

**Socialization processes during the post-merger integration phase:
conditions for tacit knowledge sharing and construction of common narratives**

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Introduction

This study analyses the integration phase of two companies involved in a merger, and devotes particular attention to the phenomena of socialization between the teams engaged in the organizational combination. Socialization constitutes an important component of the post-merger integration process. Indeed, efficient management of the integration process is currently considered a determining factor in the success of corporate combination. As noted by Napier (1989), Haspeslagh and Jemison (1991) and Schweiger and Walsh (1990), failures of mergers-acquisitions often stem from insufficient attention being paid to management of integration processes. It is therefore crucial to evaluate the coherence between organizations that are merging (Cartwright and Cooper, 1994, Datta, 1991, Marks and Mirvis, 1998). The effectiveness of organizational combination can even determine the well-foundedness of a merger or acquisition. For this reason, Deiser (1994) advances that the organizational adjustment is strategic. In this perspective, cultural integration and the various socialization processes that occur during a merger are of critical importance, and constitute factors that can facilitate the combination of companies.

Our study of a horizontal merger within the Danone group entails the analysis of different socialization conditions between the two organizations involved. The commercial and R&D functions in particular have attracted our attention because they involve both the combination of teams and exchanges or sharing of knowledge that is often difficult to formalize.

We will show in this paper that socialization is not solely a reciprocal acculturation process; it can also be understood as a process of learning and sharing of tacit knowledge. Socialization is therefore treated as a means of integration, as a learning factor and an opportunity to enrich the competencies of the companies and their members. Accordingly, we describe the socialization processes that have occurred during the transformation or creation of "communities of practices." In this framework, we pay particular attention to the common creation of "histories" or narratives. In effect, narratives play a dual role: they are both a condition and a result of socialization. They represent a means of acquiring tacit knowledge without reducing its singularity or removing its concrete richness. In addition, narratives, as shared stories, allow collective construction of knowledge. They also contribute to creating a common meaning and a new organizational identity.

First, in this paper, we will review the theoretical literature on cultural integration and socialization. Then we present our empirical study by examining the sales force and R&D department in greater detail. This exercise enables us to underscore the importance of the

narration process in socialization. We thus identify the various functions of the stories and of narration itself by illustrating their role in learning and in the creation of meaning within the organization.

I, 1) Mergers-acquisitions and organizational change

A merger-acquisition is an opportunity for major organizational transformation (Buono and Bowditch,1989; Pablo (1994). By the interpenetration of two firms, a merger gives rise to a hybrid organization and this organizational transplantation has its promise of risks of rejection. So it is important to determine the degree of tolerance to change in the organizations involved in the combination.

The amplitude of post-merger integration can be very modest, and can preserve the independence of the acquired firm. Integration may involve only a few departments. Moreover, the merge can also be more comprehensive, massively combining the strategic, organizational and cultural differences between the entities concerned. Shrivastava (1986) thus differentiated administrative integration, physical integration and managerial and cultural integration. Various positions on the amplitude of integration have been taken. Haspeslagh and Jemison (1991) and Pablo (1994) emphasize the risk of destruction of competencies during combination. Mergers-acquisitions of symbiosis allow transfers of competencies while preserving the frontiers and organizational characteristics.. Schweiger and Walsh (1990) maintain that complexity increases with the amplitude of the integration. In contrast, Mark and Mirvis (1992) insist on the need for a high degree of integration to harness the synergies between the companies. These authors believe that a partial integration will incur non-negligible coordination costs. Furthermore, it would harm the strategic clarity of the operation and could generate considerable uncertainty among the employees.

For mergers of high amplitude, the question of the cultural compatibility of the two organizations arises, together with the choice of principles and integration method. In the case we present below, the two companies belong to the same sector of activity, and the merger was intended to reduce costs while realizing economies of scale. The organizational bridging was consequently massive. It is therefore useful to examine the cultural characteristics of each company.

I, 2) Cultural integration

In a merger, the ease of integration is heavily contingent on the compatibility of cultural

particularities. Problems of cultural differences and management of the ensuing socialization processes are often overshadowed by technical concerns (Buono and Bowditch,1989). Intercultural differences can lead to the failure of mergers-acquisitions (Schweiger and Walsh, 1990) and organizational and cultural congruence play determining roles in the success of the combination (David and Singh,1994; Elsass and Veiga,1994).

The importance of cultural differences can be underlined through the concept of acculturation and the rapport between the cultures of the companies engaged in the merger (Nahavandi and Malekzadeh,1988). Acculturation is defined as the set of changes introduced in the two cultural systems in contact, whereby each system mutually influences the other. Acculturation is thus portrayed as the reciprocal diffusion of cultural elements. Nahvandi and Malekzadeh (1988) note that in most cases, one of the two entities plays a preponderant role in the acculturation process, but that socialization is invariably bi-directional. They differentiate four acculturation modes: integration (1) whereby companies preserve their cultural identity, while uniting organizationally. Cartwright and Cooper (1994) found that this integration phenomenon is manifested by harmonious coexistence or, inversely, degenerates into a collision between cultures. The assimilation process (2) is more unilateral, with one of the two partners exhibiting marked pre-eminence. The result is cultural assimilation and conformity with the characteristics of the purchaser. When separation (3) occurs, organizational and cultural characteristics are preserved. Contacts involve transfers of knowledge and exchanges of managers. Lastly, deculturation (4) is characterized by a loss of landmarks both for the purchasee and purchaser. Deculturation represents an opportunity to reconstruct an organization that is better adapted to environmental constraints.

