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Abstract. *This paper suggests that the work of management gurus resembles the performance of a witchdoctor. Central to the work of management gurus is the achievement of transformations of consciousness among their audiences of managers. The view of management gurus offered in this paper has three elements: (1) the key to understanding the power and impact of gurus is to see what they do as a performance; (2) that this performance is of a particular kind—that of a witchdoctor; (3) that management gurus act as the functional equivalents to witchdoctors in modern organizations. The paper argues that at the heart of the guru performance there lies a concern for, and an emphasis on, the irrational, emotional and symbolic aspects of organization. Successful gurus have always known and exploited what this article is arguing—that success depends upon the magic and mystery of the performance.*

Introduction

In this article we argue that the work of management gurus resembles the performance of the witchdoctor. We draw attention to two features of this metaphor: (1) that this type of consultancy activity is essentially a performance and (2) that this resembles a performance of a certain kind—that of a witchdoctor. Let us start with a summary of a classic description of the witchdoctor's work. We maintain it closely resembles that of management gurus.

> The Zande witchdoctor ... held public seances at which he divined the cause of the misfortunes, including illnesses, that sufferers brought him. Public

> seances were rather festive events. ... The performers wore special hats and ornaments and used special tools as whistles and medicines ... they danced and sang to the accompaniment of lay drums and gongs until they worked themselves into a state of exhaustion. At this point spectators who wished to determine or divine the source of some problems gave gifts ('fees') to the performers. A witchdoctor took a long time to answer these questions, first asking the 'patient' a number of questions. ... (Freidson, 1970: 6)

This description establishes some connexions between witchdoctor performance and the activities of management gurus. However, we need to identify and delineate carefully the activities of management gurus and distinguish them from other kinds of management consultancy work. In this paper we are *not* concerned with the activities of the hundreds of consultancy firms that Peet (1988) has grouped into five categories: (1) strategy advisers (e.g. BCG, Bain & Co.); (2) traditional management consultants (e.g. Arthur D. Little, Booz Allen & Hamilton, McKinsey); (3) accountancy firms (Arthur Andersen, Peat Marwick, Price Waterhouse); (4) human resource specialists (e.g. Hay, Mercer-Meidlinger, Towers Perrin); and (5) specialist 'boutiques' (e.g. Korn/Ferry, MSL, Nolan Norton). Rather, our focus is on the small, but nevertheless highly influential and visible group of management gurus. Huczynski (1993) identifies three types of management guru: (1) 'academic gurus' (e.g. Kenneth Blanchard, Rosabeth Moss Kanter, Michael Porter); (2) 'consultant gurus' (e.g. Peter Drucker, Tom Peters, Robert Waterman); and (3) 'hero managers' (e.g. John Harvey-Jones, the ex-Chairman of ICI). The content and nature of the consultancy work undertaken by these individuals is distinctive in a number of ways.

First, the focus of their work is addressed, at least in the first instance, not to organizational systems and structures but to senior managers themselves. The activities of management gurus are focused on those managers whose responsibility it is to direct or enhance organizational strategy or capability. Gurus' work is therefore aimed at hearts and minds, not structures and systems. It focuses on the 'human relations aspects of organizations' (Woodworth and Nelson, 1979: 29). This is echoed by Huczynski (1993) who writes, 'A realistic aim of the guru's persuasive communication is not that his [*sic*] ideas should necessarily and immediately modify the *actions* of his audience, but that they should alter their *beliefs*, *attitudes* and *feelings* towards his suggestions' (p. 245).

Second, the content of their work is distinctive. Gurus strive to 'improve the organization's problem-solving and renewal processes' (French and Bell, 1990: 17). Gurus claim to 'pass on the skills of how to diagnose and fix organizational problems so the client is more able to continue on his own to improve the organization' (Schein, 1969: 11). It is important to note the reference here to the transferring of skills relating to problem definition and solution. Central to this process is the guru's claim to achieve—by one means or another—transformations of consciousness among senior managers. Gurus would therefore agree with Berger's (1963)

remark that 'all revolutions begin in transformations of consciousness' (quoted in Mangham, 1978: 97), and they would see the achievement of this transformation as central to their activity.

Third, the method of guru work is also distinctive. Unlike other, perhaps more mainstream, consultancy work which results in the production of weighty reports outlining competitor behaviour, market trends, industry characteristics, etc., on the basis of detailed research conducted by members of the consultancy team, gurus' work is relatively short (seminars spanning perhaps no more than a couple of days), face-to-face (a presentation in front of a group of managers), mostly conveyed through verbal communication, largely one-way (guru to audience) and dominated by the individual guru. Gurus aren't teams—they are stars; and like other stars their reputation and success is built upon their personal performance. Gurus perform, and the power and success of their performance justifies their appearance fees, reverential treatment and influence.

In what follows we argue that the activities of management gurus share many of the features of the performance of witchdoctors and that viewing their activities as such generates insights into the techniques of the gurus and their impact. But it is helpful to ground this analysis in some illustration of what such consultants actually do. Fortunately there are examples of these activities that have been publicly displayed, for instance the public performances of Tom Peters, or the televised presentations of John Harvey-Jones. Peters is a particularly good example, and although, as with all successful consultants of this genre, his performance is unique and idiosyncratic it nevertheless highlights a number of key characteristics of such performances. These include:

- A powerfully physical presentation with a great deal of restless energy; demonic energy leading to near exhaustion.
- High levels of commitment and passion, which generate an intensity of experience for both audience and presenter.
- Challenge, threat, confrontation. The audience is not allowed simply to sit and receive information—to spectate passively—but is brought into the event by challenge and attack. Members of the audience participate in an atmosphere of danger, risk and surprise. It's not safe: they might be exposed and caught out. There will be threat and danger for all parties—presenter and audience. Things could go wrong. It might be embarrassing; in fact it almost certainly will. Anything may happen, but the presenter will get away with it—but only just.
- A Peters session is not going to be a bland, neutral presentation of options and possibilities: the presenter will show—*must* show—absolute certainty and conviction. If he falters, the audience falters. He must believe in himself, so that the audience believes in him.
- The message is posed in riddles, dilemmas, mysteriously gained insights that leave the 'audience' impressed by the performer's knowledge of them and their experience. The presenter 'knows' them, their

problems, their subterfuges and their tricks. They are open to the presenter.

