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## **Transitional Identity: Some Lessons for Communication in an International Context**

Hilary Collins

Euromed Management, Rue Antoine Bourdel, BP921, Marseille Cedex 9, France

Tel ++33 91 82 73 93 ; Fax: ++33 91

Email: [Hilary.Collins@euromed-management.com](mailto:Hilary.Collins@euromed-management.com)

### **Abstract**

The International Thermonuclear Experimental Reactor Project (ITER) project is a multi-billion dollar project involving seven international partners who are working together to build "clean" source of nuclear energy: a nuclear fusion reactor. The paper examines how the communications tools used in these organizations contributed to, or inhibited, the creation of an organizational identity. CEA, Agence ITER France, and the ITER project all have separate teams charged with the development and management of the communication tools. It is perhaps the different communication styles adopted by these organizations, and the different types of information contained in the communication tools, that were interpreted that instigated the formation of a transitional identity (Clarke et al, 2010).

## **Introduction**

The project also involves a number organizations working together, principally the Commissariat à l'Energie Atomique (CEA), an organization set up by the French government to support projects such as ITER, and Agence ITER France, which is responsible for managing the French contribution to the ITER project from the initial preparation of the site to the eventual decommissioning, and the members of the ITER project itself.

This paper examines the processes by which organizational identities are formed using a case study of the initial phases of a large multinational project based in France: the International Thermonuclear Experimental Reactor Project (ITER). The study deals with three main groups at ITER, administration, engineering, and scientific workers. It shows that the creation of a transitional identity - an interim sense of what the organization was and what it was becoming - is crucial to moving the process of identity formation forward.

The paper shows that employees in these three groups were involved in a process of both sense-making and sense-giving, using what ITER termed communication tools. These communication tools took the form of documents, paper based journals, intranet and internet websites and were intended for use by both internal and external audiences. In terms of sense-making, at the start of the project, employees compared the information contained in these tools in an attempt to make sense of issues internal to ITER. This created inertia in the identity formation process. However, when the communication tools were managed as part of a strategic sense-giving process, this enabled the formation of a transitional identity that gave employees a sense of meaning and security. This in turn enabled the groups to create a shared identity, which ensured their continued engagement in this groundbreaking project.

The findings show that sense-making and sense-giving using communication tools affects the pace at which an organization can forge an organizational identity, a finding that has implications for both the motivation and retention of employees.

## **The ITER project**

The ITER project is a multi-billion dollar project with seven international partners, the People's Republic of China, the European Union (including Switzerland), India, Japan, the Republic of Korea, the Russian Federation and the USA, working together to build a nuclear fusion reactor. Agence ITER France is the group responsible for delivering the project. The project is currently being built adjacent to the Cadarache Nuclear Research

Centre in France, where the scientific environment and technical infrastructure for such a project is already in place.

The workforce is largely recruited from the seven partners on five-year renewable contracts. The history of this research into the creation of a "clean" power source has spanned over forty years. Some of the original researchers who worked on the separate initial projects are still employed in an advisory capacity. A large proportion of the initial contracts for scientific and engineering work were awarded to people who had been involved in preceding projects in the UK, Germany, and Japan. English is the official language spoken on site although to most of the employees English is a second language.

### **Commissariat à l'Energie Atomique**

The Commissariat à l'Energie Atomique (CEA) is an organization that was set up to support projects such as ITER. It is funded by the French government and is responsible for the initial recruitment of ITER employees and providing the human resources and support services needed to help to integrate the employees into French life, such as the French language classes that are made available, within working hours, to all ITER employees.

### **Agence ITER France**

Since 2007, Agence ITER France has been responsible for site preparation, including clearing, leveling, and auxiliary works such as the installation of water supply and electrical networks. The agency manages the French contribution to the ITER project - both in-kind and financial - and will ultimately be in charge of site decommissioning. Agence ITER France is in permanent contact with the different organizations involved in the ITER project, including the European Domestic Agency; Fusion for Energy (that will be overseeing the construction of all scientific buildings and facilities); and the French authorities. The ITER project is expected to grow to a peak of 1000 employees during its operational phase. Agence ITER France provides services for those arriving from abroad via its Welcome Office. The Welcome Office is the interface with the French authorities for all administrative procedures following the initial recruitment, which managed by the CEA.

