

Using a case study based on interviews and documents, this article applies narrative theory and methods to garbage can decision theory. Narrative approaches to organizational action offer insight into how decisions and actions occur in organizations. Following narrative theory, organizational decision making may be understood as the interweaving of multiple, ongoing, and unending narratives that constitute organizational decision makers. Narrative analyses also accommodate the complexity of organizational decisions and actions.

DISCOURSE AT OUR DISPOSAL

Stories In and Around the Garbage Can

Ellen S. O'Connor
University of Notre Dame

Using a case study approach based on interviews and documents, this article applies narrative theory and methods to garbage can decision theory (Cohen, March, & Olsen, 1972; March & Olsen, 1976). Following narrative theory, organizational decision making can be understood as a process of intertextuality (Kristeva, 1986; Riffaterre, 1990). In this essay, intertextuality refers to the interweaving of multiple, ongoing, and unending narratives (Graham, 1992; Roe, 1994) in organizational decision and action. The study of intertexts offers new insight into how decisions and actions occur in organizations.

Garbage can decision theory tends to reify decisions and decision-making processes (O'Connor, 1996). That is, the theory begins with something the researcher calls an "opportunity for choice." This moment presumably sets the garbage can process into motion. However, this obscures a prior consideration: What creates the opportunity for choice that triggers the garbage can process? In

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this article, I hold that each individual participant in the decision and action processes contributes strands to the larger tapestry of the decision-action scenario. This view follows narrative philosophy, which theorizes that individuals are constituted by multiple and ongoing story lines, both private and public (Johnson, 1993; Linde, 1993; MacIntyre, 1981). Adapting narrative philosophy to organization theory, we can say that these story lines serve as the garbage can process for the garbage can product. They reduce the randomness and chaos of everyday life to narrative order, including moral order (Hauerwas & Burrell, 1989; Johnson, 1993; White, 1987). The coincidence of decision making and narrative production has previously been noted: "Accounts are routinely offered when the smooth flow of coordinated joint action breaks down" (Harré, 1993, p. 122).

Moreover, organizational decision theory in particular contains language that suggests the applicability of text-based approaches (O'Connor, 1996, pp. 317-319). March and his colleagues have described garbage can processes as a "shifting intermeshing of the lives of an array of actors" (Cyert & March, 1992, p. 235; March, 1981, p. 229; March, 1994, pp. 198-199; March & Shapira, 1982, p. 102) and as "cross-sections of the lives of individual participants" that "cannot easily be understood without embedding them within those lives" (March, 1981, p. 229). "Theories of choice in organizations may err by separating the decision process from the complexities of ordinary lives" (March, 1981, p. 230). March (1981, pp. 229-230) suggests two ways of pursuing this line of inquiry. The first aims to understand a decision "in full cross-sectional detail." The researcher fits the decision into the life of each participant, "displaying organizational action as the more or less fortuitous consequence of combining different moments of different lives." But March warns of the extensive requirements of scholarship involved in such an endeavor. The second procedure focuses on "the allocation of attention." The allocation of attention depends both on the attributes of the decision in question and on the competing demands for attention faced by organizational actors. Decisions must be understood as contextual: They depend "on who attends to the process" and on changes in the "array of

demands" on participants (March, 1981, p. 230). He observes that decision theories have "become increasingly contextual in character" (March, 1981, p. 234):

To understand decision making in organizations, we are led to consider how any particular decision is embedded in a history. . . . In many ways decisions and decision processes can be portrayed . . . as the incidental consequence of the confluence of numerous, relatively autonomous streams of history. The streams are sufficiently independent to make the short-run consequences of the process surprisingly dependent on largely arbitrary temporal connections among exogenous events.

There is also a striking parallel between one way of decision making, which Cyert and March (1992, p. 230) call the "logic of appropriateness" and narrative philosophy. MacIntyre (1981, p. 216) argues that narrative is a meaning-making form that is central to human conduct. "I can only answer the question 'What am I to do' if I can answer the prior question, 'Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?' " Similarly, in evaluating alternatives according to the logic of appropriateness, "a decision maker asks: (1) What kind of a situation is this? (2) What kind of person am I? (3) What is appropriate for a person such as I in a situation such as this?" (Cyert & March, 1992, p. 230).

In this article, I offer a little of both approaches indicated by March. Unfortunately, I had limited access to decision makers, which constrained my pursuit of the first line of research. However, one important individual generously provided copies of letters, memos, newspaper articles, and other documentation as well as a lengthy interview. I hope readers will agree that even without extensive personal interviews, March's suggested lines of inquiry are somewhat more workable than he suggested.

Moreover, my purpose is also more theoretical than empirical. March does not suggest the contribution of literary approaches to decision theory. Yet narrative approaches take his ideas a great deal further. They allow us to capture the relationship, or intertextuality, of theories of narrative, decision, and action. They illuminate how multiple, ongoing narratives contribute to sense making (Weick, 1995) and to its outcomes: decisions and actions. I demonstrate this

claim with a case study. My explication of this case shows that narrative methods provide not only explanatory power about the past but also well-founded speculation about the future actions of organizational actors.

Narrative and intertext also serve as the organizing principles of this article. First, I relate my own narrative, describing my relationship to and narrative production of the case as rendered in this article. Second, I describe the narrative recounted to me by the main protagonists of the case (all names are fictitious). Readers may refer to the appendices if they wish to see narratives in their original form (without authorial intervention). In essence, I employ a form of account analysis (Tompkins & Cheney, 1983) but with more explicit attention to story lines than to decision premises.

NARRATIVE ONE: AUTHOR OF THIS ARTICLE

The world of organizations is a giant garbage can for organizational researchers and theorists. In this section, I present the narratives that come together in a garbage can process to produce my opportunity for choice—in this case, the choice of how to represent the events described in this article.

I have taught managerial, interpersonal, and organizational communication in business schools for several years. My courses combine skill-building exercises with readings and assignments designed to heighten students' sensitivity to the context in which they communicate. I find that the combination of competent skill and context sensitivity produces a necessary strategic stance toward communication. Typically, in graduate classes during the last weeks of class, I have students write and present a "living case," preferably a real-time communication dilemma situated at a workplace. Hearing these presentations over the years has led me to conclude that successful communication depends more on context sensitivity, or ability to "read the situation," than on anything else—including "brute skill." Consistent with popular management literature and practice, context sensitivity also has much to do with emerging workplace initiatives such as intercultural communication, diver-

sity management, and teambuilding/teamwork. And surely no one would disagree that such sensitivity is essential for the “bread and butter” activities of management such as problem solving, decision making, and strategic planning. Consistent with garbage can decision theory, we may posit context as that which goes on prior to, during, and after the decision. If one is sufficiently sensitive to that context, one can speculate as to if, when, and how the opportunity for choice will emerge. I find the garbage can theory useful because students learn about it in their organizational behavior classes and can readily apply it to actual communication situations. The case study presented here gave me such an opportunity.