These are the central features of performances given by management gurus. We have seen them. Indeed, some of us may have experienced them. They are extraordinarily powerful and impressive, and very different from the conventional academic presentation of data, theory, conclusions, etc. But how do they work? What actually happens? Where is the source of their power?

The existing literature on consultancy fails to adequately conceptualize what happens between gurus and their clients. As we show later in this article most current views rely on some sort of 'helping' metaphor. But it is not clear that such metaphors of helping relationships assist us—that they turn 'imagination in ways that forge an equivalence or identity between separate elements of experience ... creat(ing) meaning by understanding one phenomenon through another in a way that encourages us to understand what is common' (Morgan, 1983: 602). Indeed, we argue that, when applied to the activities of management gurus, the conventional metaphors of the client–consultant relationship not only fail to 'turn imagination' but suppress and obstruct the illumination and understanding of each party's role. If the role of the guru is to transform managers' consciousness and awareness of their habits and assumptions and effects, then similarly our understanding of how this is achieved may need to be supported by a drastic revolution in *our* taken-for-granted conceptions of the consultant's role. *Our* metaphors of management gurus' work should allow us to illuminate *their* work by transforming it, just as they seek to illuminate and transform the work of their clients.

Existing Models of the Client–Consultant Relationship

When examining management consultancy work in general, the client–consultant relationship is conventionally viewed in terms of a variety of roles or metaphors. Tilles (1961) identified three roles: seller of services, supplier of information and business doctor dispensing cures. The first is regarded by those involved in terms of a conventional sales–purchase transaction; the second in terms of the flow of information between the parties; the third in terms of patient and doctor. Schein (1969) distinguished between three types of consultancy in terms of their impact on the respective roles of the consultant and client; these are the purchase of expertise, doctor–patient and process models (pp. 5–12). Blake and Mouton (1983) identified five 'consulting modes', which differ in terms of the way the consultant relates to the client, i.e. in terms of theories and principles, prescription, confrontation, catalytic and acceptant (p. 14). Nees and Greiner (1985) identified and discussed the implications of five types of management consultant: mental adventurer, navigator, management physician, systems architect and friendly co-pilot (pp. 69–70).

A major deficiency with much of this literature is its grounding in a root or structural metaphor of the consultant as professional helper. This may arise in part because many of these commentators are, or were at one time, active and highly successful consultants. The consultancy roles they seek to identify are therefore based in large part on their own activities and reflect their conceptualizations and understandings of their own consultancy activities and the reasons for their success. In general, they appear to view their activities as synonymous, if not coterminous, with the role of professional helpers remedying illnesses, in this case of an organizational variety. Many of these metaphors are flattering to the consultant, and it is likely that consultants would be likely to adopt and, when possible, impose a conception of their role and function in terms analogous to the doctor or therapist. Consequently, many of the consultancy roles identified above seek to highlight and reinforce professional status and autonomy as well as assume a major and acknowledged body of specialist knowledge. Therefore, these commentators impose and perpetuate a conception of the consultant role and function in terms analogous to the activities of a doctor, lawyer, therapist or other professional. When applied to the activities of management gurus, these metaphors are inadequate in three ways.

First, many of them assume precisely what is *missing* from the relationship between guru and client—an agreed, accepted, authoritative and relevant body of knowledge, in which the guru is accomplished and expert, but which is denied to the client and can be used as a basis on which to build the guru–client relationship. While gurus possess knowledge which is deployed during the intervention activity, it lacks the status and authority of other professional knowledge and so does not supply a basis for occupational qualification and certification (see Oakley, 1993; Whitely, 1989). There is no *agreed* body of managerial expertise, with the consequence that there is no single recognized body of knowledge for management gurus. Rather, management gurus peddle a plethora of 'distinctive' bodies of knowledge. If this were not the case then, according to Huczynski (1993), a key notion of gurudom—the identification of a set of ideas with a particular individual—would be broken. As a consequence, the two essential conditions of occupational security and professional monopoly are not met in the case of management guru work: they have not gained exclusive competence to the control and performance of the task, and they are not in control of the process of entry, membership and qualification (Freidson, 1970: 11).

Second, these images of the client–consultant relationship are excessively embedded in the rationality of modern organizations and modern industrial society. The metaphors assume the same 'celebration of rationality' within organizations as noted by Weber. 'When Weber wanted to contrast the organisations of industrial capitalism with those of other civilisations he identified their most distinguished characteristic as a belief that their affairs were conducted legally, reliably, consistently,

calculatingly, and predictably, magic having been banished from their procedures' (Turner, 1990: 83). The views of the consultants' work and relationships that have already been mentioned draw upon the same rationalistic, utilitarian, formalistic, hard-headed assumptions. By contrast, we argue that the actual nature and focus of management guru work deliberately opposes these values and succeeds because of it.

Third, in our view the distinguishing qualities of the guru–client relationship lie less in the currently available metaphors for institutionalized/professionalized assistance, counselling or exchange and more in the nature of the interaction between these two parties. While supporting the value of metaphorical conceptualizations of the relationship between the parties (although wishing to move beyond the rational, secular, industrial context used by most commentators), we wish to use metaphor to capture the key features of what actually happens when gurus and clients meet and 'work' together. Oakley (1993) has usefully noted that a distinguishing feature of consultancy is that, unlike a profession, people do not become qualified as consultants through 'rigorous and long training that leads to certification or licensure' (Blau, 1984, quoted in Oakley, 1993: 4). The point is not that such training is unavailable but that it is irrelevant, for the key to the success of a guru's activities lies more in the *management of the guru–client relationship as an event* than in the mastery of any esoteric theory which might underlie it. Oakley (1993) notes that one of the characteristics of 'knowledge industries', such as management consultancy, is that the knowledge which underlies success 'resists complete codification of a formal kind but ... is dependent on the appreciation of complex relationships and the practice of craft skills embedded in systematic, reflective understanding' (p. 6).

