

This article provides a critical ethnographic account of how the members of a small design company experienced a work environment riddled with ambiguous communication. I present the organization's official philosophies as well as the discourse of the members to illustrate how ambiguous communication was strategically applied and how members responded and made sense of it. Although management's goal in providing vague goals and objectives was intended to spark freedom and creativity, the employees experienced this work environment as paradoxical and constraining. I contend that the members' responses to this system demonstrate how the interplay of ambiguous discourse and organizational power can construct complex structures of control. Even when organizational members were aware of contradictory and ambiguous communication practices by management, they were largely unaware of the extent to which their responses to this situation naturalized, reproduced, and strengthened a painfully experienced organizational system of control.

## **DESIGNING DISCOURSE**

### **A Critical Analysis Of Strategic Ambiguity and Workplace Control**

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The management at Far End Design, Inc. (FED) believes that if their designers are freed from the traditional boundaries of rules, standards, directives, and expectations, their design projects will be more "cutting edge." Creating on the cutting edge means using whatever skills and abilities one has to devise and manage wild and fantastic projects. Meeting the client's needs involves tempering and refining these "out there" projects while retaining as much of the original intent as possible. In other words, FED artists should create at the outermost limits of their imagination, but their works of art must also sell to companies whose needs are practical and down to earth. For instance, if a designer wants live tropical birds

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flying over the heads of restaurant patrons (sitting on canvas camp stools as they eat wild boar off plates woven from banana leaves) so that they sense a jungle theme at all levels, this creative desire must be tamed to meet the needs of the client. Even so, the designers at FED are encouraged to explore all possibilities. As the designers describe it,

[this] is an incredibly challenging position. It offers an opportunity to express yourself in more ways than you've ever even thought. It gives you the opportunity to recall things from when you were five years old and pull things out and make them happen and the next thing you know [your ideas] are embedded in the tiles of a retail center (Chris, a designer at FED).

*Cutting edge* implies innovation and foresight, but it also conjures up images of danger—balancing precariously on the sharp edge of a blade, trying to focus on something other than the endless void looming off the edge just one tiny step away. As Terry, one of the co-owners/managers, describes it, “cutting edge design” is “the balance between all the things that are out of your control.” We often describe artists as living on the edge, delicately balancing the dual and dueling experiences of existing in the outward material world and existing in the inward world of the mind. At FED, management encourages this dual duel as a deliberate means of producing unique results.

At first glance, this company is an exciting place to witness participative management at work; employees solicit, plan, and manage their own projects using whatever resources they can find or create. Management promotes autonomy both in formal organizational rhetoric and informal organizational practices. Participative teamwork is required, but teams emerge ad hoc, depending on the particularities of each project. On closer inspection, however, the almost palpable passion and energy is laced with tension that can be associated with, and almost attributed to, a painfully experienced paradox presented by management practices. Terry, the co-owner/ manager, strategically uses ambiguous communication to encourage multiple interpretations and creative freedom, but then explodes when the designers do not perform according to unstated expectations.

In the following case study of FED, I contend that workplace ambiguity functions to construct and reproduce a powerful, hegemonic system of control. The designers experience this enveloping ambiguity when confronted with confusing messages and contradictory practices and responses. Their responses to the ambiguity around them function to naturalize contradictory, tense, and ambiguous organizational practices. Ironically, this process allows them to continue to work, but it also encourages and reproduces the patterns that prompted their initial reactions. The designers accept ambiguity and contradiction as not just a part of Terry's personality, but as a natural part of the artist's world, unavoidable and inevitable. Their communicative responses to painful workplace experiences thus bind them in the cycles they seek to escape, and a powerful system of control is reinforced and concretized.

The overall goal of this critical-interpretive case study is to provide the reader with an expanded understanding of the concept of ambiguity, both as it is experienced by the employees of FED and as it operates in relation with ideological contexts of power. As many recent studies illustrate, critical explorations of participation-based organizational cultures are useful means of understanding some of the ways in which organization members shape and are shaped by ideologically charged institutional structures and practices (e.g., Barker, 1993; Barker & Cheney, 1994; Sinclair, 1992). As these authors and others (e.g., Mumby, 1988) stress, it is important for researchers to move beyond neutral descriptions of participative workplace practices—such as fostering creativity through ambiguous communication practices—to explore participation in its actual contexts of productivity and power.

### AMBIGUITY AND MEANING CONSTRUCTION

Social-constructionist approaches to reality emphasize the inseparability of individuals and societies, focusing on the processes through which taken-for-granted social structures get formed and reformed through the intersubjectivity of the individuals that comprise them (Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Blumer, 1979; Schutz,

1967). What we call *organization*, then, is an ongoing interaction and interweaving of meaning that we make sense of retrospectively (Weick, 1979) in relation to and with others (Bateson, 1972; Watzlawick, Bavelas, & Jackson, 1967). Whether we like it or not, know it or not, or choose to or not, what we “are” and what we “do” in our everyday lives contributes to the interweaving of an unending tapestry of social life that simultaneously enables and constrains us (Foucault, 1975/1979; Geertz, 1973; Pacanowsky & O’Donnell-Trujillo, 1982; Putnam & Pacanowsky, 1983).

The shift to meaning-centered approaches to the study of organizations refocuses our attention on the discursive and intersubjective constructions of meaning, self, and social structures. Within this approach, multiple meanings and multiple realities are implicit; ambiguity is inherent. Messages can never be completely understood, meaning can never be really consensual, and a lot of what we call *communicating* is a jumbled-up process of guesswork. As Rommetveit says,

Mutual understanding can . . . no longer be accounted for in terms of either unequivocally shared knowledge of the world or linguistically mediated literal meaning. It becomes . . . actual and reciprocally *assumed control* of what is meant by what is said and, in some sense, a self-fulfilling *faith* in a shared world (1980, p. 109, emphasis in original).

Many researchers agree that ambiguity is an inherent and sometimes necessary element of human interaction and social life (Eisenberg, 1984; March & Olsen, 1976; Weick, 1979; Williams & Goss, 1975). Although researchers and theorists have attempted to figure out ways to explain and reduce uncertainty (e.g., Berger & Calabrese, 1975) or usefully apply ambiguity as an organizational strategy (Contractor & Ehrlich, 1993; Eisenberg, 1984), the notion of ambiguity remains, as it were, ambiguous. As Eisenberg notes, ambiguity has been variously defined because the concept of meaning is variously understood. For Eisenberg, ambiguity “is not an attribute of messages; it is a *relational variable*” (p. 229, emphasis in original). As such, ambiguity is only understood within the dialogic interplay of self, others, their relationship, and context.

