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THE CRAFTING OF ORGANIZATIONAL FACADES :
AN EMPIRICAL INVESTIGATION**

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The Crafting of Organizational Façades: An Empirical Investigation

Abstract:

Managers construct organizational façades that mislead external stakeholders, organizational members, auditors, researchers, other managers, and even themselves (Nystrom & Starbuck, 1984). Very little empirical research has been conducted on how managers build these façades since Nystrom & Starbuck's first influential article. This paper reports direct observation of a façade "crafter" from the day he took over a subsidiary of a large firm until the collapse of his construction. The paper proposes a theoretical model of façade crafting in large organizations. The model has four steps: initiative misrepresentation, organizational façade generation, façade fine-tuning, and façade depreciation. The concluding section discusses implications for theory and practice.

Key-words:

Organizational theory; Organizational behavior; Managerial cognition; Communicative action; Resource-dependency

Résumé:

Les managers construisent des façades organisationnelles qui leurrent les parties prenantes de l'organisation, ses membres, ses auditeurs, la recherche, les autres managers et parfois eux-mêmes (Nystrom & Starbuck, 1984). Très peu de recherches empiriques ont été menées sur la manière dont ces façades sont construites depuis l'article fondateur de Nystrom et Starbuck. Cet article tente d'élucider les processus à l'oeuvre dans la construction d'une façade organisationnelle, depuis sa genèse jusqu'aux prémices de sa remise en cause. Le modèle découvert repose sur quatre étapes: le leurre fondateur, la génération de la façade proprement dite, la mise au point, et finalement la dégénérescence de la façade. L'article se conclue par une discussion et des implications pour la théorie et la pratique.

Mots-Clés :

Théorie organisationnelle ; comportement organisationnel ; cognition managériale, théorie de la communication ; théorie de la dépendance aux ressources.

The Crafting of Organizational Façades: An Empirical Investigation

In a paper presented at the Academy of Management in 1984, W.H. Starbuck and P.C. Nystrom suggested “managers construct organizational façades that mislead external stakeholders, organizational members, researchers, other managers, and even themselves”. (p. 182). This influential article was not followed by further empirical research. This paper builds on Starbuck & Nystrom first theoretical framework, and extends its foundations through grounded theorization and empirical investigation.

Nystrom & Starbuck’s influential article draws on the resource-dependency perspective. They argue that organizational façades stem from the separation between management and ownership (after Pondy, 1969; Starbuck, 1965), noting: “separation creates needs for owners to evaluate managers, so managers have to appear competent” (1984: 182). They depict organizational façades as a byproduct of an increasing effort to professionalize management, and the desire of managers to appear to conform to environmentally preferred ideologies. Hence, façades abound in organizations under many forms (p. 184). Nystrom & Starbuck focus their attention on work processes, structures, policies, and goals. Although this pioneering article offers a large diversity of examples and theoretical insights, it says little about how façades actually emerge in organizations, and how managers initiate, develop, maintain and protect them from detection by stakeholders.

The case study characteristics corroborate Nystrom & Starbuck (1984)’s suggestion that “managers typically construct façades at crucial interfaces, such as the interface between a division and its corporate headquarters” (p. 187). The organization we studied displays a strong conformity with the authors’ theoretical propositions:

- The subsidiary should be in a resource-dependency situation (*op. cit.*, p. 183);
- Key resources are being controlled externally (*op. cit.*, p.. 184-185);
- The subsidiary’s management has sufficient margins and freedom to configure its organizational structure as they wish (*op. cit.*, p. 186).

Investigation followed Mitchell (1993)'s prescriptions for conducting fieldwork in a context of secrecy. Company's name is withheld for legal protection. Individual names have been substituted with pseudonyms. There is little literature on the theoretical dimensions of the *crafting* of façades. This article argues that the crafting of façades draws from several theoretical constructs, including institutionalization and neo-institutionalization, resource-dependency, and communicative action. This framework considers organizational façades as cognition-based and cognition-driven phenomena. It focuses on the types of misrepresentations that managers use to create, sustain, focus, and complete façades. This framework provides a new perspective for understanding the façade process, new opportunities for façade research, and an increased likelihood of detecting organizational façades in the workplace. Although conducted with ethnographic rigor, this article is speculative and it is intended to provoke thinking rather than to draw broad generalizations.

Unveiling the concept and its theoretical implications

Organizational façades are projected realities upon one or several outsiders to an organization. Façades are commonly defined as “the front part of anything: often used figuratively, with implications of an imposing appearance concealing something inferior” (Nystrom & Starbuck, 1984:1, quoting the Webster dictionary). In architecture, façades have a double function: they protect buildings from external and unwanted investigation; they display a message advertising its social status, its function, and its owners or occupants. In construction history, the rapid growth of urbanization in the 19th and 20th centuries led builders to make a distinction between the overall rise of the main infrastructure, and the *ex-post* crafting of façades, eventually erected as a last completion phase of the main infrastructure. In the late 20th century, façade restoration and separation has become a distinctive competency, as many “re-constructions” of modern buildings consist of inserting a new modern infrastructure behind an existing historical façade.

The meaning of “façade” as a figurative comment draws from the exaggerated attention given to the status function of façades, while internal constructions were driven to more standardized techniques and cheaper construction materials. In an organizational context, façades may be as much individual as organizational. Organizational façades occur when a façade agent, either singularly or in

collaboration with others, deliberately and consciously sets out to establish a misleading perception of his or her organization's performance. Unintentional misrepresentations, in contrast, are not deliberately or consciously produced but are manifested as side effects, accidents, secondary effects, or unanticipated consequences of action.

