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The Quintessential Quest: An Ethnographic Exercise in Revealing Meaning through Observation

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Recently a body of knowledge has begun to be amassed regarding organic organizational growth and natural integration of information systems. Growth through knowledge management has been evolving since the 1960s. Although Drucker’s assertion that “every knowledge worker… is responsible for a contribution that materially affects the capacity of the organization to perform and to obtain results” (Drucker, 1967) was prophetic, the profound impact that technology would have on the organization’s structural dynamic would not be realized for several years. The overall effectiveness of an organization is no longer measured merely by how quickly new products and services are brought to market but also by how effectively the firm deploys its human capital resources as well. Ethnography can reveal the deeper meaning of how and why people, systems and environments influence perception. By actively observing people in natural environments, leaders can gain a deeper understanding of the cultures and sub-cultures that exist within the firm. Understanding is a starting point from which environment-appropriate information systems can be developed and integrated into an organization that support and encourage the cultivation of knowledge bases and knowledge workers that in turn bring about innovations that forge a competitive advantage for the firm.

Burns (1978) conceptualized the transformational leader asserting “[transformational leadership] occurs when one or more persons engage with others in such a way that leaders and followers raise one another to higher levels of motivation and morality…” In the absence of understanding that which motivates and shapes the perceptions of one’s staff, how can leaders effectively create or sustain work environments that encourage innovation? Developing the skill of active observation can help to create competitive advantage. In American society, cartoons are
generally assumed to be created and broadcast for children to view on Saturday mornings or after school. Often considered mindless entertainment by some, cartoons have reflected many socio-cultural aspects of society. The visual dexterity of cartoon imagery creates a bridge the spans the physical boundaries of reality as well as the gaps that can exist in cultural categories set in language. This article is an exercise in content analysis. The purpose of this brief ethnography is to examine a segment of an episode of the 1964 primetime broadcast of the animated series Jonny Quest to uncover symbolism and meaning that can be gleaned from a seemingly passive activity such as cartoon viewing. On the surface the analysis of a cartoon may appear frivolous. However, the exercise is intended to encourage a leader to think beyond that which is readily apparent. Paraphrased, the Golden Mean Triangle theory simply states, the smaller is to the greater, as the greater is to the whole. Understanding of the smaller nuances is the starting point of the transformation of the entire organization.

**Context: The backdrop of environments**

Considerable evidence exists supporting the assertion that organizations are greatly influenced by events of the past. One must have an understanding of the behaviors of key leaders, strategic decisions and other factors that have influenced the current culture of an organization. The content analysis of the Jonny Quest episode discussed in the paper is an example of active observation. To set the tone for the content analysis, some basic background information regarding the subject is provided.

The Jonny Quest animated series was based on the cartoon strip Terry and the Pirates (Blosser, 1998). As one of the first animated series to attempt to portray characters in realistic settings, Jonny Quest aired on ABC from March 11, 1965 until September 2, 1965. The exotic locations and emphasis on scientific gadgets and high-tech hardware were reflective of the
United States advances in space explorations and expanding globalization in general. The episode Adventure in Calcutta introduces viewers to the main characters in the story.

The original animated series has five main characters. Jonny Quest, a boy of approximately 10 years of age, is the central character. Dr. Benton Quest is an American scientist and Jonny’s father. Race Bannon is a US government agent assigned to protect the groups and Hadji, an 11 year old orphan boy from Calcutta, India, is Jonny’s adopted brother. Jonny also has a bulldog named Bandit that accompanies the group on each adventure. While Adventure in Calcutta was not the pilot episode of the series, viewers get a solid overview of the storyline, era-specific stereotypes and the general dynamics of the world-traveling group.

Adventures in Calcutta

The observations noted were made based on a 10 minute segment of an episode. While observing the episode the elements of observation were applied. Mauss (2007) provides a working framework for conducting field observations. Through gathering tales, collecting variants, and noting traditions specific to the environment being observed a researcher can begin to derive context and meaning. The objectives of ethnography are learning and discovery rather than testing of preconceived theories. Each episode of Jonny Quest opens with a recap of previous adventures and perils that the group has faced. Specifically, the treks through jungles, evading enemy attacks and the use of high-tech devises are depicted in the opening credits. The scenes of the Quest group flying in a private jet, piloted by Race Bannon, set the tone and atmosphere of each episode.

Adventures in Calcutta opens with the Quest group viewing the ending of a film reel of the explosive ending of a previous mission. The scene from the film displays some sort of ray-like devise that is being used to cause an avalanche. The avalanche seals the door to a structure
that has been built into the side of a mountain. The film reel has been sent to the group by Pasha Peddler of India. Race Bannon comments that Pasha has probably sent them the reel via C.O. D., cash on delivery. The group reflects fondly on Pasha Peddler, recalling that is how they came to adopt Hadji in Calcutta. The memory of the trip to Calcutta becomes the focus of the storyline from this point forward.