Eisenberg (1984) moves beyond traditional approaches to clarity and communication competence and suggests that ambiguity can function as a strategic means of control within organizations. He develops a coherent three-point argument: (a) Ambiguity can promote unified diversity by fostering multiple viewpoints, fostering agreement on abstractions without limiting specific interpretations; (b) ambiguity can facilitate organizational change; and (c) strategic ambiguity can amplify existing source attributions and preserve privileged positions.

Eisenberg's (1984) discussion focuses on the strategic application of ambiguity by organizational leaders who are trying to develop more effective means of controlling organizational processes and outcomes. However, even if the outcome of this well-intentioned application is achieved, controlling the effects of strategic ambiguity on various organizational members is less certain. In other words, the goal of management may be to encourage multiple interpretations, but organizational members may not be able to overcome the contexts of hierarchy, authority, job security, and so forth to freely interpret ambiguous messages.

Because unequal power relations are a prominent feature of workplace structures, I believe it is also important to develop the concept of strategic ambiguity from a critical perspective, to empirically examine ambiguity as it operates and influences employees within workplace contexts. Exploring the concept of ambiguity from a critical stance allows us to analyze the potentially harmful and controlling aspects of strategic ambiguity as it functions in relation with power to create ideological meaning structures within business organizations.

### **THE INTERRELATION OF DISCOURSE, IDEOLOGY, AND POWER**

Critical theorists have expanded our understanding of the social construction of reality, arguing that constructions of meaning in organizational life are never neutral but are instead continuously composing precarious ideological relations between power and

discourse (Alvesson & Willmott, 1992; Deetz, 1982, 1992; Forester, 1992; Frost, 1980; Mumby, 1988, 1993; Steffy & Grimes, 1986). Organizations are sites of contradiction and political struggle between and among various interests and forces. However, power is not simply a monolithic structure that imposes a set of beliefs and practices on particular subordinate groups. Social actors are subject to, but also create and reproduce their own systems of meaning and domination, which implies that power is multifaceted (Foucault, 1975/1979) and hegemonic (Gramsci, 1971).

Meaning structures can therefore become embedded, unquestioned, and hegemonically reproduced. One way this happens is through the processes of discursive closure and systematically distorted communication, whereby organizational ideologies become "natural, neutral, and self-evident" (Deetz, 1992, p. 171). Through the manifestation of systematically distorted communication, alternative perspectives become an irrational option. In short, discourse that challenges the predominant organizational reality is subject to premature closure.

Searching for and exposing these layers of power structures can, at the very least, help to open the discourse and encourage social actors to question the "nature" of organizing. We all "submit" to particular practices and structures when we organize; without self-conscious analysis, however, those structures often become fixed so that organizational members no longer question the purpose or reason for them. Empirical analysis of the processes by which we become organized is "essential to the awareness and preservation of freedom" (Barker & Cheney, 1994, p. 39). By examining how power, ideology, and our everyday communicative activities weave together to shape organizational realities, we can begin to explore the various controls these constructions have on individual agency. In short, these analyses can help social actors more fully participate in the formation of organizations that enable and constrain them—through conscious consent rather than unconscious consent.

Part of my overall goal in presenting this case study is to provide a critical reading of FED members' lived experiences of deliberately ambiguous contexts. Their words call forth poignant images

of angst created through paradox. As they talk about how they experience strategies of ambiguity, we can begin to see the importance of exploring both the positive and negative possibilities associated with participative strategies of ambiguity employed by management to enhance creative productivity. The other part of my goal in this analysis is to offer the idea that the relations and functions of ambiguity and power are not easily separated, either by those people enacting and experiencing this complex system or by those of us analyzing the system from without. As theorists and researchers, we often talk about social relations as if they were composed of discrete elements that can be separately examined. We do this for purposes of explicating concepts, but as this case demonstrates, this process is not merely arbitrary: It fails to capture the meaning of social life as well as the experiences of individuals. As Foucault (1975/1979) aptly notes, power, knowledge, and discourse are inseparable. Knowledge is formed through and also specifies particular forms of discourse. Also, power and knowledge directly imply one another and are articulated through discourse. And as much as we critical ethnographers try to understand the reasons cultures are the way they are, our insights are always partial and incomplete, moments and fragments.

## PROCEDURES

As Thomas (1993) notes, the critical reading of organizational cultures "directs attention to things that are not quite right" (p. 47). As a critical researcher, I make certain assumptions about the western world of work: that organizational actors do not have equal power; that the purposes and goals of most business organizations almost always preclude democratic participation in the construction of organizational rules and design; and that we often get trapped by our inability to step outside the complex organizational tapestries we weave and are woven into. As a critical ethnographer, I interrogate and construct claims about organizational members' experiences, focusing on discursive practices and their relation with power and ideology. No doubt this is a risky project, one that

cannot help but be incomplete and idiosyncratic. Yet, as Clifford Geertz notes, this is characteristic of all research: "What we call data are really our own constructions of other people's constructions of what they and their compatriots are up to. . . . We are explicating explications. Winks upon winks upon winks" (1973, p. 9). This does not make my wink invalid, only temporary and relative—useful, but not all-knowing.

I began my ethnographic analysis of FED with the intention of gathering and interpreting narrative accounts of the organizational culture. I was in contact with FED for a total of two years, although the "official" ethnography took place over a 5-month period. I studied FED almost daily, through observation, participation, informal interviews, and diaries. I took extensive field notes both with and without a tape recorder—sometimes from my corner of the workroom where I could observe and listen to designers working, sometimes at official meetings, sometimes at parties and informal gatherings. In addition, I conducted, audiotape-recorded, and transcribed 2-hour interviews with each of the eight organizational members. These transcripts as well as official company literature serve as the primary sources of data, and the field notes were used to support or strengthen my hunches, interpretations, and eventual claims.

A colleague listened to the tapes and read the transcripts to verify accuracy. As I read and reread the transcripts and official company documents, I noted and categorized several strongly evident metaphors based on the frequency with which the metaphors were invoked, the context within which the metaphors were used, and the discursive dominance of the metaphor usage. For example, in several of the official organizational documents, FED was referred to as a *family*. In addition, seven of the eight members called FED a family of some sort—dysfunctional, Italian, loose, and so forth. I therefore created a category of *FED as family* and listed all instances where the concept of family or closely related themes were used to frame various aspects of organizational members' experiences. Through this process of extracting and thematizing metaphor use, several categories were created, including: *wartime* (bombs, survival), *dissection* (surgery, soul baring, peeling), *family*



(siblings, children, parents), *insanity* (craziness, dysfunction), *chaos* (out of control, on the brink), and *construction* (building, process).

