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## **Business School**

*Research Series*

*Paper 2003: 2*

*ISBN 1 85901 183 7*



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March 2003

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# **‘Don’t Rock the Boat’ - Learning Career and Organisational Rules through Cliché**

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## **‘DON’T ROCK THE BOAT’ – LEARNING CAREER AND ORGANISATIONAL RULES THROUGH CLICHÉ**

### **Abstract**

Presenting evidence from empirical work within a large blue-chip multinational corporation, this paper seeks to demonstrate the ways in which cliché is employed by organisational members and the functions its usage serves. Clichés such as ‘playing the game’, ‘don’t rock the boat’, ‘fit the mould’, ‘no pain no gain’ and ‘better the devil you know’ are analysed. Possessing both instructional and justificatory dimensions, such clichés are shown to actively if covertly convey, reproduce and reinforce career and organisational rules. Cliché, it is argued, is a simple yet potent discursive device through which such codes of conduct can be taught to and learnt by organisational members.

### **Keywords**

cliché, career, rules, game, learning.

*The essence of education... [is] slogans, those salted-down imperishables of the mind.*

(Belden and Belden, 1962: 157)

In recent years, the role played by a number of discursive forms and devices in organisational life has been explored. Particular attention has been devoted to, for instance, stories (e.g. Gabriel, 2000; Reason and Hawkins, 1988; Baumeister and Newman, 1994; Mallon and Cohen, 2001) and to narratives (e.g. Cochran, 1990; Collin and Young, 1992; Mumby, 1987; Witten, 1993) as well as to metaphor (Morgan, 1986; Grant and Osrick, 1996; Osrick and Grant, 1996). The work of Anderson-Gough, Grey and Robson (1998) represents the only attempt to date to explore the role in organisational life of cliché, which they define as “the taken-for-granted and unreflexive use of language through the use of commonplace phrases” (p.566). Despite the insight they demonstrate an analysis of cliché can generate, there have been as yet no additional published studies which further explore the ways in which cliché is employed and the functions its usage serves. The purpose of this paper is to address this gap. Presenting evidence from recent empirical work within a large blue-chip multinational corporation, clichés adopted by organisational members are analysed and re-interpreted as a set of instructions conveying career and organisational rules as well as communicating rationalisations and justifications for these rules. To use Giddens’ terms (1984: 21), they may be understood as communication devices for the organisation’s “procedures of action” or behavioural “formulae.” Clichés such as ‘playing the game’, ‘don’t rock the boat’, ‘fit the mould’, ‘no pain no gain’ and ‘better the devil you know’ are shown to litter accounts. The

ways in which these and other clichés actively yet covertly reproduce and reinforce career and organisational rules are assessed.

### **Defining cliché – form and function**

Attempts to uncover a precise definition of cliché are quickly frustrated. Most dictionary definitions do however present a united front in one sense at least by describing cliché as ‘over-used’ to such an extent as to render it devoid of expressive value. For example, Kirkpatrick (1996) notes two dictionary definitions. The Collins English Dictionary defines cliché as “a word or expression that has lost much of its force through over-exposure” and the Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary as a “phrase or idea which is used so often that it has become stale or meaningless.” According to Partridge (1940 cited in Kirkpatrick, 1996) it is a combination of haste, mental laziness and convenience which in large part explains its ubiquity. Clichés are thus variously described as ‘stale’, ‘meaningless’, worn out and tired and are considered to be ‘lazy’ half-attempts at communication. It is perhaps these sorts of pejorative descriptions of cliché which have contributed to its analytical neglect, not least in studies of organisational life. This is the assessment Anderson-Gough et al (1998) make, suggesting that the neglect of cliché is perhaps because its meanings are so obvious and the use of it in language so lazy that it is not deemed to be worthy of analysis. As a result, they argue, a highly valuable and powerful tool for organisational analysis which might allow access to taken-for-granted, normalised practices which would otherwise escape scrutiny has been overlooked.

Juxtaposing dictionary definitions, Anderson-Gough et al's (1998) study shows that cliché can in fact be a *highly* effective linguistic device which serves both sense-making and disciplinary functions. In their study of two accountancy practices they explore the use of clichés and organisational slogans 'at the end of the day', 'the bottom-line', 'team-work', 'simply the best' and 'work hard play hard'. The widespread adoption of the latter cliché, they argue, promotes a certain accepted lifestyle amongst accountants of long hours in the office followed by social events during which work is invariably continued. Cliché functions by conveying guidelines for appropriate conduct amongst employees of a particular firm, teaching organisational members the rules of organisational life. Much like Mumby (1987) and others (e.g. Witten, 1993; Mallon and Cohen, 2001) have suggested narratives do, Anderson-Gough et al conclude that cliché "serves to structure the thinking of the user and thus inform and normalize conceptions of appropriate organisational actions" (p.570) and "offers a set of common assumptions and beliefs which can be drawn upon to express, normalise and reproduce organisational practices" (p.587).

