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EMPOWERMENT IN BUSINESS PROCESS REENGINEERING: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF IMPLEMENTATION DISCOURSES

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Abstract

Business process reengineering (BPR) is a methodology for organizational transformation that promises employee empowerment through the adoption of IT as leverage for change. This paper argues that BPR is naive in its interpretation of the management of power relations in organizational change, particularly in regard to middle management. An ethnography of a BPR implementation using cc:Mail as IT leverage is presented to demonstrate how power relations can deny BPR through the manipulation of discourses. The paper uses Foucault’s concepts of the Panopticon and the gaze to investigate the limitations of BPR as a technology of power.

Keywords: Business process reengineering, ethnography, resistance to change, state government.

1. INTRODUCTION

Business process reengineering (BPR) has been offered as a revolutionary, radical change approach to improving organizational performance through transformation. BPR aims for a flatter organizational structure, promoting the development of empowered process workers who are encouraged to use IT in radically new ways to carry out operations. The BPR approach has given rise to many different BPR methodologies (Champy 1995; Davenport 1993; Davenport and Short 1990; Hammer 1990; Hammer and Champy 1993; Manganelli and Klein 1994) but there are issues of concern surrounding reengineering (Craig and Yetton 1992, 1994a, 1994b). The promised reengineered organization has been achieved by very few organizations, indicating that BPR is worthy of investigation, both as a concept and as a methodology. The research presented in this paper investigates BPR in practice concentrating on the concept of employee empowerment as an espoused requirement in the BPR rhetoric. The paper adopts ethnography as a means of studying how the rhetoric of employee empowerment may be a barrier to BPR implementation, arguing that there is a notable naivety in assumptions regarding the politics of empowerment.

2. BPR AND EMPLOYEE EMPOWERMENT

Empowerment is seen as essential to the post-hierarchical workplace that increasing numbers of organizations are moving to attain. “Empowerment is placing the responsibility for decisions further and further within the organisation. Empowering is making everyone in the business a manager of his/her own workstation” (Ripley and Ripley 1992, p. 21). Empowerment allows the key operations of the upper levels of hierarchy, such as responsibility, accountability and decision making, to be released and implemented further down the hierarchy. Empowerment is proposed as inevitable by the protagonists of reengineering:
“Redistribution of power and authority among functions and levels and even among suppliers and customers is an inevitable outcome of process innovation” (Davenport 1993, p. 181).

“People working in a reengineered process are, of necessity, empowered. As process team workers they are both permitted and required to think, interact, use judgment, and make decisions” (Hammer and Champy 1993, p. 70).

“Empowering employees will move decision making, communications, and control down to the level where the work is being done. This will make dramatic improvements in process time and efficiency” (Manganelli and Klein 1994, p. 27)

One key element of BPR is the use of information technology (IT) to enable this outcome. IT provides the means for a more widespread and lateral dispersal of information throughout the organization, which may alter the traditional role of middle management as information controllers.

This paper suggests that it is inherent in the philosophy of BPR methodologies that the position and power of middle management be changed and that this ignores the effects on power relations that are likely to result from organizational flattening. As Limerick and Cunnington (1995) argue, “The strength of the reengineered organization lies in the empowerment of individuals. Empowerment is its strength. The assumption that all people are empowered is its weakness” (p. 237). In BPR approaches, empowerment is imposed by leadership changing worker values (culture) and through the use of IT to enable control of the process. Both are invisible mechanisms of control; they are not emancipatory means of empowerment, as they limit empowerment to the confines of the rules set out by the organization’s leaders. Empowerment through BPR does not necessarily release control but does change the way control is exercised. Authority is still enforced through hierarchical control of culture. “Under the guise of giving more autonomy to the individual than in organizations governed by bureaucratic rules, corporate culture threatens to promote a new, hypermodern neoauthoritarianism which, potentially, is more insidious and sinister than its bureaucratic predecessor” (Willmott 1993, p. 541). The BPR rhetoric on empowerment fails to explore changing power relations and so neglects issues of power.

