Identity Across Borders
A Study in the "IKEA-World"

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Department of Management & Economics,
Linköping University,
581 83 Linköping, Sweden
Dear Reader,

The book you now are holding in your hands is a book about my journey in search of organizational identity. A search for understanding how people in organizations construct collective views of the “organizational self” across borders. How do people construct shared views of what the organization is all about in the international, complex company? This search for organizational identity has been a journey into the literature on the subject and into the corporate setting of IKEA.

As I present my journey in this way, after the search has more or less come to its end, the text is, as most texts of this kind, in some ways a reconstruction of logic. In an attempt to construct an understandable account of my journey, I have structured and presented the text in a certain order, not always coinciding with the itinerary of my journey, which has been more of a trip to and fro... From the field-work to the theories, from the analysis to the research questions, and vice versa. Thus, I wouldn't say that the research process is a simple journey with a clear start and ending, but nonetheless the story I present to you has a beginning and an end. A takeoff and a landing.

In Chapter 1, “In Search of Organizational Identity”, the actual search for organizational identity takes off, as I introduce the research area and present the paths to follow and the purpose of my study. In the next chapter then, “A Sense of Organization”, I try to give an account of how I look on organizations and the social world. With a cultural perspective, which is presented in this chapter, I understand organizations as processes of sense-making and systems of shared meanings, where organizational identity comes to denote organizational members' views and definition of the organization; a collective self-view. This perspective is further developed in Chapter 3, “Entering into a Symbolic World”, where the issue of exploring organizational identity is
discussed with focus on the empirical field-work. Here I describe the way I carried out the work in the field in the corporate setting of IKEA, and how the field-work has been interpreted and analysed.

Chapters 4-14 contain a narrative from the field. In this part you find a description and interpretation of IKEA's corporate saga, the corporate landscape, the dress-code, the fabrication of culture, etc. Each chapter treats a key theme, and in Chapter 14 you will find a summarizing interpretation of IKEA's self-view and the processes through which it is constructed. The different processes of making sense of the organizational self across borders are then focused on and further theoretically elaborated in Chapter 15, "Organizational Identity Across Borders", and in Chapter 16, "Beyond Borders" you find my concluding remarks and reflections. In these concluding chapters my aim is to develop and contribute to the understanding of the construction of organizational identity across borders.

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Linköping, March, 1994

Miriam Salzer
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Chapter 1

In Search of
Organizational Identity

Back in the beginning of the 80's there was a full-page ad in the Swedish newspapers with the title "IKEA's Soul". Below the headline there was a big colour picture and a lengthy text. The picture catches your attention. It is a picture which you can look at for a long time; a picture that invites you to ponder and rest your eye for a moment.

The picture shows a billowing verdant field somewhere in the countryside in the summer. Across the field, a long stone fence stretches up towards the green forest by the horizon. It is a rather bare picture. There are no people, just the countryside: verdant and warm. A sort of peaceful stillness rests over the landscape. Light clouds lie as thin veils over a pale blue sky. The picture conveys the feeling of a beautiful Swedish summer's day. The green of the meadows, the light, and the stone fence all feel typical Swedish. The stretching stone fence, heavy stones piled upon each other, leads to associations of hard, arduous labour, bent backs, and insistent drudgery. Nature and man's labour in harmony. The stone fence creates an image of stability, firmness and long-lasting accomplishments.

There are no products or clues to what IKEA is or does in the picture. But if you glance through the text below the picture you will find a story about a company. A story that explains that this is a company that sells inexpensive
IKEAs Själ.

furniture thanks to unconventional and different solutions. By being cost-conscious, working hard and sharing the task with the customer, IKEA can offer you a functional, beautiful and affordable home.

"IKEA's soul is in the right place. Like Småland's farmers, our values are down-to-earth. We have toiled hard in a difficult field to produce sweet harvests..."

The ad was produced by the Swedish advertising agency Brindfors in 1981. The idea was to show a typical landscape in Småland, the birthplace of IKEA, to symbolize the soul of IKEA.

In the last decade there has been a wealth of examples of selling the "corporate soul" in advertisements and in the management literature. In magazines and newspapers everywhere, we have seen big ads telling us about the company's history, outlining the unique features of the company as well as the thoughts and philosophies that lie behind the company's activities and products. Companies and marketers talk about projecting a "unique identity" and marketing the "corporate personality". And people talk about their companies and organizations as if they have a soul; a distinctive ego that make them different from others.

Defining "the corporate identity" and creating "a positive corporate image" on the marketplace have become recent buzz words, both in business theory and in corporate practice (see e.g. Alvesson, 1990; Alvesson & Berg, 1988; Berg, 1985; 1989; Albert & Whetten, 1985; Garbett, 1988; Olins, 1989; Wilkins, 1989; Christensen, 1994). It is not considered to be sufficient to market the company's products; the company itself must be profiled. Nor is the company described as a "mere organization"; it has a "soul", a distinguishing identity! What are the reasons for this growing concern for images and identities?

A Quest for Identities...
We are living in an "epoch of identity projects" (see e.g. Gidlund & Sörlin, 1993). Lasch (1984) talks about the modern "identity crisis", and Alvesson (1990) argues that there are identity problems in our societal culture. In the so
called post-modern society with societal fragmentation, changed meaning of work, and the blurring of traditional national identities, individuals and groups can sense a lack of belonging. A reconstruction of the self and the fabrication of images characterize our time (c.f. Berg, 1989). When old identities are dissolved or questioned, new identities are searched for. Individuals and groups of individuals in nations, organizations, etc., ask themselves “who are we?”. It is a quest for identities. A quest for defining who one is.

Modern business corporations are also concerned with their identities. Organizations of today are becoming introspective in reflecting on and defining their identities. To define what the company is and what it stands for has become a managerial concern. The organizational identity, as a shared definition of the “self” and a common conception of what the organization “is all about”, has become an issue of social engineering:

"In a society characterized by rapid changes, mass communication, and production processes where the relationship between what is being produced and social needs are increasingly hard to detect, corporate identity becomes an issue of specific attention and social engineering efforts”.

Alvesson, 1990 (p.375).

However, this pursuit to define who one is, is not only an internal affair. Identities have also become marketing goods, where the projection of one's identity to external audiences is a management of impressions. Hence, the growing market for stylists, image consultants, design managers, etc., in communicating identities and creating images of individuals and organizations.

Alvesson (1990) describes this tendency as a development in social order “from substance to image” (c.f. Boorstin, 1961; Lasch, 1984). The combination of a growing role of the service sector, an increased distance between companies and customers, as well as between management and employees, together with the expansion of information and mass media, have contributed to a new openness and perceptiveness for different types of images (Alvesson, 1990). And at the “corporate vanity fairs”, the surface, the appearances, have become

The present managerial preoccupation with corporate identities and images can be understood as management’s endeavour for controlling and co-ordinating complex corporations. In a fragmented society, where companies are characterized by loose structures, networks, and lack of clear organizational boundaries, the co-ordination and definition of organizations have become more problematic. People in companies try to find a way to express what the organization stands for and what it is all about.

**A Global Supra-Identity?**

In the area of international business, corporate identity has also been an issue of interest. In the international company, the meaning and identity of the company become even more complex. With internationalized and mobile publics, decentralized subsidiaries, and growth through mergers and acquisitions, corporations have come to face “identity crises” and varying and turbid pictures of what the company stands for (see Salzer, 1990). It is no longer evident, either to the company’s members or to its external stakeholders, what the organization is or what it stands for. In this context, corporate identity and image have been identified as appealing tools for creating co-ordination and shared views in the company, as well as consistent pictures of what the company stands for in the market place.

In a world that becomes even more internationalized, different cultures meet and interact. TV, telecommunications, travel possibilities, etc., intensify the transnational flows of meaning. The world is considered to have become smaller. Cultural differences are rubbed out, the markets are considered to become homogenized, national identities become blurred, and traditional territories are replaced by complex networks of relations. Cosmopolitans, “free from local, provincial or national ideas”, are “citizens of the world” that easily move beyond borders, feeling just as home in New York as in Singapore (see e.g. Harris & Moran, 1979). “Euro-kids” share the same MTV-images as the young people they meet on their inter-rail trips in the integrated European
community. Global corporations transcend and dissolve national borders in the "coca-colonization" of world markets (Hannerz, 1988). Global movements, religions, professions and business corporations are considered to provide alternative sheet anchors in the transnational network society.

But in the face of the scenarios of economic integration and global homogenization, we are seeing a revitalization of the interest in national identities and local cultures. A trend to "localization" and heterogenization, where the "world is growing". When understanding the "whole" becomes too complex, people search for local meanings. There is a focus on the local world; on understanding the parts and finding a local sense of belonging. "Back to the roots", folklorism, regionalism and local patriotism are current trends that reflect this search for local identities and heterogenization (see e.g. Daun, 1989). Just see how the interest for Swedish history, Swedish traditions and the Swedishness flourish in Sweden in face of the debate on European integration (see Salzer, 1993). The integration of nations and markets is contrasted by disintegration and quests for autonomy. Global cultures are said to be impeded by the existence of strong local, national cultures that shape people's lives.

On a corporate level, international corporations are thus said to face the needs of being locally adapted to the cultural differentiation across borders, and at the same time taking advantage of the economic gains to be found in global co-ordination. In order to offset the national cultural differences and to create a sense of sharing across borders, a global supra-identity has become an appealing tool. The idea of a supra-identity is the idea of an organization that can transcend the differences of different local cultures and move beyond borders. It is the idea of sharing a common identity that will hold the company together and give it a consistent image, regardless of where you find the company. It is the idea of creating a sense of sharing and togetherness that would unify people in the company. But can then organizational identity really transcend the borders of nations and cultures?
Defining the Research Area

Any study, research project or investigation is a search for something. A search for understanding what you do not understand, a search for knowing what you do not know. My search is a search for understanding how members in an organization construct an organizational identity in an international setting.

My journey in the search of corporate identity started in the marketing area. Being interested in the images of international corporations, some years ago I made a pilot study on corporate image (Salzer, 1990). I wanted to know why managers and marketers in companies spend so much time and money on trying to influence the market's impressions about the company. While concluding the study, it appeared to me that much of the communication efforts were directed towards the internal audiences. Managers dedicated a great amount of time on trying to influence the co-workers' ideas of what the company “was all about”. Then gradually, my interest came to shift to the other side of the coin, i.e. not how outsiders perceive a company but rather how people inside the company make sense of and view their own organization. This inside picture of the company, here referred to as organizational identity, thus became a focus in my search.

Most literature on organizational identity can be found in the marketing area, where the focus is put on how to present the company's identity on the market in order to create a positive image. Some refer to identity as the company's visual appearances, such as its logotype, buildings, offices, signs, etc., while others by corporate identity refer to the company's “distinguishing character” (see e.g. Marguiles, 1977; Bernstein, 1985; Olins, 1989; Selame & Selame, 1988; Marion, 1989). The common view is that corporate image is a projection of the organization's identity, where the identity has come to denote what the company “in fact is” and image refers to how outside audiences perceive the company. In the marketing literature, a distinction is thus generally made between “fact and fantasy”; between the “real organization and its image”.

However, identity as the organization's true character, soon became problematic to me. What is the “real organization” and what is “its image”? Such a distinction, I would argue, is not only useless but also impossible. An
image is not a false picture, a shadow of “reality”, but it is in itself a “social fact”, a mental representation that becomes our “reality”. So, how can we distinguish between a company’s “true character” and its image? Thus, I decided to search for a better notion of what we could mean by organizational identity.

Identity as a Self-Concept
The concept of identity (from Latin “idem” = sameness, complete consistency) springs from individual psychology where it signifies the sameness of a person at all times or in all circumstances (c.f. Lasch, 1984). Identity means that a person is himself or not something else, and that he can be perceived and is acting in a consistent way. Others rather define identity as an individual’s conception of his self; a self-image or self-concept (see e.g. Boulding, 1956). Identity is the answer to the question “who am I?”. It is the identity that “enables the individual to locate and define himself in the social environment” (Ashfort & Mael, 1989). It is the individual’s identity that distinguishes the self from others. Identity in this sense is a self-concept. It is the individual’s picture of himself.

Identity is thus not anything like a “true character” or a “fact”. Identity is the picture we construe of ourselves (c.f. Lampou, 1992). Instead of talking about identity as an objective true character, identity is in this sense a subjective self-concept. This needs not, of course, to be a “coherent self”; rather a person might display “an amalgam of loosely coupled identities” (Ashfort & Mael, 1989). The individual might possess an array of self-views, expressed and defined in different situations.

When applied on an organizational level, identity becomes a collective idea. Speaking of organizational identity can be viewed as an anthropomorphic approach; that is we assign organizations human or individual properties. The idea that organizations have identities is a psychological analogy, just as the ideas of a “corporate soul” or “spirit” or “brain”. We tend to talk about organizations as if they were individuals. Such metaphors can, however, be deceptive. Organizations do not have souls, brains or spirits. Organizations do
not have identities. I do not see organizations as super-persons that act and think. Hence, organizations cannot have identities in the sense that we talk about individuals. Can we then use an individual concept for understanding organizations? Can identity be a collective idea? To me, identity can be used as a metaphor; a metaphor that helps us talk about phenomena in organizations (c.f. Alvesson & Björkman, 1992).

If we use the personality analogy, organizational identity is the answer to the question "Who are we?". It is a self-reflective question; organizational members' attempt to define "what the organization is all about" (c.f. Albert & Whetten, 1985). Albert & Whetten (1985) point out that such a definition of the self embraces what organizational members claim to be the organization's central character, its distinctiveness, and the temporal continuity of these characteristics. An organizational identity is thus organizational members' views and definitions of the organization's perceived central character, distinctiveness and consistency. Defining organizational identity as a collective self-view, implies that a group of individuals might hold a view of "who we are" as a group; a definition of the organizational "self" in terms of what is considered to make the group distinctive, its central character and consistency. Organizational identity as such a collective self-view does, however, not imply that the organizational values, goals, etc., have to be internalized.

This definition of organizational identity can be compared to the view in the so-called social identity theory (see Ashfort & Mael, 1989; Alvesson & Björkman, 1992), where identity refers to organizational members' sense of social belonging. In this sense the organization serves as a basis for social identification, where the personal identity can be organizational in that an individual's identity might be shaped by his organizational belonging (e.g. identifying oneself as being an IKEA-employee, a member of the hockey-club, or a faculty member, etc.). However, I will by organizational identity not refer to the shaping of personal identity in the organization.

In this study then, organizational identity is merely how organizational members define and view their organization. Just as outsiders might define and have a conception of the organization (corporate image), insiders might
have an image of their organization as they make sense of what it is all about; an identity as organizational members' view of the organizational "self".

Paths to Follow - Purpose of the Study
Given that we can talk about organizational identities, my aspiration in this book is to create an understanding of how organizational members construct a view of "who we are". As argued above, an organization's "self-view" can be seen as a collective view or definition of the organization. I am interested in the processes through which these views come to be constructed in complex, international organizations.

Most authors who write about corporate identity seem to be referring to identity as something that is there; that the company has a unique and distinctive "ethos" as a "true character" which can be exploited and presented to various audiences (see e.g. Bernstein, 1985; Marquis, 1970; Ollins 1978;1989; Selame & Selame, 1988; Garbett, 1988; Pilditch, 1970; Wilkins, 1989; Harrison, 1972). It is generally held that companies have or can develop a unique identity that integrates people in the company and provides them with a sense of sharing and belonging.

In most literature on corporate identity it is generally assumed that there is an organization-wide, or even company-wide, identity, that unifies organizational members. Often, corporate identity is described as a top management project; a managerial tool which can be used to hold the organization together. What is less explored, however, is how organizational members construct views of the organization. Is there a collective identity or rather just an array of individual views of the organization? And if there is any sharing, what are the processes through which organizational members construct and come to share a collective self-view?

While the literature on corporate identity depicts organizational identity as something the organization has, I will not treat it as a given entity and merely describe its contents in a given organization. Even though the content of an organizational identity is important for understanding how identities are
constructed, such a description will serve as the basis for my theoretical focus on how organizational members continuously construct and might come to share views of the organization. How do people in organizations construct a definition of the organizational “self” and create\footnote{With the verbs “construct” and “create” I do not intend how people consciously or intentionally “fabricate” meanings in a functionalist sense, but rather the on-going process of bringing reality into being.} a shared view of what the organization is all about? It could be assumed that we can see a construction of identity over time in an organization’s history, but I would also hold that views and definitions of the organization are constantly created and recreated in the everyday life among organizational members.

In complex and international organizations, activities and individuals are spread over vast geographical areas and people are separated by space and time. Organizing thus involves creating and maintaining a definition of the “self” across physical and cultural borders. But can we talk about an organizational identity as a shared definition of the organizational “self” in complex, international organizations? Can a sense of sharing and definitions of the “self” be created in spite of cultural and physical distances? How does organizational identity become constructed in the international organization?

Take for example a corporation such as IKEA, whose “soul” I started by introducing to you and the company which will be the corporate setting in which my exploration of organizational identity takes place throughout the reading. IKEA is an international home-furnishing chain with some 20,000 organizational members in more than 20 countries all over the world. Do they share an organizational identity? How do they construct a definition of the self across national and cultural borders? Through a study of organizational identity in the corporate setting of IKEA, I will search for an understanding of how organizational identity becomes constructed in the international, complex organization that operates in various national and cultural contexts.

Thus, the purpose of my study can be summarized as the search for understanding how organizational identity is constructed across borders by identifying the processes through which organizational members create a view
of the organizational self in the international, complex organization. By making an in-depth study in the corporate setting of IKEA my ambition is to gain insights into how the Ikeans define and view their organization, and out of this enhance our understanding of the processes through which organizational identities become constructed.

Instead of studying identity as a top management project, the aim is to gain an understanding of the interactive sense-making processes in organizations, thereby exploring how meanings interactively are created in the international organization, both on managerial and other levels in the organization.

By doing an inside ethnography of IKEA my ambition is to give an empirical contribution with an in-depth account of organizational life in an international, complex organization. Through this ethnography the aim of the study is to contribute to the understanding of the organizing processes through which a sense of organization develops and is enacted. By focusing on the processes of identity construction the aim of the work is to enlarge our comprehension of organizing across and within borders.
Chapter 2
A Sense of Organization

If we, as I suggest, see organizational identity as organizational members' view of the organization and what it is all about, we need to find a way of conceiving organizations and how people in organizations might create a collective self-view.

In studying organization theory it becomes evident that in the heart of the study of organizations lies a concern for social order, where the theories of organizations focus on issues such as: How is social order achieved? How is organized action accomplished? How is it possible that people come to work together and reach goals? What holds the complex organization together? Both as researchers on organizations and as members in organizations we try to create order and construct a reality with meaning. In fact, the word "organization" is in itself a metaphor that creates a sense of order. We talk about different situations as being more or less organized.

In my view, the process of organizing can be understood as an activity of making a world of "chaos" into a comprehensible world of order (c.f. Ehn & Löfgren, 1982; Smircich, 1983a). To make sense and confer meanings to events, people, actions, etc., lies in the very essence of organizing (see e.g. Weick, 1979; Smircich, 1983a; Morgan, 1986). By conferring meaning to the world we create our reality.
Seeing organizing as such a reality-making process involves a fundamental view of reality as being not an objective world but rather a human construction. Thus, I do not see “reality” as a concrete structure, readily waiting “out there”. To me, reality is to be understood as a social construction (Berger & Luckman, 1967). We create our world, not just as mere reactors to external stimuli, but as active creators. The world has no meaning in itself - we, as world-makers, have to give it meaning. Through the use of labels, languages, actions, routines, etc., we make the world we impose meaningful (see Morgan, 1993; Weick, 1979; Smircich, 1985). There is no underlying reality waiting there to be discovered. Rather, we are constantly creating the world and the reality we come to share.

We create things which we give names and definitions, and as we interact with others we come to construct mutually accepted definitions of reality. In that way, human beings come to share an intersubjective world, and as this world over time is institutionalized it becomes a taken-for-granted reality (see Berger & Luckman, 1967). The reality is socially constructed. Czarniawska-Joerges demonstrates how a building, independent of us and concrete as it seems, still is a social construct:

“Reality, as we daily perceive it, is socially constructed. Every building is socially constructed: it consists of bricks, mortar, human labor, building law, architectural design, aesthetic expression, and so on, each of them socially constructed in turn and put together by a socially constructed concept of a building. This means that reality exists independent of human perception, but it is not ‘out there’, behind a wall of ‘human distortion’ that must be overcome, but ‘in here’, where the human perception is a part of it, a maker of it, and the only tool for its cognition.”

Czarniawska-Joerges, 1989, (pp.4-5).

Viewing the world as a reality created by human beings makes us see organizations as socially constructed realities. If I am looking for an organization as a concrete entity, I will not find it. Organizations are to me then not static and tangible phenomena, but rather on-going processes of human beings interacting and creating “a sense of organization” (Smircich, 1983a). As Weick so clearly puts it;
The word organization is a noun, and it is also a myth. If you look for an organization you won’t find it. What you will find is that there are events, linked together, that transpire within concrete walls, and these sequences, their pathways, and their timing are the forms we erroneously make into substances when we talk about an organization.”

Weick, 1979 (p.88).

Organizations can thus be understood as being socially constructed and deconstructed in the on-going processes of sense-making (see e.g. Gray et al, 1985). Organizations are to me then made up of the systems of meanings and the social processes of making sense and conferring meanings to things and events. This implies that the organization not is the same thing as the company or the formal organization. Organizations are inter-linked patterns of actions and meanings, constantly created and recreated. What we define as organizations are in fact superimposed structures which “rest as much in the heads and minds of their members as they do in a concrete set of rules and relations” (Morgan, 1986). And it is the process of sense-making that produces systems of shared meanings which provide organizational members with a sense of organization; a shared definition of the organization and its world.

**A Cultural Perspective**

There have been, and still are, different ways of looking on organizations. The use of different metaphors is the way we try to understand and make sense of those activities that we describe as “organization”. It is a part of how we try to make order out of chaos. By seeing something as something. Organizations have been described as machines, organisms, brains, political arenas, etc. (see e.g. Morgan, 1986).

In my view, organizations are no supra individual machines or organisms that lead a life of their own. Rather, to me organizations are made up of thinking and acting human beings, interacting and making sense out of various actions and events. Viewing organizations as such on-going processes of sense-making relies on an underlying view of organizations as cultures, inspired by anthropologists’ work on world-making in different societies. Whereas
anthropologists normally have studied the construction of meanings in distant tribes or societies, the use of a culture metaphor in business administration has involved an adoption of many of the anthropologists' methods and concepts in the study of modern organizations.

While those who understand organizations as machines or organisms, apply a rational metaphor, the view of organizations as cultures is a social perspective. Instead of studying what organizations accomplish, the focus is put on how organization is accomplished (Smircich, 1983a). Here organizations are viewed as expressive forms and symbolic fields of human sense-making (see e.g. Smircich, 1983a; Morgan, 1986; Schultz, 1990; Alvesson & Berg, 1992).

The dominating body of organizational culture literature identifies culture as something the organization has; “corporate culture” as a delimitable object consisting of defined attributes such as shared beliefs, understandings, norms, symbols, etc., which can be managed and controlled (“the culture-as-a-variable approach”, see Smircich 1983a). Culture is here reduced to a subsystem within the organization - it refers to the “soft parts” in organizational life. Culture is regarded as a variable; a managerial tool for steering behaviour and performance. In such a view on culture, however, organizations are still regarded as rational instruments or adaptive organisms. The only new thing is that the organizational “body” has acquired a “soul”.

To me, however, organizations are rather to be understood as being cultures. It involves a different view of seeing organizations; not as organisms or machines, but rather as groups of human beings making sense and creating systems of shared meanings. Culture is thus not something that the organization has - organizations are cultures. Instead of treating organizations as a set of objective and given structures, actions, events, etc., a cultural perspective leads us to see organizations as on-going processes of reality construction through which structures, actions, events, etc., are created and given meaning. The focus is here on the very processes of organizing; the processes in which organizational members create and make sense of their world (see Smircich, 1983a). Organizations are cultures. Organizations can thus be studied and understood as cultural phenomena.
Culture is here to be understood as both the process of making sense and as the resulting system of shared meanings within which sense-making takes place. In line with Hannerz (1982), I see culture as the collective meanings and the communications through which it is sustained. Culture thus becomes both a process of social construction and a structure of meaning systems.