The paper builds on the work of Anderson-Gough et al (1998), presenting new evidence in support of their arguments. The focus here is on one organisational setting and, rather than concentrating on clichés which might be imposed by managers as part of some cultural management initiative, the clichés analysed are drawn exclusively from organisational members' accounts of their careers and the contexts in which those careers are played out. Of particular interest here is the ways in which these clichés can be re-read as career and organisational rules as well as how these rules are taught to and learnt by other organisational members.

## **Method**

Derived from a broader qualitative study of career in context, the evidence presented in this paper is based on the largely unstructured interview accounts of 20 (8 men and 12 women) graduate-level employees aged around 30 years and drawn from a range of job functions, levels and UK locations within a multi-national blue-chip corporation. Names have been changed to protect the identity of participants.

Methodologically the approach adopted in this study is best described as a critical-interpretive one (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2000; Alvesson and Deetz, 2000).

Critically reflecting on career and its context as seen “through the eyes of the beholder” (Van Maanen, 1977: 174) has been central to this study. In terms of the analytical strategy adopted, each interview account was fully transcribed and a process of open coding conducted with each transcript being studied in turn - word by word and line by line. One aim of the original study was to conduct an analysis of the metaphors employed by organisational members to describe both their careers and career contexts. Whilst scanning accounts for metaphors, a variety of phrases and cliché-esque statements were found and were recorded in a separate category and all but forgotten until the study was near completion. The analysis of the rest of the interview accounts led to the identification of a series of rules which must be adhered to in order to develop career within the context of this organisation. A chance review revealed a great deal of correspondence between these rules and the statements previously recorded in the cliché category. The role of cliché in conveying rules was thus explored.



Clichés employed by organisational members can be seen to fall into two broad functional categories. First, there are verb-based clichés which convey instructions about what organisational members should do, how they should behave, what career tactics are acceptable and effective. These verb-based clichés appear to operate as codes of conduct. Second are the clichés which represent rationalisations and justifications for these codes of conduct. Some clichés, as the proceeding analysis will show, encapsulate both instructional and justificatory aspects. The various clichés and slogans employed by participants are presented in the following discussion.

### **‘PLAYING THE GAME’**

Without exception all participants in this study refer to the activities they and others around them engage in to sustain and develop their careers as ‘playing the game’, an activity acknowledged quite publicly and explicitly in some cases, more privately in others. For example, Keith observes a career game in action but warns that others may not interpret it in this way:

*For me a lot of it [the work you do to develop your career] is not your job - it's just being a nice boy to management and that sort of stuff. Playing the game... If you speak to the people who are into this kind of stuff they'll say it's absolutely not [a game] but as far as I'm concerned it is.... That's fine. It doesn't bother me. I don't want to be some big manager in a big office. I've got no interest in it. If you've got interest in that then you'll play the game...*

‘Playing the game’ is seen as an inevitable fact of life for those who wish to progress their careers within the organisation and whilst some appear to feel uncomfortable with it, they gradually (if somewhat reluctantly) accept its existence, learn its rules and begin to ‘play’ by these rules. Cathy has learned from personal experience the positive career implications of opting into the game and the negative ones of opting out. After several frustrating and confusing years of witnessing her peers being promoted ahead of her, Cathy concluded that she must “experiment” by ‘playing the game’ she had observed her promoted peers had been playing. This led, in turn, to her long awaited promotion. Reflecting on the reasons for this, she explains:

*I think it is exactly playing the game and it was... when I realised, the first time round, when I got promoted for what seemed to me like I was playing the game. Maybe I'd have got promoted anyway, I don't know. But I'm sure it's helped to be playing the game and I'm convinced now. Absolutely convinced...*

Like Cathy, Siobhan too has over time learned about how careers within this organisation can be developed and, accordingly, what she needs to do to progress her own career. She explains:

*It's just a question of playing a game really... and knowing who's influencing who and what to do... It's definitely playing a game.....I'm sort of learning how to play the game now and I'm doing fairly OK.*

There are some interesting functions served by referring to career activities as ‘game-playing’. As Deetz (1992: 41) suggests, labelling activities within workplaces as “merely a game” that can be “quit at any time” detracts attention away from the potentially detrimental and unjust products of the game. In other words the cliché itself obscures certain features which might otherwise be subjected to more careful observation. As Van Maanen (1980) reminds us, games produce both winners and losers. Referring to career practices as ‘a game’ allows their reinterpretation as harmless, playful fun and thereby discourages critical evaluation (Deetz, 1992). It encourages us to overlook the fact that the interests of some may be served at the expense of others. Looking to the origins of the phrase alerts us to the need to explore more deeply what is going on. Cresswell (2000) has traced the expression ‘play the game’ to a poem penned in 1897 by Sir Henry Newbolt entitled ‘Vital Lampada’ which incorporates the line ‘Play up! Play up! And play the game!’. As Cresswell (2000: 216) notes, the poem goes on to explain how the experience of ‘playing the game’ “trains you to die for the Empire.” Whilst no literal parallels can be drawn with the organisation in this study, the career game here does nevertheless serve some disciplinary functions as will be shown later in the paper.

