

## **‘The Costumes Don’t Do It for Me’: Obstacles to the Translation of “New” Management Ideas**

### **Abstract**

It has been argued that management support is important to successfully translate new management ideas into practice. Through focusing on the obstacles to the translation of a management guru text in a manufacturing organization, we point towards a far more uncertain situation. First, we explore the paradoxical situation of engaged managers undermining the implementation of new ideas. Second, we consider how attempts to use humour to aid translation may generate a variety of unintended employee translations. Third, we examine how the objects that management enlist to support translation can thwart change. It has been argued that ‘technological’ and ‘textual’ objects exercise agency through making humans act in intended ways. Into this mix, we add ‘cultural’ objects (in our case costumes) and argue that whilst they exercise agency, the outcomes they produce may hinder managerial designs.

**Keywords:** gurus, humour, management, objects, resistance, qualitative, subjectivity, translation.

### **Introduction**

The ideas of management gurus have been subject to considerable critical scrutiny (Collins, 2004,2008; Clark and Salaman, 1998; Cullen,2009; Jackson, 2001; Willmott,1993) but what is missing is a detailed empirical analysis of how they are ‘translated’ (see Czarniawska and Joerges,1996; Czarniawska and Sevon,1996; Morris and Lancaster,2006; Mueller and Whittle,2011) into practice. Translation is ‘an important concept for studying the flow of management concepts’ (Van Grinsven et al,2016:285). It is not merely a ‘linguistic term, but points both to movement and transformation’ (Sahlin and Wedlin,2008:224). Although it is well understood that concepts ‘are permanently translated when they travel through

populations' (Van Veen et al,2011:152), we know little about how this applies to guru texts in terms of whether translation aids or hinders implementation.

Before proceeding, it is necessary to explain what we mean by management guru. Huczynski (1993) distinguishes three types of guru - 'academic gurus' (e.g. Mintzberg), 'consultant gurus' (i.e. Tom Peters) and 'hero managers' (i.e. Bill Gates). It is the second which concerns us. We understand a management guru to imply a 'wide-ranging popularity and, by extension, influence among practitioners, consultants and academic audiences' (Jackson,2001:13). Although we distinguish gurus from large consultancies such as McKinsey & Co (see O'Mahoney and Sturdy,2015), it is important to acknowledge that gurus are also in the business of consultancy (e.g. Stephen Covey) and consultants sell guru ideas to managers (Huczynski,1993). In view of the increasingly 'porous boundaries' (Ferlie et al, 2016:186) between gurus, consultants and managers (see Sturdy et al,2014), we understand gurus to be indivisible from the promotion of new management ideas or management fashions. Like consultants, they are 'global knowledge diffusion agents' (Ferlie et al, 2016:198) and their importance is evident in the enormous sales they generate thereby touching millions of lives.

This article asks what are the obstacles to the translation of guru texts or more broadly management fashions? It is organised as follows. The next section introduces the theoretical foundations of the article. We then explain the ideas of Blanchard and Bowles (1998) - two neglected gurus before introducing our case study. Finally, we summarise our main contribution in a discussion and conclusion.

### **The Theory of Translation**

There are multiple approaches towards understanding translation (see O'Mahoney,2016; Van Grinsven et al,2016). Our approach shares much in common with both Scandinavian

Institutionalism (SI) (Czarniawska-Joerges and Sevon,1996; Sahlin and Wedlin,2008) and political perspectives (Van Grinsven et al,2016) on translation due to their focus on the construction of management fashions through *discursive* and *political* processes. It has been argued that ‘the potential of workers to resist the translations of managers and consultants is often ignored’ (O’Mahoney,2016:341) by SI and yet SI posits that ideas are ‘transformed’ as they are ‘transferred’ (Sahlin and Wedlin,2008:221-222) and so it allows for the possibility of resistance. Moreover, SI draws our attention to discourse and as the power exercised through discourse is not limited to any individual or group (Foucault,1979) this is another way in which SI provides the potential to analyse resistance.

It does need to be acknowledged, however, that due to the focus on language, discursive approaches (e.g. Kelemen,2000; Mueller and Whittle,2011; Wilhelm and Bort,2013) have tended to neglect the role that objects play during processes of translation. This was not Czarniawska and Sevon’s (1996:6-7) intention for they directed us towards Latour’s (1987) Actor Network Theory (ANT) and we follow their steer as a means to address this lacuna. O’Mahoney (2016) discusses the limitations of ANT’s explanatory powers but curiously he does so without referring to its great strength, which is that it urges us to focus on the role that humans *and* non-humans play during processes of translation.

This article draws on different theoretical traditions in the belief that this can generate a ‘richer understanding of translation’ (Van Grinsven et al,2016:284). Through focusing on a range of actors (gurus, managers and office floor workers) plus non-human actants (costumes), we contribute to knowledge because ‘previous research has focused mostly on executive managers or R&D departments’ (Radaelli and Sitton-Kent, 2016:1). A human-centric approach is not uncommon in the translation literature (see Reay et al,2013; Rolfsen et al,2014) hence scholars have attended to ‘linguistic practices’ (Mueller and Whittle,2011:187), management speak (Greatbatch and Clark,2005) and language

(Kelemen,2000). Indeed, a review of the literature has argued that ‘Translation theories argue that the transformation of new ideas ‘is in the hands of people’’ (Radaelli and Sitton-Kent,2016:1). In making this assertion the authors quote Johnson and Hagstrom (2005) who also adopt a human-centric approach arguing that ‘When we study translation processes we observe processes...[that]...all have the same type of participants: people’ (Johnson and Hagstrom,2005:382).