The view of management gurus offered in this paper, and developed in the next section, has three elements.

1 The key to an understanding of the power and impact of gurus is to see what they do as a performance.
2 This performance is of a particular kind—that of witchdoctors.
3 Gurus actually act as the functional equivalents to witchdoctors in modern organizations.

These three features of management gurus' work follow their attempts: (1) to focus on the irrational, symbolic and emotional aspects of organization rather than the rational and the formal: and (2) to overcome the lack of an accepted body of professional knowledge.

The Management Guru Performance

Most of those who have written about management gurus have failed to illuminate the work of gurus because, unlike the gurus themselves, they have accepted too readily the rational, managerial view of organization and management, and in so doing have allowed themselves 'to be

persuaded that organisations are about nothing but the solemn arrangement of work tasks, the following of rules, the making of decisions, and the pursuit of profit' (Turner, 1990: 85). In so doing they have ignored the extent to which organizations—and the consultancy activities which contribute to, and benefit from, organizational life—are 'a sensual and emotional realm, replete with its own ceremonies, rites and drama' (Turner, 1990: 85). The key to an understanding of the activities of management gurus is to appreciate that when successful they, in their methods at least, recognize and indeed emphasize this aspect of client–consultant relations. In this respect the work of management gurus is a performance.

By attending to the performance of management gurus we wish to draw attention to what happens when clients and consultants meet. Essentially, as Levitt (1981) has drily noted, clients are asked to 'buy a promise'. What are the circumstances under which this 'promise' is offered, believed and sold? More specifically, following Burke (1945), how can we explain the act of consultancy in terms of his five 'generating principles': act, scene, agent, agency and purpose? Any complete account of social behaviour, he argues, will 'offer some kind of answer to these five questions: what was done (act), when or where it was done (scene), who did it (agent), how he did it (agency) and why (purpose)' (p. xv). There are two useful features to Burke's approach. First, the focus, with which we entirely approve, is on how we can understand others' actions. The focus is on *action*, on understanding what *actually happens*. Second, Burke describes his approach as 'dramatism', since it focuses on the 'intentions and purposes we read into others' actions, *as if we were members of a critically aware theatre audience*' (Burns, 1992: 109, emphasis added). Thus, Burke draws attention to the value of the dramaturgical metaphor in understanding organizational events; the value of regarding social action as if it were a performance.

Others have looked at theatricality in social and organizational life. Perhaps the most influential work in the dramaturgical analysis of social action is Erving Goffman's *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959/1990), in which he seeks to understand everyday social life and social intercourse in terms of the crafting of theatrical performances. In so doing Goffman compresses Burke's dramaturgical Pentad (act, scene, agent, agency and purpose) into two basic notions: (1) performances must be addressed to an audience, and the part played by the audience is critical; and (2) any performance is comprised of two regions—a 'front-stage' and a 'back-stage'.

Goffman (1990) defines a performance as 'all the activity of an individual which occurs during a period marked by his continuous presence before a particular set of observers and which has some influence on the observers' (p. 32). Any performance is a 'dramatic realization' in which the performer conveys to an audience that which they wish to express. In this sense a performance is a managed event in which the performer consciously

attempts to influence the response of the audience. Goffman's social actor is not determined and controlled by circumstances and the situation, but instead seeks to determine and control. Thus Goffman draws our attention to the management—achievement—of the performance as something critical to the successful 'bringing-off' of management guru work.

The second feature of Goffman's dramatistic schema is the distinction between the 'front-stage' and 'back-stage' activity of every performance. The 'front-stage' region refers to that part of the performance which is visible to the audience. This is the permanent, or fixed, part of an individual's performance, and defines the situation for the audience. Burns (1992) notes that 'some time and space [is needed] for the preparation of procedures, disguises or materials, essential to the performance, or for the concealment of aspects of the performance which might either discredit it or be somehow discordant with it' (p. 112). This is the 'back-stage' region. In this region the audience is excluded, enabling the performer to relax 'drop his front, forgo speaking his lines, and step out of character' (Goffman, 1990: 115). The conduct of any performance is therefore characterized by a considerable degree of risk, danger and uncertainty. Should the veil drop and the 'back-stage' be revealed to the audience, the performer is exposed, with the consequence that the audience may reconceptualize the role of the performer.[1] Hence, all performances involve risk, since a crack may appear at any moment, which permits the audience a glimpse of the back-stage. To use a theatrical example, there is a constant danger that the scenery may collapse at any time to reveal the back-stage crew working the pulleys, trap-doors and other mechanisms that are used to maintain a sense of reality and quality of naturalness.

Building on this point we suggest that a key aspect of successful performances given by management gurus is the successful management of risk, promise and opportunity within a particularly highly demanding type of public performance that carries the risk of total and public failure or acclaim. The work of management gurus—bringing off successful consultant performances—is also inherently characterized by uncertainty and risk and the successful ones use their ability to manage this performance risk to build their personal 'characters' or reputations with clients.

