if finances snap? |

‘I was so touched that I had tears in my eyes. I wondered whether there were ways to thank the company for its promise, which I thought was good to the employees, customers, shareholders, and the general public.’ (Ms. T).

In Table 2, I summarize Tiger’s progress in relation to the five LO ideals, note shortfalls and truncations, record issues that have been touched upon, and anticipate additional issues about the desirability and sustainability of some practices and arrangements. The issues fall broadly into two categories; those concerned with sensegiving and those related to PCs. It is to these issues that I now turn.

Sensegiving Issues

Leading organizational change is said to entail moulding mental models, so that followers alter their individual and collective identity (Gioia et al. 2000: 71), coming to see their respective positions within the (new) organizational status quo as natural and inevitable (Hardy 1994: 224-227). Sensegiving entails ‘attempting to influence the sensemaking and meaning construction of others toward a preferred redefinition of organizational reality’ (Gioia and Chittipeddi 1991: 442). The symbolic power of language, ritual and myth (Pettigrew 1979; Gowler and Legge 1983), whether promulgating sincere faith or ideological sleight of hand, can achieve collective conceptual realignment, eliminating desires to protest, resist or even pose questions.

Sensegiving appeared to play a key role in Tiger’s progress on *ideal 2*, *ideal 3* and *ideal 5*, yet Tiger’s approach to this was double-edged (as it might also be in other organizations), as the following sub-sections show. In Tiger’s case, it was well intentioned, down to earth, and lacked grandiosity. It was in some ways seductive, exciting and inspiring, and has not (as yet, at least) ended in disillusion. However, the spinners of meanings were nearly trapped in their own webs. Indeed, there may be fundamental incompatibilities between the use of meaning management as a tool for organizational change, and the requirements of dialogue, the essence of *ideal 4*.

LO as an expedient orienting concept

Interviewees' enthusiasm for Tiger's becoming a LO appeared to be instrumental, rather than an end in itself. To Mr. X, for example, the LO was a banner under which to prescribe many processes, such as knowledge acquisition, structural change, openness and creativity, that he believed essential in order to meet business objectives set long before he came across the concept of LO. He was disappointed that staff were not yet as creative, nor managers as 'open', as he had hoped, but his overriding concern was the impact on Tiger's long term competitiveness, rather than what the term LO and its associated ideals might mean and how to further these ideals.

Seductive learning cycles

Cognitive realignment at Tiger took place over several years. Managers and professionals were initially drawn into changing practices under the TQM banner. Accounts suggested that their co-operation was secured by pragmatic arguments, i.e. the need for cost cutting and improved customer service, rather than by what Willmott (1993, 1995) condemns as empty 'functional humanist' promises of intrinsic rewards, self development and liberation. Perhaps Chinese cultural traditions, oriented across millennia toward restriction on individual liberty (Eberhard 1971: ix, 1) had something to do with the absence of pretension in this case. Traditionally, unequal relationships (Tu 1998) and the need for obedience by junior partners (Snell 1999) are assumed. Harmony, relational ties, collective duties and role modelling are privileged over self-assertion, or individuation (Hofstede 1980; Dien 1982; Bond and Hwang 1987: 247; Hansen, 1994: 72). Ironically, however, Willmott's weasel term appears to have turned out to be a reasonably fair representation of the more senior staff members' experience of TQM and BPR: they learned to organize their own work on the basis of self-discipline and flexibility, and found the learning process intrinsically rewarding. Their active involvement in TQM, and later BPR projects, provided grounding for their assumption of a new organizational identity. While most interviewees associated TQM with bottom-up improvement, the TQM programme managers (including Mr. A and Mr. X) defined the main functions as 'providing tools to change the mindset', 'installing the culture of change', and 'making employees accept concepts of quality culture, internal and external customers'. Early TQM projects, even those instigated from the grassroots, eroded informal worker prerogatives, such as unofficial free time.

‘People were not happy about the proposal. We told the TQM programme manager that the subject was very touchy. He strongly encouraged us to go ahead because it showed how serious we were. People were reluctant to give us the necessary data but they gave it nonetheless.’ (Mr. S.)

The small steps of TQM, as they became acceptable to managers and senior professionals, created momentum for the bigger steps of BPR. Mindsets steered themselves, through active involvement, away from preserving a comfortable status quo, toward new satisfaction in greater efficiency and competitiveness.