It is interesting that Johnson and Hagstrom (2005) purport to follow Latour (1986) whom they quote as saying ‘[T]he spread in time and space of anything...is in the hands of people’ (Latour,1986:267; quoted in Johnson and Hagstrom (2005:371)) because this only partially conveys what Latour meant by translation. Hence Latour (1986) argues that ‘In the translation model the study of society...moves from the study of the social...to a study of methods of association’ (Latour,1986:264), which means paying attention to both ‘social and non-social elements’ (Latour,1986:275). Translation then is not only concerned with ‘people’. The importance of objects has been neglected in accounts of translation (e.g. Ferlie et al,2016; Giroux,2006; Reay et al,2013; Rolfsen et al,2014) and this applies to the four translation approaches (institutional, rational, dramaturgical, political) that Van Grinsven et al (2016) outline. The above quote from Johnson and Hagstrom (2005) also implies a level of social determinism, which is inconsistent with Latour and so our non-managerial approach with its focus on multiple actors/actants combined with unintended consequences is distinctive in a number of ways.

To effect change in the intended way, guru texts ostensibly require a receptive management audience and a workforce that embraces the ideas. As we shall see, however, the obstacles to securing this are considerable. Although it has been argued that managers are not gullable (Sturdy, 2004) or ‘docile consumers’ (Clark and Salaman, 1998:146) of guru prescriptions it does not follow that managers will instigate change in a way that aids translation. As we shall

see, managers may seek to use objects (costumes) 'to coordinate and control' corporate cultures and employee subjectivity but objects may 'do things' (Ashcraft et al,2009:29) that are beyond the control of management. This is to recognise that the 'contours of material agency are never decisively known in advance' (Pickering,1993:564) and that objects or 'technologies exercise agency....through the things they do that users cannot completely or directly control' (Leonardi, 2011:148).

Although 'objects' have received considerable attention, the objects that are focused upon are often 'technological' - machines, tools, instruments (Latour,1987; Leonardi,2011) or textual - 'reports, contracts, memos, signs' (Cooren,2004:374), 'books, models and presentations' (Sahlin and Wedlin,2008:225). The role that 'cultural' objects such as costumes might play has received less attention. Research has highlighted that 'the mere presence' of texts 'makes a difference in organizational life, often triggering specific behaviours' (Cooren,2004:375) such as checklists that regulate pilots behaviour (Bazerman,1997) or work orders that activate what technicians do (Winsor,2000). Likewise, the weights attached to hotel keys can help to ensure that clients leave them in the reception area (Latour,1991) and so they have effects that control human behaviour. In contrast to such studies, our concern is to highlight that objects can have the opposite effect than that intended. Indeed, the agency of costumes is evident in our case in the unintended outcomes that flowed from their use. It has been argued that 'ideas are not only transformed, but also change objects and (human) actors they come into contact with' (Sturdy et al,2006:843) but, as we shall see, objects can also change how ideas and the humans who introduce them are understood. Moreover, they can also change those who are the target of change in unintended ways.

There is a limited literature that has focused on the role of management in relation to the translation of new management ideas. Greatbatch and Clark (2003) analysed how gurus such as Tom Peters and Gary Hamel, use 'humour' during their public lectures, which is

understood to play an important role in establishing and retaining ‘converts’ to their management theories (Greatbatch and Clark,2003:1517). This argument suggests that humour can be used to aid translation, which resonates with a ‘humour as a management resource’ approach (Butler,2013:2).

According to Grob et al (2015), those who are enthused by gurus performances ‘may not only act as carriers of ideas when they go back from an event to their organization, but may also shape other members attitudes’ (Grob et al,2015: 288). They continue ‘such a potentially significant area of influence has received scant attention in the present literature on management ideas’ (Grob et al,2015:288). Whilst we agree that managers may endeavour to shape other members attitudes (see also Latusek and Vlaar,2015: 225) we argue that in the process they may also undermine such shaping. This reflects the ‘interpretative viability’ of guru ideas, which ‘allows for the possibility of different interpretations and uses of a concept’ (Benders and Van Veen, 2001:39).

Grob et al (2015) suggested that audience members can respond to gurus in four ways, two are supportive and two critical. Due to the complexity of these responses, we cannot assume that managers will simply support guru prescriptions. Nevertheless, as the authors acknowledge, there are limits to their research because even if managers are ‘devoted’ to or ‘engaged’ by gurus and endeavour to use their ideas, we cannot read any further impact from this without investigating what happens once managers attempt to implement the ideas. This reflects that ‘front line practice’ (Reay et al,2013:966) and especially ‘frontline employees’, which ‘may have significant influence on the translation process, have not been subject to any systematic analysis of their role’ (Radaelli and Sitton-Kent,2016:2).

Another study that focuses on managers is Van Veen et al (2011), which explores a less well-known management fashion - Management And Labour New Style (MANS), which is unique

to the Netherlands. This ‘was developed, distributed and implemented by managers themselves’ (Van Veen et al,2011:154) and so the authors do not focus on how managers translate guru ideas. They elucidate the neglected ‘active role’ (Van Veen et al,2011:161) of managers in the management fashion process and emphasized the *constructive* role they play. A similar insight is provided by von Platen (2015) who found that supportive managers and consultants can assist the translation of ideas.