Façades from its original resource-dependency perspective

Nystrom and Starbuck (1984) did not believe organizational façades to be systematically arising from managers' desire for more discretion: "this motive need not be conscious, verifiable or even operative; it suffices if enlarged discretion results, regardless of initial motives" (p. 184). For these authors, façades are a common and natural phenomenon. As they noted, following Thompson (1967), "when confronted by ambiguities, managers and stakeholders tend to shift their criteria of effectiveness away from internal efficiency and toward external legitimacy" (*ibid.*). The original perspective on organizational façades fits Pfeffer & Salancik (1978) resource-dependency theory: "The effectiveness of an organization is a sociopolitical question" (p. 11). Although they did not specifically put together the concept of "façade", Pfeffer & Salancik already described its main mechanism: "To forestall a loss of autonomy and to remove some of the contextual constraints on behavior, the focal organization may take actions to reduce the probability of being subject to successful enforcement of external demands" (p. 96). However, "façades" are more depicted as blocking screens than as sophisticated mystifications: "organizations may purposefully manipulate the illusion of satisfaction to avoid the open expression of some demands" (p. 98). If many of the techniques described by the authors involve secrecy or the restriction of information, invention is rarely evoked as an avoidance strategy. Yet, the quest for legitimacy in the resource dependency perspective is bound up with social norms and values. As Pfeffer & Salancik put it: "On occasion, the social acceptability that comes with legitimacy may be more important than economic viability. (...) For the organizational strategist, the ambiguous, retrospective, and socially constructed natures of legitimacy are important features. (...) Organizational legitimacy is not a given. It is the consequence of the interpretation of actions, and there is some latitude for describing actions in terms of legitimate social values" (pp. 194-195).

Façades from the social construction perspective

Thus, façades are socially constructed projections. They are grounded into “ideological reproduction” (Clegg and Dunkerley, 1990), which spread throughout the organization, and the “manufacturing of consent” (Burawoy, 1979), which is set out by the façade agents. Contrary to Foucault’s analysis of power in manufacturing organizations, employees and workers indoctrinated to an organizational façade do not become “the principle of their own subjection” (Foucault, 1977:203) or unwittingly achieve the goals of superiors by their own volition (Jermier, 1998). Façade as an organizational phenomenon necessarily occurs in a context of relatively loose and relatively self-determined human social interactions, which constitute and are constituted by cognition (Giddens, 1984). These interactions produce and reproduce the social structures and actions people know as reality (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). From this perspective, organizational façades are recursive processes of social construction in which new realities are created collectively by the façade agent and its subordinates. Producing an organizational façade, then, is a matter of deliberately bringing into existence, through manipulation, a new reality or set of social structures. As Zizek noted (1989:32), “The illusion is not on the side of *knowledge*, it is already on the side of *reality* itself, their activity, is guided by an illusion... what they overlook, what they misrecognize is not the reality but the illusion which is structuring their reality, their real social activity”. Producing organizational façades is not a process that uses cognition as a tool, but rather it is a process that is created, produced, and maintained by and within cognition (Donnellon, 1986).

Façades from the managerial and organizational cognition perspective

That cognition plays an important role in the production of façade is not a new idea (see Nystrom & Starbuck, 1984). In this context, cognition is seen as a tool for announcing and explaining the façade, preparing people for its positive and negative effects, increasing others' biased perception of and commitment to the façade, and reducing resistance to the façade. Façade agents manipulate stakeholders' cognition to make them believe in the legitimacy of their endeavors. As Nystrom & Starbuck noted: “Even the vaunted Program Evaluation and Review Technique (PERT) purportedly originated as a façade. Its developers portrayed PERT as a major managerial innovation; and because PERT bolstered the management team’s image of

competence, external review boards intruded less. Behind this façade, the team reportedly did not even use the technique to manage schedules and costs. “PERT did not build the Polaris, but it was extremely useful for those who did build the weapon system to have many people believe that it did’ (Sapolsky, 1972:125).

Façades from the communicative action perspective

From Goffman’s perspective, interpersonal interactions (“utterances”) produce reactions or orientation of actors, therefore contributing to the production of the ongoing social world (Goffman, 1974:500). As he puts it: “We spend most of our time not engaged in giving information but in giving shows” (*ibid*, p. 508). Goffman’s theory of dramaturgical communication is central to the understanding of organizational façades’ acceptance and promotion by façade agents. Organizational façades are mostly advertised and embedded into their social context through talk. The façade agent is a storyteller who maintains the listener’s suspense, while deploying an avoidance strategy on the pertinence of his or her achievements, and intertwining the interaction into a complex architecture of causal ambiguities. In a sense, a façade agent’s talk is always imbued with “structured suspense” (Goffman, 1974: 506).

Contrary to traditional deception schemes, an organizational façade agent is seeking the assessment of the listener, e.g. the corporate controller, the stockholder, the mother company’s executives visiting the subsidiary. “Collusive communication” (Goffman, 1974: 515) is sought by the façade agent for it allows gaining compliance and approval, without having to dwell into a clear explication of the obvious causal ambiguities that the façade is made of. Façade agents are under constant scrutiny, and so are their constructions. The façade agent must guide his or her behavior to align with normative structures of the perceived and super-imposed moral universe. He or she can’t be dissociated from his creation. The agent along with its generated organizational façade must both pass the test of displaying a “normal appearance” (op. cit., p. 516). He or she has to “guide his conduct so as to ensure this fit, sustaining a human nature to fit the frame” (*ibid.*).

