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After the Founder:
An Opportunity to Manage Culture

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to address the question of "If culture can be managed, when and what aspects of culture can be managed". The paper attempts to do the following: first, suggest a set of conditions which might be conducive to managing culture; second, propose how and what aspects of the culture might be managed under those conditions; third, describe an exploratory study which was conducted to address the propositions; and finally, present results of the study.

AFTER THE FOUNDER:

AN OPPORTUNITY TO MANAGE CULTURE

The question of whether organizational culture can be managed has lead to much debate by both academics and practitioners. Some researchers suggest that organizations should be conceptualized as cultures (e.g., Goodenough, 1971; Geertz, 1973; Smircich, 1983). They favor the view that culture is something an organization is rather than something an organization has (Smircich, 1983). Those researchers who have argued that culture is a socially constructed system of shared beliefs and values would find it inconsistent to think of systematically managing or attempting to control the phenomenon. As Karl Weick (1983) states in responding to a recent article on managing corporate culture:

> "Organizations don't have cultures, they are cultures, and this is why culture is so difficult to change."

However, other researchers, particularly those searching for predictable means of organizational control and improved methods for organization management, would seem to hold a hope, if not a rigorously tested belief, that culture can, to some degree, be managed. Researchers who propose that organizations produce cultures usually define culture as the social or normative glue that holds an organization together (Baker, 1980; Siehl and Martin, 1983). Culture consists of values and beliefs that some groups of organization members come to share

(Louis, 1983). These values can be expressed through a number of different means including: special language or jargon, (e.g., Edelman, 1977; Hirsch, 1980), organizational stories and scripts (e.g., Wilkins, 1979; Martin, 1982); rituals and ceremonies (e.g., Gephart, 1978; Deal and Kennedy, 1982), physical arrangements, such as dress and decor (Pfeffer, 1981; Peters and Waterman, 1983) and organizational practices, such as recruiting, training and reward systems. From this perspective, culture is viewed as a powerful means of implicit control (e.g., Wilkins, 1983). The ultimate end product of culture research would be statements of contingent relationships that have applicability for those trying to manage organizations (Smircich, 1983). Therefore, in spite of a lack of convincing evidence, there exists an interest, and perhaps a need on the part of some researchers, to believe that culture can be managed and to understand just how this process might occur.

It would seem that rather than striving for an unequivocal yes or no in response to the question of managing culture, a more fruitful approach would be to explore under what conditions it would be more likely that culture could be managed. In other words, the question should be changed from "Can culture be managed" to "If so, when and what aspects of culture can be managed." This paper will attempt to do the following: first, suggest a set of conditions which might be conducive to managing culture; second, propose how and what aspects of the culture might be managed under those conditions;

third, describe an exploratory study which was conducted to address the propositions; and finally, present preliminary results of the study.

Times of Transition and/or Crisis

Organizations face times of transition and/or crisis throughout their existence. Because of the interdependency between an organization and its environment and the inherent uncertainty of parts of that environment, it is inevitable that change, in the form of a transition or crisis, will occur. Transitions may produce circumstances which facilitate the management of culture. Lundberg (1984) has identified five classes of events which can function as triggering mechanisms to culture management and change. The five classes include environmental calamities and opportunities, internal and external revolutions, and managerial crises. An environmental calamity, such as all types of natural disasters or a sharp recession, is something in an organizational environment which can not be ignored. Environmental opportunities include technological breakthroughs, the discovery of a previously unknown or untouchable market niche, and newly available venture capital. Two classes of revolution also possess the potential for culture management. One is an external revolution or something which happens external to an organization with major consequences, such as being taken over by another corporation. Internal revolutions, such as the installation of a new management team, can also act as

triggers. Finally, a whole class of managerial crises, such as an inappropriate strategic decision, can encourage the management of culture (Lundberg, 1984).

The research on organizational life cycles looks specifically at the predictable transitions through which organizations evolve (e.g., Cameron & Whetten, 1981; Kimberly, 1979; Miles, 1980). As Cameron and Whetten (1981) describe,

> "Organizations begin in a stage, labelled "creativity and entrepreneurship," in which marshalling resources, creating an ideology, and forming an ecological niche are emphasized. The second stage, the "collectivity stage," includes high commitment and cohesion among members, face-to-face communication and informal structures, long hours of dedicated service to the organization, and an emerging sense of collectivity and mission. The organizational emphasis is on internal processes and practices, rather than on external contingencies. In the third stage, "formalization and control," where procedures and policies become institutionalized, goals are formalized, conservatism predominates, and flexibility is reduced. The emphasis is on efficiency of production" (Cameron and Whetten, 1981, p. 527).