### **The Research Project**

We conducted research for the Welcome Office of Agence ITER France. They were interested in finding out how the multinational project was perceived internally and how well integrated the employees were in terms of motivation and commitment to the project. The results of this research provided the Welcome Office with an understanding

of the formation of identity processes and how important they were within the context of internal organizational development.

### **The Research Problem**

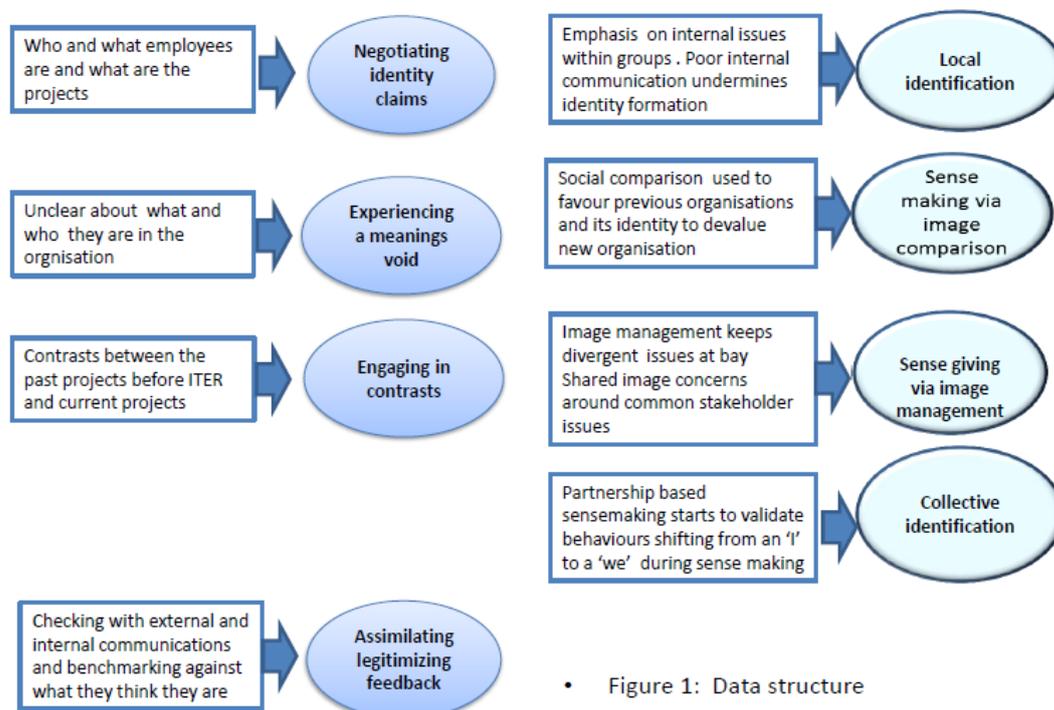
The initial research problem was discussed with the Welcome Office and focused on understanding the perception of the international employees' experience of recruitment and the early stages of employment within the ITER project in France. Agence ITER France, through the Welcome Office invested in a cultural awareness program with the aim of integrating newly recruited employees from diverse national cultures into the project. This cultural awareness initiative included language classes, lectures on national cultural differences and support for relocation and integration into the local community. They also staged events linked to employees' nationality such as a Japanese day or a Korean day.

### **Methodology**

Initially we were asked to interview British staff using a questionnaire which had been designed by the Welcome Office with the aim of finding out how successful they had been in assisting employees in the recruitment and settling in process. There was a separate questionnaire for the employee and one for the spouse. Other research teams were asked to interview different nationalities and the researchers were matched with interviewees of their own nationality. This meant that we only had access to 'British' employees. The definition of 'British' was in itself problematic because what it meant in reality was that the interviewees we saw were what the Welcome Office considered 'British'. Consequently, we spoke to Irish people, who were indignant at being classed as British, and a variety of people of different national and cultural backgrounds who had obtained British citizenship. We were also asked to interview spouses if they had volunteered for the program. We interviewed fifteen employees but only one 'spouse' volunteered. The reason for this quickly emerged. Firstly, there was an assumption that a person classed as British had a British spouse. This was not always the case. Secondly, the classification of 'spouse' was also problematic. Many interviewees thought of a spouse as female and that to be a spouse you had to be married. In addition, the notion of their partner or spouse being interviewed about their job was foreign to them and there was reticence on the side of the interviewees to ask their partner to talk about their home life in case it eventually got back to management and had negative repercussions.

