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GATHERING AROUND THE ORGANIZATIONAL CAMPFIRE:
STORYTELLING AS A WAY OF MAINTAINING AND CHANGING
FOR-PROFIT ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURES

STEVEN AUSTIN STOVALL

A DISSERTATION

Submitted to the Ph.D. in Leadership & Change Program
of Antioch University
in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

July, 2007

This is to certify that the dissertation entitled:

GATHERING AROUND THE ORGANIZATIONAL CAMPFIRE:
STORYTELLING AS A WAY OF MAINTAINING AND CHANGING FOR-PROFIT
ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURES

prepared by:

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Acknowledgements

Writing is such a “lonely” art. The writer sits immersed in his or her own thoughts, diligently typing away on a keyboard or applying pen to paper. The internal editor keeps telling the writer that the words are not quite right, or that more research needs to be done, or that one will never finish. But, the writer – the determined writer – ignores this internal editor, and plods along. Until one day, on that glorious day, a rough draft is complete.

However, a work such as this dissertation cannot be crafted completely alone. I am indebted to several individuals who not only motivated me, but provided encouragement, advice, and most importantly, always believed in me.

First, I want to thank Dr. Carolyn Kenny. She has been my inspiration, my constant motivator, my mentor, my dissertation chair, and my friend. She has a wisdom and insight that has moved me since the day we met. With her, I have an excitement for discovery that I never knew was possible.

I also want to thank my committee. Dr. Jon Wergin, Dr. Mitch Kusy, and Dr. Yiannis Gabriel are phenomenal assets to this academic pursuit and I am both awed and ecstatic that they are with me on this journey.

My cohort also deserves a great deal of thanks. Through all times – enlightening to challenging – we have been there for one another. Among them are life-long friends. And finally, without my mother, where would I be? Her belief and encouragement since the day I was born has kept me moving forward. Her unflappable positive attitude is something I aspire to attain and hold on to. Her words and smile filled my mind’s eye throughout these numerous steps along the way to this moment.

Abstract

Stories abound in the business world. They may be called “success stories,” “best practices sharing,” or even simply “stories,” but however they are referred to, these tales not only become part of the organizational culture, but they also help define it. This study examines storytelling among for-profit organizations to demonstrate how stories are selected, told, and related to employees for the purposes of either changing the organizational culture or helping to maintain the existing one. Four companies have been chosen to capture the nature of storytelling as it relates to the sharing of cultural information within these firms. Using the qualitative research methodology known as portraiture, four *portraits* have been crafted and emergent themes concerning the relationship of storytelling and culture are identified: organizational culture is not easily defined, culture emanates from the top, stories about culture are numerous, histories of organizations are stories, maintaining or changing culture is difficult, and stories about culture are real. The purpose of this study is to deepen our understanding about how and why stories function in for-profit cultures. The electronic version of the dissertation is accessible at the OhioLINK ETD center <http://www.ohiolink.edu/etd/>.

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Chapter I: Introduction

Being born and raised in Texas, it is little wonder I would gravitate toward storytelling in my research. The home of Pecos Bill, heroic stories of founding a new Texas nation, and of course, the ubiquitous tall tale, Texans seem to be born with a story right on the tip of the tongues. I grew up on a farm and every year was quite a struggle financially, but we entertained ourselves with stories. These were real and imagined; exciting and reflective; short and long; new and old. And though the stories were rarely told the same way twice – new details have a funny way of emerging upon each retelling – stories were important for building my foundation for life.

As I entered the business world I discovered that storytelling was not only present, but a thriving, vital part of establishing the culture of individual firms. It is this aspect that I have pursued in the culmination of my Ph.D. at Antioch University. Specifically, mine is an exploration of the nature of storytelling in for-profit organizations in order to better understand how and why stories are used to maintain and change culture. First, my own story is revealed, followed by the structure of this dissertation.

My Dissertation Story

We were encouraged during the last two years of this program to develop our “elevator speech,” or simplified description of our dissertation. This is an intriguing process because when I first began thinking about my topic, it would have been imperative that the elevator be in a 200 story building! I continued delving into the subject matter and fine-tuning the direction, which was pared down and at last my topic

emerged: *Storytelling as a Way of Maintaining and Changing For-Profit Organizational Cultures*

Clearly, I can now explain my work in a low-rise building – perhaps only three or four floors!

As I look back at my career, it seems as if an invisible hand has been guiding me to this point. Though, admittedly I did not recognize this until very recently. I have always told stories in my work settings and these stories were – subconsciously or consciously – tied to the culture of the respective organization I had been a part of.

As an entrepreneur who started his first company at age 21, it was very difficult for me to face the realization that I would need to hire staff. Contrary to what one would intuitively think about entrepreneurs, I did indeed want to grow my business, but I did not want to relinquish control. Adding just one person to the business means that some part of the organization must be handed over to someone else. This is a very scary proposition for the dedicated entrepreneur. Llewellyn was the first person I added to the payroll and even during the interview I was telling her *stories* about the company which would readily clue her in to the culture I was crafting. The company was called Phantom Shopper and it provided mystery shopping services to restaurants, retail stores, banks, and so forth. Essentially, the service entailed sending in to a location a “secret shopper” who acted just like all the other customers, however, when she left the store, she completed a detailed questionnaire about the visit (regarding service, friendliness, cleanliness, experience, etc.).

One story in particular that I related to Llewellyn during the interview was how I had found a typographical error on one of the reports going to a particularly valued client.

The error was very minor – the “e” was missing off a “the” in the text. But rather than just sending the report on to the client, realizing that in actuality the client would never even notice, I explained to Llewellyn how I threw away that copy, printed another with the corrected *the*, and had it properly bound as I did with all other Phantom Shopper reports. It did not matter if she thought I was very detailed oriented or even obsessive compulsive – the point was clear. Ours would be a culture where attention was paid to every detail in the work we did. Interestingly, as we hired more people, I noticed that Llewellyn would tell that story to candidates, thereby continuing the existing culture for subsequent employees.

Eight years later, after I had sold both Phantom Shopper and the small publishing firm I had started, as well as folded my management consulting practice, I took a job with a *Fortune 500* company. My first two years were spent as Director of Human Resources and later, I was promoted to Director of Sales (holding that position for an additional two years). It was here that I discovered how stories are such an integral part of maintaining and changing culture in a large organization. My entrepreneurial companies, at their zenith, had only 19 total employees. Newell Rubbermaid, on the other hand, had over 65,000. Stories were everywhere – spoken, in the company newsletter, on wall posters, and e-mails. And these stories *embodied* the culture of the organization. In fact, we had “Newellization” classes that instilled the culture of the company in employees; and it was conducted primarily through stories. The company was making acquisitions of other firms every 6 to 12 months, and when I was Director of Human Resources, one of my responsibilities was part of this Newellization process. These newly “acquired” employees had to understand, and eventually become part of, the Newell culture.

Brainwashing? Perhaps. But, we were attempting a culture change and we were doing it through stories.

Of course, I learned then that culture changes are not overnight endeavors. They take time and some people will never adopt or fit into the new culture being promoted. Some of course, will readily adapt. One story I must have told nearly a hundred times to either acquired employees or those interviewing to join the company was concerning a young lady by the name of Jennifer (name changed to protect her identity). We had hired her in 1998 as an administrative assistant in the engineering department of one of our companies (Newell Rubbermaid is a conglomerate with 29 companies under its umbrella). Jennifer had a degree in engineering from a top-tier Midwestern university and graduated with a very high grade point average. Though we did not have an entry level engineering position for her when she interviewed with us, she was anxious to work for Newell Rubbermaid and said she would gladly take the administrative assistant position at \$7.50 per hour. After six months, an opening appeared as a packaging engineer (this is a person who designs the package for a consumer product that must be well-thought with regard to form and function). She had thoroughly impressed us with her drive, enthusiasm, and initiative as an administrative assistant and the packaging engineer position was a good opportunity for her. She excelled in this new job. Then, three months later, we moved several mechanical engineers to another company and promoted Jennifer to one of their now vacant positions. As an aside, this meant in just nine months, she went from earning \$7.50 per hour to a salary of nearly \$65,000 a year. Almost unbelievably, a situation arose five months later when the Director of Engineering had been promoted and she served as interim Director of Engineering. After

30 days, we realized she was actually well-suited for the position and made the job permanent for her. She was not yet 25 years old.

This story I told again and again to job candidates. Hers was indeed a remarkable story, but it was in no way isolated. This single story told potential employees several points about our culture. First, with major corporate acquisitions occurring with great frequency, people are promoted constantly. Second, if employees are “superstars” they can be promoted up the ranks regardless of their length of tenure in their current job. And third, we paid our stars very well. As Director of Engineering, Jennifer was making well over \$100,000 – a sizeable sum for a twenty-four year old!

Of course, these are only anecdotes. This proposal details my efforts to illustrate the nature of storytelling in for-profit organizations in order to better understand how and why stories are used to maintain and change organizational culture.

The nature of my study is very interesting to me for several reasons. First, it is an opportunity to explore storytelling in for-profit settings. As an observation, the words *storytelling* and *corporation* seem to go together like honey and tree sap – those familiar with strong for-profit environments easily recognize that *storytelling* has historically been regarded as too feely-touchy to even be acknowledged. For example, at 3M, a diversified manufacturer of adhesives, laminates, and other products, one mid-level manager began a meeting by turning off his PowerPoint project and telling a story instead. Those managers above him on the hierarchy “started whispering that they could see a disaster coming” (Shaw, Brown, and Bromiley, 1998, p. 46). The message was clear – a story goes beyond the established norm of a business meeting. Second, *organizational culture* is a subject I have been fascinated with for years. It is a nuanced topic that most people

are acutely aware of, but few fully understand. And third, my methodology, which is explained in Chapter III, is a somewhat unique approach to the study of organizational culture and storytelling. I have utilized a qualitative form of inquiry known as *portraiture*. This method permits me to explore the subtleties of participating firms' cultures and stories.

As will be shown in Chapter II, the extant literature has many useful and relevant works related specifically to organizational storytelling or to organizational culture. Whether they are attempts to define either concept or to better understand their nature, they are focused narrowly on these two topics. There are a few studies that adequately address both simultaneously and those are also examined. However, what has not appeared in the literature is a study of the interrelationship of storytelling and culture through the use of *portraiture*. Furthermore, to date, after an extensive literature search, I have not been able to identify any published studies using *portraiture* as a methodology applied to a business subject. Therefore, not only does my study make a significant contribution to the literature associated with organizational storytelling and organizational culture, but it fills a very important gap in the literature. As the first known study of culture and storytelling explored through *portraiture*, this examination will fill a critical void among the research. It will readily demonstrate that *portraiture* is a viable methodology in the various fields of business and will hopefully set a precedent for similarly framed research in future studies.

In effect, this paper is a series of "portraits" of select for-profit companies and how stories are used to either maintain their respective organizational culture, or even change it. Thus, my dissertation story is a culmination of personal interests and a

building upon of the various Learning Achievements completed during my journey through this Ph.D. program. I think my voyage since the first residency may be somewhat unique in that I knew even then that my “question” would center on culture – I just didn’t know where it would lead at that time. The element of *story* emerged when I allowed myself to be open to a wide horizon as to what is possible; no matter how atypical the subject may be. And though that emergence is easy to see, the pursuit of portraiture as my methodology is not quite so linear. In fact, I only became aware of it late in my second year of the program when attending one of Carolyn Kenny’s sessions. Upon discovery of portraiture, it was as if these ideas were floating softly in front of me – I only needed to have the open mind to grasp them. More on portraiture will be discussed in Chapter III.

This dissertation demonstrates my approach to a detailed study of the interrelationship between organizational storytelling and organizational culture. I have been especially interested in how companies tell certain stories to either maintain the existing culture or to facilitate a change in organizational culture. To that end, four companies are examined: Cintas, National Bank & Trust, Candle-lite, and Skyline Chili. These companies are of varying size and are in different industries. This provides a cross-section of types of companies to better understand the subject of my dissertation.

The following chapters describe the exploration of this research. In Chapter II, a detailed literature review illustrates not only the definitions of organizational storytelling and organizational culture, but also how other researchers have studied these topics. Chapter III then explains the nature of portraiture as a form of qualitative inquiry as well as how it was applied to these four companies. Chapter IV provides portraits of Skyline

Chili, Cintas, National Bank & Trust, and Candle-lite. Chapter V discusses each of these portraits and identifies the emergent themes that cut across the four organizations. And Chapter VI delves into the implications for leaders and change agents.

Chapter II: Review of the Literature

The term *organizational culture* has become very common in the realm of business. Popular magazines, seminars, and best-selling books proclaim the importance of culture to every organization and numerous speakers and authors have made substantial livings by touting the “best ways” of changing or maintaining an existing culture. Whether it is a giant *Fortune 500* firm, entrepreneurial venture, struggling mid-size company, or fast-growing small business, the culture of that enterprise plays a vital role in its existence.

Closely tied to culture is the concept of organizational storytelling. The stories that are told to employees are often emblematic of the culture the company maintains. As will be shown in this chapter, there are many researchers who study the concept of organizational culture and there are a growing number who examine storytelling. However, there are only a few who contribute significantly to these combined concepts. It is in this realm that my research plays a key role – it narrows the gap between culture and storytelling by examining how stories are used to either maintain an existing culture or attempt a culture change. Furthermore, this review of the literature makes a case for the use of portraiture as a methodology to study this phenomenon.

In this chapter, a detailed analysis of current research into organizational culture and storytelling is presented. First, firm definitions of both organizational culture and storytelling will be established. Part II tackles the variety of studies that have been conducted on organizational culture. Then, in Part III, a literature review of studies related to organizational storytelling is presented. Because storytelling as a subject is so broad in scope and depth, the focus of this section is primarily concerned with

storytelling in organizational settings. Finally, Part IV raises questions drawn from both cultural and storytelling studies and lays out an approach to studying the role of storytelling in for-profit organizational cultures using a qualitative method of inquiry known as *portraiture*.

PART I: Definitions of Organizational Culture and Organizational Storytelling

Defining Organizational Culture

It is, at first glance, difficult to define organizational culture. It is a nebulous, abstract concept that is difficult to get one's mind wrapped around. It also has so many names: corporate culture, organizational climate, corporate environment, and so forth. And though these are sometimes interchangeable, the term *organizational culture* is used throughout this work to provide consistency. In this section, organizational culture is defined, beginning with its anthropological roots and delving into both academic and practitioner literature to derive a definition that will serve as a foundation to this study.

Of course, *organizational* culture and *anthropological* culture are fascinating concepts to compare and contrast. From an anthropological point of view, Joseph Campbell's work, *The Power of Myth*, provides a foundation for a discussion on culture. Campbell's thoughts on society can be likened to culture in an organization. "The myths that link you to your social group, the tribal myths, affirm that you are an organ of the larger organism" (Campbell, 1988, p. 90). Anthropologically, the culture of a civilization or society is also the identity of that group. Similarly, the culture of an organization is also that entity's identity. But the question remains how either culture emerges. For example, Claude Levi-Strauss provides insight into the nature of anthropological culture. He states that "it is probably one of the many conclusions of anthropological research

that, notwithstanding the cultural differences between the several parts of mankind, the human mind is everywhere one and the same and that it has the same capacities” (Levi-Strauss, 1979, p. 19).

Levi-Strauss and Campbell provide an excellent springboard to move the discussion from an anthropological point of view to an organizational one. The impetus for a literature review such as this begins with the work of Edgar H. Schein. As one of the founders of the field of organizational psychology, Schein’s research into leadership and culture is the cornerstone to understanding how those two concepts relate to one another. I first came into contact with Schein’s work in *The Leader of the Future*.. In the book, an essay by Schein appeared entitled “Leadership and Organizational Culture.” Schein states that when it comes to culture the leader animates (or brings to life) the culture in an organization’s incipency, and in entrepreneurial settings he or she creates the culture, then maintains the culture as the organization grows, and finally the leader serves as a change agent (Hesselbein, Goldsmith, and Beckhard, 1996, pp. 60-63). Of course, Schein also points out that “culture is generally a very complex phenomenon in organizations” (Schein, 1997, p. 174).

In *The Corporate Culture Survival Guide*, Schein offers this regarding the vast importance of culture:

The implications of...thinking about culture are profound. For one thing, you begin to realize that culture is so stable and difficult to change because it represents the accumulated learning of a group – the ways of thinking, feeling, and perceiving the world that have made the group successful. For another thing, you realize that the important parts of culture are essentially invisible. Culture at the deeper level can be thought of as the shared mental models that the members of an organization hold and take for granted. They cannot readily tell you what their culture is, any more than fish, if they could talk, could tell you what water is. (Schein, 1999, p. 21)

After reviewing Schein's contributions to the discussion of leadership and organizational culture, it was a natural extension to discover the classic, yet leading work on organizational culture itself: *Corporate Cultures* by Deal and Kennedy. These two authors took a methodical, broad approach in identifying specifically what culture is in companies, while offering for the practitioner methods for creating and changing cultures. Taking research both had conducted (Deal in education and Kennedy in business), the authors set out to identify what "made organizations tick" (2000, p. iv). They suspected that a values-driven organization, united around a set of shared values, would outperform competitors. They just needed to find evidence of this. In doing so, they also identified the meaning of organizational culture, which is still used more than 20 years later. They state that organizational culture is a widely shared philosophy of management beliefs and practices important to those in the organization, where heroes, stories, rituals, and ceremonies become integral to the organizational climate (2000).

Specifically, they postulate that

...shared values are important. Corporate heroes and heroines provide tangible role models for others to emulate. Rituals connect people in deeper ways than do functional meetings or rationally based encounters. Periodic ceremonies instill a sense of communal spirit, reminding people of their shared values and purposes. Stories carry values and their telling and retelling create a social glue that connects people to what's really important. And a cultural network of priests and priestesses, gossips, storytellers, spies, and whisperers carries on their indomitable informal efforts to keep the enterprise intact and on track (2000, p. iv).

Deal and Kennedy's definition is critical to my research because they specifically mention *stories* as one facet of their description of organizational culture. And though that definition is the foundation for this review, it is important to examine definitions of other researchers because the nuances and variables associated with organizational

culture are numerous. Other perspectives and viewpoints permit us to establish a solid comprehension of the meaning of culture in organizations.

Another pair of researchers who delved into the concept of organizational culture is John P. Kotter and James L. Heskett. In their work, *Corporate Culture and Performance*, they identified two levels to culture in organizations worthy of consideration. First, on a deep, “less visible level, culture refers to values that are shared by the people in a group and that tend to persist over time even when group membership changes.” According to Kotter and Heskett, at this level, culture is almost impossible to change because the members of the organization may be unaware of all the values that hold the members together. And second, “on a more visible level, culture represents the behavior patterns or style of an organization that new employees are automatically encouraged to follow by their fellow employees.” At this level of culture, change is much easier to affect due to the very nature of individual and group behaviors (Kotter and Heskett, 1992, p. 4).

Schein adds to this discussion by stating that “culture is the sum total of all the shared, taken-for-granted assumptions that a group has learned throughout its history. It is the residue of success” (Schein, 1999, p. 29). Along these lines, the concept of adult learning theory is key to understanding how change happens as well as how individuals create their own meaning from events and ideas. Human resource development (HRD) experts note that “facilitating learning, performance, and change at both individual and organizational levels, the question of how adults learn and its subsequent relation with their behavioral performance and change is a critical theme for both HRD scholars and practitioners” (Yang, 2004, p. 129). Though this is beyond the scope of this literature

review, understanding how individuals and groups learn is important to understanding how cultural meanings arise. Whether learning is self-directed, social, or transformational, adult learning theory impacts knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors of individuals and groups.

Not only the assumptions, but the values are important to recognize. Whether those values are few or numerous is examined by O'Reilly. He says that values are important to maintaining a strong culture and that "what is critical is that these beliefs be widely shared and strongly held; that is, people throughout the organization must be willing to tell one another when a core belief is not being lived up to" (O'Reilly, 1989, p. 9).

Schein also makes a distinction between *culture* and *climate*, pointing out that though they are often used interchangeably, both researchers and practitioners should be aware of their differences:

More and more managers in organizations are talking about changing their cultures, creating new cultures, figuring out the impacts of their cultures, or preserving their cultures. When one examines what they are actually talking about, much of it has to do with what we would and should call climate. Culture, in popular managerial parlance, usually refers to how people feel about the organization, the authority system, and the degree of employee involvement and commitment – the "soft" stuff, all of which refers more to climate than culture. Managers need to learn that where culture may matter most is in its impact on the "hard stuff, such as strategy and structure. (Schein, 2000, p. xxiii)

In a similar fashion, Sanchez attempts to define culture in terms of its impact on the output of those working in the organization. "Culture, in its simplest meaning, is the sum total of how an organization accomplishes all that it has to do to fulfill its purpose or mission" (Sanchez, 2004, p. 18). For the purpose of this dissertation, throughout this

paper, organizational culture is the term used that is inclusive of climate in the organization.

Some researchers take very simple approaches to their definition of organizational culture, while others are much more complex. Gallagher, for example, in *The Soul of an Organization*, defines it simply as the “core beliefs, behaviors, and actions behind its daily business life” (Gallagher, 2003, p. 3). Haasen and Shea, though, show that members of the organization determine culture as they “attempt to identify, define, explain, and communicate to others in their family or group guiding principles, assumptions, attitudes, beliefs, behaviors, and practices that they presume to be of value to their own and future generations.” In addition, culture “embodies the experience, skills, and creative talents that make life more satisfying, rewarding, and successful for at least those members who can exert some influence on their situation” (Haasen and Shea, 2003, p. 5).

Cartwright and Cooper also define culture in easy-to-understand terms. In addition to defining organizational culture, they discuss how individuals are affected by the culture. This, in effect, further defines culture:

Characteristically, organizational culture concerns symbols, values, ideologies, and assumptions which operate, often in an unconscious way, to guide and fashion individual and business behavior. Culture is often defined as a “social glue.” It serves to bind individuals, and creates organizational cohesiveness. Organizational culture, like societal culture more generally, maintains order and regularity in the lives of its members, and only assumes salience in their minds when it is threatened or disturbed. (Cartwright & Cooper, 1993, p. 59)

Even Warren Bennis, ubiquitous in his appearance among works on leadership, has this to say within the practitioner literature about what organizational culture means:

Organizational cultures...don't happen suddenly. They evolve slowly, imperceptibly, over years, if not decades. Unlike mission statements, they are

never written down. But they are the soul of an organization and determine much of what happens within it. “It’s the way things are done around here,” one CEO told me, in defining his corporation’s culture. Such cultures are collections of unspoken rules and traditions. They determine which offices are sacrosanct, whether the men wear ties, and who speaks to whom and in what tone of voice – the red, amber, and green lights that aren’t visible but that operates 24 hours a day and determine the quality of organizational life. (Bennis, 2003, p. 34)

Morgan identifies a “culture driven” organization as one in which its members are “tightly knit, bound by a shared vision and shared values, wrestling with the day-to-day administrative demands and problems that every manager knows” (Morgan, 1997, p. 127). In addition, Morgan offers suggestions to practitioners for trying to gain a grasp on the culture of the organization. Through a series of questions, members of organizations can attain a perspective on their place of employment by viewing it from the outside. They ask themselves:

- On first joining, what struck you as being novel, strange, or different about the way things happened compared to your expectations or what you had become used to elsewhere?
- Think of another organization with which you are familiar. What do you consider to be odd, novel, or interesting about the way in which they do things that would be inconceivable in your present organization?
- If you wanted to convey the essence of how things are done in your organization, capturing both the good and the bad, can you think of a recent event or happening that seems to sum things up?
- Think about some of the stories circulating in your organization. What behaviors or character traits lead people to be considered heroes, villains, or fool? What messages do they communicate?
- What would you expect to happen as you try to implement your new ideas and approaches [in your present organization]? What does this tell you about the character of your organization?
- What do people from other organizations say about your organization? What do they remark on when they come to visit, and what overheard or reported comments have you picked up? (Morgan, 1989, p. 32).

Clearly, organizational culture can be described in many ways, but Deal and Kennedy’s definition, “*a widely shared philosophy of management beliefs and practices*

important to those in the organization, where heroes, stories, rituals, and ceremonies become integral to the organizational climate,” (2000, p. 9) seems to work best for framing this literature review because the components are common throughout works of literature as well as those that specifically address culture in organizational environments: heroes, rites/rituals, and storytelling. And it is this third element – storytelling – that contributes to our understanding of how companies maintain their organizational culture or attempt a culture change.

Defining Storytelling

The idea of storytelling is important as it relates to organizational culture because, like rites and rituals, storytelling embodies the ideals and components of the organization’s culture. Stories serve as a means of transmitting information about not only the culture, but also the roles of individuals in that culture. Stories are and become many things. They can easily be the artifacts of an organization (for example, the story of the history of an organization can be viewed as an artifact of that company’s past). They convey the meaning of the culture or they can be used to describe a changing culture. There is an interdependency between organizational culture and storytelling. As stories relate the culture, the culture also fosters stories.

As Kotter (1996) states, repetition of stories, especially those associated with the vision of the company, ensures that the cultural message is kept alive:

The most carefully crafted messages rarely sink deeply into the recipient’s consciousness after only one pronouncement. Our minds are too cluttered, and any communication has to fight hundreds of other ideas for attention. In addition, a single airing won’t address all the questions we have. As a result, effective information transfer almost always relies on repetition. (p. 94)

For Howard Gardner (1995), storytelling is so compelling, that it is a means of perpetuating the myths and images of heroes in organizations, cultures, and social groups. So provocative is the concept of storytelling that he says that stories are “uniquely powerful currency” in terms of our relationships with one another. “Many scholars have pondered whether the essence of the story is the existence of a sympathetic protagonist, the positing of plans and goals, the onset of a crisis of tension in an audience member, or the creation of a distinctive narrational voice” (p. 42).

However, reliance on stories as a means of information transmittal may have drawbacks. Yukl (1989) cautions that stories, myths, and legends must be carefully crafted and conveyed. “The potential use of this mechanism may be quite limited for leaders of business organizations. A story that is ambiguous does not communicate clear values, and one that is obviously fabricated may backfire” (p. 215).

Campbell (1988) also relates the importance of stories and myths to cultures. A sense of “belongingness” occurs with tales. “The main motifs of the myths are the same,” says Campbell, “and they have always been the same. If you want to find your own mythology, the key is with what society do you associate? Every mythology has grown up in a certain society in a bounded field. Then they come into collision and relationship, and they amalgamate, and you get a more complex mythology” (p. 27). In other words the stories themselves not only become part of the culture, but can begin to define it as well.

Cultures of all kinds, whether that of a for-profit organization or an anthropological one, have an innate need and desire to tell stories. They become the cultural icons of past exploits as well as a venue for passing along the values and norms

of that culture to new members or successive generations. As Morgan (1989) states, “every organization has its own stories to tell. These communicate its origin, style, and core values, as well as juicy tidbits that can lend color and life to daily routine” (p. 159).

Stories are so vital to the discussion of organizational culture, that Deal and Kennedy (2000) make it a critical piece to the very definition of organizational culture. Those who actually perpetuate the stories – storytellers – possess an almost omnipotent status. These “storytellers are in a powerful position because they can change reality. Storytellers simply interpret what goes on in the company – but to suit their own perceptions” (p. 87).

For example, Ginger Graham (2002), CEO of Advanced Cardiovascular Systems, uses stories to enhance the company’s culture by emphasizing honesty in dealings with peers, customers, vendors, etc. “First, we tell and retell vivid stories about the most difficult, defining moments in our company’s history. Second, we have created shared experiences that solidify our culture of honesty. Working in tandem, these two devices help set and reinforce cultural norms” (p. 45).

David Armstrong (1992), in his insightfully titled work, *Managing by Storying Around*, points out that effective stories are those that have a moral and give employees direction as to how to act or not act. In his own company, he relates:

We have found stories to be so effective; they’ve replaced our policy manual...Storytelling is a much simpler and more effective way to manage. I don’t have to make thousands of individual decisions – Is it okay to have a drink during a company dinner? How about charging an in-room movie to the hotel room during a company trip?...The story gives people our guidelines, and then it is up to them. Storytelling promotes self-management. (p. 11)

But stories are more than mere informal policy statements. “They comfort, reassure, and offer direction and hope...They perpetuate values and keep the historical exploits of heroes and heroines alive” (Bolman & Deal, 1997, p. 221). In addition:

Stories are a key medium for communicating corporate myths. They establish and perpetuate tradition. They are recalled and embellished in formal meetings and informal coffee breaks. They convey the value and identity of the organization to insiders and outsiders, thereby building confidence and support...Stories can communicate the success of a good program – or obscure the failure of a bad one. (p. 222)

Along this line, for the practitioner, stories bring into scope the broad nature of culture. As members of a group learn about the organization that they are a part of, they discover it through stories. In other words, “beliefs and assumptions form about daily life, how to get along with the boss, what kind of attitude one should have toward customers, the nature of the career in the organization, what it takes to get ahead, what the sacred cows are, and so on” (Schein, 1999, p. 26).

The stories that are told can clearly influence culture. For example, while examining organizations such as TDIndustries, The U.S. Coast Guard, and AES Corporation, Haasen and Shea (2003) noted a commonality among these three entities and the stories that were told. The stories spread among the organizations were “that people’s personal growth and professional development is a definite priority, above and beyond the missions, goals, and successes of these organizations. This sense of human worth, providing opportunities and meaning for people’s work lives, will be reciprocated by the enormous commitment of the employees, establishing strong cultural bonds to the organization for which they work” (p. 77).

Storytelling is critical to maintain and even change a culture. For businesses, it is important to not only understand the role of storytelling, but also how to tell a good story.

Even *Harvard Business Review* includes articles suggesting how executives can learn to tell stories. For executives, various scenarios of the future of the business are important for everyone in the company to understand. And often stories from the past can help reinforce this future vision. “So, if a businessperson understands that his or her own mind naturally wants to frame experience in a story, the key to moving an audience is not to resist this impulse but to embrace it by telling a good story” (McKee, 2003, p. 52).

For the purpose of this review of the literature, the focus is on organizational storytelling. The key here is that a story, in its broadest sense, could be folklore or more simply, a metaphor. However, the purpose of my dissertation is to examine those stories told specifically in organizational settings that facilitate either a change in the culture or it helps in maintaining the existing organizational culture.

Boje (2001), for example, notes that there is a distinct difference between story, narrative, and antenarrative when related in an organization. For him, “story resists narrative; story is antenarrative and on occasion even anti-narrative (a refusal to be coherent). The folk of organizations inhabit storytelling spaces outside plot, not tidy and rationalized narrative spaces” (p. 2). Similarly, “stories are ‘antenarrative’ when told without the proper plot sequence and mediated coherence preferred in narrative theory. These are stories that are too unconstructed and fragmented to be captured by retrospective sensemaking” (p. 3).

Gabriel (2000) is careful with his definition of storytelling, noting that “narrative is not story, nor are stories characters in a larger narrative” (p. 239). Rather, they are “special, fragile, and valuable webs of narrative” (p. 239). His full definition is:

Stories are narratives with plots and characters, generating emotion in narrator and audience, through a poetic elaboration of symbolic material.

This material may be a product of fantasy or experience, including an experience of earlier narratives. Story plots entail conflicts, predicaments, trials, coincidences, and crises that call for choices, decisions, actions, and interactions, whose actual outcomes are often at odds with the characters' intentions and purposes. (p. 239)

Others are more specific with their definition, seeing a sense of finality to the story. Czarniawska-Joerges (1992) states that "a story consists of a plot comprising causally related episodes that culminate in a solution to a problem" (p. 78).

But Gabriel (2004) points out that defining storytelling is not an easy task.