Of particular interest to the research described below is the transition from the entrepreneurial, creative stages to the formalization and growth stage. This time of transition will be used to illustrate how times of transition, in general, may create a condition under which culture could be managed. There are several reasons why the potential for managing culture would exist at this particular time. Employees may, them-selves, feel a need for change from a culture based on entrepreneurial values to one based on values of long-term growth and stability (Martin, Sitkin, and Boehm, 1984). Employees may be looking for a new direction and may be open to

attempts to move the culture accordingly. In addition, the transition from the entrepreneurial to the growth stage is often accompanied by the resignation or replacement of the founder of the company. Such a resignation sends a clear signal that a transition is occurring. This change could breed the opportunity for other changes, such as those accomplished by managing the culture. Particularly, if employees have been dissatisfied with the past, a transition creates an opportunity to manage the culture in ways which would appear to be leading to a brighter future. Finally, transitions give rise to a condition analogous to the unfreezing stage necessary for socialization. During this time a void exists which can be filled by the management of the culture in order that refreezing can occur with the values cast in a new, predetermined image. Lest this argument seem obvious, it is worth noting that the opposite point of view is plausible. It may be precisely during a time of transition or crisis that employees would cling to the stability of the past in order to maintain some degree of certainty in the midst of change.

How Might Culture Be Managed?

For the reasons outlined above, the transition from the entrepreneurial stage to the formalization and growth stage may create a set of conditions under which culture could be managed. It is necessary to understand what aspects of culture might be managed under this set of conditions, what means could be used in managing these aspects, and what players might be

involved in the management. Referring to the definition suggested above, culture consists of several different aspects including shared values and the beliefs and ways of acting which reflect and express those values. It would be possible in attempting to manage culture during a time of transition, for example from an entrepreneurial founder to a new growth-oriented CEO, to change only the beliefs and behaviors expressing the shared values, with the values themselves remaining the same, or it may be possible to change both the values and their expression.

Transition	Managing The Aspects of Culture
Founder Resigns	• Values remain the same, expression of values changes
	or
New CEO appointed	• Values change, expression of values changes

If a company has not been successful prior to the founder resigning and/or employees are unhappy and dissatisfied with the currently shared values, then one would expect an attempt to manage the culture to involve replacing both the shared values and the beliefs and behavior expressing the values. In other words, the management of culture would involve the creation and support of a desirable, new culture. If, on the other hand, the company has been generally successful, the employees not dissatisfied, and the founder has resigned with his respect intact, the management task becomes more complex. One may attempt to change both the values and the expression of

the values in order to refocus the company toward a longer-term growth oriented strategy and find that employees are loathe to change their shared values because of past success. If, during the transition from the entrepreneurial to the growth stages, the values can continue to be guiding the company forward, it may be more appropriate to leave the values untouched and to manage the ways the values are expressed.

In addition to considering what aspects of culture may be managed, it is important to suggest what means could be used in managing culture. As described above, research has shown that values are expressed using a number of different forms including special language, rituals, stories and organizational practices. These could all be potentially used to manage culture during a time of transition. It is proposed that the most effective ways to manage culture will be through one-to-one verbal communication and role-modeling. Role-modeling would provide employees with an opportunity to observe a specific instance of behavior from which they could begin to develop new mini-theories and scripts concerning situations in which this behavior would be appropriate. According to research carried out by social learning theorists, new behavior is acquired through the influences of stimuli that cue behavior and response consequences that reinforce behavior in the setting. This process has been found to occur through the observation and imitation of others, known as "modeling" (Bandura, 1969). Role-modeling and one-to-one communication can provide relevant, current information in a timely fashion.

Because times of transition are characterized by ambiguity and uncertainty, this would seem to be particularly important.

Finally, the question of who might be involved in managing culture during a time of transition should be raised. The set of potential managers would include the CEO, middle managers, and members of work groups or subcultures. It would seem that if any of these players had an explicit interest in managing the culture, the time of transition would give them an opportunity to do so and their attempts could have an effect. The CEO, because of his/her position and the resulting focus on the position, would be likely to have the most influence. However, if strong subcultures exist, such influence may be mitigated if not obscured by the values shared within the subculture. In addition, the influence of the CEO may be over-shadowed by the influence of more immediate personnel who are explicitly attempting to manage the culture.

An Exploratory Study of the Management of Culture

The focal organization (LSI) is a micro-computer company located in the Silicon Valley in Northern California. The company researches, designs, manufactures, and markets a micro-computer product. LSI is the world-wide leading supplier of Unix-based microcomputers. When the study began, LSI had been incorporated for six months. The study continued for two and a half years, and during that time a number of events occurred which signaled that LSI was facing the transition of moving from the entrepreneurial, creative stages to the

formalization and growth stages. These events included the extremely successful initial public offering of the company's stock, which raised over $90 million, a move to a substantially larger headquarters building, and the restructuring of the corporate hierarchy. In addition, the founder of the company resigned during the course of the study. He was replaced by a CEO whose business experience was comprised solely of working for larger, bureaucratic organizations.

The study was conducted in two major stages. The first stage consisted of sixteen months of observation and interviews. Three researchers, working alone or in tandem, spent an average of ten hours per month at LSI. This time was allocated irregularly, so that the range of hours of observation for each researcher varied from zero to ten hours per month.

During this phase, the researchers spent time observing randomly selected employees from each of five departments during the working day. In addition, the researchers attended company social events. For example, one of the researchers was a guest at the company's first Christmas party, hosted by the founder and attended by 90 percent of the employees. Interviews were also conducted with all members of the top management team as well as a group of lower-level employees. The purpose of this phase of the study was to learn as much as possible about the culture of the organization and to become familiar with the different organizational roles and the people who filled those roles.