Interestingly, describing organisational and career experiences in such ‘game-playing’ terms is neither new nor exclusive to the organisation and organisational members in this study. In the careers literature for example, this phrase crops up in a number of places. For example, Van Maanen (1980) has written about ‘career games’ and ‘organisational rules of play’. Adamson et al (1998: 257) suggest that in recent years the “rules of the career game have changed.” Rosenbaum (1989) stresses the importance of competitors in career ‘tournaments’ being aware of the ‘rules of the

game'. Schein (1971: 405) refers to the importance of "playing a political game" in order to make it to the inner sanctum of the organisation. Nicholson (1996: 47) too describes career as "a game with uncertain rules to be played vigorously if one is to succeed." Nicholson (1996: 39) notes White et al's (1992) suggestion that "anyone can make it to the top, so long as they are prepared to play the game." Gunz (1989) too notes the complex and subtle games that get played within organisations. Certainly from the point of view of over-use alone, the phrase 'playing the game' qualifies as a cliché, and one employed not just by careerists at a point in time within one organisational setting, but also by career scholars over the last 30 years. Does this over-use render the phrase meaningless as dictionary definitions of cliché would lead us to conclude? The answer has to be no. Whilst notions of game-playing may be poorly-defined, they are far from meaningless. To borrow Giddens' (1979) terms, the vagueness might in part at least be because game-playing and the activities associated with it is deeply embedded in our practical consciousness (what we know how to do) rather than our discursive consciousness (what we can say). Whilst at a practical level in a particular social setting individuals may "know how to go on", as Giddens (1979: 67) points out this is "not necessarily, or normally, to be able to formulate clearly what the rules are" since they are usually tacit and taken-for-granted. That 'playing the game' is seemingly considered to be morally suspect and somehow not nice (as the accounts above hint at) might go some further way in explaining the apparent vagueness about what such game-playing entails – admitting it goes on at all is apparently difficult for some and therefore talk of it may be unwelcome, silence about game-playing perhaps even a tacit rule. To get beyond this silence and to generate routes of access to practical consciousness, Giddens (1984) has suggested that researchers should explore modes of discourse which social scientists traditionally

treat as neither interesting nor relevant. An analysis of cliché offers one way of accessing normalised, taken-for-granted and thus largely tacit organisational practices (Anderson-Gough et al, 1998), thereby granting us insight into this practical consciousness.

## **THE RULES OF THE GAME**

Several authors have documented the vagueness or opaqueness of: career rules (Van Maanen, 1980); of mechanisms by which individuals can progress their careers (Schein, 1971); and of promotion criteria (Rosenbaum and Miller, 1996). Evidence of rules in this study had therefore to be very carefully pieced together from evidence woven throughout all twenty interview accounts, through participants' tales of their activities and career 'experiments' and their assessments of their own and observations of others' career triumphs and disasters. Through this analytical approach, three main rules and associated tactics of the game could be identified. First, organisational members intent on playing the game must display devotion to the organisation and their careers within it and demonstrate their subservience. This rule demands that members exhibit conformity and work long hours. Second, 'game-players' must know the right people – usually powerful managerial figures who can be persuaded to act as a sponsor. Third, they must maximise their visibility and build their reputation within the organisation by managing their image, engaging in high profile work, taking on extra roles and avoiding making or being seen to make any mistakes.

Long after the painstaking work to piece together the rules of the game from the collective career accounts of participants, the role of cliché in communicating these and associated rules was discovered. Individual participants find it difficult to directly articulate these rules of the game and yet, as the following discussion will demonstrate, the clichés they employ simply yet very effectively do the task for them. Whilst the rules of the game aren't formally documented they are, via cliché, informally scripted and, complete with justifications, forcefully conveyed.

### **‘It’s not what you know but who you know’**

In career terms at least, the importance of ‘knowing the right people’ is well-documented (e.g. Gunz, 1989; Barney and Lawrence, 1989; Kanter, 1989; Pfeffer, 1989; Tharenou, 1997; Nicolson, 1996; Nicholson, 1996; Halford, Savage and Witz, 1997). Unsurprisingly therefore that this turns out to be an important rule of the career game within the organisation in this study, representing an effective way of increasing one’s visibility. In this setting, as Ruth explains:

*It really is not what you know but who you know.*

The importance of finding a ‘model’ manager as one of these ‘right’ people is also conveyed in cliché form. For example, Ruth recommends that those keen to develop their careers should:

*Follow in the shoes of a very, very good manager.*

Attempting to emulate the characteristics of a successful manager is seen as a good tactic to adopt, increasing one's chances of being promoted to a managerial level position. This feature has been detected elsewhere. For example, referring to his in-depth study of managerial careers, Gunz (1989) tells how managers he interviewed, when asked what they would look for in their successors, tended to list their own qualities. Though not all were conscious of doing this, one manager frankly admitted he would look for a 'clone'. Promotion patterns based on such criteria, as Gunz (1989a: 233) has found, are "resistant to change... the system is remaking itself in its own image."