The perspective on power in the reengineering literature is reflected in the approach it takes to empowerment. Power is viewed as a commodity to be exchanged and utilized, its source can be discerned, and its distribution can be controlled. It is treated as an object, however, as Boland argues, “power is not an entity. The dynamics of power are dialectic and found in human interaction. Power does not emanate from some location but, like meaning, is produced and reproduced through action and sense-making dialogue” (1987, p. 373). Empowerment is promoted within the context of increased forms of control as through the reengineering of corporate culture. It is not perceived as part of the dialectic of everyday life. The discourses in everyday life are rich and diverse, not easily manipulated by any simplistic notion of cultural reengineering. In this paper, it is argued that a Foucaultian approach to power is a more appropriate means of understanding the effects of BPR on the organization as it promotes the view of power as a relationship. Foucault (1982) argues that power is not an object, but a relationship among individuals; it is a social construction, created and sustained through the everyday discourses of organizational members (Fiske 1993). The reengineering approach glosses over the management of power relations, offering little to address the inevitable struggle that will ensue when attempts are made to change traditional power structures and everyday power relations through the flattening of the hierarchy and the rhetoric of empowerment of lower-echelon staff (Spears and Lea 1994).
2.1 Panopticism

By drawing on the theories of Foucault (1978, 1979, 1980) and his use of the panoptic principle, the concept of power within BPR is explored. The metaphor of the Panopticon is used to interpret how BPR rhetoric institutionalizes control. Wilson discusses how it is possible to understand “the developments of industrial control” (1995, p. 67) evident within the workplace through the use of the Panopticon metaphor.

The Panopticon is an early nineteenth century design for prisons, developed by Bentham (cited in Foucault 1979, pp. 200-209). The structural design of the building allows for continual observation, making control of prisoners possible. However, direct control is unnecessary; it is the promise of intervention that controls. The knowledge that one is being watched and that others have the power to intervene acts as control. The Panopticon’s construction renders all actions of prisoners visible and the guards’ actions invisible. The Panopticon’s design is of a circular building with a central tower that looks out at the periphery where the inmates are housed. The inmates are isolated and backlighting ensures that the guards can see in while prisoners cannot see if guards are present. The prisoners are always visible and cannot know whether guards are present or not. They only know that they can be watched and punished if they behave incorrectly. The principle effect of the Panopticon is to “induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power” (Foucault 1979, p. 201). The key to this exercise of power and control is knowledge of visibility. “He who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power” (Foucault 1979, p. 202). Self-control—self-discipline—is imposed on one who is under the control of possible surveillance. If one knows there is the possibility of being watched, one acts as if watched. This imposes a normalizing discipline over the watched to conform to the requirements of the assumed overseers. This visibility creates what Foucault calls a gaze, “an inspecting gaze” that exerts a power to conform, not through a direct intervention but through an indirect imposition of self-control and discipline (Foucault 1982).

2.2 The Panoptic Power of BPR

While the Panopticon originated as an architectural design, Foucault takes it as a mechanism of power detached from specific use, a “figure of political technology” (1979, p. 205). In this same way, BPR can be observed as a technology of power, a methodology that implicitly adopts the principles of Bentham’s Panopticon.

BPR exposes processes within organizations. It identifies them, maps them, and makes them visible to analysts and organizational members alike. This process of identification highlights the flaws in existing modes of operation in order to reengineer them. The intent is to change the process, to get rid of the inefficient and bring in the efficient by naming or categorizing efficient versus inefficient. As Hammer describes it, “we must challenge old assumptions and shed the old rules that made the business underperform in the first place” (1990, p. 107). Those processes that are identified (made visible) as being inefficient are denied by the reengineers. The denial forces and sustains the rhetoric of invisibility through the implication of a process being inefficient and so counter-productive. Such an inefficient process is first made visible through the gaze of analysis and then controlled through a rhetoric of denial which negates the process in everyday discourses. After exposing through the creation of visibility, the discourse of denial continues through demanding non-use, which enforces an invisibility back onto the process. It is delegitimized and so denied entry to acceptable discourses. This denial enables the rhetoric of BPR to enforce control over discourses, reifying the reengineered processes as correct and the former processes as incorrect.

