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Conflicts between founder and CEO narratives: Counter-narrative, character and identification in organisational changes

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Abstract: Corporate communication has long been viewed through the lens of narrative and storytelling. Over time, a wide variety of conceptions have been developed in this field with respect to the special circumstances regarding the organisational communicative situation, which differs from other materialisations of narrative. In this article, however, we will explore the value of a more general approach, which pays attention to some of the recurring features of narrative across media and communicative situations. We will approach organisational narrative through common analytical and narratological concepts such as master narrative and counter-narrative, character, identification and actantial roles. Specifically, we investigate the organisational change in the Danish-owned multinational company Danfoss and examine how the materialisation of a founder narrative and a CEO master narrative each evoke different expectations, reactions and counter-narratives among the employees. Our empirical material consists of public communication in, from and around the organisation, and focus group interviews conducted at Danfoss China.

Keywords: counter-narratives, organisational communication, founder narratives, narrative, organisational storytelling

1 Introduction

In 1933, the engineer Mads Clausen began developing expansion valves in the attic of his parents’ farm. This was the beginning of the story of a young, hard-working engineer who, together with his wife Bitten, laid the foundation of the

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multinational company Danfoss with the motto “It’s good, but it can always be better”. Today, the company has more than 25,000 employees (Danfoss).

Mads Clausen served as CEO until his death in 1966. Bitten took over, appointed a new CEO and set up the Bitten and Mads Clausen Foundation, which means that the family controls 99% of the voting shares in the business. Bitten and Mads Clausen’s son Jørgen Mads Clausen gained a seat on the Executive Committee in 1992 and was appointed CEO from 1996 until Niels Bjørn Christiansen took over in 2008.

Although the company is still chaired by second-generation family member Jørgen Mads Clausen and owned by the Clausen family today, the shift from Clausen to Christiansen in 2008 was not only a shift from a family member CEO to a non-family member CEO. It was also a shift in culture. It was a shift away from an inclusive culture with lifetime employment towards a performance culture where employees could expect to get what was termed “honest feedback” and with consequences for low performance. As such, it was also a shift from one master narrative to another – from a family values-based founder narrative to an efficiency-oriented business school narrative.

In this article, we will examine how the materialisation of the founder narrative and the CEO master narrative each evoke different expectations, reactions and counter-narratives among the employees. The article treats organisational communication as narrative on the same premise as other kinds of narratives (e.g. oral storytelling and fictional narratives) rather than a distinct mode of non-fictional communication. As such, the article approaches organisational communication as showcasing sameness rather than difference within narratology, following Fisher’s observation that “all forms of human communication can be seen fundamentally as stories, as interpretations of aspects of the world occurring in time and shaped by history, culture and character” (1989: 57). Thus, as pointed out by Fenton and Langley, “any instance of communication [...] can be considered through the lens of narrative and be assessed in terms of what Fisher (1984) calls its ‘narrative probability’ (internal coherence and consistency) and ‘narrative fidelity’ (resonance with listeners or readers’ values and historical and cultural understandings)” (2011: 1175).

Nonetheless, there is of course a major difference between organisational storytelling and other forms. Most significantly, an organisation’s narrative is not told in one text or document, nor in one voice or by one narrator. In The living handbook of narratology, “narrator” is defined as follows: “In the literal sense, the term ‘narrator’ designates the inner-textual (textually encoded) highest-level speech position from which the current narrative discourse as a whole originates and from which references to the entities, actions and events that this discourse is about are being made” (Margolin 2014: Paragraph 1). To many narrative theorists,
the presence or at least postulation of a narrator is indispensable in the analysis of narrative. But to others, it is counter-productive to maintain an idea of a general presence of a narrator across genres and discourses. Some have argued for focusing on “narration” instead, leaving the concept of “the narrator” to discourse types where a telling agent is manifest (Bordwell 1985). Others, with a focus on multi-medial or transmedial narrative (e.g. Ryan 2012; Wolf 2017), have argued that we should redirect our attention away from the question of the narrator towards other aspects of the narrative. According to Wolf,

narrative is a semiotic macroform of organizing and communicating representation signs [...] that are used for constructing a world or parts thereof [...] by referring to meaningful, chronologically ordered events which are centered on the experience of anthropomorphic characters in a given chronotopos so that these experiences can be re-experienced by the addressee of the narrative (Wolf 2017: 260).