In addition to knowing powerful others and emulating their characteristics, finding a manager prepared to act as a sponsor or patron is also considered a very useful tactic. Graham and David advocate similar strategies here. As David explains:

*What you need in [the company] is a sponsor... you can fly on their coat tails.*

Patronage is neither new nor unique to this organisation. Savage (1998) has noted that it was commonplace in the 19<sup>th</sup> century as the basis for recruitment and promotion decisions in public employment, the professions and railway companies. In terms of its tendency to foster homosocial reproduction, patronage has been widely criticised (e.g. Kanter, 1989; Pfeffer, 1989; Nicolson, 1996; Tharenou, 1997) and evidence suggests that inequities in the existing social make-up of the organisation are liable to be re-produced, to the detriment of certain groups e.g. women and ethnic minorities. As well as these longer-term consequences, there are immediate concerns which arise

from rules based on knowing the ‘right people’. In recognition of the career game as a politically charged process (Pfeffer, 1989) – which incidentally a good deal of the careers literature to date does not acknowledge (Collin and Young, 2000) - and the perils of a career strategy based on attempts to ingratiate oneself with powerful others, there are clichés which recommend caution against trickery and backstabbing. For example, Alison who has been promoted rapidly to a second-line managerial post before the age of 30 recalls:

*Someone said to me, I can remember... be careful, watch your back, sort of thing, because you might have unknowingly pushed a few noses out of joint.*

The fight to secure grace and favour from powerful others it seems comes at a price.

### **Visible conformity**

The political model of careers sees individuals devoting considerable time and effort to, as Gunz (1989: 20) puts it, “packaging and selling one’s reputation” and polishing one’s image. Such impression management tactics are intended to maximise chances of career survival and success (Gowler and Legge, 1989; Nicholson, 1996). As Pfeffer (1989) explains, impression management tactics are used by individuals to demonstrate that they both ‘fit in’ and are similar to others in the organisation, yet are also sufficiently distinctive to be worthy of special promotional attention.

Unsurprisingly then that another important rule of the game in this organisation is that relating to conformity and the importance of being seen to conform, to fit in with the



company culture and buy into the company's values. Organisational members are instructed via cliché to "fit the mould." Siobhan has observed the career consequences of not doing so:

*Unless you fitted a very certain, a very specific certain mould, that was it.*

David, whose parents both worked for the organisation, is acutely aware of the importance of "fitting the mould" and is often gripped by considerable anxiety about his ability to do so. He frets:

*They're going to try and sheep-dip me and I'm not going to be quite, you know... round peg in a square hole.*

In spite of his concerns, much of David's efforts are focused on demonstrating his 'fit' and his advice to others is thus:

*Don't be a round peg in a square hole.*

Whilst demonstrating similarity to other organisational members it is important also for the individual to raise their profile and publicly market their image to demonstrate their career worthiness by highlighting the extent of their conformity. Keith for example explains:

*You've got to blow your own trumpet real hard.*

Alison too acknowledges the importance of this tactic. Gillian phrases it another way, stressing, in order to alert others around her to her career achievements, the importance of:

*Having to shout... from the rooftops.*

Evidence from other studies has uncovered similar career rules elsewhere. For example, in her study of female design engineers, Fletcher (1999) noted how getting ahead was often connected to solving 'high visibility' problems, referred to as 'hitting a home run'. Those who engaged in dramatic, 'saving the day' type activities, and then recounted the experience to all those around them reinforced "cultural norms about self-promotion, autonomy and individualism... Being quietly competent... translated into not being competent at all" (Fletcher, 1999: 90). Those intent on 'playing the game' must actively publicise their achievements. Conversely, it is advisable for organisational members to exercise reasonable caution to minimise the risk of their image being tarnished by any mistakes which they have made. Steps must be taken to avoid at all costs any potential 'bad press'. As William notes:

*It's CYAS. [Company] expression. Cover your ass. You know, if you think there's just a danger of something going wrong, flag it early and take reasonable steps to show you've done all you can to avert it. And then mud won't stick.*

Visibly demonstrating conformity thus involves both promoting vigorously one's achievements as well as disguising and hiding one's mistakes.

