REPRESENTATIONS OF DIVERSITY AND ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE IN A NORTH AMERICAN UTILITY COMPANY

Using a sensemaking framework (Weick, 1995), combined with an organizational rules approach (Mills, 1988; Mills & Murgatroyd, 1991), this paper takes annual reports and company documents from a Canadian electrical company that underwent significant change between 1972-2001 to explain the ongoing nature of change and to analyze the gendering of organizational culture.

Introduction

Gender is a cultural phenomenon (Mackie, 1987; Oakley, 1972) whose re/production, is situated in a multitude of configurations of processes and practices. Arguably, it is the mediation of innumerable configurations that serve to construct dominant notions of womanhood and manhood (Rowbotham, 1973; 1999), which in turn influence the structure and maintenance of social institutions, such as the family and the hierarchical organization (Gutek, 1985; Ryan, 1979; Witz & Savage, 1992). Nonetheless, as a number of feminist scholars argue, there is likely to be variation in the degree to which gendered notions extend across organizational contexts, necessitating investigation of “local variation and uniqueness as well as broader cultural phenomena in the context of organizations” (Alvesson & Due Billing, 1997: 107).

Through the study of local contexts (e.g., individual organizations) we can gain insights into the generation and mediation of gendered understandings that may pinpoint strategies of resistance and change (Burrell, 1984). In that vein there have been a number of feminist studies of the relationship between gender and organizational culture (cf. Gherardi, 1995; Morgan, 1988; Wilson, 2002). Within the framework of feminist organizational culture analysis (Aaltio, Mills, & Helms Mills, 2002), this paper explores the re/production of gender in the culture of the principle operating subsidiary of Emera, a Canadian diversified energy and services company.

The subsidiary – Nova Scotia Power (NSP) – is interesting as a ‘site of gender construction and reconstruction’ (Burrell, 1984) and as a business operation whose influence stretch far beyond its organizational boundaries. It supplies 97% of the electricity needs of Nova Scotians and has a significant market share down the eastern sea board of the United States. This allows exploration, to some extent, of both the localized re/production of gender and its potential influence on wider communities through a focus on “ongoing sensemaking” within the organization (Weick, 1995) and the corporate imagery designed for external audiences, specifically the annual reports and internal corporate documents produced by NSPower (Benschop et al., 2002; Tinker & Neimark, 1987).
Using Weick’s “ongoing sensemaking” (Weick, 1995), it can be argued that one source of potential change is through “shocks” to the system, which serve to disrupt the established ways that things are done. In the case of NSPower, the company experienced a number of shocks. Since the mid-1980s they had a series of rapid leadership changes and they have also adopted a number of the latest change programs and strategies (Helms Mills, 2003; Kaplan & Norton, 1992; Kaplan & Norton, 2000; McShane, 2001). These changes, which used a technique that has become a significant aspect of corporate activities since the beginning of the 1980s (Abrahamson, 1996; Helms Mills, 2003; Jackson, 2001; Kieser, 1997), were aimed at changing the attitudes and beliefs of the workforce. Owing to the growing body of feminist scholarship that has been studying the impact of organizational change strategies on gender (Collinson, Knights, & Collinson, 1990; Fonds, 1997; Kerfoot & Knights, 1993; Morgan & Knights, 1991; Thomas & Davies, 2002), the changes at NSPower, and their reproduction in annual reports and corporate documents, are particularly interesting because they represent an important attempt to publicly construct an idealized image of the programme and its outcomes, which has implications for notions of gender and employment equity.

Methodology

Data for this study was collected by doing a content analysis of images and text in corporate documents and the annual reports of Emera and NSPower. A reconfigured sensemaking approach (Weick, 1995), which combines a rules perspective (Mills 1988; Mills and Murgatroyd, 1991) of organization culture, with Unger’s notion of formative contexts (1987) is used to show how sensemaking guided the enactment of certain rules, which contributed to the gendering of NSP’s culture and the creation of a certain identity construction for the men and women in the organization.

The focus of this study is on three main junctures in the history of NSP that were influenced by significant ‘shocks’ A juncture refers to “a concurrence of events which create a moment in time – a series of images, impressions, and experiences which act to give the appearance of a coherent whole and which influence how [an] organization is understood” (Mills & Ryan, 2001). The first juncture, 1972-1986, deals with the company prior to the introduction of a “Culture Change program”. The second, 1987-1992, is during the era of the culture change, when pay equity and diversity programmes were first introduced, and the third juncture, 1993-2001, is influenced by privatization, BPI, a serious of other changes that included Balanced Scorecard, and the restructuring of the company as a subsidiary of Emera.