Elsass and Veiga (1994) elaborated on the analysis of Nahavandi and Malekzadeh (1988) by adding a dynamic dimension. They posit that acculturation during a merger-acquisition results from tension between the forces of organizational integration and the forces of cultural differentiation. This tension often creates a high level of stress and resistance to change. Elsass and Veiga (1994) found that the confrontation between organizational and cultural differences may cause rigidity in each organization and could lead to the reinforcement of the organizational identity. Hence the famous "Us versus Them" syndrome that expresses the rejection of the organizational difference of the partner.

Organizational and cultural differences can nonetheless benefit the new entity. A merger-acquisition can spawn a new social system that results from the cultural interaction of the two partners. Each company contributes its management systems and cultural characteristics, and

the new entity must endeavor to ensure their cohabitation, to adjust these differences so as to construct a new enriched set of qualities from the two original sets. But cultural differences are difficult to harness: culture contains an implicit component that cannot be grasped without extensive collaboration. In addition, Marks and Mirvis (1998) maintain that it is through socialization processes that a common history and culture are gradually developed; the "US-Them" opposition subsequently gives way to gradual construction of a common "Us" (Weick, 1995).

I.3) Socialization

Socialization processes therefore play a determining role in mergers. Below we present the broad outlines of this concept in order to clarify the backdrop of our empirical study.

As defined by Ashforth and Saks (1996), who built on the work of Louis (1980), Van Maanen (1975) and Van Maanen and Schein (1979), socialization in a company can be understood as a process by which the individuals and the organization in which they work learn from each other and mutually influence each other. Socialization concerns actions taken by individuals to learn new tasks and actions implemented by the organization to teach newcomers the lessons it considers important for (Van Maanen and Schein, 1979). In this framework, socialization is understood as a learning process by individuals of beliefs, values, behaviors and all of the other prerequisites for carrying out a function in the organization. It is therefore considered a process of multiple adaptation to a new setting. In this sense, socialization can be a source of what Louis (1980) termed "surprises" for the newcomer faced with behaviors he perceives as strange. In a new environment, the individual (or the group of individuals) therefore strives to organize information and attribute meaning to organizational situations that may be unknown or difficult to understand (Jablin, 1982).

However, the process is not unidirectional: socialization also concerns the way in which the individual entering an organization individualizes his role and how he in turn transforms or furthers the environment. The newcomer must therefore not be considered a blank and a passive actor waiting to be trained and informed by his new environment. Louis (1980) and Van Maanen (1975) conclude that socialization does not take place in one direction only, and that newcomers contribute to resocializing the teams in place. They provide the host community with an opportunity to reconfigure its knowledge and expertise by introducing variety and movement.

We suggest here that the definitions of socialization in the company are very similar to those of cultural integration, and the issues are identical. Both domains explore the differences between the organizations or individuals, and evaluate how the differences can transform the organization. In this sense, understanding the socialization process is crucial to achieve better control over the integration phase during a merger. We will now present the principal sources of socialization along with the objects that are affected by socialization.

I.3.1) Sources of socialization

There are generally three sources of socialization:

- Documents and procedures issued by the institution. These are general messages concerning the organization, its history, procedures, broad outlines of its strategy and the company mission. These messages are often compiled in welcome booklets or are disseminated orally by management. Training for a position or a function is also included in this source of socialization.

- Hierarchical supervisor. This person is a critical agent of socialization in that he controls the flow of information and constitutes a model for newcomers. Moreover, the newcomer is dependent on his supervisor for his career success.

Work colleagues. Colleagues constitute the immediate and daily environment of the newcomer. They can thus reduce the newcomer's stress. They facilitate the performance of tasks and demonstrate the ideal behavior for each circumstance. In addition, work colleagues disseminate the values of the group and help the newcomer interpret different organizational events and better perceive informal networks. As noted by Louis (1980), colleagues best convey the values and standards. Ostroff and Kozlowski (1992) posit that newcomers rely initially on interaction with their colleagues to understand the tasks, roles and values of the organization. Lave (1991) argues that participation in a community of practices constitutes the essential socialization process. In our study, we will examine socialization in the perspective of this interaction between peers and particularly as participation in "communities of narratives."

I.3.1) Objects of socialization

Socialization can concern tasks, functions, requested performances along with behaviors, indispensable partners, distribution of power, language, technical expressions, goals, values, rites and the history of the company. Asforth and Black (1996), for instance maintain that

newcomers primarily endeavor to construct efficient relations that subsequently enable them to better perform the designated tasks and to understand the functioning of the organization. But the access to these objects is often gained through informal relations rather than the hierarchy or written documents.

I, 4) Socialization and learning

We propose here that the discovery of a new organizational setting, socialization can be understood as a learning process, or a process of transmission of knowledge and expertise. Therefore, in his socialization approach, Nonaka (1994) examines the problematics of learning and acquisition of tacit knowledge. He affirms that learning does not necessarily imply formulation of knowledge and expertise. Transmission and creation of expertise thus involves various socialization processes such as imitation (Bandura, 1977), practice or insertion within a community of practices (Brown and Duguid, 1991, Winter, 1987).

Access to tacit knowledge is thus gained by becoming a member of a community and by participating in a community of interactions (Nonaka, 1994; Weick and Roberts, 1993) or of practices (Brown and Duguid, 1991; Lave, 1991, Lave and Wenger, 1991, Ostroff and Kozlowski, 1992). It is also aided by contact with an expert or experienced person. Brown and Duguid (1991) believe that learning is not a "*cranial process*," and does not consist in analyzing information but rather in social insertion. Learning does not work on representations; instead it consists in becoming an "*insider*," that is integrating within a network whose members are linked by the tasks they perform together. Similarly, Lave (1991) asserts that learning is real only if it is anchored in a concrete context. That is why he refers to "*situated learning*." Brown and Duguid (1991) cite Orr's (1990) findings on approaches used by photocopy repairmen. It is mainly by sharing their experience and tips that a corpus of examples is built to repair the machinery. Socialization therefore allows the participants to exceed the formal description of tasks, which reiterates the distinction proposed by Argyris and Schön (1978) between "*theories in use*" and "*espoused theories*."