This implies a dynamic view, rather than a static one, of culture as on-going processes of culture formation, and organization is rather to be understood as “organizing”. Organizing becomes the process of creating and maintaining meaning - to make sense of the world. Sypher et al (1985) refers to this as a sense-making view, where reality is seen as an on-going accomplishment.

Adhering to a cultural perspective, I see organizing as consisting of the processes of constructing and reconstructing meanings and meaningful forms. Organizing is a process of sense-making. As individuals interpret and define their reality in interaction with others, a collective understanding and shared world-view is created. The organization can then be understood as a system of shared meanings (Smircich, 1983b), where meaning is intersubjectively negotiated (Louis, 1983). When I talk about organizations, I am thus not referring to a mere static structure of meanings, but will also include what I have above called organizing, i.e. organizations as dynamic processes of sense-making.

In such a cultural perspective on organizations, the view of the social world as an objective, independently existing reality is replaced by the idea of a socially constructed reality consisting of patterns of symbolic relationships and meanings. Studying organizational identity in such perspective then involves studying how organizational members make sense of what the organization is all about.

**Multicultural Organizations?**

This cultural view on organizations can be criticized for over-stressing harmony and consensus. By emphasizing shared meanings and social order,
you get a picture of organizations as homogeneous, consensual entities with people interacting in “peace and harmony”. However, such a view is of course naive and misleading. Everyone working in organizations know that conflicting views, multiple interpretations and struggles over definitions are more the rule than the exception.

Even though the integration view, i.e. culture as something that integrates people, still dominates in the literature, several authors have in recent years come to question this view and focus on divergent meanings and the existence of subcultures within the organization (see e.g. Van Maanen & Barley, 1985; Louis, 1985; Martin et al, 1985; Martin, 1992). While the integration view presupposes that meanings are shared by the whole organization, or rather by all organizational members, the differentiation view holds that organizations would rarely consist of just one system of meanings (see e.g. Martin, 1992). Neither are meanings in organizations pre-defined and embraced by everyone. As much as cultures can be characterized by consensus, harmony and integration, we could also expect them to be characterized by dissensus, conflict and differentiation.

Individuals in organizations constantly interpret, negotiate, adopt, reject and create meanings in the interaction with others. Different groups might develop different meaning systems, and within groups meanings are constructed as well as deconstructed. It would then be inappropriate to assume that an organization is one culture (see e.g. Martin, 1992; Louis, 1985). Rather organizations could be understood as multicultural, where shared meanings exist within subcultural boundaries.

Organizations/cultures are thus often differentiated. As Hannerz (1982) points out, social structures make different groups’ experiences different. Different hierarchical levels can create and share different meaning systems as a form of vertical differentiation. In the same way we can find differentiation across for example professional and occupational groups. Can we then expect to find just one organizational identity, or is there rather an array of varying self-views? By acknowledging the differentiation of cultures, a cultural perspective thus involves not only looking for integrated systems of shared meanings, but also
focusing on the existence of divergent views and different systems of meanings within the organization.

**Making Sense**

Organizations as systems of shared meanings and on-going processes of sense-making implies that understanding organizations means understanding how meaning is created. Weick (1979) states; "organizations are in the business of making sense". Sense-making refers to how organizations make sense of events and experiences. It is a process "whereby people attempt to construct meaningful explanations for situations and experiences" (Gioia, 1986).

But how do we as human beings come to construct and share our definitions of the organizational reality? Making sense is largely a process of assigning meanings to events and things. Weick (1979) describes this as a process of enactment, selection and retention. Organizations bracket some portion of the stream of experience and events, thereby enacting an environment. Thereafter, this world is interpreted as the organization selects schemes of interpretation, and in the process of retention the products of sense-making are stored.

Human beings create their realities; trying to make their world meaningful to themselves and others. By creating the reality, sense is made out of the continuous flow of events and things in the world we impose. As Geertz (1973) points out, the drive to make sense lies in the very human nature, just as various biological needs. We cannot live in a world we do not understand, and sense-making is how we try to give the world form and order. As organizational members make sense of the world they retain information in the memory. Pieces of information are stored in networks of symbolic knowledge of events, actions, concepts, etc. (see Gioia, 1986).

**Meaning and Action**

While some hold that shared meanings are a prerequisite to collective action (see e.g. Smircich, 1983b), others view shared meanings rather to be the outcome of organized action (see e.g. Weick, 1979).
The first view implies that sense-making should be prospective, i.e. shared agreed-upon meanings precedes action. Meanings are determined in advance, based on prior experiences and situations, where it is the existence of shared meanings that make organized action possible. Shared, collective meanings are the basis for action. As Czarniawska-Joerges (1992) exemplifies; if a group is to carry a table they first must agree on what is up and down of the table.

However, in rather sharp contrast to what I have argued hitherto stands Weick's ideas on sense-making being primarily retrospective (Weick, 1979). Retrospective sense-making means that organizational members act first and then make sense of their actions. People are thus assumed to make sense and construct meanings as they look backwards. Weick (1979, p.91) points out;

"Partners in a collective structure share space, time and energy, but they need not share visions, aspirations, or intentions. That sharing comes much later, if it ever comes at all."

Such a stance is quite different from a view of organizations as systems of shared meanings. In Weick's line of thought, organizations would rather be patterns of actions. There would thus not need to be any shared meanings for organized action to take place. Donellon et al (1986) launches the idea of equifinal meanings in organizations. Even though meanings might differ between individuals, they can have similar behavioural implications. Organizational members may have different reasons, but still they act in an organized way.

However, sense-making need not be either or. Both views can be integrated. Meanings and action are related in an iterative process "in which meanings are continually constructed and destroyed as more sense-making occurs and new actions are taken" (Donellon et al, 1986, p.53). One could thus hold that retrospective sense-making enables the organization to frame new experiences and to form scripts, which thereby are the basis for prospective sense-making. There is no one-sided relation between meanings and actions. While meanings might govern actions, new actions can also alter meanings in the continuous process of sense-making. The relation between meaning and action can thus be
understood as being cyclical and reflexive, where retrospective and prospective meanings are interrelated in the on-going making of reality.

**Sense-Making and Identity**

Viewing organizations as on-going processes of sense-making and systems of shared meanings leads us to see organizational identity not as a "true character", but rather as a social construction. As has been argued in Chapter 1, I do not see organizational identity as an objective character, but rather as a (inter)subjective self-concept. It is the way organizational members define and view their organization; a collective self-view. By viewing organizations/cultures as processes of sense-making and systems of shared meanings, identity can here be understood as a system of meanings; an outcome of the sense-making activities organizations are involved in. As organizational members make sense of events, actions, decisions, etc., sets of meanings are constructed that define and express "what the organization is all about". While culture is the overall processes of making sense and the systems of meanings, organizational identity is the set of meanings within organizations that provide organizational members with a sense of organization. It can be understood as the sets of meanings that are concerned with defining what the organization is all about.

Through social interactions, individuals interpret, negotiate and might arrive at mutually accepted definitions of what the organization "is all about". In the process of sense-making, shared meanings are constructed that can make up the organizational identity. As Smircich describes it:

"In a particular situation the set of meanings that evolves gives a group its own ethos, or distinctive character, which is expressed in patterns of belief (ideology), activity (norms and rituals), language and other symbolic forms through which organizational members both create and sustain their view of the world and the image of themselves in the world."

Smircich, 1983b (p.56).

When organizational members make sense of the organization and its activities, they might construct a collective self-view which is expressed and
reflected in various symbols. In metaphors such as “We're like a big family” or “We're fighting competition” organizational members define themselves as a group and express the image of themselves in the world. These self-views may evolve over time, out of the organization's history. If we view organizations as on-going processes of sense-making, the definitions of the self, however, need not be a stable set of meanings over time. Rather, definitions and shared meanings can constantly be constructed and reconstructed in the everyday life of organizational members in an interplay between old and new self-views.

Organizational identity is in this view not a result of a one-way communication. It is not a mere top management project, as proposed in a great deal of the marketing literature. Rather, the construction of meanings is an on-going process of intersubjective negotiations, where meanings continuously are created, interpreted, adopted and rejected at all levels in the organization (c.f. Louis, 1983; Garsten, 1991).

**Managing Meanings**

Can then organizational identity be managed or consciously created by a few? As discussed above, the construction of meanings is an on-going process of intersubjective negotiations. Still, some might have greater possibilities than others to influence people's view of reality.

Having defined organizing as a process of sense-making, management can be understood as a process of creating and distributing meanings (Smircich & Morgan, 1982). Leadership works to a large extent by influencing the attention given to different situations, framing experiences, and assigning meanings to events and actions. Stories, myths, rituals, language, etc., are different kinds of symbols which leaders express for framing situations and evoking patterns of meaning. Management becomes a symbolic action (Pfeffer, 1981). Managers function as “sense-givers” as they by their positions and roles define the reality of others. Managers are both involved in making sense for themselves and giving sense for others (see Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). As sense-givers, managers try to sell their meanings and definition of the organization to others.
The power-basis for leadership is the leader’s ability to define the reality of others. By shaping and interpreting events and actions, leadership creates a definition of reality for organizational members.

“Leadership lies in large part in generating a point of reference against which a feeling of organization and direction can emerge...

...In understanding the way leadership actions attempt to shape and interpret situations to guide organizational members into a common interpretation of reality, we are able to understand how leadership works to create an important foundation for organized action.”

Smircich & Morgan, 1982 (p.258, 261).

Defining organizational realities is thus not just an equal interactive process of sense-making, but a process which expresses a power relationship (see Spybey, 1989). And as a dynamic process, there are struggles between different definitions of situations, and meanings are constantly renegotiated and reinterpreted.

Given their power for setting dominant frames of meanings, managers or leaders in organizations might consciously try to shape the organization’s self-view. And indeed they do. As “corporate culture” has become a very popular idea as a tool for normative or unobtrusive control (see e.g. Kunda, 1992; Peters & Waterman, 1982; Schein, 1985; Kilmann, 1985), many corporations are actively trying to fabricate culture. Some people in organizations are assigned the roles of shaping and forming organizational members’ world-view. Culture as control is managers’ attempt to manage the hearts and minds of employees (Kunda, 1992; Van Maanen & Kunda, 1989). General managers, human resource managers, marketers, etc. in the company, often deliberately promote certain official meanings in the making of culture.

However, in rejecting the variable-view on culture, I do not see culture as something that is merely created by managers. Rather, in my cultural perspective, this kind of managerial culture-making can be understood as a part of organizing (or culture). It is what Kunda (1992) calls the culture of culture management. That is, culture-making by managers is a part of the ongoing sense-making activities. Pre-defined meanings from the top are
constantly interpreted, negotiated, rejected or adapted at all levels in the organization.

Still, one should bear in mind that even though sense-making is an interactive process, there is a certain power aspect by which meanings are created and shaped. Some exert the power to impose their meanings on others, and culture as control becomes an influential part of how meanings are constructed in organizations.

**Impression Management**

Sense-making is not only an internal affair. Outsiders try to make sense of the organization, and a part of the identity is to present oneself to outsiders. To present the “self” to various publics (see e.g. Goffman, 1959).

Many companies are involved in strategic external production of meaning in communicating corporate credibility and legitimacy, using expressive strategies for impression management (c.f. Berg, 1989; Davis, 1985).

“The world is a stage” with actors, performances and audiences. The theatre analogy is often used in the study of organizations (see e.g. Schlenker, 1980), where organizational communications have been described as a form of impression management. Many organizations are involved in “managing impressions”. Just as managers are trying to shape organizational members' images of themselves, they also attempt to manage outsiders’ views of the organization. Through various expressive strategies or profile communications, some people in the organization try to control and manage the meaning of the company seen from the outside world.

Berg (1984) makes a distinction between identity and profile, where the latter refers to an organization's conscious attempts to highlight certain elements of the identity. (Elsewhere I have called these attempts a company's “desired corporate image”, Salzer, 1990). Through openly expressed statements of mission, purpose, values, etc., and the use of different material symbols, managers communicate aspects of the identity “that are considered to be
important for its existence and which legitimize it in the wider society" (Berg, 1984). The more public an organization is, the more concerned its members will be with how it appears to others (see e.g. Goffman, 1959; Morrison & Bies, 1991). For example, a company operating on the consumer market, having direct contact with its customers, is supposed to be more concerned with its public image.

While identity is the organizational members' view of the organization, the profile is the conscious communications of the identity, and image is here the way others perceive the organization. The relation between image, identity and profile, as it generally is expressed in the marketing literature, can be illustrated by the figure below.

![Identity, Profile and Image](image)

In more functionalist approaches to corporate identity and image, it is often held that there must be a fit between an organization's identity, profile and its image (see e.g. Berg, 1984; Albert & Whetten, 1985). In the figure above, the overlap of the three circles should thus be as large as possible. Discrepancies between the identity and image are said to impair the “health” of the organization (Albert & Whetten, 1985), where conflicting inner and outer images are considered to create a somewhat “schizophrenic” organization.

To me, however, it is more interesting to see how these pictures are interrelated in the sense-making processes through which various groups make sense of the organization internally and externally. The figure above gives you an
impression of identity, profile and image as being three essentially separate entities. But how are they related in the construction of organizational identity? By relating identity to impression management and external images, I will throughout the reading try to come to an understanding of how these are interrelated in organizational sense-making processes.

**Sense-Making Across Borders**

Sense-making involves defining the organizational reality: who are we and what is our role in the world? Symbolic activities both create and reflect this self-concept; the organizational identity. And meaning is also created externally, where the organization's image is the meaning of the company seen from the outside world.

In the international organization, activities and individuals are spread over vast geographical areas. Organizing thus involves creating and maintaining a sense of organization and to define oneself on the markets, across national and cultural boundaries. The shared symbols and meanings that make up the organizational identity are established communicatively through social interaction. The process of making sense and constructing meanings is a communicative process. In large, international organizations, sense-making through direct social interaction is impeded by space and time. Thus, if a sense of organization is to be upheld, other processes for communicating must be at work.

The question, then, is if and how organizational members can create and maintain a sense of organization in complex, geographically dispersed organizations. Can meanings and definitions of the self be communicated and sustained in spite of cultural and physical distances? How does organizational identity become constructed across borders?

There seem to be few studies (if any) of sense-making across borders (see e.g. Melin, 1992). However the issue of "social order" in international organizations has not been neglected in the literature. In the area of international business, a
lot of literature focuses on different forms of control mechanisms for co-
ordinating geographically dispersed organizations.

**Global and Local**

As was outlined in Chapter 1, the world today can be described as being both
global and local at the same time. International corporations, operating on
many different markets, face the needs of being both globally co-ordinated and
locally adapted at the same time. In a lot of writings on international business
this is a core theme; how to balance the international organization's gains from
global co-ordination with the needs for local adaptation (see e.g. Prahalad &
Doz, 1981; 1987; Douglas & Wind, 1987; Chakravarthy & Perlmutter, 1985;
Porter, 1986; Levitt, 1983).

It is generally held that the economic and strategic gains to be found in global
coordination must be balanced with the local subsidiaries' needs for being
locally responsive towards the local cultural and political demands. As local
subsidiaries become more mature and more autonomous, a "control gap" is
said to develop which put new demands on the parent company's co-
ordination (see e.g. Prahalad & Doz, 1981). In the tension between global and
local, the international corporation tries to move in two directions. In the area
of cross-cultural management the national cultural context is stressed as a
shaper of the organization in different countries (see e.g. Hofstede, 1985; 1991;
Laurent, 1986; 1983; Joynt & Warner, 1985). It is assumed that each nation has a
specific culture which shapes the company, and in order to keep the
international organization together, functionalist literature holds that these
cultural differences must be encapsulated by a unifying umbrella.

The often suggested solution for balancing the needs for global co-ordination
and local responsiveness is being both global and local at the same time,
something which can be called the "glocal company" (see e.g. Salzer, 1992;
Gustavsson et al, 1993). Hedlund's "heterarchy" (Hedlund, 1986) and Bartlett &
Ghoshal's "transnational form" (Bartlett & Ghoshal, 1987) are both ideal
organization forms that would handle the demands for being global and local.
How is then the "glocal" organization held together? In the generally very management-oriented literature on international business, a recurrent theme is that today's complex international companies require new forms of coordination mechanisms. The need for global control and local responsiveness put new demands on the global co-ordination. The more traditional forms of bureaucratic or formal control have thus been complemented with the idea of using more subtle control mechanisms, where the development of a strong "corporate culture" has been recognized as a "new" mechanism of coordination in complex multinational companies (see e.g. Martinez & Jarillo, 1989; Prahalad & Doz, 1987; Doz & Prahalad, 1991; Hedlund, 1986; Bartlett & Ghoshal, 1987).

Hence, in the literature on international business, culture as control has become a popular notion. To create a sense of sharing as a common "mindset" has been suggested as the key to holding the "glocal" organization together. A coordinating culture is transferred from the headquarters to local subsidiaries (Jaeger, 1983). As Bartlett & Ghoshal write (1987, p.52);

"What is critical then, is not just the structure, but also the mentality of those who constitute the structure. The common thread that holds together the diverse tasks we have described is a managerial mindset that understands the need for multiple strategic capabilities, that is able to view from both local and global perspectives..."

The idea in the functionalist literature is that a "strong corporate culture" would integrate organizational members across borders and that such a culture would set off national differences and give the corporation a "consistent persona" on different markets. The global supra-identity mentioned in Chapter 1, has been launched as a managerial tool for keeping the international company together across borders and replacing national cultures with a unifying corporate culture.

**Culture as Control and Control as Culture**
To me, the solution of "corporate culture" as the key to hold the international company together appears as an over-simplified idea. As described earlier, this
"culture-as-a-variable approach" reduces culture to a delimitable variable which can be managed and controlled. In contrast to more functionalist views in international business, I see organizations as on-going processes of sense-making and systems of shared meanings; that is I understand organizations as cultures. To me then, culture is not a variable that can be managed from headquarters to subsidiaries in order to keep the company together. It is not a social "glue" that can be used to integrate organizational members. The functionalist views on organizations tend to treat corporate culture as a top-management project and organizational members as mere passive receivers of a pre-defined "culture". It presupposes that there is a company-wide sense of sharing.

But as has been argued in the preceding chapters, sense-making is not a one-way communication, but rather a mutual process of social interaction. The managerial use of "corporate culture" and corporate identity as a tool for control is merely one aspect of the on-going sense-making; i.e. how managers define and try to promote their view of the organization. The culture as control approach neglects the mutual part of sense-making, which I have been arguing for.

Instead of regarding the various control mechanisms managers use as mere instrumental activities, a cultural perspective leads us to see control activities as a part of organizational members' (mostly managers') processes for creating and distributing meanings. Any organization's written rules and procedures, hierarchical relationships and formalized structures, budgets and policies, etc., create and reflect the organizational reality.

What often is referred to as cultural control (i.e. managers' efforts to create common mindsets and normative frameworks) can then be understood as a part of the sense-making processes all organizational members are involved in. Control, as an organizational activity, may it be bureaucratic or "cultural", is thus not a mere instrumental mechanism, but can be understood as a symbolic activity of making sense and communicating meaning between organizational entities.
National and Organizational Cultures

Sense-making in the international organization takes place in different national contexts. In the international business literature various attempts have been made to link organizational cultures to national cultures. The international company faces different national contexts, and in the area of cross-cultural management these are assumed to present different national cultures which shape the company culture (see e.g. Hofstede, 1985; 1991; Laurent 1986; Hampden-Turner & Trompenaars, 1993; Joynt & Warner, 1985; Schneider, 1988; Beck & Moore, 1985). The common approach is to regard organizational culture as a micro-representation of the national culture in which the organization is embedded. The organizational culture is sometimes viewed as a subculture within the broader national context or as a mere mirror of the national culture.

The idea of a unifying corporate culture is questioned in the area of cross-cultural management. It is held that each local entity in the international company is shaped by the local, national culture. The dream of a “strong corporate culture” that would rub out national differences is therefore considered to be no more than a dream (Laurent, 1986). In the literature on cross-cultural management, national cultures are regarded as an external explanatory variable that differentiates corporations across nations. Organizations are said to be embedded in cultural contexts (see e.g. Frost et al, 1985; Schneider, 1988).

Many researchers in the area of cross-cultural management question the idea of a managed global supra-identity, and I would hold that the idea neglects the interactive part of sense-making. For instance, pre-defined meanings from the “top” or the headquarters are interpreted, rejected, negotiated or adopted by the people at the subsidiaries or local entities in different national contexts. But to me, however, these national cultures or contexts cannot be regarded as an explanatory variable, as they generally are treated in the area of cross-cultural management (see above).

National contexts are no given backgrounds against which differentiation of meanings in organizations can be explained. Seeing reality as a social construction, national cultures are as much socially constructed as the
organizations we try to explain by them. Thus, I will not treat the different national cultures as an explanatory variable, but rather as the local spheres in which the organization is constructed and enacted.

Such a stance, I think, can be very fruitful since it emphasizes the processual and mutual aspects of organizing across borders. Instead of viewing the coordination of international organizations as a mere top management project, the sense-making approach highlights the interactive process of creating and maintaining a sense of organization across borders and within different local spheres. Organizing, as the process of making sense of situations and activities, is not a one-way communication. Rather, the creation of meaning is an ongoing process of intersubjective negotiations, where meanings are created, interpreted and rejected at all levels in the organization. By studying organizational identity in an international company, focus is put on both the management centric creation of meanings and the local creation and interpretation of definitions of the self in the interplay with the various national or local contexts.

With such a perspective, studying organizational identity in international organizations, involves studying sense-making across borders and how self-views come to be constructed in different spheres. It involves looking for an understanding of how meanings are created and sustained across and within national and cultural borders.
Chapter 3
Entering into a Symbolic World

"Culture does not exist separately from people in interaction. People hold culture in their heads, but we cannot really know what is in their heads. All we can see or know are representations or symbols".

Smircich, 1985 (p.66-67).

The process of sense-making is a process of using symbols to convey meanings and understandings in making the world meaningful. Making sense and interpreting is done through the use of various symbolic modes (see e.g. Gioia, 1986; Smircich, 1983a; Gudykunst et al, 1985; Putnam, 1983). Studying organizational life and sense-making thus involves studying symbols and symbolic action in order to interpret "the patterns of symbolic action that create and maintain a sense of organization" (Smircich, 1983a).

Symbols can be found in all social life. Actions, non-actions, metaphors, logos, slogans, stories, visual images, etc., are different kinds of symbols we find in organizations. It is through the use of intersubjectively agreed upon symbols that people make sense of their world and create systems of shared meanings. As Gioia (1986, p.59) concludes;

"organizational sense-making might therefore be seen as essentially a symbolic process, as, in effect, a social construction process conducted through the manipulation of symbolic information stored in symbolic structures."
It is through symbolic interactions that organizational members create their world and construct an intersubjective reality which become objectivated and taken-for-granted.

Symbols
The word *symbol* is derived from Greek roots, and is made up of the concepts for sign and throwing or putting together. A symbol is a sign that represents something else, i.e. A stands for B in a metaphorical relationship (Leach, 1976). A sign becomes a symbol when it is interpreted, i.e. given a wider meaning.

Shared symbols and meanings are constituted communicatively (Carbaugh, 1985; c.f. Hannerz et al, 1982). The process of reality construction and sense-making can thus be seen as a communicative process (communication is here viewed in its broadest sense including all kinds of symbolic-expressive activities). Through the use of various symbols, we communicate and make sense of the social world.

Symbols and symbolic activity are thus in their essence communicative. Language, gestures, physical objects, dance, music, etc., are different forms of symbols we use in communicating with each other. Without communication there would be no organizing (see e.g. Weick, 1979; Donnellon, 1986; Schall, 1983). Social interaction and interpretations are communication activities carried out through the use of various symbols, and the way individuals make sense of their world is through their communicative behaviours.

Alvesson & Berg (1988) distinguish between three different kinds of symbols: verbal, material (artefacts) and actions. Verbal symbols can be the organization’s language, myths, stories, slogans, expressions, jokes, statements, etc. The corporate artefacts constitute the material symbols such as the products, buildings, offices, dressing, etc. And all actions, finally, can also be understood as symbols; as rites, ceremonies, dramas, etc. (c.f. Daft, 1983).

