

HERVÉ CORVEILEC

# Stories Of NARRATIVE FEATURES OF ORGANIZATIONAL PERFORMANCE Achievements



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First published 1997 by Transaction Publishers

Published 2017 by Routledge 2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon, OX14 4RN 711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017, USA

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Library of Congress Catalog Number: 96-49383

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Corvellec, Hervé.

Stories of achievements: narrative features of organizational performance / Hervé Corvellec.

p. cm.

Revision of the author's thesis (doctoral)—Lund University, 1996.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 1-56000-282-4 (cloth: alk. paper)

1. Organizational effectiveness. 2. Performance. 3. Achievement motivation. I. Title.

HD58.9.C674 1997

658.3'14---dc21

96-49383

CIP

ISBN 13: 978-1-56000-282-6 (hbk)

### En célébration de ces heures passées plage Marquet avec ma mère.



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### Acknowledgments

This work has been financed in its major part by the Swedish Council for Planning and Coordination of Research (Forskningsrådsnämnden) and the Faculty of Social Science, Lund University. Additional financial support has been provided by the Chamber of Commerce of Southern Sweden (Sydsvenska Handelskammaren), the Helge Ax:son Johnsons Foundation, the Institute of Economic Research (Lund University), the Knut and Alice Wallenberg Foundation, the Jan Wallander Foundation for Research in Social Science, and the County Governor Per Westling Memorial Fund (Landshövding Per Westlings minnesfond).

I am sincerely indebted to my colleagues at the Department of Business Administration at the School of Economics and Management of Lund University. Throughout this work, Barbara Czarniawska-Joerges (now at the Gothenburg Research Institute) and Göran Widebäck have provided me with highly efficient help and support, as did Philippe Daudi (now at the University College of Kalmar, Sweden) and Claes Svensson at an earlier stage of my research. Karin Jonnergård and Hans Lindquist were particularly discerning readers of earlier drafts. Göran Alsén, Per Arvidson, Margareta Bernstad, Christine Blomquist, Sven-Olof Collin, Ulf Elg, Lennart Hansson, Ulf Isacsson, Ulf Johansson, Håkan Lagerquist, Allan T. Malm, Gert Paulsson (now at the Swedish National Audit Office [Riksrevisionsverket]) have all had the kindness to read and comment on the fragments I presented them with.

I would like to thank, as well, Mary Jo Hatch (Cranfield Business School, UK) and Richard J. Boland (Case Western Reserve University, Ohio) for their valuable and comprehensive comments on earlier drafts of this book. I would also like to acknowledge the circumscribed but none the less important support I have received from Timothy S. Doupnik (University of South Carolina), Seppo Ikäheimo (Turku School of Economics, Finland), Peter Miller (London School of Economics), Jan Mouritsen (Copenhagen Business School), Ingemar Oscarsson (Department of Comparative Literature, Lund University), and Gösta Widmark (Linköping University, Sweden).

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Numerous people from Swedish public libraries have devoted time and efforts to guide me into the world of library management. Two of them deserve my particular gratitude. Here I have in mind Anna-Lena Höglund (Linköping County Library) and Greta Renborg, now retired, whose receptiveness and kindness never failed.

Two more persons, finally, deserve my gratitude. These are Robert Goldsmith, from the Department of Applied Psychology, Lund University, who, as a dedicated language corrector, excelled in putting into proper English the ideas I formulated in my own Creole; and, most of all, Richard Sotto, from the Department of Business Administration, Stockholm University, who never ever complained at my—at times pressing—demands for his opinion, and who unremittingly provided me with valuable comments.

