

The Ambiguous Nature of a Management Guru Lecture: Providing Answers While Deepening Uncertainty

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Carlone, D. (2006). The ambiguous nature of a management guru lecture: Providing answers while deepening uncertainty. *Journal of Business Communication*, 43, 89-112.

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Abstract:

Each year, managers and employees spend billions of dollars retaining management consultants, buying business books, and attending seminars to regain certainty. Some of this quest occurs in the lectures of star management consultants, such as Stephen R. Covey. For his audience, a Covey lecture is a liminoid event, that is, a middle phase in a secular rite of passage from “ineffective” to “effective.” Viewed through the lens of liminality, the lecture (a) disrupts the ontology of business subjects, (b) gains force by blending sacred wisdom and technical instruction, (c) makes permanent a transitional stage, and (d) situates the lecturer as guru and audience members as neophytes through their interaction with one another. Despite the quest for certainty, Covey’s lectures simultaneously ease and deepen uncertainty and anxiety.

Keywords: management guru; liminoid; liminal; rite of passage; Stephen R. Covey

Article:

We live in a time of transformation of and deep uncertainty about business and work (Garsten, 1999). Each year, managers and employees spend billions of dollars retaining management consultants, buying business books, and attending seminars (Clark & Fincham, 2002; B. Jackson, 2001; Micklethwait & Wooldridge, 1996) to undertake personal and organizational transformation and regain certainty about such issues as competitive advantage, the meaning of work, and the expectations of employees and managers. This article examines one event in which the quest for certainty through transformation occurs—a lecture of a star management consultant, Stephen R. Covey.

The early 1980s publication of *In Search of Excellence* (T. Peters & Waterman, 1982) heralded the rise of star management consultants (Micklethwait & Wooldridge, 1996). Today, the roster of such consultants numbers between 25 and 50 (Greengard, 2004) and includes, in addition to Stephen R. Covey, Jim Collins, Michael Hammer, Rosabeth Moss Kanter, Tom Peters, and Peter Senge, among others. These star management consultants shape contemporary business ideas through articles and books, videos, consultant and trainer networks, and especially, public lectures and seminars. A growing scholarly literature argues that these stars and popular management ideas have a significant effect on the shape and experience of contemporary organizing (Carlone, 2001; Clark & Fincham, 2002; Cohen & Musson, 2000; du Gay, 1996; du Gay, Salaman, & Rees, 1996; Garsten & Grey, 1997). However, star management consultants’ public lectures and seminars, one piece of the management fashion infrastructure, have received little attention from business communication and organization studies scholars (Clark & Greatbatch, 2002).

Thus, I analyze a lecture by Stephen R. Covey as part of a rite of passage for those people who wish to become effective. I advance four claims through this analysis. First, Covey redefines the meaning of *employee* and *manager*, disrupting the ontology of business subjects. Second, the lecture gains rhetorical force by blending sacred wisdom in the form of a transcendent vision and technical instruction in how to achieve that vision. Third, ironically, Covey’s lecture makes permanent an ostensibly transitional stage. Fourth, the interactions of Covey and his audience members situate him in a superior position in relation to audience members. In short, rather than providing certainty to audience members, ambiguity pervades the event. Paradoxically, star management consultants may simultaneously assuage and deepen uncertainty. Covey offers answers, even

transcendence, in his ideas. Yet, his advice positions audience members as perpetual neophytes continually engaging in the self-work of effectiveness.

Star management consultants' public lectures warrant scrutiny.¹ First, lectures and seminars form the heart of many management consultants' status as "stars" (Clark & Salaman, 1996), with tens of thousands of people attending these each year.² Many businesspeople, particularly executives, prefer to attend lectures rather than read management books as they view lecture attendance as more prestigious and a better use of one's time (Pagel & Westerfelhaus, 1999). As well, many people find lectures—perhaps because of their immediacy, interactivity, and vividness—more compelling than books (Carlone, 2001). Thus, the lecture plays a crucial role in the dissemination of star management consultants' ideas and helps frame their subsequent consumption in other settings. Second, witnessing a star management consultant in person may add a dimension of role modeling to the experience. The ideas of a star management consultant take material form in the person of the consultant and, often, the audience (Clark & Salaman, 1996; Mangham, 1990). For instance, with respect to Covey, his public authoritative modeling of effectiveness makes the idea and its implementation more readily available for consumption. Third, focusing on lectures offers opportunity to gain detailed accounts of specific members of the management consulting industry. Almost all examinations of star management consultants ignore the consultant and his or her lectures as objects of analysis (Clark & Greatbatch, 2002). Scholars have instead attended to consultant writings or change programs or have produced theoretical accounts of the consulting industry. Thus, scholars have few empirical analyses of the micro practices of star management consultants (Clark & Greatbatch, 2002; B. Jackson, 2002).

Table 1. Overview of *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*

<i>Habit</i>	<i>Name</i>	<i>Lesson</i>
Habit 1	Be Proactive	Personal values should guide how we respond to stimuli.
Habit 2	Begin with the End in Mind	We should mentally create our ideal futures before acting.
Habit 3	Put First Things First	Prioritize those actions that will bring into existence our ideal futures.
Habit 4	Think Win/Win	Look for options that satisfy all involved.
Habit 5	Seek First to Understand, Then to Be Understood	Practicing empathic listening helps us understand others, which in turn helps them understand us.
Habit 6	Synergize	The whole is greater than the sum of its parts.
Habit 7	Sharpen the Saw	Ongoing personal production requires daily physical, mental, spiritual, and social/emotional renewal.

Source: Covey (1989).

Star Management Consultant Stephen R. Covey

The work of Covey, specifically, warrants attention due not only to his enduring popularity but to the creeping institutionalization of his personal and organizational change program in corporate and government settings. For example, a number of U.S. school districts have adopted "principle-centered" curricula based on his ideas (FranklinCovey, 2003). This popularity and institutionalization rest on his book, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* (Covey, 1989), in which he defines *effectiveness* in terms of a person's ability to produce continuously over time.³ His seven habits (see Table 1) revolve around this quest for production.