‘Through the BPR process and TQM initiatives, we aim at creating a LO to enable every employee to learn and create a learning awareness’ (Mr. A)

Vision, ‘human scale’, and a sense of progress

‘Big bang’ promises of total discontinuity from the past risk being dismissed as empty (Gioia et al. 2000: 77). Carnall (1999: 139-140) argues that effective leaders (generally, not just in aspiring LOs) provide instead a sense of ‘human scale’, in that while conveying a vision of the future, they also highlight the stepping stones along the way. That, he says, helps to ‘energize people to try’. At Tiger, Mr. X enthused not by elaborating on abstract LO ideals, but rather by sloganeering concrete end-of-year deadlines, round-figure targets for cost savings, profitability, natural wastage, various phases of systems adoption, and sales targets. Other interviewees mentioned the slogans – they hit home and were met. Mr. X also believed that in order to instill urgency, employees should get clear feedback on how the company was doing in relation to such targets. The idea took shape when promoting a new product in his previous post with Tiger.

‘When I met people in the elevator, I asked, “How many units have we sold?” They did not know how to answer. After a couple of times, they realized that they had to get this data. Gradually, there was a rumour that I was very forgetful because I asked the same question ten times a day.’ (Mr. X).

Mr. X’s pragmatic use of the LO concept avoided the grandiosity that sensegivers can fall prey to when emphasizing breaking with the past (de Cock 1998: 151), a dramatic example of which was the glass entombment of IBM’s procedures manual (Reger et al. 1994: 40). Mr. X nonetheless highlighted a metaphorical break with the past in the form of a 70% reduction in

the size of some statutory physical structures that had been an eyesore and public nuisance for 30 years. He showed that this was a matter of stretching out to another stepping stone, not of taking a superhuman leap across an abyss. Mr. X was in a company car with a senior manager, one Mr. Y (whose identity was not disclosed), when they passed one of the structures, and it occurred to him to ask if it could be reduced in size:

‘Mr. Y thought for a while and said: “There is no way to reduce it because there is a lot of fixed equipment inside and we have been laying it out that way for the past 30 years.” When I came back, I thought that his attitude was wrong. If he said that something could not be done, he had to explain logically why it could not be done. And he was talking to *me*. Imagine his reply, if a junior engineer came to him and said that the size could be reduced.’ (Mr. X).

Mr. X did not confront Mr. Y directly or publicly, but his response was robust, ruthless even (Rieple and Vyakarnam 1996). He arranged an *ad hoc* competition between three teams of engineers, asking them to submit designs for a smaller structure. The youngest, most junior team won. The project saved money in construction and maintenance, and the design was patented:

‘All these benefits came from a small project that a senior manager said that we could not do something about. But we have already done it. People started to talk about it. “What we have been doing in the past 30 years can be dramatically changed.” This actually has changed the culture and unlocked their thinking.’ (Mr. X).

No one could reasonably gainsay the merits of this particular break with the past. Mr. X repeated the story, which symbolized Tiger’s self-transformation through the harnessing of the talents of existing staff, in a speech at Tiger’s annual TQM awards event in 1998, attended by 300 staff. As one manager remarked, the moral was that:

‘Human factors can achieve results even without any technological breakthrough. He values employees as an asset. I can see his direction.’ (Mr. C, second interview)

This corporate story served as a sensegiving vehicle, expressing common reference points and concrete illustrations of the direction of change (McConkie and Boss 1994: 384-385). Equally, perhaps more vivid, were the ‘before and after’ dramatizations by project teams during the 1998 annual TQM awards event. Mr. X delighted in watching them. Their content

showed that ordinary employees had contributed to improvements, savings and earnings; their delivery demonstrated employees' creative talents. Stories, dramatizations and celebrations of progress created a favourable impression of Tiger's development as a LO.

Sensegiving as psychic imprisonment

The Tiger case demonstrates, however, that in a complex organization, sensegiving by a dominant coalition can become a trap, as in Nicolini & Meznar's (1995: 744) metaphor of the millipede no longer able to walk when asked to explain how. Ways of seeing are also ways of *not* seeing. Stories of the success of TQM projects in achieving efficiency savings, while quite possibly galvanizing the managerial and professional echelons, evidently blinded and misled the management into believing that TQM was eliminating *all* resistance to further top-down initiatives. While managers and senior professionals felt that they were already beginning to live the BPR vision of closeness to customers, clearer roles and responsibilities and upgraded skills, they overlooked the paucity of active involvement by technicians and workmen in TQM or other change initiatives. For the latter staff, BPR meant threats of downsizing and loss of livelihood. Managers and senior professionals were surprised and shocked by the outcry when BPR implementation plans were initially announced.

'We received quite a lot of negative feedback from our colleagues. Initially, they viewed it as a terrible, negative thing.' (Mr. I).

'It seemed as if they might hit you, especially when we talked about the sensitive issues.' (Ms. O).