This book is a slightly revised version of a doctoral dissertation presented early in 1996 at the Department of Business Administration of the School of Economics and Management, Lund University. Parts of this work have also appeared elsewhere: Chapter 1 is a shortened version of Hervé Corvellec, "Translating Management Accounting Terms—The Case of 'Performance,'" in Advances in International Accounting, vol. 8, edited by Timothy S. Doupnik (Greenwich, Conn.; London, England: JAI Press, Inc., 1995), 129–47; a previous version of chapter 2 appeared in Proceedings of the 13th Conference on Business Studies, August 14-16, Copenhagen, vol. 2, edited by J. K. Christiansen, J. Mouritsen, P. Neergaard, and B. H. Jespen (Copenhagen: Copenhagen Business School), 525-45; parts of chapters 3 and 4 were published previously in Hervé Corvellec, "Biblioteksprestationer sedda i ljuset av sportprestationer," in Biblioteket som Serviceföretag-Kunden i Centrum, edited by Göran Widebäck (Rapport 4, Stockholm: FRN, 1992), 67-76; chapter 5 develops ideas featured originally in Hervé Corvellec, "Shaping an Activity Indicator Set for a Public Library," paper presented at the 2nd International Conference on Arts Management, Jouy-en-Josas, France, 23-25 June 1993; and chapter 6 has been published in part as Hervé Corvellec, "Library Performance in Activity Reports," Swedish Library Research, no. 3-4 (1994): 52-68. The author gratefully acknowledges the permission these publishers and publications gave for using previously published material.

### **Introduction: Performance Stories**

"C'est sur ce mot qu'on a fait ce livre."

—Victor Hugo<sup>1</sup>

What is it that fills a sports arena and excites stock brokers? What is it, likewise, that is of concern to the dean of a faculty as well as to the manager of a profit center? It is, in each case, performance—performance that permeates contemporary societies, breathes its spirit into them in a diffuse but penetrating way, and imprints its mark upon them.

Performance leads to the opening, the localization and the closing down of a factory, a post office or a hospital. Performance determines the existence, the nature, and the price of products, from bridges to green peas. Performance is the yardstick by which the quality of individual and collective human efforts is assessed. It is the key motif in sports shows, television games, and all the many works of fiction concerning those whose accomplishments are heralded, whether these be police officers, lawyers, doctors, or ordinary people. It accompanies want-to-see-all-ina-week tourists, as well as terminal-state patients kept alive by life maintenance devices. It is found at the heart of debates regarding currency rates, possible reforms of public sectors, and mergers of companies or unions of states. Everywhere, performance shapes the lives of people and organizations in accordance with its logic and its demands.

The concern for performance has spread to an ever-increasing range of contexts, into a quest that societies have adopted—"a new cult," as the French sociologist Alain Ehrenberg (1991) claims. It has successfully invaded the whole of our contemporary imagination and become one of its most recurrent signs of recognition. We have all, regardless of whether as employees, sports practitioners, car drivers, or holiday makers, become susceptible to falling under the influence of performance in our ways of looking at things and people as well as our ways of behaving. The notion of performance has become of central importance for our perception of our activities and our understanding of the world.

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Such importance calls for reflection, at least if scholarship is to be a matter of inquiry into the conditions of our existence, and it is particularly important for at least two reasons that this reflection be located within the context of organizations. First, as Perrow (1986:vii) observes, it is now widely acknowledged that "all important social processes either have their origin in formal organizations or are strongly mediated by them," and it is also increasingly accepted that "the study of organizations must be at the core of all social science" (ibid.). Not only do we spend most of our time interacting in and with organizations, but organizations today form the very conditions of our existence and thus our ways of apprehending the world around us.

Another decisive argument in favor of the study of precisely the notion of performance in organizations is that this is a context where performance enjoys, so to speak, a commanding position. Together with sports and engineering, the management of organizations is a context that makes intensive use of the notion of performance. Most managers, for example, would agree that performance is one of their central concerns. Accordingly, management literature on performance is abundant and covers seemingly all aspects of business and nonbusiness administration. Performance indeed has a major role in how organizations are managed and how they behave. These are two of many reasons, then, that make the study of the meaning assigned to the notion of performance in organizations an important matter for the social sciences of today.

The major question then—and the question to which this book attempts to provide answers—is: What is performance? I believe answers to this lie in the uses that are made of the performance notion. It is in these uses that one can learn what performance is and what it is not, what meanings organizational actors attach to it, and what is embedded in the assumptions, conditions, and consequences of performance being used as an element of the managerial discourse conducted in English. The meaning of performance rests, for example, on how management literature describes the way that specific organizations work with the notion. Its meaning lies, as well, in how performance is connected with related notions such as efficiency and competition, and how these notions borrow from, resemble, and differ from each other. To investigate the notion of performance is to explore the uses to which it is put.