In turn, Covey organizes the habits into three sections. Mastering Habits 1 through 3 moves a person along a Maturity Continuum from a state of dependence to a state of independence, representing a Private Victory. Accomplishing Habits 4 through 6 represents a Public Victory, moving a person from independence to inter-

dependence. Habit 7, finally, focuses on personal renewal, or the rejuvenation of oneself to continue productive work. The habits build on one another in a cumulative fashion (Covey, 1989). The goal of the book is to teach people that success stems from an inner, moral core rather than superficial techniques and appearances.

B. Jackson (1999, 2002) located three fantasy themes in Covey's work that provide a secular and rational vision for engaging in becoming effective. "Back to the farm" (B. Jackson, 2001, p. 102) provides a nostalgic setting for the principles of effectiveness. Here, Covey invites people to identify with one another in a desirable past. "Working from the inside-out" (B. Jackson, 2001, p.103) establishes the inner self as the site for action in becoming effective. Finally, the theme of "finding true north" (B. Jackson, 2001, p. 107) provides transcendent characters, such as Covey himself, whom those seeking effectiveness may emulate. These themes, Jackson claimed, provide Covey's vision with a moral clarity and righteousness.

As Jackson's work showed, close empirical analysis of specific works by specific gurus enhances our understanding of central management figures as well as management fashions more generally. Yet, Jackson missed some of the ambiguity and variation present within a management guru production, dissemination, and consumption network. B. Jackson (1996) described his analytic approach: "Management gurus ... are best understood by endeavouring to build a composite picture from texts that have been directly produced by the gurus themselves as well as media accounts of them" (p. 576). In focusing on texts, Jackson flattened the core of guru performances; they are embodied achievements involving a guru and his or her audience.

For my purposes, *The 7 Habits* serves as a performative resource on which Covey and his audience draw in translating and embodying the change program. This mutual performance positions Covey as a guru and audience members as followers desiring effectiveness. Thus, the 1-day public seminar examined here represents an exemplar of the interactional practices by which consumers of *The 7 Habits* self-help/business program construct themselves and one another as particular subjects.

I divide the remainder of this article into five major parts. In the next section, I develop a conceptual framework for analyzing Covey's lecture around the concepts of management gurus and liminoid phenomena. After a methodology discussion, I present and discuss four vignettes derived from a naturalistic account of the performance that capture the daylong lecture. I then use the conceptual framework to interpret these vignettes. Finally, I consider the implications of the analysis.

MANAGEMENT GURUS AND LIMINOID PHENOMENA

Management Gurus

Typically, management consultants are seen as wielding a rational and technical expertise to solve client problems (Clark & Salaman, 1996). However, recent scholarship on star management consultants, thought of as management gurus (Huczynski, 1993; B. Jackson, 2001; N. Jackson & Carter, 1998), has identified a different basis for legitimacy. The use of *management guru* to refer to star consultants draws attention to followers who seek wisdom or guidance of a spiritual or mystical nature to attain transformation and certainty. (Much popular literature also relies on the "guru" metaphor.)

Management gurus routinely use mystery, emotion, and symbols as much as reason and evidence for their influence (Clark & Salaman, 1996). First, the management guru's expertise remains closely tied to his or her individual persona and ideas rather than rigorous formal training and certification in an agreed-on body of knowledge. Second, management gurus violate the assumed rational world of organization in which client problems require situation-specific solutions. Gurus oppose rationality, heightening emotions such as anxiety and then offering magical cures for such anxiety. Finally, the success of a guru lies in managing his or her client interactions (e.g., appearing competent and charismatic), not in prescribing a standard course of treatment. In sum, management gurus legitimate their status and services through emotional appeal, public persona, and idiosyncratic knowledge (Clark & Salaman, 1996).

The appearance of management gurus roughly coincides with the start of the growth of the management consulting industry (B. Jackson, 2001) and may indicate a desire for “a magic father figure, someone to lift us out of a time or crisis” (John Gardner, cited in Stuller, 1992). Still, this desire for certainty from gurus often entails receiving a dose of uncertainty as well.

Management gurus make best use of their personas, emotional appeals, and magical interventions in public performances (Clark & Salaman, 1996; N. Jackson & Carter, 1998). In the sensual experience of the performance, “imaginative truth is experienced as present truth” (Clark & Salaman, 1996, p. 140). Realizing a script rests on the ability of the guru to generate tension, excitement, and emotion in interaction with the audience. Such public interaction, though, presents great risk for the performer and audience. For instance, the guru’s audience members may fail to perform their roles, inviting embarrassment or ridicule. Moreover, the presence of mystery and threat endangers the core identity and beliefs of the performer and audience (Clark & Salaman, 1996).

Conceiving of star management consultant lectures as management guru performances in a rite of passage draws attention to the moment-to-moment unfolding of qualities such as mystery, risk, and emotion. However, few scholars have examined empirically these claims about management guru performances. I believe that applying the anthropological concept of *the liminoid* to an empirical investigation of a management guru performance will offer important insights. Management guru lectures are places of transition, of the liminoid, where neophytes undergo transformation. I develop this argument in the next section.

Liminoid Phenomena

Gurus divine secrets; they disrupt their audiences’ sense of the world by diagnosing a series of problems and then providing solutions. Such a performance, as it destabilizes taken-for-granted reality, may significantly shift the condition of audience members. Such destabilization may be grounded in Victor Turner’s (1969, 1977) discussion of liminality.

Liminal refers to the middle phase of a rite of passage (Turner, 1969). In the first phase (divestiture), novice community members are separated from the wider community. In the middle, or liminal, phase, “the ritual subject... passes through a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state” (p. 94). In the third state (investiture), the members return to the community, now as full members with the accompanying rights and responsibilities. At its core, then, the liminal phase is a place of transformation; “the wisdom that is imparted in sacred liminality is not just an aggregation of words and sentences; it has ontological value, it refashions the very being of the neophyte” (p. 103).

Several qualities distinguish liminality from common experiences of everyday life (Turner, 1969). Liminality erases status and rank among neophytes and enlists a total obedience to those superiors who impart wisdom. Second, this wisdom is in the form of sacred instruction, not technical knowledge. Third, the liminal stresses simplicity in place of complexity, often with reference to mystical powers. Finally, liminality may “appear as dangerous and anarchical” (p. 109) as it tends to act against existing structure and order.