Dr. Quest has been asked to Calcutta as guest lecturer at the University of Calcutta. While at the University, he demonstrates a scale model of a ultra high frequency sonic wave devise. Dr. Quest dressed in a white shirt, slacks, tie and lab coat is in sharp contrast to the other scientists that are wearing what appear to be traditional robes and headdresses. Notably, no female scientists are in this group as Dr. Quest addresses them as gentlemen. The demonstration of the sonic wave devise is complete with the destruction of Manhattan, City of New York, USA via sonic waves. At the conclusion of the demonstration, Dr. Quest asserts the duty of scientists is to explore the use of sonic waves for the good of “mankind.”

At the entrance of the University of Calcutta a partially dressed Indian boy plays the Pungi flute as Race and Jonny Quest look on. Unknown to them, they are also being watched by two Indian men in a car. Although it appears to be mid-afternoon, the streets are noticeably vacant. The boy playing the flute is without shoes and has a very large gem attached to his turban. Just as Dr. Quest comes out to meet Race and Jonny, one of the men who have been watching them throws a knife at Dr. Quest. The Indian boy blocks the knife and saves Dr. Quest’s life. Jonny, believing that the Indian boy attempted to harm his father, attacks the boy. The boy protects himself from Jonny and is thanked by Dr. Quest for saving his life. The boy and Jonny shake hands and agree to become friends. As a gesture of thanks, the Quest party invites the boy to lunch.
Meanwhile, the Indian attacker reports back to his leader, acknowledging his failure to complete his mission. Interestingly, the Indian assassin speaks to his leader in English, with a very strong accent. However, when he was in the car with the other assassin they spoke in a regional Indian dialect.

While at a traditional Indian restaurant, viewer see Hadji formally dressed; shown both wearing shoes and barefoot. Speaking in broken English that is not generally associated with an uneducated person, he explains that he learned Judo and English from an American Marine. From the window of the restaurant, Hadji see the assassin in a nearby second story window. Hadji goes to investigate with Jonny’s urging. Once outside, Hadji plays the Pungi flute to levitate a rope that Jonny then climbs to peer into the window. A cobra emerges from a nearby basket as Hadji plays the flute. Closing the basket, Hadji continues to play and Jonny climbs the robe. Making noise outside of the window, the assassin peers out to see Hadji standing in the street. Dressed in a tunic, slacks, shoes and a turban with large gem, the assassin refers to Hadji as a beggar and attempts to dismiss him. Performing some magic tricks as a distraction, Hadji prevents the assassin from noticing Jonny, who is hanging from an eave of the balcony. The 10 minute episode segment ends at this point.

Other observations

The villains speak in fragmented regional dialects that could be interpreted as indication of limited education. The English that is spoken appears to be inconsistent with manner in which the dialects were spoken. There were a number of hesitations in the dialectal speech. The same level of hesitation was not present in the English that was spoken. The lack of ease with speaking either language would cause one to wonder if the assassins were of Indian origin. The coloration of non-white characters was also notable. The ethic characters were frequently
depicted in a very dark manner with limited clothing and without shoes. This portrayal may be inconsistent with the realities of India in the 1960s.

This episode of Jonny Quest attempted to demonstrate American technological expertise. Further, in this episode Dr. Quest has been asked to investigate events that could be chemical weapon experiments; implying that the Indian government was in capable or poorly equipped to undertake the investigation themselves.

**Conclusion**

The brief sample observation provides a vantage point from which deeper meaning can be drawn from the environments and interaction displayed. Cartoons often reflect the beliefs and perceptions of the societies that render them. The Jonny Quest series was revolutionary in that it attempted to take the American viewer to other parts of the world. Although filled with era-specific stereotypes, the series showcased the importance of science, critical thinking and problem solving as well as adaptation to other cultures. Applied in business environments, ethnography can be pivotal in gaining an understanding not only of the firm’s customers but the organizational dynamic as well.

Mauss (2007) likened ethnographic studies to caricatures. Similar to the Golden Mean Triangle theory, ethnography is a study of proportion and relational interdependencies. Leaders and subordinates have a dyadic relationship. Considered in the context of the Golden Mean ratio, transformational leaders influence subordinates; subordinates influence the organization’s achievement of its objectives. Organizations should consider the incorporation of ethnographic studies as part of the strategic planning process. The understanding of customers needs and perceptions can help to create or sustain competitive advantage in changing markets.
References