These symbols are however not a mere reflection of organizational meanings; they are also part of the processes that constantly construct organizational life.
Organizational communication simultaneously creates and reflect the sense-making of the organization (Carbaugh, 1985). As Putnam points out:

"Stories, myths, rituals and language use are not simply reflections of organizational meanings; they are the ongoing processes that constitute organizational life."


The traditional view of communications as a system of senders and receivers with messages as physical substances, is replaced by a view of communication as essentially a process of sense-making (see Putnam, 1983). While in the "functionalist perspective", the communication process consists of the actual movement of a message from point to point (Putnam, 1983), I, representing more of an "interpretative perspective" (Burell & Morgan, 1979), understand communication as the interactive process of constructing meanings. Communication is not so much a transmission of messages as physical substances through different channels, as it is an interactive process of sense-making.

**Exploring Organizational Identity**

In such a symbolic perspective as described above, exploring organizational identity empirically involves identifying and interpreting the different symbols through which the organization's self-view is created and sustained. How does one then gain insight to the symbolic processes through which organizational identity is constructed and constituted? How can one get an understanding of how people make sense and define an organizational "self"?

Intangible and as a cultural process, the study of identity is "sticky". As Van Maanen writes on the study on cultures;

"A culture is expressed (or constituted) only by the actions and words of its members and must be interpreted by, not given to, a fieldworker. To portray culture requires the fieldworker to hear, to see... and to write of what was presumably witnessed and understood during a stay in the field. Culture is not itself visible, but is made visible only through its representation."

Van Maanen, 1988 (p.3).
Organizational identity is not something you go out and find readily waiting for you. Organizational identity is rather something that people in organizations might, more or less consciously, experience and express in various ways. It is the way people in a group define their organization and what it is all about. Their collective self-view represented in actions and talk.

Following my definition of organizational identity, identity is a collective self-concept that people might construct as they make sense of their world and their organization. Through the use of symbols, people express and define what the organization is all about, how they view themselves and what the organization is up to. Language, stories, myths, rituals, ceremonies, are different symbols that reflect and create the organization's "self". But how do people in organizations construct this self-view? What are the communicative processes through which organizational identity becomes constructed?

Even though we sometimes can find definitions of the organization's "self" in a company's official documents, policies and mission statements, a great deal of the sense-making takes place in every-day life in organizations. People meet, talk, interpret, negotiate, adopt, reject and create meanings that define and reflect how they view their organization.

**Understanding Others' Understandings**

All social life demands interpretation, i.e. assigning meanings to events and experiences. The interpretations of every-day life are often implicit and taken-for-granted. The object of a cultural analysis is to decipher and interpret the systems of meanings. Interpreting cultures is an affair of understanding others' way of life (see e.g. Rosen, 1991; Czarniawska-Joerges, 1989). But how can we get an understanding of others' understandings?

There are two alternative ways of approaching a culture; either as an outsider or as an insider; an external view versus a native view (see Gregory, 1983). The first approach, however, means that we will only reflect our own representations. But an organization's members "act upon their representations
and not ours" (Czarniawska-Joerges, 1989). To understand others' way of life, the researcher must get “inside the world of those generating it” (Rosen, 1991).

Still, one should bear in mind that any interpretation is always merely a second or third order construction. We give the interpretations of others' interpretations (c.f. Geertz, 1973). Even though the researcher adopts a native view, the final product will be the researcher's representation of the organization's representations. And research, being interpretative by nature, is also, of course, a product of social construction.

To become an insider in an organization, to “go native”, is often characterized as an ethnographic research method (see Gregory, 1983). The ethnographer, studying how meanings become constructed and reconstructed in everyday life, tries to get an inside perspective of those under study. Such an inquiry from the inside involves immersing oneself into the organization.

"The ethnographers' method of collecting data is to live among those who are the data. He or she tries to learn the subject’s rules for organizational life, to interact with them for a frequency and duration of time 'sufficient' to understand how and why they construct their social world as it is and explain it to others.”

Rosen, 1991 (p.5).

Since my research focus concerns the construction of an organization's self-view or identity, the design of the empirical fieldwork has been largely inspired by the methods used by ethnographers. Instead of using a more traditional research approach handled from the outside, my ambition was to get an inside view of the organizational processes that make up the organizational identity. By coming close to those under study I searched for an “empathic” understanding (see Smircich, 1983c).

Since meanings are created in interactions, studying sense-making means getting involved in those interactions and taking part of and listening to the accounts that organizational members give about these interactions and the produced meanings (c.f. Tompkins & Cheney, 1983). As a “social constructionist researcher” (Rosen, 1991), I wanted to deconstruct the borders between myself and the subject; coming close to them under study.
Thus, as I wanted to study organizational identity in a corporate setting, it was necessary to find a corporation in which I could get such an access; an organization in which I could get “immersed”.

**Organizational Identity in a Corporate Setting**

When doing the pilot study of corporate image in nine Swedish companies (see Salzer, 1990), one of the companies particularly caught my interest. It was IKEA - the Swedish international home furnishing chain. To me IKEA stood out as an exciting and “human” company, where the persons I met talked more about the human beings than the products they sold. It was a company that felt different. And of course I had read about IKEA in the infinite number of articles that described IKEA as a “cultural success” on the global markets, and as a company with a distinguishing “corporate culture” and style in its international operations. Could we here expect to find a company with a global identity, an identity that had transcended national and cultural borders?

Furthermore, IKEA is a company from which I have had direct personal experience. Since it is a home furnishing retailer with some hundreds stores all over the world, I have visited the stores as a customer on several occasions. In fact, just as many other Swedish homes, almost my whole apartment is furnished with IKEA products. And as many other customers I have praised the low prices and the inspiring product range, and cursed the missing screws and the sometimes incomprehensible assembling instructions when putting the furniture together.

In many aspects IKEA is a rather “extreme company”. Few other companies do to such a large extent nurture their own “culture”, consciously displaying and exploiting symbols, both internally and publicly. IKEA is a company that consciously reflects on and dwells into its own “culture” and identity, and explicitly tries to manage people trough a shared “corporate culture”. Another “extreme thing” about IKEA, is the way the company uses the national identity, or the Swedishness, as a demarcating property on the international markets. IKEA cherishes and promotes its history and national origins.
Another characteristic which is often pointed out when talking about IKEA, is that the company has a very strong and present founder (Ingvar Kamprad) whose ideas have instilled the company ever since it was started. Furthermore, IKEA is a group with a rather homogeneous principal activity (i.e. the development, distribution and marketing of home furnishing items) compared to many big conglomerates.

Nonetheless, when choosing an organization as a corporate setting for my study, my choice immediately fell on IKEA. There was an instant attraction. The advantage of an “extreme company” is that several aspects are more visible and more easily highlighted. Due to the explorative character of the study and my ambition to get an in-depth view of organizational identity, it was preferable to limit the empirical work to one “corporate setting”. But IKEA is no “typical company” (and I very much doubt that there is such a thing), and my ambition has not been to “reproduce a representative reality”. Rather my ambition is a search for understanding phenomena we can find in organizations; the processes of making sense and defining the organizational “self”, and trying to conceptualize and describe these processes in a corporate setting. As Morgan (1983a) points out:

“...there is a contribution to knowledge if the researchers can identify generic processes or patterns through which human beings construct and make sense of their realities, illustrated through the evidence of exemplars or archetypes, rather than through systematic bodies of data in the positivist tradition.”


As will be revealed in my narrative from the field in the following chapters, IKEA can be described as a company that is very “culture-conscious”, publicly exposed, self-dependent, etc. Ikeans, customers, and others ascribe certain characteristics to the company that make it different from other companies. Meanings, and the content of various processes, can thus be said to be particular; being specific to each situation or setting. However, by searching for the processes underlying various sets of meaning, one can try to generate ideas on how meanings become constructed. While the content is particular, the study of sense-making in one corporate setting or in one organization, can lay
bare processes that one suspects will exist also in other settings (see Gummesson, 1988).

As I started the field-work, it soon stood out to me that IKEA could be understood as many organizations. There is no “one IKEA organization”, but rather a number of companies, departments, stores, etc., operating in different countries, that go under the label “IKEA”. To what extent can a sense of organization be upheld in such a complex, internationalized company? Since that is part of my research question, my ambition has been to some extent to grasp “the whole”, but at the same time, a focus has been put on certain parts of the company. Particularly, the empirical work has mainly focused on the retail organization within the IKEA Group, even though other parts of the Group have been studied as well.

Nevertheless, as I started I did not try to make an a priori “delimitation of the company” or to draw borderlines to define the organization (more than directing my attention towards IKEA), but I rather let the empirical work guide me through the organization; letting organizational members defining their world and being open for organizational themes to emerge.

Constructing organizational meanings does not only take place within what one would describe as the “traditional organizational borders”. There are also other meaning creators that contribute to the definition of the “organizational self”. Various advertising agencies, for instance, turned out to have an active part in formulating and defining organizational meanings at IKEA, especially with regard to external audiences, but also within the organization. Thus, actors from some of IKEA’s agencies also came to be embraced by the fieldwork.

To my great luck, IKEA International in Humlebaek was very interested in the issues of my research, and after some initial contacts with the IKEA Group Management in Humlebaek, I was given access to “enter” the company.
**The Field-Work**

As I said earlier, IKEA as a rather “standardized concept company”, at least for an outsider, leads to thoughts of a global identity. You get the impression that IKEA attempts to be the same on all markets, and as you mention IKEA it seems as people in general take it for granted that IKEA has a rather global identity and image. Thus, to me it appeared as interesting to search for differences, to question the idea of an identity transcending cultural and national borders.

Hence, I decided to carry out the field-work in the IKEA retail organization in different countries, my underlying assumption being that different countries would provide different contexts of sense-making. As I wanted to have a sufficient knowledge of the local languages I decided to carry out the field-work mainly in Sweden, Canada and France, where Sweden was chosen in order to capture the company’s roots and origins. The field-work also came to take place at various central functions in Ålmhult, Sweden, and Humlebaek, Denmark. Here again I want to point out that I had no ambition to reproduce a “representative reality”, because I do not believe that there is such a thing. So, the selection of France and Canada was merely a choice of taste, convenience and random, and not of “representativity”.

The field-work started in the late autumn of 1991. After some initial contacts with IKEA International in Humlebaek, in January 1992 I spent a month in a Swedish IKEA store. Shortly after I went to Canada, where I during the first week participated in an internal training programme for the Canadian IKEA-managers (an IRTC-programme). After that I spent about a week in a Canadian IKEA-store and another week at the Service Office.

During the spring 1992, I participated in the week-long IKEA Way programme in Älmhult, and I spent another week in Älmhult meeting various managers and co-workers at IKEA of Sweden and the trading units. In the summer of 1992 I had about a month-long stay in France, both in a store and at the Service Office. The following autumn I made shorter visits to Älmhult, Humlebaek and the Swedish Service Office in Helsingborg. During the whole process I have had regular contacts with IKEA, mainly with Humlebaek but also with other
entities, which has enabled me to constantly exchange ideas and interpretations with those under study.

"Going Native"

"Hi, welcome to IKEA. Here at IKEA we are like a big family... Now we have some 230 employees, and the average age is 27-28... So we are a young group. A team!"

I am at the Personnel Department on my first day in a Swedish IKEA store. Entering the office I got an enthusiastic greeting. As all new employees I got a binder “We at IKEA”. The binder is white with a drawing of two red-dressed IKEA co-workers on the front; the male co-worker holding his arm in a sort of protective way around the girl. On the inside I am welcomed by the Swedish Service Office, who has produced the cover: “Welcome! I hope that you soon, very soon, will feel that you are one of the team...”

Along with the cover I got my set of IKEA clothes: a red shirt, a red sweater, a blue skirt, and a pair of blue trousers. As soon as I started to wear my new IKEA uniform, something surprising happened; everyone I met in the store said “hello”! People I had never seen before said “hi” with a friendly smile where ever I went in the store during my month-long stay. Sometimes I even felt like one of them...

Wearing the “reds” was a part of a research strategy of “going native” (c.f. Gregory, 1983, in discussing the “native-view paradigm”). In order to be able to gather insights in how the Ikeans defined themselves as a group I wanted to get immersed into the everyday life of the IKEA store. And to take part of the everyday life not only among managers, but at the floor. And indeed I got immersed into IKEA. For almost a month I spent all my days in a Swedish IKEA store, from eight in the morning to five in the afternoon. I ate at IKEA, I worked at IKEA, I participated in meetings and training programmes at IKEA, and I even dreamed about IKEA at night!

During about one year, I have followed IKEA at various locations. However, not always as intensively as in the Swedish store. Part of the field-work has
been carried out through participant observations, i.e. participating in the everyday life of the organization (mainly in the stores). However, working in a new organization carrying out tasks in which you are not skilled is not always easy. Not only do heavy lifts and standing and walking around all day in a store get felt in an un-acquainted body, but you cannot also help feeling a little bit stupid and helpless when you do not know how all the things work. Many were the times when customers approached me, asking for items I had no idea where to find.

So, even though I have participated in many of the activities carried out in the stores, my “contribution” to the work has been very low. Mostly I have been an observer, observing the work of others and attending various meetings, ceremonies, training programmes in both the stores in the different countries, and at the offices at various central functions.

An Insider and an Outsider
Sometimes during and after the fieldwork some have questioned my somewhat unorthodox method in business studies. “Isn’t there a risk that you get all caught up by the IKEA culture?” they have asked anxiously. “I hope I will”, I have replied. To me, understanding how people make sense and assign meaning to events, means to get involved. It implies getting an inside understanding of the world you are studying. Like Morgan (1983a), I see research as engagement, where the researcher and the researched merge into a whole. Either you do an inside participation or a “traditional” survey from the outside, neither of the approaches will produce an “objective” or “true” description of the organization. At its best we can create an intersubjectively accepted representation or construct of the social world we are studying (c.f. Alvesson & Köping, 1993; Van Maanen, 1988).

Unfortunately IKEA has been too big a field for being able to reach as far as one would desire within a reasonable time period. Becoming an “insider” requires time, and understanding demands depth. Therefore, “pure” participant observations have been combined with less time-consuming interviews and conversations. Today I would have chosen a smaller arena to study. So, one
could argue that I have not gone the full length of my tether. An “ideal” study would have involved longer and deeper involvement in the organization under study.

Even though customers in the stores often have mistaken me for being an “insider”, for the Ikeans I never really was one of them during my study. Rather, I hang around at the company as “the researcher with the tape recorder always firmly clinging at her arm”. As Nigel Barley (1983), quoted in Czarniawska-Joerges, 1992, points out, the idea of becoming a fully accepted insider is naive; at the best you will be viewed as a “harmless idiot”. I suppose that was about the status I achieved.

Sometimes jokes were made about my presence; “watch out, everything you say today can be held against you” was a common remark about my little tape recorder. However, my ambition has been to make the people in the organization feel “comfortable” with my presence; not regarding me as a threat or an “intruder”. In order to participate in the organizational life, the researcher needs to establish a relationship and create trust and acceptance, so that the researcher “will be invited to see the world from their point of view” (Smircich, 1983c).

I was always open about my role and purpose in the organization. Still, in Canada and France people at IKEA sometimes mistook me for being sent out there as a “spy” from Humlebaek, and to become an “insider” it was of course necessary to try to overcome such misconceptions.

As mentioned above, participant observation has also to some extent been complemented with shorter visits and interviews at various central functions, mainly in Denmark and Älmhult. On these occasions I have been more of an outsider than an insider. Thus, during the field-work I have altered between roles; combining the insider-view with more “traditional” interviews, or rather conversations and discussions. These discussions with people at central IKEA functions have been valuable occasions for exchanging ideas and impressions from my participant observations and for gathering insights in the overall
activities of the company. This alternation between roles has thus constituted an approach of mixing “immersion” and “distancing”.

**Reading Every-Day Life**

My aim with becoming an “insider” was to get an understanding of the understanding of the organizational members. I wanted to understand how they created and defined the organizational “self”. The construction of reality is an on-going process; a process that takes place in every-day life where meanings are created, negotiated, defined, etc. By interacting with people in the organization and taking part in their interactions with others, I searched for finding expressions for and reflections of Ikeans’ views of themselves and their world.

To study the everyday life of an organization means to take part in and “reading” the familiar aspects of organizational lives. Participating in lunch meetings, hallway conversations, birthday parties, departmental meetings, etc., are all parts in the construction and interpretation of taken-for-granted realities of everyday life. Still, I think that reading every-day life is sometimes more difficult in a corporate setting than in perhaps a distant tribe in an unfamiliar society. What is taken-for granted by people in a business organization might be just as taken-for granted for me as a student of business administration.

My year with IKEA, has involved a number of encounters and observations. In this period I have not only “worked” on the floor and taken part in the “normal” every-day life with work, breaks, lunches, etc., but I also took part in several internal training programmes, departmental meetings, management meetings, etc. By participating in such situations and encounters I searched for getting an insight into how meanings are constructed and deconstructed in the organization. How do people describe the organization, how do they view themselves and their role in the world?

In the participant observations on the floor in the stores and at various meetings at different levels in the organization I had also the opportunity to observe how the Ikeans presented themselves in meeting outsiders. In the
different countries I did not only participate in meetings with customers on the
ground floor, but also in recruitment interviews, management meetings with
advertising agencies, media, etc., which was very interesting as it showed
situations of presenting the "self" to "outsiders". As I often talked to customers
and other outsiders during the field-work, I also gathered insights in their
views on IKEA.

During the participating field-work I have carried out a large number of
conversations with co-workers and managers at all levels in the organization.
In all I have talked with some 300 Ikeans, in everything from informal chats in
the coffee room to more lengthy discussions. My encounters have ranged from
coworkers in the warehouses, to department managers, store managers, and
corporate managers at the Service Offices and central functions in Humlebaek
and Älmhult. In addition, I have also at a few occasions outside IKEA run into
former Ikeans, i.e. people who have left the company, with whom I have
talked.

During my stays in the stores I have been free to walk around and talk to
whomever I wished. The talks with the Ikeans have often been lengthy
discussions or dialogues about how they view and account for different events
and properties of IKEA; "open-minded" encounters, letting the empirical work
guide my orientation in the organization. My questions have been of the
character "what's it like working for IKEA?", "what kind of company is this?", etc., thereby encouraging accounts of experiences and stories to appear in the
talk (c.f. Schwartzman, 1993).

Apart from these more "informal chats" in the everyday life at IKEA, as
mentioned above I have also carried out about 40 interviews with managers
and co-workers at some central IKEA functions in Sweden and Denmark.
These have been lengthy discussions with IKEA people at IKEA of Sweden,
IKEA Advertising and Catalogue Production, IKEA Trading Units, and IKEA
International In Humlebaek.

Most of the time, both in my role as an insider and as an outsider, I have not
been a mere questioner, but I have actively contributed to the discussions by
sharing my impressions and interpretations with the people in the organization. This is an important phase of the research process, where the establishment of intersubjective meanings makes us see if our representations and meanings can be understood (c.f. Czarniawska-Joerges, 1989). This is a part of the researcher’s on-going iterations of the field with the researcher’s understanding of the situation studied (c.f. Rosen, 1991). Another part of the “intersubjectivity” of social research is to present the written interpretations of the field-work to all organizational members involved in the study, which I continuously have done as I have been “writing up” my interpretations. The reactions from IKEA on my written down interpretations have not been so many as I perhaps had hoped for. Still, the feed-back I have received has been a valuable input in establishing inter-subjective interpretations.

Interestingly enough, often during the field-work people at IKEA looked me up to ask me questions. They wanted me to share my impressions from other parts of the IKEA-world than their own. They wanted to compare their little “piece of IKEA” with my larger one. It made me realize that people within IKEA were as mystified as I by the company. They too wanted to understand the whole and searched for a sense of organization. I became a link for transmitting pictures from the IKEA-world. And it also made me realize that IKEA is a rather “ego-centric” company (the theme is developed in Chapter 14). Ikeans all around the organization loved to discuss my impressions about the company. And as I said something which they appreciated they chuckled with satisfaction as if I had given them a personal compliment, while if they found any of my impressions negative or unfair, they tended to explain and defend their company!

All the observations as well as the conversations were continuously documented by taking field notes and making tape recordings. The field notes are some “lose” notes of my impressions and observations, written down in a “field diary” during the days and in the evenings. And the small tape recorder was almost constantly switched on. In all I have some 100 hours of tape recordings, most of which have been transcribed and served as a basis for my “second-level” interpretation.
Furthermore a large amount of written representations have been gathered at the different outlets, such as co-worker handbooks, work descriptions, training material, internal newsletters, corporate policies, etc. I tried to “snatch everything I could lay my hands on”, since such documents and manuals reveal one possible part of the identity; i.e. how various managers as fabricators of meanings choose to describe and define the organization and its characteristics.

In each country I have also collected articles about IKEA in newspapers and magazines as well as examples of the external communications (mainly commercials and advertisements) as it might show how certain persons want to present the organizational “self” when addressing mainly external audiences.

During the field-work I have also taken a lot of photographs, trying to document different artefacts or material symbols in the organization. The photos have been of great help in refreshing my memory while writing the interpretations.

**Being a Learner**

In the field-work I have largely had the role of a “learner” in the organization, striving for an openness and “free-floating attention”; working much in the way as Linda Smircich describes cultural studies:

"Researchers of organizations as cultures do not usually start with a set of a priori hypotheses to test in the field. Instead, they learn about the meanings of social action through the course of their interaction with people in a particular setting. Their work proceeds in a way that allows the themes present in the setting to emerge and to be explored in cycles of data collection and analysis."

Smircich, 1983c (pp. 167-168).

However, this does not mean that I, or any researcher, is a “tabula rasa”, free from any assumptions, understandings or prejudices. On the contrary. I entered IKEA with all my experience, pre-understandings and ideas of what
the company "was all about", which, at least the conscious ones, I have tried to reveal here openly. What I am trying to say, and what Linda Smircich’s quote above is all about, is that the nature of my research has not been that of testing hypotheses or finding pre-defined themes. It is a question of how pre-structured the study is (c.f. Czarniawska-Joerges, 1992). The key themes from the IKEA-world that you will find in Chapter 4-13 were thus not defined on forehand, but rather became constructed as the field-work was carried out and my interpretations were written down.

**Interpretations**

As has been stated earlier, all social life demands interpretation. We do not find any such things as "raw data" or "pure observations", but instead we are all the time involved in the interpretation of events and things. The whole field-work has then been a form of interpretation; an interpretation of the organizational members' interpretations of their world. And the whole research process can thus be understood as an interpretative process, which is as much an interpretation of theories as an interpretation of the field-work.

Already as I observed things and events in the field there was of course a first interpretation of reality. My cultural perspective as described in Chapter 2, has naturally coloured and led my observations and interpretations on the field. And I do not see this perspective as "a pair of glasses" that you easily put on and off as you want, but rather as a fundamental way of seeing the world. Hence, all my interpretations and analyses are a construct out of this perspective, producing a reality that is my interpretation. Another perspective and another interpretation would of course produce another construct. Thus, I do not think that we can compare or evaluate any interpretation against a given, or absolute "real reality". Rather, different or multiple interpretations can enrich and widen our ways of seeing and understanding complex phenomena.

The more conscious interpretation of the field-work occurs later as you sit down by the desk (see Ehn & Löfgren, 1982). The "structuring" of the field-work was then made as I started to re-listen and transcribe the tape recordings
and sort my notes and documents. During and after the field-work I went through all the tape recordings and made literal transcriptions of a large part of the talks. As I started to unfold the field-work into transcripts and texts, my "second-level" interpretation became a re-reading of the field.

The transcriptions along with the field notes and the documents became the basis in my construction of key themes. In the re-reading, patterns and recurrent themes started to evolve. It is like developing a photograph; gradually the fluid and sometimes fuzzy and messy talks, emotions, impressions, etc., evolve into patterns. Not that there were any "ready-made" patterns that just "popped up", but rather, in the interaction between the texts and the theoretical perspectives, my construction of various key themes started to evolve.