Researchers struggle with the words used to describe *story*:

As often happens, the appropriation of concepts like texts, narratives, and stories by discourses that had previously been oblivious to their existence...has led to definitional difficulties and debates as to their precise meanings and boundaries. It seems to me that premature definitions tend to destroy possibilities and foreclose exploration. On the other hand, excessive definitional laxness, where 'text,' 'narrative,' and 'story' are used almost interchangeably, inhibits communication and understanding. (p. 2)

Based upon the literature just examined, one can take this information and begin to craft a definition of storytelling. The definition that emerges is that stories are narratives that include plot, characters, and emotions while conveying some meaning. As Gabriel notes above, that meaning can be interpreted numerous ways. The point is that the conveyance of that meaning is initiated by the storyteller and the meaning may or may not be exactly shared by the listener – certainly, personal interpretations can be made with any story. It is this definition that will be the basis for Part III which examines research that has been conducted on storytelling in organizational settings.

Before moving on to the next section however, it is important to address the powerful nature of the story. A story in and of itself is simply a collection of words – whether written or spoken. It is the *meaning* attached to the story that becomes

significant. The connotations people associate with specific words and phrases, names used in the story, jargon, and colloquialisms unique to the organization all have a profound impact on the story. This takes a mere grouping of words to a completely different level. The words take on *meaning* and this is what makes stories so incredibly powerful.

These meanings, connotations, and associations emerge because individuals relate what they already know from prior experiences. The story then is a metaphor for things already familiar or it facilitates understanding of new ideas or concepts. Metaphors “cut to the deepest questions of what we as human beings are and how we understand our everyday world” (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999, p. 118). A metaphor is the “dreamwork of language” in that it calls for interpretation on the part of the person hearing it and the one who originates it (Davidson, 1978, p. 31). Lakoff and Johnson turn the entire concept of metaphor on its head by dispelling the major tenets of metaphor that have existed for thousands of years, even going so far as to say that Aristotle was incorrect by saying that metaphor is only poetic and rhetorical in nature. Instead, they contend that metaphor is a part of everyday language. It is something we use daily to conceptualize and reason the world around us. Moreover, they point out the dangerous aspects of metaphor. For example, some stories can be so powerful and influential that people are guided in a direction that may have moral consequences. Thus some metaphors legitimize certain power relations as being natural and therefore moral – Western culture over non-Western culture, citizens over immigrants, Christians over non-Christians, rich over poor (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999). It is this kind of influence that can make stories so powerful.

Furthermore, even organizations themselves can use storytelling in very influential ways. Top level managers in a company may choose, for example, certain stories (real or not) that give sway over lower level associates. One can easily imagine a manager telling a subordinate a story about a former employee who went counter to the boss's ideas too many times and, unfortunately, is no longer employed by the firm. The subordinate, interpreting this story, may see that contradicting the boss could result in loss of employment.

Sometimes, even innocuous events can have influential effects. For example, at 3M, a broad-based manufacturer of adhesives, abrasives, and laminates, stories are told with great frequency. They tell stories about how Post-It Notes came into existence and how masking tape was invented. These are told to employees, customers, and anyone else who is interested. They recognize that stories are central to their identity – “a habit of mind at 3M.” At awards ceremonies, as individuals are recognized within 3M, stories are told about these individuals and why their recognition is significant (Shaw, et. al., 1998). This can easily illustrate to those who did *not* receive awards what behaviors and actions are keys to success in the company, thereby influencing future behavior and actions among these individuals.

Clearly, stories in all shapes and forms assist in maintaining and changing cultures in organizations. They are a means for transferring cultural norms and expectations as well as providing a connection to the organization's past. Stories are easy to tell and understand because they have been a constant in human society for eons – it is no wonder they are powerful cultural conveyances for organizations.

PART II: Methods for Studying Organizational Culture

Now that definitions of organizational culture and storytelling have been established, we can take a look at how each has been thoroughly examined both separately and as integral concepts. Beginning with a brief historical context on organizational culture, this section specifically examines research associated with culture. The studies in this section were carefully selected because they further my understanding of the “how and why” of organizational culture. And when combined with storytelling (Part III), a clearer picture emerges on how stories facilitate the maintenance or changing of organizational culture.

It is worth noting that the *study* of organizational culture is not necessarily a recent phenomenon. Certainly, the 1970s and 1980s saw the appearance of numerous articles in the academic and practitioner press. However, researchers such as Kurt Lewin were examining “climate” and the nature of leadership as early as 1939. Lewin, along with Lippitt and White, were making generalizations about climate based upon their study of boys at an American summer camp. Essentially, it was an examination of basic leadership styles that emerge given the climate context. They did not use the phrase “organizational climate,” preferring instead to use the expression “social climates.” This study is significant from an historical standpoint because it is the first such research into the climate present within the framework of an organization – the precursor to organizational culture (Schneider, 1990).

Similarly, Rensis Likert examined climate, specifically in organizational settings. Known to many social science researchers for his “Likert Scale,” he is familiar in management circles for his “System 4” view of management (Likert, 1961). According

to Likert, the highest levels of managerial practice involve a participatory style of management (the fourth “system”), while lower levels are exploitive authoritative (system 1), benevolent authoritative (system 2), and consultative (system 3). Again, though, Likert’s analysis is centered on *climate*, and not necessarily *culture*. Using his Likert scale, researchers during the 1960s had a tool to assess attitudes, and ultimately the climates of organizations. Such studies continued through the 1970s.

By 1979, the scholarly view of climate was changing. That year, Pettigrew published “On Studying Organizational Cultures” in *Administrative Science Quarterly*. He focused his research on the creation of organizational cultures – in other words, culture is a process, not an end result. His article is significant because he is specifically addressing organizational *culture*. Pettigrew’s article did not mean that the study of organizational climate was dead. Rather, it was transformed. Schein (1985) and Hofstede (1980) were centering their works specifically on the concept of organizational culture in the 1980s, but Trice and Beyer (1993) and Denison (1996) continued to discuss “climate.” Though it should be pointed out that Denison sees *climate* and *culture* as roughly the same concept, and here in my research, organizational culture is inclusive of the climate of the firm.

This brief historical framework takes us up to the present where organizational culture remains a popular topic for researchers and practitioners alike. As the more modern studies are germane to this review of the literature, more depth will be provided for each one, particularly regarding the methodology. This is critical because it is in this chapter where a significant gap in the literature is illustrated. Certainly, case studies, ethnographies, and similar studies have been conducted; but none have used portraiture

as the methodology. As one might expect, the study of organizational culture is rooted in the research of the social sciences, namely anthropology and psychology. The methodologies associated with these disciplines are quite applicable to cultural research in organizations. Ashkanasy, Wilderom, and Peterson note that these methods “include administering surveys designed to reflect generalized concepts, conducting interviews with key informants and focus groups, observing behavior patterns, collecting artifacts, and engaging in direct interactions with organization members to develop a personal intuition for the culture” (2000, p. 7).

This review of the literature strives for representation rather than exhaustiveness. Because organizational culture is a topic so widely studied, an attempt to capture every piece of research, even those on the periphery of the subject, would make this an impossible task. Rather, representative studies will provide a keen look into the most common forms of inquiry.

When it comes to organizational culture research, qualitative forms of inquiry are much more common than quantitative and mixed methods (Ashkanasy, et. al., 2000). Ethnography, case studies, and interviews are all common forms of examining organizational culture from a qualitative perspective. In fact, research in organizational culture “has been reasonably successful in legitimating qualitative methods, renewing interest in subjective phenomena, and encouraging researchers to question their assumptions about objectivity” (Martin, 1992, p. 65). Additionally, “the emphasis on higher abstractions of organizational culture, coupled with researchers perceiving ‘either/or’ choices among methods, has led to the use of qualitative methods nearly to the exclusion of quantitative techniques” (Ashkanasy, et. al., 2000, p. 132).

Though quantitative empirical analyses are common in the study of organizational culture, qualitative studies certainly appear much more frequently in the literature. And among them, the case study is clearly the most prevalent. In this review of the literature, an attempt has been made to illustrate representative research, however, the case study methodology will be examined much more fully for two reasons: (1) it is a methodology that is omnipresent among the studies of organizational culture and (2) it is the methodology most closely related to my own research method of choice – portraiture. Obviously, case studies and portraiture are not interchangeable, but there are some important lessons that can be learned from case study research that is directly applicable to that of portraiture. Furthermore, to date, no widely circulated study of organizational culture utilizing portraiture methodology has been published, permitting a wonderful opportunity to make a significant contribution to the literature in my own research.

An excellent case study is that of Wiley and Brooks (2000). In actuality, they have three distinct case studies (banking, women’s specialty retail, and business services), and any one of them could be examined on its own. However, this pair of researchers combined all three in an attempt to make larger generalizations from three different industries rather than just one. Using a wide variety of methods of inquiry (such as employee surveys, customer surveys, “secret shoppers,” productivity measures, and sales growth), they aggregated the data to integrate all three studies. In essence, the larger study of these three distinct cases is that a taxonomy could be developed of how employees express an effective working environment. This creates a narrative description of how employees in these companies describe a successful working environment (or organizational culture). Wiley and Brooks refer to these companies as

“high-performance organizations.” Based upon their research, they were able to capture employees’ perspectives of the specific characteristics of a high-performance organization. They divide these into “leadership practices” (customer orientation, quality emphasis, etc.) and “employee results” (information/knowledge, teamwork/cooperation, etc.).

A total of eight characteristics were created and with these, the authors give greater detail of employee perceptions. As an example, under the leadership practice of “involvement/empowerment,” three descriptors are used: (1) employees have the authority and support they need to serve their customers, (2) employees are encouraged to participate in decisions affecting their work and to innovate, and (3) management solicits and uses opinions of employees in such a way that employees can see the connection. As Wiley and Brooks point out, “viewed holistically, there is a very clear sense overall of the importance of leadership and the responsibilities of communication, vision, and demonstration of priorities. This suggests that a foundation to organizational success is the ability of a senior management team to create a credible and potent sense of confidence that the organization is well led” (p. 185). Their study is notable because of the framework that is used. By examining three different organizations, they sought to find common ground among them. In portraiture, this is known as searching for *emergent themes*. As will be shown in Chapter III, the framework of my research is based upon an examination of four different for-profit companies in an attempt to identify emergent themes.

A second case study worthy of examination is one of the many conducted by Alvesson. One such study is the one he conducted of a Swedish computer consultancy

company (2002). Employing 500 employees, the firm had experienced rapid growth, high profits, low turnover, and solid financial performance. Though the author did not provide specific details on data collection, the resulting narrative does provide a window into the nature of culture in a well-performing organization. First, Alvesson noted that his research of the company identified strong values and norms (such as openness, friendship, fun, informality, and downplayed sense of hierarchy). The company made a conscious effort to recruit individuals who would share these values. Second, the company reinforced its culture by engaging in some sort of activity. "Every third month," he states, "the various units did something special, which was financed by the company: combining a conference or a training session with walking in the mountains, sailing, diving, etc." (p. 59). The idea was to create a "family atmosphere." Third, the firm had its own language that created "identity" for the employees. For example, their slogan is "fun and profit," which illustrates that though the atmosphere is exciting and laid back, a focus is still on making a financial gain. And fourth, even the design of the corporate office provided meaning and identity for employees. The office resembled more of a home than a sterile office environment. As an example, included among the office space are a sauna, kitchen, pool, television, comfortable furniture, piano bar, and so forth. Thus, the "office" consisted primarily of public space rather than specific, individual space. In this case study, Alvesson notes that this kind of culture contributes to a very low turnover among employees. It also creates a "social glue" that keeps the entire organization together while fostering an atmosphere where diverse ideas are welcome and eagerly considered.

Alvesson (2002) also conducted another case study that is worth mentioning in brief because, rather than examining an entire organization as a whole, he looked at one particular meeting in a Swedish evening newspaper office and made inferences from participants' perceptions of this meeting to form an idea of the culture of the organization. In the study, Alvesson observed 15 editors in a meeting centered around discussing invoices from the previous month and their assumed effects on daily sales. It is almost ethnographic in its approach, but he presents it as a case study replete with quotes from participants. From the statements made during the meeting, as well as jokes and sarcastic remarks, the author demonstrates that "cultural rules and orientations are communicated during the meeting" (p. 87). This study is almost a marriage of a very abbreviated ethnographic study and case study methodology. It is significant because the manner in which Alvesson presents the data is approaching that of portraiture. From the study, the reader gains an understanding of what the meeting was like in both tone and substance. In addition, the direct quotes and the manner in which they are said provides an intimate portrait of a particular event.

The fourth representative case study presented here is that of Mills, Boylstein, and Lorean (2001). The primary reason for its inclusion here is that it is one of the few studies that combine a thorough analysis of both organizational culture *and* storytelling. The authors take a close look at Saturn Corporation, the automaker based in Spring Hill, Tennessee. According to Mills, et. al.,

This study was designed to examine the Saturn Automobile Corporation's organizational culture and its relationship to media advertising campaigns. Such campaigns are integral to the creation, enactment and dissemination of Saturn's organizational culture...It is argued here that storytelling and advertisements are used by Saturn to construct a common stock of knowledge and a sense of 'community' among its internal (employees) and external (customers, suppliers,

etc.) team members. This mutually produced storytelling system creates a stage upon which story performances serve as keying mechanisms that assist in replacing individual worlds with an official, institutional reality. (pp. 117-118)

The authors, through this in-depth case study, examine storytelling and its impact on motivation, discipline, and even coercion among employees. In addition, they delve into the very structure of the organization and how messages flow among members of that organization. Through metaphors and images, Saturn creates, according to the authors, the “Saturn culture.” Again, this is a very important study for the purpose of illustrating research that combines both culture and storytelling.

Case study research is quite common in organizational culture research. And though rather frequent in the literature, it is by no means a simple research strategy. It is one of the most challenging research methods in the social sciences (Yin, 2003). Researchers must be prepared to spend considerable time and effort in crafting the initial research plan, analyzing the information, and developing the case study itself. To be effective, the researcher immerses him or herself in the setting and it relies heavily upon the researcher’s and the participants’ worldviews (Marshall and Rossman, 2006). It is not simply a matter of “writing up” a narrative. Contrary to popular belief among novice researchers, there is a significant amount of data that has to be collected before the case itself is ever written. And if adequate data collection is not done, regardless of the research goals, the design of the study, and so forth, the entire case study can be jeopardized. (Yin, 2003)

Furthermore, it can involve several research tools: “interviews, observations, document analysis, and even surveys” (Marshall and Rossman, 2006, p. 56). Researchers might use a series of cases rather than one illustrative case study. Miles and Huberman

(1994) argue that multiple cases give the researcher an opportunity to glean a deeper understanding of processes and outcomes better than a single case. For this reason, as I analyzed storytelling and its role in organizational culture in my dissertation research, I have used a series of “portraits” to identify emergent themes among four different for-profit companies. Writing about only one company would be – though insightful – very limiting in my ability to truly understand how storytelling facilitates culture changes as well as maintaining current organizational cultures.

Moving slightly away from the case study format, another piece of research is that conducted by Chreim (2006). The author, through interviews, collected information about employee perceptions of organizational change. Specifically, Chreim analyzes lower-level employees as they express retrospective views after a major organizational change in two Canadian federally chartered banks. He conducted in-depth, one-on-one interviews with 22 nonsupervisory employees who had been in the banking industry at least 10 years. These interviews were taped, transcribed, and coded. The basis for each interview was that participants were asked (in open-ended format) to identify those changes made by management in the last 10 years that had an impact upon their work. Then, they were asked to comment on those changes. From this information, Chreim identified four patterns of response: acceptance, resigned compliance, avoidance/opposition, and ambivalence. The reason for including this work here is two-fold. First, the utilization of open-ended interview questions is a tool of qualitative inquiry and thus it is fitting for this review of the literature. Second, and probably more importantly, Chreim’s efforts fill an important gap in organizational culture research. This study constructs retrospective views of major culture changes affecting lower

echelon employees; this is significant because the literature is usually replete with studies on management, and not the front-line personnel.

It must be kept in mind that the interview is simply a research tool. Certainly, Chreim could have taken the information collected and developed a case study or even developed the coding of responses further and turned this into a quantitative analysis. However, an interview, as in this example, is used to draw out information from participants in a manner that gives the researcher the ability to pursue different angles as data are collected. Some researchers see the interview as the ultimate in flexibility. Follow-up questions can be asked to probe respondents' thinking and more information about respondents can be ascertained than what is typically garnered in a formal questionnaire. (Schwab, 2005).

A skilled interviewer must listen carefully to participants and avoid projecting his or her own opinions or feelings (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, & Lowe, 1991). Obviously, when one is sitting face-to-face with an individual this can be a very difficult process. That is why interviews must be entered into with a solid framework and an ability to solicit information in a very precise way that does not introduce researcher bias. There are clear ethical implications and skilled interviewers have a good deal of practice (Marshall and Rossman, 2006). Researchers must also bear in mind that some respondents may not be as articulate and perceptive as others (Creswell, 2003). Nevertheless, it remains a commonly used method of data collection in qualitative research (Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2006).

This literature review would not be complete without an ethnographic study. The work of Scheeres and Rhodes (2006) is such a study and was conducted over a two-year

time period in a manufacturing firm. The goal was to examine how in-house training can be used to initiate culture changes while assessing its impact on employee identity. It is included here not only because it is an ethnographic study, but also because it focuses attention on one way managers can implement a *culture change* situation. With my research, there is a contention that storytelling can facilitate culture changes in the workplace. Scheers and Rhodes, through their research, contribute to this understanding. This study looks at how a medium-sized Australian manufacturing facility (“Arturo” is the pseudonym used in the study) used training techniques to implement a set of “core values” they wanted to promulgate throughout the organization. These core values are integrity, excellence, cooperation, change, and respect. The researchers spent time over the two-year period observing training sessions, talking to individuals, trying to describe emotions, and otherwise ethnographically capturing the nature of this particular culture change.

With ethnography, “the researcher tries to immerse himself or herself in a setting and to become part of the group under study in order to understand the meanings and significances that people put upon their own behavior and that of others” (Easterby-Smith, et. al., 1991, p. 38). But it should be pointed out that ethnography is not strictly based upon observation. Researchers can also examine cultural “artifacts” (Silverman, 2006). In an organization, these might include annual reports, company newsletters, documents, mission statements, and so forth. In short, ethnography is well-suited for studying organizational culture.

PART III: Methods for Studying Organizational Storytelling

Anthropologically speaking, the fireside story is as ubiquitous a part of human history as the fire itself. As we have moved from the plains and caves of prehistory to the boardrooms and conference spaces of today, the fire has been replaced by watercoolers, long tables, and closed doors. Yet, the enigmatic story has remained. Interestingly, we are probably just as animated in telling about our exploits of landing the big client as we were about slaying a particularly dangerous mastodon. Stories, in organizational settings, incite emotions, convey information, explain rites and rituals, and provide sometimes subtle clues to the norms of an organization. As in Part II, the works chosen for inclusion here provide for me a deeper understanding of the “how and why” related to stories. These studies serve as a solid foundation for my exploration of *how* stories are used and *why* they are used to maintain or change culture in for-profit companies.

Organizational culture and stories go hand in hand. Whether a leader is maintaining a strong existing culture or attempting a culture shift from a lackadaisical, mediocre one to a dynamic, initiative-taking climate, stories express the essence of the desired culture. In fact, one can hear a well-crafted story and get a fairly firm idea of what the culture of a particular organization might be. For example, after reading the following story, one can readily develop a mental picture of the working environment in this company, as well as the foreboding nature of the emerging culture shift:

The new president had called a meeting of his vice presidents at noon sharp. Only a couple of them had actually had any real conversation with him and it was going to be a chance for them to officially meet this unknown gentleman from South Carolina. They knew him by reputation only – infamous for his labor

and budget slashing. Yet, how he would manage the three men and two women reporting to him remained to be seen.

As they filed into the executive conference room, they sat at their usual seats, leaving the head of the table vacant for Bill. By 12:15pm, he had not shown and the VPs grew restless. At 12:30pm, one of them went to Bill's administrative assistant and asked her if she knew where he was. She did not.

Finally, at almost a quarter until one o'clock, Bill hurried into the room with a stack of books in his arms. He did not sit down – instead, he slid one book across the table to each VP. Actually, he threw the books. One sailed right past the VP of Marketing and hit the floor.

“Ok,” he said in his gravelly harsh voice, “you came here to find out how I manage and for me to get to know you. Well, first of all, I don't care to get to know you.” The VPs were wide-eyed and gave each other foreboding glances.

“Second,” Bill continued, “if you want to know how I manage, read the book I gave you.” It was a copy of Al Dunlap's (a.k.a., Chainsaw Al) *Mean Business*. “Read it, and decide if you still want to work here, because I manage a business just like he does.”

And that was the end of the meeting. He left as abruptly as he arrived into the room. The VPs looked at one another, raising their eyebrows in disbelief. Finally, one of them spoke. It was the VP of Human Resources. “Well,” he said, “this should be interesting.”

This story comes from an actual incident at a *Fortune 500* I encountered as a management consultant. It was told to me by one of the Vice Presidents mentioned

above who lasted about seven months before moving on to a different organization. The former VP said that he probably told the story fifty times during the seven months. It was only after he left this firm that he realized “Bill” intended it that way. Bill was attempting a culture change. The company’s sales, profits, and stock were all slipping and the new president was brought in to turn around the organization. Not all would agree that he took the most appropriate approach, but the incident became a story – told again and again. And it was emblematic of the new tougher, no-holds-barred culture that would emerge during the turn around phase.

Academic inquiry into storytelling has a rich and varied history, but it has only been in the last twenty years that it exploded into a field of study generally accepted by the academic community. Early on, storytelling was not a “legitimate” topic of exploration.

For a period in the nineteenth century, storytelling, as the object of enquiry, was of interest only to folklorists, themselves a marginal group of the scientific community, the majority of whom preferred to focus on facts rather than stories. In the twentieth century, however, an ever-increasing range of scientific disciplines started to take an interest in stories...By the end of the twentieth century, stories had made a spectacular comeback; far from being marginalized by their declared enemies, theories, information, and facts, stories suffused most popular culture and art, mass media, advertising, and journalism...Gradually academic research in every field of the human sciences would turn its attention to stories. In one of his last appearances, ‘man’ emerged as a storytelling animal, an animal whose main preoccupation is not truth or power or love or even pleasure, but meaning. (Gabriel, 2000, pp. 3-4)

With the vast number of case studies in the current literature associated with organizational storytelling, it is obvious that the evolution of acceptance has reached a point where researchers can feel confident to study the topic without fear of academic persecution or ridicule.

Again, the definition of storytelling used here is narratives that include plot, characters, and emotions while conveying some meaning. In this part of the paper, an assessment is made of ten studies used to examine organizational storytelling. Because of the nature of organizational storytelling, the vast majority of studies that have been conducted have utilized a qualitative approach. As a result, those included here are qualitative in nature. Certainly, some empirical, quantitative studies have been conducted, but since my research is qualitative in scope (portraiture), those that are comparable (case studies, observations, interviews, etc.) have been chosen to illustrate how the study of organizational storytelling can be approached.

Careful attention has been paid to case studies and observations as these methods appear with great frequency in the literature. Consequently, four representative examples of each are included here. Interviews also occur with some regularity and two are illustrated. As in Part II, the attempt here is to be illustrative with examples rather than exhaustive. Furthermore, each method includes a critique regarding its applicability specifically to organizational storytelling. All of these studies lend some insight into the type of research have conducted. Portraiture is a qualitative form of inquiry that uses interviews and observations to craft portraits and these research examples are illustrative in that they show how these two data collection methods can be used effectively.

One of the most common methods of research in the literature concerning organizational storytelling is the case study. And this is not just happenstance. The case study lends itself well to capturing the essence of storytelling as the case study is, in a sense, a “story.” There are so many subtle nuances associated with organizational storytelling, that a case study allows the researcher to present the information in a format

that is easy to explain and comprehend. What follows are four representative case studies that showcase how this method of inquiry can be utilized to examine organizational storytelling.

Gabriel (2000) presents an interesting case study where he takes a look at a single incident that occurs in a research and publishing organization. From this incident (a pressurized fire extinguisher that has exploded), four stories emerged from four different people who each had their own interpretation of the event. One, Raymond, relates the event in a very detached form, presenting only the facts of the “accident.” Another, Maureen, viewed it as a “personal attack” on her by someone in management. Chris, on the other hand, interpreted the incident in terms of those who kept their cool and those who did not. And finally, Peter assessed blame and fantasized about how the event could be carried out differently the next time. Gabriel assesses these four retellings of the event and notes that Raymond’s is actually not a story, but “facts-as-information.” The other three, though, are “facts-as-experience.” These three individuals provided meaning to the incident through their interpretations. This is key for Gabriel because through these interpretations, attributions are made by storytellers that instill meaning or provide connections to the various parts of the stories. Furthermore, Gabriel’s study is analytical in nature – he is illustrating what the stories say about the organization. Though this study is not directly associated with organizational culture, it does illustrate how meaning from a story is interpreted by employees of an organization. This of course, does give insight into the culture of the organization.

Another case study is that conducted by Czarniawska-Joerges (2004). Hers is a longitudinal study that examines the image of the Swedish public sector from the 1960s

to the 1990s. In this case study, her constructivist approach is to demonstrate that an organization is not a “person” – rather, it is “sets of collective action” that shape the people involved. In other words, Czarniawska-Joerges uses a metaphor throughout that the organization is actually a “superperson.” Basing this study on interviews and observations, the researcher demonstrates how the image of “the government” has changed over several decades. In addition, she shows that the image has been manipulated through modeling of the private sector. Once vilified for its greed, at one key turning point those in the Swedish government realized that private enterprises had a good system that could be emulated with great success. What makes this particular case study noteworthy is that the researcher focuses the attention on identity through metaphors and even an examination of rhetoric used by politicians. For example, she takes an article from a Swedish daily newspaper and examines, sentence by sentence, the rhetoric employed by politicians and even the paper itself in capturing the identity of the government. It is through this and similar analyses, that she arrives at a “story” of the Swedish public sector through nearly three decades. Obviously, the scope of my research is not as ambitious with regard to the time frames analyzed. My portraits, though with some historical contexts, are more snapshots of the selected companies. Each portrait is crafted in such a way that the reader begins to understand the current culture and how that culture is affected through storytelling.

Mats Alvesson is another researcher who has examined both organizational storytelling as well as organizational culture. One case study in particular, written with Hugh Willmott (2004), illustrates storytelling at an industrial company. Like Czarniawska-Joerges, Alvesson and Willmott were taking a look at identity within the

framework of an organization and what “story” emerges among participants. Their case study, though very brief, demonstrates how top management can impart “identity” among managers through their speech and vocabulary. In other words, though top management used “we” liberally during a presentation to middle managers, it was still clear that an autocratic decision had been made at the top of the organization on how the team would be reorganized. Alvesson and Willmott used interviews with participants to determine what “story” they garnered from various meetings. Though participants indicated that the gulf between themselves and top management was still obvious, they did agree that this situation was nothing new! Therefore, again, the language used by key individuals within an organization permeates the story despite what connotations are associated with the actual words. This language is essential to understanding organizational culture. The words selected for stories are chosen carefully to embody the culture and this study serves as a good example of how my research can take a look at the nuanced language used to tell organizational stories. With both Alvesson’s work and Czarniawska-Joerges’ case study, their studies differ from Gabriel’s in that they try to *find* the story, whereas Gabriel examines the story itself.

A final illustrative case study is that of Denning (2005). This case study is unique because Denning takes a first person approach in describing his own story with the World Bank. In an attempt to integrate knowledge sharing within the organization, he ran into many hurdles because the infrastructure simply did not exist that would permit such a “radical” concept in 1996. However, by 2000, everything was in place to achieve this massive change. His case study explores the storytelling aspect of instituting change within a change-resistant organization. In addition, his case study illustrates a very

important point about organizational storytelling. He notes that despite attempting to collect stories and capture them in written form or try to record them on video, they just did not have the same positive impact as those told orally. This is a key concept of storytelling and will be explored in length in my dissertation. Along that lines, this case study was chosen *because* it is written in first person and has a *portraiture-esque* feel about it. It is quite a departure from many of the more scholarly case studies typically encountered.

The case study, as mentioned already, is quite common among works in the storytelling literature. It is well-suited to storytelling as a qualitative form of inquiry, but there are of course some cautions that researchers must keep in mind. Part II of this literature review looked at the case study approach in examining organizational culture. The same merits and pitfalls associated with the case study in organizational culture research also apply to storytelling. However, there are some other points we can add to this discussion. First, the case study is such a common methodology because it can encompass many different approaches in its presentation of the data. For example, it would be simple to view case study research as a form of inquiry unto itself, but it is actually a method that enables the researcher to showcase his or her findings in a narrative format – regardless of whether the data was collected through interviews, observations, surveys, or other methods.

It should be pointed out, though, that some researchers are not as keen on the case study as a methodology. Boje (2001) states that “to go beyond the overused case approaches, be they comparative, functionalist or structuralist raises an important challenge. Cases, dare I say are ‘elitist’ protocols that disparage and ridicule the ill-

formed and fragmented non-retrospective story” (p. 8). The case study is quite prevalent in the literature associated with organizational storytelling and this method, at least for me, is an excellent methodology for comparison with portraiture. Though the two are not synonymous, they are analogous and some of the same challenges that exist for case study research also is present for portraiture.

Another form of qualitative inquiry that is quite common among studies of organizational storytelling is the method of observation. As with case studies, I have selected four representative studies that showcase various aspects of an observation-based study. This method of study places the researcher *in* the organization where he or she makes both obvious and subtle observations about participants. It is a way of collecting stories that permits the researcher to collect them within the framework of the organization.

The study by Schultz (1991) is an intriguing one because the researcher was firmly planted inside the offices of a department of the Danish ministry. Schultz observed ten managers in their offices, meeting rooms, and even the hallway. This researcher crafted a “story” of how these managers behave within the confines of their organizational space. When various points of crisis emerge, Schultz notes how the pace of these participants picks up or slows down once the crisis has passed. Even the gestures and facial expressions are captured in the story. The key to this study is the attachment of symbolism to these behaviors and actions. According to Schultz, the symbolic domain of the offices frames the behaviors of those within.

A second observation study is classic in the literature on organizations. Schwartzman (1993) examined meetings at a community health center. For her, the

meeting itself is an important venue for communication. Thus, those sitting around a large conference table convey meaning about the organization and make their own interpretations of how they fit within that organization. They tell stories of accomplishments, problems within the organization, and so forth. Her observations about these stories and metaphors related in meetings are important because before this study was conducted, observations of organizational meetings were largely overlooked.

Third, Boje (1991) examined over an eight-month period what he termed “story performance” in an office supply firm. He defines it as “an exchange between two or more persons during which a past or anticipated experience was being referenced, recounted, interpreted, or challenged” (p. 108). In this study, Boje was a participant-observer and he collected over 100 hours of tape recordings and video recordings in addition to extensive field notes. He followed seven executives and twenty-three managers, customers, and vendors. These observations took place in offices, meeting rooms, restaurants, corridors, and even automobiles. From the tapes, he transcribed the words and converted them to line-numbered transcripts. Then, from these, he searched for evidence of story performance. Each of these observations were then entered into ETHNOGRAPH, a computer program which isolates and catalogs various occurrences of stories. From this information, Boje discerned several key points. First, stories do not have to be lengthy discourses. In fact, some are quite short, encompassing barely a sentence or two. Second, those hearing a story fill in gaps (“you know the rest of the story,” for example). Thus, there obviously can be multiple interpretations of the same story. Third, and probably most important, Boje emphasizes that first-person, *in situ* observation is important when understanding organizational storytelling. Though there

may be some element of researcher bias, first-hand recording of stories is preferable, according to Boje, to collecting “texts” of stories away from the natural setting of the organizational environment. It is this last point that prompted me to include this particular study in my literature review. When examining the for-profit organizations for my dissertation, part of my role was to serve as an observer in crafting portraits of each firm’s storytelling phenomena. Boje’s study provides a sufficient model for understanding the observer’s role in conducting organizational research.