More recently, Mangham (1978, 1986, 1987, 1990; Mangham and Overington, 1983, 1987), building on the writings of Burke and his followers, has argued that life is not *like* theatre but *is* theatre. In applying the theatrical analogy to organizational life, Mangham (1978) argues that 'The dramaturgical model of man is based upon the idea that man improvises his performance within the often very broad limits set by the scripts his society makes available to him' (p. 25). For Mangham, therefore, a performance is rooted in a text or script. However, a script is a 'detailed set of instructions for putting on a performance' (Cole, 1975: 6) and as such does no more than inform actors of the parts they are to play, their lines and their relationships to the other actors. While a script is the

basis of a performance, it 'has nothing more than potential: the performer's text is an abbreviated and necessarily incomplete version of a possible work of art' (Mangham, 1990: 107). Similarly, Jenkins (1970) writes that 'The performer's text is an abbreviated and abstract version of the real work of art, as this has been felt by the artist who created it, and the performer must give it the finished and concrete form in which it can be felt by an audience' (p. 205). Hence, the task of the performer is to bring this text to full realization. This is achieved through a process which begins with the actor studying (i.e. 'reading') the text. On the basis of this, and perhaps also the influence of experience, fellow actors, the director and the expectations of the audience, he or she arrives at an interpretation which, through a process of trial and error during rehearsal, becomes embodied in actions on the stage. Jenkins (1970) highlights two significant features of this process. First, a performance is a process in 'which meanings that are only implicit in the performer's text are made explicit in his performance' (p. 205). In other words, the mysteries of the script are rendered intelligible to the audience by being embodied in the actions of the performer. Second, 'the performer must respect and realize the unique content and meaning of his text—of the work of art he is performing—but at the same time he must translate and embody this uniqueness in terms that are general and familiar, in order to make it publicly accessible and meaningful' (p. 205). Thus, a performer, through his or her actions, must transform the unfamiliar into the familiar so that the interpretation has meaning for the audience to which the actions are addressed.

Cole (1975) has similarly argued that theatrical performances are concerned with making the script real or, to use his term, 'present' for the audience. He does this with reference to the activities of shamans and hungans.[2] Both are concerned with accessing the supernatural, or what Cole terms the *illud tempus*. This refers to 'a time of origins, the period of Creation and just after, when gods walked the earth, men visited the sky, and the great archetypal events of myth—war in heaven, battles with monsters, the Quest, the Flood, the Fall—took place' (p. 7). Both these religious practitioners are able to make the *illud tempus* present again. This is accessed through trance by shamans and through possession by hungans. Cole suggests that a performance has both shamanistic and hunganic aspects in that these are two successive stages in encountering the script/text (i.e. the *illud tempus*). He writes that 'The actor-as-shaman is the audience's envoy to the *illud tempus* of the script. ... The actor-as-hungan is the script's envoy to the audience' (Cole, 1975: 14–15). Linking this to the previous discussion, the performer-as-shaman is the reader and interpreter of the script (i.e. actor in rehearsal), whereas the actor on stage is the performer-as-hungan. In Goffman's (1990) terms, performer-as-shaman is a back-stage, preparatory activity, whereas performer-as-hungan is front-stage, necessarily involving the audience.

While the usefulness of the work of Burke, Goffman, Mangham and

Cole in detailing the structure of various kinds of performance is noted, there is a need to move beyond their primarily theatrical conception of performance, since theatrical acting is not the same as social acting. Hence, the performance given by a management guru is not the same as a theatrical performance. When we consider this particular type of performance there is a need to enlarge the meaning of performance beyond its normal theatrical sense to include other sorts of performance, where the focus is less on the performer complying with a script for and to an audience and more on the performer managing the whole event so that the audience actively contributes to and becomes involved in the creation of a performance. Thus, a guru performance does not refer to the sense of an occasion where individuals seek to present themselves to others in terms of certain roles (whether fixed, improvised, situational, personal or strategic), moods and attitudes, important as these are. A guru performance is not simply *role-play*, however interpreted. Rather, the view of performance being developed here owes more to Schechner (1977), who writes:

> Performance originates in impulses to make things happen and to entertain; to get results and to fool around; to collect meanings and to pass the time; to be transformed into another and to celebrate oneself; to disappear and to show off.... (Schechner, 1977: 142)

Schechner has developed this sense of performance in terms of five features:

> (1) *process*, something happens *here and now*, (2) *consequential irremediable*, and *irrevocable* acts, exchanges, or situations; (3) *contest*, something is *at stake* for the performers and often for the spectators; (4) *initiation*, a *change in status* for participants; (5) space is used *concretely* and *organically*. (1977: 51)

This definition captures accurately the intensity, power, danger and impact of the performances given by management gurus. However, we wish to strengthen and extend this definition. For us, a guru performance has the following additional features:

1 It depends on the 'performer' and the performer's behaviour, not on other resources, bodies of knowledge, positions or accoutrements. The performer may create supportive accoutrement, out of everyday materials, but he or she does not depend on them.
2 The 'audience' is central to, becomes involved in and, for the duration, transformed by the event. Yet they are unable personally to re-create the event or retransmit it. The performance is consumed at the point at which it is given.
3 It is highly risky and may go disastrously wrong. It involves the manipulation of techniques and materials of an unusual kind, and in an unusual way.
4 It generates remarkable tension, excitement and energy, which cannot be derived simply from an account of the event or from its formal

content (or from those sad and often empty souvenirs—off-prints, copies, handouts), but has to be 'experienced' directly.[3] It is thus highly dependent on the individual consultant.

5 The event deals in emotion. Irrespective of the cognitive content of the performance, the power and effects of the performance *qua* performance are inherent in the emotion it generates and displays, and therefore success occurs as much (if not more) on the emotional level as on the rational, cognitive level. Emotion can at best be described to others but cannot be re-created in them—the performance's effects can only be experienced indirectly. As Goffman puts it, 'there is an expressive rejuvenation and reaffirmation of the moral values of the community' (1990: 35).

6 The event is characterized by mystery, riddle, the world turned upside-down, paradox, amazement, surprise and threat. Consciousness, expectation and normality are turned upside-down. Statuses are at risk, identities can be undermined, relationships questioned, convictions unsettled.