With the authorization of the Welcome Office and with the consent of the interviewees we extended the original questions to record more 'in depth' information on the interviewees' recruitment and employment experience. The final reports compiled for the first stage of the research were submitted to the Welcome Office and were made available to the other researchers, but for reasons of confidentiality, the records of the completed participant interviews were not.

The first stage of the research design was aimed at understanding the employees' perception of the recruitment and induction process. The results of the first stage of the research indicated that interviewees did not receive all the information they needed to inform and reassure them so they turned to the information provided by the communication tools to try to understand their place in the organization and what the organization was. Consequently, the second stage of the research was aimed at understanding how the information from the communication tools was interpreted, how this affected people's identification with the project, and what effect, if any, this had on the project's development.



## Literature Review

It was at this stage that we referred to the literature to give an understanding of the processes of interpretation and the affect, if any on people's identification with the project.

We propose that communication tools are a symbol and the meaning it expresses actually calls for considerable interpretation. Symbols within communication tools may evoke feelings and associations which can be likened to the organisation or its products and services.. Subsequently, this culturally constructed meaning from communication tools allows us to interpret and compare our identity with the organisations identity using communication tools. The organisation can communicate their identity through the communication tools it allows them to 'project a desirable image to others, to express social status and to make visible their personal characteristics' (Dittmar, 1992:

89). Therefore, the symbolic callus of communication tools contributes to the expressive equipment with which people present themselves.

Hatch (1993) defined identity as how we define and experience ourselves. This identity is affected by our activities and beliefs and justified by our cultural assumptions. Turner (1978) has suggested that individuals deliberately choose to define themselves as members of specific groups or categories. Self categorization theorists propose that individuals choose to define themselves as members by selecting self categorizations which illustrate positive distinctiveness and comparing themselves with others. They say and do things to try to change the parameters so that a subjectively more meaningful and self-favouring identity becomes salient (Hogg and Terry, 2000).

At the organisational level, it is interesting to analyze the relationship between individual employees' identities and the firm's organisational identity. Albert and Whetten (1985) defined organisational identity as members shared beliefs of organisational characteristics that are central, distinctive and temporally continuous. They proposed that organisational identity asks the question 'who are we as an organisation?' Organisational identity describes the essence of an organisation (Albert and Whetten, 1985). According to this viewpoint, it is important to understand what an organisations' identity is because it becomes a way in which organisations define themselves to customers, employees, suppliers and investors. Hence, organisational identity gives the internal and external stakeholders a reference point for what the organisation is. It is often noticeable in the behaviour of the organisational actors.

Individuals can alter organisational identities and the relationship between individuals and organisations is reciprocal. Just as organisational identities can influence individual behaviour, individual behaviour can influence organisational identities (Pratt and Foreman, 2000). Nagel (1994) found that ethnic and cultural identity develops through an ongoing dialectic between individual processes of self-perception and external political, social, and economic forces. We can also realize our social identity through our workplace or through our personal relationships. It is often necessary to communicate our identity, be it social or organisation, to others. Accurate representation of our identity helps us as well as others to navigate our way through our environment. Presenting our identity helps guide behaviour along appropriate lines and we behave differently when we are aware of others identities. The literature hence leads to a proposition that we do interpret symbols (like communication tools) and this interpretation is used in identity forming processes. However the role this process plays in helping the people change remains to be explored.

## **The Process of Identity Formation in Organizations**

Markus and Nurius (1986) proposed that we try out “possible selves” as part of the process to help us change our identities. Ibarra (1999) also proposed that we adapt to new professional roles by taking on “provisional selves.” Pratt, Rockmann, and Kaufmann (2006) described a number of processes resulting in professional identities changing over time when professional identity did not match with the nature of the work and this led to a different focus on aspects of their identity.