During the sixteenth month of observation, the company was reorganized and the founder resigned. These two events occurred almost simultaneously. The company was reorganized and three weeks later, the founder resigned. Due to the reorganization, the marketing, sales, and support functions were grouped together and divided into two regions for the entire United States. Figure 1 depicts the new organizational structure.

Figure 1 about here

The Western regional director was explicitly interested in managing the culture of his region. He was concerned about some of the values which he felt were shared among company employees including a focus on short-term results and individual superstars. He believed that several of the values had outlived their usefulness and he wanted to have a new set of values become shared. He was able to articulate three values which he embodied in the following slogans:

1) Feed it or shoot it. (This slogan refers to the value of focusing on the long-term, particularly on productive high potential customers. In the past, employees had focused on short-term results and had sacrificed long-term business relationships in favor of a quick return.)

2) <u>Professionals think success</u>. (This slogan refers to the value of behaving in a professional manner. By implication, if an employee acted professionally, he would be rewarded and achieve success. In addition, the slogan is a play on words, because it is also saying that in order to be professional, one would need to act self-confident and to define oneself as a "success.")

3) <u>We have a responsibility to the rest of the company</u>. ("We" is used in reference to the employees of the Western Region. Historically, employees had felt primarily responsible to themselves. The focus had been on individual effort rather than on the team, the region, or the company as a whole.)

The regional director wished his employees to believe in these values and to behave accordingly. During the second stage of the study, each employee in his region was interviewed on two separate occasions. In-depth, structured interviews were conducted with all 45 employees of his region. The first interview took place immediately following the reorganization, before the regional director had the opportunity to express and reinforce the new set of values. The second interview took place six to eight months later after the director had attempted to manage the culture. The study will continue for another eight to twelve months with additional interviews.

The structured interviews were composed of questions which addressed the following:

1) Employee awareness of values being espoused by the regional director.

    eg: What values do you think the regional director hopes to have guide your behavior and beliefs?

    eg: Have you been told that the following values are important? To what degree? By whom?

    (Ex).   a.   "Feed it or Shoot it"

                      1   3   5

                unimportant   very important

2) Employee commitment to values being espoused by the regional director.

    eg: To what extent are you personally committed to the following values? How have you expressed your commitment?

3) Description of Culture

    eg: What do you think is important to the top management of the company?

    eg: What values do you think other employees believe to be important at the company?

    eg: What values do you personally think are important?

4) Means of managing culture

    eg: Have any of the following means been used to communicate values? Please circle any means

which have been used. If possible, give an
example of how values have been communicated
using the following:

> (Ex) 1. formal philosophy statement
> 2. recruiting
> 3. role modeling
> 4. reward system
> 5. company stories
> 6. training

    eg: What do you think are the key factors in getting a
good performance evaluation?

5) Key players in managing culture

    eg: Which of the following have the most impact on what
you believe to be important at the company? Why?

> your immediate boss
> peers
> regional director
> top management
> company material
> other _____

    eg: Have you felt any impact of the new CEO on the
company?

Preliminary Results

After eight months, it appears that the regional director
has been somewhat successful in managing the culture in his
region. At the time of the first interview, the employees were
totally unfamiliar with the values being espoused by the
regional director. By the time of the second interview, of the
forty-five employees who were interviewed, all forty-five
responded that they perceived the value embodied in the slogan
"Feed it or Shoot it" to be very important to the regional
director. The value "Professionals think success" was also

viewed by all employees as being very important. However, "We have a responsibility to the rest of the company" was rated by only four employees as very important and by six employees as somewhat important. The majority of the employees said that they perceived this value as unimportant to the regional director.

Figure 2 about here

In addition, content analysis of the open-ended questions produced similar results. At the time of the second interview, employees were able to articulate the meaning behind the first two values in a consistent fashion. For example, a manager of support personnel explained that "Feed it or Shoot it" means that "customers are either for us or against us in the long-term. If you are for us, we'll give you all the help we can. If you are against us, let's part ways right now." A sales manager responded that this value translates into "weeding out the weak customers and signing up strong customers." A marketing manager, when asked about "Professionals think success" explained that, "People make their own destiny. If you think successfully, you'll begin to do what it takes to make it happen. This can be a real moral builder because it affects people's attitudes."

Finally, at the time of the second interview, employees indicated moderate to high levels of commitment to these values. All forty-five employees responded that their personal

commitment to the value embodied in "Feed it or Shoot it" was very high. A similar pattern was found for "Professionals think success." However, for the value represented by "We have a responsibility to the rest of the company," employees indicated significantly lower levels of commitment.