Transferring Wolf’s definition to organisational narrative, we see how it gives room for not only multi-medial storytelling, but also for multi-discursive storytelling. An organisation’s narrative finds expression in a vast amount of discourses and documents, all representing and constructing the organisation’s “chronotopos” or, as we would prefer to coin it, storyworld by referring to a sensemaking chronology for the organisation’s development, its victories and defeats, often with a focus on how different managers, co-workers, customers or other internal and external stakeholders have played an active part in this development. The communicative roles in organisational narratives are therefore also less unified than in many other narratives. The “addressees” of the narrative are both external and internal to the organisation. “Narrators” are found in the communication department of the organisation as well as in the lunch room where employees tell about their memories of and experiences with the organisation. The management and their “helpers” will of course try to claim authority and control over the organisation’s narrative, but employees and external stakeholders might be telling other stories, counteracting the mastering and “authorised” narrative of the management.

This diversity in both narrators and narratees and in discourses and document types is most certainly also the case for the organisational narrative we will examine in the following. Our data comes from public documents such as websites, marketing material and press material as well as from internal documents and meetings we were given access to in relation to an investigation of the company’s communication of their new China strategy (in 2016), and from focus group interviews of employees in Danfoss China conducted in September 2016. In that sense, the story (the meaningful, chronologically ordered events) is being communicated through a great variety of representational signs, texts and dis-
courses. Nonetheless, it is possible to approach this story as a narrative that finds manifestation in different outputs.

Our general aim is to contribute to an increased understanding of sameness and difference within narratology when applied to corporate communication. Our understanding of “narratology” is not limited to the narrow understanding originally suggested by Tzvetan Todorov, who considered the “science of narrative” (“la science du récit” [1969: 10]) a subproject to Structuralism. Instead, we lean on the broader conception suggested by e.g. Dorrit Cohn when she defined narratology as “the rigorous and systematic analysis of narrative language” (1999: vii) and include the multitude of approaches to and conceptions of narrative that have developed from sociology, cognitive studies, rhetoric, etc. We are aware that some scholars prefer this heterogenous grouping to be labelled “narrative studies” instead, but we consider it a matter of words. By sticking to “narratology”, we wish to pay our respect to the Structuralist endeavour, which we still consider the core of many of the concepts that have been developed subsequently.

We will however narrow our focus to the concepts of counter-narrative and master narrative. These concepts come out of sociology but have lately taken a significant role within corporate communication. More specifically, they provide a framework for explaining the dynamic shifts between the controllable and the uncontrollable in organisational communication. We will focus on how master narratives materialise in an organisational context in relation to changes in strategic direction and top management, and the effect this has on the company’s identity for internal stakeholders.

The article will open with a short presentation on corporate storytelling and our specific interest in this, followed by a brief presentation of the case. This will be followed by an introduction to the concepts of master narratives and counter-narratives leading to an examination of two conflicting master narratives in our case study – how they are being expressed and how the employees react to and talk about them. Special focus will be on the differences in the actantial schemes for the narratives and the differences in empathy between them.

2 Corporate Storytelling

“Narrative”, often conceptualised as “storytelling”, has played an important role in business and organisational communication and studies thereof since the 1990s (Norlyk et al. 2013). Previously, business communication was essentially limited to “marketing” and “public relations” – i.e. selling the product or communicating with the press. In the 1970s, customers, public organisations and other stakeholders began demanding more insight into the companies, and the general
understanding of business and organisation began to change (Cornelissen 2011: 5). The organisations not only needed to coordinate the production and sales lines; the general picture or brand also had to be in coordination, and the focus had to be on the organisation as a whole. This is where the understanding of business organisations as “corporate” becomes manifest. Organisations were no longer just a collection of separate divisions or departments, but a “body” (corpus) with “limbs” that need to be synchronised and coordinated. In this perspective, the communication of and within the organisation becomes imperative and has to be aligned across divisions and levels. The idea of having a corporate narrative (a story and/or plotline) grew out of this development, and “corporate communication” and “corporate storytelling” have become acknowledged terms for a communicative framework for management’s strategic coordination of all internal and external stakeholder communication.