At the same time, with my doctoral training in linguistics and literature, I have faced the same frustrations as many others in finding a disciplinary and professional “home” in a business school (Shaw, 1993). My solution to this dilemma has been to publish works that connect communication and organization theories in order to leverage off of the legitimacy that organizational behavior (as a discipline) has accumulated within business schools. Although this legitimacy has been disputed (Pfeffer, 1993), one can clearly point to the political existence of organizational behavior as a discipline, along with tenure-track lines in the field, within business schools and the lack of the same on the part of management communication.

Another contributing narrative is primarily personal. A long-time, close friend of mine works for the company in question and has done so for almost 30 years. During our conversations, this friend has related many accounts of autocratic management, ethical abuses, and what I view as inhumane treatment of human beings. My students have similar accounts from their corporate lives, and so do I. Thus, when I heard about the actions of the protagonist of this case, I thought, “Three cheers.” And then when I heard about what happened afterward, I thought, “What can be done? Is it hopeless?” Since then, I teach this case every semester. I ask my students to face the limits they will encounter in organizations as they try to use their gifts and their sense of right and wrong and to make thoughtful, responsible decisions about those limits. In narrative terms, this means to help them write a “substantive story that

will sustain moral activity in a finite and limited world” (Hauerwas & Burrell, 1989, p. 159). I have designed my teaching philosophy around the cultivation of individual ethical reflection and action in the politicized organization. This situation mirrors my own as I have consistently encountered limits based on my gender (female), doctoral training (liberal arts), and current discipline (business communication) and done what I could to transcend them in accordance with my professional and personal ethics.

Finally, this is my third attempt to publish this article. Aiming to land a tenure-track position, I insert myself already into the “publish or perish” story line. In the previous two iterations of this article, I have observed my reviewers inject their own narratives into the garbage can of my narratives and my essay. I have read that I need to adopt more of an interpersonal communication focus, and I have read that I need to adopt more of a power-and-politics focus. I have unanimously heard that I must shed the pedagogical focus and that I need to fix my typos. The entire exercise of journal review plays out the garbage can process. More in line with my argument, this feedback tells me about the narrative of the readership of *Management Communication Quarterly*. This narrative seeks to position managerial communication in a more rigorous, scholarly way than I have been attacking my subject. Thus I am aware of my problems in “reading the context” of the issue at hand: sufficient intertwining of my and the readers’ narratives (as assessed by reviewers, proxies for the readership)—that is, acceptance of my article.

In the above paragraphs, communication and literary theorists will recognize the intertextuality of narratives that cross the personal and professional domains. In fact, these narratives are holographic of my entire article, because they illustrate my own garbage can process vis-à-vis this exercise of describing, analyzing, and publishing an account of what happened to Scott Porter.

NARRATIVE TWO: SCOTT PORTER

My friend, knowing my research interests, contacted me one day about a coworker named Scott Porter. My friend also shared Ap-

pendixes 1 and 2 with me and related Porter's actions and their consequences. Following my own narratives, I decided to contact Porter and to ask him for an interview. He graciously agreed. For a little over an hour, Porter talked virtually nonstop about the incident. I have a 20-page transcript of the conversation and recall that I didn't have to ask him very many questions. He seemed to enjoy the fact that someone was just listening to him. The following paragraph is based strictly on that conversation. Where I have not used direct quotations, I have paraphrased his words.

At the time of the incident, Scott Porter was a mid-level manager for a major defense manufacturer (referred to here as "Mega Defense Systems," or MDS). When I asked him to tell me about some of the events leading up to his writing of Appendix 1, he described a number of hardships on employees. For example, he mentioned the recession, layoffs, and reorganizations that left those remaining to wonder what they were supposed to do. He stated that amid the confusion about who was to do what, management sent contradictory signals about numbers to be let go, cutbacks in health benefits, and changes to retirement programs. In particular, he said, top management contradicted itself about early retirement. In July, representatives had said that there would be no special retirement package. But not long afterward came a letter announcing early retirement offers.

The letter basically offered cash compensation to get people to retire, and it said that anyone who didn't retire would be lucky to have a job. The attitude coming across . . . was a pitting of one group of people against the other. I was never happy with ever telling professional people that they were lucky to have a job. . . . The employee needs the company, and the company doesn't need the employee. That's not appropriate to tell anyone.

In addition, the annual raise was denied in favor of a lump-sum distribution. "I began to see all this as an assault on the basic salaried worker," said Porter. On top of all that, the board of directors approved an 80% bonus for the president. "Earnings were up and dividends were up. The top executives benefited from the work we had done, and we were being asked to sacrifice." Thus, Porter described his motivation in writing Appendix 1: "Enough's

enough.” In writing the letter, he said he faced two problems: he could make it too weak, and it would receive no attention due to lack of impact, or he could make it too strong and it would receive no attention due to excessive force. “I wrestled over that and guess failed because it was taken as a personal insult.” To mitigate against either excess, Scott showed the letter to several coworkers. In fact, he had eight cosigners to the letter but never distributed their names. “I’ll take the heat for this process,” he said.

After sending his letter, Porter expected to receive a phone call and an invitation to talk. Instead, the response came in the form of a letter. This letter advised him to have “a calm discussion with [Porter’s] management,” to acquire “better knowledge” of the company, and to reconsider his views. He was also advised that if these views remained unchanged, he would be well advised to write about the company’s leadership “from a position at an employer more in keeping with [his] theories.” Porter described his shock upon receiving Appendix 2 as the response to his letter:

I certainly expected the response to be a personal communication and an attempt to resolve the issues I raised. . . . The dynamics of how this has played out were so foreign to me that I could never have envisioned where this has gone. . . . After reading it was like recovering from shock for about 10 minutes. . . . I showed it to one of the people, another group engineer. He had the same reaction. I took the letter to my management, wondering what do I do now. I asked if this was the official company policy on reacting to criticism. I also showed the response to those who signed the concurrence and gave them copies of it.

Porter began to receive numerous voicemail messages from “various people who did and didn’t identify themselves.” Most were very supportive. His boss both agreed and disagreed with Porter’s letter but found the response to it “totally inappropriate.” He also had a meeting with the vice president of his division, who told him the response was “about as dumb as it could be, particularly from that level of management.” Porter described his activities during this time as gathering support from “people at high levels” who could help “carry my message forward. . . . I needed to enlist as much of management as I could to send the message back up to him that that wasn’t right.” Among Porter, his manager, and two

vice presidents, “everybody agreed that the response had damaged morale in the company. It sent a message that upper management did not care about the employees and that it distanced itself from them.” Finally, one of the vice presidents set up a meeting with himself, McLintock (who wrote the response), Porter’s boss, and Porter. During this meeting, McLintock stated that Porter’s letter had been inappropriate and threatening. However, according to Porter, McLintock did not apologize for the letter he himself wrote.