The social and relationship dimension of learning was also revisited by Hutchins (1991), who showed how a group can be organized and collectively learn to steer a warship into a port when its navigation system is not operational. Weick and Roberts (1993) analyzed the interaction between actors during landings and takeoffs on the US Navy aircraft carrier. The authors demonstrated how a "*collective mind*" emerges in the interaction. Similarly, Lant (1999) reported that the existence of practice communities fosters the emergence of collective

knowledge while reinforcing the identity of the group concerned. Weick and Roberts (1993) believe that "the spirit" of a community of practices is therefore collective and is not centralized or individual. It emerges from a network of interactions within the organization. The difficulty inherent in social learning lies in its discretion and opaqueness. In effect, socialization is difficult to master and organize. Moreover, it is quite common to learn without being aware of what is learned or even without perceiving that one is learning. Learning can therefore be unintentional, emerging, happenstance. It can also be implicit and subconscious (Reber and Lewis, 1977), without diminishing its value. Sometimes, an attempt to make everything explicit reduces the liberty of the actors, decreases the social playing field and limits learning. The success of communities of practices rests precisely on the tacit nature of knowledge and not on systematic explanation.

The next section now presents our empirical research. Organizational meeting between teams of companies engaged in a merger are thus analyzed in a perspective of socialization and mutual learning.

II. 1) Empirical study: a merger as an opportunity to share knowledge

We have analyzed the phenomena of integration and mutual socialization arising from a merger between two biscuits companies of the French group BSN Danone: Belin and L'Alsacienne. This merger was intended to create a new more powerful entity that could compete in global distribution. However, beyond the objectives of increasing the market share and reducing costs, the company had set the additional goal of combining competencies and integrating the best of each organization (Leroy and Ramanantsoa, 1997). Even if the merger was horizontal, the strategic, organizational and cultural differences between the two companies sufficed to initiate a mutual learning process. The merger therefore entailed a combination of physical assets, a merger of Head Offices and various departments and a mixture of two cultures. Moreover, it did not take the form of absorption of L'Alsacienne by Belin, despite the fact that Belin posted higher sales and had a larger number of employees than L'Alsacienne. In addition, Belin's brand awareness was higher and Belin had greater negotiating power in global distribution. Nonetheless, despite this gap, implementation of the merger was intended to be egalitarian and abided by the principle of equilibrium between the two companies. The L'Alsacienne brand disappeared, its Head Office was transferred to Belin, but following the work of the merger committee that comprised staff members from

Belin and L'Alsacienne, the new entity ultimately integrated many organizational systems from L'Alsacienne, particularly in the commercial, R&D and production functions.

Methodology

This research on socialization during a merger is part of a broader study of organizational integration, organizational learning processes and the sharing of competencies between two firms. In the course of this study, it quickly became evident that beyond the formal and planned integration processes, socialization plays a significant role in the learning and combination of various elements of knowledge. Below we present our analysis of the socialization processes, along with those related to sharing of tacit knowledge and expertise between the teams of each company.

Data was collected over a period of more than one year, essentially during the integration period of the two companies. We thus attended and participated in preparatory works of the merger workshops charged with determining the profile of the new organization and the effective integration of the teams. Our status was dual: we were present both as a researcher and a consultant integrated into the consulting team in charge of facilitating the merger. This dual status enabled us to access a wealth of information and to modulate our approach to different interlocutors. The data was primarily collected in semi-structured interviews with the members of each company that belonged to the principal departments. These interviews were structured by categories taken from the literature on the implementation of mergers and organizational learning (Leroy, 1997). The questions were factual (technical data, description of the activity, etc.) or assessed the respondent's judgement (difference between the companies, learning phenomena, etc.). Our study was also supported by direct observation, to perceive the diversity of phenomena (Miller and Crabtree, 1992). Our presence in the field therefore enabled us to acquire a greater familiarity with the site, to multiply our interactions and to observe the evolution of a community in its usual working context (Bogdewic, 1992, Cassel and Symon, 1994). This method was particularly appropriate for the study of socialization phenomena.

Socialization initially took place within the coordinating teams in charge of preparing the merger, but it occurred in earnest during the implementation phase and the meeting between the operational departments. Socialization is undoubtedly difficult to study: the processes were discrete, largely invisible and mainly concerned day-to-day work operations, tips and

know-how. However, through interviews and our presence in the field, we acquired a preferred observation position that enabled us to accumulate a large quantity of information. We chose to concentrate on the commercial and R&D services because of their richness of socialization phenomena; which consisted in both formal training and interaction based on exchanges of practices. Moreover, in these functions, knowledge was not necessarily highly formalized or listed in directories and procedures. Narratives and stories as a vehicles for transferring or sharing knowledge thus constituted an important mode of socialization.

We therefore recorded the principal stories or those that appeared to be most significant, and we subsequently analyzed them according to several categories (actors, intrigue, expressions and images used, outcome and appropriation or transformation of stories). Below we will present the principal socialization processes at play in the merger and the role of narration and stories within the R&D and sales force.