Cornelissen and Harris, however, have argued that theories that have taken the idea of “corporate identity” to the level of claiming the existence of a “corporate personality” are “prone to produce explanatory fictions” by which

the relationship between a corporate personality and corporate identity has been given an intriguing and suggestive theoretical status, the “acting in character”, and this label with its connotations is then used as the very explanation of the total set of phenomena, i.e. corporate behaviour and communication for all kinds of organisations and in various organizational settings (Cornelissen & Harris 2001: 57).

Their claim is that conceptions of corporate personality rest on a psychological essentialism no longer valid in the field of psychology and are empirically flawed. Organisations’ and companies’ identities are seldom monolithic but the result of permanent negotiation and development and have offspring in many different aspects – some evolving internally in the organisation, others externally. Such dialogical stories “are characterized by being relational constructions in which more than one ‘reading’ of events, character, plot and moral are present” (Beech et al. 2009: 337).

Cornelissen and Harris opt for an approach to corporate identity that takes “all corporate expressions” as its point of departure and sees identity as emerging from rhetorical and symbolic practices, some being controlled by management. Here, they are in line with the understanding of organisation as being constituted by communication (see McPhee et al. 2000) but somehow neglect the fact that communication and language generate an idea of an organisational “agent”, a subject (a corpus, a body), for both external and internal stakeholders. Organisations and companies are given an anthropomorphic-metonymic function in the communication of their business and values: Companies act, make statements, they even “attack” (e.g. markets), “regret” (e.g. investments), etc., although we
all know it is much more complicated than this. We can explain this by turning to Lakoff and Johnson’s conception of “personification” as a cognitive, ontological metaphor “which allow us to make sense of phenomena in the world in human terms” (Lakoff & Johnson 1980: 34).

The level of complexity within corporate communication has increased immensely after the development of the World Wide Web and social media. However, an organisation’s story is not only told by the communication department on behalf of the CEO. Stakeholders, such as employees, customers, suppliers, politicians, NGOs or the press, co-narrate the corporate story. But these voices are out of the corporation’s control, and contemporary approaches to corporate communication struggle to accommodate “resistance”, either in the form of external stakeholders’ critique of dispositions and developments, or of internal stakeholders’ lack of understanding of strategic decisions.

In earlier theories of organisational communication, resistance was defined as something that had to be eliminated. Dent and Goldberg (1999) trace the phrase resistance to change back to the earliest sources and discover that some of the most influential publications explicitly feature the phrase in their titles:

- “How to deal with Resistance to Change”, by Lawrence (1954)
- “Overcoming Resistance to Change”, by Dreese (1955)
- Overcoming Resistance to Change, by Flower (1962)

Viewing resistance as the problem has recently been challenged. Thus, resistance is perceived as a natural part of a successful organisational change process rather than a problem to be eliminated:

- “Shifting the paradigm: reevaluating resistance to organizational change”, by Mathews and Linski (2016).
- “Reframing resistance to organizational change”, by Thomas and Hardy (2011).

It is within this paradigm that our article contributes by taking a narratological communicative perspective on the role of resistance in relation to changes in the corporate narrative of a company in development. Our general aim is to increase the understanding of sameness and difference within narratology when applied to corporate communication and corporate identity-making.

To some degree, corporate storytelling has benefited from the conceptual refinements of narratology and narrative studies as they have developed within the framework of Arts and Humanities and Sociology, but being primarily used in the
world of communicative practitioners (and not theorists), the conceptions have been characterised by a relatively high degree of looseness. And where concepts like storyline, plot, metaphor etc., and models like e.g. Greimas’ actantial model within narratology have been used as analytical tools, they function as a means for producing and keeping or taking control over the corporate story.