### **‘No pain no gain’ and ‘you can’t have everything’**

A central rule of the game relates to the importance of players displaying devotion and demonstrating subservience. This can be achieved, for example, by working excessively long hours. The theme of sacrifice is central to this rule. Aspects of non-work life and commitments outside of the organisation must be routinely sacrificed (die) for the sake of the organisation and an organisational career within it. This rule again is found to extend beyond the organisation in this study. Mirvis and Hall (1994) have for example noted that, in practice, to have a career there must be some suffering and sacrifice and this is borne out by evidence here. This rule is taught to and learnt by organisational members via the widely-employed cliché ‘no pain no gain’. This cliché conveys both behavioural instructions (experience pain if you want career gain) as well as rationalisations (those who are unwilling or unable to both make the sacrifices the rules of the game demand and accept the pain which necessarily accompanies these sacrifices cannot expect to maintain an organisational career within this setting). This cliché is most frequently evoked in relation to the career lot of new mothers to explain why it is that opportunities for their career development must come to an end. Alison, a second-line manager, draws on a cliché to explain and communicate this rule:

*You know, it's no pain no gain, I think, I mean... I might have a different view, I mean I don't, haven't got children. I haven't got family at home and I have no intention of having one at the moment... I mean, that might change. I'm not a*

*radical feminist that... I'll never have children but, I mean, the whole idea repulses me at the moment. But I don't... do you know what I mean... I don't want to say that I'll never, never, never do it because I don't know... and I might change thoroughly if, if ever that happens... I might just say I only want to work nine to five. But I think if I did that I don't think that I'd expect... well I wouldn't expect to be treated in the same way as somebody who was putting in much, much more effort, who could get involved in you know, sort of everything. I'd give, I'd, I'd expect to be treated well... if I was doing the job well and if I was doing as expected, and if I was increasing, I was improving over time, I wasn't sort of tailing off... which I think is a tendency with people at [this company]... I mean I think you can only have it... you can't have it every way, can you? I mean you either put more time and energy into your career and have it move at the speed you want it to, or you say well.... I mean it, I ... I don't see family as the be all and end all. I think if somebody decides that they don't want to move at that speed and they want to spend every Friday shopping, you know, I mean... whether it's children, whether it's... whatever it is, because not everybody has families... you know? Some people have um..... parents that they need to look after. Some people just don't want to work more than thirty... Because if you can't be bothered...*

In her account Alison outlines some of the normalised beliefs and assumptions about the necessary conditions or rules associated with maintaining a career within the company. Alison's view is that sacrifices must be made if one is to enjoy career success and she implies that individuals with outside interests and commitments cannot expect to maintain their careers – that they must make a choice, or a sacrifice,

for career's sake. In this light, it is perhaps unsurprising to discover that of the five women in this study who have children all believe that, as a direct result of becoming mothers, their careers within the organisation have come to an abrupt halt. With child-care responsibilities falling on their shoulders, they are no longer able to commit to the excessively long working hours which are seen as an accepted rule of the 'game'. Maintaining a career involves sacrifice, and by having children and wanting to take on the caring responsibilities which goes with this, these new mothers demonstrate to those around them that they are unprepared to make the kind of sacrifices deemed necessary in this organisation at least. As Alison explains in the quote above, this breaks the career rules, and hence careers – in terms of opportunities for progress and promotion - grind to a halt. Though all the new mothers in this study express considerable frustration with this state of affairs, they simultaneously employ cliché to rationalise both the position they find themselves in and the rule that took them there, justifying their career lot by the deeply held belief “you can't have everything.” This cliché is sounded in Alison's account above and echoed throughout new mothers' accounts. Sue for example draws on the cliché used also by Cathy to attempt to make sense of what has happened to her career since becoming a mother:

*I think ... you can't have everything.... all of the time... you can have everything but not necessarily all at once.*

In other words, for new mothers, the message is clear. You cannot have both a family and career. You must sacrifice one for the other. It may be painful, but as the cliché makes clear, career gain demands pain. This rule is so deeply embedded and so widely accepted that new mothers' careers coming to an end is thus interpreted as the

natural order of things and is perceived as unproblematic. Consequently, the beliefs and assumptions which underpin the rule go unchallenged, the rule remains intact, is obeyed and thereby re-produced.

This rule and its impact on women with childcare responsibilities is, once again, not the sole reserve of this organisational setting. For example, Halford et al (1997: 265) have argued that women find themselves operating in “organisational cultures which make it clear that they must choose between motherhood and careers, so that there is no option of trying to combine these elements.” Thomas and Dunkerley (1999: 168) point to “the pressures on individuals to display unquestioning loyalty to the organisational goals over and above personal life” and argue that only women “willing and able to subordinate family and home to company and career” can realistically compete. Others too have reached similar conclusions (e.g. Fletcher and Bailyn, 1996; Marshall, 1989; Goffee and Jones, 2000). Mirvis and Hall (1994: 373) note that “even seemingly ‘family friendly’ firms give the most kudos to those who ‘sacrifice’ their personal and family time to make heroic contributions.” Newbolt’s poem which explains how ‘playing the game’ “trains you to die for the Empire” (Cresswell, 2000: 216) turns out to be not as far off the mark as one might initially imagine. Whilst the game does not bring its players to an untimely end, their ongoing participation in it does depend on the killing off of their non-work and family commitments.

The employment of cliché here – ‘no pain no gain’ and ‘you can’t have everything’ - serves to create and re-create the old lessons about who should and should not be allowed to ‘get on’ in career. Those who should are those who will devote everything

to career and organisational life and those who are prepared to sacrifice their non-work (frequently family) life. Those who shouldn't are those who insist on wanting both and who thereby signal their refusal to play by this rule of the game. The net effect of this rule is to re-create existing gender biases triggering the kind of homosocial reproduction that other rules (e.g. 'fit the mould') also contribute to.