II.2) Socialization process in the merger

As mentioned above, socialization had begun before the effective meeting of the Belin and L'Alsacienne teams, with the formation of work groups in charge of preparing the merger and the adjustment of organizational systems. This initial collaboration facilitated the operational combination of the teams. In contrast, for individuals who did not belong to these teams, the merge was a source of extreme worry. Rumors were rampant, conveying the fears of some and the alleged superiority of the other company. The move and physical combination of the teams therefore constituted a crucial test.

Moving and integration of personnel of L'Alsacienne

The merge entailed the displacement of over 80 people from the Head Office of L'Alsacienne to that of Belin. This movement was expected to be a moment of truth. Instead of igniting a crisis, it played a liberating role by reducing anguish. Defiance was appeased. The effective combination was therefore a positive rupture, a return to reality that dispelled fantasies and corrected negative impressions.

A large arsenal of socialization measures was deployed to facilitate the integration of newcomers: site visits guided by members of Belin, presentation of different departments, distribution of welcome booklets and "photo albums." In addition, the general manager invited groups of newcomers to special breakfast conferences intended to present the reasons for the merger, to reassure the new employees and to introduce the new entity. These

measures were generally well received by the members of L'Alsacienne, but less so for the existing Belin employees, who felt neglected. Moreover, buddies were assigned (Belin, L'Alsacienne). The Belin employee was in charge of guiding the newcomer, and providing necessary information to help them integrate, i.e. to "acculturate" them. These buddies enabled the new employees to more quickly grasp the functioning of the organization and better perceive the informal networks.

Socialization was therefore organized at the organizational level. Nonetheless, each department also strove to create specific events that would bring the teams closer together, enable them to share their experience and to work in concert.

Organizational merging or simple integration of newcomers? Digestion or combination?

Once the teams were effectively combined, an obvious question was whether the gap in size between the two companies would not lead to absorption of L'Alsacienne by Belin and therefore result in one-way socialization. The newcomers from L'Alsacienne, uprooted from their workspace, and scattered within teams composed mostly of Belin employees, could have found themselves rapidly losing their specific cultural traits.

When a gap in size is significant, the merger may entail the integration of a limited number of people. As a large strategic maneuver, the merger then resembles less a meeting of two communities governed by their own social rules and having a real cohesion. But in departments, the merger could appear simply as a hiring phase that is slightly more voluminous than usual. For example, some of our respondents, originally from Belin, deny that the influx of newcomers had engendered significant transformations in work behaviors or had been the vector of cultural change. In some departments, there was indeed no mass effect. The merger could then be perceived by some as the arrival of new identities. Socialization is consequently reduced to the addition of a few people to the existing cultural melting pot. The success of the operation then hinges less on harmonization and the combination of organizational differences than on optimal management of individual differences.

Nonetheless, this approach must be placed in perspective. First, in the marketing, commercial and R&D departments, the merger was manifested by a significant arrival of employees from L'Alsacienne (between 20% and 25% of the staff). Moreover, the low number of newcomers does not necessarily mean that their influx did not have an effect on the behavior and orientation of a department. Lastly, the merger was not merely an influx of individuals; it was also characterized by the arrival of new tools and new management modes. Indeed, this was

the very rationale of the combination. The object was not simply to redistribute people. Even when the newcomers were not numerous, they contributed tools or procedures, retained by the merger workshops, that were new to Belin and that brought about significant transformation. Moreover, note that the systems retained originated mostly from L'Alsacienne, which could counterbalance a possible cultural digestion. The systems recommended by the merger organizers therefore constituted vectors of transformation of Belin by L'Alsacienne.

In addition, the general manager of the new entity, originally from Belin, officially asked the members of L'Alsacienne not to abdicate their differences and to preserve their cultural singularities. The objective was to harness the tension between the two *corpuses* and to collaborate in the construction of new behaviors. This approach was intended to preserve the interior boundaries between the two groups, a membrane that insulates while allowing exchange. The distinction proposed by Haspeslagh and Jemison (1991) between merger-absorption and symbiosis is pertinent to this situation. Whereas absorption suppresses boundaries and equalizes differences, symbiosis consists in optimally managing organizational and strategic interdependence and preserving some differences. Our study has also brought to light factors that have facilitated exchanges without eliminating particular organizational and cultural characteristics. We have thus identified some individuals that have facilitated mutual integration while preserving the differences. These individuals played a role of internal interface, allowing differences to be expressed while attenuating conflicts and reducing misunderstandings. They have good human relations abilities and also share the experience of having worked in other subsidiaries of the Group. It appears that the professional experience acquired in these external organizations have reinforced their integrating role. These individuals manifested Group citizenship, which prevailed over the partisan positions of belonging to either of the two firms engaged in the merger. Their position was therefore "relative;" it was not determined by their belonging to Belin or L'Alsacienne.

III.1) Socialization and learning content in R&D and the sales force

We will now describe the socialization processes within the R&D and sales force. Evidently, in these two departments learning included formalized aspects, such as product presentations, and training related to tools, techniques and procedures. Nonetheless, in both departments, socialization played a crucial role and fostered opportunities for more discrete learning related to diffuse knowledge and expertise that had been only slightly formalized.

III.1.1) R&D: socialization as a learning opportunity

During the merger, the R&D department of the new entity was grouped at a single site, where Belin had constructed a vast research center equipped with substantial technical facilities, but which was remote from the principal production unit. This move was not well received by L'Alsacienne because it necessitated travel or prolonged the transportation time. The distance between R&D and production was also criticized; particularly because controlling product quality necessitates frequent interaction between the plants and the research division. The technical facilities and the resources offered by the new center nonetheless allowed attenuated this opposition.