3 Presentation of the case

The image of Danfoss throughout history has been that of a family-run business. Mads Clausen’s role as both a self-made entrepreneur and the “founding father” of the company served as the basis of a very strong brand with clear organisational values. Hiring was often done based on personal relations and local care, and the company has had a high degree of employee loyalty. Danfoss was known for taking family relations into consideration when it came to layoffs. In 1956, they opened a Welfare and Interest Office that was intended to help employees with development and in cases of incapacity. The company also earned a reputation as being environmentally, ethically and culturally responsible – long before Corporate Social Responsibility became a common concept for all larger companies.

Even though many of these activities have been maintained, the general picture of Danfoss changed starting in the autumn of 2008. The worldwide financial crisis, along with the subsequent global recession, low business activity and high debts due to some major acquisitions, called for rapid changes. Therefore, drastic action was needed. In 2008, a new Executive Committee was established, and Niels Bjørn Christiansen was appointed CEO.

With a new corporate strategy referred to as “Core & Clear” launched in January 2010, new performance-oriented initiatives such as Key Performance Indicators, divestments and outsourcing began. This change signalled a cultural shift in Danfoss (Lunde 2010). A journey with a clear perspective on the future was depicted and initiated, and it was formulated as a shift away from the current Danfoss heading for a new future. Mads Clausen’s initial vision was revisited, and only parts of it were considered truly relevant in what was soon known as “the new Danfoss”. The original manufacturing culture, consisting of automation and mass production, was replaced by a supply chain mindset, where what doesn’t contribute to differentiation should be outsourced. The inclusive culture with life-

1 See e.g. the Wikipedia entry on the company’s history, where the personal story of its founder Mads Clausen is foregrounded. (Danfoss. In Wikipedia.)
2 Danfoss’ own presentation of the company’s history documents this. (Danfoss. The Danfoss Story: Fragments of Danfoss’ History: www.danfoss.com)
time employment was changed to an “either you are with us or against us” culture as well as a performance-driven paradigm with severe consequences for low performance. The old Danfoss culture where “Everybody does OK” was substituted with a performance culture including “honest feedback”.

The changes were drastic. Along with the change of strategic focus, 2,000 employees were laid off worldwide. Many employees acknowledged the necessity of the new strategy and were satisfied with the changes (Lykke 2011), but some employees found it difficult to adapt to and identify with “the new Danfoss” which was perceived as a performance-driven culture – a conflict still present among some employees today, giving rise to counter-narratives among them.

4 Master narratives and counter-narratives

The concept of counter-narrative was originally developed in the fields of sociology and identity research. Molly Andrews defines counter-narratives as “the stories which people tell and live which offer resistance, either implicitly or explicitly, to dominant cultural narratives” (2004: 1). As such, counter-narratives are stories of resistance that form the basis on which new identities can be established.

The range of areas in which the concept has been applied has developed since the 1990s and early 2000s: race, gender, sexuality, ethnicity and class, but also the fields of corporate communication theory. With reference to Andrews’ definition, Frandsen, Lundholt and Kuhn state that “[t]he most common distinction pointed to by those who use the notion of counter-narratives is between a preferred organizational story and an alternate vision, one that seeks to contradict or defy the authoritative version” (2017: 2). Here, the counter-narratives offer differing interpretations of organisational realities than those constituted by “dominant” (Boje 2001) or “authoritative” (Kuhn 2008) narratives. In this article, we will refer to dominant and authoritative narratives as “master narratives” insofar as they most certainly have as function to “master” the communication of the organisation, both internally and externally. The standard practice is that the master narrative is “authored” by top management and “told” by the communication department in different discourses. The master narrative functions as a general storyline for strategic development of the organisation and its value propositions. But master narratives can be met with resistance or critique. Internal stakeholders (the employees) might find the master narrative out of sync with daily life in the company; external stakeholders might find the master narrative hypocritical when compared with the praxis of the company (see e.g. Lundholt 2017). To understand the master narrative in depth, one has to understand the evolving counter-narratives.
5 Counter and master – a complex relation

The reciprocal relation between counter and master – depicted by Bamberg and Andrews in their introduction to *Considering Counter-Narratives* as “a positional category, in tension with another category” (2004: x) – is rather complex. As explained by Jensen et al., “[i]t is precisely the relational nature of ‘master’ and ‘counter’-narratives that makes them problematic to define categorically and uniformly, as they evade criteria that apply across contexts and situations” (2017: 87). To add to the complexity, counter-narratives and master narratives may shift places. This can be explained by the dynamic ways in which they evolve.