My original project was to simply analyze and present some of the ways these organizational members metaphorically framed and constructed their life at FED. However, as time passed, I began to notice two things: (a) Officially stated company metaphors rarely meshed with the organizational members' own descriptions of work life, and (b) all of the designers associated their experiences at FED with physically and psychologically damaging problems outside of work. For instance, Chris had colitis, a stress-related disease of the colon; Pat was getting a divorce; Jerry, Pat, and Chris smoked marijuana every day to relax; Chris had at least two drinks every day after work; Robin had chronic insomnia; and Corey eventually quit, saying, among other things, "This shit isn't worth it," referring to a perceived incompatibility of job and marriage. Whether these personal issues could be causally linked to the culture of FED or not, the importance lay in the fact that the organizational members talked about work and stress-related illness and problems as if they were connected. Because of these observations, I decided to conduct a more critical interpretation of the data, and I began to examine the interviews, official documents, and my field notes in terms of internal inconsistency, contradiction, and ambiguity.

In the following analysis, I begin with an ethnographic description of FED's official organizational discourses and everyday lived experiences. I then provide a critical reading of these organizational discourses with the intent of illustrating some of the complexities and the interrelatedness of ambiguity, tension, power, and dominant forms of organizing.

### **LIFE AT FAR END DESIGN: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS**

Far End Design (FED) is a small (eight-member) environmental design company<sup>1</sup> located in a large city, co-owned and managed by

Lee and Terry.<sup>2</sup> FED caters to a wealthy clientele and specializes in creating "Places for People." Lee, one of the co-owner/managers, describes FED as "multidisciplinary," saying, "We have backgrounds in architecture, environmental design, graphics, interiors, signage, product design, and visual merchandising." Shortly before I began my ethnographic study, FED had undergone a period of substantial growth. They had "just completed two unusual and wildly successful retail developments: a 44-story office high-rise with three stories of spectacular retail in downtown where several national tenants made their first local appearance and another shopping mall with nearly a million square feet which needed revitalizing" (Far End Design, 1990). As a result of their recent successes, FED had moved from a single-room office space (sandwiched in an alley between the back of a Mexican restaurant and the employee entrance of a YMCA) to one of the newest high-rise office towers in the city. They occupied over half of the 20th floor and often called themselves "the highest designers in [the city]," referring both to their newly established status among design companies in the city and their physical and sometimes psychological states. According to Terry and Lee, this change was a deliberate attempt to make the company's image more upscale and corporate.

Like many companies in recent years, FED had taken the advice of various management consultants and moved toward a more participative organizational design. The general impetus for this shift has come from many intellectual sources (see Hackman, 1986, for a review; also Kanter, 1989) and has been promoted by prominent consultants (e.g., Bergquist, 1993; Drucker, 1988; Peters, 1988). Although much of the empirical literature is inconclusive (Manz, 1992, p. 1119), employee participation is most often upheld as a morally correct way of running a business: "The question for many . . . is not whether participation works but rather how to *make it work*" (Tannenbaum, 1974, p. 105, emphasis in original; for a critical review of this position, see Locke & Schweiger, 1979). One of the premises undergirding participative management theory and research is that employees who are empowered through participation in decisions affecting their work lives are more likely to be committed to their job, their fellow workers, and the company

(Hackman, 1986; Manz & Sims, 1980, 1990; Poza & Markus, 1980; Trist, Susman, & Brown, 1977). More recent examinations of self-managing and participative decision making suggest that employees in self-managing situations are rarely if ever unbound from significant control and supervision from superiors (Mills, 1983) as well as other group members (Barker, 1993; Barker & Cheney, 1994; Mumby & Stohl, 1991; Sinclair, 1992). Deetz (1992) notes that although participative organizational designs may have democratic potential, they are "frequently motivated by managerial assumptions and . . . co-opted as new control systems" (p. 325).

Despite contradictory academic findings, participation is becoming a pervasive organizational strategy. Participation has many meanings (see Stohl, 1993) and takes many forms, ranging from individual and group participation in task design, participative decision making, participative management, to self-designed and governed work teams (see Hackman, 1986, for a useful breakdown of various levels of participation).

At FED, the officially stated organizational rhetoric brings together the concepts of self-designed and self-managed task design (autonomy and individual creativity) and self-directed and self-managed work teams (team creativity). The officially stated company philosophy stresses the causal relationship between individual creativity, active team participation and creativity, and quality outcome. This relationship is espoused by management as the most crucial dimension of successful cutting-edge design at FED. Additionally, this relationship is frequently invoked in official corporate documents, local newspaper interviews of FED management, and trade journal interviews of all organization members.

An overriding theme of individual creativity appears throughout the official and unofficial discourse of FED. Terry and Lee say that their philosophy is to "push creativity" as far as it will go, to push the design team to "new heights of design," and to push the client in directions they normally would fear. Terry says this philosophy challenges the designers to reach beyond their normal limits. As Chris says, not only does Terry offer this philosophical approach, "Terry *demands* that you express yourself that way." Pat, another designer, says, "We don't align ourselves with a singular way of

thinking about design. We approach every project from a fresh perspective, letting the project itself define the design direction.” According to the company brochure, imaginative design work should create an aggregate identity composed of the client, the market, and the designer. Creativity, then, is put forth as the means by which FED can “speak the language” of its clients, “instill spirit into the solutions,” and “Provide Lasting And Creative Environmental Spaces (PLACES).”

FED also officially supports a team-based philosophy. Although each member of the team brings creativity and expertise to the design projects, FED is “based on a collective vision” that emerges through the give and take of each member of the team throughout the design process. “This approach is not accidental,” the FED brochure proclaims. “We have the vision to see beyond the mundane, and to define crucial issues. . . . we are life givers.” The official team philosophy is particularly well represented in the following journal interview excerpt:

I consider the group the main focus. I am a functioning part of a team. I contribute my opinions and my experience toward the design objective and that makes me like the eighth member of a crew team. Everyone must row together and be in their place or the vessel will only go in circles. Perhaps what makes me indispensable, ironically, is my willingness to be dispensable for the sake of the team. (Corey)

Externally, then, the company projects a philosophy of creativity and teamwork. Internally, management champions this same philosophy of team creativity. Consistent with the official company rhetoric, Terry explains in a personal interview that

creative processes and the results can be so much stronger if the group understands that by working together on projects and letting the ego issues meld together, we can come up with a much more dynamic product than if we as individuals go into our corners and try to do it ourselves . . . It is a collection of their understanding of other people’s understandings . . . [so that] the team take[s] authorship of the whole design.