The façade agent eventually becomes a “production” of his or her own organizational façade. The agent is a central element of the show, and his interactions are intertwined

with the façade itself. Goffman's (1981:147) idea of "embedding" suggests that speakers represent themselves as protagonists in a dramatic even told (or relentlessly retold). Façade agents face this precise obligation of maintaining a perfect consistency of their staged "I". As Goffman puts it: "To say that he assumes a role and presents himself through it is already a bias in the direction of wholeness and authenticity. What he does is to present a one-man show. He animates" (p. 547).

Another concern of the façade agent is to change the perception of auditors and visitors from an inauthentic (coerced or staged) communication, into an authentic one. In a truly Goffmanesque perspective, we suggest that façade agents always walk a tightrope along the reality/make believe continuum. An organizational façade is a buffer between what Ingram has described as the organizational "underlife" (1986) and the "outside reality". According to Ingram, the *underlife* of an organization is composed of organizational members who engage in behaviors that violate organizational expectations, while maintaining a legitimate level of organizational validity and appearing to fulfill their assigned organizational roles. Ingram's concept of underlife is based on his reading of Goffman's *Asylums* (1961) in which he documented the ways people cope in the face of the stringent demands of coercive organizational and social structures. Behind the façade, its agent has to face eventual lucid resistance to his or her scheme. Posing in front of his or her façade, in staged communication, the agent has to smile, and conduct the collective to support his or her one-man show. This constant dichotomy of façade agents' selves lead them to a permanent imprisonment, as they are blocked in between their "backstage" and "front stage" (Goffman, 1959). Nystrom and Starbuck suggest that might be the very source of façade collapse: "Problems arise too when managers actually believe in façades. They see that real life does not match the prescribed ideologies, and they interpret these discrepancies as deficiencies requiring correction. Their efforts to reduce the discrepancies make their organizations worse off. (...) Difficulties with new employees who recently graduated from college frequently stem from their interpreting discrepancies as deficiencies" (op. cit., p. 192).

Façades from the institutional theory perspective

Finally, the purpose of organizational façades is to generate an enduring feeling of trust amongst stakeholders. Façades are elaborate answers to the very simple issue of

the “obligation” for executives to provide a full accountability and to report their endeavors to their various stakeholders. This form of trust has social meaning beyond rational calculations. Façade agents “mirror the rules” valued by their environments as a means to enhance their survival. The latter depends on the organization “being evaluated as legitimate by the people who control resources” (Nystrom & Starbuck, 1984:183). Hence, façade agents pursue an “institutional” conformity through the mirroring of rituals and conforming to the ceremonial demands from elaborated institutional environments (Meyer & Rowan, 1977).

Methodology

We consider organizational façade crafting a continuous organizational change process that translates ineffective and under-performing processes in “successful representations” for outsiders. Hence, our methodology draws intensively on *impression management* (IM) literature, and the study of organizational transformation over time. We used a qualitative single case study methodology (Miles & Huberman, 1984) to observe an organizational façade construction in a subunit of a large industrial group. The unit was located at a far distance from its mother company, and frequent visits of auditors and executives were an opportunity to alternate observations of preparation and animation phases of the façade. Contacts with the company made the employment appear as regular, and hence taken for granted by peers; thus giving an opportunity to adopt an ethnomethodological approach (Kirk & Miller, 1986). Data collection aimed at building an adequate and sufficiently discrete methodology to document and observe the phenomenon. Direct observation was conducted during both management meetings and interacting with other employees. The research objective was to generate theoretical propositions directly from data (Bowman et Kunreuther, 1988). Hence, we did not seek external validity, as we paid more attention to the “thick description” (Geertz, 1993) of a process that has not been directly observed before.

We followed Mitchell’s prescriptions (1993: 14), and adopted an “informed-sympathetic ally” posture. The other strategies presented by Mitchell appeared inoperative in our first approaches. We used an “ally” (Whyte, 1955) at the company headquarters for the discretionary collection of secondary data, such as performance statistics. We organized a ceaseless dialogue between direct observation and active

interviews (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995; Gubrium, 1988). All interviews were conducted on a very informal basis, during lunch breaks, coffee breaks or over brown bags. Yet, we paid careful attention to follow an implicit guideline and an “approximate” active interview methodology (Gubrium, 1988). None of these “active interviews”, especially with the CEO or management team members, were programmed. On the whole, this research benefited from a true impregnation within the organization. The objective was to obtain "nonobtrusive" measurements (Webb, Weick, 1979). These authors also recommend introducing a large variety into data collection methods, in order not to succumb to their convergence.

Two core elements are necessary to be able to conclude that an organization is engaged in the continuous crafting of an organizational façade: (a) the organization has a poor intrinsic performance; (b) the same organization is perceived by outsiders and stakeholders as complying to industry or company’s standards. The average labor productivity of the studied organization scored 39% below the company average. The overhead expenses scored 27% above the company average. The subsidiary showed a constant annual depreciation in resource exploitation over the past five years preceding the study.

