41   THE MYTH OF ALIGNMENT

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> The greatest gap between the practices of Hall of Fame organizations occurs for organization alignment…and this indicates that alignment, much like the synchronism achieved by a high-performance rowing crew, produces dramatic benefits. Understanding how to create alignment in organizations is a big deal, one capable of significant payoffs for all types of enterprises (Kaplan and Norton 2006).

Colloquially, myth denotes a widely held belief that is fictional or erroneous. Its anthropological usage, however, does not carry the same pejorative charge: myths are simply conceptual schemata, embodying core metaphysical concepts and moral wisdom. It is in this latter sense that I dub alignment as a myth; not to question its factuality (a nonsensical property in the case of a belief) but to highlight and interrogate the cultural work that it does (Stillman, 1985). Barthes (1973) defines myth as a type of speech, a "second order semiological system" of signs drawn from the medium of language in which their original meanings are modified to suit the myth-building role. Any elementary *linguistic object* (the definition is broad, encompassing visual imagery as well as language) can be symbolically coopted as raw material by the mythical system. Barthes uses a cover page of *Paris Match* depicting a French negro soldier saluting the tricolour as an exemplar. Beyond the naive meaning, the second-order mythical signification is easily read: "France is a great Empire, that all her sons, without colour discrimination, faithfully serve under her flag…" (Barthes 1973, p. 116). Other symbols conveying the same underlying idea may readily be imagined. Through a matrix of such varied *forms*, the myth of French colonialism as a beneficent force is constituted.

By appropriating signs, promiscuously and parasitically, mythical speech thus builds chains of signifiers mediating abstract, metaphysical concepts, often complex and protean, and with strong moral content. An illustrative case study from Kaplan and Norton featuring the strategic alignment of IS/IT provides a relevant example. Strategic align-

ment has been a hot topic in the information systems field for many years (Luftman 2004), although with a handful of distinguished exceptions (Ciborra 2004), much of this discourse lacks a critical edge. In Kaplan and Norton's own words, here is an elliptical rendering of their tale, abridged from the full account (on pages 149-162).

> Lockheed Martin's EIS [enterprise information system] organization has more than 4000 employees working in its Orlando HQ and decentralized units around the US. Business leaders, especially since the 1995 merger, were concerned because the IT units operated in stovepipes and silos. To meet its new challenges as a value-added IT provider, EIS launched a balanced scorecard program to align its various departments with the overall EIS strategy and the strategies of the corporation. The BSC would help EIS become the credible innovator and supplier of cutting-edge, net-centric capabilities. Figure 5.12 [see Figure 1] shows the EIS strategy map.…By mid-2005, EIS had cascaded this Strategy Map into its ten functional areas and was already seeing heightened awareness and engagement with the strategy among its workforce.

The linguistic and mythical levels in the narrative are easily differentiated. At the elementary level, we have an apparently straightforward piece of factual reporting: a short historical account of a turnaround in Lockheed-Martin due to the intercession of the balanced scorecard (BSC). The meanings are all perfectly clear and unambiguous. But the account can also be read mythically, as a single compound signifier, a kind of moral parable, exemplifying the virtues of alignment and implicitly warning of the dangers of transgression. Its mythical function is an ideological one, and at this level its truth is simply not relevant: the factual detail is pure ornamentation to lend rhetorical force through verisimilitude. The rest of the book is replete with fables of a similar genre, as well as simplistic formulae for achieving alignment, often conveyed diagrammatically. The business organization is consistently depicted as an orderly commonwealth, where managerial agency is sovereign with all working harmoniously for the public good.[1]

> Each individual in the organization develops a personal scorecard. The objectives and targets on those scorecards for the following year are agreed in December. These scorecards are linked to the business or service unit scorecard to which the person belongs, thus ensuring complete top to bottom alignment (Kaplan and Norton 2006, p. 24).