According to Gabriel, “counter-claims do not necessarily crystalize into counter-narratives unless they manage to establish a narrative coherence of their own” (2017: 210). He further explains that what was initially recognised as isolated voices may in the right circumstances “gather momentum, detail, cohesion and credibility, coagulating into fully blown counter-narratives” (212). In that sense, “counter-narratives emerge out of various counter-claims” (209).

The dynamic development of counter-narratives can furthermore be traced to the evolution of master narratives, as “[w]hat is dominant and what is resistant are not, of course, static questions, but rather forever shifting placement” (Bamberg & Andrews 2004: x). This implies that if master narratives – as suggested by Bamberg and Andrews – ‘normalizes’ and ‘naturalizes’ certain events and actions as routine, then what used to be normal and natural may become abnormal and unnatural. Gabriel (2017) shows that – based on the changing perception of female genital practices in Kenya – “counter-narratives can and often do turn into master narratives” (211). What was previously a counter-narrative (the feminist narrative against genital mutilation) becomes a master narrative along with the bans on female genital practices.

Another intricacy we can add to the complex nature of the counter/master relation is that they may not be oppositional as in the case from Kenya. As explained by Kuhn, the conflict between authoritative texts and counter-narratives “could take the form of dramatic resistance to a dominant narrative, but are more likely to be observable as subtle changes that alter the authoritative text in a gradual fashion” (2017: 22).

In the Danfoss case, the known weaknesses within the organisation initially emerging as isolated voices or counter-claims (such as lack of customer mindset, lack of transparency, manufacturing culture, inefficiency) were added up to one coherent counter-narrative by top management providing a rationale for making the strategic change. Although the counter-narrative in “the old Danfoss” consisted of numerous isolated voices or counter-claims which had been part of the culture for years, top management transformed them into a coherent counter-nar-
rative of “the old Danfoss” when the financial crisis emerged. Until then, the counter-claims were simply part of daily business. With the launch of Core & Clear, the employees had to perceive “the old Danfoss” as a cohesive narrative of a weak and unambitious organisation – formulated by top management as follows:

We have historically accepted too much defocus and complacency...
- Below average financial performance
- Unresolved strategic issues [...]
- Too high level of complexity and lack of alignment, leading to lack of focus (Danfoss 2010: 3)

Moreover, the Core & Clear communication package was built around a “To” and a “From”. As such, the shift from “the old Danfoss” to “the new Danfoss” was a drastic experience for most employees, as top management had developed and defined the coherent plot of the counter-narrative (and the master narrative) in isolation, only to be exposed to the employees initially. Consequently, what used to be normal and accepted business procedures suddenly became abnormal and unacceptable. As a consequence, the new and the old Danfoss narratives evolved into two conflicting master narratives due to the fact that employees had to readjust to a new master narrative within a short time span, resulting in a perception among some employees of conflicting relations between the two narratives.

6 Two conflicting master narratives

The master narratives of the old and the new Danfoss were perceived by some employees as two conflicting narratives of the organisation closely related to the narrative source: a founder narrative and a CEO narrative.