This is the chronological narrative I took away from my interview with Porter. After he recounted the events, I asked him to reflect on what had happened. In particular, I wanted to know how getting his MBA and being first in his graduating class had affected the situation or his handling of it. In the interview, Porter referred to management writers such as Henry Mintzberg, Lester Thurow, and W. Edward Deming. His letter made reference to McGregor’s X and Y types. Some of the rhetoric in the letter echoed the popular management books of the day on teamwork, participation, and empowerment. I reflected on my own MBA and the numerous cases we used that assigned substantial decision-making powers to us while our employers often treated us like children. I wondered if Porter’s predicament was to some extent precipitated by a disparity between the heroic role that the popular management literature and perhaps his MBA curriculum assigned to him and the trivial place he occupied in the grand scheme of things at his company. To my question, Porter answered that he had expected “greater credibility” based on his degree and standing but that his MBA had “no effect” on his code of ethics or values.

Taking up Porter’s multiple narratives based on my interview with him, I posit the following strands: (a) a professional ethic based on respect for the “basic salaried worker” (although his letter specifically identifies this worker as an engineer as well); moreover, this ethic is sufficiently strong that it self-authorizes Porter to speak out in the way he does; (b) a moral ethic of egalitarianism across hierarchical lines, particularly as regards economic rewards and sacrifices; (c) a system of values based on contemporary, popular views of management as espoused in MBA programs and a belief that it is possible to change his organization to better match

these values; and (d) a context of cutbacks, layoffs, reorganizations, and destabilized routines and feelings of frustration with them. It is noteworthy that narratives (a) and (b) preexist Porter's letter. As he said in the interview, "I would have had my criticisms regardless of my MBA education. The process certainly didn't change my sense of what's right and what's wrong." The letter also serves as an enactment (Weick 1979) of these narratives.

NARRATIVE THREE: TOP MANAGEMENT TEAM

Although Porter directed his letter to the president of the organization, he received his response from the senior vice president of human resources. According to Porter, the president had delegated the assignment to his direct report. However, Porter stated that the president had seen and approved the letter. For this reason, I unite the narratives of these two individuals. This is also partly due to their silence on the matter. When contacted not only by me but also by the newspapers, neither individual chose to make a statement. Several weeks after the matter was widely circulated in the organization, however, the company newsletter included an interview with McLintock, which obliquely referenced the incident (Appendix 8). Also, my interview with Porter contains an account of Porter's conversation with McLintock.

At the same time, we may interpret silence as a narrative. It is not an accident that McLintock stands silent as regards the substance of Porter's letter and also as regards his accounting of his reactions to it. Silence takes on symbolic status in this instance (Rosen, 1985; Rosen, 1988). Symbolic form is evocative and highly subject to interpretation (Dandridge, 1983; Todorov, 1982). But if we introduce organizational contexts, as we have in this case, we also introduce the constructs that accompany this context, or the context of that context: "actors, purposes, missions, plans, relationships, and so on" (Taylor, Cooren, Giroux, & Robichaud, 1996, p. 2). In this context, the function of symbolic form is to "objectify the process" and to "give the perception of stability to social relations" (Rosen, 1988, p. 469).

A symbolic interpretation (or narrative) of the two individuals' silence allows us to see the silence as accomplishing something important: order. Clearly, Porter has spoken "out of order." He has violated his place in the hierarchy of relationships, for he not only attempted to correct management but also assumed he had a real basis for doing so. And the response to that violation constitutes another violation. Specifically, toward the end of the interview, Porter implied that McLintock should have been fired for what he did: "I don't think McLintock belongs in that job." He mentioned his making that suggestion "to others" but not "to [McLintock's] face." Porter has committed hubris; he sought (and still does, as the case ends) to sit with the gods. The sin for hubris is expulsion. (Although the response is only a veiled threat, it was commonly interpreted as a real threat.) As the case ends (and ended in real life, for there was no resolution as Porter had hoped), divine corporate order stands protected. The silence of top management protects top management; more specifically, its standing apart verbally reflects and enacts its standing apart organizationally-politically. The message to Porter here is that he has no real basis for questioning management. He is not to be taken seriously.

Another way of interpreting the silence relates to Conrad's (1983) distinction between surface and deep structure. Porter's action is more than hubris, for it draws attention to the fact that the open-door policy of MDS applies strictly on the surface. The minute Porter attempts to have a genuine conversation, he encounters the deep structure; that is, he is beyond the level of what is taken for granted and consensually shared (Deetz & Kersten, 1983, p. 157). In this way, the conflict between Porter and McLintock manifests a conflict between rhetoric and reality. That is, the open door policy exists until it is contested; then it does not exist. The conflict exposes the more truthful rule of the organization. It renders unobtrusive controls (Perrow, 1986) obtrusive.

At the same time, we do have some verbal expressions from the president and from the senior vice president. Porter reported that, according to McLintock, the president "felt hurt" by what Scott said in his letter. Again, symbolically (as well as literally), McLintock's letter comes as a defense against Porter's attack (Watzlawick,

Beavin, & Jackson, 1967). An archetype in classical folklore and collective unconscious (Alderfer, 1988) is that of the knight who defends the lord or king, thereby proving not only his strength but also his loyalty. This in turn increases the fealty from the lord to the knight (Haidu, 1993). Once again, we do not see this symbolism rendered into literal form. Rather, I am placing this narrative into a rich tradition having to do with social relations—albeit relations transformed from feudal feudalism to “industrial feudalism” (Arnold, 1937, p. 205; Ghent, 1903; Scott & Hart, 1989, p. 29).

Another narrative at play in McLintock’s response is that of the chain of command, a classic tenet of management theory. McLintock advises Porter to have a “calm discussion” with his management. However, no basis is provided for the assumption that Porter’s immediate management has the answers to his questions. Here, form is more important than content. McLintock subscribes to the formal hierarchical view of communication and enforces this view in his letter to Porter.

NARRATIVE FOUR: ANONYMOUS RESPONSES TO THE RESPONSE

In my interview with Porter, he indicated that he knew of several anonymous letters that employees sent to McLintock. Many of these followed the same distribution channels as Porter’s and McLintock’s letters—that is, employees circulated them by photocopy and interdepartment mail throughout the organization. Porter shared some of these with me (Appendixes 3, 4, and 5). Appendix 3 takes the form of a satire, in effect giving up on the possibility of communication with top management. Referring to the elimination of the annual raise package, it advises employees to save more money. “This is what I myself would do if I were (God forbid) a low-life, gravy-sucking peon like you, living from paycheck to paycheck.” The memo advises,

The bottom line to all this is that we want to hold down costs as much as possible and increase profits as much as possible. The

easiest way to do this is to nail all of you little people to the wall. After all, what can you do about it? If you don't like it, try to get a job somewhere else. If we did something like reduce the pay of high-level people, then we would have to listen to their complaints, whereas you coolies have no access to me at all.