Figure 3 about here

It would seem that the regional director had met with some success in managing the culture of his region toward the attainment of a new, desirable culture. He had articulated a set of three values which he wished to become shared and after eight months (the time of the second interview), his employees perceived that two of the three values were very important and were themselves committed to these values. In addition to the questionnaire measures of commitment, actual behavioral changes were also recorded which support this pattern of results. For example, the number of customers serviced by the Western region dropped from 550 to 300 while the number of new orders per customer grew by 5%. The annual sales for the region increased from $40 million to $48 million over the eight month period. Relating to the value of "Professionals think success," there was a noticeable change in employee dress. The regional director equated dressing professionally with the IBM stereotype of blue suits and white shirts. His employees began to emulate this style of dress and commented on the new "IBM-look" in the office. Finally, there was little behavioral

indication that employees viewed the third value, embodied in "We have a responsibility to the rest of the company", as being important. For example, several instances occurred where employees were offered job transfers to other parts of LSI. Such transfers meet with strong resistance by regional employees. There was little interest in sharing their skills with corporate headquarters or other divisions.

This attempt to manage the divisional culture by the regional manager occurred during a time of transition following the resignation of the firm's founder. It is important to note that the employees viewed two of the three espoused values of the regional manager as being quite similar to top management values and to values held by other company employees. The third value, "We have a responsibility to the rest of the company," was not rated as being a good fit with either top management values or company-held values. When questioned about the lack of similarity between this value and top management values or company-held values, employees said that the company had focused on individuals and small teams being successful without having individuals be concerned with other parts of the company. It was believed that if each individual was independently successful, then the whole organization would be successful. In other words, a major focus of the corporate culture was on doing the best you could do without worrying about anyone else. This focus on individual effort is not surprising considering that the company was just beginning the process of moving from the entrepreneurial stages to the

formalization stage. The regional director had difficulty in promoting a value which conflicted with currently shared beliefs. He was making progress, however, because at the time of the second interview, 25% of the employees rated this value as very important.

Employees were also asked to evaluate fifteen different means of managing culture. The fifteen means included the following: company stories, jargon, rituals, formal philosophy statement, recruiting, office design, role modeling, reward systems, appraisals, management's reaction to critical incidents, training classes, dress, structure of the region, agenda items, and announcements. The regional director believed that he was using nine of the fifteen means to actually manage the culture by reinforcing his set of espoused values. He believed that he was reinforcing and expressing the three values through jargon, one-to-one communication, role modeling, a philosophy statement, the reward system, the structure of the region, dress, agenda items, and rituals. For example, when describing the structure of the region, the regional director related the following, "At the Los Angeles office, I reorganized and appointed a new area manager. I went with a guy who had retail experience in spite of the national director of marketing being behind another guy. I didn't think that the guy the national director wanted was professional. He would not have been a good person to demonstrate professionalism or long term thinking." The regional director used a variety of different means to consistently and

redundantly express the same message.

However, of these nine, only seven were perceived by employees to have been used to communicate and reinforce the values. The employees were virtually unaware that agenda items and rituals were being used. Both the reward systems and one-to-one communication were rated by 100 percent of the employees as having been used to communicate the values. The results are summarized in Figure 5 below.

Figure 4 about here

Interestingly, several means which the regional director did not believe he was using were evaluated by the employees as having communicated the set of values. Training was rated by 33 percent of the employees as having reinforced the values of "Feed it or shoot it" and "Professionals think success" and stories were rated by 47 percent as having communicated "Feed it or shoot it."

Employees were also asked from whom they had heard the set of values. Eighty-four percent of the employees said that they had heard the values directly from the regional director. In addition, seventy-two percent of the employees responded that they had heard the values from their peers. Sixty-eight percent had heard the values from their immediate managers.

Insert Figure 5 here

Discussion

This study has looked at the explicit attempt by a regional unit to change its culture during a time of company transition. The founder of the company had resigned and a new CEO with vastly different skills had been appointed. The regional director felt that this would be a perfect opportunity to effect cultural change within his region. In spite of a conscious and persistent effort, in eight months, his attempts were only partially successful. Two of his set of three values did become widely known and shared among his employees. However, these values were perceived as being similar to currently held values. The regional manager had not changed the shared values as much as he had changed the expression of those values. It is important to note that, he, himself, perceived his values as being quite dissimilar to currently held values. He felt that he was promoting a dramatic cultural change. The third value espoused by the regional manager was less widely shared than the other two values. This value was viewed by employees as being the most dissimilar to currently held values. The regional manager also felt that this value was the most dissimilar of the three values. However, he did not consciously devote an incremental amount of time or effort toward the expression and reinforcement of the value.

Once again, we are left with an ambiguous response to the question of whether culture can be managed. It is clear that the regional directed articulated a set of three values. But, the other regional employees may have independently decided or

may have come to convince each other that these values were desirable. Thus, the regional director may have been the "culture manager" only at the articulation stage of culture change. Perhaps "culture management" is articulating a possible culture, coming to agree it is desirable, and then attaining it through the sharing of the desired values. Therefore, all employees, not just the regional director, contributed to the management of culture.

This study suggests that during a time of transition, it is possible to manage the expression of cultural values, using a number of different means. It would seem to be more difficult, even during a time of transition, to actually change the value system unless the change is desired by the employees. It is important to note that only eight months have elapsed since the change effort began. It was believed that this relatively short period of time would be mitigated by the fact that the company had only been in existence for three years and the average tenure of the forty-five employees was twenty-two months. However, the study will continue over the next twelve months and it should be possible to observe further change in the culture.

