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Who put the cult in culture?

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Abstract: *This paper subjects the management blockbuster 'Built to Last' (collins & Porras 1992) to paradigmic analysis through the medium of the Burrell & Morgan (1979) framework. The interest is to explore the extent to which such a popular text could equally appeal to both populist and evidence-based business academic audiences, and to explore how the authors' have engineered this dual appeal. The authors are explicit as to the research aims and research design underlying their inquiry, and are not reticent in making claims for the intellectual robustness and practical transferability of findings derived from their innovative research approach. This clarity of research purpose greatly facilitates the process of assessing the extent to which the authors satisfy their own criteria - an assessment which the authors themselves challenge the reader to engage with in their opening 'methods' chapter.*

I. Introduction

Criteria for choosing the text 'Built to Last' (Collins & Porras 1994)

I chose to critique the text 'Built to Last' (Collins & Porras 1995) for this paper principally because it is commonly cited as one of the very few business books that satisfies a wide practitioner audience in addition to it representing a management research and theory classic endorsed by many Business School academics. I was more than curious to critique a text that could equally appeal to such largely antithetical audiences, and to discover how it might have engineered this feat. A reinforcing reason for choosing this text was that the authors are explicit as to the research aims and research design underlying their inquiry, and are not reticent in making claims for the intellectual robustness and practical transferability of findings derived from their innovative research approach. This clarity of research purpose greatly facilitates the process of assessing the extent to which the authors satisfy their own criteria - an assessment which the authors themselves challenge the reader to engage with in their opening 'methods' chapter.

As I began to read I was initially impressed by this book, drawn towards its ambition, readability and the general air of confidence it exuded; suggesting that it contained answers to the fundamental management questions that are at the back of both executives and business academics minds. However as I progressed further in I was left uneasy and distrusting of its many sweeping claims to discoveries of timeless and universal management truths; for as the text gains momentum, so too does the advocacy intensify while the warrants for its associated claims fade into the proclamatory background. The structure of this paper commences with a brief summary of 'Built to Last' (1994), and from that point of departure it moves to assess its efficacy against criteria drawn from its own paradigmic frame of reference; and then to contrast that assessment of internal validity by viewing this text through the alternative research lens of Radical Structuralism. (Burrell & Morgan 1979).

Summary of 'Built to Last'.

Since its publication in 1994, 'Built to Last' has sold 3.5 million copies worldwide, has been translated into 16 languages, and spent five years on the 'Business Week' best seller list. It summarises the results of a six year study examining the underlying factors contributing to the success of 'visionary' companies. Visionary companies are defined by the authors as widely admired industry leaders with a long term track record of survival and growth for a period of more than one generation. The research question the authors ask is 'What has enabled some corporations to last so long, while other competitors in the same markets either struggle, or disappear after a short period of time?' The authors found that the chosen companies operated differently from the comparison companies; and that the differences were as much to do with the companies' cultures and processes as they were to do with how they responded to their external environment. (The characteristics of these 'visionary principles' are summarised in appendix 1). Central to these characteristics was the need for successful companies to develop 'cult-like cultures'.

Central to the survival of these visionary companies is adherence to a 'core ideology', and key to the preservation of this core ideology is the development of a 'cult like culture', which binds organisation members around that ideology. 'Built to Last' is nothing if not wide in its definition of its audience. The preface states that 'we believe that every CEO, manager, and entrepreneur in the world should read this book. So should every board member, consultant, investor, journalist, business student, and anybody else interested in the distinguishing characteristics of the worlds most enduring and successful corporations' (p 3). An interview with

co-author Jim Collins in *FastCompany* magazine (2008) notes that this publication ‘has turned Collins, a rock-climbing 46-year-old, into the Bill Clinton of the business world, a guy who gets stopped on the street and begged for advice (or an autograph) and who is a riveting speaker, pulling \$55,000 per session. "It never occurred to me that things would be this successful," says Collins. "It never occurred to me"’.

Built to Last is recognised by Huczynski (1996) as a product of the ‘Consultant Guru School’ (p48), its genesis lying within the ‘entrepreneurial period’ (p153) and sharing a clear lineage from Deal & Kennedy (1982) and Peters & Waterman’s (1982) ‘*In Search of Excellence*’, the ground breaking business best seller with which it shares a number of common characteristics. The first common feature of both texts lies in the breadth of their respective research projects, authored by highly reputable business school academics; the second lies in their encouragement of businesses to emulate the characteristics of their ‘winning’ corporations if they wish to be similarly successful; a third similarity is that since publication, the performance of both of the books’ ‘visionary’ companies have been monitored closely by business pundits to judge whether the ‘success’ principles had proved sustainable in business performance terms. And in the case of both publications such sustainability has proved embarrassingly fragile, to the point where vulture-like business commentators have suggested – somewhat gleefully – that inclusion in such a prophetic book becomes some kind of curse.