During the merger, the engineers and technicians were required to master new technologies or products. In addition, new formulas had to be learned. These tasks were not very difficult, the technicians reported. However, they also had to master new procedures and assimilate new parameters, for example those of successful cooking, which proved problematic. In effect, in producing cookies, many parameters are contingent and non-stabilized, and pertain to variables such as the climate, temperature, specific characters of individual machines. These parameters considerably influence the quality of the cookie. If some data were coded, mastery of a technique also called for practice and accumulation of knowledge. In this sense, the possession of theoretical knowledge alone did not suffice to adequately solve problems. In contrast, practical learning, contextualized from the outset, refers to knowledge that is not external to the individual but is inseparable from a context and an agent. It necessitates simulation exercises. It is referential, deictic and requires experience. A technician can therefore become quickly operational, but acquiring skill, perceiving the differences in touch, performing a sensory analysis of texture, color, and consistency of the dough all requires time and experience. The creation of a "pastry grammar" (Pentland, 1995) therefore involves formalization of operating modes and practical learning.

Furthermore, the difficulty accessing the content of this knowledge conditioned the learning process. The process was built not around formal training but in the formation of the buddy system between an experienced technician and a novice. Proximity between the transmitter and receiver is thus necessary for transmission of tacit knowledge. In the case of buddies, "knacks," i.e. hints that are difficult to formalize, can be transmitted through observation and common manipulation. The learning is founded on concrete simulation exercises, habituation and the relationship with the experienced person. However, note that this practical learning

does not preclude symbolization. Action-based learning is therefore not mute. In this case, the expert or tutor corrected the learner's action verbally and not by gesture alone. Nonetheless, this discourse was situated, adapted and also used imagery or metaphors. Production of cookies was thus "scripted" and staged.

This perspective elucidates the value of the expert that possesses general knowledge that enable him to adequately apply his expertise, in keeping with the actual situation and the context. The expertise in turn allows effective implementation of knowledge; it rests on experience. Whereas the novice operator knows only theoretical models, the experienced operator relies on several years of practice, which imparts reliability. Accordingly, competency can be defined as an intermediary notion between knowledge and action, between theoretical knowledge and contextualized knowledge. It allows theoretical knowledge to be translated into action but also allows practical knowledge to be formalized and generalized.

III.1.2) Socialization processes in the sales force

During the merger, the combination of the teams revealed striking differences in the two sales forces. These differences were certainly perceived prior to the merger, but they appeared in starker contrast at meetings in the field. The Belin sales staff had more experience and were older on average. The L'Alsacienne vendors recognized their excellent human relations skills, even though the techniques and sales methods were not always followed to the letter. The L'Alsacienne sales force was younger and relied more on procedures and compliance with guidelines. It followed a more analytical approach during visits. Its behavior was highly controlled by commercial management by means of countless tables and activity reports.

The merger did not bring the cultures into conflict, but rather they proved to complement each other. The Belin sales team discovered more rigor, which had been lacking at times. The L'Alsacienne vendors profited from the expertise of Belin. They felt more at ease and liberated from an overly procedural sales approach. They learned to distance themselves from guidelines and benefited from the casual approach prevailing at Belin. In addition, the sternness of the sales manager contributed to the forging of the Belin and L'Alsacienne teams. Specifically, his approach facilitated the combination and created an objective alliance between the Belin sales people that had somewhat feared the massive influx of new procedures and the L'Alsacienne, representatives who saw the merger as an opportunity to work for a more prestigious brand and to ease the previously existing pressure.

Socialization among the sales team was nonetheless limited by the organization in that each vendor was assigned a precise sales territory. Direct contact between sales people was therefore quite rare. Contact mainly took place at monthly meetings where vendors reported on their experiences, problems encountered, the competition, customers, product behavior and market trends. These meetings constituted opportunities for socialization that was quite intense, yet their frequency precluded extensive exchanges of competencies. In addition, telephone contact between vendors was frequent and mainly consisted of requests for information. If contact between sales representatives in the field was rare, relations with the Head Office played a crucial role, comprising exchanges with managers at the Head Office and with leaders of Sales Development. The latter group provided the liaison between the vendors, and centralized and then disseminated information. The Sales Development department thus constituted an essential agent of socialization that allowed contact between the representatives in the field and more experienced individuals; it also formalized this experience. Lastly, at a convention attended by the two sales forces, the company presented the brand development projects and facilitated the integration process. According to most of the sales representatives we encountered, this festive event reinforced the commitment of all the employees to the new entity and enhanced mutual socialization.

The learning content in the sales force

Following the merger, the vendors received training in the products, sales methods and tools (messenger service, laptop computers, reporting charts, statistical statements etc.). Various documents were supplied to vendors concerning products, negotiating techniques and profitability calculations. The source of socialization was the organization, specifically the sales department. Learning was therefore designed to take place through well-controlled and explicit training.

However, socialization between peers also played an important role in the learning process. Accordingly, the workers broached a learning content that would have been difficult to treat explicitly during the training phase. Through interviews with sales representatives or simply by joining their informal discussions, we noted the importance of the narration of stories to convey significant experiences and to transfer specific or highly contextual knowledge. For instance, learning arose from a pooling of experience or of sales or negotiation tips. One of the vendors reported, during informal conversations with colleagues, an unpleasant experience with representatives of a large supermarket that was not known for its tenderness.