Theoretical Framework

Organizational Rules and Culture

Using a rules perspective (Mills and Murgatroyd, 1991), organizational culture is viewed as representative of rules, which are expectations that are associated with the pursuit of organizational purposes. It is these rules that dominate organizational activity, and as such, reveals how gendered practices reflect the enactment of these rules by various organizational members. The process of organizational change, therefore, leads to the establishment of various formal and informal rules as managers attempt to establish ways of doing things and employees adjust, comply and/or resist organizational control. But a rules approach alone does not explain why organizational actors come to enact these rules (Helms Mills et al., 2000, 58). What is it that influences the meaning they bestow on certain events?
Sensemaking

If we want to understand and operationalize the gendering of the culture, we need to make sense of the sensemakers. For this, we turn to Weick’s (1995) sensemaking model and its seven properties. Starting with identity construction, the extraction of cues, plausibility and retrospection, we are able to get understanding of how different identities of the key players are constructed. For example, identity construction clarifies why certain cues are extracted by some but not others, how they come to be interpreted differently, why some events seem plausible to some and not to others, and how organizational rules are retrospectively made sense of by those involved. In short, the establishment of different identity constructions is important because it draws attention to the sensemaker, and shows how rules can be perceived as experiences that influence a gendered sense of self. As well, the ‘ongoing’ property of sensemaking explains how people construct social realities. As a series of reference points, this property helps to make sense of new events and deals with interruptions to current plans. In particular, ongoing sensemaking explains how gendered order is maintained, despite organizational ‘shocks’.

On its own, organizational sensemaking does not confront the issue of gender (Helms Mills & Mills, 2000) because it lacks a firm grounding in pre-existing structures and on-going activities and says little about the (gendered) contexts in which sensemaking occurs, beyond discussions of responses to on-going events. But overall, it provides a useful starting point in which to frame our understanding of ongoing activity. Sensemaking is useful in constructing meaning, placing items into frameworks, comprehending, redressing surprise, and interacting in pursuit of mutual understanding and patterning, which helps to provide further understanding of gendering of organizational culture (Helms Mills and Mills, 2000).

Reconfiguring Sensemaking

A partial explanation for the deficits in the sensemaking model can be found in the work of Unger (1987), who contextualizes sensemaking within formative contexts. Unger links activity at the local level with dominant social assumptions about the character of social life, which also helps to explain how people come to reproduce existing practices. He contends that ‘the origins of social arrangements lies in past social conflicts and the institutional and imaginative arrangements, which followed their resolution. [That such] “formative contexts” are deep seated and pragmatic in their effects on everyday life [and] provide an implicit model of how social life should be led’ (Blackler, 1992: 283).

A reconfigured notion of organizational sensemaking, therefore, combines sensemaking, rules and formative contexts (Helms Mills & Mills, 2000). Specifically, Mills' (1988; Mills et al., 1991) rules approach explains the layers of rules that provide the framework(s) within which organizational members made sense of events. Applied to organizational culture and change, this approach suggests that dominant rules act as a sensemaking framework that shapes the way key actors comprehend and interpret events. As well, the rules approach complements Weick’s model by explaining the context in which sensemaking occurs -- sensemaking does not simply arise out of individual experience but individual experience grounded in the context of a pre-existing set of
rules that, at the very least, constrain how a situation is viewed. Weick’s model, on the other hand, complements the rules theory by providing an explanation of the social psychological process by which rules come into being and how sense is made of them, which has been lacking in the Mills’ model to this point: a detailed discussion of this approach to sensemaking can be found in (Helms Mills, 2003; Helms Mills et al., 2000).

At an organizational level, this model helps to show how control, centered at the top levels of the organization, can result in the gendered enactment of organizational rules. At an individual level, this model is useful because it offers an explanation for acceptance or resistance to rules, based on formative contexts shaping the employees’ acceptance and understanding of these rules.