Maybe this is the hardest phase of the process. Going from "tribes to scribes" as Van Maanen (1988) puts it. There are no "school-books" or rules for how to interpret cultures. And it is hard to verbalize how you actually interpret and analyze the gathered insights. One way I have used, naturally inspired and governed by my theoretical standpoints (see Chapter 2 and the first part of this chapter), has been to regard everything from the field as symbols. To look at any event, talk, action, etc., as a symbol that represents something, and to constantly ask the question; "what can this mean?" (c.f. Ehn & Løfgren, 1982). Offices and buildings, for instance, have been viewed and interpreted not as mere physical outlets in which the organizational members reside, but as cultural artefacts which define and reflect how organizational members view themselves and their world.

In interpreting and analyzing I have also employed the idea of "contrasting" (see Ehn & Løfgren, 1982). It is a way of analyzing accounts and stories through contrasts. A meaning can be better understood by trying to grasp what it does not mean. If an Ikean is described in a certain way - what is then a "non-Ikean"? For instance, by looking for how organizational members describe themselves in contrast to other groups, within and outside the company, I have looked for concepts or symbols that are used to distinguish the "self" of the organization from the "non-self".
Contrasting has also involved contrasting different views. In this way different groups and settings have emerged as entities sharing different meanings. Here, I have searched for divergent meanings and differences in self-views and tried to grasp the milieus or spheres in which these views evolve and become shared.

By interpreting various symbols, I started to construct key themes; themes that evolved around recurrent symbols in the field, as for example the dress code in the stores, the “Swedishness”, the “family metaphor”, etc. Cultural analysis is often described as an analysis of such different key themes or symbols (see e.g. Ehn & Lofgren, 1982). These themes show how different symbols are linked to each other in meaningful relationships (see Smircich, 1983c). It is often not until you start writing down your impressions and interpretations that some of these key themes emerge. Suddenly you see things you did not see before. It is here that your understanding of the organization evolves and takes form. The key themes, which are further described below, are the various stories and themes which I then have presented in the narrative from the field; the ethnography.

**Writing Ethnography**

“The process of ‘writing up’ one’s collected experiences from the field - notes, company documents, memories, and so on - is as much a literary task as it is a scientific one.”

Rosen, 1991 (p.18).

To present one’s interpretations of an extensive field-work is not an easy task. It is a literary art that requires creativity. To interpret everyday life means to see the “little things”, to put parts into a whole and separate the whole into parts (see Ehn & Lofgren, 1982). It is a process of interpretation. But it is also a process of writing down one’s interpretations; of constructing a comprehensible reading of a group’s culture for another group (see Rosen, 1991).

In most academic work there is a tendency to write as “objectively and neutral” as possible. In many texts the author is “hidden” behind neutral formulations
and an extensive writing in the passive tense. The researcher remains anonymous and absent. And this writing form is the style in which I too for a long time was trained. However, such a style, I think, is not only boring, but it also reproduces a false sense of authority. It is a trick of fooling the reader to believe that it is a “true” and neutral presentation, which hides and neglects the researcher’s active role as an interpreter and constructor of the reality he or she presents. In the last decades, as well in the recent post-modem critique on research, there has been a critical focus on the rhetoric of social science writing and the “crisis of representation” (see Van Maanen, 1988; Martin, 1992). It has put the attention on the “limitation of the author’s eye/I”, and the role of authority in texts:

“When an author disappears, the voice that is speaking through the text becomes the impersonal, objective voice of scientific authority. If no person is doing the describing, then the description must be ‘real’ - an objective view. The inclusion of any of the author’s personal views (the ‘I’) - indeed any evidence of the existence of the author as ‘eye’ - undermines this illusion of scientific objectivity.”


Throughout this text you are reading, I have tried to make myself visible. I have actively let myself and my role as a constructor of the reality I am presenting instil the text. Thus, I have avoided the “traditional scientific” way of writing neutral and impersonal, but rather used the active tense and tried to emphasize the existence of me as an author.

In writing ethnography, Van Maanen (1988) distinguishes between three literary styles. In the “realist” style the researcher is absent in the text, striving to make a “realistic” presentation of the field. The “confessional” style implies that the researcher is present in the text, accounting for his or hers personal experiences and reactions in the studied culture. The “impressionist” style, finally, is a style where the researcher is a “story-teller”, relating various “tales” in which he has participated in the field.

My own way of writing my interpretation of IKEA, can be characterized as a mixture of the impressionist and confessional styles. I have tried to “paint a picture”, to create a vivid impression of the organizational life. By using
quotes, organizational members’ own accounts of stories and tales, and reproducing dialogue, I have to a large extent let their representations talk, but I have also let my own experiences, feelings and reactions colour the presentation in a more confessional style. Some of you might perhaps be confused by my way of writing - still I hope that you will get used to it!

The narrative from the field that you will find in the following chapters is not “one story”. Instead I have mixed the Ikeans’ stories with my own stories as accounts of my observations. As for example in Chapter 4, the corporate saga that you will read about IKEA, is the saga as it is more or less written down in IKEA’s internal documents and as it is retold by Ikeans on training seminars. While in Chapter 5, the “setting of the stage”, the description of physical artefacts in the organization, is an account for my observations and my impressions in IKEA’s “corporate landscape”. But I have also tried to reflect how the Ikeans relate to these artefacts, since it is their representations, i.e. how they view and define themselves, that I am looking for. In that way I have tried to avoid the “omnipresent” author that would present the story. Because there is no such story. Still, the whole narrative, as it is structured and presented, is of course my construction. It does not exist as a ready-made story about IKEA. What you will read is a construction, a make up of parts into a whole, where I have essentially worked with finding and putting together different key themes. The whole narrative as it is presented, structured, selected, commented, etc., is in total my construction of IKEA.

Ethnographic writings are sometimes criticized for being filled with redundant “talk” without any analytical interpretations or perspectives. In the narrative about IKEA my attempt has been to continually interpret the stories and observations with some interwoven theoretical concepts (however, as explained above, the whole narrative is of course in itself an interpretation). The idea with that approach is to guide the reader through the text and make my analytical ideas and paths explicit. Many of these are then further developed and commented in the last concluding chapters (Chapter 14-16).

In the foregoing chapters I have presented some analytical concepts and theoretical ideas such as “identity”, “symbols”, “sense-making”, etc. In the
narrative these will reappear, but new concepts will also be introduced. I have chosen to present these concepts as they emerge and are used in the interpretation, instead of burdening the reading with a longer “theoretical discussion” in the beginning. Thus, many of the concepts for various organizational symbols, such as “saga”, “metaphor”, “myth”, etc., will be presented and defined as they appear.

Key Themes
The narrative in the following chapters consists of a number of stories, images and metaphors from the field presented in 9 different chapters. Each of these chapters treat different “key themes”. In the process, several so called key themes have emerged and been constructed. This does not mean, however, that the themes are omnipresent or embraced by everyone in the organization. Rather, some of the themes are more or less specific for one group, for example the French store, while others can be found at several outlets and within many groups. The key themes that appears in the following chapters can briefly be presented as follows;

In Chapter 4, “The saga about IKEA”, there is a presentation of the company’s corporate “glorious history”, which can be understood as a “corporate saga”. This was a symbol that early in the field-work stood out as current theme in how Ikeans view and define themselves. And as you will see, many of the features of the corporate saga, reappears in other stories and myths of the company.

In Chapter 5, “Setting the Stage”, the focus is put on different material symbols; the artefacts. It occurred to me that these physical traits both construct and reflect and organization’s self-view. It also gives you as a reader an introduction to IKEA as a company. Closely related to the buildings and offices are the hierarchical levels of an organization, which are also presented in this chapter. Just as buildings might constitute physical borders between different groups, vertical differentiation can separate people and their systems of meaning. This chapter is thus a search for such borders, and also a description of Ikeans' notions and conceptions about hierarchy as a part of their self-view.
My ambition has not only been to present different recurrent symbols in the IKEA-world, but also to create a vivid picture of organizational life in the company. Chapter 6 is a narrative focused on a day in a store which evokes some central activities in the every-day life in a store and also presents how the "IKEA-concept" works. In the next chapter (Chapter 7) there is a description of IKEA's product range, how it is perceived in the different countries, and the redefinition of the "self" in the on-going broadening of the product range.

One of the most visible symbols on the field was the dress code at IKEA. People in the company wear special uniforms, and in the chapter "Red-Shirts and No Ties" (Chapter 8), I am trying to interpret the meaning and role of this dress code. In Chapter 9, "From Doers to Thinkers", the focus is put on a recurrent theme within IKEA; the way Ikeans describe themselves in various stories and myths. Here I identified an interesting change or development in their self-view, reflected in the stories and myths as well in documents and manuals. A change in the description of themselves from "doers to thinkers".

Another theme that is developed in the narrative is IKEA as a company highly involved in the management of culture (Chapter 10, "Culture-making"). One of the most striking activities in IKEA as a company are all the activities carried out in order to fabricate a "corporate culture". Many were the training seminars and discussions I took part in that were dedicated to "our culture". This kind of culture management thus stood out as an important theme for top management's sense-making activities. In Chapter 11 a recurrent metaphor used by Ikeans is described and interpreted; i.e. "we're like a big family". The metaphor appeared to be widely used around in the "IKEA-world", but it was not shared universally.

Language is another important symbol in every culture. In Chapter 12 some specific IKEA words are presented and discussed in relation to their self-view. In Chapter 13, finally, "IKEA's world" as it is defined by themselves is discussed with relations to how flows of meanings are constructed across borders.
Organizational Identity Across Borders

Out of the ethnography the aim is to discuss the issues raised in the first chapter, i.e. how organizational identity is constructed and the processes of constructing and disseminating organizational identity across borders. Chapter 14 then, following on the key themes from the “IKEA-world”, is a further interpretation of the key themes, where I highlight and summarize the content of IKEA’s self-view and identify the processes through which the identity becomes constructed across borders at IKEA. The aim of that chapter is to create a link from the IKEA story over to a more theoretical discussion of the process of identity construction across borders.

In the concluding chapters (15-16), finally, I try to develop the theoretical contribution. This can be understood as the more “abstract analysis”. On the basis of the key themes and the theoretical perspective, there is an attempt to identify and conceptualize the different sense-making processes through which organizational identity becomes constructed. I have here looked for different processes in organizations which help us understand how meanings are created in international, complex organizations.

From Chaos to Order?

Cultural analysis as the search for themes and patterns makes us look for the organized and integrated. We tend to make order out of chaos, to create whole pictures of integration and harmony. As was stated before, in the heart of studies of organizations lies a concern for social order (c.f. Ehn & Löfgren, 1982). But how do we account for things that are not ordered? Do we, as researchers, try to create order where there is none? Clearly, I have been looking for patterns; and writing down the narrative is the researcher's attempt to find a structure of the findings. Thus, any narrative of the field-work must be read as a construction; an interpretation where different themes are elaborated and others are not, and where a relationship between different themes is created.

Still, even though the key themes are “nicely ordered”, I have tried to be open for conflicting views and divergent meanings to appear in the writing. Through
comparing parts and confronting different group with others, I will hopefully
give a more multi-facet picture. Mainly this contrasting is a cross-border
comparison. Since the field-work took place at various IKEA outlets in different
countries, in the narrative I am continually contrasting these countries to each
other. I have also tried to contrast different levels in the organization, for
example top management and lower levels in the hierarchy.

However, the difficulty of representation involves the problem of
generalizations in writing. By using language that make universalizing
assumptions, such as “everybody says”, “typical events”, “all claim”, etc.,
much of the particularities and divergent views are lost in the text (see Martin,
1992). Since it is almost impossible to let each individual voice be heard in a
truly “polyphonic text”, my use of generalizing expressions and summarizing
descriptions becomes something that contributes to the “created order”.

With all this in mind I would now like to invite you to my construction of the
“IKEA-world”!
Chapter 4

The Saga about IKEA

Far down in the South of Sweden, in the midst of the bewitched forest, there is a small village called Älmhult. Coming by train to the village's small yellow station house, you have travelled through a landscape of green fields with winding stone fences and thick forests where the sun gropes its way through the dense foliage. It is down here, in Älmhult, that the often told saga about IKEA begins. A saga about a young boy who with small means conquered the world. A saga about how problems create solutions. A saga with the ambitious mission to create a better everyday life for the majority of people. A saga that promises that nothing is impossible, that there is a future filled with opportunities. This is a saga of our time - a modern corporate story filled with myths, heroes, rites and legends. It is the saga about IKEA.

"The Rags-to-Riches Story"

It was here, on a farm outside Älmhult, on the poor land of the barren county of Småland, that the young boy Ingvar Kamprad grew up in the 1920's-30's. Like all the small farmers in the county, Ingvar was thrifty by nature and he early looked out for opportunities. When other young boys read Donald Duck,

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1 The story as it is written down here is IKEA's "corporate saga" as it is more or less retold on various training seminars within the IKEA group. The "saga" has also been written down in IKEA's own "history book" (The Future is Filled with Opportunities), where it is depicted in a somewhat longer but similar manner as here.
Ingvar pored over mail order catalogues. And as a little boy he started to sell matches. Soon he expanded the business to sell fish, and later on he started selling pencils, ball-points and watches.

The business went well and in 1943, at the age of 17, he registered his business as a commercial enterprise. The name he gave to the company was IKEA, an acronym of his name (Ingvar Kamprad), and the farm (Elmtaryd) and parish (Agunnaryd) where he grew up. A few years later IKEA became a mail-order firm, and as Ingvar started to buy furniture from the local furniture producers he soon came to send out a catalogue with low-priced furniture. However, the big revolution was yet to come.

Furniture was bulky and expensive to package and transport. Ingvar realized that if the customers would assemble the furniture themselves, packaging and transport costs could be reduced and prices lowered. In the 50's, Ingvar's company started to launch quick assembly furniture in compact packaging and soon afterwards the first IKEA store was opened in Ålmhult. Here people from all over Sweden would come to see and touch the furniture shown in the catalogue. Ingvar, always looking out for opportunities, found out that letting customers bringing their furniture home themselves, reduced costs. So he started to sell roof racks in the store, and from then on caravans of cars would be seen leaving Ålmhult with roof racks packed with IKEA boxes.

**IKEA - An Outsider**

However, the road to success was not without problems. There were threatening dark clouds. The new little company had to fight its Goliath. The traditional furniture dealers looked with scepticism and dislike upon the new up-coming furniture dealer. Feeling threatened by IKEA's low prices, they pressed the producers not to deliver to IKEA. IKEA was boycotted. The boycott forced IKEA to start to design its own products and to find new suppliers outside Sweden. Kamprad early established relations with manufacturers in Eastern Europe. Once again a problem led to a different, unconventional solution...
IKEA continued to be an outsider, challenging the furniture business with its different solutions. With a giant monument, a circular building inspired by the New York Guggenheim Museum, IKEA was established as the first large home furnishing department store in Stockholm. The store in 1965 was an instant success, attracting some 35,000 visitors on the opening day. People would line up for hours to see the new showroom. But the massive invasion of customers at the store opening created new problems. The employees who were fetching the goods from the warehouse for the customers could not handle the ever-increasing orders. What to do, what to do? IKEA simply opened up the warehouse, letting the customers fetch the goods themselves. And so the self-service concept was born.

At the same time, in the mid 60's, Sweden's most important home decorating magazine “Allt i Hemmet” pointed out IKEA's good quality in a comparison of IKEA's low-price furniture with other more expensive products. This was marked as a break-through in IKEA's history. It had become possible to combine low prices with good quality. IKEA was finally becoming accepted.

The small Älmhult company grew. More and more people were gathered around Ingvar Kamprad. Early pioneers and entrepreneurs. Some of them are still in the company, identified by their one or two digit employee numbers. They worked closely together, always ready to give a hand wherever and whenever it was needed. The early members of the IKEA family. They who in Ingvar's footsteps created the "jeans-rolled-up-sleeves-snuff-look" as the "uniform" for the unconventional company.

**Furnishing the World**

By the time the question arose; could IKEA succeed outside Scandinavia? Could the different IKEA concept have an appeal on foreign markets? Once again IKEA took the unconventional route, a story that many Swedish IKEA persons I've met love to recite.

“We don't make market researches or that kind of stuff. Have you heard about how we started abroad? By then we had entered Norway, but that was by mistake, you know..."
kind of consultant who had duped us to buy some building lot. And then they pondered, which market is the most conservative when it comes to furniture? Well, it's Switzerland.

So they took the train to Switzerland. Well, it was Janne and Kamprad. And they stood outside the shops that sold modern furniture in Switzerland, you know, and they stood there and they asked the people who stopped and looked in the shop windows; 'do you like the furniture?', and people said that they did; 'would you buy then?', and they said that they wouldn't; 'why?', Well, people thought it was too expensive. And when they had been standing there for half a day they were assured that there were enough people who liked that kind of furniture but that it was too expensive, so there must be a market, they thought, and then they went back to Sweden. And so we bought a building and started the first store in Switzerland...And it's continued like that”.

Per, a Swedish IKEA manager.

After the opening of the Swiss store in 1973, IKEA started a tour to conquer the world in the 70's. It was a period of rapid expansion. Some 30 years after it all started, IKEA was a fast-growing company with a couple of thousand co-workers.

But Ingvar wanted his life's work to maintain what he called the "IKEA philosophy"; the teamwork, the goals, the family spirit, etc., that had grown step-by-step out of the history. So the man who once started selling matches in the dark forests of Småland, wrote his "will" in 1976: "The Testament of a Furniture Dealer". A document with nine points under the headline "To create a better everyday life for the majority of people".

It's a document on IKEA's philosophy that explains the thoughts, ideas and rules that made IKEA a unique company. "The product range is our identity", "The IKEA spirit", "To reach good results with small means", "Simplicity is a virtue", etc. The document is still the cornerstone in IKEA's activities, being

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2 In the whole narrative I have chosen to use fictive names on the people in the organization so that no one will feel pointed out.

3 A complete copy of the "testament" is shown in appendix 1.
the basic guideline that all co-workers in the world gets in their hands as soon as they start working for IKEA.

"The Future is Filled with Opportunities"

Today IKEA is an international home-furnishing group with more than 100 stores in some 20 countries. And some 20,000 employees have joined "the family". Little by little the IKEA concept has been developed over time; flat packages, large volumes, self-service and mechanical selling, and large stores operating as "selling machines". In homes all over the world you can find IKEA best sellers, such as Billy, Ivar, System 210, etc. The IKEA catalogue, said to be the most widely circulated publication in the world; today more than 60 million copies are distributed annually. And IKEA ads, humorous and provocative, have caught attention and received awards on various markets. But the saga doesn't end here. The moral is clear:

"Today you will find IKEA all over the world and IKEA's size will give rise to new problems, problems that will be solved in the same unconventional way that IKEA has always solved its problems. IKEA will never be completely finished. Life will constantly feed IKEA with new problems. Problems that create new ideas and new solutions. Solutions that will change IKEA."

"The future is filled with opportunities", p.74.

The Corporate Saga

The corporate saga about IKEA is the story about how the company started and evolved over the years. But it is not only a vivid and heroic story of how IKEA got started and grew into an successful international Group, it is also a story that reflects how the top organization at IKEA looks at itself and its role in the world. It reflects its special language, its myths and its heroes. To me it stands out as an important symbol that both reflects and constructs the organization's identity.
The saga is often told, more or less as I have retold it here, at internal training seminars in the company and in the IKEA Way programmes; but it is also sometimes referred to in the ordinary working day. I have heard managers and co-workers tell the story or parts of it at least a dozen times, both at IKEA in Sweden and elsewhere. It is most often retold by Swedes in the organization, while French and Canadian co-workers I have met more often make shorter references to the story, mentioning how it all started by “the founder selling matches”. The saga has also often been depicted in articles about IKEA in newspapers and magazines. It has thus become a story of common knowledge within IKEA.

A corporate saga is often defined as an organization's epic or vivid description of the “living” and achievements of the organization (see e.g. Wilkins, 1983; Alvesson & Berg, 1988; Bormann, 1983). As such, it consists of myths, heroes and legends in the organization's history, and expresses the view the organization has of itself and its world. It is a verbal symbol, a dramatized history, that expresses and legitimates the company's philosophy of management and existing practices (see e.g. Martin & Powers, 1983).

Bormann (1983) talks about an important communicative practice in organizations as the sharing of fantasies. Fantasy themes, he explains, are narratives about living people or historic personages or about an envisioned future. A fantasy is the way communities of people make sense of their world, and create their social reality. This is how people in the same “rhetorical community” come to share a common view. The corporate saga as a shared fantasy is a narrative that answers such questions as: What kind of organization are we and what kind of people are members in our organization? (see Borrnann, 1983).

“A Genesis”
IKEA's corporate saga clothes IKEA in a “social mission”; “to create a better everyday life for the majority of people”. IKEA is not just an ordinary company that sells home-furnishing items over the world. IKEA has a soul. At least that is how Ikeans and media often describe the group. “We don't just sell a chair or a
table, we sell a philosophy of living and a mission”, a French IKEA co-worker explained to me.

There is a "social pathos" involved in IKEA’s mission. To provide good furniture to those who live on small means. To give people better homes and a brighter life. IKEA should always be on the side of the “small people”. "IKEA cares for those who nobody else cares for". This care and mission is said to be a part of the special “IKEA spirit”.

The saga is a reconstruction of logic that creates a view of how it all evolved quite naturally into a winning concept. Problems created solutions. Solutions that changed the company. It gives meaning and purpose to why certain things are done. The “IKEA-Way” of doing things gets its historical explanations. It not only gives a feeling of “how things are done around here” but it also explains “why”.

In the Swedish IKEA store I am visiting, for example, I often get to hear such an explanation of why the “Accenten” department was started:

“It was at Kungens Kurva in Stockholm, and a lot of people came to the store just to look around, and thus there was a large wear and tear of the store. So we needed some easy, faster-moving products to pay for the wear and tear. There were even plans to sell entry tickets to the store... So there you see how everything that has been done has evolved as solutions to concrete problems...”

The same story can be read in the IKEA “history-book”4, “The future is filled with opportunities”, a book that all employees have received, and to which managers and department heads in Sweden rather often refer.

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4 “The growing stream of customers soon created problems... But the maintenance costs for the store went up still faster. What to do? Increase the prices? Out of the question! Why should those who bought be punished because others came to look? Entrance fee? Well, it wasn’t a very appealing idea for a retailer to perhaps annoy or even stop his customers at the door. The solution to the problem was, as usual, unconventional...” (Extract from “The future is filled with opportunities”.)
Thus, the corporate saga can be understood as symbol that make sense of the past. It explains how IKEA came into being. It creates a sense of purpose. And a sense of mission.

However, the saga is hard to spread. In spite of conscious efforts at the corporate level for spreading the saga and its embodied philosophy, the rapid expansion of the Group has made it hard to always keep the saga alive. As in Canada, where IKEA's new country manager by the time for my visit identified a central problem in IKEA's development on the Canadian market. A lack of understanding of IKEA's "character and history" among the co-workers;

"What we have done very often in Canada, I think, is that we have only copied a lot of things from Europe... Why do we have the "Family-concept"? No one knows... Why do we have IKEA -at-Work? No one knows. Why do we have these new ads? No one knows... We have adopted how things are done, but not why they're done. And the whole thing about IKEA is the 'why'. Our business idea, the needs on the market... We've got to create that basic understanding."

Martin, the Canadian country manager.

The saga about IKEA is like a "genesis", a history of the creation of the company. As God created earth, Kamprad created the IKEA world. It explains how it all came into being. It creates a sense of meaning and purpose. Pieces are put together into a coherent "IKEA-world" where everything can be explained and understood. And the saga has its good characters and its bad. As we read the saga, we know that the "good side" will win, finding its way across the world, attracting new followers all the time...

**Being Different**

In the case of IKEA, the saga depicts a company that is different. It is a company that has challenged the "normal" or "traditional" in the furniture business, by using unconventional solutions and "siding with the many" instead of following established practices.
The saga emphasizes that IKEA is not like the others, IKEA is different. The corporate saga claims for distinctiveness and consistency. "This is how IKEA is and will be - we're different", the message of the saga tells us. To be distinguished from other companies, IKEA must be unique. Any identity, as a self-concept, involves distinguishing the self from others. There is often a claim for uniqueness. In the case of organizations, however, there is often a "uniqueness paradox" (see Martin et al, 1983). In their study of organizational stories in different organizations, Martin et al found that "a culture's claim to uniqueness is expressed through cultural manifestations that are not in fact unique" (Martin et al, 1983, p.439). IKEA's claim for uniqueness in challenging the normal, being an outsider, unconventional solutions, etc., could we thus expect to find in many other business corporations.