### **Don't rock the boat**

Despite obstructions to reflective activity, as the discussion thus far has shown, participants in this study, not least new mothers, do experience a number of frustrations which might provide some reason for reflective engagement. Indeed feelings of frustration are widespread. For example, Leanne's efforts to communicate to her colleagues and managers the difficulties she is experiencing in progressing her work and career are all to no avail and she has become disheartened. She complains:

*I'm banging my head against a brick wall... I'm just hitting brick walls in every department and it's slowing me up.*

Frequently she declares:

*I just want to throw my hands up in the air.*

A series of clichés similar to the one Leanne uses here are drawn on to forewarn organisational members about this feature of organisational life such that such

frustration also comes to be conceived of as the natural order of things rather than a reason to think critically about the sources of frustration and to tackle those sources. The fact that one's work efforts might be to no avail and that much work activity might seem pointless is therefore not problematized. For example, Keith observes:

*There is a lot of tail chasing.*

He is unperturbed by this and accepts it as the natural order of things. He is however extremely frustrated by his observation that those who 'play the game' get promoted ahead of those who don't. He refers to this as the:

*Bee in my bonnet.*

However, despite these irritations the best ploy is still considered to be to accept this as 'the way things are' and persevere rather than struggle or attempt to challenge the system. Whilst many organisational members might well have contemplated challenging the rules which obstruct their careers, several widely-employed clichés promote the belief that challenges to the rules are at the very least unwelcome, are potentially counter-productive and should therefore be avoided. Any temptation to challenge the rules of the game is felt by members to be ultimately futile and should therefore be resisted. As Graham advises, things must be:

*done by the book.*



Graham here stresses the importance of operating in line with the game's rules. A series of rationalisations for doing things 'by the book' are also conveyed via several clichés which communicate to those considering flouting the prescribed if largely tacit rules what fate will befall them, that they will be harming themselves and will have only themselves to blame for the career consequences. As Lynne describes, such action would merely be a case of:

*cutting your nose off to spite your face.*

Alison (and Bethany) explain in relation to the importance of building and maintaining a career-enhancing image:

*I'd be shooting myself in the foot if, you know, I just, sort of, wiped away that [reputation I've built up]. I made a conscious decision when I got married not to change my name partly for that reason.*

By not following the rules, as Ruth puts it:

*Maybe you make a rod for your own back.*

As Cresswell (2000: 234) points out this cliché originates from the Bible (Proverbs, 26:3) – “A whip for the horse, a bridle for the ass and a rod for the fool's back.”

Those who make a rod for their own back by ignoring or refusing to play by the rules of the game are therefore widely seen as fools. Far more preferable, it seems, to play the game than risk losing the respect of (powerful) others around you. A number of

examples illustrate this. David for instance has been concerned about a series of events which have, he feels, obstructed his career progress. A senior manager has recently signalled to him that he has a good chance of a promotion soon and he decides against raising his concerns. He explains:

*I'm hearing the right noises so I'm not going to rock the boat because things sound like they're going to happen.*

William too has felt in the past a little frustrated at the work roles he has been given but believes it important not to challenge the status quo for fear he may lose everything. Recalling his arrival at the organisation, he recalls:

*I was... anxious not to rock the boat and to impress.*

Continuing to heed the warnings against threatening the stability of a situation or doing anything to cause trouble, William maintains a similar approach, having learnt during his time with the organisation that this approach is effective. He therefore resigns himself once again to accepting the frustration he is experiencing with his current role and declares:

*I'm not going to upset the applecart.*

The well-worn and widely adopted phrases 'don't rock the boat' and 'don't upset the applecart' serve to discourage and deflect challenges. Such clichés arguably operate in a similar way to the oft-used phrase 'don't reinvent the wheel' which Witten (1993)

has contended functions by discouraging “the radical examination of routine, habit and standard operating procedure” (p.110) and “forcefully and covertly argues against criticism” (p.111). Though this particular phrase isn’t one used in this organisational setting by participants, these others firmly established within their linguistic repertoires operate to similar divisive effect inasmuch as existing practice, even that of a dubious nature, goes unchallenged. Fear of the consequences, not least the unwanted attention which would proceed ‘rocking the boat’ and making waves, is sufficient for most participants to avoid poking at and quizzing arrangements which might otherwise be seen as suspect. The net effect is to deflect or at the very least discourage critical reflection. Over time continued repetition and ‘over-use’ of such clichés (as is their nature) at best devalues and at worst stultifies individual reflective activity and learning. If no-one ever rocks the boat, and those who attempt to ‘make waves’ are frowned upon and ignored, or worse still made fools of, divisive organisational rules such as those which hamper career progress of certain groups (e.g. new mothers) continue to go unchallenged.