The History of Organizational Change at Nova Scotia Power

Emera (EMA-TSX) is a diversified energy and services company with 550,000 customers and $4.0 billion in assets. From Emera's "power base" in Nova Scotia, and in the production and distribution of electricity, the company has expanded both beyond its borders and into new energy businesses. NSPower, which is now its subsidiary, has evolved from a series of mergers of smaller electrical companies, during the past 80 years and is the focal point of this study.

The initial impetus for change at NSP came with the appointment, in 1983, of Louis Comeau as President. After meeting with employees and conducting an employee attitude survey, Comeau concluded that the mergers, amalgamations of various departments and the blending of different management styles had created a fragmented organization with conflicting organizational goals. This strengthened his resolve to find a way to unify the organization.

In 1988 NSP embarked on a process of “Culture Change.” It was a process that was influenced by a number of different factors. The political climate of the time, a change in company leadership, widespread expressions of low morale within the company, and the growing popularity of culture change programmes throughout the industry, all influenced the need for change (Helms Mills, 2003). So in the early part of 1988, the President, wanting to bridge a gap between employees and managers, which was attributed to the large numbers of engineers who held management positions and who were promoted based on technical rather than people skills, chose a consulting firm specializing in culture change to provide their expertise. The process began of ‘training’ managers and employees to build commitment around four key corporate values:

i) The province
ii) The employee
iii) The customer
iv) The environment

Over the next four years a new ‘humanized’ image of the company was reinforced through a series of practices, symbols, and slogans. By it’s own admission, the nature of the work its employees engaged in, and the make-up of its workforce, created a company that was male dominated and focused on task accomplishment (Nova Scotia Power Corporation, 1990). With the shift to a focus on ‘valuing’ employees employment equity practices began to receive serious attention. Yet, as the evidence indicates, the importance of women’s work (and that of other
identified groups) continued to be downplayed in corporate imagery and actions, while ‘masculine’ work received more prominence.

By 1991 several key developments were beginning to impact decision-making within the company, causing a major change in thinking. Canada had entered into a North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) with the United States that promised (or threatened) to open up a number of areas new to competition, including telecommunications, and electricity supply. In order to meet the demands of remaining effective in a highly competitive environment, the government of Nova Scotia, with firm support from the senior management of NSP, decided to privatize the company. The change took effect in 1992.

By 1993, senior management’s interest in efficiency had taken on a new sense of urgency and they turned to Ernst & Young (E&Y) to implement a Business Process Improvement (BPI) programme. They had little difficulty in convincing NSP’s senior management that re-engineering was the key to creating an effective organization and the plan that they put before them promised to streamline the organization, make it more productive, increase profits, and still maintain the integrity of the corporate culture.

However, the consultants had not been part of the culture change programme, so their sensemaking was informed by a different set of rules and within a different formative context (privatization). This lack of a shared meaning about the type of culture the organization was trying to maintain meant that overtime, the corporate values of the culture change became less important. Programmes, such as the employment equity programme were moved to the back burner and emphasis was placed on value added versus non-valued added jobs, rather than on a “valuing” of the employee.

**Results: Change and the Gendering of Culture**

**Juncture One: 1972-1986**

During the years prior to the appointment of Louis Comeau, women held few positions of power and their contribution to the running of the company was not evident in the annual reports. For example, between 1972 and 1986, 160 images of men appeared throughout the annual reports compared to 16 images of women. Of those images, only two were of visible minorities (See Table 1), and there were no apparent images of disabled employees.

There are 64 images of men in senior management positions, and in a range of tasks, including technical drawing, computing, union negotiation, construction, steel working, production, meter testing, transmission work, sales, safety instruction, and hydro work. The dominant symbols include suits (65 images mostly associated with senior management), and hard hats (60 images associated with various employees in construction work). One image shows a male scientific worker in a white coat. Until the end of the 1970s, when one women was imaged at a computer terminal (Nova Scotia Power Corporation, 1979), women are only imaged doing routine accounting (10 images) and filing (2 images). One woman of colour, whose image appears on two occasions, is shown engaged in routine accounting. During this whole period the only dominant symbol associated with women is that of office location. Male employees are generally shown as working in a variety of settings, including construction sites, plants, works, and offices. In 1979, the Board appointed its first female member, Barbara Walker, whose image appears in subsequent annual reports.
This lack of female representation is hardly surprising for a company that was considered, by the very nature of its work, to be masculine. Indeed, in these reports a central theme is construction, which is discussed at great length in the annual reports, as a matter of course. Not surprising, the word ‘construction’ was referenced more than any other word. This was closely followed by ‘safety’, which alluded to the dangerous nature of the job, and ‘engineering’, which was the primary occupation of most senior administrators. Of the ten appointed Directors and Officers of the company in 1972, five had engineering designations. And in 1976, little had changed. Three of the six officers, and seven of the 11 division managers, were still engineers.