Imbalance between advocacy and inquiry

BPR, TQM and Mr. X's storytelling sought to encourage the questioning and challenging of technical systems parameters, and the harnessing of creativity in service of efficient process innovations and marketable, profitable new products. Until, however, the outcry by workmen and technicians, it appeared that governing values regarding employee relations had not been held open to question. Tiger's emphasis on sensegiving, rather than on critical inquiry and double loop learning regarding the human systems domain (Nielsen and Bartunek, 1996) may have seduced managers and senior professionals into unquestioned acceptance of a narrow interpretation of historical events and future directions. Employees' co-operation had been assumed, and issues regarding their felt security had evidently been overlooked.

Overemphasis on advocacy and relative neglect of inquiry (Senge 1990a: 198) had diverted attention from the relationship between managers and the managed.

Psychological Contract Issues

The play of circumstances

Strong finances and a favourable position within the industry enabled Tiger's management to reiterate its promise of no layoffs and no pay cuts, and to emphasize, through a series of mass communication sessions, that re-engineering was a means to *mutual* survival. As it happened, interviewees reported that employees warmed to this emphasis on collective welfare, which cast management as benevolent rulers and matched traditional Confucian relational obligations (Hamilton and Zheng 1992). The regional economic downturn also gave a helping hand. As jobs disappeared from other companies, the promise of no layoffs, and the emphasis on retraining and redeployment, made Tiger's management appear all the more gracious. Technicians and workmen were said to have come to accept, co-operate with and adapt to new job requirements, attributing the upheavals to the force of circumstances rather than to the leadership's will to power.

'It makes them more motivated to learn to survive. You can't simply say that we have done a good job in communicating the message to them.' (Ms. O).

Recipe for disillusion?

Interviewees appeared to assume that unity of interest bound company and employees together. De Cock (1998b: 149) wonders, however, if such assumptions 'can be fully reconciled with the lived experience of employees if they simultaneously encounter a reduction in their job security and/or intensification in the pace and pressures of their work'. I shall consider stress below. The covenant promised continued employment to those who continually avoided obsolescence. No one appeared to doubt the sincerity of Tiger's promise, and Tiger's management was said to have demonstrated commitment to it by creating a viable subsidiary when facing a labour surplus. Most interviewees recognized, however, that keeping the promise in the longer term would depend on continued efficiency savings, steady core business, and development and sales of new products and services. The management appeared to believe that company performance depended on Tiger's development as a LO (or more specifically, progress toward *ideal 1* and *ideal 3*). That, in turn, assumed that Tiger could

develop a set of collective competencies associated with *ideal 5*, such as co-operation, teamwork, corporate spirit, citizenship and readiness to share. It remained possible, however, that financial pressures would, at some time in the future, break the circle and along with it, the covenant, giving rise to resentment. As Hyman (1987: 42) warns, come the crunch: ‘employers require workers to be both dependable *and* disposable’.

Buffering against stress

LO ideal 5 promises developmental opportunities, but also challenges employees to meet escalating competency demands, and obliges employers to keep stress levels within tolerable bounds, so as not to jeopardize employees’ self-esteem or confidence —an important generic leadership task in change management (Carnall 1999). In this respect, some interviewees praised Tiger’ s strategy during a bonanza period under the previous MD in the late 1980s and early 1990s, when costs were contained while investing, ahead of outside events, in developmental preparation via home grown TQM and BPR programmes. Tiger’ s munificent past provided financial buffers, without which uphill survival struggles might have exposed employees to excessive levels of stress and ultimately burnout (Maslach and Leiter 1997). Even with Tiger’ s financial buffer, some interviewees, such as Mr. U, hinted that stress was a problem. I was told informally of a small number of ‘casualties’: no one had been dismissed for failure to perform new duties or to adapt to new working methods, but some had quit because of inability to handle the new pressures. Mr. X’ s lack of concern about longer unofficial working hours would not have generally helped. More might have been done, therefore, especially in the case of the pool, to build a psychologically safe climate for learning, so as not to trap people between ‘survival anxiety’ on one hand and ‘learning anxiety’ on the other (Quick and Kets de Vries 2000).

Panopticons or scaffolding?

Critics of TQM (Willmott 1993; Townley 1998: 197-198) argue that standardization, benchmarking, league tables and other surveillance structures are totalitarian monstrosities built up during the ‘act’ part of the plan-do-check-act cycle. For Willmott (1995: 95), they deny ‘freedom to shape, change or abandon the framework within which decisions are identified and made’. From the perspective of LO *ideal 2*, if a developing LO creates them at all, they are temporary scaffolding, to be dismantled once alternative, self and peer governed arrangements are in place. At Tiger, however, interviewees saw them as unremarkable,

inevitable features of the organizational architecture under which they worked, compatible with commercial considerations, and not apparently the subject of dissent.