However, the notion of being different is a widely shared idea within IKEA. When relating how things are done, there is often a reference made to how others do. Like "we don't make market researches (as the others do)...we do it like this..." The saga clearly distinguishes the "we" of the organization from the "they" of the others (c.f. Bormann, 1983). And in IKEA's world there is not one clearly defined "they", but rather a vague mass of "others" that reside outside IKEA. Competitors, suppliers, the society, etc., are all alike - they are not IKEA.

**Writing the Autobiography**

IKEA's corporate saga can also be found in writing. "The future is filled with opportunities" is a booklet for internal use, published by Inter-IKEA in 1984, which can be viewed as IKEA's own "history book". Here you find the glorious "from rags-to-riches" story vividly told and illustrated with authentic pictures from IKEA's past on some 80 pages. This is a book that is handed out to all co-workers in the IKEA-world.

The author is not presented in the booklet; the narrator of the glorious story remains unknown. Only the postscript is signed, being written by Ingvar Kamprad. However, being curious of who had written down the story, after awhile I found out that the author was an advertising agent, who for IKEA's account wrote down the glamorous story.
Writing the “autobiography” began towards the end of the 70's. In 1976 Ingvar Kamprad wrote his “testament of a furniture dealers” as a document on the company’s philosophy. Some years later, in August 1979, IKEA’s Group management initiated a project called Kraft-80. This was a kind of sabbatical year for internal examination. The Group, that now had some 4000 employees, had grown so fast in the past years that the managers of the company feared that there was a risk of “losing the heart”. Quality problems along with tendencies towards bureaucracy and rigidity were found within the group.

One of the most important results of the Kraft-80 project, I think, was that IKEA started to nourish its own “culture” and promoting its history and origins. What until now had been something that had been let to evolve rather naturally over time, at this point became a managerial concern.

In “IKEA-Match”, the internal newsletter of Kraft-80 that was produced in Älmhult, there were not only reports from the various activities carried out within the project, but also special articles with long interviews with old “IKEA-profiles”. As a kind of “back to the roots”, the articles presented cheerful portraits of “they who were in it from the beginning”. For the first time IKEA started to write its own “autobiography”, which later on became more complete with the booklet, “The future is filled with opportunities”, in 1984. The booklet was produced for the “IKEA Way”, an internal seminar that was introduced the same year, as a means of spreading the “IKEA spirit” in an organized form.

Writing down the corporate saga can be seen as the writing of the organization’s “autobiography” (c.f. Ramanantsoa & Battaglia, 1991). The “autobiography” is not written for external audiences. It was written for the organization itself. By highlighting and identifying some of one’s perceived or desired properties, the saga enhances and contributes to the ego. It produces the myth of the self. Ramanantsoa & Battaglia describe the effects of the autobiography:
"The ultimate effect is to broadcast an image of the company as autonomous, a central and ideal actor, all at once fully free and ever strategically alert by virtue of a strong and original personality."

Ramanantsoa & Battaglia, 1991 (p.8).

The written down corporate saga can be viewed as the "public" saga. It emphasizes the heroic achievements and glorious future of the organization. It is the way that managers might want to portray the organization for creating positive images. IKEA as an entrepreneurial company, using unorthodox solutions, having immediate success, expansive and fast-moving, etc. This is what Bormann (1983) calls the "front parlour elements" of the corporate saga:

"The front parlour narratives are those that members include when they want to put the best face on their organization either for public consumption or for their needs - their self-images. Organizational sagas also include material relating to the back kitchen, the storage closet, and the bathroom, but insiders often keep them from the public."

Bormann, 1983 (p.117).

IKEA's corporate saga creates an image of how a young boy, "with two empty hands" but a large portion of "common sense" could conquer the world. And that's IKEA's whole philosophy; to create success with small means, just as that young boy did. On a tour to Kamprad's parents' home outside Älmhult, an IKEA manager told me in a confidential tone; "You know, Kamprad was by no means poor. His family was rather wealthy. But that is not often told, you see...".

**The Corporate Saga as a Key Theme**

The corporate saga includes many elements of IKEA's identity. In approaching the company, the saga soon stood out as a key theme in IKEA's organizational life (c.f. Smircich, 1983c). Its heroes, myths, language, legends, etc., are all different symbols that appear in the saga, and which turn up in many other situations in the everyday life of IKEA.

The heroic Kamprad, the family metaphor, the "jeans-rolled-up-sleeves-snuff-look", the IKEA spirit, the legendary pioneers who conquered the world, the
testament, stores as “selling machines”, the special language, the “IKEA world”, etc., are symbols that shape and give meaning to many events and actions. Those are central symbols in the process of making sense of what IKEA “is all about”.

All these symbols will be further described and developed in the following, and you will soon realize how the corporate saga reappears as a key theme in many aspects of IKEA's daily world. But before entering into these symbols, I would like to set the stage, describing some of IKEA's physical outlets and formal structures, thereby giving you an introduction not only to IKEA as a Group but also to the corporate landscape in which the field-work has been carried out.
Chapter 5

Setting the Stage

Drawing on a theatrical metaphor (c.f. Pondy et al, 1983), an organization's "performances" and "lines" take place on a "stage". There is a stage with properties and scenery, on which the world is enacted and constructed. Sense-making is thus not only an issue of verbal communications, but also the construction of a physical world, with houses, buildings, products etc. Those artefacts, as "physical traces of human activity" (see e.g. Alvesson & Berg, 1988), are a part of the organizational reality as constructed by the organization's members. It is the "corporate landscape" (see Gagliardi, 1990). The corporate landscape also erects borders between, and milieus for, different settings where shared meanings might develop. IKEA's stage, or at least parts of it, can be outlined as follows.

"Our Heart Belongs to Älmhult"

To understand IKEA, you really have to visit to Älmhult. I say that and Ikeans say that. IKEA frequently brings their managers from different countries to Älmhult. Every second year the IKEA furniture fair is held there, and when managers are to be trained in the "IKEA Way" seminar they are kept in Älmhult for a week, not only to see the various IKEA functions in the village, but to become totally immersed in the culture and nature of Småland. Älmhult is thus often described as "the heart of the group".
"Wherever IKEA expands and however much IKEA expands, its heart will always remain in Älmhult, in the midst of the forests of southern Sweden." (IKEA Facts, 1986)

Älmhult is a small village in the South of Sweden in the county of Småland. When I arrived there for the first time, almost half a century had passed since it all started. Getting off the train, in front of the station you find "Älmhult downtown", as non-Swedes in the IKEA Group jokingly call the small centre of the village. But if you cross the tracks, on the other side of the station, you enter into the "IKEA village". Here, everything is IKEA.

Even though some functions have been moved from Älmhult, the village is still regarded as the centre of the IKEA Group¹. It is here that you find the core of Ikeans. IKEA co-workers call themselves that sometimes. Ikeans. It sounds as some creatures from outer space. Ikeans, Martians... They say that the IKEA "family" is inhabited by Ikeans; people who are and feel for the company. People who are loyal and work hard. There are many Ikeans in Älmhult.

Since Älmhult is a small village, almost every household has some kind of relation to IKEA, which gives rise to internal jokes among Ikeans outside Älmhult. Such as when they received bicycles as Christmas presents in Älmhult, "and the day after you could see the whole village biking around on identical bikes..."

The hub around which everything circulates is still situated in Älmhult. It is IKEA of Sweden, the product range company. At least that is how the group now chooses to present itself. When drawing the structure of the group, IKEA of Sweden is pictured as the hub in the middle of all operations.

I co-ordinating the purchasing strategy, IKEA of Sweden places all orders with the trading agents that operate in different regions. The products are developed

¹ The name IKEA is normally used to denote the whole IKEA Group. However, legally IKEA is not one company, but consists of more than 100 different companies. The IKEA Group, which is owned by a charitable foundation in Holland, works with four basic functions: product range, purchasing, distribution service and retailing. The group's operations are co-ordinated by IKEA International A/S in Humlebaek, Denmark. Retailing is based on the IKEA retail concept which is owned by another company, Inter IKEA Systems B.V.
and manufactured in close co-operation with IKEA's more than 1500 suppliers all over the world. Some of them are basic suppliers, working more closely with IKEA. Thereafter the goods are delivered to IKEA's central warehouses, or sometimes directly to the stores.

Traditionally, IKEA has had no production of its own. Ever since the beginning, Ingvar Kamprad's strategy has been to subcontract the manufacture of the furniture to independent suppliers. In the "history" booklet, the foundation of Kamprad's strategy is explained:

"Out of a young man's experience in business grew an understanding of the value of freedom of action, of the importance of not being burdened by factories in a business where change was rapid..."

"The future is filled with opportunities", p.64.

In recent years, however, IKEA has acquired some suppliers. Through the Swedwood Group, IKEA owns a few production companies which were acquired as a means for developing the suppliers in Eastern Europe. From having more or less sub-contracted the production, IKEA today generally works more closely with many of their suppliers, not only setting specific product standards but also training them in the IKEA system and the IKEA-way of doing things.
On the retail side of the system, the stores are organized geographically. Each country operates as an IKEA company, headed by a Service Office that co-ordinates the retail activities in that country. And since 1992, the retail and distribution activities in all countries are co-ordinated in 4 different regions: the market units (Northern Europe, Southern Europe, North America and Eastern Europe). IKEA of Sweden provides the market units with range support such as product information and classification, guidelines on displays, styles, etc.

IKEA of Sweden is the centre of gravity in the IKEA system. In a big white and red building called “Blåsippan” in Älmhult, IKEA of Sweden houses the managers and co-workers for the ten business areas of the range. It is from here that IKEA’s product range is developed and the company’s profile is elaborated.

A tour around “the IKEA village”
Continuing the tour around the “IKEA village” in Älmhult you will find ICAP, IKEA Catalogue & Advertising Production, in a building with a large photo studio. It is like a big Hollywood studio, where “fictive” rooms are created from one day to another. ICAP is the unit within IKEA of Sweden that produces the IKEA catalogue. The most spread publication in the world. All catalogues, for all IKEA-countries in the world, are produced in Älmhult. Art directors, copywriters, photographers, project managers, graphic designers and interior decorators constitute the creative staff of ICAP. “Funny types speaking Stockholm jargon” as other Ikeans in Älmhult often describe them.

Next to ICAP is “HK“, the former head office, where various administrative functions as well as the Nordic trading company have their offices nowadays. Here you encounter the “price-cutters”, as the purchasers traditionally have described themselves, always negotiating every single penny.

And of course there is also an IKEA store in Älmhult. IKEA even has its own hotel: the IKEA Inn. Here can long distance guests stay in IKEA furnished rooms, enjoy the classic IKEA meatballs at the veranda, and experience the
IKEA atmosphere together with IKEA persons from all over the world in the bar and café. Every Tuesday and Thursday, IKEA co-workers can meet at the “after work” in the basement of the IKEA Inn.

More of IKEA can be found a couple of miles outside Älmhult where one of the central warehouse is situated. 220,000 square meters. It is not only a warehouse, it is also the stage for one of the most important IKEA rites. Every Christmas the warehouse is cleared out and then the annual Christmas gathering takes place.

**IKEA International in Humlebaek - the “Brain”?**

IKEA’s international operations are co-ordinated from Humlebaek in Denmark. The IKEA management group moved from Älmhult to Denmark in 1975 to mark IKEA’s international connections. In an old villa, beautifully situated by the seaside in Humlebaek, IKEA’s management company, IKEA International A/S, resides. It is here that the group president Anders Moberg and the staff functions have their offices.

The management group keep a “low profile”. There is no big IKEA sign at the villa, just a small inscription next to the door bell. And the Ikeans at IKEA International, emphasize that it is not the headquarters - it is a management service company. A service company that should serve all the IKEA Group units with management support and guidance, as well as co-ordinate the Group’s operations.

As you enter the villa you do not get the impression of a traditional headquarters office, but rather a “cosy inn”. In the hall there is a fireplace, a sofa and a coffee table where visitors can sit and glance through IKEA catalogues from all over the world. In the next room there is a reception, and from the lady behind the round reception desk, you get a visitor’s badge to wear while you are in the house. The house itself is an architectonic fantasy with winding corridors, small stairs here and there, some leading to new parts built in with the old original villa.
While most IKEA offices I have visited in the stores and the Service Offices are very much "IKEA", in that the walls are decorated with IKEA posters, IKEA ads, etc., there is much less "IKEA" at IKEA International. You find "real art" on the walls and fewer IKEA signs. The offices could belong to any company. However, like most IKEA offices, it is mainly an open-plan office, with very few closed doors and no signs of "luxury" or status symbols. Downstairs is one of the conference rooms which some refer to as IK's office. It is said that Kamprad uses to sit there when he is in Humlebaek.

A Peripheral Centre?
IKEA International is mainly an "administrative company" with staff functions for treasury, information, legal affairs, finance, property and organizational development. If Älmhult is described as the "heart" of the Group, Humlebaek could be characterized as the "brain".

In Humlebaek you get the feeling of being a long way from the "real IKEA": the pulse, the tempo, the business out "in the front-line". And IKEA fears the distance, having "anti-bureaucracy" weeks for all the administrative staff. All "bureaucrats" at IKEA International and at other administrative functions are encouraged to spend at least one week a year out in the front-line. "Bureaucracy" appears to be a very ugly word within IKEA; it is a threat to the "unconventional solutions" cherished throughout the company, and that has thus to be constantly combated.

IKEA International is the group staff that supports operations around the world. Through a few central corporate policies, a sporadic newsletter (IKEA Info), memos and an "electronic billboard", IKEA International spreads information and guidelines throughout the "IKEA world". Through their market units, all the countries report to the IKEA Group Management.

Even though the Group Management is formally connected to Humlebaek, IKEA people outside Humlebaek rarely refer to them. To most Ikeans, Älmhult is the centre. Humlebaek is regarded more as some rather distant producer and sender of general policies and memos. Being rather invisible, working quietly
"back-stage", Humlebaek should perhaps be understood as a "peripheral centre"?

The Stores
IKEA's stores are IKEA's most visible buildings. Both to outsiders and insiders. It is here where we as customers have the direct experience of the fabled company. But the stores are also the working place for many thousands of co-workers in the "IKEA-world".

In accordance with the IKEA "potato-field-philosophy", the IKEA stores are generally situated some 5-10 minutes by car outside the cities, where land is cheap and parking is easy. The stores are gigantic buildings, in Scandinavia painted white and red, while outside Scandinavia they are yellow and blue. They are functional buildings, resembling big warehouses, with no other adornments on the outside than an array of Swedish and IKEA flags, and the big logotype on the roof. From the highway passing the cities, the stores in the bright colours are easily spotted.

My first "back-stage" contact with the IKEA stores, i.e. not as a customer, occurred when I spent some weeks at a Swedish IKEA store. Later on I found out that around the "IKEA-world", the stores are very much the same in terms of layout and design. So, in order to give you a picture of how the stores are built up, I will take you to the Swedish store in which first became acquainted with IKEA from the inside.

"The House"
To find the staff entrance you have to pass the large parking lot in front of the main entrance, and drive around the building. After passing an unloading wharf, where big boxes are unloaded from trucks into the warehouse, you reach the staff parking at the rear of the store. There is a story in the store, that

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2 However, this philosophy has gradually been changed, and IKEA is now more and more seeking to establish new stores in attractive shopping centres.
a couple of years ago there used to be special parking places here for the store's managers. However, when the headquarters found out about that, the store was ordered to take the signs away immediately. Special parking places for managers was not "IKEA-mässigt".

Inside the IKEA store, the building is seldom referred to as a building or as the store. No, the people inside refer to the building "our house" or "the house". In the beginning I feel completely lost in the "house". It is a huge building, 17,000 m². What from the outside looks like an ordinary square building, turns out to be anything but square once you get inside. You get a feeling that you are walking around in circles as you wander along the labyrinth aisles and passages in the store. Just like in an old castle there are secret passages and hidden doors. What you think are fake doors in the showroom turn out to be real passages, a low hole in a wall is a short cut out from the self-service warehouse, and behind a oriental carpet hanging on a wall you find a small office.

**Office Area - "Back Stage"**

Entering through the staff entrance, you first reach the "office area" where the "administrative" staff resides. Next to the entrance in the hallway is the changing-rooms: bare rooms with showers, toilets and a solarium, and with long rows of blue lockers. It looks clean and impersonal. Each employee has his own locker. It is here they arrive in the mornings to change from their private clothes into IKEA-clothes.

Following the hallway to the right, you can either go into the corridor on the left which takes you out to the store, or continue to the end of the hallway where you will find "the office" on the right hand. In the hallway there are some framed IKEA ads on the walls. One of them often catches my attention during my stay. It is a dark picture of a modernly furnished studio. The text is simple: "New York? Älmhult." Maybe it is the suggestive picture together with

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3 The word "IKEA-mässigt" is often used at the store. It is however hard to find an equivalent word in English, and therefore the word will be used in Swedish. An approximate translation of the word could be "an IKEA-way of doing things" or "being in an IKEA-way".
the very short and affirmative text that makes it such an appealing ad. Apart from the ads on the wall, there is a mailbox for “suggestions” and another one for the union. On the billboards you find the latest press clippings about IKEA pasted together with information notes from the employee club on sports activities and meetings.

The “office” is like a big room with two “real” offices separated from the rest of the room by walls with windows, through which you can see into the offices from the rest of the room. The two offices belong to the personnel manager and the store manager. In the rest of the room, outside the two separate offices, there is a “waiting room”. Behind the sofa group, the operations manager has his office. The operations manager is in charge of the maintenance and security of the store, as well as accounting. If you need a pen, you go to him. Behind his desk you find the storage room for office supplies. Before there used to be a passage directly from the hallway to this storage, but now there is a wall to prevent wasteful use of supplies, he tells me;

“That’s to economize, it’s important, being a little stingy... For example, take those yellow post-its - that’s a need that is created. And they’re expensive and everybody just uses them. So we’ve taken them away now.”

Cost-consciousness is a key-word in Ikeans’ vocabulary in the Swedish store. To some people in the Swedish store, being “IKEA-mässig” is the same thing as being cost conscious, to choose inexpensive solutions. This is something that is repeated and repeated: in the IKEA “scriptures” and at training seminars in the store.

The office area is small and gives you an impression of a small administration. It is often said that it is a non-bureaucratic organization. However, administrative work is not only handled here “backstage”. Out in the store you also find some administrative areas, and there is a growing flow of paper. The “older” Ikeans in the store tell me that it was different before, at the beginning of the store’s history. Today, computer lists with sales statistics, budgets, turnover, etc., have to be handled every week. The administrative workload has increased. Each department has a small office out in the store where paper
works can be handled. However, there is seldom someone sitting in there. Some of the offices are more of a storage room, where such things as labels and signs are kept. A manager should be out on the floor, I am told.

In all the offices the furnishing is plain, and of course the furniture is from the IKEA range. A desk, a telephone, a chair and some wall units. On the shelves you find binders with sales statistics, product information, etc. There are few personal belongings in the offices. The wall decorations are normally posters from IKEA's own range and schedules over the department's working hours.

Out in the Store
The "real stage", the front-line of the house is out in the different departments. It is here where the company's "raison d'être" is performed; "to provide good furniture to as many people as possible", as is the way that everyone more or less explains what they are doing in the Swedish store.

To reach the store from the "office area" you take the corridor to the left in the staff entrance hallway. At the end of the corridor, there is a time-clock with punch-cards on the wall. Through a heavy black door you enter into the warehouse. It is cold in here. Men, dressed in blue jackets, receive, unload and store the goods on big shelves stretching up to the high ceiling. Through the self-service warehouse you reach the marketplace. This is the bottom floor of the store. Here you find the textile department, the lamp department, and the "Accenten". Those areas are also called "satellite", i.e. all products that are not furniture. The "Accenten" department stocks such varying items as table-ware, frames and posters, plants, small storage, etc.

Upstairs, on the upper floor, you find the furniture department with the big showroom, IKEA at Work, the Family shop and the restaurant. The two different floors constitute a kind of physical division in the store. Those who work downstairs always refer to those who work on the upper floor as "those upstairs". Selling furniture in the showroom appears to be "a little bit finer" than piling towels at the Accenten. It also seems as if the departments on the same floor tend to be closer to each other than those that are on different floors.
The employees become sort of experts in their own areas; they know their range, the product features, their competitors. In all there are more than 8,000 different articles in the store, and without any special product training, the co-workers learn to master the product range in their specific departments.

The Lunchroom

"The first thing that struck me when I started here was the lunchroom - I mean there are no special tables for the managers, as there were where I worked before...I had just been at IKEA for a few days when I happened to sit next to some of the managers in the lunchroom, and they even talked to me!"

An IKEA manager in a Swedish store.

The staff lunchroom is upstairs in the store. In the lunchroom there are five big round tables and, alongside the windows, with black and white chequered curtains, there are some smaller tables. At the first of the big round tables, in the corner by the entrance, the co-workers in blue jackets from the warehouse always crowd together, turning their trays in order to make room for everyone from the warehouse. And at the other end of the lunchroom, next to the small smoking room, the co-workers from the communication & display department sit close together at another round table. They are recognizable by their blue denim shirts. At the rest of the tables there is normally a mixture of "red-shirts" and "civilians", "floorers" and managers from the rest of the store. You simply sit where you find a seat.

In the mornings at around nine o'clock, most departments have their coffee break up here. Some sit and read the morning papers, while others just have a cup of coffee and a chat with some fellow workers. Tea and coffee are free.

At midday you get half an hour's lunch break. Every day you can choose from a daily special, the meal of the month (which is the meal offered in the catalogue) or IKEA's special meatballs at a subsidized price. The meatballs are made from a special recipe and are served in the same way in all the IKEA-concept restaurants all over the world. A salad buffet is included in the daily special. Some co-workers bring their own lunch which they can prepare in the
microwave-oven in the lunchroom. Most of the co-workers have their main meal at IKEA.

At the afternoon breaks, the IKEA store treats you to sandwiches, fresh fruit and cookies. Sometimes there is a fancy cake on the counter: a reward for good sales. During the afternoon breaks on Fridays it is much quieter than normal. Almost everyone sits lapsed over a yellow paper. It is the store's internal newspaper that is published every Friday. You find it in a paper rack at the staff entrance. Getting into the latest news from the store seems to be the most interesting occupation at this time.

There is a relaxed atmosphere up in the lunchroom. Everyone take their time to eat and chat in peace and quiet. The conversations are of a "social" nature; sports, children and having children are common topics. It is here where information is exchanged, badminton partners are booked, and next weekend's party is planned. It is an oasis in the middle of the work, a place where you relax and socialize.

The Service Offices

In each country there is a Service Office that guides and co-ordinates the retail operations in the country. Normally their offices are situated in close connection with one of the stores, but sometimes they are situated in an office-building of their own.

The French Service Office I am visiting is situated in an office building on the outskirts of Paris, St Germain en Laye. Even though the official name is "Service Office" and it is often pointed out that it is not a headquarters, many of the managers working there often refer to it as "le siege", whereas people out in the stores simply say "St Germain". In Canada one manager at the Canadian Service Office said ironically; "we call it Service Office, but really it is the headquarters. It sounds more democratic, isn't that very Swedish?"

At the Service Offices everybody sits in an open plan office. In France, however, the country manager has a big "real" office on the upper floor, and in
Sweden the country manager has an glassed-in office at the very end of the open-plan office. Like the stores, all the offices are plain and simple. There are few personal markers. Sometimes you might find a photo of the family, but mostly the walls are decorated with framed ads from IKEA's different campaigns and posters from their own range. A poster that you encounter on almost all "IKEA walls", both in the stores and at the Service Offices, is the ad with "IKEA's Soul".

At the Service Offices you find the administrative staff along with the commercial departments: marketing and sales managers for each business area. There are several conference rooms in the office areas, in which different meetings constantly are held behind closed doors. The conference rooms, both at the Service Offices and in the stores in Canada and France have names after Swedish towns. There is a Malmö room, Vetlanda room, Uppsala room, etc., as a marker of the company's Swedish origins. In the Swedish store, however, the conference room is named "Spara" (Swedish for "save"), as an emphasis of the so often repeated "cost-consciousness".

The sales managers are seldom at their offices; they are either out in the stores or having meetings in the conference rooms. At each Service Office there is a "travel board", on which all the managers mark where they are during the week. The product managers and sales leaders are almost all the time out travelling. Either to the stores or to Älmhult in Sweden.