Discussion of employees is largely confined to issues of training. The emphasis on training was placed on the development of skills and trades that were traditionally viewed as men’s work. The following excerpt is taken from the reports on ‘staffing’ during this period show where the company’s interests were:

Table 1: Diversity and Images of Employees in the Annual Reports of Nova Scotia Power, 1972-2001

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Annual Report</th>
<th>Number of male images</th>
<th>Number of female images (% of all images*)</th>
<th>Number of white images</th>
<th>Number of images of visible minorities (% of all images*)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1972-73</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1973-74</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>11</td>
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<tr>
<td>1974-75</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>8 (44%)</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>2 (12.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1975-76</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>4 (15%)</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1976-77</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1977-78</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1978-79</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1 (33%)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1983-84</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>2 (7%)</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1985-86</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>1 (5%)</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>1987-88</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>1 (8%)</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>1989-90</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>9 (20%)</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>1 (2.2%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>1990-91</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>3 (10%)</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991-92</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>4 (20%)</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>1 (5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>6 (16%)</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>3 (8%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>2 (9.5%)</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>5 (15.5%)</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2 (33%)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2 (18%)</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>2 (18%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>5 (20%)</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>1 (4%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>2 (15%)</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>1 (8%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>1 (8.3%)</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1 (9%)</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
“A particularly effective training project has been the Lineman Apprentice School, undertaken by the Corporation in association with the federal Department of Manpower, and the provincial Department of Labour and Education. During the year, approximately 160 apprentices were engaged in various stages of the four year program, an enrollment which will help forestall future staffing difficulties for our field operations” (Nova Scotia Power Corporation, 1973).

Implicitly, this type of training set the stage for men moving up the corporate ladder and women being left behind. The following excerpts confirm the unspoken assumption that supervisors must come from the trades or possess engineering degrees:

“A three-year supervisory training program was commenced during the year, emphasizing non-technical aspects of supervision. Approximately 120 supervisors received training in the first phase of the program, which included such subjects as labour relations, communication, management concepts, planning, organization, and control” (Nova Scotia Power Corporation, 1973).

“The company’s week long “live-in” courses at Truro respond to the need for continual training for middle management and supervisory staff: and yet another training program familiarizes recent engineering graduates with all phases of utility operation through on the job experience.” (Nova Scotia Power Corporation, 1974).

The masculine feel of the company was also referenced through the various images of electric grids (16 photographs), generating plants and stations (23 photographs), substations (6 photographs), construction sites (8 photographs), a mill (1 photograph), a helicopter (1 photograph), Head Office (1 photograph), rows of computer data (1 photograph), and a company shop (1 photograph). These 58 photographs represent just under 83% of all the individual photographs that appeared in the annual reports for the whole period. These photographs are in addition to those in which employees are imaged.

Juncture Two: 1987-1992

With the introduction of a program of culture change in 1987 the company was determined to reflect the changes throughout its public corporate documents and symbols. Yet, despite the focus on employees, no mention is made of employment equity and the annual report continued to present an image of the company as masculine. This is interesting in light of the fact that in 1984, a Canadian Royal Commission on Equity in Employment (the Abella Report) had argued that Crown Corporations needed to take a lead in addressing “systemic discrimination” (Abella, 1984) and the Employment Equity Act was passed in 1986. Still, at NSP, one of Canada’s leading Crown Corporations, the front cover of the 1988 annual report showed a photo of three men running an energy control centre. The three men are part of eleven men imaged, including two senior managers, three draughtsmen, a chemist, a leading meter reader and a customer advisor. The rest of the annual report continued to highlight “Construction and Generation” and “Engineering and Production”. Ultimately, a technical analyst is the only woman imaged.

