

8-6-2011

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Recommended Citation

McGowan, Rosemary A. PhD and Runte, Mary PhD, "Women Managers in High Tech: A Discursive Perspective" (2011). *AMCIS 2011 Proceedings - All Submissions*. 48.
http://aisel.aisnet.org/amcis2011_submissions/48

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Women Managers in High Tech: A Discursive Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This paper brings a discourse analytic perspective to an examination of the experiences of women managers working in the high tech sector. A detailed examination of the discursive descriptions of strategies, experiences, and advice reveals a tension between the use of unequivocal language for providing advice for managing everyday gender challenges encountered in the high tech workplace and the use of much more tempered language when trying to articulate an understanding for the basis of the issues and when discussing recommendations for change. The paper highlights the insights into gendered organizational experiences and understandings garnered through a close examination of organizational discourse.

Keywords

Women managers, discourse, gendered organizational practices

INTRODUCTION

Research suggests that significant labour shortages face the high tech sector both now and in the future (Canadian Coalition for Tomorrow's ICT Skills, 2010). Attracting and retaining women to this sector is one means of addressing this labour shortage yet women tend to be underrepresented in high tech (Cross and Linehan, 2006; Cukier, 2007; Orser, Riding, Dathan and Stanley, 2007; Tai and Sims, 2005). Attracting and retaining strong employees involves a complex set of factors, not the least of which is an organization's culture and how it supports (or doesn't!) the retention of valued employees. From a discursive perspective, organizational culture – the values, attitudes and assumptions of a group of individuals within the particular work unit (Daft and Armstrong, 2009) – is mediated through language and discursive practices (Alvesson, 2004). In recent years, discourse analysis and an organizational discourse perspective have emerged as innovative perspectives from which to explore the ways that organizations and organizational members use language (both oral and written) to develop understandings of organizational identities, structures, rules, processes, roles, and possibilities (Ainsworth and Hardy, 2004; Boden, 1994; Iedema and Wodak, 1999; Potter and Wetherell, 1987; Wood and Kroger, 2000).

Descriptive discourse analysis attempts to better understand how participants use language to construct identities and relationships and it involves the study of "language in use" in order "to identify regularities and patterns in language" (Nunan, 1993, p.7); a more critical perspective to the study of discourse "explore(s) the connection between everyday talk and the production of, maintenance of, and resistance to systems of power, inequality, and injustice" (Mumby and Clair, 1997). Critical discourse analysis facilitates an understanding of how "some organizational meanings become privileged, taken for granted and reified" (Hardy, 2001 cited in Grant, Hardy, Osrick, and Putnam, 2004, p. 16). As a perspective for studying gendered organizational processes, discourse analysis affords researchers an innovative microanalytic lens from which to examine the ways in which organizational members use language to create understandings, as well as resist or comply with traditional, frequently gendered norms.

This paper provides an examination of the discursive practices of women working in the high tech sector to provide insights into the ways in which the culture of the high tech work sector is gendered (or not) through everyday language and the challenges as well as (missed) opportunities facing women in the high tech sector. Bringing a discourse analytic perspective to an exploration of the high tech workplace culture facilitates an understanding of the ways in which these managers use discursive strategies to manage the day-to-day interactions in the workplace, and the ways in which those interactions sustain or resist gendered patterns of understanding and identities. This paper will identify issues that present opportunity to change versus those that seem concretized and less open to change.

SAMPLE

The textual samples reported here are actually part of a larger set of textual samples from depth interviews of 23 women holding managerial positions in three male-dominated occupational sectors – high tech, finance, and manufacturing. The data reported here are from a sample of seven women holding managerial level positions within high tech companies located in Ontario, Canada. At the time of the interviews, participants had between approximately three and twenty years of management experience in the high tech sector

METHOD

Interviewees participated in a semi-structured, depth interview lasting between 90 to 150 minutes. Participants were asked open ended questions including but not limited to: Tell me about some of your experiences as a manager; Are there some special challenges that you feel female managers face in your company/industry? ; Please describe a typical workday for me; What are the typical characteristics of an effective manager?; Suppose that I was a woman who was recently to a managerial position, what advice would you have for me for being an effective manager?