The introduction of reengineering introduces a new relationship of power in the form of a discipline which the reengineering sustains through discourse control (rhetoric). As Foucault explains, any discipline comes with “its structures, its hierarchies, its inspections, exercises and methods of training and conditioning” (1980, p. 158). In the
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same way BPR structures the new organization, it inspects, it trains and it conditions. The organization is subjected to the panoptic gaze and challenged to produce a new discourse. The reengineered discourse is introduced as the norm and processes are subjected to the discipline of the reengineering model. As reengineering is portrayed as the norm, the choice is then between resisting its gaze or “interiorizing” the gaze. Interiorizing is where each individual internalizes the new reengineered rhetoric so that it becomes their norm. Through the metaphor of the Panopticon, BPR can be shown as a technology of power structuring discourses and requiring the interiorization of the BPR gaze, making people unable and unwilling to commit inefficiencies. Such a degree of change manipulation indicates that BPR’s greatest challenge is in implementing the Panoptic gaze and in avoiding resistance to that gaze.

2.3 The Panoptic Power of IT

Parallels between the Panopticon and IT have been drawn (Lyon 1993; Spears and Lea 1994; Wilson 1995; Zuboff 1988), arguing that the introduction of IT into an organization has the ability to introduce a panoptic “gaze” over individuals. BPR enables organizational processes to be explicated by IT as the BPR gaze locates and individualizes organizational members. The surveillance abilities of IT are reinforced when BPR advocates using technology to maintain the discipline required of the reengineered organization. IT can be privileged to take on this role, neutralizing the power relation discourses of middle management’s managerial gaze.

Lyon suggests that the ability of IT to increase surveillance and control over users places them in a “panoptic prison” (1993, p. 653). The panoptic power of computer mediated communication in particular has been discussed by Spears and Lea. Where electronic communications have the potential to empower people through increased information and access, they may also increase surveillance and control over people. Spears and Lea summarize attributes of the Panopticon as imposing “hierarchical observation, normalization, and the objectification and individualization of the subject” (1994, p. 439). Through this imposition, computer-mediated communication can sustain the gaze and so control discourse. Middle management’s control over information has traditionally been the area of such disciplinary control. In the field study discussed below, computer mediated communication was intentionally chosen as the critical tool for a BPR implementation. However, the political ability of middle management to deny the rhetoric of the new technology was underestimated.

3. RESEARCH METHOD

Existing studies of the use of BPR concentrate on success stories of reengineering projects by highlighting what the companies did right. This is in conflict with the much quoted, although unsubstantiated, 70% failure rate (Champy 1995; Hammer and Champy 1993) in BPR implementation. It seems that existing studies are not informative on the state of reengineering. Case studies (Buday 1993; Hall et al. 1993; Hammer 1990; Hammer and Champy 1993; Kennedy 1994; Wastell et al. 1994; Watson 1997) are given but these tend to provide only a brief snapshot, concentrating on the end result of the reengineering project. More intensive research on actual BPR implementations is required to address the possible reasons for the implied high failure rate.

An approach is required that can address cultural and political issues, allows for an interpretation of contextual and historical aspects of the organization, and is intensive in its approach to interpretation (Lee 1993). The research method chosen here is ethnography (Atkinson 1992; Davies and Nielsen 1992; Hughes et al. 1992; Rosen 1991). In ethnography, contextual observation is fundamental, often occurring through participant observation which is conducted in the field. It involves observing people in the natural settings in which they work (Burgess 1982). This allows the researcher to experience close, longitudinal exposure to the context, enabling the interpretation of situations relevant to the area of interest (Bentley et al. 1992; Van Maanen 1979, 1988). In this study, a BPR
situation was explicitly sought and Foucault’s theories were already well known to the authors prior to the entry of one of them into the field work (Davies and Mitchell 1994). Although its was not the intention at the start of the field work to use Foucault’s notion of the Panopticon, it may have influenced the early interpretations. This is not considered an issue, as researchers who use ethnography are now aware of the subjectivity of interpretation and the naivete of attempting to enter a situation free from theoretical constructs (Clifford and Marcus 1986; Harvey and Myers 1995).