However, this is only the first part of our argument. We now want to argue that there is benefit in seeing the work of management gurus not simply as a performance but as a performance of a definite metaphorical type. In arguing the value of seeing the work of management gurus in terms of metaphor we are simply replacing—or complementing—existing metaphors with others. Metaphor is not something one adds on to an otherwise undistorted process of perception: it is the means of perception and knowledge. We are seeking to achieve what successful management gurus also seek to achieve—to make ourselves, and you the reader, 'exiles from the familiar' (Plessner, quoted in Burns, 1992: 109). (The connexions between these two processes have been noted by Mangham, 1978: 94–107 and Burns, 1992: 109.) As Shlovsky wrote in a famous passage about the function of art, which can equally apply to the purposes of this article, 'the technique of Art is to make objects "unfamiliar", to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception' (quoted in Sheldon, 1966: 113). Such is our purpose with the following analysis.

The Management Guru as Organizational Witchdoctor

In arguing that management gurus may behave as if they are organizational witchdoctors it is necessary to consider whether magic is out of place in secular, rationalist industrial, high-tech modern society and particularly in organizations, which represent the most complete achievement of modern values of rationality. Many authors have noted the important place of magic in modern societies and organizations—not simply the obvious persistence of historic superstitions, but the more significant and less obvious attribution of non-rational values even to the core paraphernalia and values of modern organization and society. Bene-

dict (1963), for example, argues that while secularization has reduced the power and scope of religion, it has not similarly displaced magic. In illustration, she refers to the persistent power of astrology. But more fundamentally, she notes 'more subtle beliefs in modern civilisation that are essentially magical' (Benedict, 1963: 41). To support this contention, she refers to reverential, obsessive, exaggerated attitudes towards money, education, sex and property as examples of magical thinking. She argues that

> ... the most characteristic magic of present western civilisation is that which centres around property; the violent sense of loss that is experienced by the typical modern in the loss of a sum of money, quite irrespective of whether he and his family will be housed and clothed and fed, is as much a case of magical identification of the ego with externals as any of Lévy-Bruhl's examples of prelogical mentality. (Benedict, 1963: 41)

After delineating the elements of magical thought and thinking, we offer more examples of magical thinking within organizations and about organization functioning, processes and change.

If modern thinking is not wholly rational, 'primitive' thinking is by no means wholly magical. In both cases, rational and magical thinking coexist. Malinowski (1974), for example, in his work on magic, science and religion notes that amongst the Melanesians, while magic is certainly seen as essential to the success of their gardens on which they depend, no one would be so naive as to rely solely on magic. The Melanesians know perfectly well that there are natural conditions that must be controlled and which they can control; they know that the gardens require particular kinds of labour, depending on the seasons. When the things they understand go wrong they correct them through their own labour (e.g. by mending fences, replanting the seed), based on experience and observation. But they also know that uncontrollable and powerful agencies and forces exist, which, 'in spite of all his forethought and beyond all his efforts', may bestow unwonted and unearned benefits, or bring bad luck and thwart all strenuous efforts and overwhelm their knowledge. It is the 'unaccountable and adverse influences, as well as the great unearned increment of fortunate coincidence' that are controlled by magic, and thus by magicians (Malinowski, 1974: 29).

The essential idea of magic and guru work is the attempt to manipulate through techniques and formulae that operate mechanically on the basis of analogy and intuition the otherwise uncontrollable forces and agencies that impact fundamentally upon the physical world. Magic—the discipline or body of technique and knowledge that underpins the witchdoctor's performance and function—is a *technique*, a technology for the ordering and controlling of power, agency and energy not otherwise amenable to human influence.

We are not the first to have suggested that the work of management gurus resembles that of witchdoctors. The same point has been made in a

general way by Woodworth and Nelson (1979), whose work is considered where relevant in our following analysis. At this stage, however, it is appropriate to note their general argument that consultants serve as 'perpetrators of collective myths ... that set the [organizational] system aright and correct its imbalances' (Woodworth and Nelson, 1979: 21). More specifically, these authors compare management consultants' presentations to the public audiences of elders of American Indian tribes, and remark on similarities in the *backgrounds* of consultants and witchdoctors and in the performance of both types of curative functionary.

Our exploration of the relationship between management gurus and witchdoctors is organized under three headings: (1) the nature of magical and guru knowledge; (2) the background of witchdoctors and gurus; and (3) witchcraft knowledge and guru knowledge: the performance of witchdoctor and guru.

The Nature of Magical and Guru Knowledge

Magic is a practical art consisting of acts (rites, spells) that are means to a definite end (Malinowski, 1974: 88). Scholars largely agree that the essence of magical thought is the mistaking of an ideal relationship for a real one (Freud, 1919/1960: 79). As Frazer neatly puts it, 'Men mistook the order of their ideas for the order of nature, and hence imagined that the control which they have, or seem to have, over their thoughts, permitted them to exercise a corresponding control over things' (1947: 420). It is because of the focus on *similarity* in magical thinking that some writers have stressed the imitative component of magical thinking—that a desired condition can be achieved by performing acts which in some way resemble, are contiguous with, are analogous to, the desired outcome, yet have no possible rational causal connection with it. Freud describes magic as the principle of the 'omnipotence of thought' (Freud, 1919/1960: 85). Magic also, however, involves the invoking of spirits to assist the client's cause.

Magic is essentially mechanistic in the sense that it seeks to manipulate the world by techniques, routines and formulae that operate automatically (Benedict, 1963: 40). As Benedict (1963) notes, magic is a technology, capable of being summed up in formulae and rules of procedure which, when mastered and activated by the witchdoctor, can manipulate the world of the supernatural. The similarities with guru performances and recommendations are striking.