The fourth and final representative observation study deviates somewhat from traditional examples. Dougherty and Kunda (1990) made their observations of corporate photographs. Rather than observing stories that are verbally told within the confines of an office building, they set out to see what stories companies tell through the pictures they use; in this case, the annual reports of five computer equipment manufacturers. Examining 425 different photos, they made observations regarding whether or not the photos were taken inside or outdoors, the gender and ethnicity of subjects, the type of work portrayed, and so forth. From these, they concluded that these firms intentionally chose those photographs to include in annual reports that reflect the image these companies wished to convey. As stated in the Part I of this review, annual reports and other documents are essentially artifacts of an organization. What Dougherty and Kunda did was to conduct detailed observations regarding the photographic artifacts of these firms. From these, a story emerges regarding corporate identity and the projection of that identity. This study is essential to my research efforts because it is a valid reminder that the culture of an organization permeates throughout the firm. When conducting the pilot study of Candle-lite, I noticed many items inside the plant that, though not spoken orally,

conveyed much about the company's attempts to affect a culture change. Most notably, the measurement boards the company used spoke volumes about what was now important to the organization's success and to its culture.

Case study research, mentioned already, often relies heavily upon observations. It is an anthropological approach that is well-suited for organizational research. "This role requires the researcher to reveal their identity in the setting, but the extent to which the researcher actively engages with the members of the setting is limited" (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006, p. 249). However, it is not as straightforward as it may at first seem. With regard to observation methods,

It is clear, though, that such studies are limited to two situations: a lucky access situation or a working place that does not require particular qualifications. But even the latter requires some luck or special dispositions...One needs time, and this is a serious impediment to organization studies – much more serious than the need for money. (Czarniawska-Joerges, 1992, p. 197)

In addition to the time factor, the person conducting the research may be viewed as intrusive, occasionally very personal information may be collected that cannot be reported, the researcher may not gain sufficient rapport with participants, and of course, the researcher may simply be a poor observer (Creswell, 2003). If, though, the researcher is properly trained and aware of the limitations of observation research, he or she is often able to garner key information that is helpful in understanding organizations' cultures as well as the stories told within them.

The interview is a third common approach to examining organizational storytelling and for good reason – an interview allows the researcher an opportunity to *hear* a participant's story firsthand. In addition, the interview goes beyond observation in that the researcher can seek clarification, ask for a different example, solicit responses as

to thoughts and feelings, and so on. Obviously, the researcher must be very cautious that he or she does not unduly influence participants in any way or permits bias from entering the study based upon the line of questioning. Two representative studies have been selected to illustrate the effectiveness of the interview as a qualitative method of inquiry.

The first such example is an early one described by Jones (1996). In Alan Wilkin's unpublished dissertation from 1979, a study was conducted of two companies and how stories within those organizations portrayed management philosophy as well as employees' understanding of those organizational values. Wilkins began his interviews by informing each participant that he was looking for stories that most people in the organization would be familiar with – whether of a positive or negative nature. He then asked for participants to pretend Wilkins was interested in joining the firm and what stories would they choose to tell in order to give him an idea about the culture of the organization. Next, he asked participants to pretend he was a coworker and what stories would they share if they were idly chatting. He permitted these interviews to last only 25 minutes for each of the two scenarios. The 50-minute sessions were recorded using a tape recorder, and at the conclusion of the scenario interviews, Wilkins asked the participants how they learned of the stories, when was the last time they had heard/told the stories, and if the participant knew personally those involved in the stories. From these, Wilkins was able to collect 644 stories from 80 different interviews. These stories provided a framework of describing the culture of the two organizations. And that is why this study is included here – it is directly applicable to my dissertation work in that it uses stories to make inferences regarding the organizational culture of a for-profit firm.

Similarly, Gabriel (2000) describes some of his early research from 1992 where he also looked at the relationship between stories and organizational culture. After contacting ten different organizations in Britain, five (manufacturing, research & publishing, privatized utilities, hospital, and university consultancy) responded favorably and permitted him to inquire about stories concerning computers and machines. For Gabriel, this type of inquiry was far easier than attempting a general “intrusion” to collect any kind of story. Now participating companies had a firmer grasp of what he was trying to accomplish. From these organizations, Gabriel and his associate conducted interviews with 130 individuals, which generated 404 stories. These were then transcribed and entered into a software program, CARDBOX-PLUS. This software provided a means of recording key information about each story and allowed the researcher to sort stories based on common elements. Gabriel discovered that in many cases it was fairly straightforward to classify the stories (comic, epic, tragic, and romantic), but some simply did not fit quite so easily, so they became labeled as gripes, traumas, and practical jokes. This study makes an important contribution to the literature because it is a solid attempt to collect stories through interviews and it provides an analysis as to how stories can be typed, themes that emerge (obviously, very important in portraiture methodology), the nature of the storyteller, and some examination of the emotions involved in storytelling. In short, this type of study, like Wilkins’, provides a firm starting point for my own research where interviews were an integral part of the discovery process.

The interview is a method that when the researcher is proficient with its nuances and application, wonderful data can emerge. After all, with observation, the researcher is somewhat in the “background,” but with an interview, the researcher can get to the why,

how, when, where, and who of the events noted. In other words, the researcher can be more directive in seeking out clarifications and gaining understanding of what a participant truly means. However, the interview does have certain limitations. The researcher must keep in mind that the information provided by participants is filtered, the interview may take place in a setting away from the natural environment the participant is familiar with, the very presence of the researcher can easily bias responses, and certainly, some participants may not be as articulate as others (Creswell, 2003). For my own research into storytelling and organizational culture, the interview was an important facet of the data collection. Numerous interviews were held to garner the kind of data I needed to craft applicable portraits of these organizations. The studies presented here provide both models and a keener understanding of the limitations of interview research.

PART IV: Conclusions and Questions Drawn from the Literature

The 23 studies presented here (13 on organizational culture and 10 on organizational storytelling) are illustrative examples in their fields of study. Based on a review of these works, certain conclusions were drawn that facilitated my own research into the organizational culture/storytelling phenomena. First, the study of these concepts is not easy. Some approaches to the study of culture, for example, are quite complex. The study of the role of storytelling and organizational culture is one that requires careful planning and an attention to keen details.

Second, these studies clearly show an overlap in the topics of culture and stories. Like Gabriel, Boje, and Czarniawska-Joerges, I have attempted here to bridge the two concepts – showing how there is a symbiotic relationship between stories and culture. As I began to craft portraits of four for-profit organizations, I based those portraits on how

stories are integral to the changing and maintaining of organizational cultures. The works of the authors have already provided me with a solid foundation in organizational research.

Third, it is obvious in this kind of study that researcher bias is a very real threat. Whether as an observer or interviewer, the very presence of the researcher can unduly influence participants' reactions, responses, and emotions. It is something I did not treat lightly in my research methodology planning process. Questions were carefully worded, my role as observer was understood by all, and my interpretations of the data collected were determined with a strict understanding of the context within which the data were garnered. In short, a casual approach did not suffice – only a diligent, well-prepared research strategy worked appropriately. With portraiture, *voice* is a critical component. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) recognizes that researcher bias can enter the work, but even though the portraitist frames the study, the voice of the researcher must be kept in check. In other words, the portraitist's voice is "a premeditated one, restrained, disciplined, and carefully controlled. Her voice never overshadows the actors' voices. The actors sing the solo lines, the portraitist supporting their efforts at articulation, insight, and expressiveness" (p. 85). Furthermore, *bias* itself has to be fully understood. Hans-Georg Gadamer argues that bias cannot be completely eliminated. According to Gadamer, our understanding of our experiences and our world actually depends upon having some sort of prejudgment – or bias. The key is for us to reflect on our biases and distinguish between that which is enabling or disabling (Schwandt, 1997). For me, with my decade and a half of experience in the corporate environment, I obviously had some

preconceived ideas about *any* for-profit company I entered. My goal has been to ensure that all my biases are enabling, and not disabling, as Gadamer would suggest.

And fourth, there is no *one best way* to approach the study of either organizational culture or storytelling. Illustrated within this literature review are many examples. Therefore, there is sufficient precedence to permit me to utilize portraiture as a form of inquiry into these concepts. The vast number of studies, books, and journal articles indicates that there remains room for additional study into these areas.

And this brings us to a couple of interesting questions that can also be gleaned from this review. First, *how applicable is portraiture to the study of organizational culture and storytelling?* From my research into this methodology, it is clear that this is a methodology that can readily be applied. The identification of emergent themes is central to portraiture, and that is precisely what I have done in Chapter V. In addition, if one makes comparisons to case studies or observations, it is not a large leap at all to see how portraiture can be utilized. A second question that also becomes apparent is *why has portraiture not been applied before to these concepts?* In truth, storytelling as a topic has been examined with portraiture. In fact, virtually all portraits have an element of storytelling in them just by the nature of the process. However, portraiture has not been found (at least at the time of this writing) to be used in an examination of organizational culture. That is how this study provides a contribution to the literature because it is the first time portraiture has been systematically applied to the study of organizational culture.

The study of organizational culture and storytelling is crucial to our understanding of the inner workings of organizations. Stories are told on a daily basis – often, many

times each day. And the culture of an organization is an omnipresent, sometimes tangible, often subtly nuanced concept that permeates the working lives of the employees within. This review examined only a fraction of the studies that have been conducted in these areas. Many more are yet to appear in the literature. Perhaps soon, even my studies into organizational culture and storytelling will be cited as a classic example of analysis by a future generation of researchers.

Chapter III: Methodology

In her Introduction to *The Art and Science of Portraiture*, Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) state that portraiture is...

...a genre of inquiry and representation that seeks to join science and art. Portraiture is a method of qualitative research that blurs the boundaries of aesthetics and empiricism in an effort to capture the complexity, dynamics, and subtlety of human experience and organizational life. Portraitists seek to record and interpret the perspectives and experience of the people they are studying, documenting their voices and their visions – their authority, knowledge, and wisdom. The drawing of the portrait is placed in social and cultural context and shaped through dialogue between the portraitist and the subject, each one negotiating the discourse and shaping the evolving image. The relationship between the two is rich with meaning and resonance and becomes the arena for navigating the empirical, aesthetic, and ethical dimensions of authentic and compelling narrative. (p. xv)

Essentially, portraiture is an attempt to “paint” with words the subject of a study.

The reader of the study begins to “feel” not only the research itself but engages in an almost empathetic association with researcher and participant. This is accomplished through narrative that goes far beyond a mere case study – it is complex, and superficially is almost like a tale. The reader feels many of the research nuances that are either never shared, or merely alluded to, in traditional research methods.

Portraiture then is the chosen methodology for the dissertation, but it is important to point out that it was not selected solely on the basis of convenience or my own predilections toward it. Rather, given the subject, it is truly an ideal methodology to explore the fine traces of culture and stories and ultimately, using the terminology of portraiture, to identify the “emergent themes” of the research. Furthermore, the method has as its roots in ethnography and phenomenology. By taking these forms of inquiry to the next level in narrative, thick descriptions can be achieved that bring us to a new understanding of *how* and *why* stories are used to maintain and change culture.

What is portraiture? Portraiture is a qualitative research methodology that seamlessly blends the context of the participant or site with the researcher's own relationship to the subject, context, and voice while uncovering underlying themes. Emerging from phenomenology, case studies, and ethnography, portraiture captures the aesthetic whole – the essence and subtle nuances – of the research interest.

The process of gathering data when using portraiture relies heavily upon interviews and observations. Portraitists craft their work based upon a series of meetings with participants as well as observations of the surroundings of those participants. Lawrence-Lightfoot calls this moving from the *outside in*, where the portrait takes in everything from a macro level and carefully directs the research inward to the fundamentals of *how* and *why*.

Observation is certainly a key data collection tool in portraiture. Here, the researcher makes notes about the behaviors and activities seen at a research site (Creswell, 2003). However, observation can also include an examination of the artifacts used by individuals (Marshall and Rossman, 2006). Whether setting, people, or the objects they use, information gathered from observation is recorded in field notes. These notes often provide far more information than will ever be used in the actual portrait (Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis, 1997). But, this information when gathered over time provides a firm grounding for the researcher to identify what may be significant. Typically, the researcher begins observational studies from a very broad perspective with no predetermined categorization or specific checklist. This permits the researcher to discover repeat behaviors and patterns. Once these are identified, subsequent

observations are much more focused in an attempt to explain behaviors and relationships (Marshall and Rossman, 2006).

The portraits that were ultimately created in my research used observations of the organizations and the artifacts within. My notes included many descriptors of such things as architecture, office décor, what participants were wearing, what the company chose to post on employee bulletin boards, and even what the parking lot was like upon driving up to the site for the first time. Though much of this information does not appear in the portraits directly, it did facilitate my understanding of the organizations that so generously permitted me to enter as the outsider.

Interviews, for portraitists, are perhaps the most common data collection tool. As Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis state, portraitists listen *for* a story rather than *to* a story. This is very important. If a researcher is just wishing to record a story, then it is simply transcribed word for word, with little interaction at all from the researcher. However, portraiture requires that the researcher become a much more active listener. Probing questions get to the *how* and *why*, while looking for dissonant threads.

By its very nature, portraiture uses an unstructured interview format. In an empirical study, one might ask every participant the exact same question in the exact same manner. This is appropriate when trying to code the responses and make inferences from the aggregated data. Portraiture though requires that the interviewer look for subtle nuances – the vague, almost indiscernible nugget of information that might be overlooked or lost if the researcher is not open to discovering it. An interview is not something that should be entered into lightly. It is not simply a matter of tossing out a question or two and seeing how the participant responds. In fact, interview data collection is actually

quite difficult and requires effort and practice on the part of the interviewer (Willis, 2007).

The pilot study I conducted of Candle-lite gave me extensive practice interviewing as has other research I have engaged in over the years. These provided me with a firm grounding of interviewing that made the data collection process a smoother effort. Still, there were specific interviewing factors that were key to this research. First, an establishment of rapport and trust had to be established. Had I not spent considerable time on the phone and in the offices of the participants before the first data collection question was ever asked, I never would have garnered the kind of information needed to fulfill this research. Second, the questions moved from the broad to the narrow as the interviews progressed. My first interview with a participant might paint a very broad stroke of the organization. But subsequent interviews delved deeper into how the participant *interpreted* the culture of the organization or *why* they chose to relate the stories they ultimately did. Third, during my interviews I made careful notes not only of the words spoken by the participant, but how they were said, the participant's body language, and the setting in which the interview took place. Obviously, this gave me far more information than what is included in the four portraits, but it was necessary for me to craft accurate and rich portraits. And finally, my approach to the interview was to keep the participant comfortable throughout the process. Therefore, I chose not to videotape or record audibly each interview. Instead, I made copious field notes that were later used to craft the portraits.

For the purpose of this study, four companies of varying size and type were selected. The basis for selection was my ability to enter the company as a researcher –

after all, some firms are not amenable to an “outsider” exploring the culture of the organization. Also, companies that readily acknowledged the use of storytelling as part of their culture was a critical criteria. One firm, Candle-lite, had already opened its doors to my research as a pilot study. Therefore, three other companies had to be chosen and contacted for my dissertation research.

With four distinct portraits, the emergent themes were identified and are presented in Chapter V. This is important because these themes give substance to the data. A mere description of each company would be just that: an analysis. But in shaping and interpreting the data, patterns emerge and as Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot states, the metaphors are illuminated.

It is interesting to note that the methodology chosen is rare for a business-related application. As pointed out in the literature review, a researcher is hard pressed to find the use of portraiture in organizational research. Therefore, this dissertation is an opportunity to contribute not only to the literature on culture and storytelling, but is also an important contribution to the literature on the application of portraiture.

Participants

When I first crafted my proposal for this dissertation, I had four very specific firms in mind: Candle-lite, Cintas, Skyline Chili, and Total Quality Logistics. However, once the proposal was approved and I began my research, a very unfortunate turn of events occurred. My three contact personnel at one of the participating companies, Total Quality Logistics (TQL), were no longer employed by the firm. Thus, my entrée into this organization was blocked. This resulted in a quick scramble to find a suitable replacement. As I poured through my various contacts of area organizations, National

Bank & Trust seemed like a viable candidate for inclusion in this research. They are currently going through a culture change and recently brought on a new CEO. My contact was the Vice President of Asset Management and he permitted my entry into the firm and graciously agreed to provide data support for this study. More about each of these firms and why they were chosen will be presented below.

Obviously, the Ethics Application and Review process was dutifully followed. The Appendices include the IRB application as well as the consent form and the cover letter accompanying it. In all cases, except for three participants with National Bank & Trust, each person interviewed granted permission to use their name and job title in the research. Therefore, again with exception of the three individuals just mentioned, all the participants' actual names and job titles appear in this study.

One participating firm, Candle-lite, a manufacturer of candles, opened their doors early on in my research as I looked at how storytelling was interrelated to the change in their organizational culture. Originally, this piece was written as a case study, however, it was modified to become a portrait of this interesting company and their struggles to change a century-old culture in just a short time in order to become competitive with overseas organizations.

The other three firms are Cintas, National Bank & Trust (NB&T), and Skyline Chili. Cintas is a *Fortune 1000* diversified firm that is in the business-to-business arena of uniforms, safety equipment, sanitizing, and floor mats. They are based in Cincinnati, Ohio and their portrait showcases well how a very large corporation makes extensive use of storytelling in attempting to maintain their very tight-knit organizational culture. NB&T, as already mentioned, is in the process of going through a culture change. A

newly arrived CEO has had a profound impact on the culture of the organization and stories abound regarding this evolving culture. Finally, I wanted to include a very small organization that had fewer employees to examine how stories and culture relate.

Therefore, a franchise of Skyline Chili located in Wilmington, Ohio was chosen to illustrate two facets: (1) how a small organization of fewer than 30 employees fits into such a study and (2) how a firm operating as a franchise might be influenced through a distant corporate office.

Thus, looking at these four firms, a broad base of organizational cultures emerges. Skyline Chili represents a very small organization attempting to maintain a laid-back, very communicative culture. Cintas is a much larger, *Fortune 1000*, firm that has a decades-old culture it strives systematically to maintain. While these first two companies illustrate organizations attempting to keep a culture in place, the other two involve change. NB&T is a company currently going through a culture change. It is an evolving story. Candle-lite, on the hand, has recently gone through their culture change and the portrait demonstrates the effectiveness of stories told during those recent events in its history. This is also the order in which they are presented in Chapter IV: Skyline (small firm maintaining its culture), Cintas (very large firm maintaining its culture), NB&T (a company currently going through a culture change), and Candle-lite (an organization that has changed its culture).

All four of these firms provide uniqueness in their scope, but they are all for-profit companies that permit some general conclusions to be drawn about the nature of storytelling and its use in maintaining and changing organizational culture. The next

section describes the portraiture process as well as how emergent themes were identified and described.

The Portraiture Process

Portraiture is an intriguing methodology that lends itself well to the storytelling/culture topic. It is also a relatively new form of qualitative inquiry, being only approximately 30 years old. Nevertheless, it has been used with increasing frequency in the social sciences. In the field of business research, however, it is virtually nonexistent. This is an important component of this particular research because it introduces a methodology that has been relatively untouched among management scientists.

If one were to attempt to describe portraiture in linear fashion, a step-by-step process might look something like this:

1. Ascertain and describe context
2. Express voice
3. Identify relationships
4. Search for and describe emergent themes

Of course, portraiture is much more than this. There are aesthetic aspects to portraits. According to Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997), just as an artist takes lines and shadows to express form, the portraitist uses descriptors and details to craft narratives that, ultimately have meaning and from which emergent themes can be identified. There are so many nuances associated with participants, environment, processes, and even researchers themselves. These four “steps” are briefly described here.

Context

The context of a portrait sets the stage. It prepares the reader for what is to come and illustrates the setting of the study. Like an archaeologist who meticulously describes the geological and cultural layers surrounding an artifact *in situ*, the portraitist has a responsibility to the research to accurately describe the context of the study. As Davis (2003) points out, “research portraitists choose well what to include in an introduction to a portrait to set the stage for what will follow. The palette from which the researcher constructs an introduction is made up of selected pieces of information reviewed carefully with an eye to an understanding of the environment in which the site functions” (pp. 201-202).

In other words, the researcher through portraiture is attempting to capture various facets such as the physical environment, geography, physical space, and so forth, but it also includes the portraitist’s own interactions with the context. Furthermore, this piece of portraiture is not simply creative writing that attempts to establish setting. It also involves a great amount of research into secondary data such as articles, newspaper stories, databases, etc. that can provide insight into the context of the examined topic. Therefore, with each of the portraits explored in the dissertation, focused attention is paid to the context of each of these four companies.

Voice

Next, with portraiture, there are two voices. There is the voice of the participant, but also present is the subtle voice of the researcher. Biases are naturally inherent among researchers. As Jessica Hoffman Davis (2003) notes, “No matter how realistic in detail (suggesting objective or photographic representation) an artist’s portrait may be, the

individualism of the artist is indelibly imprinted on the work” (p. 205). In addition, “Portraiture stands apart from the more traditional research methods because it makes the researcher’s biases and experiences explicit, in essence becoming a lens through which the researcher processes and analyzes data collected throughout the study” (Hackman, 2002, p. 52). The portraitist, then, seeks to “construct a credible story – putting pieces together to create a logical coherence, but being careful not to impose a facile consistency or a simplistic logic that will misrepresent the complex reality” being documented (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 246).

In addition, in portraiture, the researcher must reveal his or her stance or place in the research. More than a bias, the researcher’s stance is important because it grounds the portraitist in the study. It explains where the researcher is coming from:

The use of voice underscores the researcher’s stance as discerning observer, as sufficiently distanced from the action to be able to see the whole, as far enough away to depict patterns that actors in the setting might not notice because of their involvement in the scene. We see the portraitist standing on the edge of the scene – a boundary sitter – scanning the action, systematically gathering details of behavior, expression, and talk, remaining open and receptive to all stimuli. (Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis, 1997, p. 87)

When Djanna A. Hill (2005) used poetry as an expression of portraiture, she said, “I use voice to witness and express the outsider’s stance...In doing so, I take advantage of my position as stranger, which allows me to see through new eyes. As a newcomer to the research site, I was able to perceive and speak about things that often go unnoticed by the actors in the setting because they have become too familiar and ordinary” (p. 103). Capturing voice is not easy. Chapman (2005) states, “In qualitative research the nature of ‘voice,’ what it represents, who it represents, and who has the power to assert it, remains

a topic of rigorous intellectual exchange” (p. 27). For this paper, however, we rely on Lawrence-Lightfoot’s definition of voice.

Portraiture, then, relies on the researcher’s abilities to conduct a series of “rough sketches” in the field before bringing those works to the studio to begin a portrait that is both detailed, yet true to the nature of the subject. For the four companies (Skyline, Cintas, NB&T, and Candle-lite), my voice as well as the voice of the participants is captured in such a way that is true to the research and true to researcher and participants alike.

Relationships

Going beyond just the researcher’s stance and any biases that may be present, it is important to realize that relationships form between the portraitist and his or her participants as well as even the sites themselves. These relationships are “prioritized from first contact made with the site to the last” (Davis, 2003, p. 209). As relationships grow, evolve and change throughout the research process, the nature of the research also goes through a transformation. That is why it is vital that the process be shared with participants.

One cannot simply craft a portrait and be done with it. Rather, the portraitist prepares the research, writes the portrait, and *then* permits participants to review that work. It is vital that the final work be carefully reviewed by those involved because based upon the relationship the researcher has with his or her study, components may not have captured accurately or they may be misrepresented. “A trusting relationship between research participant and researcher allows for the co-constructing of a story that belongs to and honors them both” (Davis, 2003, p. 210).

Thus, with each portrait, key individuals at the participating companies reviewed their respective portrait and identified areas where disagreements existed or where clarification was needed. Good listening, frequent communication, and an adherence to the “truth” were key.

Emergent Themes

Compiling and analyzing the data for emergent themes is essential in any form of research, but in portraiture, it also means finding an avenue to capture these themes in narrative form. It is this interpretive process that culminates in what, ultimately, readers will discover about the research of the portraitist. According to Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997), there are five modes that the researcher pursues:

First, we listen for repetitive refrains that are spoken (or appear) frequently and persistently, forming a collective expression of commonly held views. Second, we listen for resonant metaphors, poetic and symbolic expressions that reveal the ways actors illuminate and experience their realities. Third, we listen for the themes expressed through cultural and institutional rituals that seem to be important to organizational continuity and coherence. Fourth, we use triangulation to weave together the threads of data converging from a variety of sources. And finally, we construct themes and reveal patterns among perspectives that are often experienced as dissonant by the actors. (p. 193)

In following Lawrence-Lightfoot’s five modes of synthesis and convergence, the first step would be to identify those themes that seem to emerge on a regular consistent basis. This is what she calls “repetitive refrain” (p. 193). It is those themes that are expressed explicitly (although Lawrence-Lightfoot would also include those implicit expressions that require a little digging to uncover) by those involved in the study. In my examinations of Candle-lite, Cintas, NB&T, and Skyline Chili, I looked for those themes that appear to cut across the lines of all four firms.

Next, I examined the resonant metaphors or symbols that emerged. This encompasses those words and phrases that carry with them a connotation that those involved in the study would not only immediately recognize, but understand fully as well. These can be easily found within the stories that participants are telling in all four companies.

Third, it was important to ascertain the rituals and ceremonies of the participants and their firms during the study. Clearly, as Lawrence-Lightfoot (1997) explains, it is not the pomp and circumstance one immediately thinks of when one hears “rituals and ceremonies,” but the often subtle, symbolic expressions of the participants. They are “not only an aesthetic, ceremonial expression of institutional values, they are also opportunities for building community, for celebrating roots and traditions, for underscoring continuity and coherence” (p. 201).

Next, identifying points of convergence among the themes is what Lawrence-Lightfoot calls triangulation. “Using triangulation, the researcher employs various strategies and tools of data collection, looking for the points of convergence among them. Emergent themes arise out of this layering of data, when different lenses frame similar findings” (p. 204). These findings are presented in Chapter V.

Finally, it is up to the portraitist to take the collected data and reveal or uncover the patterns that emerge. Lawrence-Lightfoot makes an interesting point when she states, “in quantitative research, the scattered data points would mean that the investigator would have no story to tell. In qualitative research, on the other hand, the divergent and dissonant views are themselves a story” (p. 209). In other words, the researcher using portraiture must look into the somewhat chaotic data and attempt to pinpoint patterns in

the divergence. With portraiture, the researcher would collect additional data through observations and interviews to see if it truly is chance or if a pattern could be revealed.

Once these five modes were investigated, the final phase in this study was to capture the data in a format that epitomizes portraiture studies – a narrative. In writing about the findings, I tried to begin with a dramatic, narrative description of my first arrival to the company’s site, or my initial phone call, or some other attention-grabbing scenario. I revealed through the narrative my concerns, thoughts, fears, relationships, trepidations, and so forth. It is through this initial portion that I also make clear my stance and any biases I had going into the study. The middle portion of the study (i.e., the bulk of the study) is a nuanced “story” of the nature of the relationship between organizational storytelling and organizational culture. Finally, each portrait ends with my personal reflections on the process of crafting that particular portrait.

Throughout this paper, it has been mentioned that this study will be a *first*. It appears to be the first time that portraiture has been applied to research into an examination of storytelling and organizational culture. It is also may be one of the first studies to utilize portraiture in any aspect of the business discipline. And though that makes a significant contribution to the portraiture field, it is also important to note that this is an exploration of the “how and why” of storytelling when it comes to organizational culture. The literature review demonstrated that there is further need for an examination of how stories are used to maintain and change culture. With portraiture, this study become three-dimensional – a more nuanced tale emerges that facilitates our understanding of this phenomenon.

Here, the *story* of how companies choose their stories and why they see these stories as critical to embody the culture they are crafting is told. And the story is captured through four well-crafted portraits that go well beyond case study – they capture the very essence of storytelling and organizational culture in these selected for-profit companies. If my purpose has been to understand more fully how and why storytelling serves to maintain or change culture, then portraiture has proven to be an ideal methodology to craft rich, thick descriptions of the ways four specific firms do just this.

Portraiture is certainly a unique, relatively new method of research. The greatest appeal to me is that as a visual, two-dimensional artist, I have an inclination to the creative and the expressive. I relate to portraiture so well because, like an artist, the researcher begins with a blank canvas. Yet, even before the first brush strokes are applied, numerous rough pencil sketches are made of the subject, taking into consideration numerous facets and ideas. Then, as the portrait is first delineated on the canvas, a clear picture begins to unfold (emergent themes). Finally, the artist works steadily and carefully in applying the paint (words) to complete the final portrait (narrative). It is this graceful, expressive methodology that permits me to explore a topic and craft with words that which I would have painted.

Chapter IV: The Four Portraits

What follows here is the culmination of numerous interviews and observations with four participating companies. These firms, Skyline Chili, Cintas, National Bank & Trust (NB&T), and Candle-lite, have graciously opened their doors to an outsider and permitted an examination of their unique cultures. These portraits illustrate the interdependency of stories and organizational culture. Two of the firms, Skyline and Cintas, enjoy richly textured cultures that they wish to maintain. The other two involve drastic change. With NB&T, they are currently enmeshed in a changing culture. Candle-lite, on the other hand, has recently changed their culture. In all four portraits, stories are captured that are emblematic of the maintaining or changing of these cultures.

At the end of each portrait, my reflections on the process of crafting the portrait are presented. These reveal my preconceived notions as well as facets of the research that surprised me. Thus, here, the voices of managers, front-line employees, top salespeople, business owners, and vice presidents are captured. However, there is another voice – that of the researcher. As discussed in Chapter III, the portraitist is an integral figure in the broad strokes applied to the canvas. Following these portraits, Chapter V identifies the emergent themes that arise from each of these four companies. In addition, it will include comparisons and contrasts of the cultures and the stories they tell.

Portrait of Skyline: Maintaining a Culture in a Small Organization

I remember my first visit to Skyline Chili three years ago. Being from Texas, the chili I prefer has large chunks of steak, a thick base, and nary a bean in it! Occasionally, we might grace the bowl with a handful of crushed crackers, but that is the only thing we would add other than some jalapeño peppers (the quantity depends upon personal preference and tongue tolerance). But at Skyline, the chili is thin, it contains ground beef and (gasp!) they actually put a pinch or two of cinnamon in the mix.

When I first tried their chili it was on a cheese coney – essentially, a hot dog with mustard, onion, chili, and more shredded cheddar cheese than I have ever placed on any entrée before. Admittedly, that first plate did not appeal to me. It simply was *not* Texas chili. Rather, when friends wanted to go to Skyline I would order the Classic Chicken Wrap – marinated chicken with lettuce, tomato, and ranch dressing on a tortilla. About a year later, I tried a cheese coney again. I am not certain if my palette had acclimated to Midwest flavors or if I was simply more open-minded, but the chili was...tolerable. After a few more times over the next several months, I began to crave the stuff! Now, of course, I will always choose Texas-style chili if it is available, but while in Ohio, Skyline chili is a highly acceptable substitute.

There is a culture – nay, a cult – that surrounds Skyline. The chili aficionados of the Midwest swear by Skyline chili and regulars will dine at their local facility four or more times per week. With over 100 locations, in Ohio, Indiana, Kentucky, and Michigan, they are a common sight in small towns and along major interstate highways. One such location is in Wilmington, Ohio.

The small town of Wilmington, Ohio is in transition. Situated almost equidistant from Cincinnati, Dayton, and Columbus, the town is at the center of a triangle formed by these three major cities. The downtown area retains its early 20th century charm and architecture, but the entire town has outgrown itself. What was once an isolated town in the middle of soybean country has started upon the path of urban influence with commuters realizing that Wilmington is an ideal location for living while working in one of the three major nearby cities. In the 1920s, parking for Model Ts was probably adequate; now there is a parking shortage for the small mom-and-pop businesses that lease space in the old buildings. Yet, despite these limitations, Wilmington continues to grow – the only catch is that the growth is pushing the “outskirts” of the town further and further from the epicenter.