Turner’s development of liminality rests on his observations of rituals in premodern societies. He later contrasted the character of liminality in premodern and modern societies using the term *liminoid*, or liminal-like, to refer to the rituals of modern, industrial societies (Turner, 1977). Liminal phenomena of pretribal societies are sacred; liminoid phenomena are typically secular, although they may retain vestiges of the sacred. Liminoid phenomena may include carnivals, alumni reunions, and sporting events (Turner, 1977).

The lecture of a management guru is a liminoid phase in a rite of passage in that the lecture experience may transform audience members by erasing some of the conventional wisdom with regard to business, work, and organization and replacing it with new, better wisdom. The lecture remedies a deficit in the audience. Thus, audience members separate themselves from those who continue to prefer conventional wisdom (divestiture),

pass through a stage of transformation (liminoid), and are then brought back into the community of business practitioners (investiture).

With respect to Covey's lecture, those who see effectiveness as a better way seek out his advice. The lecture transforms them from ineffective to effective, particularly as compared to those who have not gained Covey's teachings. However, Covey's performance possesses a content and form that perpetuates liminoidity as an ongoing endeavor. With respect to content, the performance advocates ongoing work on the self, delaying any final move from ineffective to effective. As well, the individualized nature of the self-help work may diminish the possibility of investiture and community (Czarniawska & Mazza, 2003). In form, the performance lacks the reintegration stage present in sacred rituals. The resulting more-or-less permanent liminoid state may link followers to Covey's ideas in an ongoing way, or a continued searching within the management and self-help genre, much as how codependency discourse may actually encourage codependency (Gemin, 1997).

Building on the concepts of management guru and liminoid, I ask the following research questions. First, how does the lecture of a star management consultant, thought of as a performance of a management guru, unfold moment to moment? Second, how does the lecture function as a space of transformation for audience members?

STUDYING MANAGEMENT GURU LECTURES

Performance and Embodied Research

Analysts of human behavior often focus on written and oral texts to understand how language use creates, sustains, and transforms social reality, such as identity and organization (Livesey, 2002). These accounts, though, often neglect how words participate in a larger, situated, and embodied performance that includes the integration of other elements such as gesture, facial expressions, or food (Conquergood, 1991). Previous studies of management gurus have tended to follow this pattern as when, for example, B. Jackson (1996, 2001) treated books and live performances as "texts" for his Fantasy Theme Analyses. A cultural view of management knowledge (Conquergood, 1991) highlights the ongoing performances that may create, sustain, subvert, or transform management ideology and practice.

For Murphy (2002), "studying performance suggests an embodied form of research where the researcher directly observes, interprets, and may even participate in the performance with an eye toward providing a rich and detailed historical and contemporary context" (p. 299). Dissecting the public seminar of a management guru, then, may best be accomplished through direct experience of how a performer and his or her audience engage one another in the enactment of, for instance, "guru" and "students."

The concept of the liminoid situates the live appearances of management gurus as embodied performances that transform those who participate in the event; "the wisdom that is imparted in sacred liminality is not just an aggregation of words and sentences; it has ontological value, it refashions the very being of the neophyte" (Turner, 1969, p.103). Contemporary management guru lectures have the potential to refashion audience members as, generally, better new economy subjects, however the guru attempts to define such a subject. For example, a Tom Peters (1999) lecture might help create an audience of "brands." Covey's lecture seeks to transform audience members into "effective leaders."

Fieldwork

Access to this lecture stemmed from my part-time employment at a FranklinCovey⁴ store between September 1998 and September 1999. Store staff helped promote the event, and in exchange, the lecture sponsor, Lessons in Leadership, distributed two passes to the event to each store manager. A coworker and I expressed interest in attending the lecture to our manager. When no other staff members expressed interest, we received the passes.

Approximately 1,100 people attended Covey's lecture—"The Leadership Compass: Make Your Organization's Vision a Reality"—at a cost of about \$330 per person. As a lecture audience member, my role was that of a "complete participant" (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 144). Those people with whom I interacted at the lecture did not know I attended primarily to observe, record, and analyze the lecture. I presented myself as a FranklinCovey

employee interested in the topic and a university-based organization scholar. I participated in the activities of the day as any other audience member. It is important to note that the complete participant role “allows a researcher to use the self to understand behavior in a natural setting” (p. 145). Indeed, given the limited opportunities to converse with lecture attendees, the ability to draw on my own experience aided in recording and analyzing the event.

After the event, I drew on my notes and the workbook accompanying the lecture to write a narrative account of the day, capturing the uses of and interrelations among orality, role-plays, technology, nonverbal displays, and other elements of the performance. I then used the concept of liminoid as a lens to illuminate the performance. I noted interesting aspects of the performance, such as how Covey handled audience questions. I made thematic notations in the margins of the narrative, noting patterns and breaks in his and audience members’ behavior, and began to identify which portions of the narrative to analyze further. Throughout this iterative process of condensing the event, I moved between revision and presentation of the performance narrative and analysis.

The discussion below relies on a series of ethnographic vignettes (Van Maanen, 1988). These vignettes represent focused, clarified excerpts from my fieldnotes that recount the dialogue and events of the lecture as closely as possible given that I did not audiotape or videotape the proceedings. I have chosen and re-presented these excerpts based on their ability to place the reader in the scene and to speak to the liminoid qualities of the performance.

A MANAGEMENT GURU LECTURE AS A LIMINOID EVENT

Act I: Teaching Others

Approximately 1,100 people at a sea of round tables, separated from the outside world in a windowless hotel conference room, stand in ovation as Stephen R. Covey takes the stage. His bald head reflects the overhead lighting; his dark blue suit blends into the black curtain backdrop. Microphone in hand, his toothy smile glistening, he paces the stage and shouts that he wants to give us a standing ovation. We gradually return to our seats.