All interviews were tape recorded and subject to verbatim transcription using a modified version of Atkinson and Heritage's (1984) conversation analytic notation. A summary of the notation is footnoted below¹ Hesitations, false starts, laughter, emphasis, elongated tones, rising and falling intonations and non-verbal confirmations such as “uh huh” and “yeah” were among the qualities noted.

Descriptive and critical perspectives inform the analysis of the textual samples. The analytic approach used in the current study was drawn largely from the works of Edwards and Potter (1992), Potter and Wetherell (1987), and Wood and Kroger (2000). The first stage of analysis involved reading and re-reading the interview transcripts to identify emergent themes. Files of excerpts were created for each of the major themes. Based on this stage of analysis, four themes were identified: advice to women in high tech firms, emotional control, gendered elements of the high tech workplace, identity construction and negotiating boundaries, and sites of exclusion.

The next phase of the analysis involved a detailed and close reading of the excerpts to determine how participants used discursive processes to construct identities and to describe their situations. This form of discourse considers utterances at the word and sentence level to better understand what is conveyed about people's understandings of their organization and how those utterances are also informed by broader societal norms. Key phrases that were subject to more detailed analysis are boxed in the excerpts. The analysis used a number of discursive tools and practices which are briefly described in Appendix 1.

ANALYSIS

Advice to Women in High Tech Firms

When asked about their experiences, many women emphasized the need to be extremely well versed in the technical details and language of their field.

¹ CAPS = emphasis; ...hesitation; ↑ upwards intonation; <> “yes” and “uh huh” comments from interviewer; = and – were both interruptions

Anastasia² stated, “...going into high tech, you really have to know your stuff. know the acronyms, know the language...yeah, yeah, because you know you run up against a lot of people who...will...especially, if you’re in a leader-a leadership position...”[end of comment]

Anastasia’s use of the imperative you “really have to know” makes the case that the need for expertise and technical knowledge is an absolute requirement. The use of imperatives makes this unequivocal. The initial use of systematic vagueness (“stuff”) is a shorthand term for the range of knowledge needed. But realizing that the term “stuff” is too generic, she specifies what she means by “stuff” by explicitly identifying the central building blocks of organizational communication – discursive practices. As Anastasia suggests you have to know the language because “you run up against a lot of people who...will...especially, if you are in a leader-ship position...” It is implied, through the use of ellipsis, that women in a leadership role are subject to scrutiny and that women have to be constantly vigilant and knowing in their communications to avoid failure.

Another participant, Roxanne also emphasized the importance of knowing the language and technical terms of her work context:

And one of the things that I have a hard time with is I’m very visual and I often forget the name of the thingamabob and the whatchamacallit and being in such a technical space you have to know the language. So when I go into a meeting, especially with, you know, sales or a new project or whatever, I make sure that I look over all the names of everything, you know, cause I understand what I’m doing. I could draw a picture and I could write it but I need to be able to communicate it better.

Roxanne, like Anastasia in the previous quote, used an imperative “you have to know the language.” The imperative (“have to”) suggests that this is not negotiable for those working in this context. It is simply not enough to understand the technical components of the job, without having the technical language one’s capacity to be effective in this context may come into question. Roxanne specifically ties the need for specificity of language with the demands of the high tech sector when she characterizes the workplace as “being in such a technical space.” The term “technical space” serves to mark and construct this context as special and somewhat distinct from other contexts.

The need to do this is emphasized with the unequivocal phrase, a directive - “make sure” – and, in Roxanne’s case, she uses an extreme case formulation of “all the names of everything.” An extreme case formulation serves to emphasize the meeting preparation involves thorough preparation to facilitate confidence and credibility in exchanges with other organizational members. There is also the imperative of “need[ing]” to be able to communicate it better.” So, it is not a “want” but rather a need. Knowledge of technical language is not only a means of communicating, but for Anastasia and Roxanne, it is an unequivocal imperative to operating within this industry.

The use of the member checking phrase “you know” may reflect Roxanne’s desire to confirm the interviewer’s shared understanding of the need to know the language in order to be effective in this environment.

Emotional Control

Almost every manager interviewed discussed the need for emotional control in the workplace.

Roxanne prefaced her comments on emotional control with a lengthy description of how she has come to manage and present herself in the workplace.

² All participants names are pseudonyms.