The line "try to get a job somewhere else" mirrors McLintock's threat to Porter but explicitly introduces the subtext of a downsizing period that made Porter's letter the political risk that it was. As this flurry of letters circulated throughout the company, a recession had hit California. This recession hit the defense industry particularly hard and made the difference between those with power (choice) and those without (necessity) more salient and more real. Also, because the case occurs in California, the reference to "coolies" is significant. This reference suggests the historical accounts of Chinese workers who served as slave labor in building the Western railways. It is also noteworthy to mention that the workforce in northern California is highly diverse; in particular, Asians occupy a significant percentage of jobs in high technology. The letter's satirical form belies a very serious truth or deep structure (Frost, 1987): McLintock can terminate Porter, and Porter may have nowhere else to go. Porter is a modern iteration of the "coolie."

Appendixes 3 and 4 address McLintock directly. Both comment on McLintock's lack of substantive response to Porter. Symbolically, they escalate the interaction between Porter and McLintock. They do not accept McLintock's silence and his enforcement of order. But in doing so, anonymity must be maintained to protect the powerless. In another symbolic sense, these letters do not allow McLintock the last word. They also join forces with Porter, identify him as "one of us," and indicate that his views represent those of his peers. The letters reflect and enact a counterculture within the organization. In this counterculture, Porter is a hero and he represents a large group. Both letters refer to the irony of an inhuman response from an officer of Human Resources. A deeply underlying narrative here is one of betrayal ("You chose to write a degrading and demoralizing letter which has offended the many people who have read it") and sin ("How can the head of Human Resources be so blind as to not see what is happening throughout the company?").

NARRATIVE 5: SIGNED RESPONSES TO THE LETTER

Porter provided me with copies of two signed responses to McLintock's letter (Appendixes 6 and 7). Appendix 6 responds to McLintock based on the narrative of Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI). This narrative posits empowered, committed employees and a democratic organizational environment. McLintock's letter undercuts the narrative of CQI that some mid-level managers are trying to put into place. The more important signal it sends, though, is the respect for the hierarchy. The author asks McLintock how he should respond to questions "about management's commitment to open communications." This enacts his mid-level status and also the immunity of McLintock to the CQI narrative. Appendix 7, however, adopts a more confrontational substance and tone. This is an unusual letter, because the author both identifies himself and escalates the conversation by criticizing McLintock for his response to Porter's critical letter.

NARRATIVE 6: MAJOR METROPOLITAN NEWSPAPERS (SOUTHERN AND NORTHERN CALIFORNIA)

Porter showed me two news articles about his case (Appendixes 9 and 10). These articles reflect two distinctly different readerships and sets of narratives. Appendix 9, from a southern California paper, embedded the account of Porter in a larger narrative about conflict between senior and junior employees. This newspaper account effaced all references Porter had made to ideological or philosophical differences. Rather, it highlighted the role of age in layoffs.

For now, the most obvious division among defense workers is generational. Porter's complaint was prompted by organizational changes that appeared to reduce job security and financial compensation for younger engineers even as salaries were increased for senior executives.

The article went on to mention how senior employees at another organization accused their management of unfair treatment relating

to layoff policies. The age narrative, in my opinion, relates to the population of Orange County, the principal county served by this particular newspaper. Generally speaking, Orange County residents are older and more politically conservative relative to the rest of southern California. The narrative represented by the newspaper account claims that layoffs provoke generational conflict—they pit older against younger workers. For the elderly and/or those approaching retirement, the topic of layoffs triggers the concern of age discrimination. However, the topic of layoffs can also mean protection for older employees due to seniority. The article attempts to answer these two polarized but coexisting narratives involving job loss to a population that financially and ideologically depends on its work.

Appendix 10 rewrites the Porter narrative in quite a different way. Here, I “fill in” based on my own long-time (10 years) following of this newspaper. This paper quoted extensively from Porter’s letter, giving him real “voice” in the article. It also quoted the most decisive portion of McLintock’s letter. The paper made the incident the central focus of the article. It also took sides with Porter against MDS management.

Mega Defense Systems (MDS), like many large corporations, has an “open-door” policy allowing the lowliest workers to air their woes with top executives. But an embarrassing gap between theory and practice recently surfaced at the defense contractor’s Doville headquarters.

This newspaper has long taken on the “gadfly” narrative in relationship to this company, at the time of the article the largest employer in the county. Many newspapers adopt this stance relative to powerful organizations (or they may take the opposite stance; few seem to be neutral relative to big business). In this narrative, the newspaper’s job is to keep big business honest—or at least to expose its shortcomings if not crimes.

REFLECTIONS ON THE CASE

As the focus has moved to each actor or set of actors, I have introduced several narratives that constitute them. For the most

part, these narratives preexist the garbage can decision scenario but certainly help constitute it. As an organizational researcher, I have a choice as to how to represent the Scott Porter case. Into this choice figure the narratives that constitute me in an ongoing fashion but that this opportunity (publishing an article) attracts into the can with particular force: professional and disciplinary status, target audience, private moral codes, and personal friendships, for example. Likewise, narratives that constitute Scott Porter in an ongoing fashion are made particularly salient for him in the face of two letters received from top management. He has just finished an MBA program, one in which he distinguished himself by finishing at the top of his class. Porter has gained new ideas about past, present, and future management techniques and philosophies. He refers to Theory X and Theory Y management techniques, which relate a narrative about the employment relationship between workers and managers and a particular way for the latter to manage that relationship. It is unlikely that Scott Porter knew this narrative before he attended business school. However, Porter also has a narrative that is distinctly personal in nature. This is revealed in his two different responses to the two letters that figure so prominently in this particular "plot." To a first letter, one from top management (a copy of which I was not able to obtain), announcing that lump-sum distributions would substitute for the annual raise package, Porter chose to respond with his own letter. To the second letter (McLintock's response), Porter communicated verbally to his peers (while also providing them with copies of McLintock's response). What accounts for the different decisions he made? In the interview, Porter explained that in writing to the company president, "I had a belief in what I thought they would do or would be proper for them to do." He adds that this is "why the rest of the dynamics played out much differently" than he ever expected. He explained further, "I was critical of management philosophy, but I didn't want to believe that it was true."

You say to yourself, "This is what I see, this is where I see actions leading, but I hope that's not the case, I hope I'm just mistaken." Unfortunately, the response confirmed my worst fear.