“I believe all of you are teachers and learners, and that we learn best by teaching others what we know,” Covey tells us. “Throughout the day we will applaud one another as we also teach one another,” he says. For Covey, “learning by teaching is powerful” for several reasons:

1. When you teach, you simply learn better.
2. Teaching increases the likelihood that you will live what you have learned.
3. When you learn, teach, and then live what you learn, you legitimate what you have learned and taught. People will see, hear, and feel it.
4. Finally, teaching creates strong relationships with others.

“In the next two days I want all of you to teach this material twice, once to your loved ones and once to your work associates.” We should ask these people to teach it twice, and so on. “Initiate the teaching in an informal way. Say something like, ‘Here is what I am learning...’ Use the ‘I’ rather than ‘Here is what you need to know.’”

In an allegorical aside he added, “If parents want children to learn, they shouldn’t punish, bribe, or cajole. They should ask their children to teach them what they have learned.”

These first few minutes of the performance set the tone for the day. Covey and the audience identified with one another even as Covey set himself apart from and above the audience through various strategies.

First, Covey and the audience established a dialectic that animated the performance. On one hand, his characterization of the audience as “teachers and learners” situated everyone as equals. The underlying “You’re just like me—a teacher and a learner” message positioned him as folksy and accessible. Simultaneously, Covey distanced himself from the audience, establishing himself as a patriarch endowed with wisdom and expertise, as in his lesson for parents offered through a casual aside. This aside, and others scattered throughout the lecture, was ideologically tinged in that it took a particular idea and universalized it as a general principle; the statement asserted simplicity in the face of complexity.

Second, Covey established that the pathway to effectiveness lies in active engagement with the material. For instance, teaching, one form of active engagement, helps the teacher and student acquire, practice, and master *The 7 Habits*, making abstract concepts concrete. Teachers embody their lessons, displaying them both to students and themselves in a micro performance in which effectiveness may be incorporated into one’s identity. Oral teaching inscribes its lessons on the fertile ground of the “disciple’s soul” (Socrates, cited in J. D. Peters, 1999, p. 48) and requires a more active, direct, and immediate relationship to *The 7 Habits*. This relationship helps “stitch” the participants into the script through both the improvised performance and the audience’s degree of confirmation of the performance. Teaching engages the subject not in private thought, practice, or confession, but in public endorsement and mastery of *The 7 Habits* curriculum. Thus, teaching others represents one specific strategy to refashion the ontology of the neophyte in the liminoid phase of this rite of passage.

Third, casting the audience as students and teachers levels status distinctions among audience members and situates them as neophytes, all equally in need of the guru’s wisdom. This need elevated Covey’s status as the one who is willing and able to teach the audience members.

In sum, within the first few minutes of the lecture, Covey positioned himself in an equal yet superior position in relation to the audience and established our responsibilities as followers.

Act II: Our Problem Is a Lack of Trust

Four questions flash on the five large video screens at the front of the room. Covey’s voice emanates from the sound system. Somewhere in the audience, he reads the questions aloud, asking us for a show of hands to illustrate. Almost all of us raise our hands to respond affirmatively to his questions. Most of those sitting near to me smile knowingly as they roll their eyes, nod to one another, and raise their hands.

1. How many believe that coworkers cannot use their full talents at work?
2. How many of us spend too much time dealing with politics at work?
3. How many of us feel maxed out?
4. How many of us spend too much time doing urgent and unimportant things?

From his “survey” of us and previous audiences, overwhelmingly people feel maxed out, consumed by work politics and unimportant things, unable to give their all.

Covey walks among the several tables in front of the stage. “Do you know the cause of these symptoms?” he asks. He pauses. We wait. He confides, “There is a profound lack of trust among people in organizations. This lack of trust holds back quality and empowerment.”

In our workbook, we find two charts supporting his claims. Each chart lists people’s responses to the question of what is holding back quality and empowerment in organizations. On another, we see a puzzle missing the center piece. The heading asks, “What is the missing piece?” The pieces we do have include “quality,” “customer focus,” “human resources,” “team building,” “systems thinking,” “restructuring,” “empowerment,” and “reengineering.”

“Trust,” he declares, is the missing piece. To be successful in the face of changing economic conditions, he says, organizations must possess a “high trust, high performance culture.” To attain this trust, people and organizations must be trustworthy—possessing both competence and character. Competence involves being “with it, market friendly, current.” Low trust cultures cannot produce high quality at lower costs to satisfy the customer, “who is king.”

A management guru requires a problem on which to focus his or her wisdom and his or her followers’ quest. In this vignette, Covey established the central problem for the lecture and, hence, the problem that he, as guru, must solve. As well, defining our mission laid out what we would have gained on emerging from our liminoid space. His naming and framing of the problem and subsequent solution fore-grounded our ontological standing as central to our quest for improvement. In other words, we learned that improving our organizations meant improving and changing ourselves according to the meanings and practices of an employee or manager as defined by Covey.

First, Covey’s survey called forth our latent feelings of anxiety and fatigue. Second, he articulated (Hall, 1985) these feelings to a problem/solution statement. The simple, straightforward form and content of this problem/solution statement—a lack of trust—resonated with us. Because an act of definition works in part through exclusion, equally important as Covey’s explicit labeling of the problem is his implicit occlusion of alternative explanations. We made no note, for instance, of the potential incompatibility of some of the organization effectiveness “puzzle pieces.” A reasonable question with regard to the puzzle might be, “Can top-down initiatives such as restructuring and reengineering successfully coexist with empowerment and trust?” Such contradictions were never raised nor addressed, avoiding the insertion of complexity into a rapidly simplifying world.

Covey’s diagnosis naturalized contemporary organizational processes, such as restructuring and reengineering. In place of our defeat of organization politics by leading trustworthy lives, we might view organization politics as unavoidable as people’s interests and desires inevitably clash. Further, defining effectiveness around economic and career success may exacerbate the problem of trust; those seeking effectiveness will likely come to compete with one another for scarce resources and rewards, such as promotions.