As we have already argued, the fundamental function of magic is to control the critical uncertainties of the natural world—to make rain, bring victory, ripen the harvest—through the manipulation of supernatural agencies. Yet this function must be placed in the context of the broader role of magic in relieving social tensions, defining and supporting core societal values, explaining or controlling frightening phenomena, enhancing the solidarity of a group (Russell, 1987: 416). Malinowski (1974) has noted that magic prescribes the ways in which people, groups, societies

(organizations?) can overcome the dangers and threats that face them. Recourse to witchdoctors and their magic increases with rises in social instability and disorder. And individuals consult witchdoctors in order to be released from the negative effects of malevolent magic or to obtain release from undesired circumstances. Malinowski (1974) describes the functions of magic in terms that could also describe the role and content of guru work:

> ... magic supplies primitive man with a number of ready-made ritual acts and beliefs, with definite mental and practical techniques which serve to bridge the dangerous gaps in every important pursuit or critical situation. It enables man to carry out with confidence his important tasks, to maintain his poise and his mental integrity in fits of anger, in the throes of hate, of unrequited love, of despair and anxiety. The function of magic is to ritualise man's optimism, to enhance his faith in the victory of hope over fear. Magic expresses the greater value for man of confidence over doubt, of steadfastness over vacillation, of optimism over pessimism. (1974: 90)

Benedict (1963) has noted, following Freud, the parallels between magic and obsessive neuroses, and has pointed to the role of wish fulfilment in magic; and in a lovely passage she remarks,

> The world man actually lives in ... always bulks very small in relation to the world he makes for himself. Magic is used in relation to the world he makes for himself. Magic is used to build up these worlds and to give security within them. (Benedict, 1963: 43)

However, although many writers agree that the function of magic is to supply support during times of stress, fear and anxiety, ironically the use of magic actually serves to institutionalize the anxieties it addresses. For magic, by offering protection from some perceived supernatural threat, actually confirms the nature and power of the threat it averts. Thus Benedict (1963) describes magic as mechanisms of displacement, substituting unreal achievement for real (p. 44).

The Background of Witchdoctors and Gurus

What, though, are the characteristics—the 'qualifications' and attributes—of witchdoctors? Malinowski (1974: 88) notes that the craft of the witchdoctor is 'the first profession of mankind', a specialism that is handed down from individual to individual, from generation to generation. Yet unlike religions where priests, the managers of dogma and ritual, undergo rational training and discipline, the witchdoctor exerts his or her powers by virtue of personal gifts and powers. Learning is important, notes Weber (1964), in both cases, although different—the priest bringing it through doctrine; the witchdoctor through older practitioners in the gadgetry of magic and the management of the performance.

Like management gurus, witchdoctors are frequently marginal to the groups and societies in which they work. This marginal status means that they are *of* the society but not *in* it. Woodworth and Nelson (1979) argue

that witchdoctors are often people who for some reason such as 'widowhood, sterility or insanity [are] not in a position to function in the social system in a normal, competitive manner' (p. 22). This marginality allows the witchdoctor, or guru, to manage their performance in order to achieve extremely powerful, disturbing effects and to maximize the impact of their actions on societally significant values and roles.

Witchcraft Knowledge and Guru Knowledge: The Performance of Witchdoctor and Guru

What, if anything, has the discussion in the previous two sections to do with the work of management gurus? There are three closely related connexions. First, witchdoctors and gurus serve to assist their clients with pressing problems, anxieties and stresses; but in itself this is not significant, for they can hardly be expected to do (or to claim) otherwise. Second, the knowledge they use may share properties with magical knowledge. Third, and potentially more interesting, is the possibility that *the way* gurus and witchdoctors work—the ways they try to help—might be similar (i.e. the performance).

Numerous commentators have noted that the gurus' body of knowledge involves many of the features that we have ascribed to magical thought—the omnipotence of thought, the substitution of an ideal relationship for a real one, a concern with relationships of similarity rather than causation. In addition, a number of recent commentators have noted that the popularity and power of recent ideas for the direction of organizational change, as advocated by a number of management gurus (Wood, 1989), cannot be understood in terms of their empirical basis or their actual application, or their effects—the appeal lies elsewhere.

Limitations of space allow us to do no more than point to some of the more important arguments and sources that are relevant to an attempt to assess this proposal. Numerous writers have argued that the power of much current consultancy thinking and proposals is not a result of their explanatory value or prescriptive benefit. Guest (1990, 1992), for example, has argued that the appeal of Peters's 'excellence' movement is due not to the value of the empirically dubious exhortations but to the panache with which the book is written and to the fact that 'managers and other readers *believe* the message to be correct ... the medium is the message' (Guest, 1992: 13). Guest quotes one reviewer as noting that 'the appeal of a book like a *Passion For Excellence* lies in its *mythos*, its capacity to transport readers symbolically from a world of everyday experience to a mythical realm' (Conrad, 1985, quoted in Guest, 1992: 14).

Similarly, in a thorough-going review of the search for improved flexibility—a major plank of current guru exhortation—in work design, employment and organization Pollert (1991) notes that, despite the amorphousness of the concept, its obscuring qualities, the evidence that flexibility is not occurring to the expected degree, its lack of 'purchase' and its tendency to flatten empirical complexity and unevenness, it

remains powerful—a 'fetish' whose strength cannot be derived from its empirical value but from its appeal to powerful political and social ideologies. She appeals that the 'fetish of flexibility should be replaced with more incisive analytical tools' (Pollert, 1991: 3).

Tichy (1983) argues that the reason so much consultancy advice is accepted, despite its lack of empirical justification, is because it resonates with senior managers' values of grand strategy and bold vision, which themselves feed off the values of masculinity and status, with little regard for reflection or learning (Gill and Whittle, 1992: 288).

It has also been noted that much prescriptive guru exhortation focuses on the importance of installing the *effects* of the desired condition, rather than ensuring the structures, attitudes, systems and skills that will generate the desired outcomes. In other words it addresses symptoms, not causes—an essential feature of magical thought. Hodgson (1987), in a discussion of quality programmes in the UK, suggests that interest in quality may soon wane not because 'people won't work hard for quality but because we will end up trying to install the techniques of quality management and not understanding it' (Hodgson, 1987: 40; quoted in Gill and Whittle, 1992: 287). And Peters himself has noted that 'symbols are the very stuff of management behaviour. Executors after all, do not synthesize chemicals or operate trucks; they deal in symbols' (Peters, 1978: 10).