In other words, taking a symbolic approach, we can say that Porter had a story line about management that it would listen to him. This story line is commonly referred to as the "open door policy." Again, the events make evident the deep structure (Deetz & Kersten, 1983; Frost, 1987) of the "open door" organizational narrative. Porter learns the true meaning of the term ("true" here meaning that which corresponds to organizational action). That meaning revolves around form. As a matter of form, Porter may speak out to top management. This is the lesson of the media coverage. In Appendix 8, McLintock's statement to the company newsletter, he states that management will be "open and responsive" to questions from employees. However, from a substantive point of view, he remains (and has since remained) silent on the substantive issues raised by Porter. In narrative terms, we can say that MDS has a narrative about the meaning of open door policy. This narrative sounds inviting, but it is overwritten by a bureaucratic narrative that requires employees to obey the chain of command and respect their superiors. Alongside this narrative is a classic story line of the top executive in a large firm: sheltered hierarchically (via layers of middle management), physically (in a remote office), and financially (via bonus plans, golden parachutes, poison pills, etc.) Thus a narrative analysis shows the communication conflict as a product of intertwining and clashing narratives. For example, to the extent that Porter gives up on writing again to management, his personal narrative of MDS's open-door policy now matches that of top management. But to the extent that Porter keeps talking about what has happened, he writes a story line in stark deviation to management's attempt to silence him. Ironically, the end of Porter's conversation with McLintock initiates a widespread reification of the previously unremarkable narratives dividing top from middle management.

CONCLUSIONS

Decisions and actions are embedded in a context, meaning "a shifting intermeshing of the vagaries of demands on the lives of a whole array of actors" (March, 1981, p. 229). I have proposed that

we view this intermeshing as taking verbal—and specifically narrative—form and that we use methods of narrative analysis to study it (O'Connor, 1995, 1996). Organizational action may be explained through the construction and reconstruction of narrative forms and processes that are constantly at play in organizational life.

Organizational decisions and actions are “complex” processes. This rich word, from the Latin, means “interwoven” or “plaited together.” Organizational activity brings together narratives that are, as in Heidegger’s (1962) distinctive phrase, “always already” going on. For example, long before the interaction (and lack thereof) between Porter and McLintock, both actors produced narratives about their personal and professional ethics and about possibilities for upward and downward communication. The resulting actions escalated narrative production (Harré, 1993, p. 122)—producing more narratives that were more antagonistic (some MDS employees compared Porter and McLintock to David and Goliath—a classic example of intertextuality). Porter and McLintock are intertextually linked—but ironically, in a narrative with no possibilities for resolution. In an excellent example of what Martin (1992) calls “fragmentation,” Porter’s narrative in effect launches an organizational subculture: To this day, he serves as a kind of cult hero of middle management. His narrative remains alive in a continuing conversation about top management’s corruption and its immunity to access.

I close on two practical points. First, my argument signals an opportunity for organizational actors to be aware of the narratives that constitute them and those around them. These narratives set forth the limits and possibilities of intertextuality. Second, whereas this article takes a retrospective view of narrative (explaining how an event happened by unraveling the narratives that constituted it), one may also adopt a prospective view. That is, we can gain insight into future action by examining present narratives that bear on that action, or the story lines around the garbage can that has not yet been produced.

For example, a student of mine recently told me a story of a pivotal time at an organization where he was employed. He worked

for a resort during its preopening stages. Coincidentally, a neighboring resort had opened only recently and with disastrous results. Evidently chaos had reigned in an industry where first impressions count considerably: elevators didn't work, rooms weren't ready, attractions malfunctioned. As a result, employees of this yet-to-open resort experienced mounting anxiety as their opening day grew closer and closer. My student said that the day before the opening, the CEO convened a meeting of the entire resort staff and made a statement along the following lines:

We have all noticed the bad press about [other resort's] opening day. You can't help but feel the pressure. Despite our confidence and all that we've done to get ready for tomorrow, you can be sure that something will go wrong. But that's not what makes a bad opening day. It's how you deal with what goes wrong that makes the difference. Tomorrow, you will see people walking around looking lost. You'll be lost too. Instead of sitting there feeling insecure, walk up to our guests and introduce yourself. Say, "I'm new here too, but I'm going to do my best to help you out."

The CEO went on to narrate a story line that incorporated both lack of service (confusion, chaos) and service (initiative, friendliness). This narrative replaced the most recent narrative, one of disaster, which had captured employees' attention. I do not mean to imply that success is purely a matter of good storytelling (indeed, my student also informed me that his management had simply planned and executed the opening more diligently than the other resort, which had proceeded in great haste to "be first"). However, in replacing a poor-ending narrative about the past with a good-ending narrative about the future, the CEO helped change what was on the employees' minds. And, at least according to the account my student related, this speech put people at ease and contributed to a successful opening day.

Narratives offer a way to invent the future. The CEO in this example was no different from the author of a fictional text. In a way, he gave his audience a new story. Because he had also done material things (employee training, extensive equipment testing, etc.), his story was plausible and acceptable. It fit with the logic of appropriateness (Cyert & March, 1992). And with this new story

came a new actuality. Narrative analysis allows us to identify the narratives of the past that constitute our present and the foreshadowing that these narratives are for our future. To change this foreshadowing requires authorial intervention consistent with the possibility of intertextuality. This possibility is an interpretation made by a reader. Scott Porter misread, or perhaps he simply tested, top management narratives. He acted a second time based on a revised interpretation. Action and interpretation are intimately linked. Literary narratives do not allow this possibility. But in organizational life, one may intervene directly in the text to determine the limits and possibilities of intertext. Thus readers become writers and writers become readers of the narrative that is organizational action.

Above all, narrative approaches to organizational decision theory remind us that decision processes are “only partly—and often almost incidentally—concerned with making decisions” (March & Shapira, 1982, p. 105). Among other functions of decision processes, March and Olsen (1976, pp. 11-12) note the following: occasions for (a) “defining virtue and truth,” (b) “distributing glory or blame”; and (c) “exercising, challenging or reaffirming friendship or trust relationships, antagonisms, power or status relationships.” Decisions are rich phenomena of organizational life indeed, and narrative approaches offer an equally rich method of access to them.

Appendix 1

To: Lewis Parker

From: Scott Porter

Date: 13 August 1992

Subj: Recent Executive Decisions

The recent letters that you sent to all employees covering personnel forecasts, the Special Incentive Retirement Program (SIRP), and finally the salary merit and promotion funding signal a continuing troublesome trend in higher management policies. While stating that the programs being undertaken are to enhance our business outlook, the reality of the situation is that these steps are a continuation of the antiquated, short-sighted, short-term policies too often associated with American business. All employees are aware of the changing global dynamics, and the implications on the defense industry, but the actions taken by our top management do little to inspire confidence that MDS will be a viable entity in the long term, and contribute to a growing anger and resentment among rank and file workers, particularly younger ones. This letter serves notice that many employees are disturbed by your actions, and those of corporate leadership, and that continuation of such actions could aggravate a deteriorating morale.