Nonetheless, in narrowly divining the problem, Covey focused our attention on trust, limited the scope and complexity of possible problems, and crafted his area of expertise. He neatly framed our all-too-common experience of organization and the subsequent remedy. Of course, we desire gurus for their answers, even though we may not entirely grasp our questions. On this day, Covey provided the audience both the question and the answer, deftly defining our time together and enhancing his image of wisdom in the face of our relative ignorance.

In his problem/solution statement, Covey also hailed us as desiring subjects, subjects seeking a certainty to which we might anchor ourselves. Gaining this certainty required of us self-examination and self-improvement. We learned a lesson crucial to our rite of passage: the lack of trust stemmed from each of our own personal failings. This personalized problem and solution helped position us as the subjects and objects of the work to be done. We lacked a “Character Ethic” (Covey, 1989), making organizations tiresome and us ineffective. The call to restore the Character Ethic possesses more than a tint of nostalgia, part of the allure of Covey’s rhetoric (B. Jackson, 1999, 2001). Yet, the call also fits within a broad array of “new wave management” (du Gay, 1996, p. 57) strategies that attempt to inculcate a set of values and practices centered on personal programs of excellence, enterprise, and self-help (du Gay, 1996; Nadesan, 1999a, 1999b; Rimke, 2000). Thus, Covey’s nostalgia is of a radical sort, particularly when the character ethic counteracts bureaucracy and its ills. Emerging from this liminoid phase, we will have embarked on a journey of transformation in which we recover the best of the past to meet contemporary exigencies.

Act III: Heightening Our Anxiety

Covey has jumped to a new topic as, again on stage, he tells us, “The shift from an agricultural economy to an industrial economy resulted in the downsizing of 90% of the American people.” The transition from an industrial economy to a communication and information economy, he tells us, “will have a similar impact.” The downsizing of the next 5 years will be more severe than that of the last several years, he predicts.

Judging by the expressions on many faces in the audience, he has either surprised people with his topic shift, or jolted them with his prediction. To respond to this radical transformation, he says we “must get current” and “change the way we think and act.”

Covey quickly makes another 5-year prediction. In the next few years, the globalization of technology and markets will affect most organizations and will lead to the privatization of almost all public services, including schools, prisons, and universities.

Management gurus frequently heighten their followers’ fears to establish the conditions in which a follower will heed the guru’s counsel (Clark & Salaman, 1996). Covey attempted this by asserting as undeniably true a possible reality: “the customer is king,” future downsizing will be increasingly severe, and globalization will radically alter the provision and scope of public services. The assertion builds on taken-for-granted knowledge (who discounts the influence of globalization on business?) while glossing the many disagreements on the breadth, depth, and implications of processes such as globalization (e.g., Amin, 1994; Cloud, 2001; Nadesan, 2001). Covey linked through historical analogy the “communication and information” revolution to the industrial revolution and minimized the negative connotations of current economic upheaval in terms of normal cycles of traumatic yet survivable economic and societal progress. Indeed, his articulation of downsizing to the movement of workers from farm to factory suggests that downsizing simply refers to any instance of economic change. Yet, ample evidence suggests that many contemporary downsizings occur for reasons other than structural economic change, such as to enhance the value of stock shares (e.g., “The Downsizing of America,” 1996).

By proclaiming the continuation and upheaval of downsizing and globalization as inevitable and objective realities, Covey participated in their reification and contributed to their “already-ordained” outcome. In a fashion similar to his earlier ideological comment about parents teaching children, this act of reification, in addition to increasing audience member anxiety, cast Covey as omniscient. Befitting liminoidity, he offered wisdom and his services as our guide yet little direct instruction or technical knowledge (Turner, 1969).

As neophytes, we found ourselves in not one but two transitional phases, one involving the personal quest for effectiveness, the other the social transformation due to globalization. The quest for the former in the context of the latter suggests a long-term, perhaps even semipermanent, state of liminoidity in which our ontological uncertainty leads to sustained identity work (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002).

Act IV: Becoming an Effective Person, Like Me

A 15-minute video, “Max and Max,” demonstrates the ills of “victimage,” or not being proactive. The video relates the story of Max, a young man in his first post-college job, and Max, the dog belonging to Max’s boss, Mr. Harold. As the lights dim, Covey intones, “As you watch this story I want you to ask yourself: ‘With my knowledge and enlightenment, what would I do?’”

The title disappears as a narrator introduces the character. We see Max and Max grow up through their energetic lives. Max the man has been reared for college and business success. Max the dog has been reared for success in hunting.

The narrative jumps forward. In an office, Mr. Harold introduces Max the man to his department’s mission statement, “Service, Service, Service!”

Another jump, and we again see Max in Mr. Harold's office. "Why did you send this client her luggage overnight?" Mr. Harold asks.

"Oh. She needed the luggage for a trip, and the shipping department had closed for the day. So, I went down to shipping and sent the luggage overnight."

Mr. Harold responds with frustration, "I don't care about that. You're not understanding my question. Why did you do that?"

Max, confused, points to the mission statement and says, "Service, Service, Service!"

"Don't get wise with me! Go do your job," exclaims Mr. Harold.

To avoid punishment and humiliation, Max and Max learn to follow Mr. Harold's numerous commands. Max the dog learns to "Stay on the lawn!" so well that when Mr. Harold decides to go hunting, Max refuses to get in the truck. Similarly, Max the man learns that "Service, Service, Service" means not to cause trouble.

In the climactic scene, Mr. Harold throws a party at his waterfront house so that his employees will like him and productivity will improve. As Mr. Harold proudly shows off his boat, he falls in the water. The guests/employees laugh as they come to his aid. When Max the man moves to retrieve Mr. Harold's hat from the water, Max the dog restricts him by biting his pant leg. Max looks at the dog and sighs, "Yeah, we both know better, don't we?"

"How would you have approached Mr. Harold if you had been Max? How would you have told Mr. Harold that you had an idea to improve customer satisfaction?" Covey inquires, standing amidst the tables. About a dozen people in turn role-play Max using various persuasive approaches with Covey as Mr. Harold. Generally, in each strategy "Max" nicely tells "Mr. Harold" that he has an idea he wants to try.

For example, one man sitting near the stage says, "You know, Mr. Harold, I have this idea that I think will help us achieve our mission of 'Service, service, service.'"