Dutton and Dukerich’s (1991) highlighted how outside pressures (and differences between insiders’ and outsiders’ perceptions of identity) brought about changes in organizational identity. Subsequently, Reger et al. (1994) proposed that change in identity is required to successfully implement some forms of major organizational change. Some authors also argue that differing organizational cultures may hinder organizational development (Greenwood, Hinings, and Brown, 1994). Other researchers have linked more micro-level behavioral issues such as employee stress (Schweiger and Denisi, 1991), anxiety (Astrachan, 1990), job dissatisfaction (Barrett, 1973), turnover (Walsh, 1988), and perceived justice (Ellis, Reus, and Lamont, 2009). The focus on these factors highlights the important role of cultural and behavior within organizational development and change.

Vaara (2003) used a sensemaking perspective to study the union of a large Finnish furniture manufacturer and three smaller Swedish furniture companies. Integration of the partners was slowed by ambiguity, cultural confusion, hypocrisy, and politics in post-merger decision making. Taken together, these studies highlight cross-level processes wherein individual-level issues such as differing interpretations and poor interpersonal communication interfere with the union of organizations.

Maguire and Phillips’ (2008) study found that institutional trust was initially damaged by the ambiguity of the new organization’s identity. Once the identity of the new organization became less ambiguous, institutional trust was undermined by the absence of employees’ identification with the new organization, especially among those who identified closely with their original organizations partners have strongly held but differing organizational identities. These findings suggest that how identity and consequently identity change is managed and how this can affect organisational development.

Managerial sensemaking involves selective information processing, interpretation, and action taking aimed at reducing ambiguity and developing plausible schemes for further interpretation and action (Weick, 1979, 1995). Sensegiving refers to processes that top managers use to influence others’ constructions of meaning in attempting to create some preferred (re)definition of organizational reality (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991; Pratt, 2000; Maitlis, 2005; Maitlis and Lawrence, 2007). Via sensegiving, managers attempt to shape stakeholders’ interpretations and elicit acceptance—by providing information, appealing to the values of stakeholders, framing strategic issues, and mobilizing routines that direct attention to some issues and not to others (Tushman and Romanelli, 1985; Ketchen, 2007). Such transformations inevitably create ambiguity, which is

perhaps the primary trigger for both sensemaking (Weick, 1979) and sensegiving (Maitlis and Lawrence, 2007).

Sensemaking and sensegiving are likely to be linked as managers interact with, interpret, respond to, and learn from stakeholders involved in organizational development.

Within the ITER project managers from the three different groups, scientific, engineering and administration are trying to make sense of, and give sense to, their primary stakeholders and the seven nation partners. From this perspective, making the different work groups and cultures integrate depends to a significant extent on the ability of the management teams of each group to initiate and manage the revision of their sense making bases and frameworks (including their organizational identity) and develop new, different, and shared ways of making sense of who they are in this project. (Greenwood, Hinings, and Brown, 1994).

As Baier, March, and Saetren (1986) observed, the successful implementation of major change depends on stakeholders who, in many cases, have considerable discretion to choose how to respond to (or even alter) the original objectives of a change effort. Because of the multiple players, groups and international seven nation partners with varied interpretations and understandings employees may use sensemaking and sensegiving to understand what is happening (Thomas and Trevino, 1993).

Bartunek et al. (1999), suggesting that for effective change to occur, sensemaking and sense giving should be coupled.

An organization is likely to be heavily conditioned by the identity its leading group articulates for it (Gioia, Price, Hamilton, & Thomas, 2010). New organizations may mimic existing organizations and the way new organizations present themselves to their external audiences may be critical, not only to their identities but for their image with stakeholders.