Thus, it would seem that times of transition are a fruitful area to address the question of "If culture can be managed, when and what aspects of culture can be managed." "Managing culture" is often synonymous with "changing culture." In addition to gaining a better understanding of the management of change, it would also be important to learn more about

managing non-change. During a time of transition, it may be as important to manage stability as it is to manage change. Times of transition may offer the challenge of managing change and stability simultaneously. The research described above is a preliminary attempt to begin to understand the management of culture from the manager's perspective and to begin to test the hope that culture can, in fact, be managed.

FIGURE 1

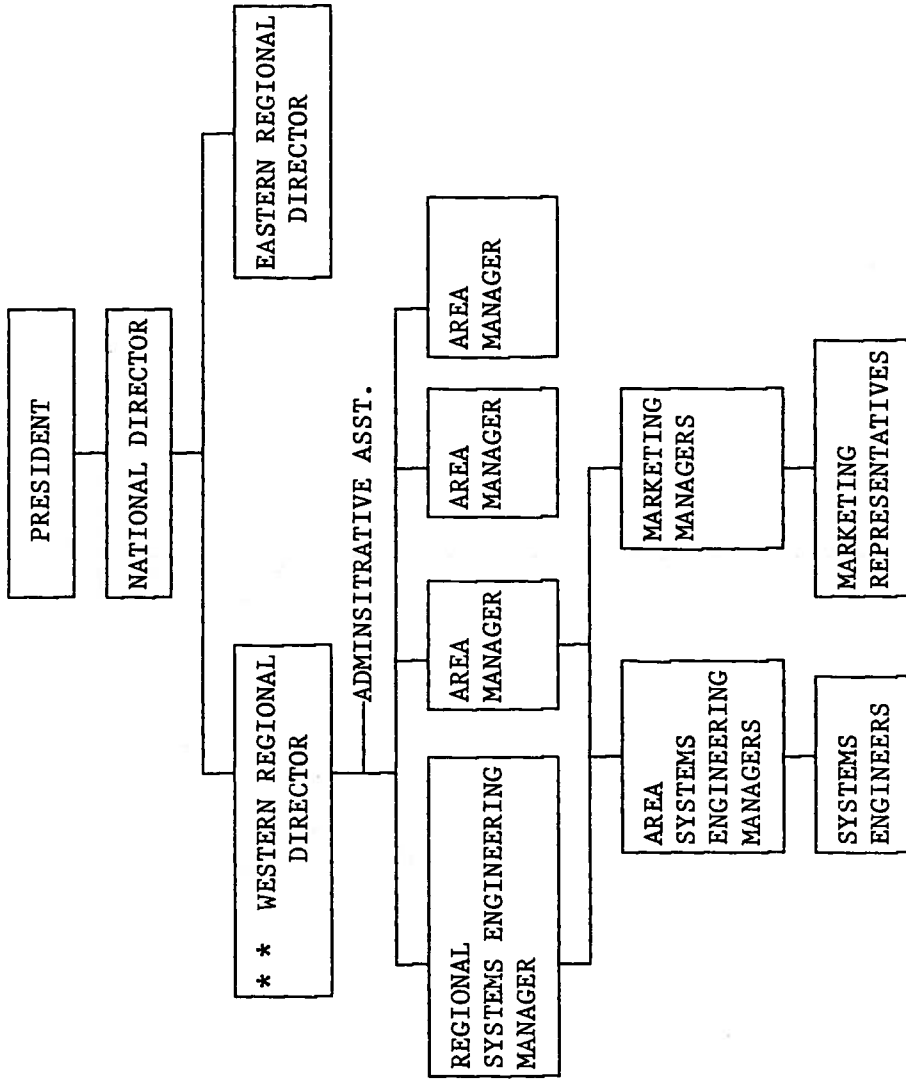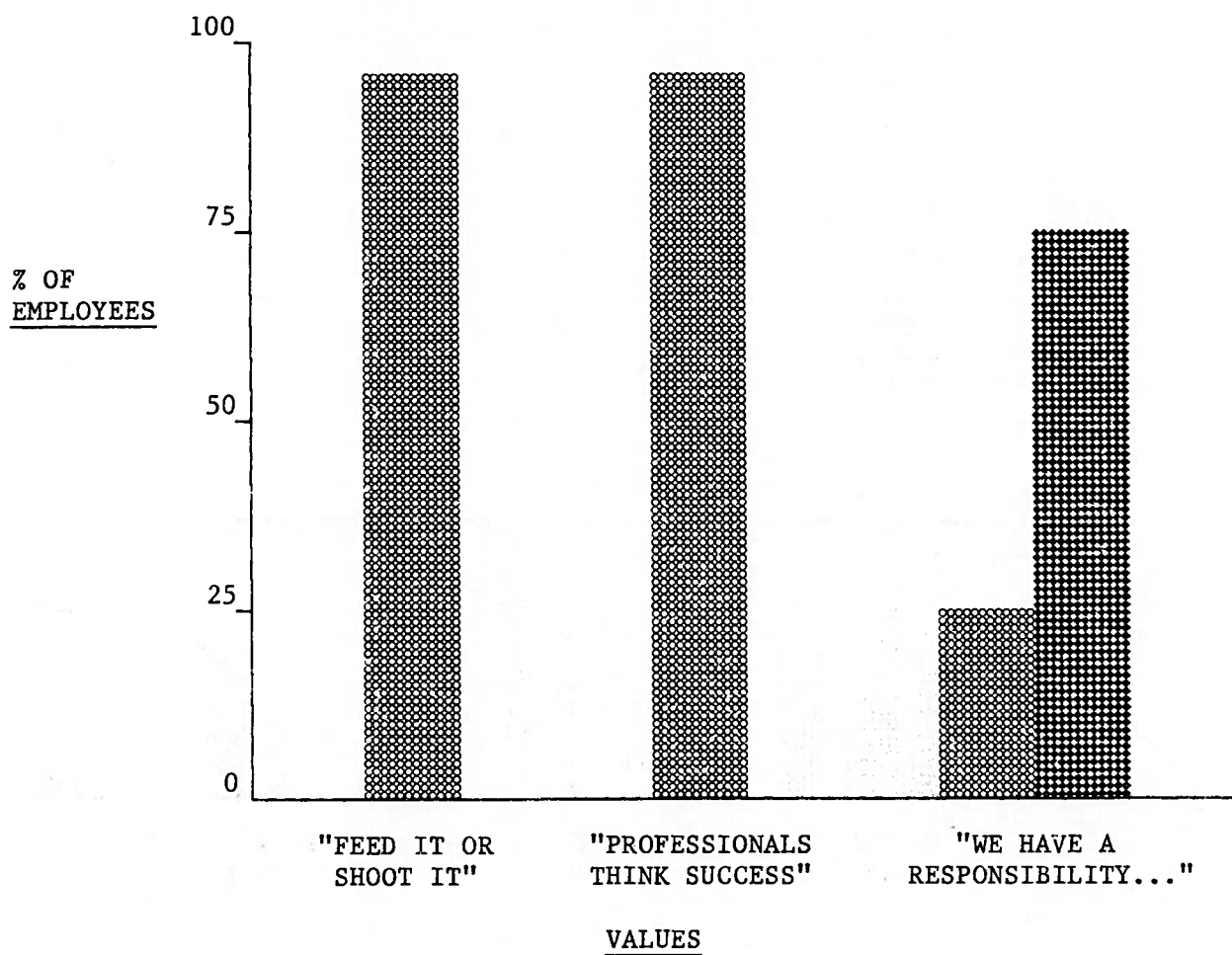ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE AFTER THE REORGANIZATION