In the founder narrative, Mads and Bitten Clausen serve as the protagonists, having a heroic function and appearing as “round characters” with diverse human traits providing an emotional appeal. This is apparent in the empirical material3 when the interviewees reflect on the role of Bitten and her passing. An issue of the Danfoss magazine Global Danfoss was dedicated to Bitten right after she passed away, which gave rise to a reaction of grief among employees: “I think we have when she passed and we did a lot of colleagues feel sorrow I think it is be-

3 The following excerpts are taken from focus group interviews conducted at Danfoss China 2016. The full transcript is available upon request.
cause of the family owned company [...] When we saw this news we feel sorry... I feel she was close to us” (160921:0025, 42:35). Moreover, employees were very impressed and inspired by Bitten’s achievements: “The whole company... the spirit... to take over the business from her husband. I saw all the information in the paper. I am also impressed by her story” (160921:0025, 42:35). Also, the role of her personality traits is linked to the business:

As Mads Clausen passed away many years ago, I don’t know so much about his story. However, I do learn a lot of his wife Bitten Clausen. She keeps on managing the company until she was more than 100 years old. From our Chinese way, she is not lack of money, while she is doing a business. I haven’t met her, but many of my colleagues have met her before and they think her very nice and careful person. As a steersman or owner, her characters influence the development of the company deeply. We can see that her contribution to the society is much more than the economy benefit which she makes (160923-0016).

The link between the company culture and the achievements and values of the Clausen family is apparent in various statements. One interviewee claims that “the founder of the company is always the root of the company culture so the employees should know that” (55:40, 160921-0015). The link between the company culture and the founder is further emphasised in the following observation: “The founder is the shadow of the organisation”. As such, the employees see the founder as a source of “human” or “emotional” (160921: 0016, 1.14–1.17) values. The emotional function of the founder story is further pointed out in the following statements: “Some of our colleagues visited a show room in Danfoss and learnt the history, which is a heart-stirring and inspirational story” (160922-0014) and “Recently on WeChat we have just released the story of Mads Clausen and Bitten Clausen [...] That is fantastic. There is a human part” (160921:0027, 14:59).

The founder’s achievements are value-adding not only to the employees but also with regard to the selling of products as the story is carefully told to the customers:

Interviewee 1: The founder... Clausen. Engineer in the garage... we always tell the story. When I was account manager for a big account, the best present to their boss was the book.

Interviewee 2: The year before last year when Ms. Bitten was 100 years old... I told the story to our customer... I said, it's Ms. Bitten's 100th birthday, they gave everyone candy [...] Our customer said, wow, very nice, yes.

Interviewee 2: Jørgen Mads Clausen... I think he is a royal keeper... That’s a story we like to share with our customers (160921:0016, 1.14–1.17)

Moreover, the fact that Danfoss is a family business plays a role in the employees’ treatment of internal as well as external stakeholders. According to the employees, the family culture impacts not only the way in which they treat one another as col-
leagues but also their behaviour towards their customers: “Every time I meet a new customer, I should first introduce the history. It is the Danfoss foundation; we are a family company. So we focus on the customer and treat our customer as a family member” (51:00–160921_0017). In this sense, the customer is included in the family: “We are a family company. So we focus on our customer like a family member, the employee as a family member” (50.02, 160921_0027). As such, there is a causal relation between being a family business and employee behaviour. Being part of a family-owned organisation also fosters an expectation of what the employees frame as a “people-oriented culture”, which is apparent in the following statement constructed as a causal relation: “Danfoss is a small family-owned company which is focusing on several products. So Danfoss should make full use of the spirit of the craftsman. In this case, the company should be people-oriented” (160921-0009).

In Figure 1, we lay out the founder-narrative of the old Danfoss in an actantial scheme.

![Actantial scheme, Danfoss founder narrative](image)

**Figure 1: Actantial scheme, Danfoss founder narrative**

As reflected in the quotes from the interviews above, the narrative of the old Danfoss pre-2008 is characterised by being of nearly epic heroic dimensions, and opponents are only local and limited. One could say that this narrative and the organisation behind it are very unfit to handle “enemies” such as a financial crisis. The second-generation family CEO Jørgen Mads Clausen acknowledges this and passes on the chair to Niels Bjørn Christiansen.