When I was just starting out and it was, like long hours and you're really tired, and you know, so and so was like – they're really tired and they would just – and when you're in IT you're fixing people's problems, so usually when you get there they're not happy. (laugh) And if you're having problems fixing the problem they're even worse, you know.

Roxanne used a storytelling approach to articulate her understanding of the appropriateness and consequence of emotional displays in the workforce. Building up the context suggests that Roxanne had to justify the catalyst for the emotional display – in turn suggesting that emotional control is the desired state of affairs. As Weick (1995) suggests, storytelling is a means for participants to make sense of organizational practices and behaviours.

Roxanne recalled that, I remember one time, a couple of times when I'd have to go to the washroom and, like cry, then get myself together again and then go in again. Roxanne ramps up her recall of the number of incidences that she needed to exit the client interface from one time to a couple of times suggesting that this was likely not a singular event. Through the imperative "I'd have to" go to another area in order to cry, Roxanne clearly relegates emotional displays to a private, women's only area, and not one where males would be or could be present. The expression "go in again" connotes a sports metaphor of going back into the game; in this case emotions are relegated to the sidelines but to be in the game, one has to park emotions outside of everyday interactions.

Roxanne continued to say, "I don't think the male contingent understand tears, so you know, it's not part of their vocabulary and you're trying to speak their language. They don't know what to think of it so they think the worst or they could think the worst." The use of the tempered "trying" suggests that women expend energy to fit into existing norms and organizational cultural values – "you're trying to speak their language." The use of the marked case of "their language" also highlights that there are dominant discursive practices within organizations and they are gendered. Roxanne's comments also suggest that there are scripts for the management of emotions and those scripts are gendered. The firm declarative "not part of their vocabulary" clearly indicates that from this interviewee's perspective, men and women draw on different discursive resources in the workplace. The downside risk of emotional displays is that the men frame this behaviour in a way that puts women in a diminished or negative light.

Gendered Elements of the High Tech Workplace

According to many interviewees, managers have to demonstrate "strength" in order to be effective within high tech. According to Beth,

I think a good manager has to be strong. You know... if someone who is going to be emotional then, you know, there a certain level of, uh, uncertainty in the ranks. It is – there are times when it is highly emotional and we understand that, you know, managers can lose it at times because they're human as well but if you're managing, specially men and women and you're in a managerial role in IT you need to be strong.

Twice in this passage, Beth used the imperative of "has to" or "need to" be strong, particularly for those in IT and strength is marked by emotional control. This assertion was also tempered by the modality preface of "I think." So, while imperatives are used, there is some equivocality around this. Using the modality of hierarchy "I think" frames this as a personal opinion, rather than fact, suggesting some uncertainty regarding the understanding and necessity for this kind of behaviour.

Salary

Participants questioned whether some aspect of their understanding or experience was due to their gender such as whether gender difference in salary, for instance. As Laura stated,

[I think] I'm making a fairly good salary but I don't know, and I bet if I was to compare myself to the industry – I know one- like my colleagues Frederic is making more than I am with less responsibility. He was brought into the organization so I also recognize that when you have to pay for talent versus, you know, I'm going to say homegrown talent and things like that salary discrepancy but [I think] that's still a major issue on what's going on with salaries...that's another one where you just, you kind of shake your head over, but whether or not you're just satisfied because of...and are you really being paid – cause I wonder whether with this position too if I was a man in this position would I have gotten my salary – would that salary review have happened sooner?

The modality of uncertainty “I think” and the questioning tone of this excerpt belies Linda's uncertainty regarding the equity both in her salary and her salary review.

Identity Construction and Negotiating Boundaries

Many women commented on the challenges of managing the social side of the male-dominated high tech workplace as well as their perceived need to hide or mask their personal style and/or their women-ness, as one interviewee referred to it, in the workplace. Joan suggested that,

... I found with the [high tech companies, the software development companies], there's a social component in – I always felt a little weird in that environment because it's hard to know how to act and how to be, especially as a female manager.

Through the use of the marked case “high tech” and “software development” companies, Joan suggests that there is something unique about this environment that makes it difficult to know how to manage oneself. Use of the marked case suggests that this uncertainty is primarily limited to this particular context. The extreme case formulation “always” suggests that it is a problematic environment for Joan. The uncertainty regarding expectations suggests that the rules for engagement in this context are not well understood.