Positioning of ‘Built to Last’ with the ‘Functionalist’ research paradigm

Within the Burrell & Morgan (1979) sociological perspectives (appendix 2) I would classify the authors as aligning themselves strongly with the ‘functionalist’ paradigm, largely as they lay persistent claim to the power of the empirical data nested within their longitudinal study, gathered over a seven year period. Their introductory methods chapter is supported by a considerable collection of tables and ‘evidence’ in the extensive appendices. Further this intellectual project (Wallace & Poulson 2005) is clearly ‘instrumental’ in nature, in that it is designed to improve practice. This emphasis on practice necessarily drives the authors towards findings that are definitive and translatable into tangible action in the workplace. The other clue to their paradigmatic orientation is that they claim a degree of universalism in their findings. The principles driving visionary companies are claimed to be ‘timeless’; they can be applied to all places at all times, suggesting that they pass tests of both reliability and of generalisability. Further support for their functionalist credentials is reached for through their claim for continuous ‘member checking’ with respondents (p20); by emphasising the sheer weight of unabating popular validity, based on the millions of satisfied book-buying customers; and through persistent claims by their chosen ‘visionary’ companies that their continued success is due to their relentlessly following the ‘built to last’ principles that made them great in the first place.

Critique of ‘Built to Last’ as an exemplar of the functionalist approach – testing its internal validity.

Does ‘Built to Last’ succeed within its own terms, standing up to the scrutiny of functionalist criteria? At face validity level it would seem to qualify well, though on closer reading positivist claims become highly challengeable; for while the authors strain to demonstrate their functionalist credentials, for example by bringing to our attention the sheer volume of data collected – ‘filling three shoulder high filing cabinets, four bookshelves and twenty megabytes of computer storage space for financial analysis’ (Collins & Porras 1994 p 21) – the analytic process they pursue to elaborate the key principles of visionary companies appears suspiciously akin to a qualitative coding or sorting method rather than any working of hard numbers. This qualitative feel to their approach is mirrored in the narrative nature of the text itself, while some ‘reverse engineering’ of the findings confirms that a coding system has been used. While the methods chapter is silent on the use of any type of narrative or ethnographic inquiry, the body of the text is driven mainly by executive ‘tales from the field’. This ‘narrative turn’ would suggest that within the Burrell and Morgan (1979) framework, this text strays much further than the authors might like to admit into the category of ‘interpretism’, while still proudly strutting its empirical credentials to support its identification with a strongly managerialist stance.

If empirical reliability over time is the criteria for functionalist robustness, then ‘Built to Last’ runs into difficulty; because fifteen years after its publication almost half of the eighteen visionary companies on the list have significantly underperformed. Collins does not accept this as undermining the essential truth behind his ‘timeless’ findings. “For the most part, my experience has been that people haven’t gotten hung up on the list of companies. At least intelligent, practicing leaders haven’t gotten hung up on it.” (*Fortune 500* magazine 2008) He might claim that it is failure to conform to these principles that have caused these companies to demise; while a counter-argument would run that it could equally be that rigid compliance to an outmoded set of precepts has caused these leviathans to underperform.

It is salutary to note that attributed inclusion of an enterprise in this totemic best seller is a powerful form of stakeholder accreditation, acting as a source of business legitimacy which any of these ‘visionary’ companies would be loath to lose; hence these companies have a high investment in the perpetuation of this ‘built to last’ mythology. They are not neutral in their evaluation of the empirical soundness of this research, thus to claim their support does not necessarily mean that this validates the visionary principles.

In the face of this deep existential uncertainty regarding the soundness of the empirical foundations, it would seem that the fallback for both author and audience is adherence to the visionary principles as a matter of faith. In this moment of doubt, the principles appear do not evaporate but metamorphose into a type of Rorschach inkblot test, where the reader interprets whatever he or she might wish from within the visionary principles; or is guided by whatever the authors' latest fresh interpretation might be. Towards the conclusion of the latest edition, the authors dedicate a chapter to 'Research Issues' - such as 'correlation versus causes' - but in the end continue to be satisfied with the robustness of their findings, with the caveat that no social science project can ever 'be conducted in a Petri dish, nor any ultimate truth found'. (p23). I surmise that a window of opportunity for reflexivity was missed at this turning point in the unfolding empirical narrative - but then lack of self questioning would be entirely consistent with the confident, somewhat self regarding tone of this deeply modernist text.