On the east side of town, the shipping company DHL has built a gargantuan airport employing nearly 7,000 people within the city limits of Wilmington. This is made even more impressive when one realizes that there are only 12,000 residents in Wilmington proper. A frequent sight at all hours of the day and night are DHL buses that rumble along throughout the county and surrounding counties commuting distant workers to Wilmington to pack and sort shipments that go out by plane, one every two minutes. Near the sprawling airport is a brand new Super Wal-Mart as well as a number of new strip shopping centers with retail and fast food. This is the new “center” of Wilmington, with plenty of parking and lots of activity.

It is on the far eastern perimeter of town that Skyline Chili sits. What was once a flat, highly cultivated soybean field now boasts a restaurant with a brightly colored exterior, concrete parking lot and drive-through. In the next couple of years, the area is

slated for rampant growth with more restaurants, banks, and retail establishments.

In daylight hours, the bright yellow and blue exterior of Skyline is like an oasis amid the browns and greens of underdeveloped surrounding property. At night, the restaurant glows intensely – the brightest building for about a quarter mile. As patrons pull into the parking lot, their ears are greeted with the sound of music leaping from outdoor speakers. Most times, classic rock or synthesized-laden tunes from the 1980s pour out.

The company started in 1949 when Nicholas Lambrinides opened a restaurant in Cincinnati overlooking the “skyline” of the city. Incorporating many elements of the recipes of his Greek homeland, Lambrinides established a restaurant that was neither fast-food nor casual dining – it is somewhere in between. Some may view it as simply fast table service. In any case, the first location was so successful that more were eventually added and soon they were franchising locations throughout the Midwest.

Dining at Skyline requires at least a cursory knowledge of chili-speak. There are phrases such as “three way,” “five way,” “p’sghetti,” and of course, “do you like your hotdog juicy?” Like a Starbucks devotee, a diner will make a request in the vernacular that outsiders cannot readily grasp: “I’ll take a three-way, ex-cheese, and no toms.” This strange assemblage of barely-English words translates to a plate of spaghetti with chili that has extra cheese and no tomatoes. Similarly, a “juicy hotdog” means that the server skims the ladle across the top of the chili so that very little ground meat is poured over the hotdog. The “ways” are important to know and it is obvious when someone not from this part of the country enters a Skyline for the first time. A three-way has already been explained, but a four-way is the same as a three-way with either beans or onions added.

A five-way, on the other hand, is a four-way with both beans and onions on top. This is a piece of the consumer culture that locals just know as they have literally grown up with Skyline. Likewise, as an “appetizer,” customers receive bowls of oyster crackers free of charge. They may certainly wait until their bowl of chili arrives, but most eat them directly from the bowl, dry. Another staple in every Skyline restaurant is a bin of York Peppermint Patties. These are ten cents each and it is customary to have at least one at the end of the meal.

When customers enter Skyline, they are greeted warmly by the staff. “Good afternoon!” they will shout in unison. “Sit anywhere you like.” Booths line the walls and tables with chairs sit invitingly in the middle of the floor. The tables can easily be pushed together to accommodate larger groups.

The servers have small sections of the restaurant that they are responsible for, but on quiet days, they take turns with each successive customer to ensure a fair distribution of workload (and tips). Dressed in khakis and short-sleeve Skyline shirts, the servers – all young women – are efficient, fast, and courteous. All wear their hair tied back and some sport Skyline visors to further keep hair out of their face.

The interior of the facility is brightly lit with tan table tops, black chairs, and orange vinyl-upholstered booths. Wide open space pushes against all four walls with the kitchen/prep area part of the open space – permitting customers an opportunity to sit at a counter and watch their meal being prepared. A central drink station gives servers easy and quick access to refill customers’ beverages. In addition, large windows let natural light in along three walls. In short, customers feel comfortable with the dining

experience and can readily trust that the constant cleaning among the staff provides a sanitary facility.

There is a great deal of repeat business for Skyline. The servers recognize many of the customers – they may not know their names, but they can readily recall what the customer usually orders. During the rush times of lunch and dinner, a flurry of activity fills the restaurant. If employees are not preparing food or serving, then they are fastidiously cleaning counters or stocking supplies. Meanwhile, the drive-through window presents a steady customer base entailing order fulfillment for large and small orders. The window itself is along the back wall of the food preparation area, so it is convenient and fast to fill these requests. In short, the layout and design of the restaurant bespeaks efficiency while catering to the comfort of customers and ensuring a fast friendly dining experience.

Nader El Nemr (pronounced NAY-der EL Neh-MEER), an Egyptian immigrant who worked hard and saved his money, is the owner and general manager of the location in Wilmington, Ohio. He opened the store in November 2003 with the money he had saved and already has plans for at least two more locations in the southwestern part of Ohio in the next couple of years. Though he elected not to be interviewed – he thought it was worthwhile experience for his manager – he stopped by many times during my interviews to tell a joke or playfully tease his employees.

Nader has an instant approachability about him. He is clean cut, bespeckled, and has a seemingly permanent smile. Always dressed in a crisp Skyline shirt and khakis, he is the epitome of the working owner. In other words, he is not just an investor in Skyline; he is present on an almost daily basis and he ensures that he touches every aspect of the

business – from checking on operations in back of the restaurant to meeting with customers and from ringing in orders at the cash register to delivering food to the tables.

Frequently, he jokes with regulars, teasing them about taking advantage of the free wireless internet service Skyline provides or how irregular their visits are to the store. The employees are also often at the receiving end of his chidings. For example, on one of my visits to the restaurant, he jokingly apologized to a table full of customers for the quality of service they were receiving from their server. “She’s only been here two years,” he said with a wink, “and she still hasn’t learned how to do her job.” Of course, the server was quick to respond by saying, “Oh, Nader, we actually do much better when you’re not around to get in our way. You slow us down because you don’t know how to cook.”

It is this kind of atmosphere that creates a comfortable venue for employee and customer alike. It is friendly and efficient; laid-back and fast.

Skyline Culture.

It is truly an amazing sight to see a full lunch crowd being expertly handled by so few employees. Even during the lunch rush, the maximum number of employees on duty is six. Typically, there are two servers, two in the kitchen, one at the drive-through, and one “utility” person who takes care of bussing tables, stocking the store room, or just general cleaning. During slow periods of the day, there may be only two employees in the entire facility to do all of these tasks at once.

On one Monday during the noon hour, I observed nearly 100 customers in the restaurant who never had to wait more than a minute to be greeted or only three minutes for their food to arrive at the table. “Oh, we can handle anything,” said Shelly with a

casual confidence when I expressed my admiration for their speed of service. Shelly has been with the restaurant for a little over a year. She maintains a constant smile and an infectious laugh. She talks with customers as if they were old friends, yet she seems to be in constant motion without ever stopping. It is this nonchalance Shelly displays even while delivering 14 cheese coney and 4 bowls of chili that characterizes the culture at this location.

The long-time manager of this restaurant is 24-year old Stephanie Dolan – or just “Steph” as she is known to everyone. She has been at this location since Nader opened the doors in 2003; however, she had worked at two other Skyline locations for two years prior to that. Obviously, she is young, but she carries herself with a worldly maturity that lets all know the restaurant is in quite capable hands. On this particular Monday, she was one of the two workers in the kitchen, assembling orders with a pace and accuracy that rivals the fastest assembly line worker in a manufacturing plant. Occasionally, she took a moment to help the servers, delivering orders to the tables. “Our culture *is* our people,” Steph said. “We hire employees who are going to be professional, but they are also laid-back and are good communicators.

She believes that a restaurant’s success depends upon the type of employees hired. They are very careful with the selection process. Steph does all the hiring of new employees. “The most important things I’m looking for,” Steph said, “are appearance and personality. They have to look professional and be outgoing.” She said that frequently applicants will come to the interview in cut-off shorts, dirty t-shirts and a ball cap. She spends a few minutes with them out of courtesy, but then shakes their hand and wishes them well in their job search. “If *that* is how you dress,” she asked, “for the

interview, then how will you dress when you actually get the job?” As for personality, she is looking for employees who are easy to talk to, extroverted, and can keep a positive attitude. Often, she will ask them to choose three words to describe themselves. “I don’t really care what the words are,” she said, “as long as they are along the lines of ‘enthusiastic,’ ‘hard working,’ ‘positive,’ ‘outgoing,’ and so on. If they say they’re boring or have trouble thinking of anything, they’re probably not a good match for us.”

It is this selection process that has established a team of employees who work well together and maintain an air of laid-back camaraderie. “Our culture,” said Steph, “is very open with lots of communication. It’s easy to work here if you are professional, don’t slack off when we’re busy, and do your job.” But it’s not all work. They also have fun. During busy times, they will have contests to see who can make the most cheese coney in the shortest amount of time without making a mistake. The coney still have to meet all the standards of appearance and portions that customers expect at Skyline, so it’s a bit of a challenge. Steph acknowledged that she’s the fastest. “I’ve been doing this longer than anybody else here,” she said. “I can easily make seven in less than a minute, so I usually win those races.”

Shelly described the culture as “not only laid back, but a safe, comfortable place to work.” She enjoys her colleagues and feels that the environment is like a family outside of the home. “We talk about everything. Boyfriends, kids, school – everything,” Shelly said. But when pressed to describe the culture of their store, Shelly said, “It depends on the day! You’ve got to be ready for anything. It’s rush, slow down, rush, slow down, all day long.”

In one of my interviews, I asked Steph how they refer to employees. “Do you call them partners, associates, employees, or what?” She looked at me incredulously and said, “Employees, I guess. Why would we call them *anything*? That’s Shelly. That’s Christina. That’s Rona.” She seemed to be unsure of my question, so she asked me to repeat it in case she misunderstood. I explained that some companies never refer to their staff as “employees,” but that they are “partners” in the company or they are “associates” or “team members.” She shrugged her shoulders and asked me, “Why do they do that? It doesn’t matter what you call them, if we hired them, we’ve employed them; therefore, they’re employees. That just seems fake to me to call them anything else.”

This kind of straight-forward thinking is again part of the laid-back culture that has been fostered during both the lunch and dinner shifts at the restaurant. Open, honest communication is also part of it. “Steph’s not a micromanager,” Shelly said. “She’s not going to hover over you to make sure you’re doing your job. But, if you step out of line, she’s quick to tell you.” Steph agreed. She acknowledged that she never has liked to be micromanaged and she makes sure she does not treat her employees like that either. “I’m not going to let things slide, though,” Steph said. “If we disappoint our customers just one time, then that may keep them from coming back.” She did, however, point out that she handles issues with employees in private, counseling them in the back office. “When I have an issue with an employee, that’s between me and that employee,” she said. “There’s no need to embarrass the person in front of customers or other employees.”

Furthermore, Steph treats these counseling sessions as just that: an opportunity to counsel an employee. For example, if an employee did not thoroughly clean her section of the restaurant, Steph sits them down in the back office and explains first the tasks they

do well. She said, “I may tell them that they’re always great with customers or that they’re really fast with delivering orders.” Then, she goes over the deficiencies in the employee’s performance. “I tell them,” she said, “how the tables weren’t wiped down well or that the floor under the table wasn’t vacuumed properly.” And finally she tries to get to the root of the problem. She does not just assume that they have shirked their responsibility. “Maybe they’re trying to do too much,” she offered. “Maybe they’re taking shortcuts to take care of something else I’ve asked them to do.” It is a two-way dialogue between Steph and the employee to find out why the tables were not cleaned thoroughly. “Once we finally get to the cause of the problem,” she said, “we work on how to fix it. If it’s just sloppiness or laziness, they know what they need to do. If it’s me assigning too many jobs, then I’ll back off to make sure we keep a clean restaurant.”

Therefore, the culture of this Skyline location consists of open, plainly spoken communication along with a laid-back climate that includes both hard, fast work, but also a little fun, too. But, this is a franchise. What impact does the overseeing corporate office that grants the franchise have upon this location?

Corporate Influence.

The location in Wilmington, Ohio is one of the numerous franchises Skyline Chili has in the Midwest. To open a franchise, potential operators must be prepared to invest between \$500,000 and \$1.2 million. Furthermore, they can expect support from the corporate office with regards to products, merchandising, marketing efforts, and so forth. For the location in Wilmington, the corporate influence is everywhere. The exterior and the inside décor are distinctly Skyline-esque. The vibrant colors, dining furniture, and

even the paint on the walls are all part of the Skyline package to ensure consistency in style and ambiance.

The menu offerings are also driven by the corporate office. Recently, in March 2007, the servers told customers that “corporate has brought back the habanero cheese.” This is a spicy cheddar cheese that is only available in the spring and franchisees must wait until the corporate distribution center sends it out to the restaurants. However, along with the cheese, arrives a table-top advertisement touting the cheese as an option on all Skyline dishes. After about a month, the promotion ends and this special cheese is no longer available. “It is a bit frustrating,” Steph admits, “because customers really like it and if the corporate office isn’t sending it to us, we can’t offer it.”

About every two years, the menu is completely redesigned by the corporate office. The mainstays – cheese coneys, spaghetti bowls, and chili – remain, but new items appear (such as low-carb chili) and the format is updated to keep it from becoming staid and boring. Again, this is something that is initiated and implemented by the corporate office, with the franchisees in a position to simply replace the old menus.

And although it may seem that there is undue influence by the corporate office, it is primarily among material goods. They obviously want to maintain consistency from store to store, so that customers can expect to enter any location and find themselves in a familiar setting with predictable menu offerings. However, when it comes to managing the restaurant itself, there is very little corporate authority. “New managers go through a brief training session at corporate,” Steph said, “but that’s about it.” The corporate office takes a hands-off approach to how the franchisees manage their facility. “We know what

numbers we should be making,” Steph added, “and as long as we’re on track or even close, we don’t hear from them.”

This is important because in some organizations, particularly those with numerous locations, the corporate entity maintains or at least tries to maintain close ties with those distant locations. But here, other than marketing and menu offerings, there is very little corporate influence. “We think of ourselves as our own restaurant,” Steph said. “We sometimes forget we’re part of something larger.”

Stories Told.

The Skyline Chili location in Wilmington, Ohio is a small organization, employing fewer than 30 full- and part-time employees total, with usually only 5 or 6 working at any one time. Despite this small group, they have enjoyed a laid-back culture with open, upfront communication. It is this kind of culture that Steph and Nader hope to maintain. “We aren’t interested in changing anything,” Steph said. “This is just right for us.”

There is very little turnover among the staff (about 20%) and this usually occurs at the beginning of summer and at the end of summer when the younger employees are on vacation from school. Some return, but after graduating either high school or college, most do not. As new employees come aboard, they often hear stories from other employees about how the location is managed. Not surprisingly, many of those are about Steph.

“I was actually a little afraid of her,” Shelly admitted, who is about 15 years older than Steph. “I heard all these horror stories about how mean she is.” Shelly said that the one story she heard more than any other is that Steph regularly makes employees cry.

“Other employees kept telling me to stay on her good side, or she’ll make me cry. I’ve been here over a year, and haven’t cried yet!” Apparently, these stories emanated from one instance when Steph counseled an employee about the attitude she was displaying in front of the customers. Steph straightened out the story for me: “She was copping this attitude about everything – cleaning, bussing tables, vacuuming. I finally pulled her aside and said, ‘In my office. I have some feedback for you.’” In there, she explained that she was a hard worker most of the time, but that night she was balking at doing any of her assigned tasks and was acting immature in front of the customers. She explained that there was no tolerance for that kind of behavior and wanted to know what was causing it. The employee said that she had stayed out partying too long the night before and still had not caught up on all her sleep. Steph thanked her for her honesty and told her to go home; she wasn’t fired, but she was not an effective employee in her current state. She was useless to the restaurant until she had gotten the proper amount of rest. “She was a little upset and grabbed her things,” Steph added. “She stormed out of the restaurant crying.” It was that abrupt departure from the restaurant that the other employees had seen and assumed Steph must have said some terrible things to her. “Actually,” Steph recalled, “the next morning she called me and apologized and said she had a good night’s sleep; could she come back in for the lunch shift?” Steph said that she definitely could and would be glad to see her. “After just that one time,” Steph said, “the employees think I make employees cry all the time!”

But there are other stories about Steph, too. “One time,” Shelly said, “we were getting slammed. Every table was full of customers and more were standing in the doorway waiting for a table to open.” It was a Friday lunch and the number of patrons

was one of the largest the location had ever seen. “Steph could tell that me and the other girls were getting frazzled,” Shelly said. “She quickly pulled us into the kitchen and said, ‘ok, take it easy...we can do this. If you feel yourself sinking, just let me know.’” She said it in a calm, reassuring voice. Suddenly, Shelly and the other employees felt that they could indeed handle all the customers in their usual fast, friendly manner. Shelly added, “There was something about the way Steph said it that made us believe that she had our back. She wasn’t going to let us get in over our heads.” Furthermore, Steph helped out in every part of the restaurant. She cooked, cleaned, took orders, and delivered food to the tables. She did all this without pointing out that she was doing the servers’ jobs or that she had more important paperwork to do. “She was right there with us in the trenches,” Shelly said.

Another type of story employees like to tell about Steph is how she acts as their “older sister” sometimes. “She’s young,” Shelly said, “but she has this sisterly or maternal thing about her.” Shelly was referring to several occasions where she has had to ban certain customers from the restaurant. “We get some creepy guys in here,” Steph said. “For some reason, they get in their heads that because the servers smile and are friendly to them, that they must be interested in them.” With an all-female staff, this is unfortunately a somewhat common occurrence at this restaurant. “One time,” Shelly recalled, “this one guy came in every day, sat in my section, and said all kinds of vulgar things to me. Now, I always thought I could handle myself in these kinds of situations, but this guy just wouldn’t take a hint.” That is when Steph stepped in. “Shelly told me what he was saying,” Steph said. “I walked over to his table, picked up his bill, and said, ‘this one is on me, now leave.’” The customer appeared incredulous and she explained

that the way he was talking to the servers was not going to be tolerated – he was banned from the restaurant. “He said, ‘you can’t do that,’” Steph said. “I told him, ‘come in here again, and see if I don’t call the cops.’” That customer has not been back since.

But not all the stories are about Steph. Some are just about working at Skyline in a small town. Shelly told a story about one busy day where they ran completely out of tomatoes and lettuce. “I was sent to the grocery store to buy all I could,” Shelly said. “I don’t think Kroger has ever sold crates of tomatoes to an individual before.” Shelly went to the nearby grocery store and found the produce manager. She explained to him the situation and he helped her load large crates of tomatoes into her car as well as bags of heads of lettuce. “My car smelled like a big salad, but there was nothing else we could do,” Shelly said. “Our normal delivery hadn’t arrived and we didn’t want to take a chance of being out of these vegetables.” Shelly recalled that all this was done with little hesitation. “When we realized the truck had not arrived, it didn’t take us long to figure out we needed to jump to action. Luckily, we were able to cover all our bases without missing a step.”

There is a strong dedication to customer service at the restaurant. Spontaneously going to the local grocery store to buy vegetables is just one example of their above-and-beyond attention to service. Another story Shelly told was related to a customer, an older gentleman, who broke up a fight within the restaurant one afternoon. “These two guys,” Shelly remembered, “started punching each other. This other customer stepped in and broke up the fight.” Apparently, both of the fighting customers left money on the table and immediately departed the store. “They kept saying ‘don’t call the cops’ but we did immediately anyway.” The customer that broke up the fight sat back down and

continued his lunch. Steph then went over to his table and asked if he was alright. He explained that he was, but he just did not appreciate two young men behaving in such a manner. “To this day,” Shelly said, “this customer gets a free dessert every time he comes in here. We call him our Skyline bouncer.” Shelly and Steph believe that if a customer is willing to put himself into harm’s way to protect other customers and employees, a free dessert is only a small token of appreciation for his actions.

Interestingly, the story spread quickly to virtually all the employees on all shifts. Steph believes the story reached so many employees within just a day or two because of the small number of employees and the regular communication that goes on between them.

These stories are just a few of the many Shelly and Steph readily tell about the culture of the restaurant. They are personal and real. They demonstrate the laid-back culture of the location, but they also show a genuine concern for customers and open communication between employees. It is a very small organization staffed with personnel who care about one another and care about their jobs.

Reflections.

It was interesting to sit down with Steph and Shelly on different occasions. Several of the interviews were one-on-one, but the one interview I conducted with both of them present was a fountain of conversation. Both of these individuals fed off the other in recalling incidents and stories. Whether together or separate, both displayed an eagerness to share and it was clear that a deep-seated pride exists for their respective positions within the organization and the organization itself. As stories progressed, the other would jump in and provide an additional detail, saying, “oh, and don’t forget this...”

Steph, who has been with Skyline in one capacity or another for six years is already making plans to buy her own franchise some time in the next year or so. Despite her young age, she demonstrates a maturity and level of professionalism that is not often seen in young adults. Nader, according to Steph, frequently leaves her on her own to manage all aspects of the restaurant, from ordering supplies to hiring and firing employees. I found her to be very easy to talk to, yet she is humble about her accomplishments or how she manages the employees. “I just treat them how I like to be treated,” she often said in our interviews.

The stories each of these women shared highlighted the open atmosphere of the restaurant. Both talked freely about the other, occasionally jibing one another, but always with sincere respect for the other person. In fact, Steph seemed to laugh right along with Shelly when Shelly told stories about Steph’s management style. The story about Steph making employees cry was a dynamic interaction between these two. It was clear that Steph wanted me to know that this was not a regular occurrence, but because the story had been told so many times, some of the newer employees believe that it was more than just the one time an employee left her office crying. “I don’t know why that story is still sticking around,” Steph said. “It was nearly a year ago.”

I found one of Steph’s comments intriguing. When she said that sometimes she forgets that their location is but one franchise among more than 100 Skyline locations, it is very telling about the culture they have created. “I forget we are part of something larger,” were her words. This isolationist view demonstrates that they have a strong culture somewhat free from corporate influence. Nader, Steph, and all the employees – though few in number – have fostered a culture that is primarily their own. I have

worked as a consultant with other restaurant chains where a frequent sentiment from franchisees was to blame the corporate office for any problems or deficiencies in the restaurant. But here, very little is ever said about the corporate office. It was something I had to initiate in my interviews.

Additionally, the very small size of the organization was unfamiliar territory for me. I know from personal experience (in my own companies from my entrepreneurial days) how tight-knit a small company can be, but intuitively I just assumed that a franchise would somehow be different. It isn't – at least not in this case. With so few on duty at any one time, the handful of employees is bound to become close to one another. Additionally, because of this, stories spread very rapidly among the employees. The story about the older customer breaking up a fight was noteworthy because both Steph and Shelly commented on how many employees knew about the incident by the following day. Of course, there may occasionally be personality conflicts, but these seem to be ameliorated rather quickly because of the open, upfront communication between them. I also assumed that with so many of the employees being high school or college age that there would be more "drama" among them, but this also seemed to be minor in scope. As Steph pointed out, this is probably due to the selection process where those who display a solid element of professionalism are hired.

As this is but one portrait of one Skyline location, it would be an interesting study to see how other Skyline locations and different franchises operate. I kept asking myself if this location was unique or were all Skyline franchises so free from corporate influence? Furthermore, would another location have the same kind of laid-back culture or is this strictly the dynamics of Nader, Steph, Shelly, and the rest of the employees? A

comparison of Skyline locations in Ohio, Indiana, and Kentucky would provide a fascinating glimpse into the organizational cultures of multiple franchises. I also wondered how Nader's future locations or Steph's future franchise might be the same or different than this location in Wilmington, Ohio. If Nader does indeed add two more locations, he obviously cannot be at all three at the same time, so will the culture remain the same at this location or will it change? And, once Steph leaves to open her own Skyline franchise, how will this be affected? Will her own store reflect the same kind of culture? Obviously, these are questions that cannot be answered now, but encountering such an organizational culture with detailed, personal stories caused me to speculate. I suspect that much of the culture at this Skyline is driven by both Nader and Steph. It is their management styles and personality styles that are maintaining the culture at this location. Both have a casual confidence about themselves and both are straight-forward communicators. Neither micromanage, but they are not reluctant to provide counseling and guidance to employees who falter.

In short, my observations and interviews were a delight to experience because the participants were so open about their jobs and the organization. Stories rolled off their tongues with ease and took very little prompting at all from me. However, admittedly, when asking them to describe the culture of their location, they did struggle somewhat. Even after asking me to clarify the question (I tried using words such as *climate*, *environment*, or even *what is it like to work here?*), both Steph and Shelly wanted me to give examples of cultures of other organizations I was familiar with. Once all this was done, both (independently) used terms such as *laid-back*, *open communication*, and *professionalism* to describe their organizational culture. This was probably my strongest

experience with any of the four companies examined in this study. I attribute this to their openness and eagerness to share and never had the feeling that they were holding information back or looking for the right words that would “sound good” to me.

Portraiture of Cintas: Maintaining an Old Culture

Throughout our busy lives with fast-paced technology surrounding us, over-specialized jobs, and 24-hour services available, there are many tasks being done with little or no notice from the general public. Every time I enter a restaurant or retail store, I wipe my feet on a floor mat. It had never occurred to me how that mat gets cleaned or even stays in such remarkable condition, despite the amount of foot-traffic it receives. Or, consider the mechanic who works on my car. He has crisp, clean shirt and pants, and yet on a daily basis he is handling oil, grease, and transmission fluid. How do his clothes stay so clean?

To tackle these kinds of matters, one company has built a multi-billion dollar empire on replacing floor mats monthly for companies and providing uniforms on a daily basis to literally millions of working men and women every day in North America.

It is almost impossible to live in Cincinnati and not be familiar with Cintas (pronounced *sin-TOSS*). Their easy-to-spot trucks in blue and white with red seem to be as common as trucks for Fed Ex and DHL. In addition, their corporate office sits prominently along Interstate-71 just north of the city and its red brick exterior with tinted windows is a well-known sight to commuters. And though executive offices are located here, the real action takes place 22 miles away in Milford, Ohio.

Driving from the large, stately corporate office, one steers along the six-lane loop that circumnavigates Cincinnati. At the exit off the loop, there has been a recent

explosive growth of chain restaurants, big-box retailers, movie theatres, and banks.

Winding through this maze of buildings, a turn on Whitney Drive reveals a medium-size industrial park. If it were not for the signage and the incessant stream of Cintas-marked trucks, the nondescript building could easily belong to any other company. The facility is a cream colored structure with stucco exterior. Two thin bands of dark windows wrap around the corners and a plain, undecorated entrance is imperceptible at first.

Interestingly, upon closer inspection of the building, I spy a very narrow painted stripe between the window lines. I recognize the color as “Cintas blue.”

As one enters the building, the sterility continues. There is very little in the claustrophobic foyer that would feel inviting to the casual visitor. A tile floor supports a handful of matched visitor chairs flanking a table of Cintas catalogs. A tiny, almost closet of a room to one side has a computer for interested candidates to apply for a job. The walls in the entire foyer area have no decoration at all – instead, framed awards, letters, and pictures of organizations who receive Cintas’ charitable contributions are scattered about the room. In the middle of the wall facing the entry doors, a small cut-out square has a sliding glass window for the receptionist to greet visitors.

The middle-aged receptionist, who is also the switchboard operator, greets visitors in between the constant ringing of the phone. Despite the sterile environment of the entry way, her greeting is warm and friendly, and almost apologetic for the phone interruptions. Without an employee badge that also serves as a security key to get past this foyer, visitors must wait for this receptionist/gatekeeper to “buzz” them in.

On the inside, the starkness of the foyer ebbs its way into the corridors and cubicle space of the rest of the facility. Shades of cream and gray provide the neutral

tones for the floor, wallpaper, and cubicles that make up the office setting. The only décor on the walls is a series of posters every ten feet or so with various Cintas expressions. There is no art. Windows are few. And individuality is kept to a minimum within the confines of each employee's cubicle or office.

There is a sense – for the outsider – that the facility does not exist for the purpose of boasting or to wow the visitor. It is a place to work. The utilitarian nature of the décor belies the incredible energy within. Employees – or “partners” as they are called – bustle about from one office to another or to their next meeting or conference call. The sense of urgency among the partners is palpable.

Cintas has a history rooted in the Great Depression and this very history is the basis for the culture they have today. Despite its *Fortune 1000* status, it is still a “family business” with the third generation of the family helming the firm. What is today known as Cintas started out as Acme Wiper and Industrial Laundry in 1929. Richard “Doc” Farmer started the business when he saw a need for reclaiming soiled rags from Cincinnati-area companies. Before World War II, factories used rags (typically made from old clothes) to clean machinery or to remove grease and oil from components. When the rags became too soiled for use, companies simply threw them away. Doc Farmer began collecting these very soiled rags and laundering them in his house. Once cleaned, they were sold back to companies. It was a sound business idea that proved lucrative for the family – so much so that by 1938, they had moved the process out of their house and into a dirt-floor building in Cincinnati.

However, the industry was rapidly changing. By the time the United States entered World War II in 1941, industrial rags were being manufactured that were all a

uniform shape and consistent in materials. Furthermore, they were much more effective at tasks than an old shirt or a piece of a jacket. Doc Farmer immediately changed with the industry and made it cost effective for companies to rent these uniformly shaped “shop towels” from him. He continued cleaning them and once again the company grew through the entire war and after.

In 1965, Richard “Dick” Farmer, grandson of Doc Farmer, suggested the firm take on a new service for companies – providing uniforms on a rental basis to companies, mechanics, and deliverymen. It was a new facet that would dramatically change the company. After all, Acme was already making regular visits to customers on their routes, and they already possessed laundry equipment to clean uniforms. To reflect this change in the business, the company’s name was now Acme Uniform and Towel Supply.

Fortuitously, Doc Farmer simultaneously began to look at fabrics used in uniforms. It was not enough for him to simply supply uniforms to blue collar workers – many companies around the country were already doing this. Instead, he wanted a fabric that would hold up well after numerous washes and would resist wrinkles. Cotton had been the standard fabric and the pressing of these garments was a very labor intensive process. If the fabric itself could be changed rather than the expensive process, a competitive advantage would emerge. Working with a garment manufacturer, a textile mill, and a firm that made a new synthetic fiber known as polyester, various experiments were conducted until finally a product emerged that would suffice. It was a blend of 65% polyester and 35% cotton – this would become the new industry standard for decades.

The competitive advantage for the company was indeed born and expansion began in earnest. With new markets in Cleveland, Detroit, and Chicago, the company

name changed again; this time it was called Satellite Corporation to reflect the “satellite” locations away from Cincinnati. By 1973, after continued growth beyond the Midwest, the name changed one last time. Dick Farmer wanted a name that was distinctive and one that could foster brand awareness. He settled on Cintas and this name has become the umbrella corporation for numerous industrial services well beyond uniforms. Many have thought that perhaps the word *Cintas* was an acronym or stood for something specific, but in reality, it is simply a fabricated word.

Today, the company has 351 facilities across North America employing more than 30,000 people. The primary divisions are:

- Uniform Rental
- Cleanroom (i.e., supplies for workers in the semiconductor and biotechnology industries)
- First Aid & Safety
- Facility Services (i.e., entrance mats, hand soaps, air fresheners, etc.)
- Documents (i.e., on-site shredding of confidential paperwork)

The company continues to make acquisitions and grow the firm. In 2006, they achieved \$3.4 billion in sales and experienced their 37th year of consecutive growth in sales. The current CEO is Scott Farmer, the great-grandson of Doc Farmer.

Keeper of the Culture.

Cintas is clearly a large company – number 589 on the *Fortune 1000* list for 2007. With more than 30,000 partners, located across North America, maintaining an overriding culture is difficult at best. However, the company is very clear about what their organizational culture embodies and how they wish to maintain this culture.