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                          PRESIDENT
                             |
                     NATIONAL DIRECTOR
                             |
          -----------------------------------------
          |                                       |
   **  WESTERN REGIONAL                    EASTERN REGIONAL
        DIRECTOR                               DIRECTOR
          |---- ADMINSITRATIVE ASST.
          |
   --------------------------------------------------
   |              |              |              |
REGIONAL       AREA           AREA           AREA
SYSTEMS        MANAGER        MANAGER        MANAGER
ENGINEERING
MANAGER
   |
   -----------------------
   |                     |
AREA                MARKETING
SYSTEMS             MANAGERS
ENGINEERING            |
MANAGERS          MARKETING
   |              REPRESENTATIVES
SYSTEMS
ENGINEERS
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FIGURE 2

PERCEIVED IMPORTANCE OF VALUES BY EMPLOYEES

FIGURE 3
EMPLOYEE COMMITMENT TO VALUES
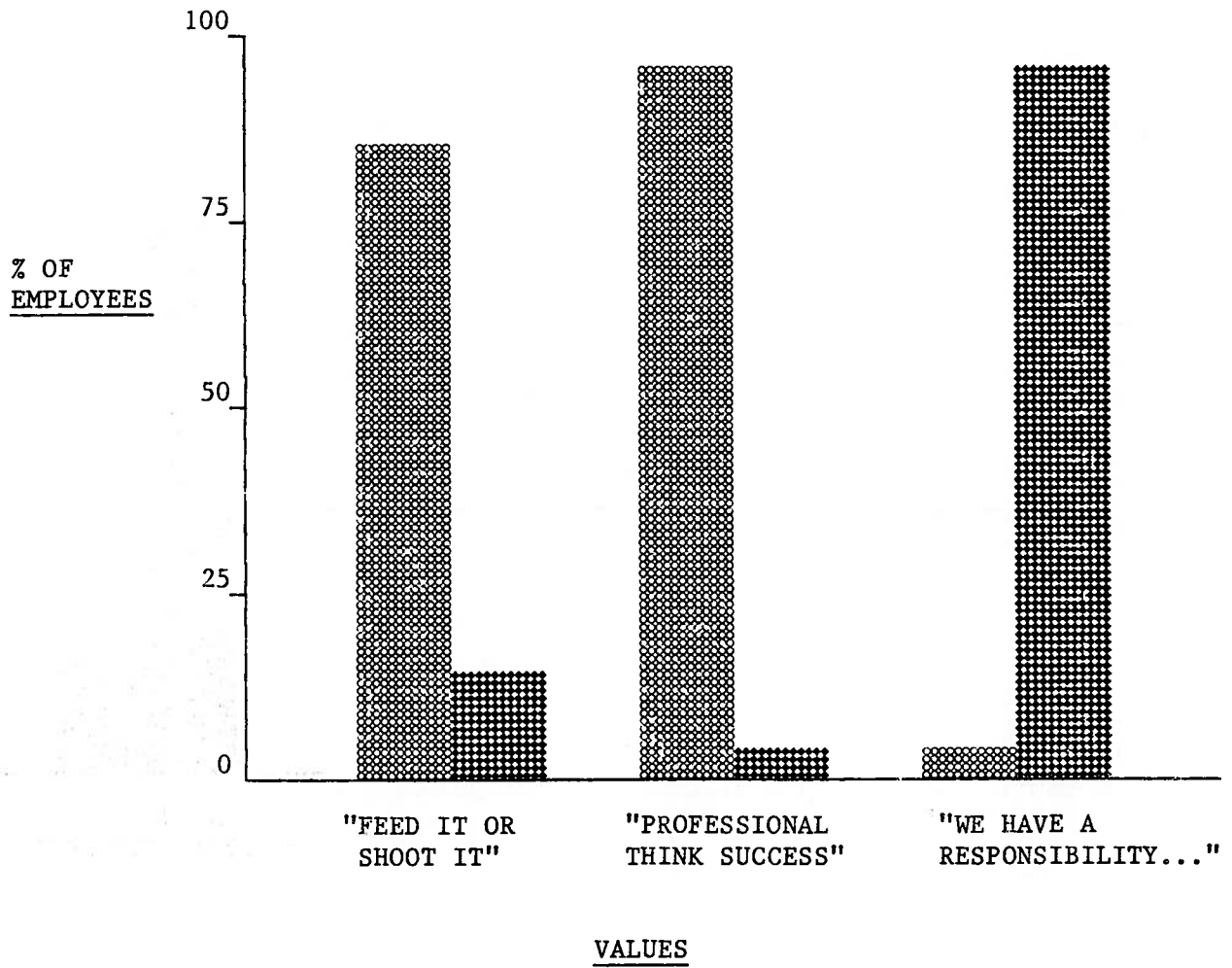
FIGURE 4
EMPLOYEE PERCEPTIONS OF MEANS USED TO EXPRESS VALUES