Producing an organizational façade requires that an intended result, state, or condition that does not already exist must be brought into existence (i.e. an intended perception must be produced). In order to document the changes in the organization itself, and in its perception by stakeholders, we gathered data from two sources: (a) The actual production, tasks, projects actually being achieved *internally*; (b) the reports that were produced on the subsidiary at the mother company, which we obtained through our sympathetic ally at the firm’s headquarters. We thought that the accomplishment of the intended façade would be demonstrated by some objective evidence or measure of the final outcomes, showing in what way they are different from what was present before the façade process. Research instrumentation was somehow paradoxical, because what we were trying to measure is indeed a *null hypothesis*. If the façade were to be successful, then the organization should have accomplished close to nothing, and the façade should display outstanding accomplishment and compliance to external control demands. To achieve this goal, we used several measures:

- We compared, over the observation period, the evolution of written outputs that were archived as “realizations” by the company, by using the “compare documents” function of Microsoft Word;
- We also compared the evolution of templates and PowerPoint presentations that were given to visitors, mother company executives and controllers, using the same software function;
- We conducted informal and discretionary interviews with managers and employees of the mother company in order to validate or invalidate the successful persuasion of the external control by the emergent façade after resigning from the studied subsidiary.

We then generated a simple set of codes for the analysis of the produced qualitative data, from interviews and reports. We developed this code from the *Impression Management* literature, as we sought an adequate framework to analyze how the organizational façade was imbued, imposed, enforced or adopted by organization members. Coding encompassed managers and employees’ discourses, and also included symbols, artifacts, theatrics, and so forth, which were used in conjunction with what was spoken. We used Kipnis et al. (1980) eight categories of IM tactics, to which we added goal settings manipulation (Frink & Ferris, 1998). Categories are summarized in the table below:

Tactics	Definition	Authors	Measures
Ingratiation	Increasing likeliness of self	Gordon (1996)	Façade agent invokes compassion, “collective wound”
Self-promotion	Attempting to create an appearance of competence	Jones & Pittman (1982)	Façade agent invokes relentlessly his career achievements when justifying decisions
Rationality	Using data to make logical argument	Leary & Kowalski (1990)	Decisions relative to façade generation are supported by intensive data; “fact & figure” men take over.
Assertiveness	Using force to obtain desired outcome	Falbe & Yukl (1992)	Façade is reaffirmed through assertive messages that are forced upon collaborators, and even stakeholders.
Exchange	Using economic rewards or symbolic exchange	Kipnis et al. (1980)	Rewards are associated with contributions to façade in detriment of other tasks (emphasis on work processes).
Sanctions	Using threat to get compliance	Giacalone & Rosenfeld (1991)	People who question the legitimacy of the façade are severely sanctioned. Sanctions associated with façade
Upward appeal	Calling in superiors and political network to obtain compliance	Mowday (1978)	Steps of façade building are systematically anchored in upward approval. Upward approval routine is implemented.

Performance evaluation	Performance outcome is associated with compliance to agenda	Cleveland & Murphy (1992)	Performance interviews put a strong emphasis on façade contribution, with less emphasis on other aspects.
Goal settings	Goal setting is used as a way to impress and deter non alignment	Frink & Ferris (1998); Giacalone & Rosenfeld (1991)	Goal settings avoid any measurement of the façade components, or use biased metrics (e.g. obsolescence of data, or absence of data supporting decisions).

Table 1: Impression Management tactics categories used for qualitative data analysis

Because this article is an exploration of the strategies used in producing organizational façades, the focus here is only with formal reporting and/or spoken aspects of misrepresentations. The role other aspects of misrepresentations (i.e. financial, accounting, legal) might play in producing organizational façades remains for subsequent examinations.

Case description and findings

When Mr. Tsujez (*fictitious name*) gathered his executives for their first management meeting, he made things clear: “The company is undergoing an important reorientation, and we need to reorganize this unit adequately”. He had drawn a new organizational chart, wrote a new mission statement, and reallocated responsibilities so “to align our competencies with the new headquarters demands”. The first Vice President later commented that he did not understand why the headquarters themselves did not document these “important changes”. As another executive puts it: “Management meetings resembled a television sitcom. We were told that a ‘V.I.P’ had told him that radical changes were to come, and that we should adapt by anticipation ‘for our own sake’”. Company vocabulary evolved rapidly. The terms “V.I.P.”, “personalities”, “fundamental”, “honored”, “image”, “reputation” appeared in the working jargon, and occupied the highest frequencies of occurrences in the company report. Impressive titles were given to the new managers of the redrawn corporate map. Coffee-breaks comments spread like thunder “I feel I’m responsible of half of the earth now”; “Who is going to believe that my team of four people can achieve all this? This is complete non-sense”; “I don’t have the skills to achieve all these objectives, and I’m given zero budget for hiring. How does he think I can do this?”

The executive team spent most of its first month producing the PowerPoint presentation of the company for external visitors. Mr. Tsujez took care of the first

three slides: the mission statement, the new budget allocation process, which he changed as soon as he took office, and the new departmental definitions. New functions were created with the mention “TBD” (to be defined) such as “skunkworks”, “project office manager”, “chief operations manager”. Managers later discovered that these positions were to be fulfilled by Mr. Tsujez’s old friends, who already fulfilled similar positions for him in the past. The P.O. manager worked alongside Mr. Tsujez during most of his career. As he put it himself in a management meeting: “Mr. Cyan has a great experience interacting with headquarters. He knows how to formulate reports appropriately, and knows to which door he needs to knock when we face a difficult budget situation”.