Likewise, Ferlie et al (2016) drawing on research in the British NHS pointed to the importance of ‘leadership and agency’ as a means to ‘mobilize management knowledge’ (op cit:197). Moreover, Reay et al (2013) attended to ‘actors’ (Reay et al,2013:988) and emphasised the ‘critical’ (Reay et al,2013:985) role of managers in transforming ideas [teamworking] into practice. Our study diverges from these accounts because we argue that managers’ attempts to engage with and translate gurus ideas can have a *destructive* impact on them. Our explanations for this point towards: (1) how managers translate ideas and seek to implement them, (2) how employees translate their translations, (3) the unintended consequences of using humour to aid translation and (4) the role of seemingly unimportant ‘cultural’ objects during processes of translation. Our insights contrast with Ferlie et al’s (2016) argument that ‘studies of the diffusion of management texts and knowledge...should concentrate on macro-level forces’ (Ferlie et al,2016:198) because such an approach may miss the equally important ‘micro-level’ dynamics that Mueller and Whittle (2011:189) argue is also missing from the literature. In the next section, we outline the ideas of two neglected management gurus that were implemented in our case study.

### **Blanchard and Bowles: Gung Ho!**

Ken Blanchard and Sheldon Bowles (1998) are the authors of *Gung Ho!*, which has sold more than 18 million copies worldwide. As Blanchard’s website states, he is the cofounder

and 'Chief Spiritual Officer' of The Ken Blanchard Companies, an international training and consulting firm. Gung Ho! is written as a narrative based on the observations of a wise Indian Grandfather who advocates that organizational cultures should be structured around three principles, which were developed by watching animals. In the foreword, Blanchard states that his books provide 'secrets to help people make work better' and specifically he views Gung Ho! as 'an inspirational story of how to energize and empower your people'. The ideas are to be applied so that 'you, your people, your customers, and your organization benefit'. Johnson and Hagstrom (2005) pointed out that the 'central implication' of a translation approach 'is that the 'message' is problematised; it can be interpreted in a number of ways, and can never be said to be imbued with a fixed, definitive meaning' (Johnson and Hagstrom,2005:367). This means that we can only interpret guru ideas and interpret how others do so 'as they travel through organizations' (Johnson and Hagstrom,2005:370). Indeed, 'in the translation approach the initial force does not count for more than any other' (Latour,1986:268) and so rather than dwelling on what Blanchard and Bowles *really* meant we focus on how their ideas were translated.

Gung Ho! begins with the 'Spirit of the Squirrel', which refers to how squirrels work hard collecting food for the winter. It is explained that they do this to survive and this makes their work 'worthwhile' (Blanchard and Bowles, 1998:34). Applying this principle, it is suggested that employees should be encouraged to understand 'why their work makes the world a better place' (Blanchard and Bowles,1998:35). Blanchard and Bowles (1998) advocate that the 'dignity of work' (Blanchard and Bowles,1998:45) and employee 'well being' (Blanchard and Bowles,1998:51) should come before profit, which is laudable. There is, however, no mention of shareholder demands, resistance, inequality, workers' rights or trade unions and

so the substance of their point can be questioned because they do not explain how employee well being can be made to come before profit.

The second principle of Gung Ho! is the 'Way of the Beaver', which derives from how beavers build their dams. It is argued that they do "what they do because they decide to. Not because they've been ordered to" (Blanchard and Bowles,1998:69). It is suggested that employees should also take responsibility for their work and to cultivate this, Blanchard and Bowles (1998) posit that managers must 'define the playing field and the rules of the game. Then you have to get off the field and let the players move the ball' (Blanchard and Bowles,1998:79). Although this evokes freedom and devolved responsibility, employees are only free and responsible, to the extent that they follow the rules set for them by management (see Willmott,1993). This contradiction could generate cynicism and mockery creating a potential obstacle to translation.

The 'Gift of the Goose' is the final principle, which refers to the honking sound geese make as they fly with each other. It is asserted that: 'They are cheering each other on' (Blanchard and Bowles,1998: 133), which is presented as the secret of 'teamwork'. In Gung Ho!, team members are said to live by this principle through morning 'huddles' which end with 'a victory yell' (Blanchard and Bowles,1998:93). They 'cheer' sales and distribute photographs of team members who do something well but one can anticipate that in different cultural contexts this could foster derision.

The three principles of Gung Ho! are offered as a means to change corporate cultures and to align employees and managers with teamwork, self-responsibility and the importance of work. At one level, it provides an engaging and seemingly harmless narrative that is

seductive in its frivolity. At another level, we can observe that it exemplifies the dangers outlined by guru critics (e.g. Cullen,2009; Willmott,1993) for it asks employees to embrace corporate demands and to understand them as their own.

In Blanchard's (1998) foreword, he explains that he 'started writing fun parables that told simple secrets' (Blanchard and Bowles, 1998:3). This emphasis on 'fun' suggests that Blanchard wanted to 'invite laughter' (Greatbatch and Clark,2002:17) from his audience. The narrative is told in an amusing way and, in this sense, the text attempts to secure a receptive managerial and employee audience. Humour is used to stimulate 'audience members to collectively empathise with' the gurus (Greatbatch and Clark,2002: 15) but, as humour is ambiguous (see Butler,2013; Collinson,1988, 2002; Grugalis,2002; Kenny and Euchler,2012; Rodrigues and Collinson,1995; Westwood and Johnston,2011), the ideas may not translate as intended. During a lecture or video, it may be possible for gurus to ensure that 'audience members laugh with the gurus, not at them' (Greatbatch and Clark,2002:11) but in everyday organizational life we argue that this is more problematic.