In the paper racks you find home furnishing magazines along with Swedish newspapers, "Älmhultsbladet" (IKEA's internal newsletter in Swedish from Älmhult) and with copies of all the stores' internal newsletters. There are also special books with press clippings, where you can find the latest writings from the press on IKEA. Overall, it is a world that is truly "IKEA".

**Physical Artefacts**
IKEA's buildings, offices, etc., are a part of the physical artefacts that constitute the corporate landscape. These properties are not only the "stage" where the organizational world is created and constructed (c.f. the "theatrical metaphor"
in e.g. Pondy et al, 1983). They are also themselves symbols that create and maintain organizational meanings. Artefacts are partly expressions of cultural conceptions and ideas, and partly signs that actively contribute to the on-going process of making sense of the organizational world (c.f. Alvesson & Björkman, 1992; Berg & Kreiner, 1990).

IKEA’s buildings, especially the stores, are one of the company’s most visible symbols, both to external “audiences” and to the internal “public”. Their design reflects IKEA’s official philosophy of “being simple and functional” and the pursuit of being cost-conscious. The location on low-priced real estate outside the more exclusive shopping centres downtown and the functional and modern buildings express a low-cost attitude. There are no expensive adornments or luxury elements, such as marble and glass entrances or offices in leather and teak, which can be found in many other companies as signs of prosperity and success. The only sign of success is the giant size of the stores. IKEA gives you an impression of being “big”. IKEA’s buildings can thus be understood as deliberate symbols of the company’s desired profile and strategy (see Berg & Kreiner, 1990).

**Insiders and Outsiders**

IKEA’s buildings can be divided into the “public” parts and the “back-stage” areas. While the former are erected for meeting the customers (i.e. the shopping areas in the stores), with easy access and welcoming entrances and generous parking lots, the latter are more closed and restricted areas, for insiders only. There is a physical border against the outside world. To get in to the back stage areas you need to be allowed. You have to have a passing card or sign in at the guard or receptionist. Customers are not allowed to enter the warehouse or the office areas. Customers cannot just step in to one of the Service Offices or the headquarters. They need to have an appointment.

There is a clear distinction between insiders and outsiders. During my visits in the different IKEA stores, I had to sign in every morning during the first days. In France I even had to deposit my personal ID-card. But as I became recognized, I soon became more of an insider, being let in by just waving my
“stagiaire badge”. These physical barriers, constructed perhaps for the sake of security and control, create a border between “them” and “us”, between insiders and outsiders. They draw a frontier between what is IKEA and not.

**In Search of the Individual**

On the whole there are few traces of the individual in the “back-stage” areas at IKEA. You hardly see any personal markers, photos, or decorations of the offices that reflect any personal taste and style in the offices. Everything is IKEA, IKEA and IKEA.

Even in the changing rooms in the stores, a well “hidden” area into which hardly ever any managers or outsiders enter, a place where you could expect a “sub-culture” or “counter-culture” to flourish, you do not find any personal markers or individual traces. There are just long rows of bare lockers.

In all the offices it is only IKEA that counts. The “I” of the individual is replaced by the “we” of the group (c.f. Ehn & Löfgren, 1982, for the distinction in cultures between the collective and the individual). This is also something that is emphasized by IKEA managers all around in the IKEA world. It is important not to stick out. The group and the team are stressed, not personal profilation.

A Swedish manager in Humlebaek told me; “at IKEA you shouldn’t hold up yourself. It’s taboo to try to expose yourself”. A store manager who exposed himself in a local newspaper came in for many gibes. He had gone over the limit. Another manager proudly told me that he got the job at IKEA thanks to the fact that he said “we” all the time during the interview. “Kamprad liked that”.

The only marked “I” in the organization is Ingvar Kamprad. The founder of the organization. He writes documents and official letters in the “I-form”. His “self” is exposed in many writings. And after having held a rather “low profile” for many years, in the last decade he has appeared on TV, in radio, and given personal interviews in newspapers. He is the only individual that is
personally profiled, and this is something that get comments from some IKEA managers in Sweden:

“There are some rather strict rules about whom is allowed to talk to the press and so on...and personal profiling is the worst thing you can do, you know. Well, nobody should compete with... (points upwards and giggles)...that is viewed with disapproval...”

Per, a Swedish IKEA manager

The “I” of Ingvar Kamprad, however, can be seen as a “self” that symbolizes the “we” of the Group (c.f. Ramanantsoa & Battaglia, 1991). Kamprad becomes a sort of a spokesman for the collective “we”, an official voice of the “organizational self”. He has the authorization to speak as an “I” as he appears as the symbol of the “we”.

**The “Personality” of the Locations**

The sites, buildings and offices of IKEA’s activities are not mere physical locations, many co-workers also have a kind of “personal relationship” to the outlets. One sign of that is the habit to give the buildings and conference rooms personal names. The Swedish store, for instance, is always referred to as “our house”. IKEA of Sweden’s building in Älmhult is called “Bläsippan” (the Blue Anemone), and another building in Älmhult is normally referred to as “HK” (“H.Q.”), a name that becomes totally incomprehensible for an outsider, since the building no longer is the headquarters. The name is a reminiscence from the time when the headquarters actually were housed there. In that sense, the building is a historical symbol, pointing at the origins and history of the growing company.

The whole village of Älmhult is a rather “personalized” site within the IKEA Group. For Ikeans all over the world, Älmhult symbolizes the origins: the Swedish traditions of living and home furnishing, the Swedish style of informality and egalitarian relations, and the pursuit of economizing which is said to be typical for the county of Småland. Älmhult is a part of the historical origins, it is the place for the corporate saga, it is here that the whole “Creation” started.
Co-workers and managers often describe Älmhult as the "heart" of the Group, thereby metaphorically depicting the company as a human being; a living organism with a heart and a soul. Others refer to Älmhult as the "Mecca", a "holy" place inhabited by "fundamentalists" and to which "followers" from all over the world go on a "pilgrimage". But such religious references are always made in a joking manner, showing that one is keeping a distance to IKEA and Älmhult where IKEA is considered to be taken too seriously.

Reflecting the Identity?
The "stage" on which IKEA's "world" is performed bears certain characteristics. The artefacts both construct and reflect many aspects of how Ikeans view themselves as a group. For instance, Ikeans often describe IKEA as an organization that is non-bureaucratic, and in the buildings the administrative areas are limited. The real life is assumed to take place out in the front line. All the administrative areas maintain low profiles, being called service offices rather than headquarters. IKEA's conception of itself as being different is expressed in the avoidance of status symbols and the construction of simple and functional outlets. Corporate architecture can then be understood as a way that managers and architects intentionally create certain meanings to organizational members and the outside world (see Berg & Kreiner, 1990).

At the same time these artefacts constitute physical borders against the outside world. They create a distinction between insiders and outsiders, between "us and them". The few traces of the individual in the offices, etc., reveal that the "us" of the group is a collective, where the individual in many aspects is subordinated to the "we".

The buildings and offices, as well as the names they are given, also create an impression of that hierarchy and hierarchical levels have a low importance. In the next part of the chapter we will look further into IKEA's hierarchical levels and differentiation of meanings across levels and different groups.
Hierarchical Levels

As was described in the foregoing chapter Ikeans, when describing their company, often stress that there are no special lunchrooms for managers; special parking lots for managers were taken away as they were considered being not "IKEA-mässiga"; there are not really any special offices for managers, and so on. And in Sweden I am often told that an IKEA manager should never just sit in an office. Walking around in the Swedish store, you encounter many empty offices, being more of storage rooms than real offices. The managers are out on the floor.

These different features create an image of the low importance of hierarchy within the organization. And that is something that IKEA's managers in the front parlour speeches and documents stress. "IKEA is a non-hierarchical organization". The "flat" organization is emphasized. Still, we can find other hierarchical markers; more subtle ways of expressing hierarchy than in the building and offices.

Organization Charts

IKEA seldom draws any organization charts, and when doing so there is an avoidance of doing it with traditional hierarchical levels (see e.g. the sketch of IKEA's organization above, which gives the appearance of a rather "free-floating" organization). The formal lines of order are not regarded to be so important as the informal structures. "For every formal hierarchical level we build into the system we also create an informal short-cut", a manager in Humlebaek explained.

That is a part of IKEA's corporate philosophy as expressed by top managers. It is often described as a "Swedish" style of managing, with small hierarchical distances and egalitarian relationships (c.f. Sjöborg, 1986; Lindkvist, 1988; Salzer, 1992). "It is not your position that counts, it's what you do" as Ikeans often declare. The managers and co-workers should work side by side.

In the Swedish store I am visiting everyone emphasizes the importance of the manager working "on the floor". It is a part of what they call "leading by
example”. A manager or department head should not sit in the office, giving orders, or as they say in the store; “go out and point with the whole hand” as a military command. That is not “IKEA-mässigt”. Anna, an IKEA co-worker in the Swedish store explains:

“The bosses here, it’s so nice, they aren’t any bosses in suits and ties. They are out here on the floor with us... At the January sales, both the store manager and the personnel manager worked in the hand-out area, and they were really sweating, you know. That’s fun!”

On a broad level there are five “official” hierarchical levels. The corporate headquarters that resides in Humlebaek, the Market Units, the Service Office, the Store Management and Department Heads in the stores. The Market Units constitute the most recently introduced hierarchical level that constitute a link between the different countries in the four regions and IKEA of Sweden in Älmhult.

“Hierarchy? Mais c’est normal!”
While in the Swedish store all the managers and co-workers appeared to be rather all alike; eating together, working together, etc., in France and Canada the hierarchical distances are more emphasized. “Le bureau” and “The office” in the French and the Canadian stores, are clearly marked “administrative areas” where managers have their open-plan offices “back-stage” with a physical distance from the sales areas and the co-workers. Here, the vertical differentiation appeared to be more outspoken and emphasized (c.f. Hofstede’s, 1991, notion of “power distance” in different countries).

During my stay at the French IKEA store I spend an afternoon in the self-service area. A manager takes me down to the department. On the way, he alerts me; “you should be aware of the fact that they are a little bit simpler down there, ‘plus rudimentaire’. Intellectually, I mean. They work more physically, if you see what I mean”.

When I come downstairs I first meet a department head, then a group leader, then a 1er vendeur. There seems to be many hierarchical levels, at least when
compared with the Swedish store. The department heads are seldom seen out working on the floor. Two men working in the warehouse give me a long explanation of how it all works.

Alain: First we have the store manager, of course, and then the department heads, and group leaders, 1er vendeurs, and then you have the co-workers with varying periods of experience down to non-qualified co-workers...

Miriam: But why do you have all these levels?

Pascal: But it's necessary! For the rules, ehhem, for your salary level...

Alain: Oh, yes, it's important. Those are the socio-professional categories...If someone has some responsibilities it's got to be marked somewhere...even between the co-workers...That's motivating. You've got to know. If you don't have that basis, then you have nothing!

Miriam: To me it seems rather hierarchical...

Alain: Hierarchy? Mais c'est normal!

For the French co-workers, hierarchy is something quite natural. They expect their managers to be different, to wear different clothes and to sit by themselves in the lunchroom. You hardly see any French managers actually working on the floor. It should be like that. It is the “French way”. That is why it is so hard to “tutoyer”. You say “tu” because it is the rule, but you always keep the distance, you always bear in mind who is your boss.

But still, Alain in the warehouse says that IKEA is much less hierarchical than other French companies. He tells me that once he met Kamprad and explains; “this is a company where you can see the highest top manager in jeans; that would never occur in a French company...” The significance of the dressing as a symbol
for reducing (and creating) hierarchy will be further developed in the chapter “Red-shirts and No Ties”.

**Up the Ladder**
In the Canadian stores a new organization structure is being introduced. By removing the group leaders there will be one less level of hierarchy. This change is however not unproblematic. For most co-workers in Canada it is important to “move up the ladder”, and the new organization raises many sceptical questions, both at group leader training seminars and steering meetings in the store.

John, store manager: The problem today is that the department heads don't deal with the co-workers, nor with the customers. They have no contact with the front-line.

Laura, group leader: But if we are all gone...if there are no group leaders in the market place, they would just discuss the latest movie and so on...We got to be there to supervise them. (Nods of assent from the rest of the group leaders).

John: The terminology group leader is really bullshit, but even if we take away that term, we'll still have people working on that level, you know.

Karen, trainee: I wonder why you don't see the group leaders going anywhere, I mean up the ladder?

June, dept.head: Who will be in charge of the department? What's the purpose of all this everybody being equal. Should we just be sitting around holding hands, or what? Someone's got to be in charge, to get the job done...
John: This is the old Swedish organization we're introducing... In our company, the idea that someone's work is more important than others' is not a very good idea...

For many of the Canadians it seems as though it is important to have clear responsibilities. Everyone should know who is in charge of what. In general at IKEA in Canada, I had the impression that things are more formalized than elsewhere at IKEA. Formal lines of orders, written down rules, etc., are important and defended, as is an hierarchical division of labour. The “Swedish model” is looked upon with some scepticism.

**Different Locations - Different Identities?**
Hierarchy is not only a question of formal structures and organizational charts. It is more a “vertical differentiation of social relations” (Alvesson, 1991), which is grounded in the collective meanings assigned to various positions and categories. And those positions are defined in the social interaction of organizational members, where some have the power to impose their definitions on others (Smircich & Morgan, 1982; Alvesson, 1991). Some actors, such as formal leaders or others, possess different material and symbolic resources that give them the power to define the reality of others.

Physical artefacts and constructed organizational structures can both be integrating and disintegrating organizational members. Sharing an office means that physical distances are reduced and direct social interaction is facilitated. And the people sharing a location might develop a sense of sharing of their own. Where people meet and interact on a daily basis, shared world views can develop in the everyday sense-making (c.f. Smircich, 1983b). Within all organizations of any size, one might expect to find such “sub-worlds”.

**The Decorators at IKEA**
The differentiation of meanings need not to be “vertical”, i.e. following the pathways of hierarchical structures, but it can of course also be “horizontal”. In the stores it is even shown how the physical distance between the departments
downstairs and upstairs create a division between “them” and “us”. And in the whole IKEA world, the group of decorators expose a clearly demarcated identity of their own. Other groups at the offices and in the stores, describe the staff of decorators as “being a little different”. “You know how these creative types are...” In Älmhult, the creative staff of ICAP is referred to as “funny types”. For most Ikeans in trading and retail, the decorators form a distinct “out-group”, even though they are clearly a part of IKEA.

In many aspects, the decorators share a world of their own. Regardless of whether you are in Sweden, France or Canada, you always find the decorators as a rather homogeneous group, sticking to themselves. In the stores they dress differently than the others, having a “uniform” of their own. They normally have lunch together, not mixing too much with the others; they work closely together, sharing a special office or studio; and many of them have a common background from special schools.

The decorators are also the group that has most contact and exchange with other stores and outlets in the IKEA Group. Being specialists in their areas, they frequently take part in the build-up of new stores, travelling a lot to other countries. In doing so, decorators from the different sites meet and interact, sharing information and experiences. And they also share a feeling of how IKEA’s room-settings should be designed and set up, having a basic guideline from IKEA of Sweden which through ICAP and the catalogues create the “ideal model” of “IKEA-mässig” that is spread throughout the whole IKEA-world.

**Distances**

When an organization is geographically dispersed, there is also a distance between different outlets. IKEA in Canada is a long way from IKEA in France, and there is hardly any contact between the two. Meanings in Canada can thus be essentially different from meanings in France. Each “milieu” is a setting for locally shared meanings (Louis, 1985).

But there is not only a physical distance in organizations, but also a social one (see Alvesson & Björkman, 1992). Even though people are close to each other in
that they share the same physical outlet, there can be social distances in terms of world views, values, conceptions, etc. As Ehn & Löfgren (1982, p.56) write;

"The cultural landscape involves definitions of community, alienation and social hierarchies, but also of the tension between physical proximity and social distance".

The hierarchical and vertical differentiation can be understood both as a physical and a social distance. Where managers and co-workers are physically separated (e.g. the store versus the office) there can also be social differences, such as varying world views or definitions of the self. But the social distance can also be there without any physical barriers, when for example different hierarchical layers expose different values and meanings.

**Loci of Culture**
The hierarchical and horizontal differentiation along with physical distances between different groups can thus involve a “differentiation of meanings”. Louis (1985) describes organizations as culture-bearing milieus with many loci of culture. Organizations are not necessarily to be understood as *one* culture, but rather as sites which may foster many different systems of shared meanings; as Louis (1985 p.79) writes:

"The (top of the) organization, vertical and horizontal slices, and other formal unit designations (such as departments) all represent typical sites in and through which culture may develop. Some relevant properties of organizations, and of these sites in particular as ‘culture-bearing milieus’, are: They are regularly convening settings, they impose structural interdependencies among people for performing tasks, they provide opportunities for affiliation, and they constitute constellations of interest and purposes. As such, they serve as breeding grounds, if you will, for the emergence of local shared meanings."

In studying IKEA it becomes evident that there is not *one* system of meanings. In the chapter “Culture Making”, top management's culture as the active design and creation of a “for-public-consumption” culture is focused (c.f. Louis, 1985; Garsten, 1991). This reveals how the vertical differentiation together with
a certain physical distance form a special site of meanings system. Throughout the reading, however, this “official corporate culture” is constantly contrasted to the different systems of local shared meanings that are exposed within various groups within the organization. Especially the different geographical or societal sites appear as different loci of culture and sharing of self-views.
Most people in Sweden have at least once in their lives visited an IKEA store. With the catalogue in your hand, pushing the carriage in front of you, you choose and pick home furnishing items from huge shelves and bins, which you then bring home and assemble by yourself. The pride of having assembled your own “Björn” chest of drawers is a satisfying recompense for all the trouble you have went through. IKEA talks about us as being “procumers” rather than mere consumers. We are part of the process.

Taking Care of the Products
Working a day in a Swedish IKEA store is a very special experience. It is a world of its own. For the co-workers, a day at the store begins early in the morning. In a few hours in the morning, before the store opens for the customers, the store has to be “renewed”. All traces of yesterday’s customers are to be swept away before 11.00 am. The cleaners come to sweep the floors, and the “red-shirts” are hurrying around in the departments and in and out of the warehouse. Shelves and bins are gone through. In the mornings shelves are empty, and the bins do not have the right “bulla” look, i.e. being full to overflowing. It is time for replenishment.

One of the most essential activities in the Swedish store I am visiting is to push pallets. Every morning, goods on pallets from the warehouse are pushed out to the store on forklift trucks. It is a necessary job, and everybody, at least in the
selling departments downstairs, has to do it. It is often said in the store that a "real" manager must be a manager who can put on the red shirt and push a pallet. And at the same time it appears to be a low-status job in the store; "I don't want to stay here and push pallets all my life...."

The replenishment of products is normally not finished when the store opens, but sometimes goes on until late afternoon. And then there are always the "basics" to take care of. The products are put in order and missing price tags and product information have to be put in place again. "Basics" stands for the basic measures; to make sure that the product is undamaged and clean, correctly assembled and carrying price tags and buying information. The product must be "taken care of in the right way". I often hear that in Sweden. It is important to look after of the products. To be "low in basics" is a recurrent expression, meaning that the department looks untidy. That is bad.

At IKEA in Sweden, the co-workers are very product-oriented. To take care of the products is an essential activity, and when customers come and ask questions they are almost regarded as disturbing interruptions in the real work. I got the same feeling as I dedicated a whole afternoon to rearranging a number of shelves with light bulbs and I all the time was interrupted by inquiring customers...

Working at IKEA is often hard work. Heavy lifts, standing and walking - you feel a day in the store in your legs and back. It is easy to wear out your back and shoulders. So the personnel department promotes fitness and health activities. On my third day in the Swedish store, a warming-up programme is introduced in the mornings. This is a new thing in the "IKEA-world". The event is announced over the internal "radio" loudspeakers.

At a quarter to eleven we meet at the open place close to the check-out counters. The properties consist of a tape-recorder put on one of the cash registers, and on the floor there are some printed papers with photos of the exercises we are to perform. "We are getting to be like the Japanese", one man mutters. Nevertheless, the attendance is good on the first day. Laughing with some embarrassment, managers and co-workers jump and stretch to the
accompaniment of modern disco tunes. After some ten minutes we finish the exercise with an applause, discovering that the customers waiting outside are watching us with a curious look... With an embarrassed giggle, everybody returns to their work.

"Putting on the Customers' Eyes"
The IKEA stores are built around the concept of “mechanical selling”, i.e. the customers should find, choose and pick up the goods by themselves. The store should work as a highly efficient sales machine. That is why it is so important to take care of the products; otherwise the customers would not have all the information they need to make a buying decision. Sometimes the co-workers “put on the customer's eyes”, going through the department as if they were customers in order to see if the product is taken care of in the right way. And sometimes they walk after customers, studying their buying behaviour. Where should a product be put? Are the displays informative enough? Which is the best place for a bin?

The customers must learn the “system”; “how to shop at IKEA”. Signs, billboards and arrows directs the customers around the store. Nevertheless, the redshirts are needed to be there to answer questions and help with more information. In some departments the co-workers have closer contacts with the customer, e.g. when selling complex kitchen systems. They recognize their customers as friends, laughing and joking with them.

Customer: Do you have this sofa with another fabric?
Seller: Don't you like it?
Customer: No, it's horrible!
Seller: Then maybe you could put it in a dark room? (laughter)

Sometimes the customers complain about missing screws and items being out of stock. Those are the most common complaints, even though many customers think that it has become better over the years. And the co-workers are convinced that it has become better; “IKEA is much better today than in the 70's”. If they get complaints when meeting the customer, the co-workers always
defend IKEA, trying to explain why an item is out of stock, etc. "You have to teach people how IKEA works...", Lisa, a young IKEA co-worker explains:

"You often get to hear; 'oh yes, that's typical for IKEA, I have come a long way just to get this thing and now it's out of stock', and that is of course very bad for the customer, so then you have to explain that in a good way so that you make the customer satisfied... So that's why it's so important that you know..."

The communication & display department, or "deco" as it often is called, has a central role in meeting the customer. They are responsible for all the communications in the store. The communication & display department has the role of pedagogically teaching the customers "how to shop" with extensive communications in the store. And furthermore they are supposed to create inspiring environments with the help of room settings in the showroom.

"Deco" is one of the few departments that has its own manual. I find it in a bookshelf in the deco room. A set of ring-binders that describe the art of creating room settings, different styles, etc. In the manual for the department it is said that "communication & display is one of the most important sales resources in the IKEA store". Still, the manuals are seldom used. They might be taken out of the shelves when a new decorator starts at the department.

In the Swedish store, with about 200 employees, there are some 15 people working in the communication & display department, everything from decorators to carpenters. Many of them have travelled a lot around in the IKEA world. They are often sent out to help to build up new stores. In the store they are regarded as being a little different. They look different, they work with different things, and they often have different backgrounds. "You know how those creative types are..."

In the room settings their assignment is to create "IKEA-mässiga" presentations of the product range in an inspiring way. The room settings should reflect what IKEA stands for to the customers. "We should work in a simple way, in the 'IKEA-mässiga' way, you know, simple and cost conscious. Swedish, light and blond, and at low prices..." The decorators have to know how
the customers live, their tastes and their lifestyles. Reading home furnishing magazines, visiting fairs and studying design are important parts of their job in creating room settings. But still the rooms must reflect the IKEA profile.

"The Selling"
At 10.55, just some minutes before the store opens, there is an announcement on the internal radio. It is the manager who is on duty who talks to the store:

"Good morning, this is Karl and I'm on duty today. The number of my pager is 234. Yesterday sales were 542,000 in the store, 26% more than the same day last year. And the restaurant had 23% plus... Today's lunch is cod and potatoes... Have a nice day!"

The ritual is repeated every morning. One man compares it to the briefing on the TV-series "Hill Street Blues"; "be careful out there". On many places in the store the work stops for a moment when the announcement is made. Good sales are greeted with an exclamation or a raised hand, as a gesture of victory. This is "säljet".

In the Swedish store, during the days, managers, aspirants, department heads and some co-workers talk about "säljet". That is a made-up Swedish word, a substantive form of the verb to sell. The "selling". "Säljet" is what they call the sales. To talk about the sales, is not so much talking about selling home-furnishing to customers, it is more of an exercise in figures.