It was not until 1991 that the issue of employment equity appeared in an annual report as “another program that’s grown out of the culture change” (Nova Scotia Power Corporation, 1991).
Corporation, 1991). The language, however, clearly referenced the Abella Report (1984) by talking about “employment equity”, “systemic” discrimination and the need for “an appropriate representation of females, visible minorities, disabled people, and aboriginal people”; four “designated groups” that the 1984 Abella Report focused on. The report goes on to state a commitment to ensuring that the “Corporation’s workforce [arrives at a point of] generally being representative of the diversity of the Nova Scotia population through diligent attention to employment equity practices” (Ibid.). As well, the President’s Report promised that the coming period at NSP would see “visible minorities [and] more women in management”. Nonetheless, the report images 26 men and only 3 women. The male images consisted of 23 senior managers and 3 engineers. The female images included the Director, Barbara Walker, and a line drawing of two women carrying pipes (presumably to show the potential of employment equity!).

The next year, in a report on the follow-up to equity initiatives, the Director of Employee Development highlighted how the promise to engage in employment equity had been operationalized:

“During fiscal 1991, aggressive steps were taken toward achieving Employment Equity at Nova Scotia Power: regular contact with target groups; discussing our plan at community events, schools, career fairs, and so on; educating employees and implementing five special employment programs. We regularly met with target groups to share information and promote Employment Equity at Nova Scotia Power. During this year, Nova Scotia Power attended five career fairs, and 26 speaking engagements at educational institutions to discuss the plan for our workforce. Nova Scotia Power is the host of a national YWCA pilot program, launched in November 1991. YW-NOW (New Options for Women) encourages women to enter Trades, Technology and Operations (TTO) jobs. The program’s initial information session drew more than 200 female employees. Already the numbers of women applying for TTO jobs at NSPC has increased. During the year, the Corporation began to promote the Job Share program. This program gives employees more flexibility to balance career and other commitments, for example parenting. There were 10 employees job sharing at Nova Scotia Power during 1991. (Nova Scotia Power Corporation, 1992).

The process was imaged, in part, through a single photograph that showed three female employees, including a woman of colour, listening to guest speakers from the ‘New Options for Women’ initiative. The remaining images consisted of 16 male senior managers and board members and one female board member.

In the 1992 annual report, reference was again made to the company’s commitment to its equity programme. An Employment Equity Advisory Committee had “been struck to set up workshops to educate managers and supervisors about biases and stereotypes in the workplace” (Nova Scotia Power Inc., 1993b). That year Barbara Walker completed her term on the board but female representation increased to two (of eleven board members). Later that year, Sherry Porter was appointed at Vice President of Public Affairs, and was one of eight executive officers. She was the first women ever to be appointed to the executive, yet was replaced only a year later by a male colleague.

Overall, during the period of the culture change (1987-92) men were imaged 120 times, women 23 times, and visible minorities 5 times. There were no apparent images of disabled employees. In purely percentage terms this marked an improvement in the imaging of women...
from 9 to 16% and of visible minorities from 1.1% to 3.5% of all images for a given juncture. In terms of the range of jobs imaged there was also some improvement. With the exception of one clerk-stenographer all other images were of women in professional or authoritative positions, including a board member (Barbara Walker), four members of a ‘Space Amenities Committee’ (SAC), a district customer service supervisor, a technical analyst, an environmental technician, and a biologist. There were no apparent images of disabled employees but visible minorities are imaged as a (female) member of the SAC, an unspecified (female) employee at a meeting, two images of a male “CADD II operator”, and one male post room employee. White men still dominated images of power and authority and a range of tasks deemed central to the company’s operation. These included senior managers (61 images), middle management and supervisors (6 images), draughtsmen (3 images), engineers (2 images), linesmen (4 images), transmission employees (3 images), a chemist, a “leading” meter reader, a customer advisor, a designer, a journeyman, and three men on a space amenities committee.

Thus, at one level the imaging of women and visible minorities represents an improvement over an earlier period. In part this may be due to specific efforts made in regard to the imaging of employment equity, but in part this may have reflected the changing times. At another level, the central subject remains the male figure who is in control. No longer is the dominant masculine archetype that of the engineer, whether he is in a suit or a hard hat. There was a shift in the notion of the ideal-typical (male) manager. According to the Director of Organization and Employee Development, existing managers had to change their approach, from primary task orientation to include people orientation:

“We have managers who have become very successful in their careers through their technical skills and track record of getting the task done. It’s hard for these people to accept the fact that they must now put an equal emphasis on their relationships with people. This forces them to learn and practice a whole new set of skills – interpersonal skills”(Nova Scotia Power Corporation, 1991).