The challenges and protests which such clichés successfully lobby against serves to maintain the appearance, on the surface at least, of a system as fair and equitable with little cause for conflict. Appearances can however be deceptive. As Graham observes:

*I don't see anybody really throwing their weight around to get what they want.*

Visibly throwing your weight around is not an effective means of achieving one’s ends in this organisation. This is not to say that some organisational members don’t pursue their own aims and agendas, but that getting what you want demands much

more cunning less visible means. Career progress in this setting demands alternative tactics – and these tactics are clearly laid out as rules of the game.

### **That's Just The Way It Is... Que Sera Sera**

An additional group of clichés operate to further ensure that existing protocol and practices are taken for granted, subjected to little if any critical reflection, are accepted as embedded and immutable and thus challenges to the rules are considered futile. As Gillian reasons:

*It's just a case of oh well, that's it, you know, that's the way it works.*

Despite confessing his irritation with it, Keith also draws on cliché to rationalise the ‘game’ he so loathes, explaining:

*That's just, you know, the way the world works. That's fine.*

Keith’s acceptance of the game as “just the way the world works” reflects the sentiment of inevitability contained in Cathy’s account above and Siobhan’s account as she explains why she plays the game:

*I [play the game] because I know it has to be done. Yeah. It irritates me and it doesn't suit me but it's something I know I have to do so ... It's not naturally something that I'm very good at. ... but I'm getting better at it.*

Despite her disapproval, Siobhan has come to accept that she must learn to ‘play the game’. Despite the general unease, the ‘game’ is accepted as an inevitability. As Jane reflects:

*So long as we keep [the company] happy... so it is playing this game. You do... you have to keep [the company] happy... and just accept it's just the way it is. You're not going to change it.*

Once again, cliché here is used to justify, to both self and others, existing arrangements as well as to deter challenges to the game and its rules, securing in turn the game’s maintenance. Since the rules within the organisational setting can’t be changed, those who don’t like them must vote with their feet as Cathy’s husband opted to do. She explains:

*My husband, he's actually left the company, he refused to [play the game]. He was kind of annoyed at the fact that people could get on like that and I find it a bit annoying too, but I think it's the same with every company.*

The general acceptance that this is ‘the same in most companies’ (as both Cathy and William hint at) also discourages challenges to the game. Despite feeling uneasy about it, Cathy also justifies ‘playing the game’ by drawing on the clichéd statement ‘it’s the same everywhere’. Interpreting the game in these terms ensures that any incentive to mount a challenge to the game or question its rules wanes. Why challenge something which is merely the natural order of things – a general feature of all

organisational life? This leads in turn to a rather lackadaisical approach to career-related matters. Jennifer, for example, sees it important to:

*Go with the flow.*

Cresswell (2000: 115) believes this cliché derives from the “hippy era” and “recommends tolerantly accepting things as they come, letting yourself be swept along by events, rather than swimming against the stream.” Similarly, William who, like Alison, has enjoyed rapid promotion early in his career explains:

*I've really taken a que sera sera in some ways, roll with it sort of attitude, approach to my career..... I've been slightly sitting on my hands.*

These accounts offer some contrasting imagery to the ‘free agents’ Hirsch (1987) urges careerists to become in the classic career self-help text. In addition they present some stark opposition to the notions of autonomy and self-direction central to recent theorising about careers and their ‘new’ forms (e.g. Waterman et al, 1994; Arthur and Rousseau, 1996; Hall and Moss, 1998; Peiperl and Arthur, 2000).

### **Better the devil you know**

Last but not least in the repertoire of clichés which organisational members draw on are those which suggest, that despite any flaws which might be perceived, life on the inside of the organisation is far, far better than life on the outside. A series of clichés

are employed to reinforce these beliefs ensuring again that the majority of members accept existing practices rather than reject them by voting with their feet and leaving the company which, for Gillian, would be akin to:

*jumping out of the frying pan and into the fire.*

Nick expresses in his account great dissatisfaction with his lot within the company and is especially aggrieved about his salary level relative to some of his colleagues. In spite of this he feels suspicious of the outside world and doubts his ability to thrive in it, rendering him dependent on the organisation. Moving to another organisation is not something he feels he is able to contemplate. He says:

*I might well be better off somewhere else but you can't always see the grass is greener.... Um.... what's the other one? Better the devil you know. I mean it's... I'm very much aware of problems with salaries and others where I am at the minute but at the same time I've built up some respect in the organisation and some credibility and I'd have to do that all over again if I went somewhere else... there are various other jobs. Contracting perhaps... Don't know that I want to really.... It's very high pressure contracting... you can be seen to fail quite easily out there. But I'm very much a company person, more than a contractor.*

Nick draws heavily on cliché to defend his decision to stay at the company. It seems the perceived dangers of life outside far outweigh his frustrations inside the organisation.