Each week the designers attend meetings to collectively create and produce design solutions. As Chris comments, “Ideas are drawn on paper and presented with an explanation of why they

work . . . they are exposed, critiqued, and eliminated till you finally come up with the one.” According to Lee, one of the co-owners/managers, these meetings are designed to be a “collective, positive sort of thing” where the designers draw on each other’s strengths and weaknesses to create the design solution. However, as Lee points out, designers (and artists in general) typically create as individuals, not groups. They therefore have difficulty with the idea of detaching themselves from their own creative ideas in a way that is “open to other people’s perspectives.” Chris concurs, adding that “it’s very, very difficult to take all these ideas from everyone’s minds—about a billion possibilities about what something can be—and to put it together so that it works.” Nevertheless, Lee continues, “from the context of business and solving design problems,” mature involvement and participation as a team is crucial to success. Terry agrees that to create the best solution for the client, everyone must be involved in the design process to collectively brainstorm, evaluate, eliminate, and refine an individual’s design ideas. The eventual solution should be an assimilation of everyone’s input, “never one person’s response.”

In addition to—and in apparent contradiction with—*team* creativity, FED management encourages autonomy and *self*-direction, which is intended to allow the designers to create on their own terms before they bring their ideas to the group. To accomplish this organizational objective, Terry and Lee are deliberately ambiguous in their descriptions, definitions, and explanations of job task, project management, and work process. Terry states, “I don’t want to tell them exactly what to do. I want to tell them some clues about how it might happen. . . . I’m interested in having them discover how to do it for themselves.” The designer’s existence at FED, according to Terry, is individually defined and determined: “I don’t control their lives. I don’t take that responsibility. It’s their lives and they’re the ones who can explore it here.” According to both Terry and Lee, the designers are typically given a project and told to “meet the needs of the client” with little or no further direction. Lee says, “There is a lot of self-direction. If you don’t have self-direction, if you don’t think about things yourself, if you aren’t motivated to explore things on an independent basis, then you’re

likely to be miserable.” The context or situation should drive the accomplishment of tasks, not a set of standards or procedures set forth by management. Observations indicated that management consistently used nondirection to encourage self-direction, an organizational practice that appears to empirically support Eisenberg’s (1984) idea that through the strategic use of ambiguity leaders can encourage creativity.<sup>3</sup>

The designers echo management’s philosophy of creativity and self-direction when describing their experiences, but they frame it mostly in terms of the extent of direction they receive from Terry and Lee. Jerry says, “Typically, goals and objectives are not spelled out. . . . They give you a lot of freedom . . . It’s set up where [the designers] manage themselves.” Chris explains that “Terry and Lee operate this company from a very idealistic standpoint; people should be free to do what they do best.” Each person is responsible for setting up and executing a job, including the management of people involved. Self-directed project management is emphasized. In fact, Chris says, “The minute you turn to Terry and Lee for those directions you’ve *failed*, right off. You have to expedite that yourself.”

Although this formal corporate philosophy of creative teamwork and autonomy is an important dimension at FED, a closer examination of the members’ everyday discourse reveals several contradictions and tensions between the officially stated culture and the everyday lived culture. Accordingly, the following critical interpretation will be conducted around three interrelated and progressive themes:

1. *The lived paradox of autonomy and control.* FED employees experience and recognize a paradoxical contradiction between the job requirement of self-direction and the explosive consequences of exercising autonomy.
2. *The institutionalization of ambiguity and tension.* As FED designers experience this paradoxical pattern of communication, their organizational and work roles as well as their overall understanding of life at FED becomes ambiguous.
3. *The naturalization of ambiguity.* Although the organization members reach a certain level of resolution by recognizing and relabeling or reframing the tensions associated with ambiguous communication

practices as well as their own ambiguous roles, they also naturalize the situation and their response to it, saying, *That's just the way it is.*

In effect, the members have a certain level of knowledge about the paradoxical context in which they must work, yet they largely fail to see the extent to which they actively participate in the discursive construction and reproduction of both an organizational reality that thrives on strategic ambiguity and a powerful system of control.

#### THE LIVED PARADOX OF AUTONOMY AND CONTROL

Although self-direction is management's stated philosophy, the design process, as well as daily activity, is held up to ambiguous guidelines and standards. Several paradoxical situations are perceived by the organizational members, including a desire for increased direction, management's refusal to provide it, and the explosive outbursts that consistently accompany their attempts to be autonomous.

Throughout their discourse, the designers frame FED's philosophy of creativity, autonomy, and self-direction as a lack of direction. They often bemoan the persistence of vague or absent direction from management, arguing that a large portion of their time is spent floundering, trying to obtain information from Terry or Lee about how to proceed. For example, Chris indicates feeling safer with a task-oriented job because it is "not as likely to get [me] in trouble" as a more creative project requiring self-direction. Even understanding the official philosophy and requirement of autonomous creativity, Chris relies, as do the other designers, on management to provide needed direction. Chris explains, "One, they are your boss, and two, they write checks; so no matter what, they are always at the very top. Because of that, I sort of depend on them to give me goals and objectives, but they don't." Robin, another designer, agrees with this assessment and adds that it is a constant frustration to be "unable to obtain enough direction to perform the job." Robin declares, "I don't know if I can take it. I don't know what to do, I don't know what I'm doing wrong." Val (in-house accountant) and

Jerry also feel the design team would be more effective if they were given more direction. Val says, “[Designers] will be told a certain amount about the job, go ahead and do a portion of the work, and then find out that what they’ve done is useless” because they did not get enough information about what to do or about who is responsible or accountable. “I know people are constantly waiting around, just waiting around trying to get the information they need . . . but it doesn’t seem to happen. I don’t know why. They [Terry and Lee] just don’t.” Jerry adds, “It’s not that [the designers] don’t want the responsibility. It just isn’t given to them from the forces above.”