The narrative that substitutes the founder narrative can be termed a “business school narrative” (see Figure 2). Here, Niels Bjørn Christiansen renounces the subject position and leaves this to the company.
As mentioned, the two master narratives are conflicting in the sense that they rest on very different grounds. The founder narrative is tied to the founder and his wife, who have laid out the path to walk on in the future, whereas the business school narrative has the impersonal “company” as the subject. Here, efficiency and profit overrule human values along with the shift from a family CEO to a non-family CEO when Niels Bjørn Christiansen replaces Jørgen Mads Clausen in 2009. The employees experience an increasing shift from what they have perceived as a human-oriented organisation to what several employees describe as “a US company culture” (160921_0022, 9:42):

Recently I think the culture is changing. It is more result-oriented [...] it’s like more American now. Sometimes it feels a little uncomfortable actually... focus on the performance too much. Sometimes personally I care much more about how we do a thing, motivating myself and the team is more important than [...] I can feel the team has similar worries... I can feel it because I can feel the difference. In fact, I think because in the past the company operations were handled by the owners. Now it is the CEO, so it is KPI-oriented, it is totally different (160921:0016, 25:40-27:20)

The shift towards a performance culture has become apparent within recent years: “Three years ago when I joined Danfoss, Danfoss was not a performance-driven culture, it was more like a family relationship. In the past two years I see a lot of differences” (160921-0018, 12:35-12:50). There is a clear value-laden evaluation of the past and present: “For so many years we never saw the EBIT. We now talk about EBIT. Because we did not look at the profit [...] now it’s more and more important. So the family values changed to the business values” (52:00, 160921_0017).

As mentioned in the case description above, the old Danfoss culture was by some employees considered an obstacle by the new master narrative. It
was defined as a “counter-narrative” which should be rejected for Danfoss to survive.

In the company’s own publication on the history of Danfoss, the difference between the presentation of Mads and Bitten Clausen and the information on Jørgen Mads Clausen (the son) and Niels Bjørn Christiansen is remarkable. The older Mads Clausen’s boyhood is presented: his personal motivation for becoming an entrepreneur (his great-grandfather’s workshop (Danfoss: 6), his ambitions, his impatience (7) are outlined; organisational development and changes are personalised and “familiarised” (Mads Clausen’s expansion of the production plant at his family’s farm, his mother’s concerns about the impact it has on the garden (8)); and the extended timeline in the book, where the company’s development is laid out along with the general development in Denmark and the world at large, contains many personal events on Mads and Bitten Clausen.

The same is not the case when it comes to Jørgen Mads Clausen and the “external” CEO, Niels Bjørn Christiansen. In the Danfoss material, hardly any personal information is given on them. Where the old Mads Clausen is presented as a round character with a personal story laying the foundation for the company, the later CEOs are flat, functional and – at least on a communicative level – interchangeable. Instead of being the subject/hero, they, and most clearly Niels Bjørn Christiansen, take on the role of donor and helper with an economic focus on profitability. Like Mads Clausen, he has a strong ethos, but it is grounded in the strong logos of an extratextual master narrative (the business school environment). Here, the family-driven and value-based business model becomes the opponent due to its vulnerability to external threats.

As mentioned, these two masters are in conflict. Seen from an employee perspective, the founder narrative seems to be easier to identify with than the business school narrative. This is due to, on the one hand, the personal identifications with and relations to the personified exponents of the family values of the company, Bitten and Mads, and, on the other, the depersonification of the “new”. Thus, the change in subject position from human actors (i.e. Mads and Bitten Clausen) to a strategic goal (i.e. the new Danfoss) has an impact on some of the employees’ degree of identification.