Cloning versus diversity

Tiger's attempts to develop 'open' and developmentally oriented leaders at all levels resembled a cloning operation. A danger here, since there are many different ways of being open and developmental, is of favouring adaptors while dismissing potential innovators as stubborn rebels (Kirton 1994), thus neglecting the needs of the latter and nipping diversity in the bud.

FURTHER IMPRESSIONS AND IDEAS

Figure 1 represents relationships between issues discussed above. Collective learning requires that employees willingly share intellectual property with one another and with organizational systems. Such co-operation depends on employees feeling included in the organization's commonwealth, rather than that they are treated as expendable factors of production. The honouring of PCs is portrayed as a foundation for the LO, for if PCs are violated, progress toward the five LO ideals is likely to stall.

One of Tiger's approaches to building inclusion in the LO entailed structuring co-operation through managerial sensegiving and sensemaking processes that rested on two implicit unitarist assumptions. These were that there were no conflicts between individual and organisational interests, and that channels of collective decision making and collective sensemaking were open to the participation of all. These assumptions drew attention away from otherwise prominent differences between managers and the managed. Organizational rhetoric told of collective decisions made on the basis of technocratic rationality and logic, and of personal development arising from involvement in TQM, BPR and *ad hoc* initiatives. The rhetoric was based on the first hand experience of an enthusiastic core, and drew in further support around the paradoxical injunction: 'join us, we are open!' paradoxical because joining in entailed being selected to operate within the confines of an unchallenged, role modelled, technocratic frame of reference.