One of the authors conducted participant observation over a ten month period, for three working days of every week. Her role was overt in that everyone knew that she was there to conduct fieldwork. She was mainly an observer in that she did not conduct a specific work role, although her opinion was sought on some occasions. During that time, the primary methods of material collection used in the field included participant observation of everyday work practices, including the keeping of a field diary, conducting interviews (unstructured and semi-structured), review of organizational and project documentation to develop an appreciation of the history of the context, and key informant collaboration. These are ethnographic techniques that are common to ethnography (Orlikowski 1988, 1992).

The field diary provided a record of many events and situational activities which helped the fieldworker interpret her experiences. The interviews both provided information and helped with the contextualization of interpretations. Document analysis enabled the authors to appreciate discourses on the formal representation of the organizational history and proposed futures. This provided information on the official departmental vision and its intended implementation into everyday life, allowing for the proposed BPR implementation to be later interpreted as part of the organization’s formal rhetoric of change. A particular informant, who negotiated access with others in the organization, was relied upon. His perspective on the organization provided further interpretation and an appreciation of the negotiated order of the context where the BPR implementation was intended.

4. THE FIELD STUDY

The ethnographic fieldwork occurred over a 10 month period during 1994. The interpretation and initial write up of the ethnography occurred in a 12 month period following this. During the interpretation and write-up, the participant observer returned to the field to interview people again and share her interpretations. In 1996, the ethnography was finalized and a copy was delivered to the sponsor who had first agreed to access. This was the individual named as PM in this section. When the interpretations were discussed, there was a great deal of agreement with what the researchers had constructed and the general story, which had emerged during the interpretations, was accepted as meaningful by those in the context.

The ethnographic fieldwork took place in a section of one of Queensland’s largest government departments. The department has an annual budget of more than $1.2 billion and employs in excess of 7,000 people. The department is organized into nine operational divisions and five regions, with its head office located in Brisbane, the capital city of Queensland, Australia. The main activities of the department include:

- infrastructure planning and construction,
- developing and administering services,
- improving user behavior and safety, and
- providing appropriate level of services to the industry.
At the time of the fieldwork, the department was moving from centralized operations to regionalization as part of a more decentralized approach to management. The intended BPR implementation was to support this decentralization.

The fieldwork occurred within a branch, referred to in this paper as “the RUMS branch.” RUMS is an acronym for Road Use Management Section and is not the actual name of the branch. The RUMS branch employed approximately 80 people. The branch was a result of an amalgamation comprising half of one branch of Road Transport (RT), three quarters of another branch of RT, and some from Road Safety (RS), “each with culturally diverse backgrounds.”

At the time of entry, the communication within the branch formally followed a hierarchical chain of command. Informally, “leapfrogging” sometimes occurred as junior staff communicated directly with more senior people by bypassing their immediate managers. However, in some sections, the formal structured approach to communication was enforced more stringently than in others, depending on the style of management.

The leader of the RUMS branch was an executive level manager, referred to here as Principal Manager (PM). He was the initiator and champion of BPR within his unit, seeking to introduce BPR in line with a move toward IT-centered communication. By gaining IT-based communication and control, he saw process improvement capabilities and organizational flattening of hierarchies of command.

4.1 The Panoptic Gaze

In this section, the ethnographic text using Foucault’s theory of the Panopticon is explored. The perception of BPR and IT within the research site is examined from the perspective of the Panoptic principles, discussing power and culture in the context of the investigation.

At the start of the fieldwork, communication in the branch was controlled by middle management. They controlled the flow and speed of communication up and down the hierarchy, being the center points for information, often deciding who would see what, when, and where. While the strictness of hierarchy was not always imposed, variation was always at the discretion of middle management. As one manager explained:

> Odd things come through my in tray and I send them back [to my staff] and tell them “you can sign.” It’s a confidence building exercise when you’re empowering people. It gives them a thrill to sign something for themselves when they’re coming up through the ranks.