## **THE CASE STUDY**

The case study focuses on a global manufacturing organization and to maintain confidentiality the name of the organization and all of the respondents have been anonymised. Fireco (pseudonym) manufactures fire protection products for the construction industry. Its United Kingdom headquarters is in the South of England and the research presented here is part of a two and half year research project (January 2008 to December 2010) that involved 25, 2-hour interviews; thirty hours of observations of a range of meetings and documentary investigation. This particular case draws on formal interviews with 10 individuals including two team leaders, three engineers, four customer call centre employees

and an off-site inspection manager. The research also draws on informal interviews during invitations to lunch/coffee; observations of a customer call centre and five, one-hour, department meetings each attended by approximately ten people. The customer service team meeting, for instance, included two team leaders, seven customer service representatives, and one line manager. Observation of these meetings sought ‘to gather first-hand information about social processes in a “naturally occurring way”’ (Silverman, 1993:111). Fieldnotes (Van Maanen,1988) were written before, during and after interviews and during observations.

Access to documents enriched our understanding of the case especially the ‘Team Guide’, which is distributed to all new recruits and became the starting point for our analysis. It is 150 pages long and most of the information is displayed in symbols, diagrams and tables. The research therefore employed ‘an array of interpretive techniques’ so as ‘to describe, decode, translate, and otherwise come to terms with the meaning, not the frequency’ (Van Maanen, 1979:520) of events and issues as they emerged through the field research. We make no claim to representativeness in a positivist or quantitative sense because, for us, qualitative research reflects a concern to grasp a complex, fluid reality and so our representations are inevitably ‘partial’ (Clifford,1986).

Our interest in understanding how the ideas of management gurus are translated necessitated the use of qualitative research as it allows one to get closer to the complexity of everyday life. The specific focus of the paper emerged through conducting the research because we did not know in advance the gurus being used or the obstacles to translation. Recognition of the obstacles provided ‘the first step in translating experience...into the intellectual sphere...[whereby one]...gives it form’ (Mills, 1959). It became a guide to analysing interviews, documents and observations.

The early interviews with management were relatively unstructured and explored the organizational culture and culture change programme. Analysis of notes written during these interviews began immediately; key words were identified, expanded notes were written as ideas arose and connections were made. This was the first stage of the analysis that involved manually 'coding' (Emerson et al, 1995:146) the material. The transcribed tape-recorded interviews, observations and documentary materials were then analysed. This second stage of the analysis amounted to a 'fine-grained, line-by-line analysis' (op cit: 160) whereby one builds up and elaborates 'analytically interesting themes' (ibid). All references to gurus and potential obstacles to translation were extracted for the purposes of comparison and analysis. The following case study materials have been selected and ordered to illustrate the processes through which the ideas of Blanchard and Bowles (1998) were translated by management and employees.

### **The Culture Change Programme**

Fireco's culture change programme was initiated in 1984, when its Chairman introduced cultural seminars. Then in 2003, 'Culture Journey' workshops were introduced to establish a more direct link between individual behaviour and how individuals contribute to team and organization success. This coincided with the implementation of Blanchard and Bowles' (1998) Gung Ho! which was initiated by the Director of organizational development at Fireco - Micheal McDaniels (pseudonym). He arrived at the company in 1995 and tried to improve morale by shifting the focus from profit towards employee happiness (Leadership document, 2008). Concurrently, the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) was concerned with the company's high staff turnover and declining profitable growth. To begin to address these issues McDaniels eliminated all executive parking spaces, introduced customer satisfaction surveys and promoted the use of Gung Ho!. At that time he stated: 'Gung Ho the company and we'll see a turnaround' (press release). Gung Ho! took two years to fully implement in Fireco's

American Headquarters but its translation into the UK began when McDaniels attended a training session held by Blanchard and Bowles at Blanchard's global headquarters in San Diego, where attendees received a copy of 'Gung Ho'.

The translation of Gung Ho! included discussions with colleagues in other countries, including Germany, who adopted a corporate governance booklet, rather than a team guide. In the UK, Germany's approach was deemed to be 'a kind of do's and don't's', whereas in Fireco, 'it's more of a feel good factor here, a laugh, a different mindset with the fun and games and dressing up' (Emma, Sales Coordinator, fieldnotes). In this sense, 'task fun' (Plester et al,2015) was embedded in the way in which Gung Ho! was translated:

'the focus was on Gung Ho from the start but we have adapted and changed things to fit with our own company. Some of the stuff was foreign. Somebody else's model and trying to make it work in here wasn't going to happen. So we decided to make it our own, sit down and take the bits that we want (laughs) and kind of, you know, make it fit with what we are trying to achieve' (Emma, Sales Coordinator)

Bob (team leader) asserted that the culture change and the translation of Gung Ho! evolved together:

'The culture started on an individual level – the way people were paid, rewarded, prize giving, but we had to change this, it instigated too much competition. Teamwork is important to us and some of the original ideas rolled out from America, to Australia we adopted but we're British after all, aren't we (laughs) – it could be deemed a bit cheesy but we adopted it anyway'

Gung Ho! was implemented across approximately one hundred sites worldwide but given the scale of the organization, responsibility for local level implementation was devolved to the

different sites and this involved localised translations of the text. The use of Gung Ho! is explicit in Fireco and its team guide states that they ‘found inspiration’ (Team guide, 2004: 150) from these gurus. Fireco’s mission statement is displayed in the reception area of its UK Headquarters, which states its concern to ‘create a better tomorrow!’ and this resonates with the Spirit of the Squirrel, for it encourages employees to believe that ‘We do worthwhile work’ (Team guide, 2004: 17).