Managing boundary issues was detailed in Maureen's description of challenges with respect to everyday choices:

I was working for a software development company, actually when I was managing the two guys that worked for me, and you know, [I had to really think] well how can I be professional, work in a [male environment] and still be feminine and not invite unwanted attention? I remember my sister once telling me, giving me a picture of my nephew. She said put this on your desk and they'll think that they're your kids. (laugh)

For Maureen, there was a tension between femininity and professionalism. Her use of storytelling and detail suggests an attempt to create an understanding for the interviewer for the choices made (e.g., the photograph of her nephew). The conscious effort committed to constructing identity is marked by the declarative “I had to really think” with respect to the construction of her identity as a professional. The software development company is also clearly demarcated as a gendered place with the use of the phrase “male environment.” The recommendation of placing pictures of children on the desk was a strategy to keep her “safe from unwanted attention” as Maureen described it earlier in the interview.

Sites of Exclusion

Many women described meetings and activities that they were not involved in. Carolyn shared the following experience,

It was one of my earliest managers who was female. When we sat down one year at the end of the year to do my review and what my goals were for next year she wrote down that [I had to learn how to play golf]. <Mm-hmm> Cause she had the savvy to say that [if I wanted to get ahead and if I wanted to do things I

need to learn how to play golf. And I remember laughing at that, thinking oh my God! (laugh) And you know what? I really wish I had taken that more seriously. ..Yeah, she was smart enough to recognize it because it's so true. When you go to the – and it pisses you off because, you know, we were invited to the wireless sales conference and so we went there and sure enough all the guys are, you know, heading off to the golf course and stuff. And luckily at that time they were savvy enough to offer the women gift certificates to the spa if they wanted to but the girls didn't go play golf.

The advice regarding the need to play golf was marked by the use of imperatives - “had to” and “need to.” Also, the emphatic affirmation “it’s so true” gives credence to the advice. The use of the contrastive in the extreme case formulation - “all the guys” went to the golf course versus none of the women (or “girls” as the interviewee labeled them) highlights the gender divide with respect to social activities in the workplace. The golf course has long been associated with the opportunity to work on business deals and build relationships, so non-participation in this activity serves as an exclusionary environment.

Yvonne, a senior manager in a high tech firm described meetings as non-inclusive as well. As Yvonne noted,

It's the group of them, like they're all male and they get in their room every week and have their management meetings and you hear them laughing and stuff, and you think what are they doing in there, you know?...Like I'd actually like to attend the management meetings but I'm just like, okay, I've been here a year now. Let's SLOWLY start changing things and getting them used to it.

The use of the pronoun “their” differentiates the activities and locations open to the men in the organization versus this female manager. The strategy for change is one that comes from a tempered approach, the word “slowly” represented in capitalized font because it was emphasized by the interviewee. Yvonne’s strategy was designed to “get them used to it.” The elliptical reference of “it” does not clearly identify what male managers have to get used to – the idea of women in the workplace, the involvement of women in meetings and decision making or all of the above.

Another participant, Anna, who was continually excluded from meetings advised patience as a strategy for women.

I think patience, you have to be patient with them and understand that it's not going to maybe come all into place like you want it to. Like I know I bet I talked for the last year wanting full information, you know, wanting to attend some of the meetings and that. I think you have to be patient. Prove yourself first, I think. Like let them build up the confidence in you and then it'll be easier to bridge that gap.

The use of the expression “I think” ranks fairly low on the hierarchy of modalization in terms of certainty of understanding on the efficacy of this strategy. In the short excerpt, the phrase “I think” was used three times which suggests that patience may or may not be an effective strategy for inclusion.

Finally everyday banter and lunches become another point of exclusion for women. As Sophia observed,

But just even, like I sit with all of them and they all sit in the same area as me and you just hear, like little jokes. Like they'll talk about their wives and laugh and (laugh) hello, I'm one of those wives you've been talking about. (laugh) <laugh> Like it's not being really bad but just little things when you think, oh my. <Mm-hmm> Exactly. But just, you know, some of the jokes and stuff, like it's not rude or crude, right, in that respect. Like it's not beyond where it should be but you just think sometimes oh my goodness guys. You can just see it's a male thing, you know, the male bonding thing. <Mm-hmm> Even, like just silly things like lunches, you know. it would be really nice once in a while if you ask but they just don't think that far. ...But they just don't think that far.