Assessment of the text as an example of 'covert' narrative inquiry.

If this text is not in fact the hard nosed functionalist research it claims to be at all; but is instead an example of covert interpretism - a soft, touchy-feely sheep in wolfish positivist clothing - then how would it stand up as an example of narrative inquiry? While acknowledging that the qualitative research field is split on agreement on the standardisation and description of criteria - or even whether 'criteriology' should be indulged in at all (Sparkes) - then for the purposes of this exercise I judge that it is useful to adopt the synthesis of qualitative criteria developed by Speedy (2002) to assess the efficacy of this work. With regards to the criteria 'substantive contribution' to knowledge in the field, I find it difficult to make strong claims for this text, not least for the fact that its principal findings have been empirically undermined; though contribution could be claimed for the capturing of the 'lived experience' of those people who have made these companies great - while bearing in mind that these are the victors' stories, with contrarian voices selectively edited out. There are few tales of the fallen; only of corporations that temporarily stumble but then heroically resurrect themselves through adherence to the visionary principles. As far as 'impact' is concerned, then there is little doubt that the impact of this text has been considerable in leading and directing the management conversation across practitioner and academic population alike regarding the nature of visionary companies, and what might make them enduring. For 'aesthetic merit', this piece is judged to be highly readable; it is well shaped, artfully constructed and has the capacity to draw its apparently huge numbers of readers towards it - although we have no means of measuring the extent to which it is read, as opposed to serving as totemic shelf-ware.

It would be in evaluation against the criteria of 'participatory ethics', of 'transparency' and of 'reflexivity' that I would challenge this text's qualitative credentials. Ethically its functionalist nature may well intensify the 'crisis of representation' (Denzin & Lincoln 2005) with regard to the effective silencing of the voiceless majority that represent the employees and customers of these corporations. I would also construe ethical difficulty with claiming adherence to one research paradigm while largely following another. This paradigmatic duality could have been made transparent, to the benefit rather than the detriment of the text. However recognition that the trajectory of the research had departed quite some distance from its functionalist origins - which is unsurprising during the course of such a longitudinal study - would have required a capacity of reflexivity that remains in short supply throughout the construction of this book. While the authors 'signature' (Clandinin & Connelly 2000) is transparent - indeed vivid to the point of unignorability - the authorial role or position is rarely alluded to, let alone problematised. The need to advocate and to proselytise - which grows more strident as the book progresses - drives out any incipient reflective tendencies. In conclusion this text scores quite highly on a number of dimensions of qualitative inquiry; though crucially its ethics are questionable, to the extent that this text could be seen as an example of the unilateral appropriation of normatively based narrative practices for the covert fulfilment of functionalist purposes.

A possible psychodynamic interpretation

The enduring popularity of this text - despite its empirical base being badly holed - might be explained by reaching for psychodynamic interpretations of its function among its targeted audiences. One such interpretation would locate this text not as piece of research for understanding at all, but rather as a marketing artefact of the consulting industry, of which its authors are highly successful leaders and exemplars. Psychodynamic scholars claim that a primary purpose of the consulting industry lies in the generation of thought forms and of associated products that do much more than provide new tools and new ways of thinking about the world, which is the purported intention of much consulting practice. Their role instead is to reinforce the 'legitimation' of management itself, and of its historical and current practices. (Czarniawska- Joergas 1997). Associated with this requirement for legitimation, such products can also be interpreted as providing a comfort blanket, a 'transitional object' (Winnicott 1977) which offers executives solace, reassurance and a promise of certainty in a world which is hostile and ultimately unknowable.

Refracted through this psychodynamic lens, perhaps this text and all of its accompanying consultancy ritual serve as a denial of death; as a promise of immortality for the institution, and therefore at some implicit level for the individual. It offers management gospel as means of anxiety management; a projection of (unclaimable) certainty as a means of flight from complex political realities and power dynamics, on which the book is practically silent. Such a promissory emotional security comes at a price of course, which is the price of 'dependency', which Bion would identify as one of the primary 'basic assumption' issues underlying organisation dynamics. At this point the audience is dependent on the consultants / medicine men for a fundamentalist interpretation of their world which is duly provided by this biblical text complete with its twelve visionary commandments. The title of the text might convey a Derridian message suggesting that it is the text itself which is 'built to last', that it is this bible which is immortal, not the companies it surveys; and that the 'cult like culture' which has been created is none other than the cult of its gurus Collins and Porras, of which we the readers are pressurised and persuaded to become devout followers.