PM saw his main mission as changing the hierarchical structure, viewing this process as over-bureaucratic and inefficient. He denied hierarchy, arguing for information at the hands of everyone, expressing his desire for everyone to have the ability to immediately communicate directly with everyone else. He viewed the technology of e-mail as the key enabler in implementing reengineering. Through his reification of e-mail as the preferred mode of communications, the process shifted from middle management as the communication controllers. Through denial of hierarchy and legitimization of the need to reengineer, PM was reifying a discourse that both rendered visible the inefficiencies management had brought to the process and denied them their practices, introducing the power of the Panoptic “gaze” and opening up communication to inspection, surveillance, and judgment.

4.2 Exposing the Power of the Gaze

Computer-mediated communication technology was new as a means of communication for many employees. To encourage its use, PM requested that all communication to him be via cc:Mail. Replacing paper-based communications with electronic communications was seen by PM as the critical first step in preparation for process reengineering. Hierarchy could be bypassed as communication was given to all. PM verbalized an intense dislike for
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paper, arguing that the electronic network made it possible for him to receive everything electronically. Everyone
in the organization knew of and discussed his dislike for paper as this had always made him distinctive in the
predominantly paper-based government department.

If you’re working [for PM] and you send him stuff on paper, he will send you back a little note
“cc:Mail please” or “e-mail please.” He doesn’t want to get the paper.

[PM] likes responding to it [cc:Mail], you phone him and you don’t get an answer, maybe two days
later and of course the encouragement is very strong for it there. If you want to communicate with
[PM] you do it on his machine and he will respond to his machine with a quick answer.

PM set the informal protocol for the use of cc:Mail in communication. As he held a very senior position in the
organization’s hierarchy, by instigating direct communication he gave the employees the authority to take communi-
cation control away from middle management. PM’s requests for cc:Mail use encouraged the freeing up of
information from the layers of the hierarchy that traditionally placed middle management as central to the informa-
tion flow. This changed centrality, placing discipline on the employees to email PM direct. As a further step, PM
introduced surveillance in order to monitor how the communication initiative was progressing. He directed all users
of e-mail to “cc” a copy of all messages to him. This meant that he was getting copies of all communications, which
included information on who was communicating with whom. This surveillance tactic was named as PM’s “cc:Mail
directive” and was viewed as a threatening imposition by many middle managers. The process allowed for the
freeing up of information while also introducing surveillance as control through the technology of cc:Mail. Sewell
and Wilkinson describe such a situation as “where decentralization of tactical responsibility occurs at the same
time as strategic control is centralized” (1992, p. 279). Autonomy is only given within the confines of strict control and
surveillance mechanisms.

4.3 Averting the Gaze

By openly displaying his surveillance, PM had made visible his technology of power: cc:Mail. Once cc:Mail became
a reified object in the discourse, its power could be discussed, making that power visible to others and giving them
the opportunity to manipulate it. It is at this stage that language games (Lyotard and Thebaud 1985) came into play
in an attempt to manipulate cc:Mail as a technology of power. A counter-discourse developed among middle
management to deny the technology which focused on the denial of both PM’s authoritative power and his use of
IT. One middle manager described the situation as he saw it:

The senior level...they operate in a rarefied atmosphere and what goes on with the rest of the world,
goes on with the rest of the world. I think they could do a lot more to get out amongst the people.

This middle manager challenged the belief that executive management was in the position to dictate. He expressed
a counter-belief that executive management was out of touch with what really went on, denying them the right to
impose new work practices on others. PM’s enforcement to communicate electronically, the requirement of cc:Mail
to become a way of life, was perceived as a top-down mechanism of control. Middle managers also ridiculed PM’s
love of the technology by contrasting technology with people, reifying an object-other bipolar relationship (Foucault
1979), where people were the “object” central to the organization’s needs and technology was the “other,” the
inessential. This opposition was constant in discourses of that time:

I consider myself a people person and email brings an impersonal touch to communication.
It’s people that matter, not the technology. Technology doesn’t replace people.

Well seeing as with the government, the only thing we’ve got to lay claim to is the people, so if you start to lose them through drops in morale and if people feel they are losing touch with the human side of things...we’ve got to keep the people side of the organization up.

The personal contact side of it I feel is a very important part of the work environment.

The people’s opinion, on something like e-mail, to say “hey, here’s the silver bullet, this is going to fix our communication” is [irrelevant] because it’s people that communicate not machines.