In an interesting attempt to explain the cyclical nature of consulting *packages*—one new panacea replacing yesterday's and then in turn being replaced—Gill and Whittle (1992) refer to writers who have focused on possible psychoanalytical process within senior management teams which may produce unconscious forces and concerns which in turn lead senior managers to seize on available solutions with insufficient thought. But it is also possible that it is not simply the ideas that are attractive but the forum and manner in which they are presented.

Guru activity is concerned with management functioning and organizational structures and processes, an area that is encompassed by the appellation HRM (Human Resource Management) or HRS (Human Resource Strategy). This approach to organizational change subsumes the approach and content of much guru knowledge (e.g. the 'excellence school') and the performances associated with it, but goes further to include such themes as quality, flexibility, re-engineering, culture change, the learning organization, etc. (see, for example, Beaumont, 1993; Blyton and Turnbull, 1992; Salaman, 1992; Storey, 1989).

This approach has many of the features of magical thinking referred to already, for example, the reverse logic apparent within magical thinking—the 'omnipotence of thought' whereby people try to bring about a desired condition by producing the behaviour associated with it (for example, by trying to increase staff and customer satisfaction by making sales assistants smile). This shows the power of imitative thinking within consultancy knowledge. For example, many guru performances are focused around programmes aimed at changing organizational cultures in

order to change how employees feel about their work, their managers, employers and customers. Yet despite their highly doubtful claims to change *attitudes*, what these programmes actually change is *behaviours* rather than values. They achieve some degree of compliance, not surprisingly, but that they do any more than this is empirically unproven and theoretically unlikely. Yet the programmes persist and are highly popular. Behaviour is apparently enough. They are today's version of the rain-making ritual: focusing on *ideal* connexions between events, not real ones—trying to produce causes by producing the results. It's like trying to make it rain by putting up umbrellas. These programmes have a magical component—the conviction that if staff can be made to behave in the way they would *if* they had more positive attitudes, then they *will* have positive attitudes (Ogbonna, 1992).

Another magical feature is the unrealistic emphasis on optimistic models and frameworks which fly in the face of empirical experience (HRS, like magic, 'ritualizes man's optimism'); the insistence that HRS can assist managers to gain competitive advantage and thus gain control over dark and threatening forces.

This optimism is also revealed in one of the intriguing features of consultancy knowledge: that while it is highly pervasive as a set of prescriptions, and is firmly embodied in managers' *conceptions* of what is happening, it is far less easy to find examples of it in practice. It seems to exist more as a set of deeply felt incantations than as an actual guide to practice (Glover and Hallier, 1993; Keenoy, 1990: Storey, 1989). This can be explained in more than one way—some attribute it to deliberate management duplicity, others to ideology. But yet others suggests that managers themselves believe in HRS while they fail to follow its prescriptions. Yet as two authors remark, 'HRM did seem to perform useful *symbolic* functions for many line managers' (Glover and Hallier, 1993: 5, emphasis added).

Yet despite the widespread evidence of internal contradictions (Legge, 1989; Storey, 1989) and lack of empirical support, the HRS movement continues to attract considerable support, a support which bears no relation to any empirical evidence for the existence or success of the HRS project—a triumph of 'ritualized optimism'. Not only does HRS seem to have a magical, talismanic status—one study reports managers claiming that they were convinced that they had a human resource strategy but on further questioning were unable to describe what it was (Storey, 1992)—but it also contains its own myths and legends (i.e. the exemplar case studies and anecdotes endlessly reiterated by management gurus). Guest (1990) argues that the appeal of HRS lies in its connexions with the values of the American dream and points to the role of the consultants and others who market the dream as '*dream-makers*'. HRS has a magical element, in the sense that it seems to be important to managers (and to management consultants) not for what it actually means or achieves but for its own sake, as a set of ritualized incantations.

If we are to illuminate the performance of the guru by reference to

features of the performance of the witchdoctor, it is necessary to remember the guru performance we are considering. First, we are concerned with public, group performances where consultants aim to persuade, illuminate, convert and change the managers present. The performance has major elements of display (of the guru's world-view, technique, approach and convictions) and of conversion (of the manager's to the guru's viewpoint). This is not anything as simple as an attempt to achieve a straightforward conversion to the guru's theory or model. Rather, it is to get the managers to be converted to the guru: to accept the guru, to be transformed by the performance, to see things anew, to recognize the insight and power of the guru so that only he or she will do. Whatever the subject matter of the performance—quality management systems, Transactional Analysis, organizational change, identifying defensive behaviours, understanding barriers to team working, etc., or understanding themselves or their organization, or their relationships with others, or with clients, competitors, etc.—in order to produce transformation and illumination, these performances depend primarily on the impact and persuasiveness of the performer. The performances therefore are much much more than mere exposition: they involve highly theatrical behaviour, anecdotes, exhortation, challenge, role-playing, confrontation and humour. Odd things happen. ...

It will help in your reading of what follows to bear in mind any experience you may have had of such consultancy performances, either directly or through video recording or broadcasts. We ask you to consider what is described below *as if* we were describing management gurus at work.