Certainly, the book, *The Spirit is the Difference*, is a start. But that is merely a recording on paper of what surrounds each partner every day at the firm. The culture overall is one that is supportive and fast-paced. Partners are trained on how to do their jobs – given the skills to succeed – and it is up to them to follow through. The culture is an old one – built upon conservative, well-informed decision-making borne out of the Great Depression, where every cent is cautiously considered.

Fundamentally, the Cintas culture consists of three primary elements: principal objective, company character, and management system. These form the foundation of the culture and partners are frequently directed back to these elements when making business decisions, facing ethical dilemmas, or planning their career path.

For Cintas, the *principal objective* is what provides guidance in making those decisions that affect partners or the company. The principal objective can be found on posters in the building, in *The Spirit is the Difference*, and on the company website. That objective is: *We will exceed our customers' expectations to maximize the long-term value of Cintas for its shareholders and working partners.* In short, for the individual partner, the principal objective is designed to show the partner how he or she can impact the business. If partners who are working directly with customers exceed the expectations of those customers, then profits will rise, the company will grow, and the partner will have career opportunities available. For those partners who do not work directly with customers, their support of those who do will afford them with similar career choices. One phrase that is often heard among partners when discussing the principal objective is “positive discontent.” This means that partners should be constantly looking for ways to enhance the company which ultimately will improve

relationships with customers. Again, the principal objective is a “guide” that serves in decision making while possibly improving the partner’s station within the company.

The second element of Cintas’ culture is *character*. Almost synonymously, the word *professional* is used to describe partners. The character of the company is reflected by the professionalism of the partners. Partners must be professional in the way they look and act. The company even provides a set of guidelines to facilitate professionalism among the partners. Each partner is thoroughly trained on these during their new hire orientation. They are:

- We are thorough in everything we do.
- We have a Spartan attitude about our business.
- We do what is right, not what is expedient.
- We are humble, and respect the partners on the front line.
- A professional looks professional.
- We are courteous.
- We are enthusiastic. (Farmer, 1999, pp. 34-39)

As with the principal objective, there is a phrase closely associated with the character of Cintas. It is *competitive urgency* and it is a phrase known to all Cintas partners. It is an attitude; one where partners “are willing to work nights, work weekends, dig deeper, think harder – whatever it takes!” (Farmer, 1999, p. 42). It is a sense of urgency that focuses on how the company can gain a competitive advantage. Of course, this is done while following the principal objective and maintaining an element of professionalism.

The third element of Cintas’ culture is the company’s management system. This entails all the policies and procedures for keeping the business running smoothly. When

the firm began, it was small and only a handful of people were making all the management decisions. As the company grew and the number of partners reached into the thousands, standard operating procedures had to be established and this became the management system at Cintas. For example, it defines who has the authority to terminate another partner or to establish a service contract with a customer. The management system was established in 1960 and remains in effect today. Key points to this system are:

- The system provides management with control.
- The system provides consistency.
- The system gives us competitive advantage.
- Policies and procedures are invaluable training tools for new employees.
- Our management system is vital to communications within the company.
- Our system gives us the advantage and flexibility of moving management resources. (Farmer, 1999, pp. 77-80)

This management system creates consistency in management practices at Cintas. This is very important in a company as large as Cintas with tens of thousands of partners spread out over an entire continent.

All of these elements – principal objective, character, and management system – make up the formal Cintas culture. Most importantly, these elements are not something that is superficially covered in a new hire orientation class and then forgotten. There are constant reminders and the company truly lives these elements. One may ask any partner

about these elements and the partner can not only recite these elements, but easily provide examples of how they have guided key decisions in that partner's career.

How important to Cintas is their culture? As already mentioned, each new partner receives a book written by Dick Farmer entitled *The Spirit is the Difference*. On the opening page, in large bold letters, the following appears:

We are the premier company in our industry. We attribute this success to our Corporate Culture. The principles and values our partners share are the driving force behind all of our accomplishments. (Farmer, 1999, np)

The book, 86 pages in length, is essentially a handbook of the Cintas culture. Divided into sections, it explains to the reader not only the culture, but also the principal objective of Cintas, their character, the history of the company, and how the management system operates at the firm. Fundamentally, though, the work is about understanding the Cintas "spirit."

This book is about the most important aspect of a Cintas career. It is about something more important than our products, our services, and even more important than sales and profits. It's about what separates great companies like Cintas from mediocre and unsuccessful organizations. It is about our Corporate Culture. Corporate Cultures separate the winners from the losers. Chances are, two of every five companies appearing on the Fortune 500 list today will not be on the list 10 years from now. What separates those who stay on the list and those who don't is neither their products, nor their marketing – it's their cultures...At Cintas, our culture is no accident. It is our planned approach to business. And every Cintas partner must be aware of this approach. The time and expense of writing this book reflect the deliberate attention we give to maintaining and teaching our Corporate Culture. This book is an introduction to what we believe, what we hold dear, and what we all need to know as a member of the Cintas team. (Farmer, 1999, pp. 15-16)

Cintas has spent decades crafting their culture and efforts to keep that culture is at a grass roots level. On the first day of new hire orientation, every new partner reads the book and sits in a classroom learning about the Cintas spirit. They demonstrate their

comprehension of the principal objective, the company's mission statement, and they are able to explain Cintas' character and management system. They do this through discussions and most interestingly, through a book report. New hires write a book report that is read by the ones conducting the orientation as well as their supervisor.

Sometimes, the trainer and the supervisor are one in the same. The trainers are selected from among Cintas' best-performing supervisors and managers. They are the ones who epitomize the company's culture and have a dynamic and capable training ability.

One of these star performers is Chad Poeppelmeier (pronounced *PEP-el-myer*). He is young – about 30 – and his energy is both enticing and contagious. At six feet tall, he could be an imposing figure, but his approachability and attentive eye contact makes him anything but intimidating. Clean cut, save for his ear-lobe length sideburns, he is the epitome of the rising Cintas star. He is a success story and one of the keepers of the Cintas culture.

It should be mentioned that Poeppelmeier is one of many – perhaps hundreds – inside Cintas who educate new partners about the Cintas “spirit” or refresh those who have been with the firm for a while. But, he is a good representative of how the Cintas story is perpetuated.

A walk in the plant alongside Poeppelmeier illustrates how in tune to the culture and the partners he is. As we leave the neutral tones of the front offices for the large plant connected to those offices, we enter a different world altogether. There is a somewhat comfortable volume of whirling machinery, trucks, and people talking. A gray floor hosts a seemingly chaotic entanglement of moving racks of uniform shirts and pants. The pathway for visitors, and employees not working on the line, is clearly

marked, and Poepfelmeier and I continue on our tour. He stops for a moment and chats with a gentleman in a striped uniform shirt and gray pants. As we leave him behind, Chad comments, “Rick came in at 5:30 this morning. He’s a really hard worker who has been with the company for years and helped train me; what a great guy.” A common occurrence on our tour is that Chad knows everyone in the plant. And not just in a casual sense. He knows their name, how long they have worked in the company, where their next move is likely to be, or in the case of Rick, even what time they started their day.

The “plant,” as it were, is a large warehouse-shaped building with a network of moving racks supported by narrow metal beams and trusses. These racks transport laundered uniforms from dryer to hanger to bagging to the trucks in an endless process that is dizzying to the outsider. The racks, some at eye level and others two stories or more overhead, flow in an even motion up, down, and around the facility from one station to the next. As we stroll through the “hanging area” where partners are placing shirts and pants on wire hangers, Poepfelmeier chats with the ones working here. It is just small talk, but his eye contact is genuine and his tone possesses an inflection that is easy to listen to. The partners, never ceasing their task, wear white uniforms and engage Poepfelmeier easily. As we walk away from this section of the facility, he comments, “Each one of those partners hangs 200 shirts and 180 pants per hour. By the end of the day, they will have hung 100,000 garments.” It is a statistic he tosses out with a bent toward astounding the listener, but it also contained a hint of expectation (as if to say, *of course they would perform at this level*).

Poepfelmeier is a product of nine years in the Cintas culture. “I started as an intern while in college,” he says. “And when they offered me a full-time job when I

graduated, I jumped at the chance.” He began as a Management Trainee (or just MT as this position is typically referred to). He worked various jobs throughout the facility: service department, the plant, customer service, and accounts receivable. After his MT position, he was promoted to work in the Facilities Services division (mats, hygiene, paper, etc.). Soon he was recognized as the number one sales representative in the company. This prompted even further growth for him when he spent the next four years in uniform sales. “This was an exciting opportunity for me. It gave me a chance to show what I was capable of,” he says. During this four-year stint, Poeppelmeier was named “Sales Representative of the Year.” But his career path was really just beginning. “An opportunity came along in St. Louis for me to be a Sales Manager. The place needed a lot of work, though.” He began by putting a five-year plan together. “Everything had to be fixed,” he said. “The environment had to be rebuilt – we needed to *Cintasize* it.” This term, *Cintasize*, refers to the process the firm goes through to introduce its culture to a business unit. It is typically reserved for instilling the Cintas “spirit” in a newly acquired company. But here, the process was being utilized for an existing business unit.

“We established a five year plan for the St. Louis facility,” he recalls. “It was a lot of work – we cleaned house with the partners who did not buy into the new winning attitude. But we turned it around. And we did it in less than three years.” The house cleaning referred to the employees who were considered “deadweight” and did not buy into the culture; they were terminated. In addition, the Cintas culture is one with a strong sense of urgency. Even though a five-year plan was in place, a company “star” should be able to achieve the goal in a time-frame shorter than that plan. Poeppelmeier did it in less than three.

An integral part of the Cintasizing process is telling stories; stories about successful people in the organization and how they achieved their success as well as stories about other parts of Cintas that have proven their value to the organization. “We had to bring people in from other parts of the company,” he adds. “And we also had to hire a lot of new partners who first had to go through the MT program.” The MT program at Cintas has already been mentioned, but a little more detail about this training program is important from a cultural standpoint because it is a vital part of the enculturation process of new employees.

The MT Program.

The MT program was started in 1981 and is a long, two-year process that involves manual labor, driving a truck, and spending time in an office. Because of the type of work done in the program and the long duration of it, there is some difficulty in attracting and keeping individuals in the program. At one point during our discussion I mentioned that I had heard that Cintas was truncating the time down to a year or that pieces of the program had been removed so that less manual labor was involved, thus making it more appealing to interested candidates. His response was swift: “Oh, no. Definitely not. The time and work done in the MT program does not change. It’s how new partners learn our business and learn our culture. Nope. Not changed.”

The two-year MT program does require a strong commitment from new candidates. The first six months are spent on routes with the truck drivers. This entails picking up dirty uniforms, delivering clean ones, replacing soiled floor mats, and other Cintas services. “When people find out they have to handle other people’s dirty clothes,”

he says, “they tend to self-select out of the program. Those that bear it and treat the situation as a learning experience, do well.”

In the second six months, the trainees find themselves in the plant. Once again, they are among the dirty laundry of strangers. They sort the uniforms, wash, and dry them. It is a non-stop job that is seemingly never-ending with literally tons of pants and shirts coming through the door on an hourly basis.

At this point, the trainee has spent a year with the company. These first twelve months are clearly grueling, but important for the individual to understand the next twelve months. “If the trainee,” Poepelmeier says, “did not go through this, they would not do as well in the subsequent parts of the program. And, probably most important, as they move up through the company, they’ll always have an appreciation for the partners on the front-line.”

In the third six months, trainees split their time between the field and the office. During this time, they are in a sales capacity. They work with existing Cintas customers to try and drive sales or they prospect potentially new customers.

Finally, in the fourth six-month period, the trainee is assigned to any number of office positions within the company. These are based primarily on the company’s needs, but also on the trainee’s strong points or personal interests. It is the last phase in their training and it serves as a springboard to their position within the company.

The MT program is an integral part of the Cintas culture. Partners learn the business, they learn about the company, and they begin to become part of the Cintas “spirit.” But this is just one facet of the enculturation process. Individuals such as Poepelmeier conduct training sessions and groom individuals for greater opportunity; all

the while, they are perpetuating the Cintas culture. In the next section, the way Cintas keeps the “spirit” alive through story is illustrated.

The Cintas Spirit.

Throughout this piece, the Cintas spirit has been mentioned. It is something every Cintas partner is fully aware of and it is a pervasive part of their culture. It is everywhere: posters on the wall, their website, company literature, and especially in the “handbook” on Cintas’ culture. In fact, the very title of the book is *The Spirit is the Difference*. On the last page of the book, the very last sentence reads, “You see, the principles and beliefs we share in common create the spirit most responsible for our success, and the preservation of this spirit will have more to do with our future accomplishments than anything else” (Farmer, 1999, p. 86).

One of the ways this strong spirit is maintained is through powerful stories. They are told in new hire orientation, in meetings, in interviews with potential candidates, and in training sessions. Some of these stories are about partners who have excelled. Others concern events or experiences that are emblematic of the Cintas culture. One example of the latter is one that is told orally, but also appears in *The Spirit is the Difference*. In the book, it is a story told in first person by Dick Farmer, former CEO of Cintas:

In 1979, we made an offer to acquire a company which had several locations. The company was owned by one of the most honorable men I know. He is respected throughout the industry and has an excellent reputation in the business. We drew up a purchase agreement that spelled out the value of the business and was backed by certain representations and warranties he made. He guaranteed that all his customers had contracts and that the company had no liabilities other than those listed on the balance sheet. This fine man sincerely believed that all of his customers had signed service contracts, and that he had revealed every liability.

A few weeks later, I received a phone call from our own people who were on the scene familiarizing themselves with his business. They

discovered that many of his customers did not have service contracts, which increased our risk and reduced the value of the business. They also discovered “bonus programs” and other financial incentives provided to a number of employees that were not disclosed in our agreement. This also decreased the value of the business and added liabilities not on the books.

Now, here was an honest man, respected in his community. He had given us his word and made representations concerning the value and condition of his business. When I called him about these issues, his reaction was what you might expect.

“Farmer,” he said, “you’re crazy! There’s no way those kinds of things have been going on in my company. You can’t possibly have the story straight.”

“I know how you must feel,” I reassured him. “This company is not operating the way you think it is. I wouldn’t be calling you about this if it wasn’t based on some very reliable information. The fact is that this company is not worth the agreed upon price because many of your customers have not signed contracts which increases our risk. You have liabilities over and above those on your balance sheet.”

After a pause, he finally conceded, “Well, Dick, I’ll tell you what I will do...I will check with my people down here and get back in touch with you tomorrow” (Farmer, 1999, pp. 77-79).

The lesson here is that the management system that has been established within Cintas is critical. The “other company” did not have such systems in place and the leader of that company was oblivious to on-going practices in his firm. The conclusion to this story is not revealed, though. Did Dick Farmer sue the other company for breach of contract? Did the deal simply fall through? Did the business owner ever call Farmer back the next day? If so, what was the result of the conversation? These answers are not provided because for the purpose of the tale, they are not important. This story is designed to illustrate a key facet of the Cintas culture; namely, the management system. The other details are superfluous for the ones telling the story.

Similarly, to show how important this system of policies and procedures is, Farmer reveals another story. One day he had several visitors in his office and he thought a nice gesture would be to give each of the visitors a token gift of appreciation:

I thought a Cintas baseball cap would be nice. We have thousands of them in our warehouse, so I called my secretary and asked her if she would be kind enough to get us a few. She said she'd be happy to, but it would take some time since she had to fill out a form and have it processed by our distribution center. Now, I'm the Chairman of the company, and all I was asking for were a couple of hats to impress some visitors. The form and the system were obviously a big inconvenience to me. But then I realized it was an inconvenience I must tolerate. The forms were necessary to insure accuracy in processing customer orders and keeping our inventory straight. How would it look for the Chairman of the company to be breaking rules that we ask our partners on the front line to enforce every day? (Farmer, 1999, p. 81)

Again, the Cintas culture of rigid policies and procedures is illustrated and even the leader of the company is not immune from them. The new partner and even partners who have been with the company for years are told this parable to remind them that every employee must abide by the rules that are in place. However, the company makes it clear that these rules are not to be blindly followed without consideration of gray areas. Partners are told that if a situation arises where a customer relationship is in danger or another partner may be harmed, exceptions to the policies are advisable. Managers are expected to review policies and procedures in their area at least once a year. After all, repeated requests for an exception may indicate that a policy is outdated. Yet, the story above is still illustrative of enforcing the management system in even seemingly insignificant transactions.

One type of story that is quite common within Cintas is the tale of a partner that rises from the front lines to a high position within the company. Poepelmeier frequently tells one particular story to new hires and interviewees. A few years ago, Poepelmeier was working in a local gym and a fitness trainer struck up a conversation with him. The trainer asked Chad what he did for a living and he mentioned that he worked for Cintas in sales. He did not mention the job title he held. After a couple more

conversations, the fitness trainer asked how he could go about applying for a job at Cintas. Poeppelmeier gave him a person to contact and the trainer followed through with his application. On the day of the interview, the trainer was surprised to find Chad as one of the interviewers. Ultimately, the trainer did quite well in all his interviews that day and the company extended an offer to him. As expected, he went through the rigorous MT program picking up dirty laundry, rags, etc. with a starting salary of \$36,000. Today, he is a very successful sales representative in the St. Louis area earning a six-figure income. “Our culture,” says Poeppelmeier, “is to work your way to the top. Even my own boss is an example of this. He started 26 years ago as a route helper, and now he’s held just about every position in the company. Not bad for a guy who started at \$12,000 a year and no college education.”

Actually, Poeppelmeier himself is an example of this type of story told at Cintas. His own beginnings as a college intern that has led him to become one of the top Sales Managers in the company is a story told by him and by his colleagues. New recruits hear about Poeppelmeier’s meteoric rise in the firm and he is a real, approachable example of the Cintas culture that rewards and recognizes star performers.

Reflections.

This was probably the toughest portrait out of the four to craft. I went into this piece thinking that because it is a giant, *Fortune 1000* organization, I would have significant access to many parts of the company. However, this did not occur. Poeppelmeier was certainly very helpful, but I did not have free reign to wander around the halls or the plant on my own – he was my constant escort. He did repeatedly ask if there were any other areas I would like to see, and when I would reply, he would say,

“Sure, follow me”; he would make sure I was properly accompanied through or to that area of the company. Repeated requests to meet with the Vice President of Human Resources went unanswered as did requests to talk to additional personnel. My only contact was with Poeppelmeier, whom I knew as a recruiter on our college campus. Again, he was very generous with information, but only answered the specific questions I asked, without volunteering any information beyond that.

What also made this a difficult piece to craft was that corporate approval was needed at every step of the process. He needed prior approval to talk to me, and then when I wrote the first portrait, he had to approve it for accuracy and then send it to the Vice President of Human Resources for final approval. Some changes were strongly recommended. Two sentences that were considered to contain proprietary information were deleted and the tone of one sentence was softened to reflect a slightly more positive image of the company. None of the other three portraits had this systematic approval process. Truthfully, the other three read over the draft of their respective portrait and approved it on the spot with no revisions. Though necessary for a company such as Cintas, it was a time-consuming and admittedly, scary process. I thought to myself several times that Poeppelmeier would come to me and say, “Sorry, we’ve decided not to participate in your study.”

From the standpoint of a study of organizational culture, Cintas is a stunning example of a company maintaining a very old culture. They were the only one of the four companies that had a prescribed method for imparting the culture to new employees or that had a book describing in detail how the culture is to be interpreted and maintained.

Describing Poepelmeier as the “keeper of the culture” was an apt description and he admitted to me that he liked that moniker.

As I delved into the history of the company and would ask Poepelmeier for clarifications on various historical points, he knew them right off the top of his head. He said the history of Cintas is a vital part of the culture training and everyone in the company should readily know the answers to the questions I was asking. It was at that point that I realized that the very history of the company is a *story*. That story is told again and again because it demonstrates the humble roots of the company and their continued focus on serving customers while operating in a lean environment. For me, this was an “ah ha” moment because it drove home the idea that even the history of the company can be an artifact of its culture. And, when repeated as many times as it is, it is an useful device for maintaining a strong existing culture.

Finally, of the four portraits crafted in this study, only Skyline Chili and Cintas are attempting to maintain their cultures. Candle-lite illustrates a company that just changed its culture and National Bank & Trust demonstrates a firm currently going through a culture change. Of these companies, Cintas appears to be the only one that is making a concerted, strategic effort to keep their organizational culture intact. The others certainly make strides, but none of the other three have published books to educate employees, conduct intensive training sessions specifically on their culture, or have individuals responsible for ensuring the culture remains solid and true. As additional research in the future, a contrast and comparison of Cintas to other *Fortune 1000* companies might show whether this is an anomaly or not or if it is not, then what actions these other firms take to maintain their strong cultures. Furthermore, if access could be

granted, visiting other Cintas plants and facilities as well as interviewing additional personnel might provide greater insight into not only the culture of this company, but more stories as well.

Portrait of National Bank & Trust: A Changing Culture

On an unusually cool day in early June 2007, I sat at a conference table with three employees of a local bank. Classically designed office chairs surrounded a heavy veneer table that sat solidly on a plush blue carpet. Behind me, a wall of windows let the outside light in while cars and trucks zipped by on the street separated from the windows by a wide sidewalk. Around us, bare, cream-colored walls stretched up toward an acoustic-tiled ceiling.

Outside this room, a hallway ran both directions with offices and more hallways radiating away under florescent lights. Even further down the hallway, a large open area is where customers and employees alike entered. It contained the foyer, lobby, and teller windows. However, when entering, few people noticed the beautiful barreled ceiling or the 1940s era woodwork along the counters. Instead, the large round vault door – eight feet in diameter – dominated the space with its thick sheets of metal, gears, knobs, and locks all exposed as it stood open, leading ominously to the safety deposit boxes.

The three bank employees – all women – smiled and sipped steaming coffee from white Styrofoam cups. I sat on one side of the table – nearest the windows – and the women all sat on the opposite side of the table from me. I was the only one who brought pen and paper, so the table space in front of each employee was empty save for the small cup that moved up and down between cautious sips. Each wore a conservative business suit – two in skirts, one in pants. In our initial conversation, I found out that all had

worked for the bank for more than four years; one had even been with the bank for twelve years.

These were three of the front-line employees and they each came from a different branch location – each hand-selected for this interview by one of the vice presidents. National Bank & Trust (NB&T) was founded in 1859 in Wilmington, Ohio and has grown to become a medium-sized local bank with 16 locations all located in southwestern Ohio. The bank employs a total of 223 employees. These ladies were from branches in other towns. Their buildings were much smaller than this main facility, but each had been here many times before for training, to help out when there were staffing shortages, or for meetings.

As I probed them about their tenure with the bank, their roles, and how they liked working at NB&T, we moved on to questions about the working environment of the bank. “If one of your friends desired to work at NB&T,” I asked, “and wanted to know what it’s like to work here, what would you say?” Each looked at the other and smiled. Almost in unison, they said, “Much better now.” I did not even have a chance to ask for clarification, when Jill cited a change at the top of the organization as the impetus for the improvement.

A Change at the Top.

Many of the employees at NB&T will readily reveal that the bank is currently going through a culture change. When I sat down with the three employees in the conference room, I had asked them to identify the greatest change of the last three years. Their words may have been varied, but the message was the same. They agreed that the most impactful change was that employees, for the first time in recent memory, were

being held accountable. “Theresa” (each of the three employees asked that their names and specific branch location not be used) has been a teller for NB&T for twelve years. According to her, “people were getting away with murder around here. You could come in here and not do anything all day and you would never get fired.” Theresa is happy to see the changes that have come about. “Too many of us,” she continued, “picked up the slack for those who weren’t taking care of their responsibilities.”

So how did the changes Theresa was referring to come about? Tom MacDonald, Senior Vice President of Asset Management for NB&T, has been with the organization for three years. He has been intimately involved in the culture change – seeing it emerge and eagerly embracing the attempts to change the culture. A twenty-year veteran of the financial industry, MacDonald has worked primarily with large, national banks. But after a consolidation of his former employer with a giant national banking system, he found himself “downsized out” of the bank. His career search led him to NB&T. “Admittedly,” he said, “I was reluctant to take a job with such a small bank in rural Ohio. It seemed like a step backward to me.” However, the job gave him a chance to be a “big fish in a small pond.”

MacDonald is in his late forties and has piercing gray eyes. His New Jersey accent has been blunted from twenty years in the Midwest, but every now and then a short vowel sound in his words gives away the location of his formative years. Twenty years in privately held and publicly traded investment firms gives him an experience that is very beneficial to a bank like NB&T.

“I’m actually surprised I was hired,” MacDonald said. “I mean if you look at my background and my personality, and you look at the executive team that was here three

years ago, I didn't fit in." The problem was that the "old" leadership went to the extreme in operating the bank like a local, community bank. "We waived every fee," MacDonald recalled, "gave too many discounts, and basically operated like a charity bank." The former executive team had the feeling that their customers were in the community and that they would see them at the grocery store, at a local restaurant, or some community event. "We didn't want to hurt anyone's feelings," MacDonald added.

It was an uphill battle for him when he arrived three years ago. He questioned the business practices of the bank and wondered aloud how the bank remained profitable. "I came close to quitting a couple of times," he revealed. But after almost two years on the job, a change occurred that opened the door to a new era for the bank. The CEO and a couple of the vice presidents retired. The board of directors decided to bring in a new CEO from outside the organization and John Limbert was hired. "From his first day on the job," MacDonald said, "it was obvious that things would be different. I was ecstatic." Upon Limbert's hire, two vice presidents retired and were replaced almost immediately by, again, individuals from outside of NB&T. According to MacDonald, "there was no attempt to get rid of people – no systematic firings for the sake of firings." Although, he admitted that some managers "saw the writing on the wall and left the bank before they were told to leave."

In effect, the executive team (made of the president and the vice presidents) was changing rapidly. Even though MacDonald was hired before Limbert's arrival, he was new enough to the bank to *not* be part of the "old guard." The change at the top of the organization was having a trickle-down effect throughout the entire organization – all the way down to the front-line workers. "Many people stepped up," MacDonald said, "when

they realized that the old ways of doing things around here would never be the same.” Of course, some people unfortunately did not “step up” and they left on their own volition or were let go. There was no particular area or department of the bank that was affected more than another; all areas of the bank had staff changes.

Adapting to Change.

“Jill” is another one of the three women who sat in the conference room with me. She is petite, has long dark hair she keeps tied in a ponytail and has been with the bank for more than four years at a very distant branch from the main bank. “You had to get on board right away,” she said. “There were some employees who fought the changes. They wanted everything to remain the same.” But with vice presidents, managers, and supervisors being replaced throughout the organization, there was no way everything *would* remain the same. “I was glad to see the changes,” Jill reveals. “I was tired of having to do all the work, while people who had been with the bank longer than I had didn’t have to do anything.” Jill saw the managerial changes as a benefit to the bank. It meant that people were finally being held accountable for their actions and their jobs.

MacDonald told the story of an associate in New Accounts. “This woman was always shy,” he said as he related the story. “She never told new customers anything else about our services. If the customer only wanted a new personal account, that’s all the customer got.” MacDonald told the story with a hint of admiration for the employee who ended up changing her ways. “All of a sudden, when this lady had a new boss that worked with her, sent her to training, and for the first time spelled out expectations, she was a completely different person.” Now the New Accounts person was actually asking for business from new customers. She told them how they could upgrade their account or

informed them how reasonable their safety deposit boxes were. “She was somebody,” MacDonald added, “that could adapt to the changes that were coming. She is one of our top salespeople in the bank now.”

Similarly, MacDonald told the story of how one of the managers completely changed how he interacted with others in the bank while in meetings. “This guy would ramble on for half an hour if you asked him one simple question,” he said. The former CEO would just simply let him continue talking incessantly, expanding upon tangents and taking a circuitous verbal route to finally arrive at the answer to a question. “At one of our first meetings,” he continued, “the new CEO asked this guy how we could cut 401(k) fees to attract more business. He got through about two minutes before the CEO cut him off and said, ‘just answer my question – if I need more info I’ll ask you.’” Apparently, everyone sitting in on the meeting was shocked. No one had ever cut the manager off like this. “It was amazing,” he added. “The guy stammered a little bit and then just answered the question as simply as he could. Now, he’s succinct in every meeting – a completely different guy.”

However, there were others in the bank that could not or did not change. MacDonald mentioned that there was one employee who had been with the bank for over 26 years. “I explained to him that his job expectations entailed far more than what he was currently producing. I told him what those expectations were. Nothing extravagant. Just being at work five days a week instead of playing golf on two of those days.” The veteran bank employee thought about the situation and told MacDonald he was not willing to change. Instead, he decided to retire from the bank.

Yet, not all the stories end like this. Another one of MacDonald's employees had been with the bank for nearly fifteen years. "She had moved up through the bank from a teller position all the way up to a top managerial position," MacDonald said. "She had no college education and the only reason she had been promoted each time in the past was because she had been here the longest." He sat down with her one Friday afternoon and told her that for her position, there were five expectations for her to remain employed. He went over these five items with her and said, "Over the weekend, I want you to think about your job and these expectations. On Monday, let me know if you're both willing and able to do these five things." She did indeed think about her job and realized that she did not possess the necessary skills to succeed in the position. She came to MacDonald on Monday and told him that she felt comfortable with three out of the five expectations, but did not feel she could accomplish the other two. He thanked her for her honesty and said, "Well, I do not want to lose you. If you're willing to take on another role within the bank that is well-suited for your skills, I will be happy to get a transfer for you." She accepted MacDonald's offer and moved to a different department, making the same income, and has been quite successful ever since.

In an interview, I asked MacDonald what type of individual succeeds at NB&T and what type does not. "It's simple," he said, "those who are willing to change and are able to change, will do well here. They may have to learn a new skill and that may have to be initiated by themselves." For MacDonald, adapting to change is the primary measure of success at NB&T. "If an employee," he continued, "does not want to be questioned about their job or if they lack any sense of accountability, they will perish at this bank. It's not always been like this, but it is the new norm."

MacDonald feels that the reason for such a strong emphasis on adapting to change is a matter of self-preservation for the bank. “In the past,” he said, “tough decisions were not made and in this industry, you have to be willing to make those tough decisions.” He said the banking industry continues to experience consolidations and buyouts as the larger banking systems look for smaller banks to add to their portfolios. “We need people, and not the CEO, to look around and make the hard choices we need to make to keep this bank highly profitable. Otherwise, if we falter, all of us will potentially lose our jobs as we find ourselves redundant as part of a giant bank.”

The three women at the conference table concurred. “We know that it’s just a matter of time before some big national bank, or even a regional bank takes us over,” Jill said. “But, if we do all we can to make the right decisions for our customers and for the bank, then it will be harder for another bank to take us over.”

The Old Culture Versus the New.

Much has already been said about changes in the culture, but how does the evolving culture differ from the old culture? “Lisa” was the third bank employee at the conference table. Lisa has spent eight years with NB&T at one of their branches, including training roles at two other locations. At those two, she trained new employees. She is over forty and has a keen eye for detail. For example, during the interview, she noticed that I misspelled the new CEO’s name in my notes. She was also the most reticent with her comments, measuring out each response very carefully. I asked her, “What did you think of the old culture here at the bank?” Her response was, “It was a culture that needed to change.”

“But what about it necessitated change?” I clarified.

“Because it was not the right environment for us to work in,” she replied flatly.

“Can you be more specific?”

“All I know is that I like coming in to work now. Two or three years ago, not so much. I like the direction we’re heading.”

Despite her reluctance to provide specifics, she was very candid about how the new culture is outwardly increasing the efficiencies and effectiveness of the work environment. “I finally feel,” Lisa said, “that I am working next to very competent people. I used to not feel that way.”