My first level of concern involves the letter regarding the SIRP and personnel forecasts, along with the upcoming reorganization of our division. The shifting defense priorities and their impact on personnel requirements are understandable. What is difficult to understand is how we can justify sacrificing many of our junior engineers, while making few changes in upper echelons. This was reinforced through the organizational structure recently announced for division engineering. In an effort to reduce overhead costs, over 50 first line managers were changed from indirect to direct employees, essentially a demotion. At the same time, no change was made to the upper management structure that controlled them. We still have a vice president with a span of control of 3, with the next level of control being 5-10, and finally the last level of control being approximately 100-150. Such a skewed branching is questionable policy at best, leaving much of the responsibility for day to day management of organizations in the hands of group engineers and supervisors, while providing little budget to perform those tasks. The implications on possible layoffs is also clear. Since those 50+ people are now going to be direct

employees, they will be competing with the remaining direct employees for charge numbers. As layoffs start to occur, they will occur at the lowest levels first, meaning that once again, some of the few junior engineers remaining will be released simply because they lack the experience gained with time. While this might satisfy short-term sensibilities, it clearly is damaging for long-term business prospects. Finally, the letter of explanation regarding personnel and the SIRP left much to be desired in terms of style. It is simply egregious behavior to tell one segment of your employees that they will be awarded what amounts to significant cash contributions while at the same time telling the rest of your employees that they will be lucky to have a job. This reminds me of the outdated Theory X style of management in which employees are viewed as tools to be manipulated, coerced, or threatened. This combined with the merit pay announcement signals a situation in which younger, non-management employees are asked to make significant sacrifices, while employees that are older, or those in upper management reap significant monetary rewards.

This leads to the subject of the salary merit package for this year and the pay for performance methodology. While Pay-for-Performance is commendable as a theoretical concept, our implementation of that concept is significantly flawed. The inherent assumptions in the implementation such as linear, quantified values of employees, and the unfathomable linkage of pay for value, rank for retention, and salaried performance appraisal scores have given us a mechanization of Pay-for-Performance which has the potential for significantly unfair decisions. Attempts at the Supervisor level to modify the flawed ground rules in the system have not been successful. Consequently, the flaws in the system will be magnified during the situation in which we currently find ourselves. Given a shrinking dollar amount, many people who have provided good work to the company over the past year (and beyond) will go unrewarded for their efforts through no fault of their own. This will lead to good people seeking employment outside the company as their belief in top management wanes. While you may be counting on the sluggish economic times to protect you from the consequences of this decision, we will still lose those employees, primarily younger employees, whose skills are valued enough that they are able to find work elsewhere. This means that many of the best and the brightest talent which must form the nucleus for our long-term prospects will not be here, leading once again to a diminishing of our future outlook.

Finally, the decision to provide personnel not in upper management with a one-time "bonus" instead of a salary increase, while making no changes

in the pay for upper management, is one of the worst examples of arrogant, short-sighted, self-serving management that I have ever seen. If the corporation had had flat earnings, lowered dividends, and reduced compensation for upper management, and had then announced such a package, employees would have been accepting and even grudgingly supportive of such a move. But when MDS recently announced a 10% increase in profitability and a \$4 increase in the dividend, recently passed a stock option plan for more of upper management, and showed cash compensation increases for yourself and for [the President] (without mentioning stock options exercised) of 10% and 22% respectively (from 1990 to 1991), your calls for other employees to sacrifice rings especially hollow. To demonstrate the level of sacrifice, if instead of a bonus of 3% (\$30/week), the present value of the raise (assuming 5% interest rate) would be \$7000 for a 5-year annuity and nearly \$20,000 for a 20-year annuity. That would mean that an employee that is 35 would lose over \$18,000 in present dollars by having the bonus instead of the raise. When the corporation was going through the takeover battle with Mr. Simonsen, corporate management set up poison pills and golden parachutes to protect themselves. When that appeared insufficient, the ESOP was established and employees were asked to bail out our current leadership, which they did in record numbers. Now that rank and file employees are no longer needed to protect the positions of yourself, Mr. Parker, and the rest of our leadership, the attitude seems to be "How can we control everyone else's costs?" For top management to claim that they are trying to reduce overhead costs without reducing their own overhead structure, and to claim that they are trying to control salary rates while their own compensation skyrockets, is abhorrent and unethical.

As a stockholder, my pleasure at seeing an increase in the dividend (about \$80 a year on 1000 shares of stock) is tempered by my concern that MDS is practicing the same short-sighted earnings sheet approach to management that has hampered many other American corporations. As an employee, I am simply angry. As a student of business (having graduated first in my class from a local M.B.A. program), I am troubled by yet another example of management styles and philosophies born in the 1950's being propagated into the 1990's, a time when such philosophies clearly have no place.

Appendix 2

August 31, 1992

Dear Mr. Porter:

Your letter to Mr. Parker has been referred to me for consideration and response. In your letter you make a number of derogatory statements toward [our firm], American business, Mr. Parker, and MDS management in general.

Most of the premises and assumptions on which you base your attacks are wrong, and in general you display a lack of knowledge regarding our current business environment and Company strategy, which is a rather weak position from which to launch a personal attack on the President of the Company employing you.

I suggest that you have a calm discussion with your management as to what the Company is doing and the rationale for it. If, after getting a full explanation of the facts and circumstances, you still feel like writing about the "abhorrent and unethical" behavior of the Company's leadership, you probably will feel better doing so from a position at an employer more in keeping with your theories.

Very truly yours,

A. J. McLintock

Vice President

Human Resources

Appendix 3

From: Lewis Parker

Subj: 1992-1993 Salary Merit and Promotion Funding

In response to our competitive business environment, and our desire to make as much money as possible for the stockholders, we are taking a different approach to the distribution of our salary merit fund from the approach we have taken in the past. During this fund year, the merit amount will be calculated for an entire year and paid in a lump sum.

We (meaning me and the other high-level executives of MDS) realize that after you get your lump sum (if any), most of you will probably catch up with some bills or buy something with it. Of course, this will mean that for the rest of the year you will have to get by on the same money that you had last year. This is very foolish of you, as we feel that the proper thing to do would be to set this money aside in an account somewhere and take a certain portion of it out each week, so that it feels like a raise. This is what I myself would do if I were (God forbid) a low-life, gravy-sucking peon like you, living from paycheck to paycheck.

The bottom line to all of this is that we want to hold down costs as much as possible, and increase profits as much as possible. The easiest way to do that is to nail all of you little people to the wall. After all, what can you do about it? If you don't like it, try to get a job somewhere else. If we did something like hold down or reduce the pay of any high-level people, then we would have to listen to their complaints, whereas you coolies have no access to me at all.

In addition to this, just because you didn't get a pay rate increase doesn't mean that medical co-payments and other costs won't go up.

Have a nice day,

[wavy line]

Appendix 4

Dear Mr. McLintock:

I was outraged to read your response (dtd Aug 31, 1992) to Mr. Porter's letter concerning Recent Executive Decisions (dtd Aug 13, 1992). Mr. Porter's letter, in my opinion (and in the opinion of many others that I have discussed his letter with), did not make any "derogatory" statements at all. I think his letter was a well-defined and deliberated statement filled with intelligent and obvious "assumptions" (as you call it) that were brought about by sad but true facts. Your indolent and lackadaisical response appears to be no more than a sycophantic remark in order to preserve your own being and protect your superiors. By just telling Mr. Porter that most of his premises and assumptions are wrong, and that he displays a lack of knowledge of MDS's current business environment and Company strategy, is a complete cop out on your part and further illustrates your incompetence to fulfill your job.