Mr. Blue, the “skunkworks” manager, arrived with incredible discretion. He was not introduced to the management team, occupied a separate office space from others, and interacted only with Mr. Tsujez. There was no selection process for these discretionary positions, and the Human Resource Manager was puzzled at times when he had to justify this new wave of hiring to the headquarters. One main obstacle is that the “skunkworks” manager had very little experience in the industry, and quite awkward credentials, such as in the erotic magazine industry. The credentials were difficult to integrate into the perspective of an industrial firm; and were eventually erased from company files. “Skunkworks” was defined in the job description as “accelerating the change process by bringing together ‘out of the box’ perspectives, and renewing work processes with innovative thinking”.

Managers who interacted with this new “change agent” were also quite puzzled: “He has no technical knowledge at all! How is he supposed to help us?”; “He is really making impossible demands. It’s like interacting with an adolescent. I had to explain to him what the job was about for half-an-hour”; “In a sense, it was very useful. It’s like talking to a customer who does not know how we make things. He was pretty candid, but pretty useful” (interview excerpts). Managers soon realized that the “skunkworks” agent was indeed gathering more information than he was giving: “It’s like a second pair of eyes. I think he is just watching over us, and checking if we agree with the boss”; “He is pretty astute. He asked me if I was happy in my job and what I thought of the new plan. I told him I was seriously impressed by the exceptional competence of the boss (laughs)” (interview excerpts). As soon as a collective

agreement was reached on the new organization, work processes and plan, the company started to be flooded with executives from the headquarters and other divisions of the firm. Local managers had just started their new mission a month before, and they were already asked to present their accomplishments in front of these “VIP guests”.

A small revolt started arising under the organizational surface: “It’s completely crazy. When am I supposed to produce when I spent my time presenting slide shows for visitors?”; “There is now at least a visitor from headquarters per week. When am I supposed to do what is written on my slides?”; “He hired an ‘event coordinator’, a photographer, a video producer! What are we suppose to be? A reality show?”; “There is this guy who spends all his days producing slide shows with the boss showing off next to corporate VIPs for the flat panel displays that he had put all over the place. I think the guy must have a personality cult issue, really” (Interview excerpts). Dissidents were heavily sanctioned. A manager was retrograded to the line level after he made a comment on the consistency of the plan. Another manager was fired for “personality issues”. Another one was caught listening to music on his laptop, and was subsequently laid off for misuse of company property. He had shared his concerns about his work plan too loudly. After two months of “fine-tuning” disagreements, and “one on one” auditions with all the personnel, everything got back into order.

Problems arose when external evaluations took less controlled communication channels. The unit organized a series of thematic meetings with executives from the headquarters and different divisions of the group. Managers were asked to fill evaluation questionnaires on the seminars they attended at the local firm. Participants were more randomized than the usual interaction channels used by the organization. Evaluations did not match expectations. Mr. Tsujez carefully supervised the analysis of data, and managed to aggregate items to push figures higher on the scale. A grandiloquent article was put on-line on the company intranet, picking up excerpts from mails sent by the few happy external visitors. However, some managers who attended a “very disappointing meeting”; “a clear demonstration of a lack expertise”; “a waste of time” (interview excerpts) spread their comments back at the headquarters. Another issue rose when managers started to send their friends to the

local subsidiary. Following standard operating procedure, they shared the data they gathered during their past visit with their colleagues back home. Five months later a group of subordinates of these senior managers paid a visit to the unit. As soon as they got back home, they reported on the “excellent experience”; “warm people”; “quality of interactions”, and forwarded the collected PowerPoint slides to their supervisor. The latter thought it was an error, because the slides were exactly the same he himself had gathered five months before.

Curious and amused by his findings, he dropped by the office of another executive, a few doors away, at the headquarters to compare his slides with the one he had gathered eight months before. His suspicions were correct: all the slides were nearly the same. “Well, if this is ‘work in progress’, ‘advancement status’, then these people must be lost in the fourth dimension, or on a different time interval (laughs)” (interview excerpts).” The façade started to crack when employment issues took a legal turn, with subsequent financial consequences. Most of the “fine tuning” of dissidence was achieved through secret transactions with fired personnel, and a mutual agreement that all information of the transaction should be kept confidential. A financial compensation was systematically given. The mother company’s legal department started to add these substantial costs, and expressed a serious concern about more than three transactions in a row. Although the unit was never suspected of silencing whistle-blowers, the financial cost was well above the organizational norms. A series of financial audits followed the incident. But no evidence could be gathered. The façade resisted the ultimate test, and business kept on as usual.

1. Exploring The Dynamics of Façade Crafting

When we regard organizational façade as a temporal phenomenon moving from beginning to end, or from unfreezing to refreezing (Lewin, 1951), the general sequence of misrepresentations will move from left to right in Figure 1. Each avenue is described next. An organizational façade arises from an initial misrepresentation in the organization at some point following a claim, a declaration, and associated promises. These initiative misrepresentations are like the identification stage of organization decision making, in which opportunities, problems, and crises are recognized and evoke action (Mintzberg, Raisinghani, & Theoret, 1976) or as the beginning point in issue selling (Dutton & Ashford, 1993). This is the "dramatic call"

that constitutes the first phase of a façade process. It may be a reaction to anticipated environmental shifts or organizational performance downturns (Ford & Baucus, 1987), or it may be intended to move the organization toward a new grand vision (Kouzes & Posner, 1987). The IM tactic of “**upward appeal**” was indeed intensively used throughout this initial phase.