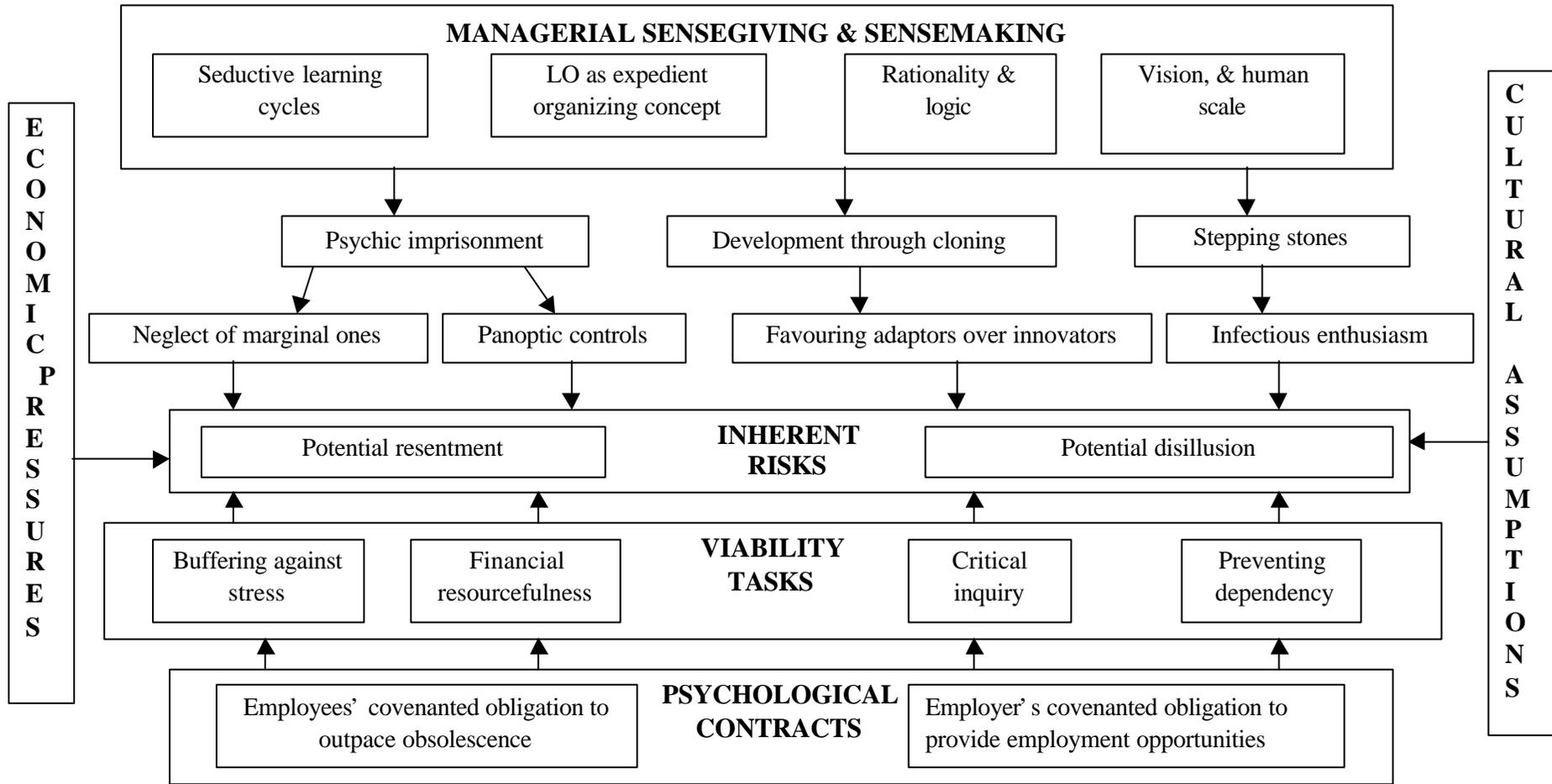


Figure 1: Sensegiving risks, and viability tasks arising from psychological contracts in the developing LO

Tiger's other approach to inclusion in the LO was a covenant symbolizing that employees were stakeholders. In return for providing employment, the organization would appropriate knowledge generated by employees while requiring them to remain competent by engaging in continuous learning. The covenant assumed that industrial relations were governed by 'give and take', a pluralist frame of reference, which became a parallel reality to that of unitarism.

Unitarist and stakeholder assumptions are uneasy bedfellows. Some contradiction is implied in combining the faith that we are a family of one-blood (Mr. X's Chineseness was said to represent special empathy with the workforce), with the recognition that membership is conditional on the continual passing of 'examinations'. The prospect of PC violation, and thence possible dissonance, resentment and disillusion, is averted only if the organization, by performing four viability tasks, continually keeps its promise while also being seen as providing all reasonable help to members in their attempts to avoid 'failure'.

One of these tasks is that of sustaining financial viability. In the case, Tiger could leverage a favourable position in the industry to create redeployment opportunities, but companies in less munificent environments may face sterner financial tests, as might Tiger at some point in the future.

While 'casualties' at Tiger were apparently small in number, went unnoticed by most interviewees, and were not attributed to employer negligence, their occurrence suggests another viability task, that of buffering employees against stress. The prospect of falling behind in a race against obsolescence threatens employee self-esteem, and is a major source of stress, which beyond a certain threshold point impairs ability to learn (Carnall 1999: 206-210). A point may be reached where, in an aspiring LO, larger numbers of stressed employees feel unable to continue their struggles against obsolescence, and stigmatization of isolated victims gives way to attributions of mismanagement. Carnall (1999) argues the need for managements to show empathy, give support and encouragement, provide information, and provide space and resources for necessary skill development.

A third viability task is to foster critical inquiry, an ingredient of dialogue, but comparatively neglected at Tiger except perhaps on special occasions at the very top. The general privileging of technocratic problem solving rationality over irreverence and play, and of top-down sensegiving over critical upward experience sharing may have allowed archaic assumptions about authority structures to persist unchallenged. These may (I am thinking of the customer service hotline example) imprison employees within single-loop skill-sets and mindsets upon which they are constantly assessed, even as technological breakthroughs are made elsewhere.

Even if a LO squarely tackles these three viability tasks, there can be no guarantee, within competitive business environments as currently constructed, of it succeeding indefinitely in honouring its covenanted responsibilities to the workforce without enabling them to find employment elsewhere. Tiger was able to create Outlet, and to buffer redeployed employees while they adapted to their new positions, thus preventing disillusion and resentment. Other LOs may not be in a position to create subsidiaries for this purpose. A fourth viability task is thus suggested, that of preventing dependency by members on the organization itself by helping them to build repertoires of portable competencies and thereby greater competitiveness on the wider labour market. There is an analogy here with the role of overseas passports in helping to maintain Hong Kong's stability during the 1997 transition of sovereignty.

APPENDIX

Statements prepared for showing to interviewees who asked for a definition of a Learning Organization?' were as follows:

1. A organization where people 'continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning how to learn together' .
2. A learning organization 'facilitates learning and personal development for all of its employees, while continually transforming itself' .

3. A 'system of actions, actors, symbols, and processes that enables an organization to transform information into valued knowledge, which in turn increases its long-run adaptive capacity' .
4. A learning organization 'empowers its people, integrates quality initiatives with quality of work life, creates free space for learning, encourages collaboration and sharing the gains, promotes inquiry, and creates continuous learning opportunities' .

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