The sceptical reader may respond by saying that this psychodynamic interpretation is fanciful; and that even if it does contain a germ of truth then the reader might ask 'Well so what? Is this doing any real harm? If this book were not providing this managerial placebo then something else would. So good luck to the authors for cynically cashing in on this deep vein of managerial neediness. Maybe it is another brick in the wall but it is not doing any essential harm'. However a closer reading of the chapter on 'cult like cultures', viewed through a radical structuralist (Burrell & Morgan 1979) or through a 'critical management studies' lens might suggest that the moves that this text with regard to cults are deeply troubling.

Critique from a radical structuralist / critical management paradigm

The reason given for adopting the 'cult like culture' descriptor is that the authors noted that one of the characteristics of visionary companies is that of being a 'tight knit group or society'(p122), which, if you don't fit it, will 'eject you like a virus' (p122). They quote the founder of IBM, Thomas J Watson describing the environment at IBM as 'cult-like atmosphere.'(p122). After a brief literature search of cults that startlingly omits reference to the work of Robert Lifton (1963) - routinely regarded as the seminal voice in the analysis of the 'thought reform' that underpins the creation of cults - Collins & Porras (1994) land on the following definition; 'a cult is a body of persons characterised by great or excessive devotion to some person, idea or thing (which certainly describes many of the visionary companies).'(p122) This definition they describe as the 'most common definition', without indicating why that might be so, although this definition is surely so wide as to be meaningless, as it would include all mainstream religions, and many political parties, all of who would vigorously deny cult status.

Having posited a case for the 'cult like culture' descriptor, 'Built to Last' (1994) then works strenuously to qualify its meaning of cults, and to justify the terminology. 'Please don't misunderstand our point here. We're not saying that visionary companies are cults. But to merely say that visionary companies have a culture tells us nothing new or interesting.'(p123) 'Built to Last' strives to distinguish between extreme sects or cults who revolve around a charismatic leader, and visionary companies who 'tend to be cult-like around their ideologies.' (135). This qualifying statement is made after a number of case studies that explicitly focus on the inspirational qualities of early leaders such as Walt Disney in shaping the cult like adherence to core ideology, thus the authors attempts to take 'the leader out of cult' are unconvincing, undermined as they are by their own repeatedly enthusiastic accounts of heroic leadership. And while 'Built to Last' (1994) denies rhetorical charges of extremism it makes free use of the terms 'secret', 'indoctrination' and 'high control' when discussing cults, and would seem by inference to advocate the embracing of the such shadowy practices. They are however quite silent on the issue of preying upon the vulnerable, which Lifton (1963) would identify as a key characteristic of a cult.

Acknowledgement is made of the dangers of 'group- think' (p136), but assurance is given that stagnation will not threaten visionary companies, as the 'cult- like culture which preserves the core must be outweighed with a huge dose of stimulating progress.'(p136) Resistance as an issue is not explored as an issue; nor is any guidance given as to how to reconcile progress with dogmatism. Ever mindful of the risk of the text being contaminated by negative association with cults and group think phenomena, the authors seek to remind us that 'cult like culture is a 'descriptive, not a pejorative or prescriptive term'(p123); yet conclude in a prescriptive manner that 'those seeking an empowered or decentralised workforce should first impose a tight ideology, screen and indoctrinate people into that ideology, eject the viruses, and give those that remain the responsibility that comes with membership in an elite organisation.'(p138). In summarising the book, the language becomes more strident, where reference is made to 'the need to obliterate misalignments..... that promote behaviour inconsistent with the core ideology or that impede progress. Think of misalignments as cancer cells. It's best to get in there and cut them out before they spread too far.'(p238).

It is difficult to divine the rhetorical strategy behind the authorial cat and mouse game being played with this 'cult- like- culture' discourse. They cannot have failed to have known of Lifton's (1963) work on

criteria for 'thought reform' which would suggest a weak but none the less discernable correspondence between their advocacy and thought reform(see appendix 3), yet they fail to mention his thinking. They attempt to detune a stark totalising message around cults and 'group think' with unconvincing tales of taking the leaders out of cults, and inspiring innovation. So why invoke this cultish bogey man, when it might have been safer to have used less emotive and startling language to ease this particular Trojan horse into the managerialist discourse, by stealth and by subterfuge?