The study of these uses of the notion of performance leads me to claim that performance is a story about the achievements of an organization. The implausibility of the idea that performance might be some intrinsic

attribute of the organization, or of the idea that an organization's performance is what the organization does—the action itself—leads me to claim that performance is a tale affixed to an organization by managerial discourse. The arbitrariness with which authors within management literature choose their indicators of performance, the way in which accountants translate an organization's activity into performance measures, the way organizational actors account for an organization's activity in annual reports, and the way the feat of an athlete is encoded into discourse on sports—I will later show how relevant the latter analogy is—are all indications that performance is something narrated. An organization's performance is a series of meaningful statements recounting what has been achieved in and by the organization within a given period of time, for example, "the marketing department was effective at introducing our new product, allowing us to meet our budget." As an account of organizational activity, the performance of an organization is a tale, a narrative.

When speaking of story, tale, and narrative I refer to the literary tradition in which a story stands for "a chronological sequence of propositions consisting of actions and attributions that are invoked by a text" (Columbia Dictionary of Modern Literary and Cultural Criticism 1995). Thus, tales, stories, and narratives designate here textual chains of statements aimed at representing something.

Such a view is less encompassing than Bruner's (1986) for whom narrative designates a mode of knowing and argumentation based on lifelikeness and verisimilitude, as opposed to a paradigmatic or logicoscientific one based on procedures for establishing formal and empirical proof, and on logical argumentation. My view of tales is, likewise, of more limited reach than is Fisher's (1987) claim that stories and narratives are the basis of all human communication. These views can be seen as an appendage to Lyotard's (1979) use of stories and narratives as an epistemological way of challenging the modern generation of knowledge. This is where the inspiration for my perspective comes from: to say that performance is a story—in a literary sense—is a way of challenging the traditional view of performance as an ontological trait of organizations. It is a way of emphasizing that management consists in the production of small local narratives, which, for that matter, constitutes just another illustration of the communicative qualities of storytelling.

What I aim at in claiming that performances are narrative constructions is to qualify the nature of these constructions, indicating that, like any other tales, performances are the product of narration. My claim is

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that performances are organizational stories, or more specifically, stories of achievements. Accordingly, I propose to answer the question "what is performance?" by listing some of the central features of organizational performance stories. Listening to what organizational actors refer to when they speak of performance, my objective in this book is to explore, present, and discuss the distinctive features of performance stories, such as what they deal with, how they deal with it, where they come from, how they are constructed, and how they function as stories.

This study of the features of performance stories starts, in chapter 1, within the broadest and most basic context in which words and notions acquire a meaning, namely, language. In an imaginary meeting between three division managers who speak of performance, I find reasons to look in dictionaries for the meanings of performance. Dictionaries propose a wide array of meanings for the term, all depending upon the context in which the word appears. This contextuality is convincingly illustrated by the difficulties one encounters whenever one tries to translate the term from English, where it was coined, into a foreign language, for example French or Swedish. The first chapter provides a sense of performance as a word. It points to the multiplicity of meanings the term can take, and underlines the ambiguity this results in. The chapter emphasizes, in particular, the tension that exists between performance understood as an ongoing action, captured by the idea of performing, and performance understood as a result.

Chapter 2 is a contextualization of dictionary meanings in the context of management literature. Various sets of texts taken from the performance literature are queried regarding how they conceive of their core notion, the answers they give being presented. These answers turn out to be not only considerable in volume, but also quite diverse. Textbooks in accounting, for example, emphasize performance being a matter of results and control. Academic management journals see in performance an imperative that encompasses all aspects of organizational life, one to be used as a universal yardstick of validity. Public management literature, driven by managerialism, mimics its private counterpart and likewise views performance as an imperative, though less in the name of earnings than in that of improvements of and accountability for public services. The overall picture one acquires from reading performance literature, however, is confusing; definitions abound, contradictory claims cohabit in mute ignorance of each other. Performance emerges as a matter that

involves varying criteria. What is considered as being the performance of an organization seems to depend entirely on the measurement procedures applied in the case at hand.