Furthermore, I, unlike yourself, found that Mr. Porter is not the type of person that openly expresses discontent and resentment toward the company but is in fact a respected and talented engineer who is stacked highly within his department and has a lot of praise from his "immediate" management. You, on the other hand, have lost any respect you may have had from myself and from all the people within MDS who are now reading these letters. You are suppose to be the head of "Human Resources," yet in your letter you have threatened Mr. Porter with his job. How can the head of Human Resources be so blind as to not see what is happening throughout the company?

Name and address withheld for obvious reasons.

Appendix 5

17 September 1992

Mr. McLintock:

I am outraged at your response to S. W. Porter's letter to Lewis Parker. Although I do not personally know S. W. Porter, it was apparent that he had put considerable thought and effort into writing this letter. Your flippant and threatening response was completely out of line, especially considering your position in Human Resources. If you felt that he was misinformed of the facts, it would have been much more appropriate to give him specific information to counter them. Instead, you chose to write a degrading and demoralizing letter which has offended the many people who have read it.

I would also like to let you know that the letter written by S. W. Porter represents the feelings of many, many employees. Threatening S. W. Porter will not make this problem go away. In fact, your letter has only added fuel to the fire. Management should openly deal with the issues stated with all employees, instead of writing the sugar coated IDCs [inter-departmental communications] about the problems that MDS is facing and how well we are dealing with them, that we have received over the past few months. I hope your views are not representative of all MDS management, or the future of MDS is far more shaky than I had previously thought.

It is too bad that an employee at this company can no longer state his views without fear of reprisal.

Appendix 6

To: A. McLintock

From: J. Jameson

Re: Working Together for Improved Management Communications

Date: 24 September 1992

Mr. McLintock,

Doubtless you have been informed that a letter under your signature addressed to a Mr. Porter has achieved widespread distribution among the fellowship of MDS's employees. Because of my position teaching Continuous Improvement disciplines and consulting throughout the corporation, I am compelled to ask your guidance in addressing questions about our management communications.

On the 27th of August, Mr. Dave Martin [division VP] made himself available for two and a half hours to a small gathering of Manufacturing personnel to discuss the division's future and management's desire to promote open communication from the bottom to the top of the organization. Dave pointed out that the success of our recent restructure effort, in fact, depended upon open communication in order to achieve risk management and successful integration of our complex business structure. Dave's meeting with this group was a great success and did much to drive out fear and build trust in our management team and our future.

Your letter, on the other hand, is widely perceived as dismissive and threatening. It does much to undercut the diligent and responsible work of leaders like Dave. When asked again, as I certainly shall be, how do you suggest I respond to questions about management's commitment to open communications?

Anxious to help,

J. W. Jameson

Appendix 7

To: A. McLintock

From: G. Giorgio

Date: 24 September 1992

As a fellow member of the MDS team, I was appalled, embarrassed and disappointed at your response to S. W. Porter's letter of 13 Aug 1992. I felt Mr. Porter was sincerely expressing his concern for the potential detrimental effects of the recent management actions taken to increase MDS's competitive position, albeit in a direct and confrontive manner. Although you felt his letter was a derogatory attack on this company and its management, it was his assessment of reality from an employee and stockholder point of view. I believe your response is a clear example of how to repress communications, slam the door on MDS's "open door policy," instill fear of retribution in employees and further reduce morale. Your response runs contrary to every class I've taken and book I've read regarding how to effectively communicate. As an employee/stockholder, I found your response unacceptable and believe you owe Mr. Porter an apology.

I believe you should have provided those facts which clearly define where Mr. Porter is wrong, while positively thanking him for his concerns. For instance, was it not true that MDS announced a 10% increase in profits and a 4% increase in dividends? Or, has the company held the line on upper management compensation? Were Mr. Porter's numbers on the division restructure span of control incorrect? I would have acknowledged his facts and then provided the information which would have eliminated those wrong premises and assumptions. I also would have seen to it personally that Mr. Porter was informed on exactly what is MDS's current business environment and company strategy, rather than relegating this to his management.

I must agree with Mr. Porter's philosophical viewpoint which suggests that our corporate level officers apparently are not sharing equally (if at all, based on what I know) in these difficult economic times. And, I feel he makes a valid statement that MDS can expect to lose some of its brightest and younger talent if they believe they can be better compensated for these talents elsewhere.

I would encourage you to personally meet with Mr. Porter and be prepared to discuss at length his concerns. Since these letters are obviously now widely distributed, I feel it would also be appropriate for you to present the facts to the employees at large. Those to whom I have spoken seem to

support Mr. Porter's views, and they feel you have set "communications" back several years and badly hurt management's image.

Management and employees need to work together during these changing times to assure we have a healthy and profitable company in the future. Management decisions must be made with an understanding of employee interpretation and the long-term effects on securing new contracts and employee productivity. Aggressive, rash communications reflect a person's frustrations and concern for future employment, as well as the sometimes not so subtle messages which convey a sense that the system is flawed.

We must work together to build a company restructured for the future and convey with concrete evidence that we are all in this together, equally sharing in both the rewards and pain associated with a defense oriented company.

Appendix 8

[The following is the only public statement, as far as I know, made by Mr. McLintock with regard to the events described in this case. It appeared in the company newsletter.][Column entitled "Reply" and featuring an interview with McLintock covering a variety of companywide matters.]

Reply: Employees have expressed their concerns about a response you wrote to an employee's letter. As a result, some employees have questioned management's willingness to address criticism.

McLintock: A number of employees wrote to me criticizing my response as inappropriately strong. In my role, I am frequently criticized and I take that criticism seriously. I acknowledge the tone of my response was strong and tended to obscure the positive steps that we—employees and management together—have made in communications about company policy and practice. This one incident should not mar all of this progress. It was not my intention to stifle questions. I believe it is important for all of us in management to be open and responsive; this objective has been and will continue to be the center of MDS's employee communication and continuous improvement initiatives.

Appendix 9

Orange County Newspaper, November 10, 1992

**“Young vs. Old? Defense Layoffs Bring Conflict:
Mega Defense Systems Memo Shows One Side”**

On August 13, Scott Porter, a 35-year-old Mega Defense Systems (MDS) engineer, sat down at his office computer and began typing. Within minutes, he produced a two-page, single-spaced memo that has ignited an unusual debate at MDS and exposed sharp divisions among Southern California’s increasingly restive defense workers.

Writing to his boss, Lewis Parker, president of MDS, Porter accused the company of “arrogant, shortsighted . . . abhorrent and unethical” policies. Parker’s approach to running the supersecret company, he warned, was fueling a “growing anger and resentment among rank and file workers, particularly younger ones.”

What triggered Porter’s memo was a reorganization at MDS’s Doville unit that seemed to spare senior executives economic pain at the expense of younger employees. The memo was extraordinary for its target, as well as its tone.