I’ve always been a bit suspicious of the automated office and that environment....I think we have enough interpersonal communication problems in our work environment as it is, if people start interacting on a personal level even less...I don’t think we do well at all at the moment, but I think it could be even worse if we don’t have that face to face contact.

Once the “technology” had been discussed as an object in opposition to “people,” it was then downgraded further by being relegated to being merely a “tool.”

E-mail is only a tool, it is only as good as the people who use it...I suspect it won’t be the answer to all our prayers.

I don’t see it as solving a particular problem but being a useful tool.

Don’t misunderstand me, I see the need for that sort of thing, but I see it as a tool rather than as the be all and end all. It’s just another way to work and my view is, it can’t be enforced on people who have a totally different way of working.

I think it’s a very useful tool for a lot of routine business, but I think we’ve got to be careful we don’t take it to the extremes.

The emphasis is to see it and use it as a tool rather than the way of doing things.

Through continually reinforcing the tool-like attributes of e-mail, middle management were shaping the discourse on e-mail by reifying the tool as an inanimate object with the single purpose of performing a designated function. This implied that an individual who prefers technology is functional in a simplistic manner and lacks an appreciation of the importance of people. The process of denial of the BPR had started with the concentration on the technology of e-mail and then relegated technology to a tool. This was done by contrasting people as legitimate objects with technology-as-tool as illegitimate other. Next, PM’s association with the technology was used to ridicule him, challenging his authoritative power. As the power relations developed and resistance became more widely discoursed, middle managers developed metaphors of the clinic to deny the technology even further, thus denying PM and his attempts at initiating BPR. E-mail was talked of as bringing about a sterile, germ-free organizational environment:

The personal contact side of it I feel is a very important part of the work environment. If it’s not there, the environment lacks, it’s probably a very sterile environment. Maybe that’s one way it is heading.
I don’t want a situation where people come to work and lock themselves in a germ free cubicle and come out at the end of the day, I think [that would] be a sad day.

It’s people that matter not the technology. Technology doesn’t replace people....I think it’s important to get out and rub shoulders otherwise it all becomes clinical and, you know, three cc’s of this and ten cc’s of that and a triple antigen there.

This discourse clinicized the technology, ridiculing it with comparison to the worth of people and then denying it by ostracizing it as an acceptable mode of communication. This effectively challenged and neutralized PM’s discursive authority. It was at this point that middle management called a meeting with PM to discuss the problems with the new directives on the use of e-mail. In the meeting, middle managers declared a counter-strategy by accepting, adopting, and extending PM’s earlier strategy. They insisted that they be “cc’d” by staff during all relevant communication transactions, thus making the use of the “cc” process both ridiculous and untenable. They had effectively turned the PM’s “cc:Mail directive” around and used it against him. The power of the technology, which originated from PM himself, was now used by middle managers to deny PM and the technology. In doing this, they prevented communication process changes and retained the hierarchy.

Following the meeting, a message was sent around the organization to all staff, both electronically and through paper memo. At the insistence of middle management, PM was the signatory on both the paper-based and the electronic message. By signing both forms of the message, PM had relegitimized paper-based communication, publically displaying a change of direction from his previous, well known stance of demanding electronic-only communications. The content of the message reaffirmed this stand down. An excerpt of that message follows:

One concern expressed by some managers is the potential impact on their responsibility to monitor activities and the allocation of resources within their section or unit. You are therefore asked to exercise judgment in directing cc:Mail messages to me and other senior officers (as you would with paper based communications). cc:Mail provides a very easy facility for you to provide your manager with a carbon copy of any message you might send me and vice versa – please use this facility.

The message clarified and reinforced the position of management in the communication process, displaying how their revolt against the gaze had won. The empowerment initially promised to all, through the denial of hierarchical control of communication, was now constrained as the hierarchy imposition of middle management control returned. The process of sending a copy of everything to an employee’s immediate manager imposed management control over information deployment once again. The hierarchy and authority structure was reinforced, enabling middle management to retain control over information.