So what were the changes? First, each participant, including MacDonald, acknowledged that the old culture could be described as reactive and people were unaccountable for their actions. In addition, there was a lack of decision making. “We had lots of meetings,” Jill said, “and lots of talking, but nothing ever got done.” Essentially, the culture was static. Each person I talked to agreed that the arrival of the new CEO changed things – especially the culture.

And the new culture? All point to the CEO’s commitment to take action and how he passes down this authority to lower levels of management. “We know what our jobs are,” MacDonald said, “we just needed the authority to do them.” MacDonald also related a story that distinguishes the decision-making aspect of the old culture from the new one. According to him,

We all knew this one branch in Ada, Ohio was not performing well. In quarterly meetings we would sit around and comment on how poorly the numbers were at that location. A couple of people even suggested closing the branch. But, we never took action. We didn’t even address the issue with the branch manager. Instead, we just kept talking and talking, without ever deciding anything. Then, Limbert comes on board. Within 180 days, we closed that branch. It was a huge decision and set all of us on the path to make those tough decisions.

Similarly, the bonus structure was changed for the executive team as well as the managers throughout the bank's locations. "Before," MacDonald said, "the year-end bonus was an entitlement – just for being employed at NB&T, you got money at the end of the year." This was irregardless of the performance of each of the individuals. Therefore, there was little motivation to perform beyond barely meeting expectations. "Limbert changed that," MacDonald said. "In 2006, he changed the year-end bonus structure to a quarterly bonus system based entirely on performance." Again, the issue of accountability is cited as necessitating the change.

Another example of this was the indirect auto lending NB&T was offering to car dealers. Essentially, a local auto dealer could lend directly to the consumer, but it would be through NB&T. "We were losing money on this," MacDonald revealed. "Yet no one would pull the plug on it." This is again one of the actions the new CEO took in the first 180 days. This story, told throughout the bank, embodied the changing culture.

There were more subtle, yet effective changes taking place as well. For example, in the past it was rare to see any of the eight executive team members in their offices on Fridays. This day had been reserved for playing golf (although some played golf on additional days as well). However, that practice has been discouraged and all are in their offices five days a week. "The front-line employees took notice of this," said MacDonald. "They knew this was real change." In addition, in the past, there were only a handful of parking spaces available right next to the main bank facility and these were all reserved for the president and eight vice presidents. About two blocks away, a paved parking area designated "NB&T Employee Parking Only" was for everyone else in the bank. However, this was changed. The handful of spaces next to the bank are now for

anyone who arrives early enough to park there. Even the president parks two blocks away and walks to his office if he arrives later than those opening the facility.

These subtle and not so subtle changes have precipitated a change at NB&T that moves from the top down. Employees are encouraged to make decisions within their realm of authority and they in turn pass along decision-making authority to their direct reports. From the vice presidents down to those on the front-line, stories are told about the changes taking place: from no more reserved parking to no golf on Fridays. Yet changes continue to occur.

Evolving Culture.

As MacDonald has already alluded to, the culture at NB&T is in transition. It is not *changed*, but *changing*. Culture change rarely occurs overnight; however, it is evident that the arrival of a new CEO triggered some significant as well as minor changes in the culture. The “old” culture has been one described as reactive with very little accountability on the part of employees. There is also a sense that in the past, there was a lack of decision-making at many levels of the organization. The culture included numerous meetings with much conversation, but very little action. The current culture, though, has been described as action-oriented and employees are held accountable for their performance. In addition, little changes such as removing reserved parking have led to a more open, less “entitlement” culture.

Though these are changes to the culture that have been viewed as positive, there are more changes on the horizon. At one point, I asked the three bank employees at the conference table what additional changes they would like to see.

“Don’t get me wrong,” Jill said, “I appreciate everything that’s been done here so far. It’s a better place to work. But, we can’t forget about why we’re here. We’ve got to make sure we’re serving our customers.”

This was also echoed by the cautious Lisa. “We have changed the environment internally, but I would like to see us now do more externally. We’ve always had a good reputation in the community – sometimes to a fault. But, now it is time for us to step up.”

MacDonald was more forthright. “If we are not customer-oriented,” he said, “we’re done. The big banks will always have more branches than us. But we can beat them on customer service.” He said that a couple of years ago the bank hired a consultant to enhance their service through better branding of the bank. “We paid the consultant tens of thousands of dollars to design a new logo for us and develop a tag line,” he said. The new logo is still being used, but the tag line, “Focused on You,” has disappeared after less than two years of use. “We didn’t *do* anything with it,” he complained. “We just assumed that if we said ‘focused on you’ we would suddenly have great customer service.” In other words, training of front-line personnel was never conducted, an explanation of what the tag line meant was never offered, and it just became three words added to every poster and brochure without anything standing behind it.

To achieve a real enhancement to customer service, MacDonald sees more changes internally for the bank. “We will continue to see increased accountability for everyone in the bank system. We’re getting close now, but we’re not there yet.” He added that a few more employees may lose their jobs as they have not yet adapted to the new culture. They are currently being evaluated. In addition, new employees need to be added. “Truthfully,” MacDonald advised, “we have more changes that need to take

effect. But, we don't have the people in place with the right skills to make that happen. We need to bring in additional staff that has real skills.”

New staff, possible turnover of a few existing employees, and greater attention to customer service is the key areas for moving NB&T's organizational culture forward. Clearly, just making a change at the top of the organizational chart will not facilitate a change in culture right away. It takes time to institute new policies and practices. It takes time to evaluate the effectiveness of employees. And it takes time for changes to become the norm.

“We now have a culture where communication is much better,” MacDonald said. “We rarely communicated within the bank about changes that were taking place.” But now, e-mails are sent out bank-wide on important changes or updates. “One thing we've started doing,” MacDonald added, “and I think this will be commonplace in our culture soon, is explaining the *whys* of our decisions.” For example, when the indirect auto lending program was cancelled, an e-mail went out to all employees explaining that the program had ended and demonstrated why as it was not a profitable service for the bank. “Employees were not used to this,” he said. “If they had been told about something in the past, they definitely did not know why we did it.”

Obviously, it is impossible to accurately know the future. The culture MacDonald and his colleagues describe as the next phase appears to be realistic and many in the organization are committed to making these changes and more to take the bank to an even greater level.

Knowing the Right Path.

As I finished up my conversation with MacDonald, I could not help but wonder if he felt that the changes that have come about are truly the right steps for the bank. After all, the bank had had moderate success under the old style of management and had added numerous branches to the bank. The culture that existed before the new CEO arrival may, in hindsight, not have been ideal, but it was *the* culture of the bank. Numerous careers were made, new services were offered, customers were apparently happy, and the bank experienced solid growth. Though the evolving culture is *different*, does that necessarily make it better? How can anyone know for certain that this is indeed the right path for the bank?

According to MacDonald, “We are definitely on the right track. We were successful in spite of ourselves.” The bank had made strides in growth, but MacDonald felt that that now the bank can be even more effective. Furthermore, employees will find NB&T a more comfortable place to work. “We have good people working here,” he said. “Some just were promoted beyond their capabilities or skill set and others were put into positions where they couldn’t be as effective as they could in other jobs.”

As mentioned before, there will be more staff changes within the bank. Some of these changes do not entail employees losing their jobs, but rather being moved to other areas of the bank where they can make significant contributions to the organization. Of course, a few more will be terminated or may even voluntarily resign if they feel they no longer “fit” in the bank’s evolving culture.

“I’ll tell you a story,” MacDonald offered, “that tells me we’re on the right path with our culture changes.” He talked proudly about a young broker with the bank that

was outstanding in every way – one of the best he had ever seen. “Now, usually I have a sense when someone is going to quit. They act more withdrawn. They just aren’t themselves immediately before they give notice.” In this story, though, MacDonald was caught completely by surprise. The young broker came into MacDonald’s office and said he was giving his two-week notice. When MacDonald asked him why, he said he was going to start his own brokerage business. “In our old culture, we would have probably just let him go and figured that was it,” he said. However, MacDonald did not make a counter offer to the young man. He sat down with him and told him that there was probably very little he could do to change his mind, so he encouraged him to follow his dream of starting his own business. “If we made a counter offer,” MacDonald said, “then a few months later this guy would once again be thinking he could be better off on his own, despite the pay increase we would have offered.” MacDonald gave him some pointers, wished him the best, and told him that if things did not work out in his brokerage business, he would gladly hire him back. The young man thanked him and left the bank to seek his fortunes. “Four months later,” MacDonald recalled, “he called me up and asked if his old job was still available. I said that it was and he was welcome to it.” The broker had realized that there was more to starting and operating a business than just the brokerage piece. It was just too difficult. “He’s only been back a few months,” MacDonald said, “but he’s already doing better than ever for us. And now we know he’ll stay because he had a taste of greener pastures, and found out that it wasn’t really better.” Before, they would not have offered him his job back and “he wouldn’t have *wanted* to come back,” MacDonald added. The fact that the new culture fosters more open

communication and has key employees returning after trying to start their own business speaks volumes to MacDonald. “That,” he said, “is how I know we’re on the right path.”

Reflections.

Tom MacDonald is a natural storyteller. In fact, many times during our interview, he would say, “let me tell you a story that illustrates this point.” It is this kind of participant that makes collecting stories effortless and admittedly, enjoyable. He readily had at least one story for every major point he was making regarding the organizational culture of the bank. Although, there were times when I felt he was reluctant to share everything that he knew. For example, he carefully avoided giving names of personnel, referring to them as “female employee” or “person in New Accounts.” Additionally, some details were not revealed at all. When he told me the story about one of his employees whom he told that there were five expectations he had for her, I asked him to list those five. He simply replied, “those aren’t germane to the story.” Another example is the indirect auto lending program. I asked how much money it was actually costing the bank, and he replied, “a lot.” However, I understand his reticence to release information, given his position with the firm. And the information he did supply was more than adequate to capture the elements of storytelling that affect their evolving culture.

It goes without saying that the three women were somewhat reluctant participants. They provided some insight into the culture of the bank and told a few stories emblematic of the culture changes occurring, but they were very careful with their responses. Again, this is understandable considering the current changes being experienced within the bank, especially in light of the turnover that is occurring. This in itself is emblematic of a changing culture – people become very careful about whom they talk to and the content

of what they say. Despite their measured responses, they were also helpful in crafting this portrait of the bank.

Some aspects of this particular study of NB&T beg for further investigation. Originally, this organization was not part of my proposal. I had initially planned to investigate a third-party logistics firm known as Total Quality Logistics, but when all three of my contacts left the organization to go to other companies, I scrambled to find a replacement. Though this portrait illustrated very well how stories impact a changing culture, the time constraints certainly had an effect on the depth of my investigation. My preference would have been to visit other branches, interview additional personnel (especially more top-level managers), and make more observations. However, I am not certain that permission would have been granted. As they currently have an evolving culture and many more changes are in the works, an “outsider” would only impede progress and efforts.

Still, the experience with this bank was fascinating in that it gives a glimpse of change-in-process. Turnover among personnel is occurring throughout the bank’s locations and at least one location has already shuttered its doors. Further study should include a follow-up visit in a year or two to determine what additional changes have occurred and how the stories have either remained the same or changed as well. I also could not help but wonder about the three female workers and MacDonald. Would they still be employed a year from now? Would their roles be any different? If I were to conduct additional interviews two years from today, would they still be as reluctant to share information or to provide specific details? As I wrapped up this portrait, these questions lingered for some time. Yet, only time will eventually provide those answers.

Portraiture of Candle-lite: A Recently Changed Culture

Leesburg, Ohio is like any other tiny town in Southwestern Ohio. It is far enough away from the metropolitan areas of Cincinnati and Dayton that many people you talk to wax nostalgically about their last big trip to “Cincy” a couple of years ago. Yet, the town is also close enough to the glass and concrete of the city to have a network of railroad tracks that criss-cross the town like the random lines of a child doodling with a crayon. At street level, the tracks provide a rough, teeth-rattling jar to any driver who makes the mistake of taking his or her car too swiftly over them.

Two stop lights in town halt drivers just long enough to permit an old farm truck laden with hay to trudge slowly through the intersection on its way to one of the numerous small hog farms in the area. But even if the lights were not there, if you knew this town, you would probably know the person on the other side of the intersection any way – the lights really seem to only be there for the occasional traveler or the rare individual who commutes to “Cincy” and must pass through twice a day in early morning or late evening hours.

It is here, in Leesburg, Ohio, that Candle-lite operates its candle-making facility as it has since 1952. I will not soon forget my first visit to the plant. When I had called to get directions, my notes ended up being a series of bullet points listing landmarks and geological features rather than state roads or street names.

- “go past the five metal silos”
- “at the old white farmhouse – with a fallen-in roof – turn left; the street sign is missing, but this is where you should turn”
- “when you get to the second railroad track, look for a right turn”

As I was not familiar with the geography of this part of the state, the directions were actually quite easy to follow. Obviously, I could have as easily found directions on mapquest.com, but the journey to the facility felt like I was following an ancient treasure map where “x” most assuredly would mark the spot. And mapquest.com would not have indicated as clearly that there was indeed a sharp turn to the left near the old white farm house with its fallen-in roof.

The building itself is a very prominent feature of the town of Leesburg – not necessarily a striking, architectural achievement, but large and not easily missed. In fact, it is not just one structure, but several and even the casual observer can readily see that the site has had numerous iterations and additions, with little concern for consistency in style and form. But within the walls of this Frankenstein-esque structure, votive, scented, taper, and other candles are produced for worldwide distribution. The company has built a reputation for quality products and fast service.

Signs throughout town direct trucks and visitors to the various shipping, human resources, and other areas of the business – there are multiple entrances to the sprawling facility. The largest parts of the facility are enormous metal buildings housing the actual manufacturing equipment while smaller, yet connected, parts are made of brick and house different administrative functions. A railroad track crosses right through the property permitting wheeled petroleum tanks to unload their cargo. For such a tiny Midwestern town, the facility is a substantial part of the town.

In this study, I am exploring the incredible change experienced by Candle-lite. They instituted significant culture change that went counter to their decades-old culture. Specifically, my question is *how did Candle-lite use stories to change their culture?*

My Own Story.

I first learned of Candle-lite from a colleague at Wilmington College where I teach. “You want a unique company who has gone through a swift culture change?” she asked. “Try Candle-lite just down the road.” With a couple of phone calls as an introduction expressing my interest in learning more about how they accomplished their extreme culture change, I was on my way past the five metal silos to meet Bob Higgins.

But, my interest in organizational culture certainly predates my meeting with Bob. My fascination found its incipiency in my early entrepreneurial ventures. At one point, I had nineteen full-time employees working in my firm in Dallas, Texas. We were small enough to know each other well, but large enough to have cliques and the usual amount of personality issues. However, though I did not fully comprehend the concept of organizational culture, I did know that I wanted to foster a laid-back environment that encouraged team work and creativity.

Years later, I had sold two of my companies and had joined Newell Rubbermaid. It was here that I learned more about the importance of culture in organizations as a phenomenon while I became intimately familiar with how one acclimates to a new culture. The culture at Newell Rubbermaid was aggressive, consisted of very long hours (80 to 100 hours per week), individualistic, and almost mean-spirited at times.

In both cases, entrepreneurial activities and Newell Rubbermaid, stories were told that embodied or some how attempted to communicate the existing culture. Candle-lite

has recently gone through a culture change and stories, according to Bob Higgins, were integral to the success of this transformation. As an outsider viewing culture in a specific firm, this presented a unique opportunity for me. Clearly, I approached this study with my inherent biases about culture from my own experiences and culture is difficult to assess and relate to as an outsider to that culture. But, through Higgins' openness and candor, much can be gleaned from this examination.

Bob Higgins: Storyteller.

Bob Higgins is not an imposing man. He has the joviality of someone who could readily don a Santa suit and entertain children at Christmas. With a steady smile and even an occasional Chris Cringle-like twinkle in his eye, Bob does not project the image of an aggressive, heavy-handed corporate executive. But then, that's because he's not. With a soft voice, leaning in toward me – he chose to sit on the same side of the desk as me for our initial meeting – he explained the situation faced by Candle-lite.

“In 2002, we were in as dire a state as we could be,” he said, shaking his head in recollection. Hands wringing like one remembering a particularly tragic event, Bob continued. “Throughout our 170 year history, we had enjoyed phenomenal growth rates – sometimes as much as 30% a year. But we didn't see the writing on the wall. As the 1990s came to a close, we noticed our growth rate in sales declining.” Even with his explanation, that twinkle in his eye remained vibrant. “Sure, we were making money,” he said. “But less and less each year. Then in 2002, we were hit with one piece of bad news after another. CVS Pharmacy would no longer carry our products. Then Kroger dropped us. K-Mart was next. Our business was eroding right under our feet. But we didn't react. Actually, we did nothing.”

The so-called “big box retailers” are the mainstay for consumer product companies. Typically in the shape of a giant cube (hence the name), these firms have become *the* means of selling major consumer brands throughout America and the world. Their names and logos are easily recognized by customers: Wal-Mart, Target, Lowe’s, Home Depot, and so forth. Before 2002, Candle-lite had a rich relationship with their major customers (the big box retailers) and as these retailers expanded, so did Candle-lite. But, as Bob was intimating, reliance on only a few major outlets means that the loss of even one could be devastating to the bottom line.

“Truthfully,” Bob said, “I don’t know how we even made it through the 1990s. With all of our overspending, outdated methods of manufacturing, and a tendency for extreme hierarchical organizational structures, we had been successful in spite of ourselves.” His frustration with the situation permeated even the constant eye twinkle. “By 2002, we knew something would have to change – or we would be no more.”

“It all came down to our culture,” Higgins continued. “Our culture had to change. And it had to change fast.” He felt that the only way the company’s strategy would improve was that a change in culture had to occur. The culture that had existed no longer fit in a globally competitive industry where low cost manufacturing meant low retail prices for consumers.

Organizational culture is a widely shared philosophy in an organization founded upon an ordered set of management beliefs and practices. It emphasizes people, but also identifies “heroes” and values in the organization. In addition, rituals and ceremonies that become integral parts of the company are important pieces of the identification of corporate culture (Deal and Kennedy, 2000). From a strategic standpoint, a strong

culture will enable employees to feel better about what they do, which ultimately means they will be more productive (Deal and Kennedy, 2000).

Company Background.

Candle-lite began in Cincinnati, Ohio over 160 years ago when Thomas Emery sold candles and other household items door-to-door in 1838. By 1840, he had established the Emery Candle Company. Over a hundred years later in 1953, the company changed its name to Candle-lite and in 1972, Lancaster Colony Corporation purchased the firm and added it to its line of household product companies. Figure 1 illustrates a time-line of Candle-lite from its inception to the present day.

Today, Candle-lite produces approximately 300 candles per minute in its three-shift operation. However, regardless of the number manufactured, the company still requires strong sales to earn profits. Competition has been a major factor on Candle-lite's ability to succeed in the U.S. market. Primary competition for candle products comes from China and has steadily increased as fewer U.S. sanctions are placed on imports from China. China has become the "workshop of the world" ("Is the Waking Giant a Monster?", 2004, p. 63). To enhance their positioning in the world market, China enjoys extremely low wage rates. The minimum monthly wage in the Guangdong region of China, for example, is \$63.75. In the U.S., the minimum monthly wage is \$893 (and that is for a 40-hour work week; in China, the work week may be as much as 80 hours) ("Sweating," 2003, p. 14). What's more, according to Higgins, "The Chinese government owns the paraffin wax production. And they give the paraffin wax to candle manufacturers free of charge, so their raw material costs are negligible."

One way Candle-lite has attempted to effectively compete with international sales has been in a new process that eliminates the use of beeswax altogether. In 1970, the company began production of candles using a new product called *prill*. Prill is paraffin-based and comes in small pellets only an eighth of an inch in diameter. The beads are heavily compressed into molds and because of the high compression, candles burn longer and more even than standard paraffin wax products.

Candle making in the U.S. is a \$2.3 billion industry and contrary to many product categories, has experienced a 17% increase in sales since September 11, 2001 (Schmitt, 2002, p. 35). And according to the National Candle Association, of the 350 major commercial, religious, and institutional manufacturers of candles based in the U.S., Candle-lite is the largest (NCA). This places Candle-lite in an even greater precarious position because without major changes, they would lose their enviable position in the marketplace.

Figure 1: Time-line for Candle-lite

- 1832 Thomas Emery, Senior immigrates from London to Connecticut
- 1833 Emery arrives in Cincinnati and opens a real estate and money agent office
- 1838 The Panic of 1837 causes Emery to fold his offices, but he quickly rebounds by selling household goods door-to-door
- 1840 Emery's candle business flourishes as he discovers a ready supply of raw material: fat and oil byproducts of the meat processing facilities in and around Cincinnati; the new firm is called Emery Candle Company
- 1843 Emery develops new process for candle-making resulting in a longer burning product
- 1857 Emery falls four floors to his death inside his downtown Cincinnati factory. Thomas Emery, Junior takes over the family business.

- 1925 The company's name is changed by Thomas Emery, Senior's grandson, John Emery. The new name is Thomas Emery's Sons, Inc. and reflects the diversified nature of the company, which now includes real estate, apartments, chemicals, and hotels.
- 1952 Operations are moved from Cincinnati to Leesburg, Ohio when it is purchased by Al Levinson and John Margo. The name is changed to Candle-lite.
- 1970 An entirely new material is introduced by Candle-lite to replace paraffin wax. It is called *prill*.
- 1972 Lancaster Colony Corporation, a diversified consumer products company purchases Candle-lite.
- 1988 Automatic packing equipment is purchased, replacing manual packing procedures.
- 1993 The glass line is expanded to meet increased consumer demand.
- 2003 After numerous additions, the company now encompasses 1.1 million square feet of manufacturing, warehouse, and distribution space.

- Compiled from company personnel, website, *Cincinnati Post*, and the book *Rich in Good Works* by Millard Rogers.

Candle-lite's Former Culture.

Bob Higgins joined Candle-lite twenty years ago as Plant Manager. "Truthfully," he stated, "in those days, all I had to worry about was keeping up with production. Even though I recognized that our style of management was not solid, it didn't matter. We were simply pushing product out of the door as quickly as we could make it."

The management style Higgins referred to can best be described as autocratic with ample amounts of bureaucracy permeating the organization. Even routine decisions wove their way through layers of management, often becoming stalled, or completely forgotten about. Larry Senn and John R. Childress in their book, *The Secret of a Winning Culture*, list bureaucratic, hierarchical structures as one of eleven cultural barriers that

cause change initiatives to fail (Senn and Childress, 1999). Another pair of researchers state that a stifling bureaucracy is not an effective means of keeping operational activities under control (Kotter and Heskett, 1992). For Candle-lite, the burdensome bureaucracy was clearly impeding progress.

In addition, change was a concept seemingly foreign to Candle-lite. “We did what we did,” Higgins said, “because that was the way it had always been done.” It was more than complacency that created this environment. The status quo was maintained through the power structure of the company. “Authority was everywhere, but accountability could not be found,” Higgins added. Accountability is the general notion that an employee’s actions or inaction determine success or lack of success (Senn and Childress, 1999). Authority and power are often confused, but authority is something that must be earned (Hesselbein, et. al., 1996). At Candle-lite, the issue was that few people actually *earned* the authority they possessed.

The company was paralyzed by departmentalization. This created an environment at Candle-lite that was slow and unresponsive. “We could not have made changes if we wanted to,” Higgins lamented, “because departments were in a protectionism mode.” In other words, various departments worked against one another rather than with them. An example of this can be found with the Maintenance and Engineering departments. Prior to the sweeping changes Candle-lite would eventually make, Maintenance, Engineering, and Production were autonomous. Maintenance worked on those problems they chose to resolve, as did Engineering. If Production had an issue, they waited in line after projects for the front office, warehouse, or any other area of the company. Of this, Higgins said, “We were an environment of lost opportunities – we didn’t tackle those opportunities that

would have facilitated our success.” If a machine along the production line was incapacitated, there was no reason for Maintenance or Engineering to make repair of the equipment a priority.

Higgins also points to what was measured in the organization. Many companies realize that what is measured is precisely what is carried out by employees. However, companies are often missing the mark when it comes to specific targeted measures. At Candle-lite, “no one knew what the goals, values, or mission of the company was,” said Higgins. A solid set of values will define a company’s primary goals and determine how those goals are carried out (Frederick, 1995). A mission, on the other hand, is similar to a “snapshot” of the company – it explains *who* and *what* the company is. Therefore, goals, values, and a well-crafted mission are critical if a company is to surround itself with a healthy culture combined with a forward-thinking strategy. As an example of flawed measurement practices, departmental managers received financial statements on performance once each month for the prior month. “This meant that we were unable to react to problems swiftly,” Higgins stated. “The data was old and meant so very little by the time we received it.”

One measurement Higgins identifies as ineffective was the practice of producing efficiency reports. “Supervisors learned to play the numbers so that their efficiency reports looked stellar,” Higgins revealed. Efficiency in a manufacturing sense is essentially a measure of how much a given machine is operating. In other words, the number of candles produced did not matter – only how many hours in an 8-hour shift the equipment was running. “Changeovers, cleanings, and mechanical problems were not

accurately reflected in the efficiency reports,” he said. “What we thought was a good day was mediocre at best.”

The impact of this cultural mix upon the strategy of the manufacturing division is four-fold. First, because Candle-lite did not possess a culture of measurement, they were forced to rely on past practices for their operational strategy. For example, because financial statements and labor analyses were so outdated and underutilized, a change of any kind was difficult. Often, change in strategy would have been too late anyway, so the company continued with the same operational philosophies that they had implemented years ago.

Second, even the structure of the manufacturing organization created a culture that adversely affected their strategy. As an illustration, layers of management meant that routine decisions were slow to be made because those decisions required approval from upper management. Therefore, if a new idea from the plant floor emerged to enhance production, it was frequently stalled upon the desk of some mid-level manager. After experiencing delays or even complete dismissal of ideas, fewer suggestions came from the front line.

Third, the old culture created an environment where excuses were readily accepted and when issues arose, few took responsibility for their actions. This severely limited the ability of manufacturing to discover root causes to problems. Instead, according to Higgins, as conflict emerged, the emphasis was not on what caused the problem or even how it could be resolved. Rather, those involved denied any active participation or placed the blame squarely on someone else.

Finally, and probably most paramount, their culture of departmentalization and self-protection meant that the manufacturing division's strategy could never move forward. As Higgins points out, when machinery became disabled, both Maintenance and Engineering were either slow to respond or simply never did. Equipment went unchecked and as long as these two departments reported to individuals in the front office (and not Production), few efforts were going to be made for those on the front line. Priorities clearly were not related to manufacturing products, but on "keeping busy with simply tasks, rather than on those major projects that would have improved production."

This was the culture of Candle-lite in 2001. Change seemed impossible. Higgins recognized a strong need to change if the company was going to compete with the products arriving in American stores from China. But any proposed change would be met with strong resistance from the staff and might be too late to have an effective impact. However, if operations were to continue down the same path, the company would most likely close its business. Something had to change, and it had to change immediately.

Candle-lite's New Culture.

"Where and how does one begin to change a culture that is over 160 years old?" Bob Higgins asked himself and his coworkers in 2001.

It was indeed a daunting task. Candle-lite had become an institution unto itself; the firm languished in old management practices while looking with disdain at 21st century ideas of managing a business. It was as if the company had embraced many long-standing styles of managing simply because they were all that were known. Higgins though, was determined to turn the company around, or lose his twenty-year job trying.

Higgins looked outside Candle-lite for guidance. “I began by examining popular tools of management,” said Higgins. “There seemed to be hundreds of books, seminars, and consultants promoting such concepts as Six Sigma, Lean Manufacturing, Re-engineering, Just-In-Time, Quality Circles, Total Quality Management, Management by Walking Around, and countless other fads.” The problem Higgins discovered was that all of these seemed to be prepackaged programs that Candle-lite would take “off the shelf” and implement, hoping they would be successful. “We needed something tailored specifically for our company in our situation,” Higgins said. “Though we tried several of these, and spent thousands of dollars, none took us to the level we were looking for, or they were too cumbersome to manage effectively.”

One consulting firm, however, provided a very simple approach that Candle-lite was willing to try. Midwest Manufacturing Solutions (MMS), based in Mason, Ohio suggested that Candle-lite brainstorm a list of all the problems they had in the manufacturing division of the firm. Then from that list, they should determine one problem to tackle. The idea was that the company had been trying to impact the entire company in a single broad stroke; instead, they should go for a small victory. “It seemed too easy,” Higgins recalled. “When I met with the executive team of Candle-lite to make the proposal, some scoffed because the approach was too simple. Others said that by focusing on only one problem, too many others would slip by. Still more said that we would never be able to get everyone to agree what single problem should be approached first.” Nevertheless, Higgins moved forward.

Bringing representatives from throughout the manufacturing division into a meeting, Higgins laid out his plan. He told the group that it was time to set egos aside

and engage in forward thinking. He reminded them how sales had slipped about 30%, that manufacturing costs were increasing too rapidly, that a recessive economy was a variable they would have to accept, and finally that tired, old ways of managing the business were behind them. It was a difficult speech for everyone to hear. “I’ll never forget their faces,” Higgins remembered. “They looked at each other, then stared at me. I suspected many in the room were thinking these were probably my last days with Candle-lite!”

The team spent that afternoon brainstorming all major problems in manufacturing at Candle-lite. Surprisingly, egos were indeed set aside, and important issues were identified without assessing blame on any one particular person or department. After a lengthy list was established, they narrowed the problems down to the top three that would have the greatest impact on production. The criterion for selection was that a topical problem would be one that, if solved, would increase speed of production and quality of products.

Ultimately, from their list of three, they chose to examine the votive line. A votive is any small candle, usually less than three inches high. The problem with this line of products was that it was a vital line for Candle-lite, but the process was slow. The machine that produced the votives had a capacity of 200 candles per minute according to the original manufacturer’s specifications. However in 2001, on its best days, it was only producing 160 per minute. Higgins stated, “The folks on the production line had no idea how many candles the machine could potentially make. They thought the max was 160. Engineering said it was impossible for the machine to physically manufacture more than 160 a minute. And Maintenance warned us that if the process was sped up, the machine

would break down.” Higgins added facetiously, “After all, the machine broke once before when an attempt was made to increase its speed – *ten years* earlier!”

The votive line is the company’s premier line and it garnered the highest sales volume and profit margin. It was critical that Candle-lite try to improve the capacity for production in this area. Throughput of this machine would be Higgins’ first test of change.

Meeting after meeting, Higgins ran into resistance. “No matter what the specifications indicated,” he said, “every person said it would not work to increase the capacity.” Finally, he convinced his coworkers that they should at least try. Reluctance and portents of doom filled the air on the day they made the attempt.

“You know what happened?” Higgins smiled. “Production went forward at 200 candles per minute. It wasn’t impossible. The machine did not burn up. It worked.”

Certainly, employees had to change certain aspects of their procedures to meet the increased capacity. Set-ups, change-overs, and production efforts were streamlined to maintain the new production target. But despite these modifications, it was clear that Higgins was on to something.

And then Higgins started to tell this story again and again. In meetings, Higgins would tell how so many opposed the idea of ramping up the machine to 200 candles per minute, but that when it was implemented, everything was fine. Nothing bad happened. It was a story that embodied the new culture. The new culture would be one of innovation – of trying something and testing it without immediately scoffing at the idea. With new employees coming into the company, he would address them in new hire orientation, telling them about this story. “We want you, with your fresh eyes,” he would

say, “to look around and see how we can improve this place.” Thus, even those who were brand new in the company were hearing the story and relating to its implications.

“Ok, what’s next on our list?” he asked. “What can we improve now?” Higgins had a win and he was not going to let the momentum die down. Eventually, Candle-lite took this new problem solving approach to six more product lines. Each time, they determined the maximum opportunity they could extract from the line and did anything they could to ensure the maximum was achieved.