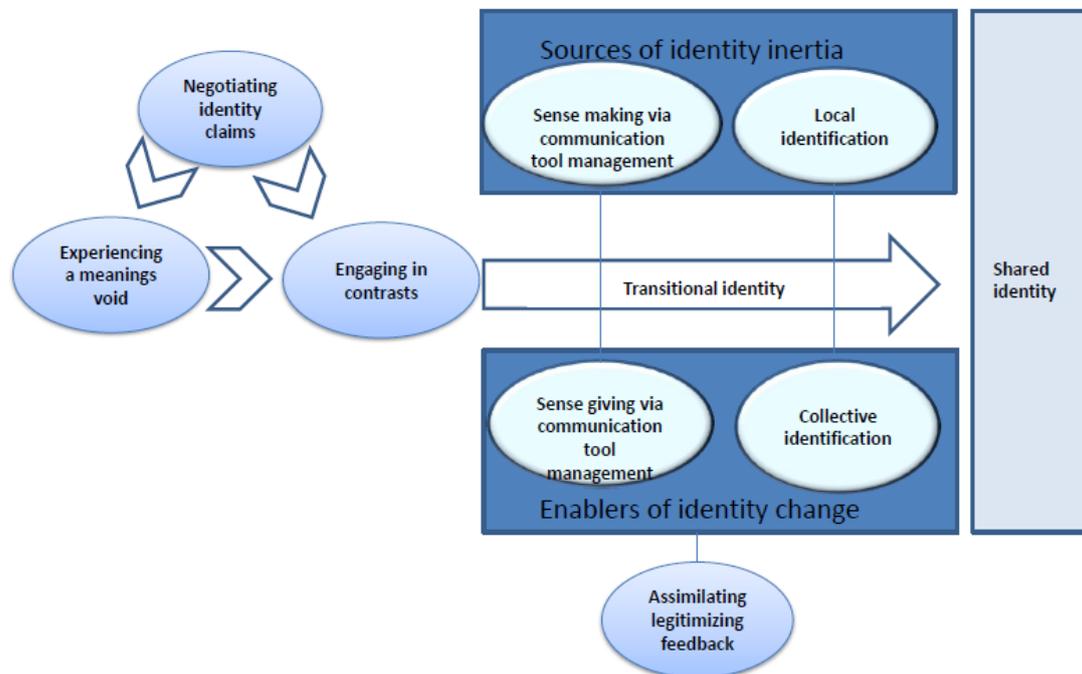
Identity construction occurs within the wider context of the industry in which the organization operates, so identity is defined with reference to partners and rivals. Employees undertake identity construction work not only for its own sake but also to legitimize and support the organization's goals and actions (Gioia et al., 2010).

In order to understand the process of identity formation we need to understand the issue of coping with identity ambiguity and deciding who and what the organization wants to be in its competitive domain. The identity formation process is likely to involve attempts both to attain legitimacy through mimetic processes and to construct some dimensions of distinctiveness within the organizational field.

People and groups identify themselves according to category membership and to compare themselves with other organizations. An identity claim gains legitimacy when that claim agrees with the wider context (Dutton, Roberts, & Bednar, 2010). Adapting

to external forces is an important influence on identity change. Both internal and external images of the organization matter in prompting attempts to change identity, especially when there are discrepancies in internal and external images of the organization. These are particularly important in prompting attempts to change identity. Iterations back and forth between insiders and outsiders affect organizational identity (Gioia et al., 2010). Employees form identities by learning via iteration to see themselves as others do.

Figure 2: Organisation identity formation on a greenfield site



At the individual level, the identity formation process answers questions such as what does the organization want from me and what do I want to be in the future? The first question relates to our identity in the organization while the second relates to our own personal identity. People are involved in processes as they interact and negotiate with themselves, their colleagues, and their environment to arrive at some understanding about who they are.

In this study, the organization was recently formed and so the employees and the project were developing, making it difficult to determine what should be emulated for best practice. In addition, due to the groundbreaking nature of the project, they were limited in the degree to which they could base their identity on existing institutional models. In the beginning, they had to explain and describe who they were to themselves and others and so established contrasting external referents to serve as exclusionary boundaries that defined what Agence ITER France and the ITER project was and what it was not. Defining themselves by exclusion provided employees with temporary reference points

against which they could compare themselves as they worked to form an identity that could be expressed in positive rather than negative terms.