The other values advocated by Blanchard and Bowles (1998), such as teamwork and self-responsibility are initiated at the recruitment stage and so we can observe that Gung Ho! is part of an attempt to instil a particular way of life. Hence individuals are asked to provide examples of when they have utilised corporate values in their lives and this draws them into the process of translation. Sarah, a Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) officer, commented that ‘in my interview I was asked to describe situations which showed the core values, so where I showed courage, teamwork, commitment’. This attempt to align employee subjectivity with corporate values and behaviours prior to commencing employment evokes the fears of those who are critical of management gurus (e.g. Willmott,1993; Cullen,2009).

The ‘Gift of the Goose’ relates to teamwork and this value was translated through the team guide, which states that ‘We encourage each other and recognize results’ followed by a quote saying ‘Rain and sun are to the flower as praise and encouragement are to the human spirit’ (Team guide, 2004: 119). These sayings appear throughout the team guide and are part of an attempt to promote a particular culture. In the next section, we examine the subjectivity of employees, managers and customers of Fireco and indicate that for some the ideas met with a receptive audience.

### **Successfully Translating Gung Ho!**

There was evidence of managers and employees identifying with the corporate culture hence some viewed their jobs as 'worthwhile' in terms of 'making a difference' and 'saving lives' (Kim, sales co-ordinator). This is redolent of the Spirit of the Squirrel and Sarah (CSR officer) stated that: 'The worthwhile work principle really does matter to us and, you know, it's fundamental to our business and sort of symbolises every little thing we do'. We can see therefore that for some, Gung Ho! was embraced.

Melanie, an export manager, felt that her enthusiasm was at an all time high: 'I've been at Fireco for fourteen years and to still have such enthusiasm now shows something. I sometimes feel I'm living my life by it and there is a feeling of being empowered; I love it here'. Melanie's belief that she has been empowered is consistent with the Way of the Beaver and the need to take responsibility. Kim, a sales co-ordinator, expressed a similar subjectivity:

People have said to me that 'you are Fireco' as you represent fully the company's values. I think that once you embody it, you begin to love it (fieldnotes).

According to Kim, being identified with Fireco, reassured her that she was working effectively and that her actions in support of the company were recognised. The comments of Jack (sales manager) who is a customer of Fireco provide an indication of the spread of the ideas. He stated that he 'loves' reading 'guru management books' and we can observe that he has absorbed Gung Ho! through 'imitation' (Sahlin and Wedlin,2008:219):

they have this book, team guide it's called, have you seen it? Yeh, well, it's great, draws on all the top gurus. But their culture is specifically based on these two gurus, Ken Blanchard and Sheldon Bowles, who wrote a book about Gung Ho...absolutely

loved it...The gurus tell you exactly how it should be done...they say...have values associated with teamwork, and reward people when they've done well, get employees to focus on goals, and be autonomous in their work, so they remain interested and motivated....I wrote a strategy document based on it...I work closely with Fireco and this culture filters to our customers as well, so we're spreading Gung Ho, it's like guru mania (laughing).

Jack laughed when he referred to 'guru mania' indicating, perhaps, that this might seem incredulous to others nevertheless it implies an 'affinity' (Greatbatch and Clark,2002:11) with the gurus. It seems that Fireco's management, like the gurus, realise that these ideas are humorous, and expect employees to find them amusing and therefore engaging, which was evident when we spoke to Mick, a marketing manager:

Ken's principles of Gung Ho for instance, yeh, we were introduced to them and I learnt that the right culture is everything.....You have to be contributing to teamwork, you have to recruit the right people who are going to do worthwhile work, which is one of the Gung Ho points, and you also have to teach people self-responsibility. It's not a British thing to upset each other, but this is what the challenges are; we can't roll up like a hedgehog, we have to get out there and be acting like squirrels and beavers, and teach our employees to work together like geese. Oh sorry, do you have a clue what I'm talking about? (laughing). These are the animals Ken talks about, have you heard of them?'

'Laughter' is 'ambiguous' (Greatbatch and Clark,2002:14) and so Mick's laughter might be interpreted as reflecting the 'emptiness' (Westwood,2004: 780) of the ideas. Yet, it suggests

to us, that he is absorbed by the corporate culture. This section has indicated that for some managers, employees and customers the gurus' ideas had successfully translated becoming part of their way of life. These individuals appeared to be laughing *with* rather than *at* the gurus and they can be seen as 'fashion followers' (Sahlin and Wedlin,2008:222).