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[1]There is, of course, something of a much older myth at work here, the myth of an idealized realm where all live in peace and prosperity in a community governed by a wise and benign authority. Plato's Republic, Hobbes' Leviathan, More's Utopia provide relevant examples from political philosophy, whilst literature invokes the motif allegorically through the pastoral idiom with its Arcadian depiction of idyllic rural life. The figure of the shepherd provides an ingenious double emblem of the natural pastoral order, both as model subject (of the polity) and model ruler (of his sheep). Stillman (1985) offers an exegesis of Sydney's "Old Arcadia" based on Barthes, emphasizing the role of myth in the naturalization of aristocratic power. The relationship between pastoral power (in its Christian embodiment) and Foucault's concept of governmentality is discussed by Blake (1999).
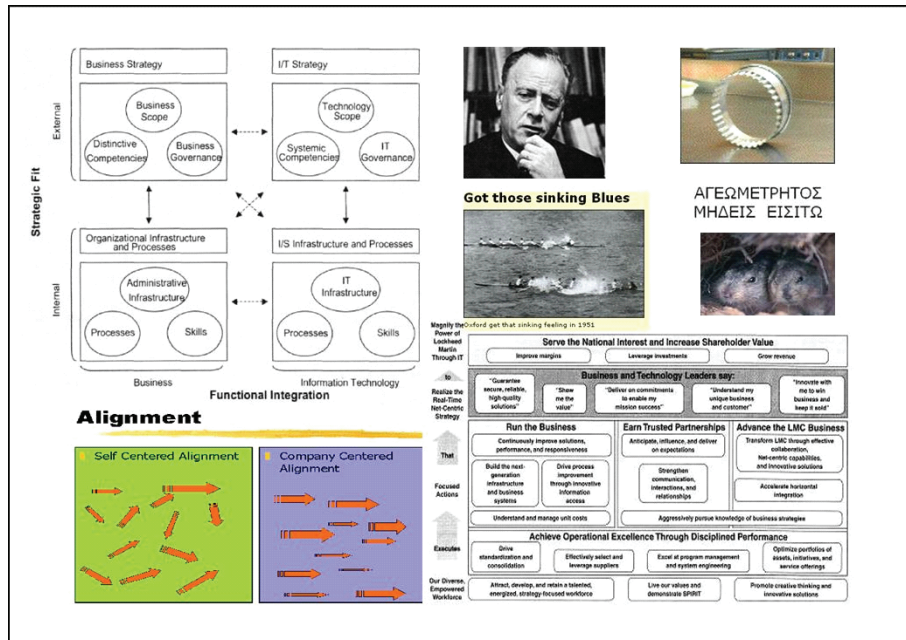
***Figure 1.* Collage**

Clockwise from bottom left: a random image of alignment found on the Internet; Henderson and Venkatraman's (1993) seminal model of strategic alignment (SAM); Marshall McLuhan; a pastry cutter; motto from the entrance to Plato's Academy; two lemmings; Oxford vs. Cambridge boat race (1951), and Figure 5.12 from Kaplan and Norton (the illegibility of the latter is deliberate, partly for copyright purposes, partly to emphasize the form of the diagram over its content). The relevance of some of the images to the text is direct; the symbolism of others is encoded in heuristic juxtapositions and left to speak for itself!

Like so many business case studies, these "parables of alignment" share a simple canonical structure, lacking even the limited sophistication of fairy tales where villains and evil forces figure to provide moral depth and complexity (Monin and Monin 2005). The formula usually goes as follows: a looming crisis, the arrival of a savior, choice between redemption or calamity, a happy ending when the prescriptions are followed, apocalypse otherwise. The pervasive use of diagrams throughout the alignment literature (Figure 1) is an interesting semiotic device is its own right. As McLuhan gnomically observed, the medium is the message, and potent metaphysical messages are subliminally conveyed through such imagery: that the organisational world is an orderly domain, inhabited by well-defined concepts, entities, and processes, governed by simple laws of causality and managerial agency. The geometric regularities are themselves aesthetically enchanting, powerfully reinforcing the sense of natural order. This is a mythical world of magical thinking, of reified concepts standing in fixed determinate configurations, and

of outcomes flowing almost automatically as if from supernatural intervention (the BSC *ensures*, etc.).