### **The Problems with Identity Formation in ITER**

There are three broad types of work groups within the ITER project: scientific, working on research elements of the project; engineering, building the machine; and an administrative support. Because recruitment is largely drawn from the partner nations, an informal and formal categorization of employees by both their general work function and their nationality developed. Management's intention was to integrate employees and their families into the culture of the ITER project and to the local community. However, this process was being managed by categorizing employees by their work function and by their national culture. Employees were angry at being categorized in this way and felt it symptomatic of a culture that misunderstood its employees. Of the fifteen participants interviewed, six had life partners who were of another nationality and most had travelled and worked in other national cultures. Therefore, this classification was not only problematic for the research project, in that it resulted in a bias in the sample, but was also indicative of the culture.

The cultural awareness program and the CEA human resource policies assumed that new employees were coming to France and to ITER from their country of origin, partners, and children were of the same cultural origin as the employee and that they intended to return to their country of origin when the contract was finished. The human resource recruitment policies were French (although written communication is in English). There were differences in recruitment policies used within France when compared to the international recruitment policies of the partner nations and these were at times confusing for the recruits. In addition, the difficulties of finding housing, employment for partners and integrating children into school life were underestimated by many employees.

All the participants who were in the highly specific scientific category or working on building the machine were highly engaged with their work and their work groups. They expressed concerns about their families' integration into the community or the decision to relocate without their family, but the job function took precedence over family issues. They did not discuss problems of understanding the culture and issues of disengagement. Communication tools were not mentioned. In contrast, employees recruited to perform support roles, which were roles that were not ITER project specific, were disengaged with the organizational culture and formed discreet local workplace identities using the communication tools as a reference point to mirror how the organization was portraying itself in what they perceived to be a contrast with their own experience. This resulted in identity inertia. They reported dissatisfaction with their workplace and did not feel integrated in their environment. They were very concerned for their families and discussed issues of misunderstanding of the culture and lack of

integration into the local community. They all directly related these feelings to the lack of clarity in communication tools that they believed were designed to give the impression of a multinational corporation, dedicated to the needs of a multi-cultural staff, when this was not their experience.

These employees included those recruited from their home country and those who had been recruited after substantial experience working abroad. They all expressed the opinion that they came to ITER for the level of salary, which is high in comparison to the European average. They were also comparing working conditions and styles of communication with their previous positions. Partly due to difficulties in understanding the French language, these employees were heavily dependent on the internal communication tools, which were produced in English. They said that they were experiencing a drop in levels of motivation and many were considering leaving the organization. This was different from employees within the scientific or engineering project groups who hardly used the internal communication tools but relied on external communication with the other nation partners.

During stage one of the research, the results suggested that there were different rates of formation of an identity and resulting engagement with the project from the different groups and it became clear that the ways communication tools were being used had an effect on this. Within all the broad types of work role, the employees discussed high levels of engagement with parts of the organization whilst being disengaged with other parts. Our investigation of the three main work groups revealed that a change in the management of the communication tools, and the subsequent emergence of a transitional identity - an interim sense held by employees about what their organization was and was becoming (Clark, Gioia, Ketchen, & Thomas, 2010) - was critical in moving the process forward.

### **What Happened?**

At the start of the ITER project research (June 2010) there was no real identity within the three groups of employees. A period occurred where employees were not sure what the organization was and what their identity was within that, resulting in a meanings void. A process of understanding began by negotiating identity claims. The employees went on to engage in contrasting interpretation of the communication tools. The administration group experienced a meanings void, whereas the scientific group did not experience a meanings void but rather relied on previously formed (within preceding projects) competing identities.

Analysis of the data collected showed a certain amount of disconnect between the strategic direction in which the organization was moving, and the experience felt or 'lived' by the employees, almost as though the organization was going through a transformation whilst the people were feeling 'left behind'. There were various reasons for this.

It was perceived that the newly created project groups in support staff lacked a strong identity and that members of the support project team went about their business despite it rather than being aided by it. The term 'stuck' was a common expression, intimating that the project groups operated independently and territorially, in contradiction to the ethos of the organization, which was to be an organization that initiated a number of project groups, all of which would be interconnected and interdependent.

In the scientific project groups, several employees appeared to mourn a loss of identity, having previously been working together in other projects that preceded the ITER project. There was also some comment about the way that the organization was becoming 'unclassified', and its original identity of being 'important and secret' eroded. There were also issues surrounding the way that the project groups identified with the organization.