“Though the concept was simple,” Higgins cautioned, “ a lot of work and conflict went into each problem solving event.” It was obvious from the beginning that some people would be for the changes and some would not. He began telling a story of another company to illustrate his point. “This small company out West wanted to begin making a new paperclip,” his story began. “They had been making the same paperclip for a hundred years, completely unchanged. But a few people in the organization had an idea for a new paperclip. It wasn’t especially revolutionary, but it did look different and it did the job well. There were some in the paperclip company who said, ‘sure, let’s try it’ and there were some who said the whole idea stinks and it will fail. But, the decision was made to move forward with the new paperclip idea – regardless of opinions. It became clear to the managers at the paperclip company that the conflict was too great among the employees and even some of the other managers. So, the President of the paperclip company gave an ultimatum. He said, ‘ok, we can bicker about this new paperclip until we are blue in the face, or we can give it a try and see what happens. If you’re on board with trying this new idea, we would enjoy working side-by-side with you on our team. If not, it’s been a good working relationship, but we wish you well on your next career

opportunity.’ Some employees did leave the paperclip company. Most did not. They gave the new idea a try and though it did not revolutionize the paperclip industry, it did increase their sales.”

Clearly, this story had an undertone that even an uninvolved outsider can easily detect. Higgins explained to all employees in the manufacturing division that radical changes were coming and those who fought those changes would not be part of the company’s future. “It was a very tough stance,” he recalled, “one that many people did not expect, given the company’s history.”

Employees did leave the company – some voluntarily, others were terminated. “When a culture change occurs,” he said, “you have to change some of the people, too. In our case, we turned over about 20% of the workforce – from front line employees to top managers.” Major affectations of culture require commitment. This requires a focus on attitudes and values, as well as seeking buy-in to the change (Kunde, 2000). Maintaining a workforce that is committed to the culture of the organization is key. According to the National Research Council, businesses attempt to eliminate those “most likely to be disruptive to their cultures” (Druckman, Singer, and Van Cott, 1997, p. 78). For Candle-lite, a change in personnel was expected. Higgins realized early on that not every employee would have buy-in to the comprehensive changes in store for the company.

One way both culture and strategy were impacted was how authority was reconfigured. “Life in the company became uncomfortable,” Higgins said. “People were uncomfortable because decisions had to be made *now*. Those who formerly held all the power – including myself – had to relinquish it. If we were going to make quick

decisions, management could no longer stand in the way.” According to William C. Frederick, a researcher into managers’ values and ethics, “the pragmatic authoritarianism that suffers corporate culture typically turns the company’s power brokers toward expansionist goals” (Frederick, 1995). It is this managerial approach (overzealous expansionism) that created a weak culture for Candle-lite. Removing, altering, and impacting the old way of managing enabled Higgins to affect significant change in the organization.

All of this is not to say that each problem solving effort was seamlessly implemented. “On the second product line,” Higgins said, “the machine *did* break, as some had predicted. Immediately, people said ‘I told you so,’ but Maintenance repaired it and we continued. Eventually, people had to adjust. We proved that change could happen.” When Kotter and Heskett examined ten major *Fortune 500* firms, they found that “the single most visible factor that distinguishes major cultural changes that succeed from those that fail is competent leadership at the top” (Kotter and Heskett, 1992, p. 84). In true humble leadership fashion, Higgins reluctantly accepts this notion as he stated, “It was the employees who made the real difference. They learned to work smarter, not harder.”

In addition to examining major problems, solving them, and then moving on to the next, Candle-lite created a culture of measurement. “We had measured things before,” Higgins stated, “such as financials and efficiencies. But those were always outdated or meaningless to help us improve.” The company, with input from employees, developed new meaningful measurements and crafted highly visible boards depicting those measurements. Figure 2 illustrates a sample measurement board from the third

shift of the plant. It compares the goal of 191 candles per hour in the votive line to the actual number produced. Employees in each workstation update the boards every hour. It takes only a minute to maintain these boards, but the information is a constant, current visual representation of performance. The boards became an extension of the problem solving process because if any deviation occurs from one hour to the next, solutions can instantly be found that will impact the next hour of production. Higgins summed up impressions of the boards by saying, “Anyone – from employees to management – can walk around the plant and immediately see how production is moving along. Corrections are on the spot. We no longer have to wait a month or more to see how we’re doing today.”

Figure 2: Sample Measurement Board for Votives, 3rd Shift

<u>Date</u>	<u>Hour</u>	<u>Plan</u>	<u>Actual</u>	<u>%</u>
3/3	10:45-11:45	191	160	84
	11:45-12:45	191	185	97
	12:45-1:45	191	180	94
	1:45-2:45	191	188	98
	2:45-3:45	191	179	94
	3:45-4:45	191	182	95
	4:45-5:45	191	185	97
	5:45-6:45	191	190	99

Beyond visual representations, Candle-lite has even changed *what* they measure. No longer is efficiency the key measurement for manufacturing. Instead, “effective capacity” drives the production process. Efficiency essentially measures how long a machine is in operation. But effective capacity analyzes the number of candles produced in a given time period. The objective is to get as close to 100% effective capacity as possible. In other words, Candle-lite wants to produce the maximum number of candles

as determined by the machines' capabilities. Higgins said, "Effective capacity gives us a more accurate picture of our operations. At this point, we consider 90% and above as a satisfactory goal. Obviously, we would like it to be consistently in the high 90s, but the improvement over two years ago is remarkable considering where we were. As we progress, the bar for acceptable standards will rise."

To enhance communication, not only between departments but between shifts as well, Higgins implemented *transition meetings*. These are brief, fifteen-minute meetings with representatives from Production, Engineering, Maintenance, Quality Control, and Support Staff present. "The idea behind these meetings," Higgins said, "is to make sure everyone is on the same page at the start and end of every shift. We designed them to overlap in time from first shift to second shift, from second to third, and from third to first." Topics for these meetings include problems that may have been encountered during the shift, best practices discovered, and any other information that will enhance the production of the subsequent shift. "It is in these meetings that I tell success stories and talk about 'heroes' in the plant. They're just stories, but they are still powerful messages."

A strong culture will have meetings that become ritualistic, but clearly "dramatize cultural beliefs and values" (Deal and Kennedy, 2000, p. 72). Higgins' transition meetings have become an important part of doing business. They no longer are thought of as "prescheduled meetings," but truly a part of the culture. And they have become an easy venue to relate stories to the employees.

In a very strategic move, Higgins took the bold step of changing the organizational chart of the manufacturing division. Production, Maintenance, and

Engineering had historically been autonomous. Higgins moved Maintenance and Engineering to report to the Plant Manager (i.e., Production). “Egos were definitely bruised,” Higgins admitted. “But the plant floor had to come first. It was silly for Maintenance to spend three hours rewiring a desk lamp for a front office manager while production was stopped on the floor of the plant.” Higgins stated that “this became my stock story. When it seemed someone might not be working on something value-added, I would tell the story of the Maintenance Department working on that stupid desk lamp while a hundred employees sat idle on the production line – that story works time and time again to keep people focused on what really needs to be done.”

In effect, Higgins was relying less on departmentalization and bringing the focus to what mattered: production. “We finally became a team,” Higgins said. He has clearly been the driving force. Deal and Kennedy (2000) have researched one effect of building a strong team. After studying scores of large, multinational corporations, they have discovered that as individuals on the team become closer, personal ties become secure. As this happens, individuals share more about themselves, and as the sharing increases, the team becomes even stronger resulting in a potent corporate culture.

Beyond just team building, there was a renewed focus on recognizing employees for their contributions to the company. It is now an integral part of the culture of Candle-lite. “When we surveyed our employees,” Higgins recalled, “they said higher pay would be nice, or even better incentives, but what they really wanted was someone to recognize them. We have an annual awards ceremony now and we also ensure that star employees are reminded of their value to the company. It’s a simple concept we forgot

about long ago. But now we have it back again and it shows in the morale of our workforce.”

Teamwork, improved communication, recognition, measuring for success, problem solving, and changes in authority were huge steps for Candle-lite. They were all new ventures for a company formerly deteriorating in an outdated culture of blame, autocratic management styles, and a general lackadaisical attitude. But were these steps enough to garner true strategic success for the firm? And how did the telling of stories maintain the forward progress?

Results.

In 2001, the future of Candle-lite looked bleak. Facing a 30% decline in sales and increasing costs, plus fierce competition from China, it seemed impossible to imagine Candle-lite continuing operations much longer. However, with strong changes initiated by Higgins, the company has indeed turned things around. In 2004, sales were back to pre-2001 levels. In addition, they have taken their cost savings problem solving approaches to most areas of the plant. For example, in the Glass Department, employees have found ways to cut costs by 55%. This translates to a \$1,000,000 annualized savings to this single department. And while costs have declined, the Glass Department has increased production capacity by 60%.

“Our culture is palpably different,” Higgins said. “Everyone notices it. Managers are now out of their ivory tower offices and on the plant floor. People are accountable. We’re a culture of action and a culture of measurement.” Indeed, turnover is now averaging approximately 5% -- an incredible figure given the typical nature of manufacturing environments. Furthermore, a shared set of values and vision emerged.

Employees developed a sense of belonging to Candle-lite and wanted to perpetuate those values and the vision of the company.

So far, Candle-lite has taken Higgins' approach to most of the manufacturing division, but they still have other areas of the company that require a committed problem solving plan. The Sales and Marketing departments are targeted next for brainstorming a list of problems. It is hoped that the success experienced in Manufacturing will also occur in other areas of the company.

Reflections.

Higgins notes, in his humble fashion, that the achievements at Candle-lite were not accomplished by him alone. He readily points to the people in the company who made it happen and puts all the accolades upon them. He does, however, see himself as a driving force through his storytelling. "Sure," he said, "we could have eventually gotten here – well, maybe – just by sheer will alone. But, stories of our successes and even stories that that might provide an analogy of where we could fail were important."

So how were stories used to change the culture at Candle-lite? First, Higgins recognized that there was a time for them. He could not just relate a story willy-nilly and hope that employees would find applicability in what he was saying. For example, when he told the "paperclip" story to employees, the timing was crucial. It was a make-or-break moment and that very story showed employees that change was inevitable – they could either be a part of that change or look for employment elsewhere.

Second, Higgins selected and told stories that reinforced the behaviors that would become integral to the new culture. For instance, when he would repeatedly retell how the votive line increased capacity without the machinery failing, it was a way of saying

“ok, you’re right, this might fail, but let’s try it first before we declare the situation hopeless.” By retelling the story again and again, Higgins was reinforcing and encouraging new cultural norms for innovation.

And third, Higgins sought and found venues for effective storytelling. He discovered that the newly instituted *transition meeting* was the perfect place to tell stories. It was as if he had a captive audience that fed off of every word. Stories were selected for their ability to continue motivating employees and those that highlighted those employees who had gone above and beyond.

In my conversations with Higgins, I was struck by his ability to be the individual inside the organization – the frontline-in-the-trenches person – who can also look at the organization with an outsider’s lens. He could see the big picture while being deep within the company immersed in minute details. As a researcher developing this portrait, I had to be careful of getting too close to the storytelling aspect of this study. Unlike Higgins, I found myself (perhaps because of my own business background) wanting to learn more about the machinations of progress rather than stepping back and looking at the broader picture. Storytelling, in this study, was clearly integral to Candle-lite’s success – Higgins readily admits this. But it is not a panacea that can work in every situation with the same astounding results as were achieved here. For Higgins, it was a tool – and remains a tool. Storytelling can indeed impact a change in culture, but it cannot accomplish this feat alone. New procedures, new policies, new approaches, and even new people are all part of the process.

Chapter V: Discussion of the Four Portraits: Emergent Themes

The purpose of this research study was to look at the organizational cultures of four companies and their use of stories in either maintaining or changing their culture. It looks at the kinds of stories these firms tell that either keep a strong culture in place or are involved in affecting a culture change. Skyline Chili is a small franchise employing fewer than 30 individuals. Their culture is a laid-back, highly communicative culture with an omnipresent manager and owner. Their portrait demonstrated what stories were told that were emblematic in maintaining that culture. Cintas is also interested in maintaining their culture. Theirs is a decades-old culture with prescribed aspects to their culture based upon four generations of family ownership. Through a published book on their culture, intensive cultural orientations, and repeated training sessions, they maintain a strong culture of performance. However, National Bank & Trust (NB&T) is a culture in transition. Their portrait illustrated how the culture is slowly evolving now that a new CEO has arrived. Stories abound about those who have adapted to the changing culture and those who have not. In addition, some stories were captured that showed how the bank is making subtle changes to the culture as the bank sheds some of its old practices. Finally, Candle-lite is a company that has changed its culture. Driven by an individual desperate to see the company he spent 20 years with change its ways in order to survive, it is a portrait of change-or-fade-away.

In this chapter, six key emergent themes cut across the four companies and provide some insight into the nature of storytelling among a changing culture or one that is to be kept in place. Here, there are comparisons of the stories and cultures as well as notations about how they differ. Next, the limitations associated with this research are

presented. And finally, a section on possibilities for future research is given in light of the emergent themes presented here and as a way to perhaps ameliorate some of the limitations discussed.

Emergent Themes

According to Lawrence-Lightfoot (1997), “the development of emergent themes reflects the portraitist’s first efforts to bring interpretive insight, analytic scrutiny, and aesthetic order to the collection of data” (p. 185). Each portrait, if it were to stand alone, can certainly provide data to make some very broad generalizations. But, combined with the other three, patterns begin to reveal themselves. Commonalities among the stories told and the nature of the organizational cultures become more than just nebulous concepts – they become a handhold in the darkness of the data. There were many avenues that could have been explored in these four portraits, but I have selected six primary areas of convergent threads to discuss. These six reveal the culmination of my research into the nature of storytelling among cultures that are maintained and those that are changed.

Organizational Culture is Not So Easily Defined

As I spent time with each of the participants examined in this study, it became apparent right away that defining the organizational culture was not an easy process. And why should it be? Schein (1997) points out that the concept of organizational culture is a very complex phenomenon. When I asked participants to describe the culture of their organization, many would say, “What do you mean?” I would clarify in various ways or provide examples of the cultures of other companies that served as a prompter for their own interpretations of their culture. However, probably the most effective way

to word this question was, “If I were a friend of yours and I told you that I was thinking of applying to your company, what would you tell me when I asked, ‘what is it like to work here?’” This question immediately solicited responses that effectively described the culture of the organization. This is the same approach that Jones (1996) describes when faced with how to solicit from participants a description of an organization’s culture. However, as in the portrait of Cintas, when I presented this question to Poepelmeier, he responded with the well-rehearsed description of the culture from the *Spirit is the Difference* book, virtually word-for-word. I recall asking him to give his own interpretation of the culture or what the book meant, and he continued to provide the standard answer to describe the culture. “What else could our culture be? It’s what we teach our employees in orientation, training classes, and in meetings,” he replied. This kind of response in itself reflects the rigid culture that Cintas has created.

But aside from Cintas, participants in the other companies struggled with this question. Trying to coherently describe their organizational culture typically began with short one- or two-word descriptors such as *fast-paced*, *team-oriented*, and *laid-back*. From these descriptors, participants would slowly expand upon their idea of what their culture was like, but it was a slow process. Some even gave sentiments such as, “I don’t think I’ve ever thought about this before.” In the end, when the final portraits were presented to the participants, each agreed that what we had established accurately described their organizational culture. Comparing these to Cintas, the difference may lie in the fact that Cintas is a large, conglomerate corporation while the other three are much smaller organizations. With Cintas, the imparting of the culture – whether through stories or through the artifacts of the company – is more prescribed through training

sessions, meetings, and even a published book on the culture. In the other three firms, the culture is more absorbed through stories, with less formality on being “told” what the culture is at Skyline, Candle-lite, or NB&T.

Still, this was a part of the learning process that surprised me. Intuitively, I approached the study surmising that participants would readily be able to describe their organizational culture. Again, except for Cintas, this was not the case. Looking back at the review of the literature, this should not be as surprising as it was to me. After all, Schein (1999) indicated that members of the organization have difficulty describing their culture: “They cannot readily tell you what their culture is, any more than fish, if they could talk, could tell you what water is” (p. 21).

This in itself is an intriguing part of organizational research. Attempting to put into words that nebulous, abstract concept of culture is inherently a difficult process. All of us have worked in organizations, and we know *what it was like to work there*. But the opportunity to conceptualize that working climate rarely comes along. If it does, it may be part of a specific incident or a particular colleague that serves as the basis of that conceptualization. Steph, the manager at Skyline Chili, when presented with this topic, spent several minutes thinking about her response. On our first meeting, she even asked me if we could come back to that as she would like to continue pondering what the culture of her location was like. It was not until our second meeting that she began to use terms such as *laid-back* and *open communication* to ease into her description of the organizational culture.

Culture Emanates from the Top

Two companies in this study, Candle-lite and NB&T, have experienced a culture change or are currently going through such a change. In both cases, these changes were initiated and implemented from the top down. In the portrait of Candle-lite, Bob Higgins was instrumental in changing a century-old culture to one that became of culture of measuring performance so that the company could be competitive with foreign companies. He was the driver of this process and, fortunately, had buy-in from the president of the organization to follow-through with his ideas. Similarly, at NB&T, the new CEO has precipitated a strong culture shift. Holding employees accountable for the actions, performance, and decisions is causing a major culture change throughout the organization as it trickles down the management hierarchy. Plus, there are subtle changes that the CEO has instituted that are affecting the culture of NB&T. Removing reserved parking and having the executive team in their offices on Friday rather than playing golf sends a nuanced message to employees throughout the bank that the culture is changing from one laden with entitlement to one that strives for equity. These stories, though, capture the essence of a changing culture. This research supports what Alvesson and Willmott (2004) found in their study as they attempted to evaluate how top managers impart identity among managers through the language they use. Just as the CEO at NB&T instituted subtle changes in the bank, the participants in the Alvesson and Willmott study noticed that the very words used by top managers influence the culture of the organization.

These two organizations demonstrate well how efforts beginning at the top of the organization emanate to the rest of the organization. However, it is evident that without

support from the very top of the organization, these culture changes may not be as effective. In the case of NB&T, the new CEO is the driving force behind these changes, and so far has maintained the support of the Board of Directors. Tom MacDonald, a vice president reporting to the new CEO, has received the benefit of this trickle-down effect and is carrying on the culture changes in his area. Similarly, Bob Higgins at Candle-lite has shown that with the support of the president of the company, sweeping changes can take place that directly impact the culture and ultimately the performance of the organization. Also, since NB&T and Candle-lite are two firms that are dealing with changes in culture, they have created a sense of trepidation among some of the staff. Some may feel that if they do not change and become a better fit with the culture, then their jobs could be lost. The stories they hear about the evolving (or evolved) culture may create a culture of fear as they consider their future with these firms.

Though Cintas and Skyline are not and have not recently changed their culture, the endeavors to maintain the existing culture remain at the top of the organization. In the portrait of Cintas, Poeppelmeier is several levels of management below the CEO, yet he takes on a “keeper of the culture” role because the CEO clearly supports the maintenance of the culture his great-grandfather started when the firm first came into existence. As for Skyline, Nader and Steph keep their laid-back, communicative culture through their hiring practices and their own management styles. In contrast, Cintas has a culture that is almost *by design* in that it is very prescribed, published, and communicated on a regular basis. Skyline, though, has a culture that has *emerged* on its own. The culture at Cintas was established decades ago, while Skyline’s developed slowly due to the influences of Nader and Steph, but is not formally communicated as it is at Cintas.

Whether the firms are working to keep their existing culture or desperately trying to change, these four portraits illustrate that all these efforts begin at the top of the organization.

Stories about Culture Are Numerous

Though participants may have had some difficulty in describing the culture of their respective organization, they had no trouble offering stories that embodied that culture. Stories are provocative conveyances that perpetuate the myths and images of the individuals within the organization (Gardner, 1995). This was true with every participant at each of the four firms. Individuals such as MacDonald at NB&T are natural storytellers who readily tossed out stories for every point he wanted to make about the organizational culture of his bank. He often began a response with, “Let me tell you a story about...” As for Steph and Shelly at Skyline, they had numerous stories as well. Most did not appear in the portrait because the vast majority of their stories were about either above-and-beyond service to the customer or the management styles of Steph and Nader. However, their profuse storytelling made it easy to select representative stories to include in the portrait of Skyline. Likewise, Bob Higgins and Chad Poeppelmeier, at Candle-lite and Cintas respectively, could readily retrieve and tell a story that illustrated aspects of the culture of these companies.

Admittedly, based upon conversations with friends and colleagues at for-profit companies and my fifteen years of corporate and entrepreneurial experience, I approached this study with the belief that *storytelling* was too “feely-touchy” a term to be accepted by participants. I just assumed that I would have to use terms such as *best practices* or *anecdotes* to solicit the kinds of responses I would need for this

investigation. However, my first interaction with Candle-lite and subsequently the other three companies proved that stories were acceptable forms of communication that adequately share the various facets of organizational culture. My assumption was probably stronger for Cintas because it is so large and more corporate-like than the other three. But, even asking, “Can you tell me a story that illustrates this?” did not receive eye-rolls or quizzical looks. Rather, participants eagerly had a story at the ready to respond. This is in line with Gabriel’s (2000) study of a research and publishing firm, where it was clear in the study that individuals readily provide meaning to an incident or event through their own interpretations. Participants in Gabriel’s study were able to tell immediate stories that gave insight into various individuals’ interpretations of events. Similarly, as mentioned in Chapter II, there was a mid-level manager at 3M who decided in one meeting to turn off the projector and instead tell a story to the executive level managers. Even though there were whispers of impending doom for this man’s career, he told his story anyway and was granted the buy-in he was seeking (Shaw et al., 1998). Therefore, stories appear to be an acceptable form of conveyance of information, and as these four portraits illustrate, also about the culture of an organization.

Histories of Organizations Are Stories

As research continued into these four companies, I discovered that each had fascinating histories that participants were willing and excited to share. These histories were often told in story format with characters (often CEOs or managers), plot lines (arrival of a new top executive or handing over the keys of the company), as well as a climax to the story (closing of locations or adding of new ones). As Gabriel (2000) states, “Stories are narratives with plots and characters, generating emotion in narrator

and audience, through a poetic elaboration of symbolic material” (p. 239). Cintas is a perfect example of this. The history of Cintas is long and interesting and I spent a great deal of time capturing the history of this company because that story in itself is part of the Cintas culture. According to Poeppelmeier, all employees know that the founder of the company was a prizefighting boxer on the Ohio River during the Great Depression. As the company changed hands from father to son, the company continued to grow and each successive generation of CEOs have left their mark on the company, while retaining the same organizational culture that is decades old. Even in the Cintas book, *Spirit is the Difference*, the engaging history of the company is detailed for the reader in story format.

NB&T may have a history that goes back to 1859, but it is the recent history that is readily cited by participants. The story of the retirement of the old CEO and the arrival of the new one was told with a “and then this happened”-format. Participants could identify steps along the way in the last three to five years that have caused the bank to evolve and change its culture. These events did not seem to be viewed as isolated circumstances, but an unfolding story that continues to have new pages written on a daily basis as the company is transitioning to a new culture.

For Candle-lite, with its long, storied history, capturing it in the form of time-line (Figure 1) seemed important to understand the many iterations the firm has gone through. Higgins, who has been with the firm for twenty years, is part of its relatively recent history. The changes he has made to the manufacturing division of the company has become part of the history of the firm and when he is no longer part of Candle-lite, his efforts will still be recognized as significant milestones in the company.

Still, Skyline, which has the shortest history of the firms examined, has a story that embodies that short history. Nader's story of arriving in America from Egypt, working diligently at a number of restaurants and saving up money to invest in his own franchise is a story unto itself. The hiring of Steph who has become the manager of the store is part of that history. These events become the lore and folklore of the organization. From a larger perspective, Skyline Chili – not just Nader's franchise, but the entire company – has a storied association with the city of Cincinnati. Its very name derives from the downtown skyline of the city and those who have spent their lives in this part of Ohio know well the story of how Skyline was started by a Greek immigrant, adding a Midwestern flair to the old family recipes of the Mediterranean.

In all four of these firms, participants could easily tell the story of their company. In every case, this history embodied the very culture of the organization. Just as Dougherty and Kunda (1990) made observations about the photographic artifacts of organizations representing the identity of the firms in question, these stories on the histories of the organizations are also artifacts that reveal the identities of the four participating companies. This was definitely an "ah ha" moment for me because it was not something I had the intention of discovering in my research. This concept was something that jumped out from my field notes after finishing up my final interviews with NB&T. Individuals such as MacDonald, Higgins, Poeppelmeier, and Steph see their roles as part of the new history of their respective firm. Interestingly, they talk about these roles in story form, as if they are a character in an unfolding plot.

Maintaining or Changing Culture is Difficult

One theme that threads its way through each of my conversations was that the stories told about the process of either keeping the existing culture or attempting to change showed that it was not easy. It clearly takes time and it takes a concerted effort among a number of individuals within the firm. Of the four firms, Candle-lite appeared to have the greatest difficulty in this endeavor. Bob Higgins' portrait is the epitome of the "hero story." He struggled uphill against a very old culture that operated in a manner "because they had always done things this way." His work to convince the manufacturing personnel to utilize the equipment to its fullest capacity was a daunting task. Furthermore, he knew throughout the process that if they were not successful, the competition from overseas would eventually put them out of business. Therefore, not only did he have to push back the tide resistance from inside the organization, but he also had somewhat of a looming timeline from outside as they watched shelf space for Candle-lite products slowly erode away. In addition, referencing an earlier finding, it should be noted that none of this could have occurred without top level support from the president of the firm.

Cintas may seem to have an effortless approach to maintaining their organizational culture, but it too has a constant battle to keep a very old culture in place. Individuals such as Poeppelmeier have to be committed to the organization as well as its core values. They have to be so committed to these ideas that they are eagerly willing to espouse them to new hires; often from memorized scripts. As Cintas continues to grow through acquisitions and more individuals are brought in to the company, without a

concentrated, focused strategy to acculturate these new employees to the Cintas “spirit,” it becomes even more difficult to keep this culture in place. New ideas and approaches from recently hired employees can begin to chip away at their established artifacts of Cintas culture. Furthermore, one cannot help but wonder what would happen to the organizational culture of Cintas if *they* were to become the target of a takeover? Would their assimilation mean the end of the Cintas spirit, or would it continue on as a quiet, underground facet of the parent corporation?

As for Skyline, they are also attempting to keep their culture in place and they are accomplishing it primarily through a careful selection process of new personnel. Steph and Nader’s systematic hiring of individuals who are outgoing, confident, and are good communicators may be fine for now, but even Steph admits that finding the right talent takes a great deal of time. Sometimes, she said, the restaurant goes weeks without hiring a replacement, even though they will interview literally dozens of potential candidates. “Occasionally,” she said, “I think I just want to hire a warm body and get it over with.” But, she fights this temptation because in the end she feels that taking time to interview and ultimately hire a person that will fit well into their culture is the most effective means of maintaining a successful operation. This is echoed in the work by Alvesson (2002) where he examined a computer consultancy company and found that this particular firm made a conscious effort to recruit those individuals who shared the company values, thus ensuring a perpetuation of the culture. The hiring practices at Skyline result in a vibrant culture that reflects the young, energetic employees that are selected.

Finally, Tom MacDonald at NB&T knows all too well how difficult a culture change can be. He is currently in the midst of the process and though he is seeing the

short-term benefits of an evolving culture, he recognizes that more challenges lay ahead. He has already acknowledged that additional terminations will have to take place. It is a difficult situation for any manager to evaluate employees and determine if they are still a good fit after the culture change – some of these employees have been with NB&T for a decade or more. Yet, this process is part of the ongoing culture shift taking place at the bank.

Stories about Culture Are Real

Finally, my supposition going into this research was that some of the stories told about the organizational cultures of these firms were complete fabrications designed to illustrate an important point about either an old culture or a changing one. The stories were not meant to deceive, but rather more illustrative of a value or idea than any actual tale of events might have been. Having worked in a *Fortune 500* firm before entering academia, I had encountered numerous stories about the culture of my employer. Many were authentic, well-established stories that embodied the culture of that company. However, I knew that there were a number of stories told to me, and I in turn passed along to others, that were totally false. For example, a common story many of us managers told to new personnel centered on arriving promptly to meetings. As I walked down the hall to the conference room with a new recruit beside me, I would say something along the lines of, “You should have been here last week. This one guy from accounting was only four minutes late, but as soon as he walked into the door, the vice president chewed him out for arriving late and told him to just leave and come back next week when he could learn to be on time.” Now this had never happened, but it was a story told to me and many other new individuals to the company. I told this story some

twenty times during my tenure at the firm. However, like those before me, I had learned that the story was an effective means of driving home the point about prompt attendance at meetings.

It was this kind of experience that had me postulating that I would encounter many such false stories. Such was not the case at all in this study. Story after story was told to me, and I would often ask, “Is this real?” The participant would usually say, “yes, of course” or “why wouldn’t it be?” and I had the feeling that they were genuine in their response. In larger firms such as Cintas and Candle-lite, I had prepared myself for at least a handful of stories that the interviewee would say, “just between you and me, this never happened, but it’s a great story, isn’t it?” Part of this assumption may have been because Cintas is a giant corporation as was my former employer, and I had (wrongly) assumed they would be similar in their approaches with stories.

However, according to all the participants in this study, their stories are real. And some are very personal as well. Those about Steph managing her employees at Skyline are genuine tales of a young manager beginning her career and establishing a management style in her own unique fashion. As Shelly told additional stories about her, Steph jumped in to provide additional details, lending even greater credibility to the reality of the tales.

The stories Tom MacDonald told about NB&T employees changing their ways to fit in to the evolving culture attest to the internal spirit of adaptation. One employee became more extraverted in her dealings with customers, while another learned to be succinct in his responses rather than rambling on incessantly.

Bob Higgins' anecdotes about going against tradition cry out for empathy and I could feel his frustrations as many coworkers resisted his ideas. Convincing others to operate a piece of equipment that was decades old met with opposition from employees on the line as well as long-time maintenance workers who feared a major repair job when the machine would ultimately fail. Of course, the machinery did not fail, but to stand by one's words despite very vocal and vehement protests must have been gut-wrenching.

Poeppelmeier's meteoric rise through the Cintas corporate ranks embodies the personal drive so many people have to be successful in their jobs. He started as an intern while in college and became the top salesperson in the entire company; this is a story that is told not by just Poeppelmeier, but others in the company as well to showcase a rising star. All of these stories are real and they embody their respective cultures in such a way that the listener or reader readily identifies with the protagonists.

Limitations of the Study

Though these findings provide very broad interpretations of the results, there are some distinct limitations to a study such as this. With portraiture, the idea is to craft accurate portraits that capture the essence of the topic in such a way that emergent themes can be identified. One portrait may certainly provide sufficient data to draw some key conclusions, but four portraits – as in the case of this research – has provided a broad canvas to make certain interpretations.

Still, one major limitation of this study is that only four companies were selected. A greater number of participating companies would have given an even larger base to gather data. The sampling procedures used to select the four companies were appropriate for this kind of research, but perhaps ten or more participating firms would have

generated even more data for making generalizations about stories and culture. This became even more apparent as I attempted to compare and contrast the four firms. A homogenous grouping of participating firms would have made comparisons easier, but would not have adequately provided grounding for contrasts. For example, I could have selected four restaurants as the totality of my study; or ten manufacturing plants; or eight service companies. However, the four that were chosen provided some insight into how two firms of varying size maintain their culture, how one is currently dealing with a culture change, and how another changed its culture.

A second limitation of this study is that all four organizations are Ohio-based. Again, this was due to convenience sampling, however, firms from other parts of the country or even another country altogether may provide different demographic variables. It can be assumed that the values of the Midwest or the peculiarities of Ohio in particular created an influence on both the organizational cultures of these firms as well as the stories told. The stories told herein may be somewhat reflective of the Midwestern mindset. If a firm was chosen from, say, the west coast, where there is a different demographic as well as anthropological culture, one might expect a more diverse portrait.