The previously undisclosed flap provides a rare glimpse of the emotions unleashed by the historic changes buffeting the defense business. It also illuminates an emerging generational split among the industry’s employees. As pink slips pile up, defense workers express growing doubt that the economic pain is being equally shared. And some say what’s at stake is the human talent needed to develop the weapons for future Operation Desert Storms. “There’s a building animosity within the future players of this industry. . . . They’re going to be needed 10 years from now and they’re going to be gone,” said Rodney Stahl, an aerospace industry consultant with Aerospace Consulting, Inc., in Dallas. The MDS case—and the ongoing industrywide consolidation—illustrates for managers the danger of a misstep in handling a now edgy labor force.

In a stinging Aug. 31 reply to Porter, a Parker subordinate, A. J. McLintock, senior vice president for human resources, rebuked the 12-year MDS veteran for “a rather weak position from which to launch a personal attack on the president of the company employing you.” The letter ended with a thinly veiled hint that Porter should start looking for other work.

McLintock’s sharply worded missive has transformed one employee’s gripe into a cause celebre that has energized a large slice of MDS’s Doville

work force. Word of the blunt exchange, which was highly unusual in the cloistered aerospace world, spread quickly. Although some coworkers found Porter's language intemperate, the vast majority sympathized with his complaints. Over the next few weeks, a blizzard of memos critical of McLintock flew through the company.

"I believe you owe Mr. Porter an apology. . . . Our corporate level officers apparently are not sharing equally (if at all, based on what I know) in these difficult economic times," wrote Gerald Giorgio in a typical example.

Through a spokesman, McLintock declined to be interviewed.

But if the open dissent at MDS is unusual, the problem the company confronts is not. Every contractor is struggling to implement layoffs that dwarf any previous reductions.

For management, the challenge is twofold: to lay off the "right" employees and to maintain the morale of the workers that remain.

"Management is keenly aware of the morale problem and they don't know how to mitigate it. They've never had to do it before," said Stahl. "They know how to close plants, but management is frustrated in how to do this well."

For now, the most obvious division among defense workers is generational. Porter's complaint was prompted by organizational changes that appeared to reduce job security and financial compensation for younger engineers even as salaries were increased for senior executives, including MDS's chief executive and president.

At other companies, it is older workers who say they are being singled out unfairly. Hughes Aircraft Co. in Fullerton and Loral Corp. in Newport Beach face lawsuits alleging they have discriminated against older workers in laying off several thousand local employees.

Nicholas Betshner had worked for Loral Aeronutronic in Newport Beach for 10 years when he was laid off March 13. Betshner was 62 at the time. A 30-year-old coworker with less experience was retained. On September 25, Betshner sued Loral in Superior Court alleging that the company had a policy designed to eliminate employees over the age of 40.

"One fellow in my department was laid off before me with 20 years (experience). He went to the front office screaming his head off. The answer they gave him was he didn't know his job well enough—after 20 years," Betshner said.

Within weeks of being let go, Betshner learned that the supervisor who had laid him off had himself been let go after 25 years with the company. Loral officials declined comment. But the New York-based defense-electronics company isn't alone in receiving complaints. Hughes Aircraft

was sued in September by Gerald Velte, a Riverside man who accuses the company's Fullerton unit of laying him off while younger, less experienced workers were kept.

Hughes won't comment on specific cases. But Ted Westerman, Hughes senior vice president for human resources and administration, said seniority is not the only criterion managers consider in implementing layoffs. The demand for specific skills also weighs heavily in the decision, he said. Hughes has formed special review boards to preside over layoff deliberations. The boards are designed to ensure that any layoffs are applied fairly, says Westerman.

Appendix 10

Major Metropolitan Newspaper, Northern California
November 9, 1992

“MDS Worker’s Complaint Elicits Gruff Response: Firm Moves to Quell Furor Over Letter”

Mega Defense Systems (MDS), like many large corporations, has an “open-door” policy allowing the lowliest workers to air their woes with top executives.

But an embarrassing gap between theory and practice recently surfaced at the defense contractor’s Denville headquarters, causing controversy throughout the company and forcing a rare written response this week from top management.

It all started with Scott W. Porter, a 35-year-old missile guidance engineer. Upset by recent layoffs and cutbacks, Porter sent a long letter to MDS president Lewis Parker on August 13.

“The actions taken by our top management do little to inspire confidence” in MDS’s future and contribute to “a growing anger and resentment among rank and file workers, particularly younger ones,” Porter wrote.

A recent decision to give most workers a one-time bonus rather than a raise, he continued, “while making no changes in the pay for upper management, is one of the worst examples of arrogant, short-sighted, self-serving management that I have ever seen.

“For top management to claim that they are trying to reduce costs . . . while their own compensation skyrockets is abhorrent and unethical.”

Porter got an answer from A. J. McLintock, MDS senior vice president for human resources, in a terse, four-paragraph letter dated August 31.

“Most of the premises and assumptions on which you base your attacks are wrong,” McLintock wrote.

“I suggest that you have a calm discussion with your management,” he continued. “If, after getting a full explanation of the facts and circumstances, you still feel like writing about the ‘abhorrent and unethical’ behavior of the company’s leadership, you probably will feel better doing so from a position at an employer more in keeping with your theories.”

Porter, taken aback by the implied threat from McLintock, shared copies of the two letters with a few friends. Those friends sent copies to a few of their friends. And so on. And on.

Soon, the two letters were zipping by fax throughout MDS—with 16,800 local workers, the largest corporate employer in the area—and even reached facilities of parent MDS Consolidated Corp. in Florida and Texas. Some employees were outraged, and the talk got so out of hand that McLintock and Parker took the unusual step of commenting in this week's edition of a company newsletter.

McLintock, as part of an interview in the newsletter, said, "I acknowledge the tone of my response was strong. . . . It was not my intention to stifle questions."

Porter, meanwhile, finally got what he wanted—a face-to-face meeting with Parker last Friday, following a meeting with McLintock last month. Neither executive apologized for the tone of McLintock's reply. But, Porter said Wednesday, McLintock "told me he would not write the same letter again."

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Ellen S. O'Connor is currently affiliated with FX Palo Alto Laboratory, Inc. She formerly taught management communication at the College of Business, University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame, Indiana. Her research interests include the relationship of language, particularly narrative, to organizational action; the application of literary and linguistic methods of analysis to organizational studies; and histories of management and organization theory. Dr. O'Connor earned her Ph.D. from the University of Chicago. Her recent publications include "Telling Decisions: The Role of Narrative in Organizational Decision Making" (in Organizational Decision Making, ed. Z. Shapira, New York: Cambridge University Press) and "Lines of Authority: Readings of Foundational Texts on the Profession of Management" (Journal of Management History, vol. 2, no. 3). She has also published in Organization studies, Journal of Management Inquiry, and Journal of Management Education.