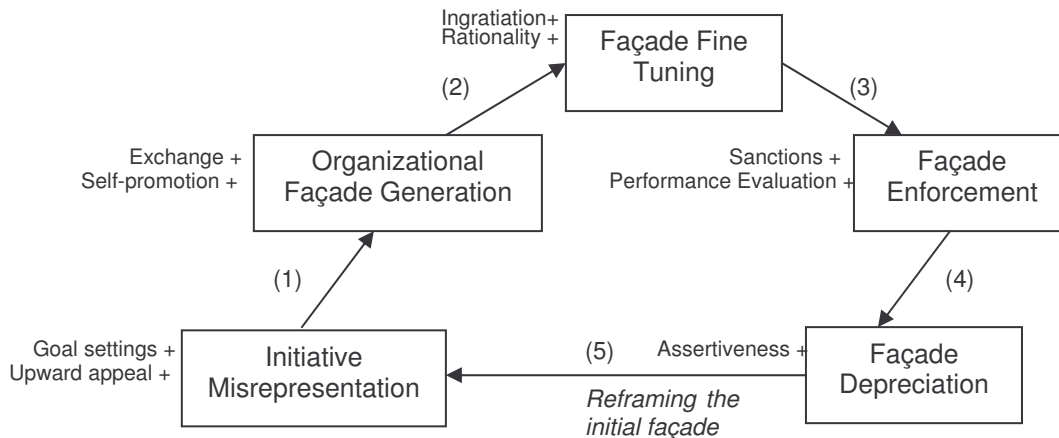


Figure 1: Phases of façade crafting as observed in the studied company

The “initiative misrepresentation” is essentially a “legitimate and urgent proposal”, and whether it will be honored is left to further relations between the façade agent and listeners (e.g., Leary & Kowalski, 1990; Stiff, Kim, & Ramesh, 1992), the context in which it will occur (Dutton & Ashford, 1993), and the adherence qualities of the deceptive projection itself (Reike & Sillars, 1984). In his initial speech act to launch the façade, the CEO used mainly the “**goal settings**” and the “**upward appeal**” tactics. Awkwardly, there was little to no mention of his own competencies to lead the organization to the projected goal. We also noticed that this phase was documented very little. The façade agent made organizational members contribute to his proposed projection, without imposing external data or consistent evidence that he had gained an actual approval for his plan, or that managers were working in compliance with external control. The façade agent displayed a strong empathy towards his employees during this phase that lasted six weeks. A senior manager who showed a strong opposition to a plan that she considered non-sense was quickly isolated, but the use of this IM sanction tactic was kept secret from other employees. The façade agent used a

private transaction to avoid legal pursuits, and imposed discretion on the dissident employee. When this initiative deceptive projection was successful, the façade process shifted into organizational façade generation (Figure 1, line 1)

2- Generating the Organizational Façade

The generation phase of the façade was surprisingly embedded into loose couplings, generalities and ambiguity. However, this finding corroborates Eisenberg (1984) propositions on the use of ambiguity as a strategy for organizational conversation. One main obstacle for the façade agent is issue selling because the intrinsic quality of a façade is its “emptiness”: no specific career perspective, no immediate concrete rewards, and obviously very little consistency with on-going and previous agendas. To overcome this obstacle, we observed that the façade agent engaged employees in determining what the façade should produce and what actions were appropriate to make this façade happen. The façade agent started to change the internal budget allocation, and explained to employees that the “external control” budget allocation process would soon change. Hence, he “reinvented” both the evaluation criteria for resource usage, and the local resource allocation rules, leaving a much larger part to his own discretionary power (25% of unit resources). Doing so, he engaged in a series of “personal face-to-face interviews”, “to get to know you better, and discuss your new missions”. These interviews were very lengthy, from one to three hours. Employees who left the façade agent’s office were puzzled: “I still don’t know what I have to do”; “He was rather not clear on how I will be assessed”; “I don’t know much about my budget, that’s all I can say”; “He spent his time telling me his life story, and not much about mine in the immediate future”. We observed that the façade agent was intensively using IM “**Exchange**” and IM “**Self-Promotion**” tactics during this phase. This finding is consistent with Nystrom & Starbuck (1984) suggestions: “When outcomes seem unclear, evaluations increasingly emphasize work processes. Inharmonious and non comparable goals lead to less attention devoted to how organization’s members pursue these ambiguously defined goals” (p. 184). The “**Self Promotion**” tactics took many forms, one of them being forgery. The façade agent arranged for his own interview in a leading newspaper, and composed his biography where he claimed to hold a Ph.D. that he never obtained. The biography was sent by fax to the newspaper, but employees printed a second copy from the fax machine, and circulated the document secretly in the company. Another manifestation of this Self

Promotion tactic was the appearance of very large flat panels in the company lobby, where the façade agent staged himself in a slide show in company of headquarters executives. We also observed that most of the IM “**Exchange**” tactics pursued the purpose of diverting employees from the awareness of the lack of content of the initial misrepresentation proposed as the “grand new project” for the company.

The façade agent seemed to be very aware of the socially constructed nature of his project. Not a single employee in the company escaped the “one on one” “get to know you” meetings. Sometimes, the dialogue did not progress. The participants found that they were “hung up” or “stuck” (Smith & Berg, 1987). We observed a tactic that did not belong to the IM literature we used for our qualitative analysis (Kipnis et al., 1980). In this case, the façade agent deployed a considerable energy to dissociate the ill being of the employee from the crafting process of the façade. The impression tactic consists of associating the lack of adhesion to the façade to a personal issue of the employee. His or her personality issues would be directly addressed by the façade agent as the rationale for his or her lack of enthusiasm for the collective project.