These examples illustrate not only a perceived lack of direction from management, but the organization members’ desire for more clear direction from management. The following statement by Jerry epitomizes the perceived conflict between management philosophy and behavior:

The biggest challenge for Far End Design? Managing. Tell people what the fuck they are doing. Terry really could control the whole thing. But it is set up where they manage themselves. They *think* they manage themselves, but they know that ultimately everything they do has to get through Terry. It’s really weird. [Management] gives you a lot of freedom, but everything you do has to pass through them even though they say it doesn’t—but if it doesn’t they’ll come down on you.

Jerry’s statement captures the frustration expressed by the designers, who suggest throughout their discourse that they crave direction in order to perform their job but are unable to obtain it from management. “Self-direction” in this sense is not so much freedom as it is constraint. Further complicating this context of ambiguity (or perhaps contributing to it), the designers are constantly plagued by a paradoxical fear that asking for direction *as well as* working autonomously will result in an explosive outburst. Terry admittedly refuses to provide constructive direction at the outset of a project, but does not hesitate to provide immediate, humiliating, and sometimes vicious feedback and direction after the designers have begun work on a project. Virtually all of the staff members describe Terry as a “bomb” waiting to explode.



Most of the “team” discussions I observed were marked by a significant amount of yelling and screaming. Terry’s outbursts were frequent and fervent, as were the designers’ private conversations about these situations. In one instance, Chris reported:

I couldn’t get anyone together to start talking about the job, so I just took it upon myself to do some drawings. I thought it would be a good start to this process of elimination by pitching out some ideas to see what would happen. Very harmless thing, very harmless—took me about an hour. I showed them, and Terry just went *ballistic* on me, told me this was not the way it was supposed to be.

Chris then described a similar occurrence when another designer was pressed to get a project done and made a common mistake. “Terry proceeded to blow up and climb all over Robin for such a *stupid* mistake.” Val, who describes the FED’s team meetings as “those *fucking* times,” vividly recounts an “explosive” moment:

There was a problem with a client and a lot of miscommunication and the client ended up calling Terry and complaining about it. Terry just *exploded* at Lee and I and called us idiots because we didn’t know what was going on with the situation—managed to do it in front of everyone in the office . . . You walk out of a conversation and you feel all beat up.

These explosive moments consistently followed the organization members’ attempts to follow management’s philosophy of creativity and self-direction. One event, “the Creighton Project,” became the focus of recurrent storytelling by the organization members. After a long night of overtime, Pat and Chris were discussing their design progress with Terry. Terry began to yell at Pat, screaming that their ideas were “stupid” and did not reflect the project concept, adding that it was a wonder “such idiots” had been hired. Pat began to respond by arguing with Terry but, after several interruptions, told Terry to “fuck off!” and walked out of the office. Chris and Terry then began to argue and when Terry called Chris a “baby,” Chris answered, “Now you’ve really pissed me off! You’re gonna have to eat my dust!”

Interestingly, each of the designers indicated that this event was indicative of their own experience and shared a similar story. The tension and explosion accompanying the design process followed

a predictable pattern: After extensive work on a project, Terry would “explode” at either one or all of the designers, criticizing them for their failure to meet with company expectations and standards, “with a lot of yelling, pushing, shoving and people’s feelings getting hurt.” One designer (Val) states, “I don’t think I’ve ever seen a decision handled quietly around here . . . Terry is just that type of person—you know, stomp your feet and pound your hands on the table and throw a tantrum.” Even Lee stated that FED’s atmosphere is explosive: “The ways of solving things are very childlike ways” with people “blowing up” and “behaving as children” to solve problems.

The organizational life at FED presents a complex paradox. As the above discourses illustrate, autonomy is encouraged, indeed demanded, yet daily interactions belie this philosophy and reveal a tense, explosive atmosphere of tight control through ambiguity. Ambiguity is used to encourage creativity and freedom. However, as is demonstrated in the next section, not only is this strategy not experienced by the designers as “freedom” but, over time, this paradoxical structure becomes institutionalized and is associated with high levels of tension.

#### **INSTITUTIONALIZING AMBIGUITY AT FED**

Just as a bomb cannot explode continuously, the atmosphere at FED is not always explosive. According to the discourse of the members, however, when the atmosphere is not explosive, it is very tense. The everyday tension is in most cases attributed to the above paradox of freedom and autonomy and the lived experience of explosive control.

Terry is the first to admit that the “atmosphere in communications is very tense. We have people all bouncing off each other all the time . . . There’s a lot of emotions that get out.” Val attributes this tension to Terry, saying, “I wouldn’t be a designer here if my life depended on it, [because Terry’s behavior is] way too abrasive . . . [and] brings the tension level up just like someone turning a screw . . . It affects the communication all the way around.” Chris says that because the designers are intensely and personally in-

volved in their projects they internalize Terry's "bomb-like" behavior. This, in combination with the contradiction between management philosophy of autonomy and the actual practice of tight control, creates a nearly constant "feeling in the back of your mind that Terry will jump all over you" (Chris). For designers who are already emotionally involved, the tension "takes a toll" (Pat). Pat adds, "It's one of the most destructive environments I've ever worked in." The rollercoaster influence of Terry's mood on the designers "is unbelievable." One day might be destructive and negative, and the next fine: "The next afternoon Terry will come in, happy days are here again, we got the next big job, Terry's happy, we're all happy. Terry is very, very influential" (Pat).

The designers do not feel so much freedom and increased creativity as fear and anxiety. At this point, we can begin to see a critical extension of Eisenberg's (1984) claim that sophisticated managers can successfully utilize ambiguity to further the goals of the organization. Beginning with the premise that tension between the individual and the aggregate exists in every social system, Eisenberg asks a question that FED management would probably also ask: "How can cohesion and coordination be promoted while at the same time maintaining sufficient individual freedom to ensure flexibility, creativity and adaptability . . . ?" (p. 230). Eisenberg suggests that management can strategically and creatively state missions and goals in an ambiguous way, which "allows for multiple interpretations to exist among people who contend that they are attending to the same message—i.e., perceive the message to be clear" (p. 231).

FED offers a working example of how the strategic application of ambiguity can infuse the designers with creative tension and productive energy but does not foster multiple interpretations or a sense of individual freedom. In this way, ambiguity functions as a powerful means of control because the designers have difficulty dealing with and/or resolving the contradiction between what they *think* the message means and what Terry eventually tells them it means. And although clear top-down communication is not always the best way to get things done in the organization, the impact of ambiguity on the lives of organization members who rely on clarity

and direction to perform their jobs should not be minimized. Indeed, FED designers confront everyday ambiguity and the resultant paradox with confusion and frustration, sarcastically joking that they can “do whatever [they] want to do—as long as [Terry] likes it.”