From this consequential event, the vendor had learned very specific lessons on the way to negotiate in order to avoid being intimidated or thrown off balance. The tips appeared to be common. They pertained to behavior and interaction with the purchasers (look, seating arrangement), the pace of the meeting, alternation of aggressiveness or false camaraderie, etc.), rhetoric to adopt and phrases to prepare in response to verbal aggression, gestures to avoid (for example, pouring oneself a glass of water may be interpreted as an attempt to stall and will spark mockery or acerbic comments on the vendor's nervousness). The sales people therefore built a repertoire of responses and attitudes that enables them to overcome a new trial of this type. We also observed conversations between vendors whose subject was, for example, the characteristics of some buyers of large stores, behavior of some supermarket managers or department heads or even the layout of negotiating venues.

Learning also covered the sales process (attitude, way to transmit a message, how to behave toward the department head or shelf manager, type of gift particularly appreciated by different customers, bandanna, mini-calculator, baseball cap, etc.). The transfer of knowledge was undoubtedly asymmetrical in that the Belin sales force had more seniority and more experience than that of L'Alsacienne. The "veterans" were veritable living memories ("*living bibles*"). They know the customers and the arguments to use to promote products, and have an impressive repertoire of tips adapted to each customer.

All of these "tips" could have been written in manuals, but the value of the knowledge exchanged lay in the very process of narration and in the dialogue between vendors, with its series of questions, observations and comments, along with additions, corrections and confirmations. To quote Nonaka (1994), learning was not only a question of the difficulty of exteriorizing tacit knowledge; its value also lay in the exchanges between vendors. All of the tips acquired collective value only in the exchange within a community of practices. These exchanges arose informally, at a meeting with the customer or during a conversation around the coffee machine. This type of conversation was consequently difficult to organize.

An alliance of complementarity thus emerged between the experienced "*old hands*" at Belin and the L'Alsacienne sales force, who lacked experience. Moreover, in the course of the merger, the vendors perceived the need to improve the transmission of their knowledge. Through mutual exchanges, some of them have become more skilled at analyzing their behavior. There was therefore a reflexive re-examination of practice. As noted by Schön (1996), the interaction and socialization allowed practitioners to better understand their practice, to analyze their successes (and not only their mistakes, as the traditional learning

schema dictates) and therefore to be able to reproduce this practice by improving upon it. This example confirms the findings that experts can better understand their practices through interaction with less experienced associates.

III.3) Socialization and learning by narration

Our study of the socialization processes has highlighted the importance of the narration of stories. This act facilitates both mutual acculturation and the transfer or sharing of knowledge. We consequently compare communities of practices to communities of narratives in which common narratives are gradually constructed. Learning then rests on the exchange of stories and the use of "speaking" metaphors or vivid images. We will demonstrate the way in which stories facilitate mutual socialization and allow "learning of the ropes" within the organization (Wilkins, 1984). As a learning mode, they transmit non-formalized knowledge. However, the stories also provide meaning to various organizational actions (Boje, 1991; Mitroff and Killman, 1976; Robinson, 1981), allow construction of common signification (Bruner, 1990; Choo, 1998) and foster the creation of a new organizational identity. We therefore interpret the meeting between two communities of stories as a means of creating a new organizational identity (Giroux, 1999 and 2001; Weick, 1995) resulting from the merger.

III.3.1) Narrative and organization

The narration process within an organization has received considerable attention in recent years (Polkinghorne, 1988). The main principle of this approach is that the members of organizations think more in the form of stories or narration than argumentatively (Zuckier, 1986; Bantz, 1993; Boje, 1991; or Orr (1990), show that the reality of a company is embodied in a story, whereas organization theory explores this reality by means of an argumentative model (Weick and Browning, 1986). Narration mobilizes both reason and emotion, which most closely reflects the data gathered from experience. Fisher (1989) also referred to "narrative rationality," which functions in the mode not of assertion but rather of suggestion and identification with the narrator. There is therefore an evocative character to the story, that is not founded on logical arguments. In addition, Robinson (1981) asserts that the story recounts complex actions that are difficult to formalize. It stages events that cannot be grouped into standard categories, and it allows understanding of the context and integration of both what is known together and the conjectural.

Nonetheless, the story is not solely an account of a state of affairs, which differentiates it with a simple description. Ricardou (1978) showed that the descriptive narrative relies on temporality and that description is a hidden narration. *Mimesis* is absorbed in *diegesis*. Narration therefore describes a series of actions that lead to a denouement of the intrigue that it has established. The narrative structure introduces coherence that rests on the chain of causality. The story is therefore a creator of order. It inserts in the same frame ostensibly independent events. The story does not recount events as such, it filters them and organizes them in a causal chain that resolves the intrigue (Zuckier, 1986, Weick, 1995). In this sense, the story is a fiction but also resembles an abstraction or schematization.

III, 3, 2) Structure of the story

Faced with numerous narratives recounted by various respondents, we considered it is important to gain a better understanding of the structure and function of the narratives. To this effect, we have reviewed several theoretical works of narrative analysis (Brémond, 1973; Greimas, 1970). The adventures of sales people throughout the sales territory, as they contend with bizarre situations or characters, can be grouped in the category of picaresque narratives that relate anecdotes and adventures. There are also epic sagas that describe heroes' responses to adversity. This was the case of the vendors in the "hell" of Global Distribution. The stories of learning are structured as a quest that allow construction of the subject, a situation observed in both the sales force and R&D. Technicians, to achieve excellence, must face a multitude of singular situations that they experience concretely.

All of the stories can be decomposed into elementary units (Brémond, 1973). The story is composed of a unifying theme that brings together different events, which are then organized around a problem or intrigue. Moreover, the story is constructed according to a sequence of causality that combines a problem, a hero that must solve an intrigue, opponents, enemies or disturbing factors. Greimas (1970) identified, aside from the subject of the story, actors according to a logic of opposition. There is the receiver (the community) and the destinator/giver, the assistant and the opponent. The narrative sequence culminates in the resolution of the problem. In this sense, the narration is finalized. It is oriented toward a conclusion, a moral. There is therefore intentionality in the narrative that allows transmission of an experience of learning a lesson (Bruner, 1990).