Covey—Mr. Harold jumps in. Moving his head and arms in a dismissive manner, he says, "Oh, I don't think so. That's not necessary. I think things are going pretty well, and my boss doesn't like me to rock the boat. Let's stick with what we have."

These exchanges take some time and effort, continuing for some 15 minutes. As Covey/Mr. Harold shoots down the attempts, one by one, audience members begin to exchange puzzled looks. One man at a nearby table whispers to a table mate, "What the hell's going on?!"

Covey's point? Each "Max" has failed to practice Habit 5—Seek First to Understand, Then to Be Understood, failed to become personally trustworthy, and, thus, failed to become a "change catalyst." Covey's lesson flashes on the video screens without prompting; the key to human influence is to first "be influenced."

Covey continually emphasizes what "Max" should have done and delineates the hints he provided. "Max" should have taken the clue that "Mr. Harold's" boss does not want him to rock the boat. Max needs to understand Mr. Harold and then "sell his idea" to him based on this understanding. Max needs to "stop being weak and timid and take responsibility." Max might have said, "Let me set up a pilot program for which I am responsible. If it fails, my head is on the block." Max will have understood Mr. Harold, established a relationship with him, and sold his idea.

Max "developed a reactive focus" when Mr. Harold "slapped" him. We, Max and the audience, must develop a proactive focus and exercise our freedom to choose.

This segment of the lecture crucially stabilized meanings and roles. First, the role-play attempted to fix the meaning of *Max and Max* within the preferred narrative of “effectiveness.” Second, this segment most clearly engaged the audience and guru in the mutual performance of expertise and effectiveness. Third, Covey adopted two conflicting roles, that of the in-touch, caring teacher, and the distant, all-knowing advisor, placing audience members in complementary, yet also conflicting, roles.

This role-playing episode illustrates attempts of Covey’s oral performance to constrain the possible meaning(s) of video and written media. Covey inflected the meaning of the video in a particular and surprising direction: Max is at fault, not Mr. Harold. Although some audience members disagreed with this framing, this disagreement occurred in the liminoid space of a guru and his students. Rejecting the many and various attempts to persuade Mr. Harold, Covey presented the correct approach, nullified other possibilities, and normalized effectiveness. The extended role-play and frustration led me and other audience members to see our expertise as less than and different from that of Covey. Moreover, as people desiring to be effective, Covey clearly demonstrated that we fell short of the mark and, thus, needed his assistance as our guide to emerge successfully on the other side.

Ultimately, the form and content of the lesson—that we must take responsibility and put “our heads on the block”—had a disquieting effect on many in the audience. In a day that had relatively little interaction among audience members, this segment led to a number of visible bodily and oral expressions of puzzlement and even hostility, such as head shaking, quizzical looks, and profanity. These reactions suggest that this segment of the lecture violated the need for management gurus to create and sustain “an affiliative mood” (Clark & Greatbatch, 2002) in their audience members. A guru performance may in fact be a site for some measure of alienation even as neophytes within this liminoid experience suspend (to an extent) a critical stance toward wisdom. Such alienation acts as a catalyst for intense focus on the sacred lessons imparted by the guru.

The shifts between affiliation and alienation exemplify contradictions present in Covey’s performance. During the role-play, Covey developed an image of “personally in touch” as well as “detached and all knowing.” On one hand, he walked among and invited audience members to engage him as Mr. Harold. He seemed to enjoy this interaction and appeared interested in audience members’ ideas. On the other hand, Covey continuously dismissed these people and their attempts, causing frustration and hostility. Try as they might, no one could effectively connect with “Mr. Harold.” When Covey “revealed” the correct yet still ambiguous strategy, he yet again assumed the mantle of the teacher who could provide anticipated and mysterious wisdom. The creation of frustration prior to the revelation of the “right answer” culminated in a sense of our inferiority.

Thus, this act in the larger performance led to an implicit message from Covey: “With practice—a lot of practice—you might someday be like me.” Although better off than those not at the lecture, our status as neophytes, measured against the knowledge of Covey, would endure.

DRAWING LESSONS FROM THE LECTURE

The Covey lecture performance sought to subvert the existing organization order, replacing old rules of organization and offering new roles and practices for employees and managers. Specifically, viewed through the lens of liminoidity, the lecture disrupted the ontology of business subjects, gained force by blending sacred wisdom and technical instruction, made permanent a transitional stage, and situated the lecturer as guru and audience members as neophytes through their interaction with one another. Ultimately, these four themes illustrate how the lecture simultaneously assuaged and deepened the uncertainty of the audience members. In this section, I explicate these four themes before considering their effect on uncertainty.

Disrupting the Ontology of Business Subjects

Liminoidity is transformative; upon emerging from the liminoid phase of a rite of passage, neophytes have become different people (Turner, 1969). Covey’s lecture disrupted the ontology of audience members by moving them from ineffective to effective. First, Covey emphasized a personal, organizational, and societal need—greater trust—and path for us to fill that need—become trustworthy and (more) effective. Second, Covey

modified the meaning of *effectiveness*; effectiveness lies in integrity and trust, not merely in how much one gets done.

Negative reactions to the role-play suggest the acute unease felt around the shifting meanings of terms such as *employee* and *manager*. We were not just *to do* certain kinds of things at work. We were *to be* different kinds of people. Unstated questions lurked in the performance: “Who am I? Who are you?” Audience members were not only employees or managers seeking and receiving technical tips on how to do things in the world of business. Audience members were employees and managers being told that as employees and managers we had largely failed. We lacked trust, leading to organization ineffectiveness. Remediating this required employees to “put their heads on the block” to understand their manager, just as Max should have. This destabilized and redirected the meaning of *employee*, while also curiously leaving the meaning of *manager* unexamined. The risks of the performance (Clark & Salaman, 1996) clustered around the meanings and responsibilities of the role of employee.

Liminal and liminoid events highlight disruption and suspension of the taken-for-granted order. Liminal performances do so temporarily, eventually leading to reaffirmation of the natural order via reintegration of the former neophytes into the larger community. In contrast, liminoid performances upset and attempt to overturn the existing natural order with an alternative order. Thus, in disrupting the ontology of audience members, Covey’s lecture seeks to shake up the practice of business, more generally.