3- Fine-Tuning the Façade Over Time

Façade crafting is a very creative activity, and there is room for surprises in the façade agent’s agenda. Not all the components are under his or her direct hierarchical supervision. This is especially true for the “external components” of the façade, i.e. its suppliers and business partners. Auditors and executive from headquarters often ask for advancement briefing sessions with suppliers or partners. It rapidly occurred the façade agent that there would not be much to discuss, because not much was done with any suppliers. The façade agent developed in response a strategy of exploiting management team’s and employees’ network externalities. Address books were dig, and employees were told that complete data and documentation should be brought to the table. This gain of interest and repeated meetings made suppliers believe that they could expect new “business perspectives” with the firm. In return, they willingly accepted to come to business meetings with external visitors and executives from the headquarters. This mining of employees’ address book was conducted as an empathetic strategy: “as a personal favor” (IM **Ingratiation** tactic). Whilst the two first phases were anchored in the personality of the façade agent (with intensive use of “self promotion” tactics), the fine-tuning is one of “depersonalization” of the façade.

Facts and Figures men took over the animation process. The old friend, Mr. Cyan, implemented a severe Project Office with an extreme granularity of metrics. Observation and data show a sudden shift to a rationalization phase. The use of the **IM Rationality** tactics could be seen on an everyday basis. The façade agent, however, did not appreciate being outsmarted by one senior manager, who had a long experience in budgeting, and who presented a superior standard of reporting for his team. He was assertively told to strictly follow Mr Cyan's plan. Suggestions were not welcome.

4- Façade Enforcement: Moving on and Burying Whistle-Blowers

Not all employees accept the façade as it progresses, and some may be inclined to “whistle-blow” the deceptive behavior of their superiors. As our findings suggest, organizational façades are rooted into a slow fine-tuning of perceptions, and might appear as a violation of their rights by employees. Our observations show that resistance to the growing organizational façade took place in the form of non-violent acts, on a more everyday and modern fashion, corroborating De Certeau's suggestions (1984). For example, two employees substituted the company presentation DVD in the main lobby, edited the movie – in which the CEO had a major and central role – and substituted a few still images with cartoons borrowed from the “Dilbert” series. The practical joke provoked a good laugh in the organization, but implicitly pointed towards the non-sense of employee's tasks, and the erratic and discriminatory practices of their superiors. The use of sabotage (Mars, 1982), indirect resistance (Ong, 1987), hidden transcripts (Scott, 1985) and subjective resistance (Kondo, 1990) were hence observed throughout the direct observation period of this research. **IM Sanction tactics** started to flourish as a means of retaliation from management. The most common one was “degradation / isolation”. The dissident was given a new temporary mission, with no team, in an isolated workplace. He or she would not be invited to go to lunch with any of the management team member, who was told not to do so. This practice led to a discrimination case, and the façade agent had to organize a secret transaction with the employee, accompanied by lawyers, at far distance from the office. As employees were witnessing the sudden and silent “disappearance” of their dissident colleagues, tension could now be felt.

Performance evaluations meetings were now used to remind employees with their obligations. Formal letters of warning were sent to people reading cartoons, listening to music, or “talking to each other too intensively during work”. The IM **Performance Evaluation** tactic took over the whole enforcement routine, leaving the façade agent almost invisible, and putting the Human Resource manager at the center of attention. Resistance became rare. Cynicism was the dominant tactic of transgression used by employees. Interviews with employees are pretty revealing, as the following extracts show: “I perfectly know that I’m just producing vaporware here. If I have to produce the same vaporware for five more years, as far as I get my green card, it does not matter”; “One more day, one more gig of MP3” (music downloaded over Peer to Peer networks); “The most difficult part of my job is to make the difference between a working day and holiday”; “I’m getting used to this copy and paste lifestyle; maybe I should get a special keyboard with only three keys: copy, paste, shutdown”. As Fleming and Spicer (2003) noted: “The very capacity cynically to challenge the company culture provokes a counterfeit sense of self-determination that allows the corporate roles to be enacted without the friction that is usually present when one feels hard done by. Employees become trapped in a ‘vicious circle of cynicism and dependence’ (Willmott, 1993:518), which disarms them of any staid ability to challenge the existing power structure”. When asked why they would stay in the studied organization, despite a lower pay, a lack of recognition, and their own self-declared feeling of uselessness, employees made assertions such as: “If they are cheating, it’s really none of my business. They can put their names at the bottom of my work, I’m fine”; or “I’m much smarter than they are. I’m using system, and I’ll cash in somewhere else”; “I’ve been here for ten years. They are all the same. The next one will be the same, until another clone removes him. The winners, it’s us”. As Zizek (1989:32) noticed: “Cynical distance is just one way to blind ourselves to the structuring power of ideological fantasy: even if we do not take things seriously, even if we keep an ironical distance, *we are still doing them*”.

5- When Façades Collapse: Coping with Depreciation

Façades can just simply collapse. The first flaw that we observed was in the “initiative misrepresentation” credibility. As employees moved around, and especially visited the headquarters, they quickly felt the “cognitive dissonance” between their life under Mr Tsujez, and the life of colleagues in other business units. Ironically, people may

still accept empty requests and not fulfill their promises to deliver empty results. We observed that outperforming became a sort of sabotage, as people would do more of a very different thing, to implicitly show the façade agent that they were aware of the dupery of their imposed work plan. People left façade projects unfinished, or they finish a project and move on to the next one without documenting this completion for external control.