Although space does not permit further elaboration, these categories are useful to analyze the socialization processes. The narrative is organized around an intrigue, a problem to solve. In

R&D for example, the goal is to develop a new product, reduce the quantity of raw materials or costs, or to solve a cooking problem arising from particular circumstances such as the rate of humidity in the air. In the sales department, the problem may consist in launching a new product, successfully negotiating with difficult customers, and outsmarting the competition. The resolution of the intrigue is generally founded on ingenuity and the capacity to take advantage of circumstances rather than on formal knowledge or the power and awareness of the Group. The employees were more likely to use micro-strategies and stratagems than large strategic maneuvers. Problems were not solved by financial power, machinery, negotiating power or market share, but instead were resolved by vendors' tips or those of experienced and clever technicians. Moreover, the stories, especially in the sales force, included negative characters, i.e. opponents such as the Mass Distribution personnel, competitors or even the sales manager of the entity. In R&D, the opponents were less concretely incarnated. They mostly comprise financial constraints or cost cuts, or even difficult aspects to control in the proper production of a cookie. Assistants were represented by other members of the sales team, representatives of Sales Development, the BSN Group or objective allies in the field that aid the vendors.

The following table presents, for R&D and the sales force, the main elements around which the stories analyzed are structured.

| | R&D | Sales Force |
|------------------|---|---|
| recipient | Community of practices, service | Community of practices, service |
| intrigue | Product development Cooking problem, other aspects Mastering raw materials Mastering a machine Climatic conditions, humidity rate | Implementation of shelf facing Launching of new product Negotiation with referrals Negotiating a price Negotiating a promotion Cutting production time |
| heroes | technician | Vendor |
| opponent | Financial restriction Cost control, management controller Production times Interlocutor at the plant | Global distribution representatives, store manager, shelf manager, etc. Competitors Sales manager Production managers |

| | | |
|------------------------------|---|--|
| assistant | Colleagues, expert Central research center, Interlocutor at the plant Experience, history BSN Group | Colleagues, expert, “living bibles” Local ally in store, department head Marketing contact Experience, history BSN Group |
| destinator/ giver | Community of practices, service | Community of practices, service |
| type of story | Learning | Learning, epic, picaresque |

Table 1 Structural elements of stories analyzed

III, 3, 3) Function of narration and narratives

a) Narration as identification and catharsis

Most of the stories that we have inventoried and studied, be they picaresque or intended as part of training, involve heroes that either suffer or triumph. This personalization adds force to the stories and incarnates the moral. This process also facilitated the audience’s identification with the main character. There was a process of "catharsis" that allowed the audience to relive the situations more intensely and also to put the situations at a distance, in order to simultaneously minimize their impact and learn a lesson.

The awareness of the link between the narrator and the audience emphasizes the role of emotion in the narration process. It also underscores the importance, not of the hero or the main character, but of the teller. Some narrators, particularly among the vendors, proved to be highly persuasive, very good actors who were able, thanks to their talent and staging of subjectivity, to evoke emotion and identification in their audience.

b) Narration as a process and sharing of experiences and as a learning tool

We will now more closely examine the story as a vector of learning. In this perspective, socialization is both a means of collaboration and of assimilating knowledge that is tacit or difficult to formalize. Formalized knowledge such as procedures, formulas or nomenclatures are necessary, but must be supplemented or even corrected by knowledge of the context. Orr (1990) showed how teams of photocopy repairmen had constructed, in their exchanges, stories that enabled them to better analyze problems. Whereas the procedure manuals seemed of little use, stories constructed, developed and enriched in communities of practice were both

more effective, richer in information, more supple and integrated contextual data that was difficult to generalize. The story then allows reconstruction of complex situations, while being easy to memorize (Bruner, 1990). As Weick (1995) concluded, the story creates a base of experience and possesses a power of inference that facilitates a diagnoses while reducing the element of surprise. Stories therefore take into account the singularity of events while being flexible, transformable and generalizable.

Orr (1990) and Brown & Duguid (1991) maintain that these stories are developed informally. Individual stories and anecdotes gradually accumulate to form a repertoire of experiences that each user can draw on as required. This repertoire includes "tips" contributed by some and improved by others. Narration is therefore both a result and a process consisting in recounting and encapsulating experience in a story. This process is not necessarily the work of a single author; narration appears in interaction. It is developed jointly and involves a plurality of viewpoints. Indeed, the concept of intertextuality specifies that no story exists independently but is linked to others. A story is constructed from fragments of other stories. Bakhtine (1978) and Kristeva (1977) addressed the concept of polyphony, the plurality of discourse that a narration weaves. The narrative is thus a mosaic of quotes that integrates the different experiences of various narrators. As Brown and Duguid (1991) conclude, stories are constructed by the community, by the speaker and also by the listener. They are also shaped by the audience, that adapts them and integrates contextual data. Initially individual, stories are therefore re-appropriated, modeled by the community to orient individual experiences in return. The collective intelligence of the story is thus manifested. It is in this sense that individual learning, according to Brown and Duguid (1991), is inseparable from collective learning, which is socially constructed.