7 Identification

The evocation of an emotional reaction towards actors can be understood as a narrative technique. As pointed out by Mar et al., “[e]motions can arise from an encounter with a work of art [...] as if from the outside; they can also arise specifically from entering a narrative world” (2011: 822). In narrative theory, the term
“character identification” has been applied in order to understand the emotional experience in the reception of narratives. Character identification occurs when the addressee identifies with a character and imagines himself or herself in the character’s position (823). According to van Krieken et al. (2017), the intensity of the emotional reaction depends on the extent to which the readers identify with the character. Thus, the more the reader cares about the character, the more they will rejoice at the character’s success or mourn it. According to Cohen (2006), caring about a character depends on two factors: character-based factors and storytelling techniques (3). Cohen explains that “[p]eople often identify with characters that represent what they wish to be or to whom they are attracted, rather than what they are” (2006: 188). Thus, when employees identify with Mads and Bitten Clausen, it does not necessarily mean that they see themselves reflected in their personality traits. However, the employees are more inclined to identify with a character that holds the same norms and values as themselves. This is due to the fact that a character’s likeability is an important driver of identification according to Cohen (2006; van Krieken et al. 2017). According to van Krieken et al. (2017), “[c]orrespondence between the character’s values and personality and the audience’s values and personality is likely to result in the character’s actions being in line with the audience’s normative preferences” (3). A prerequisite for identification is thus the exposure of a character’s values and personality. This is accomplished through storytelling techniques – the second determinant for caring about a character. Storytelling techniques concern the perspective or point of view from which the events are presented, which according to van Krieken et al. is a core aspect of identification. Leech and Short (2007) argue that the “very exposure [...] to a character’s point of view – his thoughts, emotions, experience – tends to establish an identification with that character, and an alignment with his value picture” (221, quoted in van Krieken et al. 2017). Thus, when the subject position in the transition from the old to the new Danfoss shifts from a heroic founder to a strategic goal, the identification process is weakened not only due to the shift to a non-family CEO but also due to the change from a round to a flat character with only limited identification potential. In comparison, the fact that the subject position in the actantial model of the old Danfoss is taken up by characters (Mads and Bitten Clausen) with a high exposure of values and personality traits generates a strong narrative due to the high identification potential.

8 Conclusion

The unfolding of narrative techniques and their effects on the materialisation of the founder narrative and the CEO master narrative are topical for theoretical as
well as practical reasons. As demonstrated, each narrative evokes different expectations, reactions and counter-narratives among the employees.

From a theoretical perspective, applying narratological concepts across disciplines increases our understanding of their potential and nature. By moving beyond narratological models like Greimas’ actantial model and by turning towards other narratological concepts like flat and round characters and character identification, the applicability of such concepts across disciplines becomes apparent. Considering organisational communication from a narrative perspective, and thus approaching the CEO function from a character perspective, enables a more profound understanding of the employees’ (un)emotional reactions when the position shifts from one master narrative to another – from a family values-based founder narrative to an efficiency-oriented business school narrative. As the article reveals, the emotional bonding between the employees and the organisation is constructed through textual cues established mainly around the members of the founder family, who ignite a reaction of empathy through the unfolding of their actions and personalities. Accordingly, this affective response evokes the feeling of those emotions at an individual experiential level among some employees.

The narratological approach to organisational change furthermore provides a strong foundation for contributing to the shifting paradigm within the study of employee resistance. As illustrated in the quotations, the quoted employees do sense a change from a human-oriented culture to what several employees term a “US culture”. In their articulation of the cultural change, their reasoning is dominated by logic and seemingly factual observations, with only a few explicit but highly modulated evaluations such as the following statement: “Sometimes it feels a little uncomfortable, actually”. However, the observations and concerns are not followed by any explanations or further reflections. This could indicate a lack of comprehension of why a human-oriented organisational narrative is more attractive than a business school narrative. Explaining such reflections from a narrative perspective enables a more profound understanding of the emotional reactions among some employees – an understanding that enables managers to look beyond resistance to change as the main factor.

From a practical perspective, the unfolding of narrative techniques and their effects on the materialisation of the (non)founder narratives are highly relevant due to the fact that 23,000 organisations will be facing a generational handover in less than a decade. This brings certain challenges, as new strategies are often introduced which cause drastic changes within the organisational culture. As Dan-

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4 https://www.igenerationer.dk/aktuelt/boom-generationsskifter-virksomheder
foss has already experienced such changes, it is valuable to shed light on some of the complexities that may arise in order to be better prepared for what might come. Moreover, as Danfoss is a global organisation, the complexity surrounding their experience may resemble the complexity experienced by numerous organisations worldwide. This means that numerous CEOs must face the challenge of gaining employee support and sympathy. Here, an awareness of the mechanisms and potential in working with round character traits could be of great value.

References