Not unexpectedly there was resistance. A number of senior managers did find it hard to change their style. Even the HR Director who was in many ways committed to employment equity lamented the fact that ‘good men’ would lose out in the process and “that wasn’t fair” (personal interview). Those resisting employment equity began to find themselves isolated and may have continued to do so had the culture change, with its emphasis on “humanizing” the company, developed.

**Juncture Three: 1993-2001**

At the heart of the culture change era, a task force had been established to survey and review employee attitudes. It reported on May 19, 1993 and the recommendations reflected conflicted views on the issue of employment equity. Despite Comeau’s earlier acknowledgement that NSP was too often being referred to “as a construction company”, run by task oriented engineers (Nova Scotia Power Corporation, 1990), employees were expressing concern that employment equity might lead to the promotion of people from outside of the traditional areas of expertise:

“Employees feel strongly that supervisors should have relevant background and experience, particularly in the trades. They feel that this would encourage mutual trust and respect […] Prerequisites for the hiring of supervisors and managers must include a consistent track record of excellent people skills and a background relevant to the area being supervised. This information cold be obtained from

At the same time, it was recognized that employment and pay equity were important and timely issues that needed to be addressed; yet the interpretation of ‘employment equity’ reveals some problems in how it was being understood. In the following example, there is some suggestion that employment equity means (a) a lowering of job standards (to a minimal level), (b) that women and visible minorities are more likely to be hired for their demographic characteristics than their skills or abilities, and (c) that existing notions of qualifications are value-free:

“NSPI needs to educate all employees on its Employment Equity practices and philosophy. We feel key components of this process should include: 1) Having a workforce that is representative of our population, 2) That we make no secret of the fact that the most qualified person may not be hired but stress that minimum job standards will not be compromised, 3) Invest in the education of Nova Scotia minority groups to provide a future pool of talent” (Nova Scotia Power Inc., 1993a).

In the next example it is suggested that it is inequitable to improve the salaries of women where that disturbs “job relativities”. The implication here is that job relativities are not in themselves problematic and should be reviewed. Instead the task force recommends that pay inequities should be geared to existing job inequities:

“Employees suggested that morale would improve if the inequities caused by the implementation of pay equity were corrected. When pay equity was implemented, job relativities were thrown out of line and some inequities were created. Salary Administration is aware of the discrepancies and where some have occurred. NSPO should acknowledge the problem and correct the situation. The rule is equal pay for equal work.” (Nova Scotia Power Inc., 1993a).

In the meantime the company had started re-emphasizing the need to be more efficient and competitive. Annual report references to employment equity almost halved when comparing 1987-92 with 1993-1996 (see Helms Mills, 2003). The value of the ‘employee’ (including equity programmes) was downplayed, replaced by the need to be more focused on the customer and ‘competitiveness in a global market’. Between 1993 and 1998 most of the images in annual reports showed senior (male) managers, or (male) employees carrying out administrative duties and technical functions.

Images of men (113) continued to outrank those of women (20) and visible minorities (4). This meant no improvement in the already low imaging of visible minorities, a continuation of the non-existent imaging off the disabled, and a slight drop from 16% to 15.0% in the imaging of women. Visible minority employees are not imaged as playing leading or important roles in the company, being imaged as a (male) mechanic, two (female) customer service representatives, and a (female) customer relations officer. The image of women appears much better but it must be tempered by the fact that the majority of the senior management images are accounted for by just three women. Women are imaged as board members and senior management (9 images), an office supervisor, clerical workers (2 images), customer service representatives (2 images), a call centre “coach”, a customer relations officer, an operations planner, and a chemist. Male images remain unchanged as the centre of power and technical knowledge within the company. Seventy images are of senior managers, with the other images depicting male employees as mechanics,
operators, engineers, technicians, field planners, “linespersons”, business analysts, line inspectors, drivers, field engineers, customer advisors, clerical workers, and regional planners. As in earlier times, men are seen as controlling the board room, field and plant operations, while women are located in customer relations, some professional work, and to a limited extent in the board room.