In the next two sections, we examine different translations of Gung Ho!. In particular, we focus on the ramifications of using costumes during training sessions as a means to promote the ideas to everyone in the company. In doing so, we go beyond analysing 'the discursive devices used by trainers to facilitate translation' (Mueller and Whittle,2011:188). The costumes were part of an endeavour to translate Gung Ho! in a way that would engage others but these objects had ambiguous and unintended consequences.

### **An Ambiguous Translation: Laughing at *and* with the Gurus**

To implement change, managers sought to translate Gung Ho! in a way that employees would embrace. During training sessions, trainers were required to dress up in costumes. The costumes were supposed to aid translation so if the training message was 'self-responsibility' then a beaver outfit was worn:

...he's [*beaver*] made of real stuff, you know, so it's dead animal skin and some people don't like it, you know, he's got a stuffed beaver on his head...some people don't like it because it's furry. But removing that away from it, I mean it's just a beaver, or an Indian Chief depending on what costume I'm wearing. It's at least manmade, although I think he might have some ears on his head (laughing) (Bob, team leader)

Bob appeared to see the funny side of the cultural intervention. He is part of its implementation and is responsible for training others and yet there is ambiguity because he also laughed *at* the costumes and stated that some people ‘don’t like’ them. Rather than simply being an ally of translation, the costumes can be understood as a potential enemy, which shows that the ‘temporally emergent’ (Pickering,1993:564) agency of materials (costumes) can undermine translation. As suggested above, theoretically the ideas underpinning Gung Ho! can be ridiculed. This potential increased through management’s use of costumes and this was apparent even for those responsible for implementing the ideas:

It started off in America and that’s where Blanchard and the gurus mainly originated from. But what they (management) don’t realise is that the use of the funny animals and stories, you know, don’t always work, cause it depends on the culture. In America, the gurus are a huge hit, huge amount of sales and the people think they’re fabulous but you bring that into England and nobody has ever heard of them. Management thought the guru inspired costume stuff could be multi-cultural, but we’re British (laughing, smirking) and to see people dressing up as an Indian Chief is just strange, yeah, really strange (laughing) (Bob, Team Leader).

Bob’s laughter can be interpreted as challenging or criticising the attempt to translate the guru’s ideas. He suggested that the cultural context [England] and national identities [British] work against translation. His laughter can be interpreted as challenging the translation even though, as a trainer, he is involved in imparting the ideas to others. Bob suggested that these objects (costumes) are culturally inappropriate, which implies that the agency of objects is different according to the culture they confront. They may serve management’s interests in the USA but not in Britain. In this sense, the costumes are not tools of management or ‘neutral carriers of will’ (Latour,1994:31) that do their bidding because the same object is

different in different contexts. As Bolton and Houlihan (2009: 561) recognised, the cultural context is important when discussing empirical evidence of fun at work, because the 'proud to work here and have a nice day' mentality is new to Europe. The comments of Kelly (sales co-ordinator) also pointed towards an ambiguous translation:

You take parts of Gung Ho into your home life, it kinda drifts in. The dressing up is hilarious and extreme in here, especially when Bob comes in with the Indian Chief outfit on and bells on his head! You hear him jingling before he enters the room (laughing). But it has definitely helped with my young son. He's five now and a bit of a handful, but we've actually got a similar costume to the one used here for us and we've replicated the training session with him. So, we use the costume to tell him that "Mr Beaver expects you to behave and be responsible at school, he's watching you" (laughing). I've spoken to other guys here and they've done the same with their children, some of the things can help to resolve problems, it's great, in a funny sort of way

Kelly indicated that the costumes are 'hilarious' but also 'extreme', which conveys a sense of ambiguity. On the one hand, describing them as extreme tends to 'distance' (Collinson, 1994) her from them but on the other she finds them hilarious. Moreover, despite being distant from the ideas they have nonetheless invaded her private life. This reveals both the ambiguity and the unintended consequences that such cultures and costumes can foster for they allow for mockery and distance but still the ideas can 'kinda drift' into employees' lives.

The use of costumes promoted ambiguous reactions and certainly the intention was not to foster distance or for employees to use them to discipline their children. The costume was 'different' (Latour,1994:33) depending on who was on the receiving end of them and

managers were ‘different’ (Latour,1994:33) in terms of how they were perceived with or without the costumes. It is apparent that even when managers are engaged and seek to engage others their endeavours to translate ideas can have ambiguous outcomes.

### **A Resistant Translation: Laughing *at* the Gurus**

In this section we explore how the managers translation and attempt to implement guru ideas, using costumes, fostered opposition. Resistance is apparent in the comments of Ross, a sales co-ordinator, who mocked (Collinson, 1988) the use of costumes:

The costumes don’t do it for me, the people look ridiculous in them and I’m not sure what message they’re meant to be getting over. We just take the Mick out of Bob when we’re down the pub with him, can’t help but tease him after he’s done a training session (laughing). How can we take him seriously when he’s standing in front of us with a furry beaver head on? (laughing).