The witchdoctor's performance is characterized by a high degree of anxiety—on both sides. Frequently, the witchdoctor is dressed in a terrifying manner; often the events which gave rise to the occasion itself, and the concern for the outcome of the magical processes, plus the extreme tension generated by the rituals and the paraphernalias of the event generate high levels of excitation and anxiety, release tensions and reduce the control of social conventions. Weber indeed saw the excitement—or ecstasy—that is generated in the course of performances of the witchdoctor's art to be so critically important that he regarded it as the foundation of the concept of the soul—the idea that the human body contains something that leaves it in sleep, death and magical ecstasy. Clearly then, the emotions raised and released by the performance are very great. Of the shamans' ceremonies, for example, it is reported that every seance ends in an astonishing spectacle, totally unequalled in the world of everyday life. Because of its similarities (at a lesser level) with aspects of guru performances, this is worth quoting at some length:

> ... the fire tricks, the 'miracles' of the rope-trick ... exhibition of magical feats, reveal another world—the fabulous world of the gods and magicians, the world in which everything seems possible, where the dead return to life and the living die only to live again, where one can disappear and reappear instantaneously,

> where the laws of nature are abolished and a certain superhuman freedom from such structures is exemplified and made dazzlingly present. (Eliade, 1987: 207)

For some types of witchdoctor, such as the shamans of Siberia and Inner Asia, the techniques of ecstasy are fundamental to their activities since these shamans specialize in the trance state during which their soul is believed to leave their body and to ascend to the sky or descend to the underworld (Eliade, 1987: 202). During his initiation into the ecstatic state the shaman learns how to conduct himself in the new planes of existence and, crucially, how to use this personal revelation—this totally esoteric, individualized knowledge—to help his clients. He (the guru or shaman) 'knows the road to the centre of the world: the hole in the sky through which he can fly up to the highest heaven, or the aperture in the earth through which he can descend to the underworld' (Eliade, 1987: 205).

Clearly, the individuals who are capable of undergoing the experiences through which such knowledge is gained are exceptional, in any society. Weber argues that the witchdoctor is distinguished by being permanently endowed with charisma, having a unique capability to induce ecstasy in himself and his audience, and being versed in and capable of miracle and revelation. These skills and capacities are employed to induce among the participants (clients, managers) 'an "awakening education" ... *using irrational means and aiming at rebirth*' (Weber, 1964: 31, emphasis added). It would be hard to find a clearer description of guru performance.

The performance of the consultants in question—the management gurus (e.g. Tom Peters and many others)—also displays many of the features of the witchdoctor's performance. As noted, the strenuous efforts, by one device or another—to reawaken; to generate fundamentally transformed 'consciousness' of self, organization and priorities; to see new patterns and new possibilities, which ordinary life, before the performance, had not made available or obvious. These are all familiar in witchdoctor performances. The focus on the emotional and irrational, with all the fear and anxiety that this occasions for audience and performer, is also similar. (And surely one's first impression on witnessing a consultant performance is anxiety that the performance is so extravagant, so melodramatic, that it will appear absurd; but slowly this risk, being overcome by the performer, actually adds to his or her stature.) There is also risk for the audience—as in witchdoctor sessions. No one is safe. Those who hope that they can remain immune and detached as observers soon find that by a variety of devices they are drawn into the session, become the focus of the session in which strange things happen to them—they may be exposed to combative questions, publicly posed with riddles, forced to reveal their ignorance which is then immediately exposed, required to participate in role plays—a battery of destabilizing techniques are used which move the content of the event from a safe, cerebral level to the level of 'here and now', with egos, identities and

pride at stake, with potentially significant alterations in status, senior manager to public incompetent, etc. (see the discussion of Schechner's qualities of performance quoted earlier).

The focus on the emotional, the generation of threat and risk for all parties, the destabilizing of identities, allied to the repetitive emphasis on simplified, action-focused ritualistic nostrums, all presented in a style where 'confidence dominates over doubt, steadfastness over vacillation, optimism over pessimism' (Malinowski, 1974: 90), creates an environment where the gurus are able to generate a collective sense among the managers not only of power and impact but also of truth and relevance. As Goffman puts it (of performances), 'reality is being performed' (Goffman 1990: 35).

Conclusion

The work of management gurus is an enormously important and influential activity. Much of the agenda for current programmes of organizational restructuring—TQM, JIT, re-engineering, culture change, delayering and so forth—owe much of their appeal and pervasiveness to the activities of a small number of management gurus. Despite the impact of their ideas, however, there have been relatively few attempts to understand the origins of the appeal of these ideas. Those explanations that have been offered have focused primarily on the ideas themselves. In this paper we offer an alternative approach. We suggest that attention deserves to be given less to the ideas themselves and more to the performance in which these ideas are presented. We seek to illuminate the work and role of these consultants in terms of their performances, thus drawing attention to qualities of the interaction between consultant and 'audience'. Furthermore, we argue that this performance has many of the qualities of a witchdoctor's performance in terms of knowledge, role and behaviour. At the heart of the performance there lies a concern for, and an emphasis on, the irrational, emotional and symbolic aspects of organization. Such a focus is not only the key to understanding management gurus—it is also the key to the guru's success. Successful gurus have always known, and exploited, what this article is arguing—that success depends on the magic and mystery of the performance. Furthermore, given the absence of conventional bases on which to establish sustainable competitive advantage, the management and achievement of an impressive performance is the only possible way in which continuing personal success can be established and maintained. Performance is central to both the effectiveness of the guru within the organization and to his or her competitive success within the industry.

From the outset we distinguished between the work of management consultants in general and that of management gurus and suggested that the differences were related to the nature of their work, the way they work, the sort and number of people in the organization with whom they

work and the output of their work. The distinction also relates crucially, as we have seen, to the sort of impact they have on those for whom they work. These differences, however, are also apparent to the organizational clients. It is not uncommon for clients, having been exposed to the drama and excitement of a guru performance, to use other more conventional management consultancy firms to assist with the detailed implementation of the ideas emerging from the guru performance—to translate heart into mind, magic into reality.

Notes

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1 Mangham (1978) argues that the role of the consultant is precisely to help managers uncover the scripted nature of their performances and to expose mutually hidden back-stage areas.
2 A shaman is a religious figure whose distinctive activity is going into a trance. 'Hungan' is a Haitian term for a priest of a possession cult.
3 Despite this, the demand by seminar participants for souvenirs of the event is strong. In response to this, Peters published *The Tom Peters Seminar* (1994). As he wrote in the Foreword: 'After my seminars dozens of participants invariably ask for paper copies of the 35 mm slides I've used as visual aids. This book is my answer. It's the contents of a typical two-day Tom Peters seminar, circa early 1994. Enjoy!'

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