Women did make some gains during this period. In 1995, a third woman, Irene d’Entrement, was elected to the Board of Directors, joining Parr-Johnston Scanlon, but in 1993 Sherry Porter, was replaced by Robbie Shaw as VP of Public Affairs, making the list of Officers for the company all male again. This did not change until 1997 when two women, Liz MacDonald and Anne Petley-Jones, were appointed as VP Human Resources and Chief Information Officer, respectively. In all, during the period between 1972-2001, NSP had a total of four women serving on the Board of Directors, compared to 34 men, with the highest percentage in 2000.

Comparing the re-engineering phase with the previous culture change era there is a definite change of focus and a shift from a strategy of employment equity, and the valuing and empowering of employees, to a strategy of attention to performance outcomes, customer service, competitiveness and related management and organizational styles. In 2000, the annual report stated that, “technical achievements have long been our strong suit” (Emera Inc., 2001). Both the annual reports of 2000 and 2001, verbally stress the importance of the technical and mechanical aspects of electrical production, while again downplaying the importance of the non-technical side, and reinforce this through the images of men in the ‘power of people’ section of the 2001 report. Indeed, if we look at the image of Emera in the 21st century we find a company not unlike NSP in the 1970s. Only two of 23 images are of women and there are no images of visible minorities and the disabled (see figure 1).

Discussion

There are a number of interesting assumptions that can be made from looking at the values that NSP espouses and how they make sense and enact them in the context of organizational rules and formative contexts. For example, by looking at their employment equity policy, we can see that NSP was initially ‘shocked’ into action by the employee attitude survey, and they took their ‘cue’ on how to address this issue from federally legislated guidelines that arose from the Abella Report. Thus, the senior management ‘invented’ a notion of how the organization should be configured and how this legislation should be implemented, according to their own formative contexts and identity construction. Following privatization, and after re-engineering, NSP was again ‘shocked’ into re-evaluating existing policies and strategies, and it seems as if the equity initiatives were downplayed. However, we do see that there is evidence of specific initiatives to promote women and people of colour, yet this isn’t always reflected in the company documents. Instead, if we look at the images, practices, and statistics in the annual reports, we might assume that NSP used a different interpretation of equity legislation, in deciding who to promote, and what equity means in terms of pay, training, and promotion. In other words, their actions appear to belie their words.

Collinson and Hearn (1994) suggest that different forms of masculinity emerge at various points in time, which have different outcomes for women. Thus, the formative contexts (or notions of masculinity), which have shaped both the identity and ongoing sensemaking of senior management at NSP have changed during each of the three timeframes because different archetypes of masculinity were introduced. We can see that the male archetype was changed to
reflect the strategic direction of the company during a particular timeframe, which then had implications for the representation of women in the annual reports.

For example, in the first juncture, the predominant image of masculinity was of ‘the engineer’, ‘the constructor’, or ‘the hard hat’. There were few women employed in the company, and those who were mostly held support jobs, such as clerical, or secretarial. Thus, the few images or references to women reflect them in these roles. During the second juncture, the focus on values, arising from the culture change, throws up images of community involvement and expanded democracy. During this phase, the ‘good manager’ was concerned with employees, the environment, the province, and the customer. This was not inconsistent with broadening the discussion to employment equity, but the years of being perceived of as a construction company had to be overcome and engineers and ‘hard hats’ had to be convinced to become team players. At this stage, employment equity, took back seat because of a struggle over the culture change and the building of a different kind of masculinity: the team player. The third juncture might have given employment equity a chance to resurface and work out, but privatization and re-engineering brought about another new masculinity. The images of dominance of the environment (i.e. globalization, competition, efficiency) certainly didn’t gel with images of employment equity, which were completely left out of the corporate reports at this stage.

Conclusion

An analysis of the corporate reports of NSP confirms that while NSP professed commitment to the principles of employment equity, the enactment of their policies was wholly dependent on how these were understood by those in positions of power (i.e. senior managers). Therefore, perceptions of masculinity, which changed according to the different strategies (i.e. change programmes) the company was employing, strongly influenced how the equity rules were enforced. From what happened at NSP, we can see that the development of equity programmes depends not only on legislation and policy, but also on sweeping cultural changes that create the climate for equity. These are changes that constantly need to be strived for and cannot be seen as reliant on “progress”. Employment equity needs to be viewed as a discursive practice whose “truths” need to be constantly reaffirmed through constant struggle.

References