The initial phase of the BPR, to prepare the denial of hierarchy through the introduction of computer-mediated communication, had been successfully opposed by middle management. Middle management had the political ability to effectively resist the reengineered communication process. The history of power relations within the organization enabled hierarchy in its fullest form to override any individual’s authority. PM’s political positioning within the branch can be traced back to his history in the organization and the perception of him within that context. Compared to middle management members, PM was new to the organization. He had little knowledge of historically important power relations. PM was portrayed as a lacking in the political attributes reified as important by middle management. He had entered the organization near the top, as a young, high flying graduate. He had not served his time working through the hierarchy. His education was far more advanced than those in middle management and this was often discussed by attributing him with being too clever for the job. His youth, intellect, and technical competence were
turned against him as they were denied as wrong for leadership in that context. In direct contrast, middle management represented human contact, face-to-face management, and life-long industry experience. As discussed by Knights and Vurdubakis, “relations of power are historically constituted configurations of practices. Power thus has to be understood in terms of its particular socio-historical settings and these settings can in turn best be understood in relation to the forms of power that define them” (1994, p. 172). There were two opposing discourses on authority, historical experience versus seniority, and these clashed with the strength and dominance of the traditional values within the organization, allowing the middle management view to dominate. PM was perceived as the source of the change, the instigator behind the move to reengineer. In trying to discredit PM from the role of change agent, he was redefined in the eyes of middle management. He was redefined in accordance with the dominant values held by them.

PM’s power relations was not the only reason why problems developed with the introduction of a cc:Mail approach to communication. It is necessary to look wider, at the working practices of the department at that time to understand other obstacles. These practices, in line with much of Queensland government, reified privacy of communication as sacrosanct. Surveillance of e-mail through PM’s “cc:Mail directive” was in direct breach of that strongly held value. Any overseeing of communication was allocated to those in direct working relationships with individuals. An immediate superior could check the communications but others should not. If they did, this denied the localized management of privacy. Of course, this implicit control also served to legitimize the importance of hierarchy as, paradoxically, a means of protecting workers from undue surveillance. Empowerment through localized control, preventing intervention from others, served to prevent the ease of introduction of anything that created visibility outside of the direct sphere of the working hierarchy. Hierarchical control of communication allowed for protection from surveillance and so empowered locally through an historically accepted imposition of control. This kept visibility local, making actions less visible to those outside of that immediate chain of command. The process empowerment of BPR was not possible while this hierarchical notion of empowerment was so active and historically valued.

5. DISCUSSION

This paper has argued that much of the literature on BPR and its relation to organizational transformation takes a highly prescriptive and deterministic view in carrying out the social changes required for BPR to succeed. As a consequence, the research presented here provides a reconceptualization of this relationship by taking a power relations view of BPR rather than the mechanistic view that prevails. The primary assertion presented in this research is that it is the implicit focus of control inherent within the BPR approach that makes the claim of empowerment rhetorical. This constrains both the cultural and the structural change required for complete organizational transformation.

The process view promoted by BPR challenges the notion of formal hierarchy. BPR approaches transformation with the notion of producing the flatter organization. While the efficiencies that are enabled through the removal of management layers are attractive, they still promote hierarchy and control, in so far as they are valued in the existing cultural norms. This makes it difficult to truly empower.

Within BPR, the emphasis lies on changing the formal patterns and using mechanisms of control to change the informal. This is approached through cultural change. However, BPR takes a prescriptive, engineered view of culture. With cultural change, it is the managerial and the tribal powers of the organization that are likely to reject
the new “reengineering” rhetoric as powerful. Empowering workers by getting middle management to change is anathema to the views of managing in many bureaucratic organizations.

This paper has highlighted the importance of power relationships and their role in the manipulation of reality construction, their effects on the outcome of reengineering, and the importance of having an historical understanding of the power-political relationships within an organization. BPR and its mechanisms of control have been shown to be perceived as technologies of power. BPR imposes a gaze and a shift in power as promoted by the gaze which prompts resistance. This resistance is inadequately dealt with in BPR methodologies. While concentrating on the initial stages of preparing for a process move from hierarchy control to workflow control, the presentation of a field study has been used to demonstrate how BPR ignores the power relations that influence change in an organization. The fieldwork discussed here is part of a more detailed interpretation which is presented elsewhere (Sayer 1997).

6. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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