One of the first things you see as you enter through the staff entrance is a white billboard with the latest sales figures. Every week, the store's sales are reported on the billboard, day by day. The figures are presented both in relation to the budget and in relation to last year's sales. The figures for the store and the restaurant are presented separately. And these are the figures that are presented in the morning announcements.

There are a lot of sales statistics circulating in the store, and most co-workers are aware of how the business going. They want to be up-dated. There is competition between the different departments, and there is a system of bonus-
salary. Sales above budget can give the co-workers up to about an extra month's salary a year. It is an incentive for the co-workers, even though it is not something that they reflect upon in the daily work.

Meetings
Every Thursday afternoon, after lunch, there is a sales leader meeting in the Swedish store. There are no written summons or any agenda sent out before the meetings. At one o'clock, all the department heads and other managers gather in the classroom “Spara” at the end of the hallway in the office area. Punctually all the managers enter the classroom in small groups and set themselves around the long, rectangular wooden “working table”. In all there are some 10-15 people attending the meeting. Some have brought their calendars. When noticing my tape recorder on the table, one of the department heads jokingly remarks; “Watch out! Everything that is said today can be held against you!”

At the end of the table, perched at a stool, Lars, the store manager chairs the meeting. As he introduces the meeting, the chatting subsides.

Lars: Well, hi everybody. Eh... first I was thinking that we should do like this, I have two things that I want to bring up first, and then we run the round of information. And then, those of you who aren't directly involved in the sales can leave, because I have some points that only affect they who are in that group, the selling department heads... Eh, who writes? It was you last time, so that means it's Bengt today!

(At the meetings one person takes the minutes. The minutes, which usually are very simple, just a few points on a paper about what has been discussed, are then published in the internal newspaper every Friday).

Lars continues: Well, first of all I want to congratulate you on a good week. (He points behind him where CONGRATULATIONS is written in big letters over the white board).
We were 12 plus compared with budget, and compared with last year 15%...And the restaurant...figures that almost make you sick! This is really fun, it's incredibly good!

Other manager: But we did beat the restaurant yesterday. I pointed that out in the announcement in the loudspeakers. Didn't you hear that?

(Laughter, and then the store manager continues...)

In the round of information that follows the general information from the store manager, each manager reports about what is going on in his area, and problems are brought up for discussions. The discussions are informal, and everybody seems to be engaged in the different issues that are brought up, regardless of which department it concerns. It is an easy-going atmosphere, with a lot of laughter and jokes.

Leif, department head: ...And well, we have some big trading deliveries on Tuesday next week...

Others: Yippee!! (laughter)

Leif continues: So, well, I guess we need some help again with the unloading.

Mikael, department head: Why don't we let the customers themselves take care of the unloading - that's what Kamprad would have done in his time...

Ove, department head: Yeah, the unloading wharf - serve your self!

Mikael, laughingly: Oh yes, we have to change that slogan; you do most of it and we do a little, together we save money...

Leif concludes: With signs; 'the goods is in container B, down in the corner, at the bottom...we guess'...
Jokes like the one above are common in the store. They seem to like to make fun of themselves, or rather of IKEA and the IKEA concept.

At most departments the information from the sales leaders meeting is passed on to the co-workers at weekly department meetings. These meetings are informal; it is more a kind of a “sit-together” where information is shared, than a formal meeting. On a Friday morning, the day after the sales leader meetings are being held, I join a department meeting. We gather in the classroom. It is me, the department head and three co-workers. One of the guys goes upstairs to get some coffee, and the department head opens a bag of sweets which she puts on a piece of paper; an “IKEA-bowl” as she laughingly calls it. “It’s like the IKEA business card - writing your name and phone number on a napkin!” These things are considered to be examples of the so-called “cost-consciousness”; how Ikeans all the time are said to choose in-expensive solutions.

The department head leads the meeting. The main topic at this particular meeting is the division of work at the department. The department head wants to try a new division of responsibilities, and in discussing this the department head comes to explain a lot about how the store “works”; activities and concepts such as “basics”, sales control, taking care of the product, 3 aces and a king, and turnover are brought up and interpreted. It is like attending a lesson in “how to sell in the IKEA store”.

**Sales and Budget**

It is in the store where “the selling” take place. It is here that “business is made”. And sales are to a large extent a competition. In all the stores I have visited there are a lot of sales statistics circulating. The latest sales figures are presented on billboards and announced on the internal radio. Sales are discussed at managers’ meetings as well as at department meetings. Sales by department, sales by business area, and sales by store. There is a certain prestige in beating the other departments or the other stores. It is a part of an identity-seeking process. Even on this level, differences are staged between “us” and “them”. Our department or store as compared with theirs.
But most of all, sales are compared with the budget. The budget becomes a sort of a magic limit; the borderline between failure and success. Sales above budget are considered as a success in the stores, even though this might mean problems with items out of stock and delivery delays. It is only the sales figures that count. And in Sweden, sales above budget are rewarded with a bonus, which of course strengthens this focus.

IKEA's year runs from September to August. The budget process starts in the early spring. This is a gigantic operation that preoccupies the whole company once a year. It is an annual ritual in which all managers are engaged.

For each two-year period, the Service Office in each country makes a general strategic business plan. The business plan describes the market conditions and sets the priorities for the coming fiscal years. Quantitative and qualitative objectives for all areas are defined. The management of the market unit gives the Service Office some input and corporate guidelines for the country's business plan. And with the business plan as the starting point, each store then makes its store plan once a year with a budget of forecasted sales.

**The Store as a Sales Machine**

The stores constitute the "front-line" in the IKEA system. It is here the company meets the customers. It is here "business is made". The example of a day in an IKEA store above reveals many themes of the everyday life in the stores. The store as a sales machine, the "selling" and the special "IKEA concept" around which the stores are built are three interesting aspects in understanding how Ikeans construct their world and everyday life.

A recurrent metaphor is to describe the store as a "sales machine". Being built around the idea of mechanical selling, the store should be more or less "self-running". Customers should be able to choose and pick up their goods themselves; the co-workers not being so much salespersons as "product supporters". With the help of special "sales solutions", such as studios and compacts in which the products are presented in an informative way, the use of special information tags on the products, the self-serve warehouse and
inspiring room settings, IKEA has created a rather standardized concept of how the stores should work. A concept that in the beginning was completely new to the home furnishing market (see e.g. Mårtensson, 1981). Today, however, the concept has been copied on many markets. But whereas in Sweden, this concept has become an established model, the IKEA way of selling furniture is still something quite new and different in many other countries.

"Le Concept"

One of my first days in the French store I make a tour of the showroom upstairs with Pascal, one of the department managers. The store is built up very much in the same way as in Sweden. The marketplace at the bottom floor, and the showroom upstairs. As we walk around I am introduced to all the co-workers. Pascal introduces me as a "stagiaire" from Linköping University in Sweden. He has a hard time pronouncing Linköping, and tells me that the Swedish product names sometimes are impossible to pronounce.

When we make our tour in the showroom, Pascal all the time refers to "le concept", the concept. "Le concept - c'est IKEA", he says.

Pascal: Here we have a studio. You have 16 obligatory points when you set up a studio for a product. As this for "Ivar". That's the concept. Central solutions. It's the price, the catalogue page, the size...it's all regulated...c'est IKEA.

Miriam: The concept, what is it?

Pascal: The concept...you know...all the stores are almost identical. And the people from St Germain come here to control... And they say; "c'est pas IKEA, c'est pas le concept". We can create the room settings, but the rest is the concept. For instance, the studios, Anders Moberg said that the studios were too different in the world, and we received a memo, that we had to make the studios more similar. It was a question of centimetres...
Laurent, a young guy down at the Accenten develops the theme for me as he is arranging a podium with vases.

"I wanted to make a podium with blue vases here, but they said; 'no, no, it's not the IKEA concept. C'est pas IKEA'. The concept, I suppose, is a set of rules. What you cannot do...You shouldn't mix products. C'est pas concept...You shouldn't sell products that are broken or damaged. C'est pas concept. You learn that as you work. There is no special training. And there are products that the French people ask for that we do not sell, since it's not the concept. C'est pas IKEA."

After the tour in the showroom, we return to the office area, "le bureau". Pascal spend most of his time here. A big sketch of the showroom is spread over the desk. He works a lot with the layout of the showroom; to optimize the customer flow around the room settings is important. The trick is to get the customer to go around the whole store before he exits.

In France, the concept, is almost a synonym for IKEA. IKEA is "le concept". It is the concept that explains why certain things are done. The concept is a central order. It is the core of IKEA. It gives you the frame for what you can or cannot do. It is the concept, more than the corporate saga or the "IKEA Way", that gives meaning to what IKEA does. It explains how the store works and what IKEA "is all about". As a central set of rules and guidelines for how an IKEA store should operate, the concept for the French Ikeans becomes at the same time a "philosophy", a norm for what you should do and not (c.f. Alvesson & Berg, 1988). And the concept is checked up and controlled, both by the head quarters and the Service Office, thus becoming a rule that you must obey to.

"How do I shop at IKEA?"

In Canada I am told that IKEA's self-service concept is very different from the American more aggressive personal selling that is said to be the common method in retail.
First-time visitors have a hard time finding out how to shop at IKEA. Even though there are big signs and posters explaining the system and a special information counter welcoming you at the entrance in the Canadian store, the co-workers say that they spend most of their days explaining how the system works. After standing a whole day at the information counter at the entrance, I realized that for the Canadians the central question when entering the store was: "How do I shop at IKEA?"

Janice, a girl working at the kitchen department, says that she tries to explain to the customer that it is like shopping in a grocery store.

“IKEA is different. We’re not like Brick, Léons, or the other competitors. You don’t approach the customer, and still so many people buy here. Sometimes the customers are really fed up, but I think for many it’s a challenge. You know, going in to the store, getting all the things on your own, pronounce the Swedish product names properly, and get the right aisle, and then bring it home and assemble it. I think some people like the challenge of it. And it’s just like a grocery store, but you have to explain to them... Now we’re having a big customer service wave running. You know, seminars, and people from the Service Office have come... We have to make up for the self-serve, you know. ‘If better service is possible, good is not enough’, the slogan has been....”

IKEA’s uniqueness is considered to lie in the self-service concept. That is new and original; it is something that makes IKEA different from the competitors. Still, it is also IKEA’s problem in North America. Americans want service, I’m told. In newspapers there have been ironic chronicles about the “Swedish way” of shopping and the pain you have to go through; “IKEA doesn’t only expect you to pick up the goods yourself, you also have to put it together...”

But IKEA in North America adapts, and offers the customers today not only home delivery for an extra charge, but has also subcontractors that can take care of the assembly of the furniture. “Everything for the customer - the customer is number one...”, as the often repeated slogan in the Canadian store goes. For a long time, IKEA managers in Canada have run a customer service campaign in the stores in order to adapt to the North American market.
**Customer Service**

My impression of IKEA in Canada is first and foremost customer service. It does not matter who you talk to, everyone working at IKEA talks about customer service. Whereas the people in the Swedish IKEA store often talked about taking care of the product, the co-workers in Canada repeatedly talked to me about customer service. For most co-workers in the Canadian store, customer service is the real “raison d’être” for IKEA. To take care of the customers is the mission. And there are many icons to be found on this “philosophy”.

In the hallway up to the staff lunch room in the Canadian store I am visiting, there is a big panel in wood with gold-coloured inscriptions. It is the board for the customer service award. Each month an employee is elected “the best customer service employee” and is awarded a watch and an golden inscription on the wood panel. You can either be nominated by customers or by your colleagues, and in the store there is a lot of “hustle and bustle” around the nominations. It is an honour to get your name on the panel. All this “gold and wood” feels very far from the Swedish “IKEA-mässighet” of cost-consciousness and not “sticking out”.

There are also a lot of slogans promoting the customer orientation. In all staff areas, on the walls and the doors leading out to the store, there are signs with the commanding message: “You are just about to meet the most important person in your life - our customer!” and “Our customers are really important - they make pay­days happen!”. So, before you go out to the store, put on your smile and make the customer happy! Out in the store, most co-workers almost stand at attention as soon as a customer approaches; “Yes sir, what can I do for you?”

At the office in the store a “store manager log” is kept which all department heads are obliged to read each week. The log is a compilation of all complaints and comments that all customers have written during the week. By the exit in the store there is a photo of the store manager on the wall, next to which there is a mailbox and a special form that customers can fill in. And all customers receive a letter with an answer to their complaints. The most common complaints are “the personnel is unavailable” and “items out of stock”. “Out of
stock” has been a difficult problem on the Canadian market, and a common joke among both customers and co-workers is a travesty of IKEA’s slogan “Swedish for common sense” into “Swedish for out of stock”.

At the store’s switchboard there are also a number of co-workers who work full-time with customer service over the phone. They answer questions about products, opening hours, deliveries, etc.

**The No-Nonsense Return Policy**
One early morning I join Joanne and Doug at the “IKEA-at-Work” department in the Canadian store. It is a couple of hours before the store opens, so we can have a talk in peace and quiet. They explain what they do at the department, and soon we get into IKEA’s philosophy. Which here in Canada means customer service. IKEA is customer service, and customer service as a phenomenon even carries its own myths and stories in the Canadian store.

Doug: When you’re hired here they explain the policies, the philosophy, the different things that are written in stone, and you have to bend in to these rules... you wear your uniforms, you have to put the read stuff on, that’s the policy.

Joanne: And the IKEA philosophy is “the customer is always right”. And IKEA truly lives by that rule...that’s retail! It’s the way it works in retail!

Doug: Yeah, in a word IKEA for me means SERVICE. That’s what it means to me. And low prices. As our return policy - we’re in the lead. I heard someone who actually brought in a car tire to an IKEA store, he obviously went to the wrong place, and he wanted to return the tire, and we don’t sell car tires, but we gave him money back, just to keep him happy. That’s real service, you know!
The “no-nonsense return policy” is a part of IKEA Canada’s customer service. Within a month you get your money back. Even if it’s a car tire!?!?

Thus, in Canada, the concept with the store as a “sales machine” has changed. It has turned into a concept of “customer service à la North America”. The concept is adapted to what is said to be the “truth” of “retail in North America”, namely customer service.

This customer service orientation is not only exhibited in extra services to the customers, such as assembly, information counters, a generous return policy, etc., but it is also promoted internally through training seminars, special awards and rituals, story-telling, and by the constant use of slogans such as “the customer is number one”. Customer service has thereby become what many co-workers perceive as IKEA’s most distinguishing characteristic. Customer service becomes “la raison d’être” of the organization. “We’re much better than our competitors when it comes to customer service”. Still, the self-service concept is at the same time the thing that for many Ikeans makes IKEA unique on the Canadian market.

**Defining the “Environment”**

The stores are not only a concept, a way of selling home furnishing articles. They are also the arena where the co-workers in their day-to-day interactions come to define “their environment”.

In meeting the customers, co-workers are given input to and feed-back on their view of themselves. When customers complain or ask questions, the co-workers always defend IKEA, trying to explain why it works as it does. The “concept” becomes the point of reference for explaining to outsiders how IKEA works. This daily interaction with the “outside market” also strengthens the self-view. By reflecting themselves in the customers, the co-workers’ identity as “Ikeans” is confirmed. As Christensen (1991, p.3) points out:

> "Like culture, any identity needs, in order to maintain its distinctiveness, to be reflected ‘outside’ itself through processes of communication".
Looking at the Competitors
The competitors appear as another source of such reflection. In the stores Ikeans all the time compare their company to the other companies that are defined as its competitors. By comparing themselves to other organization, the distinctiveness of the “self” is defined. “We’re not Léons or Brick”, or “We’re becoming more like But and Conforama”, or “That’s what distinguishes us from Åhléns”.

Those quotes also reflect what the organization defines as its environment. The outside, or the “others” are named and defined (c.f. Berger & Luckman, 1967). The “others” are different from IKEA; they are the outside of the organization. On a regularly basis all the different departments in the stores, as well as the product managers at the Service Offices, visit their competitors, making sure that IKEA keeps the right price level. In a Swedish store a girl explains how they reason when choosing which other companies to visit;

“We ask ourselves: ‘where would you go if you don’t go to IKEA?’, and then we visit these stores and shops. But they don’t have any equivalent products, they don’t have our product range...”

By having a point of reference, a difference can be staged between “them and us”. Other home furnishing retailers become “the others”, the outside world from which IKEA differs.

The Logic of the Business
The “environment” is also sometimes defined in terms of the “business”. Especially in Canada, where “retail” is an established concept for denoting a special kind of business activity, the identity of the business seems to be very dominant. “Customer service - this is how it works in retail”.

Ikeans in Canada often refer to themselves as being a “retail company”. And when the IKEA concept is changed and customer service is promoted it is done with reference to “this is how things are done in retail”. The “environment” is
that of a "retail business" and the logic of that business (c.f. the concept of "industry recipes" in e.g. Dutton & Dukerich, 1991).

The business here becomes the "environment" with which the organization compares itself. "Retail" is the North American context in which IKEA mirrors and evaluates the "self" of the organization. The "industry truth" of that business becomes the "corporate truth" or "myths" that define and legitimate IKEA's actions. The logic of retail constitute the "meanings in use and legitimated in a broad external context" (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991), in which IKEA's Canadian "self" is defined and interpreted by organizational members.
IKEA's products, home furnishing articles, constitute the "physical outcome" of IKEA. They are the artefacts, the tangible commodities of IKEA's activities. As such, they do not only convey meanings to the organization of what IKEA is all about, but they are also an important part in forming IKEA's image on the markets. Together with IKEA's stores, ads, commercials, catalogues, etc., the products contribute to the images that we, as outsiders and particularly as customers, construct of the company.

In the first point in Ingvar Kamprad's testament it is stated that "the product range is IKEA's identity", and that the basis of the product range should always be the part that is regarded as "typically IKEA", or outside Scandinavia as "typical Swedish". The "typically IKEA" range was developed and marketed in the 60's - a colourful and joyful "young-hearted" way of living.

The product range is developed by IKEA of Sweden in Álmhult, and the design and the development of the products are carried out by some 12 in-house designers, and a number of freelancers. As IKEA started to expand on the international markets in the 70's, the basic, typical IKEA range was extended as it was to the new markets. There were hardly any special products, or adaptations of the existing range, on the international markets.
Even though IKEA is a “concept company” (c.f. McDonalds, for instance), where not only the product range, but also the catalogue and the layout of the stores are centrally co-ordinated, the image of the company varies on different markets. During my stays in Canada and France, I found that IKEA’s products stand for different things in different contexts. Various market surveys carried out by IKEA, and talking with customers, revealed that while IKEA in Sweden, for instance, is often regarded as selling inexpensive but functional products, in France IKEA represents something trendy and very modern, and in Canada IKEA’s product range is regarded by many as being too modern!

**IKEA - A Swedish Institution**

Since the late 60's, the “typical IKEA product range has become a part of the Swedish “folkhem”, the Swedish model of social welfare. “The Social Democrats built the ‘folkhem’ - Ingoar Kamprad furnished it”. With origins in the Swedish philosophy of living from the beginning of the century, and with some inspiration from artists and designers such as Carl Larsson and Carl Malmsten, IKEA developed the “popular” and affordable variant of “beautiful living”. Light, blond, simple, clean and functional. Functional quality at low prices for “the majority of people” was the IKEA-way of furnishing Swedish homes. Youthful and simple furniture, at “impossible prices”, became IKEA’s trademark in Sweden.

IKEA is probably one of the best known companies in Sweden. With a market share of about 25%, almost every person has some kind of experience of IKEA. A Swedish customer I once met said:

“IKEA is like the post-office... just as you know that you should go to the post-office to buy stamps, you go to IKEA to buy furniture...”

Ikeans themselves often say that you can almost certainly find a piece of IKEA furniture in every single Swedish home. In palaces as well as in tenants' cottages\(^1\)... Whatever IKEA in Sweden does, it receives attention. The annual

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\(^1\) “I slott och koja” one of IKEA's slogans goes in Swedish.
catalogue is reviewed on the cultural pages, IKEA’s slogans become expressions in everyday language, IKEA ads are debated and reviewed, and hundreds of column inches have been published about IKEA in newspapers and magazines.

**There Is a Screw Missing**

From the start IKEA stood out as a different home-furnishing company on the Swedish market. With loud and striking advertisements and a youthful and modern design, IKEA became in the 70’s the marketplace for young first-home buyers. With a children’s playroom, restaurants and appealing showrooms, visits to the IKEA stores developed into an “outing” for the whole family. A popular amusement.

IKEA’s youthful touch and popular style, however, was also accompanied by a poor quality image on the Swedish market. Missing screws, items that were out of stock, and chip-board furniture produced a low-quality image, which IKEA sometimes still suffers from in Sweden. When something is broken or a screw is missing, customers say “typical IKEA”.

IKEA is a company surrounded by myths, stories and jokes. It is a company that people love to hate, and as an “institution” it is a company that is often made fun of. Like the Swedish humorous author Fuchs (Fuchs, 1991, p.170, own translation) has described it:

> “Life is like assembling IKEA furniture: it is hard to understand what the purpose is, you are unable to put the pieces together, an important part is always missing, and the final result never becomes what you’d hoped for”

Whenever I tell people that I am studying IKEA, it doesn’t matter who I am talking to, people will always spontaneously tell me different stories about IKEA: such as when they bought a table they couldn’t put together, or when the chest of drawers was out of stock for months, or when there was a screw missing in the package, etc., etc. One lady told me that learning how to
assemble IKEA furniture is the main subject in technology classes in some Swedish schools.

"Not for the rich. But for the wise."

"Not for the rich. But for the wise." was the IKEA tagline for the 80's, which soon became a common concept and still is quoted when people talk about IKEA. By the end of the 70's, IKEA initiated what would turn out to be a long and successful co-operation with the Swedish advertising agency Brindfors. Image surveys had pinpointed IKEA's low-quality image. Internal quality programmes were accompanied by advertising campaigns during the 80's, in which IKEA was to launch "value for money" as the main message. In large newspaper ads IKEA contrasted itself to the traditional furniture retailer in the "expensive store" on the "Main Street". Traffic ads would demonstrate IKEA as a speciality shop in different areas, and image ads started to explain IKEA's concept and "different methods". By placing IKEA furniture in new environments, IKEA wanted to wash away its "traditional" low-quality image.

With slogans such as "Stop dreaming. Start living.", "Santa Claus surely comes from Småland", "A richer life", and with large outdoor posters poking fun at Swedish politicians, IKEA's promotions soon gained a reputation of being different, humorous and provocative.

IKEA's philosophy is not only an internal affair but has also become a marketing issue. The "IKEA Soul" was presented in a full page ad in 1981, in which IKEA's philosophy was explained below a beautiful picture of a stone fence in the Swedish countryside. And newspapers and magazines, fascinated by the successful company and its "unique philosophy", published long articles on Ingvar Kamprad and IKEA's culture. Over the years IKEA has been described as a religion, a sect, or an ideology.

Today, everyone is familiar with the stories and myths about Ingvar Kamprad and his cost consciousness. IKEA customers you meet in Sweden, talk not only about visits to the IKEA store, but do also retell stories about Kamprad and the company. IKEA has produced a rich mythology. In Sweden IKEA has become a
sort of “national monument”, an institution that constitutes an integrated part in the Swedish everyday life. It is a symbol of the Swedish “folkhem”, of the deep-rooted mentality of Småland; a part of the “Swedish soul”.

“Canadians Are Brownish”
On a late evening, after a long flight across the Atlantic Sea, I landed in Canada. Already as I went through the customs, I got my first “input” on IKEA, when the lady in the customs with all “the North American enthusiasm” commented on the purpose of my visit.

Customs officer: Business or pleasure?
Miriam: Business.
Customs: What kind of business?
Miriam: Well, I’m working on a research project on IKEA...
Customs: Oh, IKEA!!! Ah, you’re Swedish! I love IKEA! They’re doing real well here. And it’s such a fun company. I really love going there...

When I came to one of the IKEA stores in Canada, I was at once taken in by the very Scandinavian room settings. The Stockholm series of furniture is given a section of its own, and many co-workers and customers think that this part is the most typical IKEA. “It’s simple, it’s clean, and it’s beautiful” as one of the decorators describes it.