Blending Sacred Wisdom and Technical Instruction

This liminoid event blended sacred wisdom and technical instruction, enhancing the power and reach of the lecture (Rich & Rasmussen, 2002). The sacred wisdom provided the vision for which we should strive, whereas the technical instruction taught us how to achieve that vision. An aspiration of business and work being so much more than it currently is invigorated the lecture. Working on ourselves and becoming more trusting and trustworthy, we were told, would unleash untapped reservoirs of good will, energy, and creativity. References by Covey to “universal principles and laws” such as these lent an element of transcendence to the day. Anticipation and excitement flowed from the dream that we might participate in something greater than ourselves.

To help realize this vision, Covey engaged the audience members in more mundane instruction. The Max and Mr. Harold role-play displayed this technical dimension of the lecture. Here, we were taught that achieving the “high trust, high performance” vision required that we re-conceive ourselves and become proactive. Being proactive, in turn, required new interactional practices whereby the effective person acts entrepreneurially. Vestiges of the sacred amidst the secular may explain some of the popularity of guru performances, much as we desire the sacred, spiritual, and transcendent in our work more generally (Ashforth & Vaidyanath, 2002). Business management gurus such as Covey meet our desire by offering transcendence in and through the technical practices of business.

Making Transition Permanent

Unlike a traditional rite of passage, the transitional quality of the liminoid phase of the ritual did not remain within the bounds of the lecture. Rather, Covey’s performance illustrated the liminoid made permanent (Murphy, 2002). For example, at the conclusion of the lecture, rather than being reincorporated into the collective (investiture), attendees fragmented in numerous directions, toward their various home organizations, partly as disciples with the charge to spread the word. Moreover, much of the work in becoming effective would be personal and internal, with no seeming end point—one might always be more effective.⁵ In these ways, those people desiring effectiveness via *The 7 Habits* program are always betwixt and between, never completely in the community, never wholly effective.

Turner (1969) noted the possibility of liminality becoming a permanent condition of contemporary life:

with the increasing specialization of society and culture, with progressive complexity in the social division of labor, what was in tribal society principally a set of transitional qualities 'betwixt and between' defined states of culture, and society has become itself an institutionalized state. (p. 107)

Indeed, one key distinction between liminality and liminoidity is the relation of each to the whole societal order. Liminal phenomena appeal to the entire collective in their emotional and intellectual content and "are centrally integrated into the total social process, forming with all its other aspects a complete whole" (Turner, 1977, p. 44). By contrast, liminoid phenomena may be more plural and fragmentary in their relation to the whole culture (Turner, 1977). Although Covey claimed universality for his ideas, they remain in competition with other ideas.

Other scholars have recently documented the seeming permanence of this transitional stage. For example, the growing use of consultants, employees who remain attached to yet apart from their employer, signal the commonplace of liminality (Czarniawska & Mazza, 2003). Murphy (2002) witnessed the "perpetual liminoid" in the cultural performances of air travel that simulate the ordinary events of daily life in part to distract travelers from the dangers of flight. Finally, Rich and Rasmussen (2002) argued that a linear view of liminality, in which a person systematically moves from neophyte to full member, should be replaced with a view of liminality as fluid, with the promised transformation an ongoing process or even illusory.

As this analysis and these recent studies show, in contemporary life liminoidity increasingly exists as a permanent state of transition. Many people now live removed from the stability of the old order, somewhat adrift in a fluid new order. The form and content of liminoidity are becoming more routine, shifting from extraordinary to ordinary (Murphy, 2002).

Situating the Lecturer and Audience Through Interaction

Liminoidity and *guru* draw attention to the interaction between the audience and performer. The interactive performance analyzed here as a liminoid event situates audience members as neophytes desiring effectiveness, a role that complements Covey's role of wise elder. In fact, Covey's status as a guru depends on the positioning of audience members as less knowledgeable and practiced followers. This positioning was achieved in several ways.

Management practice, generally, relies on oral communication (Huczynski, 1993). For management gurus, specifically, orality provides an important avenue for cultivating followers. Being in the immediate physical presence of a guru invigorates interactional strategies that might elsewhere be questioned and situates the performance as a liminoid passage. Covey's physical presence afforded him the freedom to reframe continually the oral contributions of audience members, developing an aura of wisdom around him and ignorance around us, the aspirants. These interactions cast Covey as the hero possessing what we lacked and modeling what we desired. In this way, the immediate and authentic form of Stephen R. Covey redeemed us as we witnessed how to enact effectiveness and overcome our own flaws.

These acts of redemption afforded Covey moments of both identification with and alienation from audience members. As we displayed our knowledge and desire to learn, we emulated Covey and sought to identify with him. These attempts at emulation displayed our ignorance and allowed Covey to categorize our responses as wrong, frustrating us and separating us from him. This reach-for-push-away dynamic, rather than being a flaw, helped animate the performance as a liminoid place.

Covey's presence also contributed to a mystification of audience members. As neophytes in a liminoid space, we largely suspended our abilities of critical reflection (Turner, 1969,1977). A willingness to forego questioning of Covey's ideological statements seems less likely when encountering his ideas in other contexts, as when reading his books and essays or watching videotapes of his public appearances. The relatively solitary

acts of reading and watching lack the sensuousness of the live performance and do not appear as a rite of passage. Critical reading and viewing may be more likely in these situations.

Assuaging and Deepening Uncertainty

These four qualities of the lecture—the disruption of ontology, the blend of the sacred and technical, the permanence of transition, and the interactivity of the lecture—show that, paradoxically, a management guru like Covey may simultaneously assuage and deepen uncertainty. Covey offers answers, even transcendence. Yet, his advice positions audience members as perpetual neophytes continually engaging in the self-work of effectiveness.