Moreover, a sense of confusion and contradiction is exhibited in much of the designers’ discourse, as the following example illustrates. When talking about how management does not give goals and objectives, Chris responds with several inconsistent belief statements about the way things get done:

They do that [provide no direction] intentionally, and it is a very difficult thing. . . . If you’re the type of person that needs to get kicked to get things done [if you need direction] . . . you’re not going to get anything done because that’s not the way it works. . . . [Directives] stifle the inspiration and creative attitude that goes into the design.

Yet about 5 minutes later in the interview Chris says, “When you know what you have to do [when you get direction], it’s much easier to structure yourself in a way that you’ll get it done.” Finally, Chris says,

I wish I had more direction. I need some parameters. I need to know how far out I can go and where the center is and where are the boundaries. . . . I tend to feel safer with a task-oriented job. I’m not as likely to get in trouble.

Chris begins with the idea that direction is not the way people really get things done around FED, and within a few sentences directly contradicts that idea by contending that a person gets more done with directed tasks. Finally, Chris expresses a desire for more direction because standard-driven work is less painful and more productive. Chris’s responses to ambiguous goals and directives are contradictory and unclear. In addition, Chris’s response does not seem to reflect freedom of interpretation as much as it reflects an inability to make sense of the contradiction between the message of “do whatever you like here” and “the feeling in the back of your head” that doing whatever you like will most likely result in an explosive encounter.

As Eisenberg (1984) suggests, strategic ambiguity can promote unified diversity when the participating communicators have equal power and ability to articulate and actualize their individual goals within the parameters of an abstract mission, but at FED this is not the case. The designers' "goals" include receiving more direction about how to perform their jobs as well as experiencing a less ambiguous atmosphere, but these goals are in clear conflict with management's. Regardless of whether FED management is strategically applying it, ambiguity is institutionalized and functions to constrain the designers by creating a contradictory, tense, and volatile atmosphere that is reproduced and strengthened by ongoing organizational discourses.

Organization members expressed anger, frustration, confusion, and personal anguish when describing their environment. Moreover, as mentioned earlier, several of the designers perceive a link between work tension and stress-induced illnesses and relationship problems. Conversely, Terry says that this environment is thick with emotion and passion: "Like a virus. A healthy virus." In this setting, ambiguity is both process and product. To use Terry's apt metaphor, ambiguous management communication produces ambiguity in the workplace, which is strengthened and reproduced by the designers' responses, so that this painfully experienced system of meaning feeds and continues to infect not unlike a virus.

To deal with this ambiguity, FED members engage in a co-constructed process of systematically distorted communication. Rather than experiencing freedom through multiple interpretations or reaching consensus on abstractions through ambiguous discourse, as Eisenberg (1984) predicts, FED members experience discursive closure. Specifically, they do not confront the paradoxical situation to better it; they only confront it to conceal it.

#### THE NATURALIZATION OF AMBIGUITY

Through their everyday discursive responses to their situation, both management and the designers naturalize and neutralize the ambiguous, tense, and often explosive organizational reality with

expressions such as “That’s just how it works here” or “It’s just a process.” This process of naturalization effectively denies alternative interpretations of ambiguous meaning structures and thus reifies predominant organizational practices.

Terry dismisses the visibly tense atmosphere and describes the organization as “an Italian emotional family,” explaining that:

I’m very emotional, passionate, very excitable, which some people love being around, some people are very intimidated by that. And I think in the past the people that have been able to realize that those kinds of communications aren’t personal but more specific to the task are the ones that do the best. Where they don’t take it inside and realize we’re talking about the business of design, not about whether one person’s performing a certain way.

Repeatedly, Terry emphasizes that “the mood shifts aren’t personal; they’re the creative personality . . . and that’s what you need to do the kind of work we do.” In other words, the ambiguity and tension that marks the largest part of everyday life at FED “would be seen as chaos,” but is a “natural” part of the creative process, beyond the control or direction of either Terry or the organization. Terry’s discourse reinforces and naturalizes current organizational patterns and simultaneously allows management to deny any complicity in the construction of this reality by presenting it as normal, rational, and common to all design organizations. Moreover, removing or displacing management complicity from the construction of a strategically ambiguous structure helps to construct it as neutral or value-free.

In the following interview excerpt, Terry recounts the process of firing one of the designers, and in doing so illustrates a disturbingly ironic fusing of the need for tight control “in this business” and the separation of management from that control:

People would say that I’m very cutting and impatient—but I tend to have a lot more patience for the people . . . by putting up with certain behaviors until I can see if they are actually going to play out and adapt or if they’re going to really continue to screw things up. . . . The opportunity for them to be here is their own choice, it can be whatever they want it to be. I don’t control their lives, I don’t take that responsibility. It’s their lives and they’re the ones who can explore it here. . . . I’m probably more of a humanitarian than I

should be . . . to try to help them get to the point where they get creative value for the company . . . and if they don't, then eventually I have to, you know, do the amputation.

This and other statements frame and rationalize the organizational practices as natural, value-neutral processes of creative art. This statement also frames the designers' responses to ambiguity as their inability to work successfully within an "autonomous" system. Terry insists that "[the designers'] destiny is in their own hands," and that designers must be self-directed to succeed. Yet in this excerpt Terry implies that their choices are either "adaptation," which leads to producing "creative value" for the company, or "screwing things up," which leads to getting "amputated." Ironically, the designers' freedom to interpret and work autonomously within ambiguous standards somehow disappears if they do not conform to management's authority.

The designers also recognize and naturalize the organizational paradox they face, attributing it to either Terry's individual personality or their own inability to deal with the creative "nature" of design. For instance, Chris says matter-of-factly,

I wish [management] would control it a little better, but [they] won't. It gets back to their idealistic style of managing a job that requires emotion and very personal thoughts. It is very easy to leave yourself vulnerable . . . you leave yourself wide open to be hit.

Chris glosses over his desire for more direction and focuses on the idea that the emotional nature of this type of job requires the employee to be vulnerable enough to "be hit." Val also minimizes the importance of the designers' concerns and rationalizes management's philosophy and practices as "just their style . . . I've tried to explain [my concerns] to them, but they won't, they can't understand. It's not something that would relate to them." Through these statements and other everyday discourse, the designers rationalize the "nature" of the organization by saying, as Val does, "That's just how it works here," as if there were no other way of conducting the business of design.<sup>4</sup>

The organizational members recognize the ambiguous and contradictory philosophy of management but at the same time implicitly accept the confusing and tense nature of their jobs. If they talk

about it openly, they do so in a joking manner that emphasizes the inescapable nature of their “fucked up,” “unstable,” “dysfunctional,” and “destructive” organizational reality. Repeatedly, the designers would joke with me, saying things like:

Oh, you picked a *really* good one!