An explanation for this strange tactic might lie in the work of Gellner (1985) in his analysis of the successful psychoanalysis techniques included the inducement of 'tension' as a useful way of mobilising anxiety. Huczynski (1996) translates this idea of 'tension' as being engendered by management consultants through 'promise and threat. It provokes (in potential converts) an inner anxiety as evidence of its own authenticity. It provides some good reasons for doubting or fearing its truth' (p114). Or may it be that despite all of the reassurances designed to neuter this cultish threat, that the authors are issuing a subliminal warning, representative of Freudian leakage regarding the dangers of indoctrination within the corporate environment? On the other hand it could be interpreted as a powerful tacit legitimisation of the same, a giving of permission to leaders to treat their employees like vulnerable cult followers, and to expect devotion – perhaps to the point of mass suicide - from them in return.

If these interpretations are at any level accepted, then at this point this book ceases to be a piece of airport bookstall frippery and begins to assume more sinister overtones. Critical Management School theorists from the Labour Process School persuasion, drawing upon neo Marxist theory, would certainly see this text as confirmation of many of the symptomatic capitalist pathologies that they critique from within a 'radical structuralist' paradigm. For example 'Built to Last' advocates that 'tight ideological control can provide wide operating autonomy.'(p137). Willmott (1993) would see this as evidence of what he describes as 'double think contention' that 'autonomy can be realised in monoculture conditions that systematically constrain opportunities to wrestle with competing values standpoints.'(p515) Willmott addresses the tendency of corporate culturalism to 'replace bureaucratic frustrations and depersonalisation with autonomy,' (p527) without delivering to that promise. What is delivered instead is a 'colonising of the 'softer features' of organisation',(518) where labour is controlled through the shaping of identity and self consciousness. Corporate culturalism is perceived here as representing an incipient form of 'totalism'; a conclusion that I suspect Lifton would not deviate too far from either (Collins 1991).

II. Concluding Reflections

The exercise of stripping out this text has been proved full of learning for me. In the process of analysing the text through a variety of paradigmic lens, I found it fascinating to discover that the reasons for its enduring success were not in fact those commonly cited, but probably lie in a psychodynamic explanation that suggests that executives are highly vulnerable to dependency creating homilies disguised as robust empirical research. It was also interesting to develop the argument that a more sinister reading could suggest that the authors are taking agency – though not perhaps at a conscious level – for the continuation of the hegemony of capitalist power at the expense of the waged, among whom the management cadre would be included while acting as instruments of their own oppression. Though I am not fully convinced by the stark totality of the full blown critical management explanation, it is powerful enough to convince me that such texts are far from benign. As a 'recovering' consultant turned academic the reading of such a populist text has brought up a fair degree of cognitive dissonance for me, as I struggle to reconcile myself to the notion that much of my life's work on could be dismissed as smoke and mirrors if not something more sinister. The dissonance causes me to reflect deeply on the extent to which I have been an agent of oppressive managerialism masquerading as liberational culture development.

I would own to a degree of envy that such a transparently flawed text could prove so enduringly popular. Part of me would love to have authored such an influential book and to still be on the world tour fifteen years later. On the other hand there is a part of me that is really troubled by the extent to which I have audienced such blockbusters in the past, jumping on bandwagons with insufficient critical review. My analysis of the 'covert' interpretive method caused me to feel really unsettled as I found myself questioning the degree to which my interpretive research could be dismissed by the same inkblot test accusation that I level at the authors; I ask what in my frustration might I be unfairly projecting onto these authors here, rather than fronting up to my own doubts about the robustness of my method?

This exercise had assisted in clarifying my own ontological position as residing more strongly that I realised within the interpretivist paradigm, with some complementary overlap with the paradigms of radical humanism and radical structuralism. I find the strength of my affinity interesting, when I think that my early training as an economist was in unrelieved functionalism. With regard to concluding reflections on the efficacy of the Burrell and Morgan (1979) matrix as a frame to identify and contrast paradigms, I would judge that it served well, despite aspects of it being superseded by chronological developments in the research field,

including the emergence of post-structuralism. As for more recent revisionist thinking on Burrell and Morgan (1979) suggesting that the 'paradigm wars' have long since been over – and that differences in research approach can be best presently understood to be on a continuum rather than being in incommensurable opposition (Hatch & Cunliffe 2007) - this deconstruction has suggested to me that the tensions that exist between functionalism and radical structuralism remain extremely deep seated, and that it would remain no small matter to embark on a mixed method inquiry that could reconcile both approaches.

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