Third, as illustrated in the portraits, I was unable to get permission to access all areas of the four participating companies. Skyline Chili was clearly the most open, permitting me to observe all shifts and interview participants at varying times. Candle-lite was somewhat open in that Bob Higgins allowed me to wander the plant freely; however, I was unable to interview anyone else for that particular portrait. Similarly, Chad Poeppelmeier was a gracious host and participant, but repeated requests to interview others within the firm went unanswered. Additionally, the Cintas portrait had

the greatest scrutiny from within the organization than the other three. Specifically, at least one executive level vice president in the firm had to approve the piece. Finally, the NB&T portrait was driven primarily by Tom MacDonald. He did, though, provide three individuals from three different branches to participate, but they were reluctant participants at best. They were also the only participants throughout this research who elected to have their names kept anonymous.

The fourth limitation to this study is that all four firms are for-profit companies. Not-for-profit, governmental, and educational institutions could provide additional insight into the nature of storytelling in maintaining or changing cultures. This was a limitation that was set early in the proposal process to reign in the parameters of the study, especially given that only four firms would be utilized in the research. A large part of this was based upon my own experience (before academia, all my work experience was in entrepreneurial or corporate enterprises), but it was also the approach taken because it made comparisons easier between the four firms. This, in addition to the participating firms being only four in number and all Ohio-based, does limit the transferability to similar organizations. Certainly there is a foundation in this paper for other firms to consider; and the work begun here does break new ground in the literature by utilizing portraiture in an evaluation of organizational storytelling and its interrelationship with the culture of those organizations.

Finally, it must be acknowledged that one potential limitation of this research is the very use of portraiture. As a qualitative method of inquiry, it has been shown to be an effective means of research in the social sciences. However, its application to the business discipline has been minimal at best. As a relatively new foray into business

research, the work here has demonstrated that this is indeed a viable inquiry method. The portraits explored a depth of study into both storytelling and the cultures within these firms that would have been difficult if a case study only was utilized, for example. In addition, though it was beyond the scope of this particular study, supporting this research with quantitative research methods would lend a stronger validity to the conclusions drawn here. In other words, a mixed methods approach would show multiple analyses of the data collected than the single approach of portraiture.

These five limitations were kept carefully in mind in identifying the emergent themes from these portraits. They are important considerations and as will be shown in the following section on future research, provide an opportunistic springboard for additional study of both culture and storytelling.

Future Research

Organizational culture and storytelling have each been topics of numerous studies. Culture, and more recently storytelling, remain at the forefront of managerial research among all types of organizations as they compete in an increasingly global marketplace. As such, multiple avenues for future research exist and continue to develop as we learn more about the importance of stories and culture in organizations. The research described here provides yet another stepping stone for future studies. The six emergent themes identified above are just a start in understanding how culture and storytelling come together and become intertwined.

As mentioned in the limitations section of this chapter, more firms should be examined other than the four chosen for this study. Additional companies will provide a broader base to make extended generalizations that go beyond the emergent themes

presented here. It would be interesting to conduct portraiture research within one industry (such as restaurant, banking, manufacturing, or service) and select varying sizes of organizations. Then, an allowance can be made for correlation development between size, industry, and other distinguishing factors. This type of research would yield a greater awareness of the nature of storytelling in either maintaining or changing the culture within one type of organization.

Second, additional research could be focused on companies outside of Ohio. Other parts of the United States as well as different countries could be considered for comparison and contrasting. For example, one might examine cultural differences from one country to another or the influence of government agencies on Latin American or Asian companies. There may be peculiarities with Ohio that are not so readily apparent without other geographic areas considered.

Third, an examination of organizations outside the for-profit arena may provide additional data. Governmental, not-for-profit, and educational institutions all have stories and unique organizational cultures just ripe for study. For example, not-for-profit agencies are often considered reactive rather than proactive in their managerial decision-making. Would this have an impact on both the cultures of these agencies or the stories told within? Similarly, how does the concept of tenure influence the culture at a university or the stories told to junior faculty about that culture as they begin their careers at the institution?

Fourth, three of the firms selected for inclusion in this research have facilities in distant locations from the main office. The exception is Candle-lite. Skyline is a franchise that is nearly an hour away from its corporate office. NB&T has 16 branches,

with some nearly two hours away from the main bank. Cintas has facilities throughout North America. Future research might examine the influence a central main office has over satellite locations. Additionally, even within one firm, such as NB&T, it would be interesting to compare and contrast the organizational cultures of all 16 branches. As evidenced by Skyline, a distant location free from corporate influence creates its own culture. A portrait study of a single, geographically dispersed firm would be research worth tackling.

Finally, a note about portraiture itself and its role in my future research activities. I definitely see portraiture as a viable form of inquiry and will continue to use it to examine not only organizational culture and storytelling, but other concepts in management and business. Admittedly, I have discovered that portraiture is *not* an easy qualitative methodology to utilize. There were so many aspects to this process that bogged me down sometimes in the minutia of the examined companies. My field notes consist of literally hundreds of pages, with only about 20% of the material actually used in the four portraits. However, this effort had to be done to capture the essence of the participants as well as the organizations, and most importantly, the very nature of the stories told in these four very different cultures. What I gleaned from this, though, is that portraiture is a wonderful methodology for this kind of research. It has been difficult to find the use of portraiture in the literature for a business application, let alone a study of organizational culture or organizational storytelling. It is hoped that this study has opened the door to other researchers to explore managerial studies utilizing portraiture.

Chapter VI: Implications for Leadership and Change

The day started out as any other for the young businessman in his late 20s. He had a number of meetings later that morning and he had two reports that were already past due to the vice president of sales. It was going to be a busy day. At one of these morning meetings, the young man sat listening to the president talk about how sales desperately needed to keep increasing during the next quarter. Nothing new here. This was the subject of most sales meetings – sales can *always* be better.

However, something was different at this meeting. It wasn't tangible and the business man couldn't be certain that it was entirely new. In his usual fashion, the president was telling the team of sales men and women a story. It wasn't anything earth shattering and it contained the folksy colloquialisms for which the president was known. But that story – about how the president landed a particularly big client in his early days as a salesperson – struck the businessman unlike any of the other stories he had heard in the past. Truthfully, the story was no different than others the president had told, but it was the context in which the story was being told that caused him to reflect on it in a deeper sense. *Why was the president really telling this story? Why did he so often tell stories?*

From that day forward, the young businessman began to take stock of the stories he heard and asked himself why these stories were being told. Later, he left the business environment and entered academia. Still, the aspects of storytelling remained with him. As he entered his doctoral studies, his research

led him down the path to tie stories to organizational culture, and suddenly that path became a well-lit avenue leading straight to his dissertation.

It seems only appropriate to begin this chapter with a story – autobiographical as it may be. Both stories and culture have been an important part of my life for many years, but I did not recognize their significance or even their relationship to one another until much later. The preceding chapters explored this relationship, but here I expand on this study and the findings by providing more personal interpretations and the implications this research has for leaders and change agents.

The research presented in this paper represents the culmination of two years of intensive study into the nature of organizational storytelling and culture. Maintaining my focus on a specific topic related to this was, at best, difficult. There were so many tangents I desperately wanted to explore. For example, it would have been interesting to classify stories by type (as Gabriel has done) or to examine a wide variety of cultures and determine if the method of conveying a story varied by culture (i.e., oral versus written). However, that is fodder for future research. The resulting study, though, does demonstrate some important points as well as my foray into doctoral-level research. Still, there are some ideas about culture and storytelling I would like to share here that add to the scope of the study.

First, culture remains for me a nebulous concept that continues to fascinate. How can an outsider truly know what the culture of a firm is? I liken it to being from Texas. I was born and raised there and spent most of my life in various parts of the state. Yet, when I travel – or in my new home in Ohio – I ask people if they have ever been to the Lone Star State. If they have not, I ask them to describe what they think Texas is like.

Most times, I get responses like there are oil wells everywhere, it is flat, it is brutally hot year round, longhorn cattle roam the city streets, it is primitive, and they talk funny. Actually, nothing could be further from the truth. Well, ok, maybe they do talk a little funny. But Texas has mountains, lakes, beautiful rolling hills, thick pine forests, and even a canyon or two. The cities of Austin, Houston, and Dallas are progressive with high-tech centers rivaling those in California. The panhandle of the state frequently receives snow in the winter and oil wells and longhorn cattle are not as plentiful as many would guess. But it would take more than a couple of visits to still learn what it means to be a Texan. One would have to live there for some time to begin to understand all the nuances associated with this state.

To me, this is what trying to understand the culture of an organization resembles. Even after asking numerous questions and hearing countless stories, my perspective of the culture is still that of an outsider. I therefore must rely almost entirely on the abilities of those being interviewed to convey the essence of their culture. In my dissertation research, this never made me a *part* of the cultures, but it did give me a unique opportunity to examine the cultures of four particular companies. Other researchers have certainly taken a close look at organizational cultures before, however what differentiates my work from the others is that portraiture was used to describe not only the cultures of these four fascinating firms, but the stories told within as well.

Deal and Kennedy (2000) succinctly and appropriately defined organizational culture. Though numerous interpretations from other researchers were presented in the literature review, their definition remains a firm hand-hold on an otherwise abstract concept: *a widely shared philosophy of management beliefs and practices important to*

those in the organization, where heroes, stories, rituals, and ceremonies become integral to the organizational climate. This definition provided the foundation for this study and their recognition that stories are a vital part of culture is significant. Also, Schein's (1999) work contributed greatly to my further understanding of culture. He acknowledged that culture springs to life upon a company's incipiency, it tries to be maintained as the firm grows, and when it is time, a change agent steps forward to attempt to change the culture. The research presented in these preceding chapters support Deal and Kennedy as well as Schein. It extends Schein's notions by illustrating in concrete terms how cultures are maintained and how they change, but by taking one of the elements of Deal and Kennedy's definition of culture, it shows how this is done through powerful stories.

Second, stories and culture clearly go very well together. The stories are artifacts of these companies – just as archived newsletters, old advertisements, and faded photographs are. And the culture reflects the stories that are told. For example, the candid tales about Steph managing the Skyline franchise immediately reveal the laid-back, yet communicative environment of the restaurant.

It does not matter if the one telling the stories is a “natural” storyteller or not. Tom MacDonald at NB&T may be the epitome of the office troubadour spinning yarns with ease, but that does not lessen the stories told by others at the bank or any other company for that matter. According to Gabriel (2000), stories are “special, fragile, and valuable webs of narrative (239). So, even if Steph at Skyline is plain-spoken in her storytelling abilities, and Tom MacDonald is more animated, her stories remain valuable webs of narrative.

And third, stories are a vital part of any culture. Joseph Campbell (1988) believed that stories provided the link to one's social group and through their telling, an individual affirmed their place in the larger culture. The stories told bring people closer together. They give them unity and a sense of belongingness. Figuratively, they are gathering around the organizational campfire to hear about the exploits of those who came before them or the current adventures of their colleagues. As with any culture – organizational or anthropological – stories are repeated to record the past, but also to say something about the here and now. Stories reveal what is acceptable and what is not. They show the listener where he or she fits in the current culture. Stories then provide inclusiveness to the culture for those who are a part of it.

Implications for Leaders

So what are the implications of this research for leaders, particularly those in the business arenas? Are there aspects to this study that can readily be applied in business settings and if so, what should leaders keep in mind? The following address some of the gleanings that can be pulled from the preceding chapters.

First, leaders should choose the stories they tell very carefully. Because stories embody the culture so readily, leaders must be cognizant of not only the stories they tell but the way in which they are conveyed as well. For example, stories told tongue-in-cheek or with an eye-roll may suggest that the tale is less than important or that it holds little truth. Furthermore, if a leader continually tells stories that are negative in nature, those hearing these repeated stories may begin to feel that the culture is in decline or that a less than favorable climate exists. Similarly, if only uplifting stories are told despite issues everyone knows to be problematic, the leader may be viewed as too Pollyanna-like

and is not taking glaring problems seriously. When it comes to leadership, though they may not say it or reveal it in their conversations, the “followers” see and hear what leaders do and say. They pick up on the little things as well as the behaviors leaders consciously and subconsciously exhibit. Sometimes, the followers even begin to emulate those behaviors, too. That is why leaders must be very careful what stories they tell. After all, these stories are likely to be repeated again and again and the leader has little control of what is added to or pulled from them. Wise leaders understand the power of storytelling and recognize that a well-told tale maintains an existing culture or can easily be used to embody what the culture can become.

Second and on the same lines of thought, leaders should remember that interpretations of stories are many. Gabriel (2000) states that mankind’s primary “preoccupation is not truth or power or love or even pleasure, but meaning” (pp. 3-4). When Tom MacDonald at NB&T told stories that showed how the culture was changing, he was very careful to avoid details that may slant each story depending upon the listener’s perspective. Certain details may have given the story an entirely different meaning than the one MacDonald was intending. In Chapter II, a case study by Gabriel illustrated how three individuals attached their own meaning to a particular incident through their interpretations of the event. This is important because in the four portraits included in my research, the individuals interviewed could not help but provide their own meanings to the stories being told. Their interpretations, at least for them, were the only interpretations.

In the opening vignette to this chapter I mentioned that I began to question why the president was choosing to tell certain stories at particular times. This affected my

interpretation of each story he told. Similarly, when leaders tell stories, it is a good idea to provide one's own meaning behind the story. I particularly like the practitioner work, *Managing by Storying Around* by Armstrong. The author provides seventy-five short anecdotes from his company or his business experience. But each one illustrates something specific. He even includes a few bullet points at the end that give the reader the moral of the story. He includes stories to inspire self-management, stories to kick-start urgency, stories that make the policy manual obsolete, and stories to boost creativity. But these are more than just plug-in-play tales that anyone can take off the shelf and bandy about in the workplace, hoping all who hear them will react favorably. Rather, these are designed to provide a springboard for leaders and managers. They may jog in the mind something similar that has happened in one's firm that can illustrate a particular point. But in the end, no matter what the story, a specific moral is implied or provided explicitly. This forces the leader then to be a more thoughtful storyteller – one who crafts tales that have meaning. Going back to the original definition of *story* in Chapter II, conveyance of meaning is key to the definition. That is why this is such a critical point for leaders. Meaning *will be* attached to the story. There will be other interpretations – irregardless of how careful the storyteller is. But the storyteller can minimize the number of interpretations by crafting well-worded, sound stories.

Third, leaders should treat their organization's stories as carefully as they would the early historical artifacts of the firm. Cintas has done just that. They recognize that the heritage of the company is found in many of the stories that have been told since Doc Farmer established the company in the middle of the Great Depression. Just as they have retained original memos and documents from that era, they have also recorded and kept

the early stories of the company. Stories are such important artifacts for the company that not only have they published them in book form, but they continue to tell the stories in new hire orientations, meetings, company newsletters, and their website. For Cintas, the story is as tangible and real as any of the early black-and-white photographs of Doc Farmer and his delivery truck. The story is something to be preserved, cherished, and retold many times to every partner in the company. Firms of all sizes and types should hold their stories with such reverence as well. In Cintas' case, many of the stories are as applicable today as they were forty years ago. For other firms, that may not be true. However, by recording the stories of a firm's past and present, the company will be able to archive aspects of its culture for future generations of employees. An understanding of the hurdles a company has overcome in the past or knowledge about how they handled a difficult situation such as an attempted buy-out from a competing firm may help in current crisis events. Certainly an organization does not have to publish a book detailing its history or its stories, but keeping a record of some sort (such as files, written-down stories from long-time employees, or even audio/video recordings) goes a long way in maintaining the stories of the past.

And finally, leaders need to realize that stories reflect leaders themselves. As mentioned at the beginning of this section, how leaders tell stories is important. But there is more to this than just the interpretations others have of the stories. The types of stories and the way leaders tell stories reflect who the leader is. For example, leaders should ask, *do I always tell stories that showcase people's mistakes or foibles?* If so, then the leader may be viewed as someone who delights in finding fault in others, thereby possibly undermining his or her leadership altogether. Gabriel's (2000) early research

demonstrated that stories could indeed be categorized, which might also reflect the nature of the storyteller. Stories could be viewed as comic, epic, tragic, or romantic. However they are categorized, the type of story is reflective of the storyteller. Or, a leader might ask, *when I tell a story, do I always add 'this is between you and me' or 'don't tell anyone else'?* Here, the leader's stories may be verging on gossip rather than stories that embody the specific culture of the organization. Another question would be, *do I embellish my stories so much that they become incredulous?* There is nothing wrong with adding a little to a tale so that it is more exciting to hear, but when a leader continually tells stories that stretch believability, the leader can easily begin to lose credibility among others in the firm. This is especially important if the leader is someone high up on the organizational chart. For example, if the rest of the organization begins to doubt everything the president says then a breakdown in communication can occur because many will question every edict or suggestion emanating from that office.

These are important considerations for leaders as they should begin to acknowledge the power and influence that stories have within an organizational culture. They are not something to be taken lightly as they are often the conveyances of important rites and rituals of the company as well as tales of the heroes that have made and are making the organization what it is today. As some leaders are also catalysts for change in their firm, the next section addresses the implications that exist for change agents.

Implications for Change Agents

Modern American businesses are in a constant state of flux. They duck and dodge, weave and bob, run forward and drop back through the environs of the marketplace. Their attempts to capitalize on their strengths and minimize their

weaknesses are efforts to improve their operations while tackling the competition.

Change is an inevitable part of doing business and companies must readily adapt to changes or risk losing their position in the market.

For change agents (those who initiate change in organizations), understanding how people react and adapt is critical. The research carried out in this examination of two companies in particular – NB&T and Candle-lite – illustrates some important lessons for those who may be initiating change in their organization.

For starters, stories are very influential. As mentioned in the previous section regarding leadership, the power of stories can impact individuals in profound ways. Stories paint vivid pictures for people that express what is real and what is imagined. They are vehicles of influence, yet they also can be wielded as heavy-handed hammers of power and control. For example, some of the stories told at NB&T represent the new environment of the bank and the message is clear: *if you do not conform, change, or adapt, you will no longer be employed here*. Lakoff and Johnson (1999) acknowledge that stories may have significant moral consequences. They may legitimize certain power relations as being natural and therefore moral – Western culture over non-Western culture, citizens over immigrants, Christians over non-Christians, rich over poor (p. 304). Therefore, for change agents, realizing how stories can influence others can affect how they approach employees during major culture shifts. It is a power that cannot be taken lightly. However, the influential nature of stories does not have to be negative. Bob Higgins at Candle-lite used stories to positively influence the manufacturing plant to change the culture in order to effectively compete with Chinese companies producing a product that is much more affordable than Candle-lite's.

Second, change often involves repeated telling of a story. At NB&T for example, tales about the removal of reserved parking and executives in the office on Fridays rather than on the golf course, have been told time and time again. These kinds of stories reinforce change that is occurring. With retellings, the story becomes a change agent itself. It signifies the turning tide within the organization and for some, affirms that the right decisions are being made; for others, it is a sign of things to come. Therefore, for change to truly stick and become the new *norm*, a one-time telling cannot suffice. It must be repeated – and not just by the change agent. If others repeat the tale and believe in its meaning, then the story becomes an accepted piece of the culture. And once accepted by many, change is also accepted.

Third, even with the success Candle-lite experienced, change is not a quick process. It is true that significant changes occurred on the votive line in just a couple of years, but this was only one aspect of the production facility. The culture had indeed changed, but it did not happen overnight. Similarly, NB&T is experiencing radical changes in the culture, but they are still *changing*. No one at NB&T would likely say that no more changes are on the horizon. The new CEO came aboard nearly two years ago. Yet, change continues to move slowly, albeit steadily along. Could a person or group of people wield the sword of change with one mighty blow that results in immediate alteration to the culture – a change so radical that the organization's culture is no longer recognizable by those within? Probably not. Could it be done in a day? A week? Definitely not. The challenge is in studying the nature of change and determining what is an acceptable time frame to affect effective change. That of course goes beyond the

scope of this research. But for now, it suffices to say that change is not and should not be a sudden volcanic eruption to the culture of the organization.

Finally, change requires that the change agent must hold fast to his or her ideals. This is most evidenced by Bob Higgins at Candle-lite. Despite continued resistance from many fronts, he stayed true to his vision for the plant. *Change was going to occur*. It did not matter how many protests were heard, the number of people who said it would never work, or even those who said they could not work in such an environment, Higgins kept moving forward with his ideals. Achieving small victories became his mantra with each one hoping to become affirmation that he was on the right track. Likewise, the new CEO at NB&T is ensuring that his vision for the bank does not falter. Individuals like Tom MacDonald readily grasp this vision and facilitate the changes that are envisioned. However, if any of these managers and executives were to waiver in their convictions, significant changes or changes that have to occur in order to compete, would be difficult at best.

Bottom Line on the Research

Clearly, research such as this reveals many points. Some have been presented here with the more significant emergent themes, in the prior chapter. But what about the research itself? What do the methodology and the subject of the research say? Why is this study important?

The most significant aspect of this research is that it is a unique study of organizational culture and storytelling told through the qualitative method of inquiry known as portraiture. The rigor of this research lies in the abilities and skills of the researcher to humanize the process and the participants. As a writer and a visual artist, I

found myself in a wonderful position to paint with words the feelings, thoughts, images, and metaphors that revealed themselves during this fascinating journey. The process is a powerful method for conveying the subtleties of the research that go either undiscovered or underreported in other forms of research.

The review of the literature showed how studies have been conducted through a variety of methods specifically on culture as well as studies particular to organizational storytelling. There have even been a few that examine the relationship of storytelling to culture. But where this study distinguishes itself is through the use of portraiture. Portraiture permits the researcher to delve into the greater picture. An overflowing palette is at the research artist's disposal to paint with words rich, textured portraits that more than capture the essence of the topic. Here, portraiture permitted me to apply not only broad brush strokes of the culture and stories told in these four companies, but smaller brushes dabbed in the nuanced details of the individuals and the organizations where they worked as well. Another methodology might not have provided such a depth that was achieved here. As Lawrence-Lightfoot (1997) states, with many qualitative forms of inquiry, the researcher listens *to* the story and records it. With portraiture, the researcher listens *for* the story. In this study, not only were stories discovered and presented, but the very portraits became stories themselves. They had fully developed characters, emotional struggles and turmoil, and even multiple plot lines. Yes, portraiture has proven itself a viable tool beyond the social sciences. As an application to a business-related topic, portraiture has been shown to be a worthwhile, highly effective way to convey the nature of storytelling and culture in organizations.

Another valuable contribution this research makes is it shows how stories facilitate culture changes. With NB&T and Candle-lite, stories were integral to the changes in culture that were evolving. Tom MacDonald at NB&T illustrated many stories that told of the cultural shifts throughout the bank. And Bob Higgins used stories (such as the paperclip story) to show how the culture could change. Deal and Kennedy (2000) readily acknowledge that organizational culture is made up not only of shared values, rites and rituals, and heroes, but also stories as well. My research supports this, but it goes beyond Deal and Kennedy's definition of organizational culture by showing specifically *how* stories are utilized in culture change situations. This study demonstrates how stories become the vehicles for all the other pieces of Deal and Kennedy's definition. Stories reflect the shared values, they exemplify the rites and rituals, and they present heroic tales of accomplishment. Stories then can be used as the conveyances of change in organizations of varying size.

In addition, the research here suggests that stories are useful in maintaining an organizational culture. Both Skyline Chili and Cintas have cultures that the top managers wish to keep in place. Through stories emblematic of their respective cultures, these two companies have shown that a strong organizational culture can be maintained. Skyline tells stories that illustrate their laid-back, highly communicative culture, and they tell them repeatedly. Cintas, though, catapults this notion to the extreme. They not only tell stories again and again, but also they indoctrinate their employees through organized training sessions, intensive new hire orientations, and through a published work on their stories and their culture. Thus, through stories, these firms are keeping in place cultures

that have evolved through management styles (such as Steph and Nader at Skyline) and through multiple generations of leaders (such as the Farmers at Cintas).

Whether it is maintaining an organizational culture or changing it, stories are powerful, influential artifacts of the firm. They convey tales of heroism, demonstrate the company's shared values, and explore the firm's ceremonial natures. The research in these chapters ultimately contributes to the literature by showing how stories achieve this. In addition, this initial study using portraiture has proven to be a viable methodology in managerial applications. It is especially useful in crafting nuanced, highly textured portraits of organizational cultures and the stories told within. This should serve as a springboard for future research that utilizes portraiture in additional managerial studies.

So, how does *this* story end? In the opening autobiographical vignette, the young businessman begins to see how culture and stories are interdependent. But, he is older now and no longer works in a business environment. His doctoral work is nearing an end and he has indeed explored the interrelationships of storytelling and organizational culture. What happens next? How will the story reach its climatic conclusion? Fortunately, the story is still being written. Small details, new plot lines, and an increasing number of characters slowly ebb their way into the folds of the story. Just as the four firms examined here are continuing to develop their stories, so my personal story is revealed. The tale of research does not progress neatly from introduction to body to denouement. Others pick up the work and add to it their own plots and subplots. The original researcher continues to add new characters and conflicts. Therefore, there is no definitive, neatly-packaged end to this story. It is always just on the *next* page.

APPENDIX

APPENDIX A: ANTIOCH UNIVERSITY PH.D. IN LEADERSHIP & CHANGE
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPLICATION

**APPENDIX A: ANTIOCH UNIVERSITY PH.D. IN LEADERSHIP & CHANGE
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPLICATION**

**Antioch University
Ph.D. in Leadership & Change
Institutional Review Board
Human Participants Research Review Form
Application**

1. Name and mailing address of Principal Investigator(s):

Steven Austin Stovall
XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX
XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

2. Departmental Status: Student

3. Phone Number: (a) Work XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

4. Name of Core Faculty Advisor: Carolyn Kenny

5. Name & Contact Information of other Program Faculty Involved in this Project:

a. Antioch Faculty and/or Primary Evaluator for Learning Achievement or Research Project: Carolyn Kenny

b. If this ethics application is for your dissertation, the name of your Dissertation Chair appears below.
Carolyn Kenny

6. Title of Project: Gathering Around the Organizational Campfire

7. Source of Funding for the project (if applicable):

8. Expected starting date for project: 05/15/2007

9. Anticipated completion date for data collection: 07/01/2007

10. Describe the proposed participants- age, number, sex, race, or other special characteristics. (Up to 250 words):

The participants will be a cross-section of managerial employees in three distinct organizations (Cintas, Skyline Chili, and Total Quality Logistics). There will be an equal number of males/females and a variety of ages. There will be between 20 and 100 participants.

11. Describe how the participants are to be selected and recruited. (Up to 400 words):

Participants will be selected from the three organizations already mentioned. The method will consist of making phone calls and sending e-mails to various contacts already in my personal database. However, snowball sampling will be used to solicit participation from others in these firms. For example, one contact at Cintas will be asked to supply the names and contact information of others in the firm who are available and interested, and then these individuals will be asked the same question regarding other possible participants.

12. Describe the proposed procedures, e.g., interviewing survey questionnaires, experiments, etc. in the project. Any proposed experimental activities that are included in evaluation, research, development, demonstration, instruction, study, treatments, debriefing, questionnaires, and similar projects must be described. Continue your description on following page if necessary. USE SIMPLE LANGUAGE AND AVOID JARGON. Please do not insert a copy of your methodology section from your proposal. State briefly and concisely the procedures for the project. (500 words):

The procedures will include observation and interviews with participants. Observations will be based upon what is visible in the corporate offices or locations of these companies. Interviews will consist of dialogues with participants and will not be recorded digitally.

13. Project Purpose(s) and Benefits: (400 words):

The purpose of this study is to determine how and why stories are used to either maintain or change the culture in selected for-profit organizations.

14. If participants in this proposed research may thereby be exposed to an elevated possibility of harm—physiological, psychological, or social—please provide the following information: (UP to 500 words)**a. Identify and describe the possible benefits and risks.**

NOTE: for international research or vulnerable populations, please provide information about local culture that will assist the review committee in evaluating potential risks to participants, particularly when the project raises issues related to power differentials:

As this is research regarding storytelling and organizational culture, there is no risk associated with physiological or psychological issues. There may be minimal risk socially in that participants may divulge (in a one-on-one interview setting) information about the internal culture of their own organization. Beyond that, risk is minimal to nonexistent.

14b. Explain why you believe the risks are so outweighed by the benefits described in (13) as to warrant asking participants to accept these risks. Include a discussion of why the research method you propose is superior to alternative methods that may entail less risk:

Risk is minimal to nonexistent.

14c. Explain fully how the rights and welfare of participants at risk will be protected (e.g., screening out particularly vulnerable participants, follow-up contact with participants, etc.):

Risk is minimal to nonexistent.

15. Explain how participants' privacy is addressed by your proposed research. Specify any steps taken to guard the anonymity of participants and/or confidentiality of their responses. Indicate what personal identifying information will be kept, and procedures for storage and ultimate disposal of personal information. (400 words):

Permission is being sought from participants to use their names and job titles, as well as the information they supplied regarding storytelling and organizational culture. However, for those participants who wish to maintain their anonymity, in the narrative based upon interviews and observations with these participants, names will be changed to ensure anonymity. Job titles will also be altered slightly if they are in any way identifying titles. In addition, once the research is concluded, any identifying information will be kept in a locked file cabinet in this researcher's home indefinitely.

16. Informed consent statements, if one is used, are to be included with this application. If information other than that provided on the informed consent form is provided (e.g. a cover letter), attach a copy of such information. To submit or fax these documents, refer to the instructions in the next question.**If a consent form is not used, or if consent is to be presented orally, state your reason for this modification below:**

The consent form is attached to this application.

17. If questionnaires, tests, or related research instruments are to be used, then you must submit a copy of the instrument, or a detailed description (with examples of items) of the research instruments, questionnaires, or tests that are to be used in the project. Copies will be retained in the permanent IRB files. To submit documents

- i. Go to end of on-line form to upload attachments; or
- ii. Fax to [tbllRBChair.name](mailto:tbllRBChair.name@tbllRBChair.fax) at tbllRBChair.fax

Please identify all attached documents.

No instruments, tests, or questionnaires are being utilized in this study.

18. Will electrical or mechanical devices be applied to participants? No**If YES, describe:**

I agree to conduct this project in accordance with Antioch University's policies and requirements involving research.

APPENDIX B: COVER LETTER TO PARTICIPANTS

APPENDIX B: COVER LETTER TO PARTICIPANTS

Participant Consent

Study Concerning Organizational Culture

You have been asked to participate in a research study conducted by Steven Stovall, a doctoral candidate in the Leadership and Organizational Change program at Antioch University, Yellow Springs, OH.

This study is seeking your input regarding organizational culture. Your participation is completely voluntary and you may discontinue participation at any time.

If you would rather that your name and job title remain anonymous, please indicate this on the consent form. Again, the purpose of this research is to find out more about organizational culture. There is no financial remuneration for participating in this study.

If you have any questions or concerns about this research, you may contact Steven Stovall (steven_stovall@wilmington.edu, 937-382-6661) or the University Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects at Antioch University (Dr. Carolyn Kenny, ckenny@phd.antioch.edu, 805-565-7535).

Please indicate your preference for anonymity and sign the following informed consent form, indicating that you have read, understood, and agreed to participate in this research.

Thank you,

Steven Stovall

APPENDIX C: PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

APPENDIX C: PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

Consent Form

I agree to participate in the research concerning organizational culture conducted by Steven Stovall, a doctoral candidate at Antioch University, Yellow Springs, Ohio.

Please print your name: _____

Please sign your name: _____

Date: _____

Please check one:

_____ You may use my name in your research

_____ You may NOT use my name in your research

Please check one:

_____ You may use my job title in your research

_____ You may NOT use my job title in your research

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