The plasticity of the story allows it to combine differences. It conveys different types of logic, personified in antagonistic characters, for example. This ambiguity contributes to its richness. As Lewis (2000) contend, the plasticity of the story allows management of paradoxes and accommodation of contradictions within the organization. Similarly, Ricoeur (1990) notes that the story is a forum for tension between a requirement of coherence or homogeneity and the admission of discord. It integrates a disparity of logic while manifesting coherence. Short stories are consequently concatenated to constitute a larger story that creates meaning, which forms the basis of a community of interpretation (Smircich, 1983).

c) Narration as a meaning creation process

Narration and the development of stories can be understood as meaning creation processes. In the case under study, the story emerged from an intrigue, its denouement, and its moral. As Weick (1995) observed, a single story generally does not suffice to provide meaning. Rather, it is a repertoire of stories developed by a community that generates meaning. Stories thus supply identifying models for the members of the group, they convey values and sustain a feeling of belonging. The narration thus participates in the gradual construction of common meaning, one of the elements of the "*sense making process*" (Weick, 1995). The story is therefore endowed with social efficiency. It is a mode of integrating the real in the community and also facilitates integration into the community. In addition, the story fosters a community of representations. Narration constitutes a means of socialization, inter-subjective accommodation that, by transmitting shared values, gradually shapes the culture and identity of the company. In this perspective, narration can be understood as an essential mode of socialization and as a means of constructing and furthering the identity of an organization. It is in this sense that Ricoeur (1990) refers to a dynamic narrative identity, that combines both uniqueness and diversity. The organizational identity is thus viewed as both an interactive and discursive reality (Weick, 1969) and as a construction that is not frozen but in continual creation (Gioia et al, 2000). It is therefore important to explore whether the narrative processes extend beyond simple anecdotes and indeed shape the organization and its identity. Granted, it is difficult to empirically determine the creation of common meaning. To begin with, researchers must construct indicators that allow identification and evaluation of creation of a "common sense." In our study, owing to the lack of measurement tools, we questioned whether the sharing of practices or combinations of stories have contributed to reducing antagonism between the teams that were being merged. These conversations of comprehension (Ford and Ford, 1995) have facilitated integration and, we believe, have gradually constructed a common "Us."

Power and communities of stories

The question of intertextuality and the combination of fundamental differences in stories necessitates an examination of the relations of power between the various narrators and hearers. As we have mentioned, marked differences, even contradictions, may exist between stories; adjustment or convergence are possible, as is a conflict. Peaceful coexistence of different stories then gives way to conflicting narrations, each of which can respond to

diverging interests. The question is then to determine to whether one story is preeminent over another, whether there is a winning story and by which criteria. Although this notion of power has been little explored in the research on communities of practices, it is central to post-modern theories that analyze reasons and modes of domination of one story over another. Understanding communities of practices and stories as interaction between peers has enabled us to study the rivalry between narrative sequences. It is likely that some stories are imposed and have relegated other stories to obscurity. Several criteria can explain this domination, such as the company of origin of the hero. The imposition of a story is thus linked to the merger and the possible preeminence of one company over another. The dramatic power of a story is also worth noting. The more intense the adventures narrated, the more likely the story is to prevail. A more subjective concept, that of the narrator's talent, his power and charisma in the company or within the work team, is another pertinent concept. We have observed that some narrators manifest significant evocative power and power of persuasion that can elicit fear and admiration. Lastly, we can retain as a selection criterion the exemplary character of the story and its moral. If the moral of the story is clear and compelling, the story is more likely to endure. Moreover, stories that center on success are more likely to endure than stories of failure.

This competition of narrations raises the question of whether the power of the story is linked to the story of power, and whether the story is not arranged, manipulated to be more uplifting and to serve the cause of the company or the management team. This did not appear to be the case here, but a more in-depth study is warranted. The question of power in the communities of practices and stories constitutes a stimulating avenue of future research. In a broader perspective, this subject encompasses questions of management and socialization in mergers-acquisitions.

Conclusion

We have studied socialization processes during a merger. Socialization was formal and involved training in products, techniques, tools and procedures. However, it also unfolded more discretely once the teams were combined. Socialization was manifested by a process of mutual acculturation that enabled the teams to work together.

It also consisted in learning and sharing competencies within communities of practices. Our work therefore illustrated the definition of socialization proposed by Nonaka (1994) as learning and sharing of tacit knowledge. Learning did not take place solely by observation,

imitation or practice and the acquisition of experience. We have seen that it can also be transmitted by symbolization, by narration and the use of metaphors or stories. We have thus shown that processes of narration, sharing or creation of common stories have enabled the sharing and dissemination of singular knowledge that is tacit or difficult to generalize. Narration also fostered the creation of a common meaning that undoubtedly facilitated integration of the teams of the two companies studied. Narration therefore appears to be a collective mode of construction of knowledge, processes and identities (Brown and Duguid 1991, Orr, 1990, Boland and Tenkasi, 1995). Moreover, it is a mode of preferred analysis of socialization. In addition, it illustrates, by interrelating singular stories, the construction of a common history that each group can appropriate as it wishes and that can contribute to reinforcing or transforming the organizational identity.

From our findings, several avenues of future research are possible: despite the existence of consequent work, we believe it is worth pursuing the analysis of organizations from the standpoint of narrative processes and demonstrating how stories are constructed in the company and how they contribute to creation of collective meaning and a community of interpretations. The conditions for creation of "common meaning" also deserve rigorous theoretical analysis and in-depth empirical study.

From the managerial perspective, socialization is thus a crucial element: it is a factor of change that allows, when effectively conducted, facilitation of post-merger integration. Nonetheless, controlling this multi-purpose process appears to be a delicate matter. Socialization processes are indeed discrete, diffuse and difficult to master, and an overly planned action undoubtedly risks hindering these processes. The solution therefore lies in attaining the proper distance between planned or manipulating interventionism and uncertain and random *laissez-faire*.

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