In contrast to the above accounts, Ross appeared to be laughing *at* and not *with* the ideas of the gurus or at least the way they were translated and implemented. Although using costumes was meant to amuse, Ross’s laughter appeared to express ‘cynicism’ (Fleming and Spicer,2003) rather than identification with the corporate culture. Bob, the trainer, is clearly ‘different’ (Latour,1994:33) for Ross when he is wearing a costume such that he cannot ‘take him seriously’. It seems that for Ross the use of costumes to translate Gung Ho! worked against management. Even though management embraced the guru ideas, the costumes unintentionally erected problems. Phil, who is also a sales co-ordinator, also suggested that the costumes used in the training events were something to mock and criticise:

When the team leader dresses up in a costume, it's just well, plain embarrassing to watch and a bit patronising if you want the truth. There's this guy right, they call him 'Mr C' [short for customer] and we're told to 'Watch out for Mr C because he observes what your team is doing'. Mr C is gonna be sitting there and saying 'What you're doing boys is not good, it's not the right thing to do' (chuckling, wagging his finger). I feel that they treat us like kids, I mean who cares who Mr flipping C is, I don't and half of the people in this building don't. Whose idea was it to get people to wear a costume and dress up, and at a workplace, for goodness sake!

In the last section, Bob ended up laughing and similarly Ross and Phil both found humour in the dressing up, but by contrast, they were more cynical about the costumes and, by implication, the cultural programme. Phil indicated that when the team leader dons a costume he perceives it as 'patronising'. The use of 'Mr C' aims to inculcate a belief among employees that they are being watched by their customers and this reveals a more sinister side to the programme; the manifestation of panoptic self-surveillance (Foucault, 1977). Nevertheless, 'a tiny actor [the costume] becomes a macro actor' (Callon and Latour, 1981:296) in terms of toppling the intentions of management. Resistance through humour was evident when Phil stated in a sarcastic voice:

Under Gung Ho, we're told that we should be 'living the values' and how good it would be to have no rules and regs, just live by the values. Well, that's fine, but the values are told to us through the dressing up events. So maybe they want us to all come in dressed as an animal...ah, that's it, isn't it? (laughing and clicking his fingers). Now I know where I've been going wrong all of these years, I just need to get a beaver outfit on, sit at my desk in it and charm the customers. Then I'll stop being told off, excellent!

Phil explained that he was often told by colleagues that he was not 'embracing the culture', but despite this disciplinary peer-pressure he continued to resist through mocking

management's translation. The childishness of the costumes had unintended consequences as Matthew, a former team leader, explained:

There was such reluctance for people to volunteer to do this training thing, where you have to dress up I mean. They couldn't get enough people to do it. We had Craig, the recruiter, who told us that we would be expected to wear costumes...Well, the outfits were good, quite posh actually, but *it was the concept behind it*. You felt stupid, I hated drama at school and that is what it is. You have to be in role, play act to the whole organisation who then thinks you're an idiot. I know it was part of the job, but I felt silly, like a child and that's why I could only do it for so long, I had to pull out.

The costumes were described as 'good, quite posh' but when Matthew was required to act they became something that made him feel – stupid, an idiot, silly, a child. It led to 'disidentification' rather than 'identification' with the attempted translation (Fleming, 2005:296). The costumes, combined with acting, hindered ideas that might otherwise have been embraced. The intended culture without the costumes was different than the culture with the costumes. It was not only wearing costumes that irked Matthew but, as he said, 'it was the concept behind it' and this refers to the requirement to perform. Blanchard and Bowles (1998) suggest that individuals should align themselves with Gung Ho! and 'put on' their 'best face' (Blanchard and Bowles,1998:82). Yet this manipulation of self, through acting disturbed Matthew. He felt and resisted 'the infantilising effect of the programme' (Warren and Fineman, 2007:99), which he considered humiliating and he so withdrew from being a trainer. It is evident, therefore, that not everyone is willing to bring out 'their inner clown' (Bolton and Houlihan,2009:557).

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This article has explored obstacles to the way in which management guru ideas are translated and adapted into practice. Although scholars have focused on how management ideas are translated through ‘conversation’ (Mueller and Whittle,2011:195), our first contribution is to argue that the obstacles facing translation do not only relate to ‘linguistic elements’ (Mueller and Whittle,2011:204). This is because the objects (costumes) used by management to translate and implement guru ideas, proved problematic. Although authors have acknowledged that the ‘process’ of translation ‘is neither smooth nor linear’ (Justesen and Mouritsen,2009:985) these and other scholars (e.g. Morris and Lancaster,2007) have not considered how materials can undo translation. Likewise, Cooren’s (2004) focus on the agency of texts considered how this ‘enables the functioning of texts’ (Cooren,2004:378). Rather than facilitative or triggering intended actions, we have highlighted that ‘cultural’ objects can have an ambiguous impact and indeed generate opposition to the translation of ideas. Hence to effect change along the lines outlined by Gung Ho!, management used costumes but for some through ‘appropriating the agency’ (Cooren (2004:379) of costumes, management did not become ‘more powerful’ (Cooren,2004:379). Indeed, their capacity to enrol others was hindered and mobilised resistance in the form of cynicism.

The agency of costumes can be understood by considering a person with or without a costume. Putting on a costume changes the agency of the person. If we see someone wearing a beaver costume, perhaps in the street, it may make us smile whereas if we saw exactly the same person without a costume we are unlikely to do so. It is this agency that management sought to enlist in support of the ideas of Gung Ho! But the agency of the costumes in the context of a training session did not always support management designs. One has also to acknowledge that the national cultural context played a part in this because dressing up, even according to Bob, a trainer, seemed ‘strange’ in a UK context. One could speculate that the

cultural specificity of the costumes (beaver, Indian chief) is North American and so they are alien to the UK and the importance of the national context during translation has been noted elsewhere (Rolfsen et al,2014). The comments of Matthew suggest, however, that even had the costumes been more culturally specific (e.g. a fox, hound or befeater) the costumes would have remained disconcerting for some because dressing up and acting is alien to them, which one could argue also relates to national cultural differences. This is confirmed by our research findings as follow-up contacts with the company have indicated that the costumes [but not the culture change programme] have now been phased out in countries such as the UK where they were deemed to be culturally inappropriate and this suggests that resistance to the costumes must have been significant.