Cracks also arose from external components, such as suppliers. After coming to eight meetings with external visitors, one supplier sent a formal letter of complaint, asking some “concrete elements or feedback regarding discussed potential partnerships”. Interviews with suppliers were revealing: “I must have seen at least fifteen people from their headquarters now. It’s like Groundhog Day. Every time I show up there, I do exactly the same meeting”; “I cancelled my last meeting. I hate losing my time. There is nothing coming out of these meetings at all”; “These guys are phony. Every time I show up, there is always another level up that need to look at our project. I understand it’s a large organization, but how many people do they need to take one decision?”; “I think these guys did not understand there is no free lunch. That was the last time they saw me”. Being on the defensive, the façade agent and immediate collaborators started to use more IM **Assertiveness** tactics. While still kept behind close doors, voices were raised and could be heard through the thin panels.

IMPLICATIONS & CONCLUSION

Organizational façades work because people are interested in how they are perceived and evaluated by others (Leary & Kowalski, 1990). This is true for the façade agent, but also for the employees in “agentic state” (Milgram, 1975) who collaborate to erect the collective construction, aware of the duplicity in the overall project. It is doubtful, however, that people would continue such collaboration if the façade did not further their public identities, promote their personal interests, and enhance their self-esteem. During this research, I saw many people engage in distortion, lying to cover up the imposed façade and to maintain or save their public personae.

Our findings suggest that façades rely upon a sequence of *Impression Management* tactics that starts with “upward appeal”, and is immediately followed with “goal settings”, “exchange”, self-promotion”, “ingratiation”, “rationality”, “sanction”,

“performance evaluation”, and ends with an “assertiveness” phase, which signals façade depreciation. Interestingly, the façade agent intensively uses loose couplings and ambiguity in role assignments; a finding that we found rather counter-intuitive, and not corroborating the impression management or indoctrination literatures.

We discovered that façades serve as a more or less desired buffer between the external control of an organization and its local management. Façades do provide flexibility to external control, as they allow for “discretionary transitional buffers” for resources that are not yet legitimate, or resources that need a temporary institutional “hide out”.

The sociology of secrecy of the façade agent was indeed not a full surprise. It does corroborate classical research on the matter, such as Georg Simmel’s influential article (Simmel, 1906: 497), concerning the use of secret transactions: “In all directorates, faculties, committees, boards of trustees, etc., whose transactions are secret, the same thing holds. The individual disappears as a person in the anonymous member of the ring, so to speak, and with him the responsibility, which has no hold upon him in his intangible special character.” The more the façade grows, the less it becomes possible to determine who belongs to the “ring”. Company meetings were not held anymore. New hires were not introduced neither to management, nor employees, even so they obviously constituted the new “organizational ring”. As a consequence, and corroborating Foucault’s suggestions, people develop a self-constraining behavior, avoiding taking new initiatives in an environment that is becoming unpredictable. The façade thus becomes the only realm of predictability and legitimacy in the organization, and the only safe exit from the “underlife” (Ingram, 1986)

Implications for practice

This article seeks to identify means of façade detection by a parent company. One intent was to create a framework for detecting the production of organizational façades and to make explicit the underlying process that could signal an organizational façade under construction. Limited by the lack of external validity of this first exploration, we suggest the following propositions for a parent company:

- Listen to parallel channels, either coming from the “underlife” or from suppliers and industry partners.
- Strengthen control over the hiring of critical interface personnel, such as operations managers, office managers and accountants; make sure the hiring process is transparent and competitive, and get suspicious if management is too rapidly replaced by managers selected by the heads of subsidiaries.
- Control change and renewal in secondary data, i.e. compare documents over time.
- Ask for copies of all private transactions that senior managers conclude with laid-off employees; check for reputation clauses and “locking agreements” that might signal efforts to silence whistle-blowers.
- Do not let the subsidiary handle your agenda; façade agents try to control priorities as they increase their discretion.
- Ask for lists of employees who have been given leaves or paid time-off during an audit processes; façade agents are likely to hide dissidents by allowing them to go off-site.

Implications for theory

The initial perspective offered on organizational façades (Nystrom & Starbuck, 1984) treat cognition as something that occurs within the façade process alongside other phenomena. Our perspective reverses this view, and we infer that organizational façades are based on and driven by five different phases of cognitive manipulation. Producing organizational façades becomes a matter of creating and shifting misrepresentations rather than bringing about opportunistic and resource-dependent alterations. It is our experience, however, that façade agents may face real difficulties when they try to turn socially constructed realities into collectively objectified realities. There is a limit to people’s tolerance of the distortion of their identities. In the studied case, some people left the game; while others indirectly cracked it.

This perspective has theoretical implications beyond façades. If façades are very common in organizations, we should reconsider the empirical foundations of Agency Theory and the Resource Based View of the firm. What motivated the headquarters in our case study to keep this subsidiary afloat, even though they perfectly understood it was growing into an enduring façade? One hypothesis, which would deserve further

investigation, is that façades act as institutionalization buffers. The deceptive relationship between principal and agent produces collateral institutional benefits for the principal, which in turn increases the tolerance for misbehavior. Analyses of cases such as Enron or WorldCom might benefit from this analytical perspective. Our observations also suggest that organizational façades play a substantial role in safeguarding organizational resources. The façade constituted on many occasions a temporary and discretionary resource reservoir that allowed senior management from the parent company to justify on-going projects.

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