Are you *sure* you want to tackle this place?

You’re doing a parallel study on apes at the zoo, aren’t you?!

These comments imply both knowledge and acceptance of their culture, particularly when accompanied by a lighthearted tone and/or laughter. In another example, Pat refers to the ‘60s television show *Lost in Space* to joke about the inevitable inability of the designers to get the direction they need to perform their jobs, saying sarcastically, “I’d *kind of* like to know what’s going on around here,” followed laughingly by a lot of arm waving and, “Not that! Warning, warning Will Robinson!”

In a variety of ways, then, FED members rationalize their organizational reality in direct opposition to their own needs. Further, by participating in the maintenance of pathological organizational structures, they reproduce and reinforce a complex and paradoxical system of power.

Deetz (1992) contends that this reification can occur through a process of systematically distorted communication, which is

based not on a simple mismatch of fixed interests with a fixed expression, but on an interactionally determined reduction of certain experiences to other ones outside the intentional awareness of the interactant. The core issue is the way certain experiences and identities are preemptively preferred over equally plausible ones. (p. 174)

In this case, employees are to some extent aware of their participation in a tense, paradoxically ambiguous system. Giddens (1979) calls this knowledge *discursive penetration* and argues that “every social actor knows a great deal about the conditions of reproduction of the society of which he or she is a member” (p. 5).

However, while the FED members’ comments suggest a certain degree of discursive penetration, they simultaneously engage in



responses that naturalize the predominant meaning structures or deny alternative possibilities. Further, they are largely unaware that they participate in the co-construction of a complex system of systematically distorted communication and discursive closure. Even as they demonstrate a sophisticated awareness of ambiguous and contradictory paradoxes, their responses deny alternatives to the predominant meaning structures, thus suppressing critical evaluation of a particular system of norms, values, and practices.

Jerry, for example, displayed a high degree of discursive penetration of the situation, saying:

This is a structure problem, a management problem . . . because of the structure, which is *equal*, they've given all the employees this rope and said, "Take as much of this rope as you can, you're all equal." Well, we've all hung ourselves with it. It's like a Latino country. You've got fifteen different political factions who all control. They're all equal, they're all going to be president. But you've got the military, who says, "Do it, and we'll kick your butt." That's the problem.

These vivid metaphors illustrate an overall awareness and understanding of inconsistency within the organizational structure. Jerry realizes that FED management promotes yet precludes self-direction and, in addition, inadequately monitors the employees who are not capable of handling the responsibilities given them. In the next statement, Jerry's discourse reveals a complex understanding of the situation and at the same time reproduces, through naturalization, the paradoxical system being discussed: "[The designers] all have so much freedom to do what they want that they're just as much at fault [as management] . . . yet we *have* to give [freedom] up in order for the business to go forward."

Jerry's statements demonstrate that however sophisticated the discursive penetration of the situation might be, it nevertheless helps to construct a complex structure of control. Interspersed throughout Jerry's discourse are statements such as, "It's just the nature of the beast," that reify the dominant, but now neutralized, structure of meaning. Deetz (1992) describes this discursive tendency as a self-deceptive process where "individuals believe that they are engaging in communicative action—pursuing mutual understanding—but are actually engaged in a concealed strategic

action, even concealed from themselves” (p. 175). In other words, the designers may think they know what is *really* going on beneath the surface of everyday activities, yet even as they articulate their understanding, they reproduce—at a deeper level—a powerful system that continues to control and constrain them.

The following quotation captures the essence of the designers’ knowledge of and reproduction of this hegemonic system. Jerry stated that the explosive process was painful, but, like an addiction, was constantly reproduced and sustained by the designers:

It’s just a process, it’s a thing they do. They have this blow up and then everyone walks around like a zombie and bitches. And then the next day, they just, it’s just like they take their next shot in the arm and hop right in again.

Jerry acknowledges the co-construction of a self-destructive design process but at the same time objectifies and trivializes the problem. Accordingly, any discussion that might question the origins of or rationale for this particular construction is closed because the issue is not really important. Thus a contradictory, confusing, and volatile cycle of organizational practices continues.

Another example illustrates the extent to which systematically distorted communication allows the designers to make sense of ambiguous situations through *meaning denial* in order to continue and complete their jobs. Chris described an explosive, publicly humiliating interaction with Terry. Chris had been given ambiguous messages about the goals and expectations of a particular project, and after starting creative autonomous work on the project, Terry exploded with many statements, including, “That’s not what I want! That’s not what this project is all about! This is not a Disneyland amusement park!” Chris completed the account by saying emphatically, “Now *that* is direction! *That*—by Terry telling me *that* gives me a better understanding of at least what is *not*. I didn’t even know what it was not, before.” Rather than relabeling it “Terry’s personality” or “the way design business is,” as was the norm, Chris engaged in what Deetz terms *meaning denial*. This occurs when “one possible interpretation of a statement is both placed in the interaction and denied as meant” (1992, p. 194). Several interpretations of Terry’s explosive response are possible: Terry is insane;

Terry is screaming; Terry does not like what I did; explosive encounters are the nature of design; and so forth. Clearly, Chris received censure from Terry. But rather than choosing an interpretation that adds to the frustration of not being able to follow the organizational philosophy of autonomous creativity, Chris, to deal with the situation, transforms Terry's statement, "That's not what I want, that's not what this project is all about," into the sought after but nonpresent directive management style. This example may support Eisenberg's (1984) notion that ambiguity can foster creativity by allowing for multiple interpretations, but more important, it allows us to see just how far the designers have to go to make sense of ambiguity to continue to work.

So, at one level, discursive penetration helps the members make sense of and rationalize their experiences, enabling them to persevere. At another level, however, it deceptively allows them to believe they have a complex system of ambiguity figured out. These two examples illustrate how the organization members, through a process of systematically distorted communication, effectively close off discourse that might question the underlying ideology of organizational ambiguity and tension. FED designers, therefore, unwittingly participate in the discursive construction of a much stronger configuration of power and ambiguity.

## IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

One begins to wonder at this point why the designers stayed. Why, if this environment was so destructive, did they not quit? Although I cannot answer this question explicitly or concisely, it merits exploration. A month after my study was completed, Chris, Val, and Jerry were laid off without notice, with the explanation that business was too soft to support their services. Six weeks after the initial cut, Pat, who had the longest tenure with the company, was also laid off, leaving only Terry, Lee (the two principals), and Robin (the newest, lowest-paid graphics designer). Soon thereafter, the company relocated and reorganized with a new name and clientele.

My conversations with the organizational members over the past 4 years indicate how they feel, in retrospect, about their experiences at FED. Both Chris and Pat expressed one primary reason for staying in an admittedly dysfunctional and personally destructive atmosphere: "I didn't think I had any choice." Although they were dissatisfied with the system, they perceived FED as a way to make a living—perhaps easier than searching for a job during the Persian Gulf War when the market for "luxury" services was low. Lack of choice does not completely answer the question of why they stayed, however. They also explained that as soon as they began working in similarly structured organizations *without* the paradoxical situations, they realized that "[Terry's] idea of the way creative design works is totally fucked . . . I—we all thought that was the way it was, that, that—the whole thing pisses me off—when I think about what we *thought* was real . . . it really wasn't, you know?" Arguably, as this statement suggests, the designers stayed at FED for as long as they did precisely because they were able to naturalize and rationalize the system as unavoidable, the "natural design" of design.

Through the presentation of this case study, I want the reader to get a sense of how the members of FED lived in and coped with an ambiguous and destructive workplace environment. In their everyday work lives, the designers were presented with the contradictory messages of *this job requires autonomy and self-direction and attempts at working autonomously will result in explosive consequences*. The paradox of these competing messages, as well as the anticipation of humiliating, public, and vicious censure, created an ambiguous, tense, and fearful atmosphere, in which the outcomes of one's actions were unpredictable and might result in a yelling match with the boss. Although each of the designers at FED had moments of frivolity and joy, overall this was not a happy place to be.

Yet, for many reasons, the designers persevered. They did so in whatever ways they could, by drinking, taking out their stress in their private lives, withdrawing, and so forth. However, they also were able to reconcile the contradictions of their workplace culture by convincing themselves that it was natural. All of the organization

members provided a rationalization of the paradoxes that affected their everyday work lives, and by objectifying pathological communication as *just the way things work around here*, they reinforced specific self-limiting parameters for discussion. In other words, by allowing the management-defined *essence* of design work to remain unchallenged, they deflected discussions that might have questioned or contradicted underlying organizational ideologies, hence shutting down their own possibilities for change. This acceptance and active perpetuation of a system that controlled them in painful ways is a good example of hegemony at work.

By focusing on the ways ambiguity is strategically applied and responded to, we can more fully appreciate the complexities of this concept. Further, placing ambiguity in the context of ideologically embedded structures of hierarchy, power, and authority allows us to examine critically how ambiguity can function as a powerful means of control over employees.

In this case study, the communicative practices of both the designers and managers provide us with a means of better understanding the idea that power is not simply a monolithic structure that is imposed on organizational members. Rather, FED members are both enabled and constrained by the formal and informal organizational logic at work. At one level, organization members can discursively penetrate the ambiguity presented by the requirement of autonomy and the practice of tight control. At another level, however, they seem unaware of the extent to which they actively participate in the naturalization, and therefore reproduction, of ambiguity, tension, and control.

As critical researchers, we need to acknowledge and more fully address the complex and often surprising workings of power in organizations. This is not only crucial for our own edification, but for the critical goal of providing organizational actors with alternatives. As Thomas (1993) states,

Critical ethnography begins from the premise that knowledge is a resource as powerful as any tangible tool. As a tool, new ways of thinking become implements by which we can *act upon* our world instead of passively being *acted upon* (p. 61, emphasis in original).

The insights we gain from a critical reading of ambiguity can influence the ways we think about and enact our organizational structures, our relations with self and others, and our place in the construction and reproduction of these structures. As the artists of FED could tell us, knowledge of possibilities and alternatives comes through imaginative and creative thinking about the ways our social worlds are—and could be—constructed.

A final FED example may be illustrative, not only of the possibility for change but of the ethical dilemmas all ethnographers face when they realize their presence can affect others' lives: Eight months ago, I sent a version of this article to one of the designers I keep in touch with, Chris. Six months ago, or roughly 4 years after I completed my study at FED, Chris called me to tell me that he had finally quit his latest design job. After 4 years of talking about going to work for himself, Chris said, "I finally reached the end of my rope. I'm sick of it, and I won't put up with their bullshit any more. So I took an extended leave of absence, and I'm not going back." Chris had told me versions of this story numerous times before, but had never actually acted on his impulses, so I asked what the impetus had been for this actual, long-awaited change and he replied, "I read your paper, and that's why I'm calling." Shocked at the implications of his statement, I laughed and said, "Wow, did you really read it? I hope you skipped the heavy stuff at the beginning." He agreed that the theory was hard to read, but added, "When I read the part about us . . . I was so moved. I thought it was only me. And what you said—well, what we said too—that was powerful stuff." As Chris continued to talk, it began to sink in that he had quit his job partly because he had read my article, a critical reading of his and others' experiences. On one hand, he was happy, so I was happy for him. I also think that starting his own business was the right move, and I (as a friend) had been pushing him toward that since we met. On the other hand, my interpretation of FED—indeed, my being there—changed his life and may have changed others', for better or worse, and that feeling of responsibility will always be in the back of my mind.

## NOTES

1. When asked to describe environmental design, Terry gave the following response:

Some people think it's a young profession, but it's actually been around forever. The Egyptians. The Zuni Indians. The cave paintings at Lascaux. Michaelangelo would be my favorite environmental designer. Do you think somebody asked him to design something to cover up that big blank ceiling? In retail we define environmental design as a way to link the market with the place. Sociologist Ray Oldenburg, in a wonderful book called *The Great Good Place*, talks of third places—home is first, work is second—a third place is where people gather and talk and exchange ideas. Our mission is to create third places. Or what we call public living rooms.

2. The names of the company and the organization members have been changed to protect anonymity.

3. One could analyze this situation in terms of self-discipline through authoritative appeals to autonomy. Sennett (1980) provides an excellent discussion of how the promotion of autonomy can serve to disguise authority and simultaneously produce self-discipline.

4. One might ask if this really is the way most design firms operate. Two years after the completion of this study, both Chris and Pat answered this question with vehemence: "No!" Both were working as designers in similarly sized and structured businesses and expressed bitterness toward both Terry and their experiences at FED (personal conversations, 1992-1994).

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