This brings us to Barthes' second critical point regarding the function of myth. Barthes describes myth as *de-politicized speech*, in which the active mode of the prefix is emphasized. Political interests are obfuscated (often through *ex-nomination*) enabling the social order to be portrayed as natural and necessary: "Myth is constituted by the loss of historical quality of things…the quality that they were once made." The image of the soldier-Negro does not deny French imperialism or act as a crude alibi; on the contrary its existence as a benign force is intentionally affirmed: "what is got rid is the contingent, historical, *fabricated* quality of colonialism." In moving from history to nature, myth mystifies, giving complex, human acts the "simplicity of essences," concealing their springs-of-action and endowing a natural and eternal justification for the historical and political. Mythical language is typically tautological, intransitive, and often sentimental: the world is the way it is because that's how things are and how they should be; nothing can be changed. The cultural work of myths is thus to naturalize the *status quo*: as Barthes remarks, "Statistically, most myth is on the Right." The mythology of alignment involves the same process of conservative mystification. Not only does it paint a vista of the organization as a harmonious system, but this depiction is normalized as inevitable, timeless and natural rather than a fabricated, cultural arrangement privileging some interests over others.

As Mary Douglas famously said, "dirt is matter out of place" and we must next ask, what is hidden, banished or swept away as the myth of alignment enacts its cultural work of ordering the world. The answer should by now be clear, but to assist in this demystification, I will detour with a vignette of my own. Wastell et al. (2007) report a short ethnography of how alignment was accomplished in one organization, a UK local authority. Today, the IS function considers itself well-aligned, having gained a "seat of at the top table," and the organization as a whole has achieved fame and distinction for its e-Government achievements, winning a range of prestigious national awards. This prowess contrasts starkly with the beleaguered, hopelessly misaligned position of the IS function toward the end of the 1990s. Then they were demeaned as "the people who put PCs on desks" with the Damoclean sword of "out-sourcing" poised to strike. How has this transformation come about? There was no top-level imperative to align, no messianic saviour, no methodological bromide. Instead, a human story is told, of front line improvisation and renegade action.[2] The story speaks romantically of a group of senior professionals taking fate into their own hands and through a determined and resourceful campaign of opportunism and political manipulation eventually gaining the influence and status which they coveted. The historical reality inverts the alignment myth: misalign-ment becomes a force for good not ill, a stimulus for innovation without which the glittering prizes would never have been won. The demystification creates the potential for new mythical readings, of David-versus-Goliath, the heroic few winning out against the many (Gertz, 1986). More seditiously, by romanticizing misbehavior (Trickster as victorious folk-hero) core elements of alignment mythology are destabilized, particularly the idea of power as the concentrated monopoly of a senior, managerial elite.

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[2]A less starry-eyed version may be found in McMaster and Wastell (2005)!

Alignment provides a totalizing myth of the organization as a happy family, a perfect society in which the manager/worker divide has been forever sutured and all work for the common good. It undergirds a range of management fads such as BPR and TQM, and is the *sine qua non* of the systems paradigm (entirely predicated on the notion of functional unity) which has so dominated orthodox organizational theory (Parsons, 1956). But by naturalizing the world, myths inevitably pathologize. There is no place for resistance or subversion in this mythical world of "designer employees" (Ackroyd and Fleming, 2003): all act as "docile bodies," rationally and obediently serving the "primary goal" vouchsafed by the organization's priesthood. Dissent is automatically cast as deviant and irrational, as a dangerous pollution (dirt). Describing alignment as a right-wing myth is not to judge it good or bad, true or counterfactual. This essay is no anti-bourgeois crusade (and satirical temptations are also tightly reined): such polemical demystifications so often turn into remystifications, with authors infiltrating their pet social theories in tendentious re-readings. Rather, it is an invitation to interrogate writing and scholarship in this area more critically and ironically. As an exercise in de-politicized speech, Kaplan and Norton is a *tour de force*: organizational politics are utterly elided; the only agency in town is the hybrid agency of senior managers hand-in-glove with the technology of the balanced scorecard; there is no allusion anywhere to dissent, critique, or alternative views. Dubbing alignment as a myth is not to denigrate it, but merely to bring out its latent ideological content, to analyze its semiotics and the cultural work it does in converting history into nature.

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