The strong identification within some of scientific and engineering project groups gave employees a sense of meaning and security that ensured their engagement and identification in a way that the organization culture was unable to create. For example, employees gained status and legitimacy by drawing on their involvement in the preceding international projects and their status as their own 'secure points of reference'. This 'localized' form of constructing identity resulted in higher engagement and identification with close colleagues and local managers. This simultaneously enabled them to disengage from the attempt to move people towards a more unified shared organizational identity through the communication tools. Despite systems and structural change over two years, the employees continued to identify with their sub-cultures at the expense of subscribing to the idealized notion of a more 'unified' culture at the organizational level.

The results showed that there were two sources of identity inertia that stalled identity formation. These were local identification, as described above and sense-making via image comparison using the communication tools, as described in the case of the support group. Employees in this group were evaluating the image of ITER in external stakeholders through press reports and media, and because of the mismatch between what was presented internationally and projected via internal communication, they became unsure and this prevented the process of identity formation.

The results also showed that the enabler of identity change was the sense-making via image management. This followed a change in the management of communication tools to enable an image in the media and the intranet to evolve. Collective identification then started to form and employees began engaging in an identification process that spanned the three work groups, resulting in the beginnings of a shared identity. In this context, the communication tools were designed to embed new values and behavior across groups and beyond.

Concurring with Clark et al, (2010), the transitional identity was effective because it was ambiguous enough to allow multiple interpretations of what the organization would become and eventually gelled into a single mutual understanding.

## **Conclusion**

This case study provides lessons in engaging employees in change and suggests that centralized cultural initiatives, whilst seemingly necessary and desirable, may prove to be counterproductive in creating a unified identity. The role of communication tools is important in both identification processes and managing change and this has practical implications for managers and designers involved in changes to an organization. Because image and identity are constructs that employees hold in their minds they actively screen and interpret issues, issues that are, in part at least, interpreted from the communication tools. In this way, the communication tools can help or explain how the individual can push against or for these change processes. It is the inconsistency between various conditions, such as the mismatch between managerial action, the communication tools and the organizational identity and image, which can affect the individual's workplace identity.

This case study also illustrates the different dynamics that are played out in different sections of the organization and explores the way that resources for creating identity and meaning can hinder the creation of a single and monolithic culture, and which more closely represent a fragmented and contested culture if they are based on misplaced assumptions. Organizations can be "on the move" for years and years, while the workplace identity can develop or change at a far slower pace.

## **Some Lessons**

Placing people in "national" groups did not work. The result of this was that employees stayed in these groups and in this case, sub divided further into scientific and

engineering and support groups. These national categorizations are not cultures and perhaps as a reaction, the employees formed sub groups based on their more accurate job categorizations (scientists, engineers or support). They felt they were misunderstood and in consequence interpreted the communication tools to understand their place in the developing organization. Only when there was sense-giving through a more coherent managed communication of image did it become an enabler of change.

In addition, the evidence suggests that organizational identity, and more specifically a transitional identity, was not only prominent but also central to the process of development of the project. The process model proposed suggests that negotiating identity claims at the start of the project was a necessary first step towards the creation of a shared identity.

There were also two important cognitive shifts facilitated by transitional identity, these were (1) from local identification to collective identification and (2) sense-making via communication tool comparison to sense-giving via communication tool management. These represented a progression from a source of identity inertia to an enabler of identity change. There is a strong possibility that factors that inhibit identity formation could work to prevent change and these factors have varying levels of strength across different change processes. In practical terms, the change occurred when there was a change in management of the communication tools and the image created internally was more coherent with that in external media. If Agence ITER France link their identity claims to identity relevant actions they will have their identities affirmed by internal and external stakeholders.

When sense-giving using communication tools was a managed strategic process, this enabled the formation of a transitional identity. This gave a sense of meaning and security that enabled the groups to create a shared identity that ensured their engagement within this groundbreaking project. The findings show that social construction for sense-making and sense-giving using internal and external communication tools, as well as micro and macro influences, affect the pace at which a new project will forge an organizational identity. This has implications for the motivation and retention of employees.

The paper suggests that it is possible to increase levels of support, and in consequence identification with the organization, by carefully managing the communication tools and representations employees have of the development of a project.

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