David shares similar concerns which, in his case, resonate with his ongoing anxiety about not 'fitting in' and his fears about whether he will be accepted into another organisational culture. Reports in clichéd format of others' experiences on the outside are drawn on to confirm his worries. He explains:

*You... get cloned. You become part of the site and I think that if you go to another company... with a strong sort of like culture and corporate image and stuff, you might... you might find it hard to sort of gel in..... I've got friends who've gone to, you know, greener pastures outside and they've not liked it at all.*

Ruth too has many reasons why leaving the company is not a viable option, not least tales from a friend who, with hindsight, regrets leaving the haven he now understands the organisation he departed offers to those who stay. She explains:

*If you've been here a while... you do get taken care of...whereas I think it takes time to get to that in a new company. So, whenever I've been tempted, it's like, well, you know..... One of my friends left because he couldn't do what he wanted to do in [the company]... and so he left ... but he's jumped around from company to company since... At the time when I was looking around he sat down and he said, 'O.K I'll give you a bit of advice... if you're going and it's just for money to do the same thing, then don't do it, stay where you are, because it's just not worth it... But if it's something you want to do and you can't do it in [the company] at all... then it's worth going. And every time I,*



*sort of, consider... every time I get head-hunted... I sort of ring up and say, you know, 'Is this still true?' and he's going 'Oh, it's definitely true. If it's something that you definitely can't do in [the company] or you'll never be able to do within the time-frame you want... then go for it... but if it's purely for money, then don't. Stay where you are, it's just not worth it, the grass is not greener on the other side believe me. It'll take you years to get to the same kind of level of being able to do what you do in the way that you work.' Better the devil you know,*

Despite its warts, and despite their frustrations and complaints, participants in this study opt neither for fight nor flight. The clichés they employ here serve broadly two purposes. First, they incorporate a persuasive justificatory aspect, offering convincing reasons for members to stay and not to take flight from the organisation by warning them that things will be no better elsewhere and may indeed be worse. Second, and simultaneously, they (once again) lobby against mounting a challenge to existing practices. The belief that existing arrangements are as good as it gets, and that fitting in elsewhere will prove an immense struggle, renders members increasingly dependent on their existing organisational ties.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Following the work of Anderson-Gough, Grey and Robson (1998), the aim of this paper has been to further explore the ways in which cliché is employed by organisational members and the functions its usage serves. Contra to the established

and somewhat pejorative definitions of cliché as stale and meaningless, it has been argued here that cliché represents an extremely potent disciplinary discursive device. Cliché ensures organisational members are reading from the same script, singing from the same song sheet and dancing to the same tune. Cliché actively and forcefully if covertly and non-consciously communicates, reinforces and reproduces career and organisational rules. Through the medium of cliché, codes of conduct, behavioural and attitudinal “formulae” or instructions and “procedures of action” (Giddens, 1984: 21) are conveyed to and transmitted by, taught to and learned by organisational members. More than this, cliché also conveys rationalisations and justifications for these rules. Thus clichés employed by participants in this study possess both instructional and justificatory dimensions and through them, organisational members come to learn both what should be done to develop their careers within this organisational setting (e.g. ‘play the game’, ‘know the right people’, ‘fit the mould’, ‘don’t rock the boat’) as well as why (e.g. ‘no pain no gain’, ‘that’s just the way it is’, ‘better the devil you know’). Interestingly, many of these rules have been found to be neither new nor exclusive to this organisation, applying far beyond this organisation’s boundaries.

Whilst cliché performs certain functions, it also obstructs others. On the one hand it promotes aspects of learning, teaching organisational members the ‘rules of the game’. On the other hand, it thwarts aspects of learning too. By presenting practices as normal and unproblematic (as the employment of cliché succeeds in doing), the incentive and perceived need for the kind of critical reflection central to and at the heart of learning activity is greatly diminished. Through cliché the same lessons are taught and re-taught, learnt and re-learnt, created and re-created. Challenges to rules

and practices are obstructed and change is thus impeded. As cliché reproduces rules so the existing features of organisational life - warts and all – are re-created. Cliché ensures practices remain taken-for-granted and unproblematised and any divisive effects which accompany them, for example homosocial reproduction and the maintenance of gender biases illustrated in this study, continue unchallenged. Those concerned with studying and facilitating learning should therefore devote attention to the role which discursive devices such as cliché play in thwarting critical reflection and obstructing learning. The very latest dictionary definition of cliché as “an expression that does your thinking for you” (Cresswell, 2000): vii) would suggest we would be most unwise to continue to neglect cliché.

Existing definitions of cliché continue to miss the mark. It is *precisely* the (much berated) over-use of clichés that secures their status as an extremely potent discursive device which covertly directs action whilst simultaneously deflecting critique. That its frequent usage in day-to-day conversations goes unnoticed only adds to its power. The discussion here draws to a close with two calls. The first is for a re-definition of cliché which acknowledges its potency to convey and enforce rules, both facilitate and obstruct learning, thwart challenge and change, and thereby re-create facets of organisational life with all its imperfections intact. The second call is for more research which explores this discursive device as the rich data source it deserves to be acknowledged as.

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