From Sophia's perspective, the attribution for non-inclusion is not one of malice but rather neglect and inattention. Marked case of a "male thing" a "male bonding thing" clearly marks this as a gendered and exclusionary activity.

CONCLUSIONS

The expression, "The more things change, the more they stay the same" seems to unfortunately capture the discursive constructions of the experiences of many women in the high tech sector who participated in this study. This paper contributes to our understanding of the experiences and day-to-day negotiations of women in the high tech sector by enhancing thematic analysis with the insights provided by a microanalytic discursive perspective. In women's descriptions of their experiences and their advice to other women there was generally a strong reliance on declaratives and unequivocal language (e.g., "must," "should," etc.). When discussing experiences and advice, participants are on fairly strong and clear footing with respect to actionable steps in certain aspects of the workplace. Where language changes to a more tempered tone, however, is in trying to understand the source of the cultural norms and behaviours that these women experienced in their organizations. The use of more tempered language also marked their descriptions of strategies for bringing change (e.g., "slowly", "I think" and "maybe"), to understanding exclusionary practices ("Are they intentional or unintentional?"). In fact, women in the high tech sector seem to be expending considerable energy negotiating and managing their identities and the everyday challenges of the workplace.

For the women who participated in this study, high tech comes with legacy organizational cultural and procedural issues that are marked by gendered practices. This is similar to the findings noted by Cross and Linehan (2006). Women are able to clearly articulate and explain some of these issues and others – those that tend to directly impact on employment issues such as salary, decision making are still marked by language of uncertainty. The challenge facing these women is that if do not understand the situation and the rules, it is difficult to negotiate for change, difficult to envision long term career paths, and difficult, even undesirable, to stay within this industry. Exactly the opposite of what is needed in this industry.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The researchers gratefully acknowledge the support received through a 4A Social Sciences and Humanities Research grant for this project. Also, sincere thanks are extended to Gisele Woods for transcription services. The authors would also like to express their sincere appreciation to the helpful feedback provided by the anonymous reviewers.

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APPENDIX 1

Discourse Analytic Tools

The following discourse analytic tools were used in the analysis.

1. **Ellipsis.** In the case of ellipsis, the speaker does not identify the specific noun or object of under discussion. Instead, the listener must make either an anaphoric (found in preceding text) or cataphoric (found in subsequent text) search for the object of reference (Halliday, 1994). A speaker may use ellipsis if they find the words problematic and difficult to express. Alternatively, ellipsis may be used if the words are assumed to be so taken-for-granted that uttering them would simply be redundant (Halliday, 1994)
2. **Extreme Case Formulations.** Edwards and Potter (1992) offer an excellent example of an extreme case formulation with the phrase “*everybody* (italics in original) carries a gun” (p. 47). It is simply not the case that “everyone carries a gun” but the phrase allows the speaker to normalize his or her actions with respect to bearing arms. One of the outcomes of the use of an extreme case formulation is the normalization of an activity or event. \
3. **Hierarchy of Modalization.** Individuals choose words to present opinions of varying degrees of certainty or facticity. Latour and Woolgar (1986) proposed the following hierarchy of modalization to refer to the certainty of facts:
 - X is a fact
 - I know that X
 - I claim that X
 - I believe that X
 - I hypothesize that X
 - I think that X
 - I guess that X
4. **Marked cases.** To draw attention to a particular item, a speaker may use adjectives to identify and draw attention to that word. For instance, rather than making simple reference to a writer, that writer may be referred to as the Pulitzer prize winning writer.
5. **Member checking.** Individuals frequently use such member checking phrases as “you know what I mean” or simply “you know.” Member checking serves a number of purposes. It can verify that the listener is following the story. It can be used to determine whether or not the listener is in agreement with the opinions expressed. Alternatively, it can be used to check whether the listener shares the same cultural understandings (Schiffrin, 1987).
6. **Storytelling.** The stories organizational members develop and share offer insights into the processes, activities and values of the organization and its members. Constructing and telling stories is a form of sensemaking in organizations (Weick, 1995).
7. **Systematic Vagueness** When speakers offer accounts that are systematically vague they are formulating a description that, by the very nature of its vagueness, resists challenge by the listener. A vague description is much less easy to attack since it does not provide details that can be challenged (Edwards and Potter, 1992).