The inability of management to exercise power as intended derives, in part, from the agency of the costumes – they, in effect, provoked resistance to the intended translation. In this situation, the costumes exhibited an agency that in others contexts would be different and this requires further research in different contexts because the agency of objects is not separate from humans and how humans and objects interact will create its own peculiar dynamics. In our case, the costumes did not always act in the interests of management and this highlights that engaged managers are not always sufficient to ensure that ideas are translated into practice (e.g. Reay et al,2013) because objects can play an unpredictable role and may not always do their masters' bidding.

Translation therefore depends on human actors but also non-human actants that shape outcomes and being aware of the potential agency of objects to facilitate or hinder one's designs should foster greater caution on the part of those seeking to effect change. Object agency is different from human agency because, of course, costumes are not conscious and so do not know that they make people laugh, feel stupid, generate cynicism or love for a culture but this does not mean that they are without effect. A costume cannot intentionally resist but

it can lead others to. The agency of costumes is evident then if, in conjunction with the human beings who seek to use them, they provoke a change in subjectivity or actions in others. This case has highlighted that it is not only 'control' that 'emanates from' a 'chain of actors' (Cooren,2004:388) but also resistance.

Our second contribution relates to humour and translation. Humour has been largely neglected in relation to processes of translation and, as we have shown, this is an important omission because humour infuses processes of translation in ways that can both facilitate and thwart translation. Although it is well established that humour is ambiguous (Butler,2013; Collinson,1988, 2002; Grugalis,2002; Kenny and Euchler,2012; Rodrigues and Collinson,1995; Westwood and Johnston,2011) we do not know how this applies to translation. We have suggested three possible ambiguities. First, ambiguity in relation to the gurus text. Blanchard and Bowles (1998) sought to present their ideas in a humorous way by using a narrative which included different animals. The intention was for the audience to laugh *with* them and yet these seemingly harmless ideas are ambiguous because they could easily provoke audiences to laugh *at* them. Moreover, they are potentially dangerous because they promote employee self-discipline and 'infantilise' (Warren and Fineman, 2007) workers.

Second, there was ambiguity in management's attempt to use humour to translate and implement Gung Ho! Hence the use of costumes was meant to engage but for some it rendered the ideas ridiculous. The ideas became laughable in ways that neither the gurus nor management intended. Rather than an ally the costumes became an enemy tearing at management's intended translation. Hence even those who were charged with *implementing* Gung Ho! (Bob, a team leader) laughed when referring to the 'costumes'. This could be interpreted as laughing *with* the gurus and management in the sense that both the ideas and how management sought to translate them was regarded as amusing. Yet, this same individual who was responsible for training and enrolling others laughed *at* the ideas due to

their cultural inappropriateness ('but we're British') rendering translation ambiguous and problematic.

Finally, humour evoked an ambiguous response from the employees. It was evident that some laughed *with* the gurus and management whilst others distanced themselves from the corporate culture and mocked those responsible for implementing it. Matthew depicted the ideas as ridiculous and mustered an infantilising counter discourse to the official corporate culture. We can observe therefore that 'humour' may not always be 'central' to the 'effectiveness' (Greatbatch and Clark,2002:10) of gurus because it unfolds in unpredictable ways. This was evident when Phil's use of humour took on 'a more oppositional character' (Rodrigues and Collinson,1995:740), which is indicative of 'humour as a worker resistance approach' (Butler,2013:2). Similarly, an ethnographic study of Swedish meatpackers, found that humour can be used in the form of satire as an expression of 'systematic cynicism about the thinking and doing of management' (Stromberg and Karlsson, 2009: 633). Humour therefore enables employees to voice opposition and express frustrations with corporate cultures but another ambiguity is that this opposition can serve to 'reinforce the status quo' (Butler,2013:3) because it poses only a limited challenge to it (see Rodrigues and Collinson,1995:759).

Our third contribution has been to highlight that engaged management is not necessarily a solution to implementing guru prescriptions or more broadly translating management fashions as some research has suggested (Ferlie et al,2016; Nicolai and Dautwiz,2010; Van Veen et al,2011). This is because the translations of even engaged managers can have unintended consequences. We have highlighted how attempts to translate ideas using objects can have ambiguous outcomes and indeed spark opposition from those who managers are attempting to enrol. The role that objects play during the process of translating management fashions is an area that warrants far more research.

To conclude, critical accounts of management gurus offer dire warnings in terms of how their ideas subjugate employees. These accounts are not without substance but reveal only part of the story and neglect the uncertainties around translation. Whilst there have been empirical accounts into popular management ideas such as TQM and BPR, the link with specific gurus is rarely present. Likewise, focusing on how audiences respond to guru performances can only tell us so much because managers have to translate their ideas. As we have illustrated, even engaged managers can unwittingly undermine the ideas they seek to implement rendering seemingly unimportant objects such as ‘costumes’ significant and humour, a player, in terms of both facilitating and undermining translation.

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