% OF
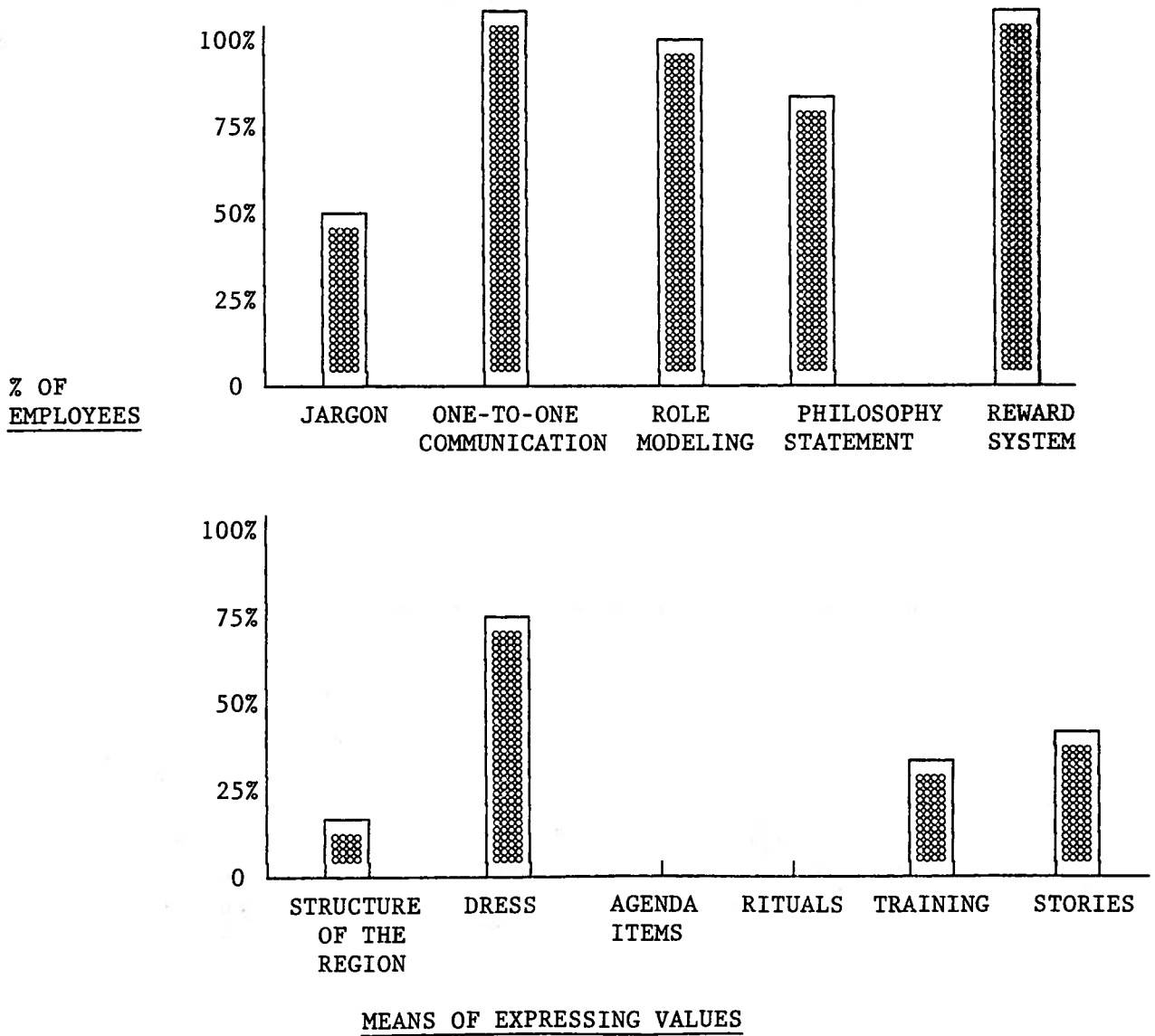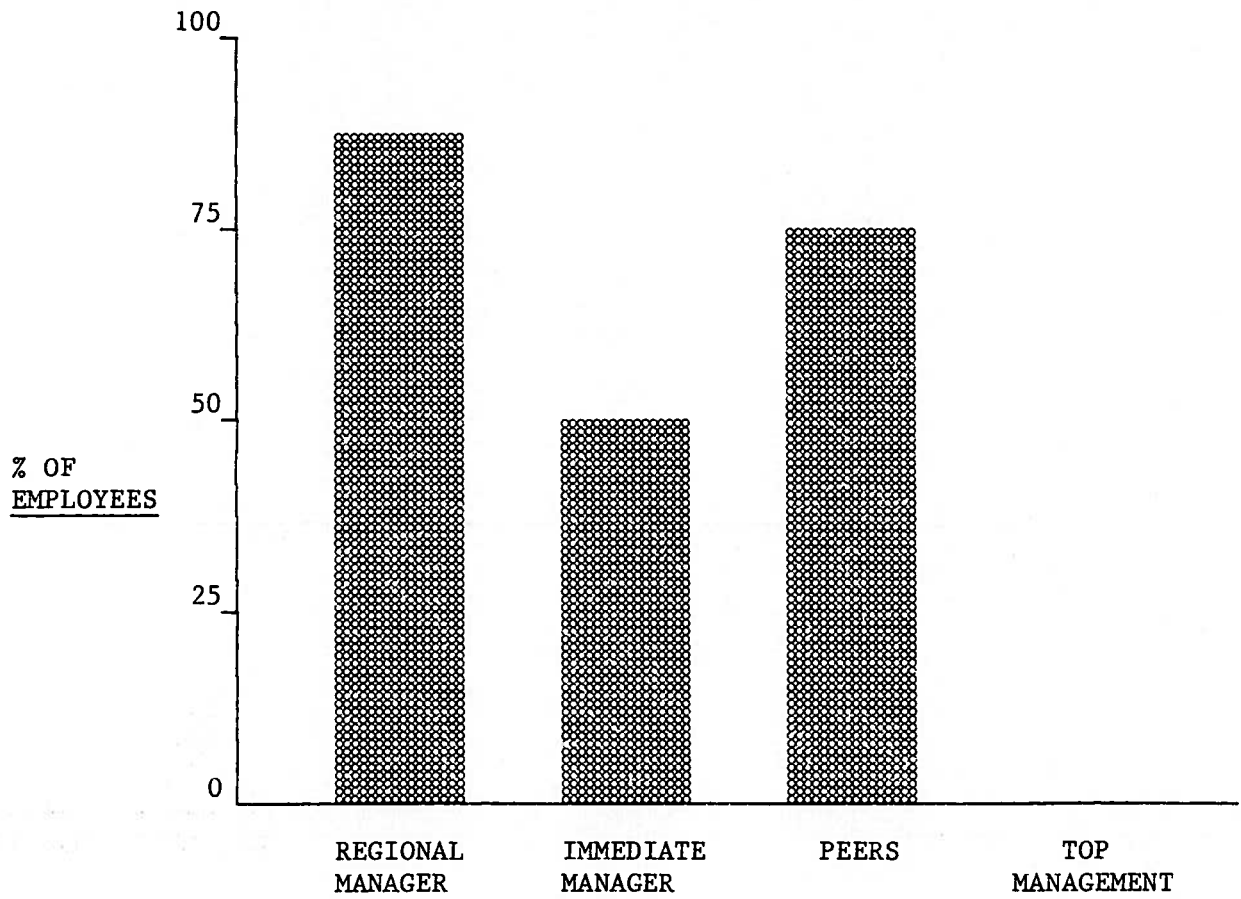EMPLOYEES

MEANS OF EXPRESSING VALUES

FIGURE 5

TRANSMISSION OF VALUES

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