Ambiguity is inherent to liminoid spaces, although this ambiguity may be heightened in modern society due to the de-centering of various traditions, such as religion, as forms of cultural authority (Lears, 1981). Still, the ambiguity presents possibilities and problems. Temporary workers' employment contracts, for instance, afford potentially liberating fluidity and creativity while situating them as outsiders, separated from work-based community (Garsten, 1999). Czarniawska and Mazza (2003) made similar claims with respect to business consultants. For both temps and consultants, the possibility of new ideas and practices comes with the tradeoff of existing alone at work. From the perspective of business firms, flexible employment relations may introduce new ideas and ways of working from sources external to the organization while eroding organization memory and commitment (Tempest & Starkey, 2004).

Covey's lecture also presented possibilities and problems. On one hand, Covey's appeal to transcendent ideals and argument that we could fix our problems through greater trust anchored us against continued drift and anxiety. Accompanying this sacred wisdom with technical instruction grounded the vision in concrete behaviors and attitudes. Moments of affiliation connected us to Covey on our journey to becoming effective. A journey of self-exploration guided by a transcendent vision might yield better relationships or a greater purpose.

On the other hand, framing our problem as a lack of trust glossed over other possible diagnoses, suggesting that the solution might not work in all situations. Although concrete, the technical instruction to "be proactive" remained incomplete and generated frustration and alienation. Our effectiveness, particularly measured against that of Covey, seemed quite distant. Lacking incorporation into a community at the end of the lecture, our journey to effectiveness seemed potentially lonely. Perhaps most important, shifting the meaning of key roles of employee and manager created significant anxiety.

Covey works at the limits of organization. He pushes people and organizations in new directions and offers assurances to mitigate uncertainty. Hence, as he preaches the reinvention of business, he achieves contradictory effects, creating both opportunity and uncertainty. The great popularity of and demand for management gurus may lie in this dual capacity to ease and stimulate uncertainty and anxiety.

IMPLICATIONS

I have argued that ambiguity pervaded Covey's lecture. Paradoxically, then, management gurus may simultaneously assuage and deepen uncertainty. Because Covey and other management gurus ostensibly assist us in alleviating anxiety, an appropriate avenue to drawing out the implications of Covey's lecture is to consider it in light of the uncertainty present in contemporary business and work. One great source of uncertainty stems from the personal implications of economic change. Sennett (1998) argued that work in the new capitalism corrodes character. Short time horizons, flexible work arrangements, and the need to continually reinvent oneself erode personal standing and interpersonal stability. How does Covey's lecture, with all its ambiguity, respond to this condition?

On one hand, the lecture provides some remedy for the corrosion of character. First, the lecture stabilizes the meaning of business and work. At their core, these should be about trust and integrity. Second, trust and integrity help make one's work life legible (Sennett, 1998) by serving as resources for articulating personal and societal narratives. Third, trust and integrity bind people to one another in the face of mobility, free agency, and

downsizing. Cultivating trust and integrity among employees, managers, and others points us toward public, collective action, toward “the dangerous pronoun”—“we” (Sennett, 1998). Finally, Sennett closed his book with an admonition, “a regime which provides human beings no deep reasons to care about one another cannot long preserve its legitimacy” (p. 148). In advocating a return to a world in which work and character enhance one another—a rather radical idea today—Covey’s ideas recognize and respond to Sennett’s advice.

Yet, on the other hand, the lecture is ambiguous, offering answers and inserting uncertainty into the experience of business, work, and organizing. First, the never-ending quest for effectiveness may be exhausting, leading to self-doubt, not confidence. Writing a coherent, positive life narrative becomes more difficult in such circumstances (Sennett, 1998). Second, locating the ills of business in a lack of personal trust centers the problem and solution in individuals, leaving the larger system—of hierarchy, competition, politics, and so on—largely unexamined and unaltered. Future failures will likely point back to the individual who has, apparently, yet to master Covey’s teachings, generating greater doubt, anxiety, and searching. Third, lacking a clear community to join at the conclusion of the lecture may leave people stuck betwixt and between the old and the new. This seems to undermine the very hope for “we” shared by Covey and Sennett. In sum, the form of the lecture as a liminoid space and the content of the lecture in terms of unconventional teachings cultivate angst with respect to the meanings and practices of business, work, and organization.

The influence of management gurus on business may be greater than has been imagined and may emanate from unexpected places. We seek out management gurus for answers to business problems. We receive unanticipated questions with our answers. Acknowledging and engaging this paradox may help us sort out the consequences of business wisdom.

NOTES

1. Star management consultant lectures may be thought of as quasi-public in that attendance typically requires membership in a client organization or an association and/or an attendance fee, which may run \$300 or more. Thus, these lectures are public in the sense that they are open to all those willing and able to pay to attend. As well, these lectures are often public in that they receive coverage in local, regional, and national newspapers, magazines, and Web sites.
2. Firm lecture attendance figures are difficult to find, although some estimates may be made. According to various sources, star management consultants Tom Peters and Stephen R. Covey, for example, make between 40 and 60 personal appearances each year. Often, 1,000 or more people attend a lecture. Most star management consultants also offer workshops via video, teleconference, and a network of certified trainers. These “appearances” raise considerably the number of those who access public lectures.
3. *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* has been well received since its publication in 1989. The book tied for the top spot in a *Chief Executive* magazine survey of the most influential business books of the century. *The 7 Habits* has sold approximately 12 million copies in 72 countries and 33 languages, spending more than 250 weeks on the *New York Times* best seller list (“Time’s 25 Most Influential Americans,” 1996). *Time* rated Stephen Covey one of the 25 most influential people in the United States. According to *USA Today* (Strauss, 1998), Covey brought in more than \$2 million from his 1998 appearances and charges \$75,000 per appearance. More than 750,000 people attend his lectures and seminars each year, and more than 17.5 million people use FranklinCovey planners and other products. In short, Covey has a pervasive and enduring presence, if not influence, in organizations.
4. FranklinCovey is the name of the publicly traded company that Stephen R. Covey helps lead. The company, formed out of the 1997 merger of the Covey Leadership Center and Franklin Quest, sells time management and day planning products and offers training seminars on topics such as *The 7 Habits*, time management, leadership, presentation skills, and long-range planning.

5. Covey (2004) recently extended the journey with the publication of *The 8th Habit: From Effectiveness to Greatness*.

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