In order to avoid the reduction of performance to mere measurement, the two chapters thereafter carry the reasoning outside of management into sports. The aim of this detour is to investigate the narrative features of performance by taking advantage of the visibility and readability of these features in the sports context. Chapter 3 focuses on sports, going through sports history to provide insights into the historical background of the notion, and describing how one can actually read a performance. The chapter emphasizes the possibilities for multiple tellings and multiple readings of performance stories, and restates in this regard the importance of context for understanding what is meant by organizational performance. Chapter 4, in turn, discusses parallels between sports and organizations. It describes the fascination that contemporary organizations have with professional sports and details similarities and differences between the notion of performance and notions such as competition and hierarchy.

Chapter 5, which returns to the context of organizations, is concerned with the practice of performance measurement as considered within the light of insights gained in the two previous chapters. The chapter recounts the case of the creation of a set of performance indicators in a public library, tracing the creation of it from the initial manifestations of an interest in performance indicators to the constituting of a performance measurement set as a managerial tool. The chapter attempts to provide an understanding of how these indicators were selected rather than others. The case shows clearly how the performance indicators that were chosen are associated with a complex of individual intentions, collective representations, technical feasibilities, and narrative concerns. The case also illustrates the role of performance indicators in the construction of an organization's performance. The creation and use of performance indicators amounts to a textualization of the organization's activity, that is to say, the framing of this activity within a text. In specifying the series of historical contingencies that have shaped performance indicators, chapter 5 reveals the contingent character of the conditions that shape the process of the textualization of an organization's activity.

Chapter 6 then scrutinizes a specific form of textualization of an organization's activity: annual and activity reports. The focus is on how these

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texts narratively compose the organization's performance. On the basis of an examination of annual and activity reports of public libraries, the chapter describes who speaks in these reports (the narrator), to whom (the audience), and how (style, rhetoric, and arrangement). Three major traits of the stories delivered by activity reports are singled out—that they are mostly positive stories, that they are multiplot stories, and that they are stories by installments. Also analyzed is how these traits influence the way in which activity reports construct an organization's performance being discussed. It is proposed in the end section of the chapter that activity reports be regarded as a genre in itself: the administrative serial.

The concluding chapter restates the central argument of performances being tales and recaps the principal observations made in the previous chapters concerning the specific features of performance stories. If, as I argue, performance is the product of a narration, then there are as many performances as there are ways of narrating an organization. The endless possibilities of recounting an event and of reading an account of an event mean there are countless forms of performance in the world. Virtually any event, provided it is recounted in an adequate manner, can be made into a performance. This explains why performance stories abound—an abundance that fits particularly well the need of our time to be reassured of our capacity to achieve.

The study combines interpretations issued from the use of various methodologies in various contexts. Each chapter is situated within a specific context, and each covers particular aspects of the performance notion—linguistic, semantic, theoretical, logical, historical and narrative aspects. Such a construction of the study demands that each chapter follow a specific methodology that corresponds to the central issues the chapter raises and the type of material it features. Chapter 1, for example, consists of a lexical study based on dictionaries and a limited corpus of uses. Chapters 2 and 3 are literature studies. Chapter 4 combines cultural studies and traditional comparative methodology. Chapter 5 is a case study based on interviews, participation, and organizational texts. Chapter 6 makes use of a theoretical framework and a methodology of systematic questioning of texts borrowed from narratology. What unites these chapters is a common interest in the meanings attached to the notion of performance. Each chapter undertakes to examine how these meanings are constructed and constituted in the context at hand. Each chapter represents, therefore, a smaller study on how the notion is manifested in a particular context. Together, the chapters provide a general presentation of how the performance notion is utilized in organizations, where it comes from, and what is meant by performance in managerial discourse generally, raising the important issue of how an organization's performance is objectified.

### Note

1. Notre Dame de Paris, 1831 Preface. "This is the word about which this book has been written" (translation Robert Goldsmith).



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