All the rooms in the showroom have a striking Scandinavian air, with light, blond colours, Carl Larsson paintings on the walls, Swedish newspapers in the paper racks, and many other Swedish accessories such as books, records, etc. “The decorators are doing a fantastic job, creating these Swedish rooms”, I thought. But when I told about my impressions at the Service Office, the new country manager declared; “well, that’s our problem. We must learn to present our range in a more Canadian way”.

IKEA has been in Canada since 1976. The store that opened back then was a franchising outlet. The franchising concept is used on a number on distant
markets, such as Australia, Hong-Kong, Saudi Arabia and Singapore. In Canada, however, IKEA chose to take over the franchising operations. By the end of 70's the market had been "tested" through the franchising operations, and IKEA Canada was started. IKEA soon became a well-known company, with the famous moose figure adorning every store inauguration. Still, Canada is a big country, and IKEA's market share only amounts to a few percent. In the last few years the sales have stagnated due to the general economic recession, and it is often said that sales could be much better.

At the IRTC-seminar, an internal training seminar for IKEA managers, I attended in Canada, one of the groups had studied the room settings in the showroom in an IKEA store, interviewing customers as they walked through the showroom. They showed their results on a video tape. While most of the young IKEA visitors enthusiastically expressed their liking of IKEA's range and low prices, the middle-aged who were interviewed at the video were more cautious in their comments:

"Oh, the furniture does really look nice. And it's affordable too. But very modern...to us it's a little bit too futuristic, I guess. I mean, we could find some real nice stuff for the kitchen or the children's room, but for the living room I think it's too modern. Maybe in the rec. room in the basement"

Canadians appear to have a more conservative taste. IKEA Canada has made image surveys and visits to Canadian homes that have revealed the same thing. "IKEA is a fun place to shop at - but only for children's rooms and the basement", could be a summary of many customers' description of IKEA.

"We're brownish" as one of the store managers declares. The traditional home-furnishing style in Canada and North America is a red-brown, oak tree-coloured style with "heavy", ornate furniture. IKEA's light, blond style is regarded as being very modern, maybe too modern. Some of the products are not considered to be suited for the North American market.
“North America - The Big Awakening”

At the Canadian Service Office there is a lot of talk and discussions about how to attract “the many Canadians”. Many IKEA managers I have met hold that operating in North America is very different from in Europe. It is a much tougher market. Even though IKEA Canada was established rather early, it took a long time before IKEA took the big step to the United States. “It’s a big country, someone’s got to furnish it”, IKEA jokingly stated in one of the slogans. The first store opened in Philadelphia in 1985. Whereas the establishment on the European markets generally became immediate successes, the start on the gigantic North American markets has been a more long-winded process. As IKEA of Sweden says in an internal brochure, “In the USA, IKEA hasn’t really ‘taken off’ yet”.

Many IKEA managers in North America talk about coming to America as “the big awakening for IKEA”.

**André, store manager in Canada:** I think as IKEA is growing and becoming a more international company, IKEA is realizing that they have to adapt more to the local market. I think that North America was the big awakening for the company... Usually when IKEA opened in a new market, it was just to open the door and boom... and here it didn’t work, you know. So now we have to stop and reflect why...

**Miriam:** And what do you think are the reasons?

**André:** Ehhem, the American people are very independent, well educated, they are their own people... And in the US there are the best retailers in the world. Just look at the customer service... IKEA has to adapt...

**Miriam:** Adapt, in what way?

**André:** Take customer service, for instance. When I first started at IKEA, I think the return policy, I think we gave two weeks,
and you had to turn in the goods with the packages, with your receipt, and we would take off 25%. It was very rigid. In North America you cannot do that... I mean, we have to follow the train that American retailers have set...So we've adapted our return policy, now it's very generous...

One of the most obvious “misfits” between IKEA and the North American market, which often is mentioned, is the bed sizes. Whereas in North America the common bed is “Queen size”, IKEA's beds, sheets and quilts have European sizes. And then there is the problem of translating metric measurements to inches. There is a need for local adaptation.

**Becoming “A Serious Furniture Dealer”**

The case of the Canadian market illustrates the problem of a standardized concept and the need for local adaptation; a problem that has been widely discussed in the literature on international marketing (see e.g. Keegan, 1984; Douglas & Wind, 1987; Levitt, 1983). To what extent should a concept be adapted to the local markets?

By the end of the 80's various managers at IKEA of Sweden and around in the “IKEA-world” started to ask themselves: “Is IKEA growing with its customers?”. Not only was it obvious that on many markets abroad IKEA was a rather limited “niche company”; but also that many of the original younger customers now were looking for more “serious” furniture. “*For too long the competition has been allowed to dominate the market for conventional and traditional furnishing*”. In an internal booklet, IKEA of Sweden addresses the problem:

> “Some 20 years ago, young people came to IKEA for their first items of furniture. Today these people have reached middle age and their values have changed, their incomes grown and their tastes matured. Can they still find what they are looking for at IKEA? Are they at the point of deserting IKEA for the up-market furniture on fashionable Main Street?...”

> “A richer IKEA for everyone”, internal booklet, p.6.
And IKEA of Sweden started to develop an extensive expansion of the product range. "If we want to create a better every-day life for 'the many people' we must attract a wider variety of tastes". IKEA must become regarded "a serious furniture store for all ages", IKEA managers now keep repeating.

With a new style programme, which will be completed in the mid-90's, IKEA now aims at broaden its market. The product programme will become both more internationally adapted and broader to attract a wider age range. In a general more "conventional" programme, IKEA will launch furniture with a modern international style, a traditional "English" style, and a "popular" contemporary style. The second part of the range consists of the "IKEA unique" product range with "young Swede", "Scandinavian style" and "Swedish cottage". This range is to be perceived as "typical IKEA".

At the Service Offices, there is a belief that the new market unit organization together with IKEA of Sweden's widened product range will create more freedom of choice for each region.

"We're going towards more local adaptation...You got to work with the tastes that exist on the market. But we shall only adapt how we treat the product range, we'll never change the core philosophy. Never."

An IKEA manager in Canada

The new product range appears as a big revolution at IKEA, giving rise to far more questions and emotions than the new organizational market unit structure. Becoming a "serious furniture dealer" implies that many of the old "corporate truths" are being questioned. It involves a new view of the self and the world.

Many co-workers fear that what they describe as IKEA's "uniqueness" is threatened. Not only is the product range changing; they also see how the promotions (ads and commercials) are given a new tone. IKEA is becoming a "serious furniture dealer"...
To Attract the “Many” Canadians

When the co-workers at IKEA Canada describe IKEA they often make references to IKEA’s TV-commercials. “IKEA is a fun, a more casual company. As in our commercials” they often say. When a new ad or commercial is launched, it is often discussed in the lunchroom.

One of the most popular commercials, which both customers and co-workers often mention when talking about IKEA, is “the conveyor belt”. Have you met Ingmar?

“It was funny, some years ago IKEA’s ads were very Swedish...one of the most famous commercials in Canada was Ingmar. Have you met him? It was him sitting on a production line, and one of IKEA’s products was going by, and he was talking about how IKEA’s products are put together. You know, we start with components, then packages, and then shipped to the customer’s home, and then it’s assembled into a chair...and he spoke in Swedish with English subtitles. And at the end of it you see that it’s not the conveyor belt that moves, it’s him! So he falls of at the end of it and comes back up...So it was really funny!”

George at the Canadian Trading Office

The funny thing is that this Ingmar works as a manager at the Canadian Service Office, and whenever he shows up in the stores everybody recognizes him as “the funny guy on the conveyor belt”.

In the past year, however, the commercials have changed. The message and style in the advertising is softer and “quieter”. Quality of life is focused in the ads with “IKEA lets you get more out of life” as the tagline. A new style to become “a serious furniture store”, is the key word among IKEA managers.

A major strategic concern is to make the widened product range known to the Canadian market and to present the range in the right way, to create an image of a “serious home furnishing company”, and to show that IKEA has furniture for all age groups. The new Swedish marketing manager, Fredrik, who was brought over to Canada by the new country manager, talks a lot about “the new IKEA image”.

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“In the past ten years we’ve created a rather split image...and we’ve been repeating over and over again the message of low-priced furniture. And there is nothing wrong in that, you know, but it has meant that we’ve built a rather one-sided picture of a company that only sells cheap book cases, folding chairs and chip-board furniture...so that’s the image we’ve got here. But then you’ve got to be honest too and admit that it’s only in the last few years that we’ve got the complete product range here in Canada... And now we’ve got all these new styles that IKEA of Sweden has developed, but we haven’t communicated that here, so now we got to show that wider range to the Canadians. To attract the ‘many Canadians’...”

“Ils Sont Fous Ces Suédois”
In France, IKEA’s furniture style is considered to be Swedish. Modern, blond, pine wood, and youthful. The “Swedish model” which in France has been launched with the IKEA slogan of “ils sont fous ces suédois”. The products have Swedish names, but sometimes the customers are confused when they notice; “made in Taiwan”. “This is not Swedish”, they say with surprise. And some of the Swedish products are hard to understand. Such as “those funny candle lights you put in the windows, we don’t do that in France”.

Overall, it is a Swedish image that IKEA in France creates. And being Swedish is considered to imply positive values, as a French manager explains;

“Sweden has a very good image in France...all the social advantages, women’s liberation, a social example...the Swedish model you know...And that’s reflected in IKEA’s services. IKEA offers everything for the family; the children’s ballroom, the restaurant, etc....and that’s Swedish”.

IKEA entered the French market as a new, highly different company. However, over time other companies such as Fly and Habitat have copied the concept. And IKEA’s new, enlarged product range is received with some scepticism among the co-workers. There is a fear of losing IKEA’s uniqueness. For many of the French Ikeans I met, IKEA’s uniqueness was considered to be found within the “typical Swedish IKEA product range”, which for the time of my visit was
beginning to change with the introduction of the new broadened product range.

Jean, co-worker: We are losing our identity. IKEA is just like any other job, you know.

Miriam: But what is your identity; what's IKEA?

Jean: The IKEA style, that's young living. It's modern, you see. IKEA's image is 'Jeune habitat', innovative, modern, like this... (points at a modern compact disc rack). But now it's changing. The product range I mean. These more classic things. And you think, that's not IKEA. C'est pas IKEA. It's not our concept. Is it Conforama, is it But, or what?

"C'est pas IKEA" is a common expression, denoting things that are not "IKEA-mässiga". It is most often used when talking about the products, about IKEA's style. As Monique, working at the Service Office, said:

"This year there are some items that showed up in the catalogue that really stunned me...For instance, those crystal lamps in a style...I said to myself, 'c'est pas IKEA', it's not what you expect from IKEA when you go to the store. You expect more modern stuff, more design, simple, I think."

It is not only the product range that has changed. Many Ikeans in France, just as in Canada, also comment on the promotions. The humorous, provocative ads have been replaced by more calmer, classic campaigns. The Swedes are no longer launched as "fous" (crazy). As in all countries, IKEA now strives to be perceived as a more "serious" home-furnishing company, with furniture for all age groups. Not only for the young.

But the customers that come to the store still seem to perceive IKEA as a different, funny home-furnishing store. They are mostly young people coming to the store, regarding IKEA as a trendy place.
“IKEA is a fun place to shop at... all this hyper modern, designed stuff. I guess it’s Swedish? That’s what IKEA is known for. And the opening on Sundays of course. There has been a great fuss about that in the papers, you know. There is even a song about that. Les Inconnus. Have you heard them? So IKEA is a different company. It sure is.”

A French IKEA customer.

A Metamorphosis?

It can be said that IKEA as a Group is experiencing a metamorphosis. The company's identity is changing. From “funny to serious” and from “Swedish to international”...

The widened product range expresses management's endeavour to become a more “serious furniture dealer”. The idea seems to have been most widely launched within the management groups at IKEA of Sweden. The new product range becomes the symbol that materializes the management's definition of the self as “serious”. A reconstruction of the meaning of the company.

Even though this symbol is mainly directed towards the external public, as a sort of impression management for creating a favourable image on the marketplace, the product range also has great implications on the “self”. As the first point in Kamprad's testament states; “the product range is our identity”. For many co-workers, the change in the selection, is very frustrating. “We're losing our uniqueness”, many French co-workers said. Changing the product range is regarded as something that threatens the perceived uniqueness.

The reactions towards the new selection I found were most widely spread in France. In Sweden, the process has been much slower, since the enlargement of the product range have been going on for some time. Still, in the Swedish store I am visiting, I ran into various discussions on the new more “classic” things. Many Ikeans in Sweden seem to have almost a personal relationship to the products. They call the products by their names, and have strong feelings about which products are “IKEA-mässiga” or not. Crystal lamps, hand-crafted glassware and rococo chairs are met with scepticism. The new, widened product range is sometimes characterized as being too far from “ordinary
people”. “That's not what people expect from IKEA - how can we sell that here?” a lady who had worked for a long time in the Swedish store asked.

Promotion as Sense-Making

The change in the product range is also accompanied by a change in the style of external promotions. The advertising agencies that IKEA work with in each country have interpreted the new selection in terms of more serious and “softer” communications. The traditional humorous commercials have been replaced by more “sophisticated” campaigns. “A Richer Life” is an example of that approach, with soft, elegant pictures of up-scale room-settings.

However, the ads are not only communicating to the market that IKEA has changed. The Ikeans, especially in Canada, often refer to the ads and commercials when depicting their view of IKEA. Ads and slogans are verbal symbols that are part of the sense-making of the organization. “We let you get more out of life” and “A richer life” are slogans that give essentially a new meaning to the company. Gone are the slogans of being “crazy” and unconventional, such as “Not for the rich. But for the wise”, “Ils sont fous ces suédois”, “Das unmögliche Möbelhaus aus Schweden”, and “Swedish for common sense”.

The redefinition of the self at IKEA has been started by the managers who review the markets; by those who carry out systematic image researches and those who have the position to define the corporate “self”. Advertising agencies and designers have been the visualizing agents of this redefinition. On other levels in the organization, however, such a redefinition of the self is not so obvious. The established and widely accepted meanings are turned upside down. Hence, the frustration, the fear of “losing the identity”.

The extension of the product range is, for many of the Ikeans, regarded as a way of diminishing the difference between IKEA’s products and other furniture companies’ selection; IKEA is becoming “more like the others”. The perceived uniqueness is being neutralized.
Chapter 8

Red-Shirts and No Ties!

“There has always been a special IKEA-dress; in the beginning it was the jeans, t-shirts and wooden shoes, you know. Ingvar himself followed that style. The dress code has merely been refined over the years...”

The story is, that in the beginning of IKEA’s history, everybody had the “jeans-rolled-up-sleeves-snuff-look”. That was the uniform of the early pioneers. And Ingvar Kamprad still represents that kind of informal dressing. People relating their encounters with Kamprad always make references to his simple way of dressing. To them, it symbolizes IKEA’s “being different” and “unconventional solutions”. Whereas people in other companies are described as wearing the traditional “suit-and-tie”, Ikeans constantly describe themselves as being different in the way they dress.

Today, most of the people that work in the Swedish store are red and blue. Blue trousers and red sweaters and shirts with which you are outfitted by IKEA. They say that there is a rule that everyone who has contact with the customers should wear the “uniform”. However, not everyone does wear the uniform. Some wear their own red sweaters, others are dressed in civilian clothes. I suppose I would not have reflected so much about that, if it was not for the big “drama” that appeared to lie behind the dress code. All around the store I fell into discussions about how to dress, or how not to dress.
"I suppose it has been the biggest subject for discussion from the beginning here at IKEA, that some people think that everybody should wear the red clothes. And of course there can be some jealousy, 'why is she allowed to wear private clothes', you know. But if you aren't working with the customers, it's not a requirement. That's what it's all about. The red clothes exist so that the customers can find the IKEA employees."

Birgitta, an IKEA co-worker in the Swedish store.

Those who work "on the floor" normally wear the uniform. But there are some complaints. Birgit, an older lady tells me that it feels as one loses one's personality when getting dressed in the "rags"; and others often say that the clothes are uncomfortable. In order to be relieved from wearing them, if you work on the floor, you have got to present a doctor's certificate.

The people who work "back-stage", in the office areas, wear civilian clothes. Dressing civilian means dressing casual: jeans/slacks and a sweater or a shirt. Being snobbish is somewhat a taboo, as Birgitta explains;

"I guess it means being simple. Well, that you don't primarily think that you should be 'styling' when you go to work...How shall I put it, of course you want to be nicely dressed, it's not that, you know...but I still don't think that here...that you just have that thought in the morning that you should dress up...You rather try to be neutral."

It is often pointed out that nobody wears a suit and tie here. This informality, I am told, is typical for IKEA. Among some of the co-workers on the floor in the Swedish store, there is a story about how the department heads once came to the store all dressed up in suit and ties, to play a joke on the store manager. The point of the story is that they only wore it until lunch - they could not bear it any longer.

"Is this EuroDisney, or what is it?"

I soon discovered that the dress code was a big issue at IKEA in France and Canada as well. In France, a mandatory uniform had not been introduced yet, but it was on its way. And that was causing some strong reactions when I was in the French store; "Is this EuroDisney, or what is it?"
In France, lunch is something to be enjoyed at leisure. IKEA serves a three-course menu everyday in the staff lunchroom upstairs in the store. The managers normally sit at one table, and the co-workers at the others. Everybody takes their full hour to eat, smoke, and discuss the next match in the ongoing European football championships. Sweden against France in Stockholm... IKEA's French advertising agency Peyrat, has been alert enough to create an ad on the theme, which is pasted on the personnel billboard. It is a funny quibble in French promoting the Kristianstad sofa in leather; “Si là-bas les Suedois sont prêts à vendre très cher leur peau, ici ils continuent à vendre pas cher du tout leur cuir!”

What strikes me, as I sit in the lunchroom on my first day in the French store, is the co-workers' wild dressing. There is everything from shorts and tights to jeans and mini-skirts. Everyone is expressing his or her personal, individual style. The only compulsory dress code is a kind of red sleeve-less jacket that you wear over your own clothes. However, a uniform is going to be introduced. It is said that France is the only country that has not adopted the IKEA uniform - the French have resisted such a mandatory outfit. French individualism, they say. But now it is decided - the uniform will become obligatory in France. And that has caused a lot of discussion in the organization.

Agathe, co-worker: When I heard about the uniform, I was really surprised. C'est pas IKEA...A uniform is not at all the IKEA image. IKEA is more youthful, cool, you know...But a uniform, I would never have imagined that IKEA would have a uniform...

Miriam: Will everybody have to wear the uniform?

Agathe: Well, yes, from September 1st. And yeah, even the managers and the department heads, but I don’t know if they gonna wear the same uniform as we will wear. Probably they’ll have something that will indicate that they are
It is strongly felt that the uniform is not in line with IKEA's "cool image" in France. The new dress code is viewed as something that reduces the "uniqueness" of the company. By the time for my visit, EuroDisney is somewhat an abusive word in France. The press has castigated EuroDisney, the recently opened American amusement park outside Paris, as a place with very strict and "American" rules for how to look and not to look. Often EuroDisney is mentioned as a terrifying example of excessive moulding of the employees into neutral, well-shaven and smiling "Ken-dolls". To be compared to EuroDisney is not a compliment!

In the Canadian store the co-workers are recognized by their red sweaters. Putting on "the reds" is obligatory. But together with the red sweater you can wear anything you want. Well, not exactly everything. In the co-worker handbook given to all new employees in the store, there is a full page describing a rather rigid dress code. Skirts should not be more than 2 inches above the knee in length. Frayed or patched jeans are not allowed, nor are shorts or pants. The rules are strict. During my stay, one co-worker was sent home due to her dressing.

At one of the weekly steering meetings I attend in the store, the "downfall" of the dressing is tackled in a fierce discussion. One of the department heads complains that group leaders are not wearing their reds. The store manager wants to know who they are, and asks the department head if she has talked to them. The department head replies that she has talked to their department heads; going the formal way.
The Dress Code - Staging a Difference

The dressing style is one of the material artefacts that can be found within an organization. The way of dressing is a means for marking one's cultural habitat; which group one belongs to or identifies with. It is also an artefact that any culture might use for expressing their view of themselves and for demarcating their own world from others' (c.f. Ehn & Löfgren, 1982; see also Rafaeli & Pratt, 1993).

In the IKEA stores, the red-shirts as a mandatory uniform, is a marker of identification. It identifies who the insiders are as opposed to the outsiders in the stores. For the customers it is a visual symbol that makes it easier to find the Ikeans.

It is also a marker of identification for different “sub-groups”. As mentioned before, the decorators wear their own outfit, and so do the less public Ikeans working in the warehouses in the stores. Dressing is thus a visible symbol distinguishing different groups in the “IKEA-world”.

Wearing the uniform contributes to the moulding of individuals into a collective; making people more alike (c.f. Rafaeli & Pratt, 1993). Wearing the reds is a symbol for becoming one of the group. As was mentioned in Chapter 3, as soon as I started to wear the uniform I more easily became “one of them”. Ikeans in the store started to say hello, regarding me more as an insider than an outsider.

Conformist dressing emphasizes the collective “we” ahead of the individual “I”. The question is then if the resistance in France against the introduction of the uniform, and a more individual style of dressing, is an attempt to keep the individual’s sphere?

Hierarchical Dressing?

Dressing also reveals a hierarchical division. As in the case of the physical outlets and the formal structures described in Chapter 5, the dress code is an expression of hierarchical relationships. At the same time as informal dressing
is often cited as an example of low hierarchical distances within the group, paradoxically the way of dressing has also become an important marker of differences across vertical levels in the organization.

The dress code distinguishes the co-workers from the managers. Many of the managers wear civilian clothes. The managers and department heads say that they wear civilian clothes when they don't want to be disturbed by customers. However, wearing civilian clothes can be a kind of status symbol. As one girl puts it: "It's like they want to show that they are bosses - they don't wear the uniform." And managers are recognized in another more subtle way too. They beep! Being a manager you're entrusted with a pager which starts beeping as soon as you are wanted somewhere.

When the trainees, the young managers-to-be, have their training seminars in the Swedish store I am visiting, they change to civilian clothes. I joined a training seminar, and when we went upstairs for lunch, one of the co-workers from the warehouse ironically remarked; "Ah, are you going to a Rotary lunch?"

At the offices around the IKEA world, you seldom see any ties. Wearing no ties has become an important IKEA symbol; a symbol of being a different and unconventional company. It is a way of visualizing the "corporate saga"; it is a cultural marker for staging a difference. Especially in France and Canada, where the normal dress code in business corporations is said to be more strict and traditional, IKEA's "tie-less" approach is viewed as being very different.

Like the absence of "real offices", informal dressing is an often cited example of the small difference between managers and co-workers and the non-existence of class distinctions; "the managers are just like anyone of us." But still, the informal dressing can be perceived as a kind of snobbishness, as Klas, a Swedish department head, critically noted:

"Like this thing, that we don't wear suits and ties, for example. At the same time, if you look at the managers from head office and so on, the sweaters they are wearing cost about 700-800 crowns instead. So, what's the difference? That's a kind of snobbishness, but in
So even though hierarchy and hierarchical levels are downplayed in the “front-parlor speeches”, there are other ways through which hierarchy and positions are marked. The dress code becomes such a symbol that distinguishes different groups from each other. And even though a traditional hierarchic way of dressing (like the use of suits and ties) is avoided among IKEA managers, the casual looking civilian dressing can be interpreted as symbol of status.

A Two-Faced Self-View

The dress code expresses different things. When presenting themselves for outsiders, Ikeans often stress informal dressing as a part of IKEA’s uniqueness. “No ties” is an often used metaphor in describing IKEA as an informal company with few hierarchical levels. “Here we’re simple and egalitarian”. No one shows off in elegant Armani suits or extravagant clothes, even though a man like Kamprad could easily afford to do so. Ikeans promote the image of themselves as being casual and informal. “C’est cool”, as they say in France!

However, at the same time, the dress code, even though it is informal, is used as an important marker between groups internally. It symbolizes hierarchical distances between managers and co-workers. And it is also a symbol that causes a lot of irritation and frustration.

As has been outlined so far, the way of dressing is a recurrent theme in the “IKEA-world”. The dress code is often mentioned when Ikeans talk about their company, and it is something they often refer to when comparing IKEA with other companies. In many of the stories and myths that circulate in the company, the storyteller surprisingly often makes allusions to what the “hero” in the story was wearing. The dress code is a part of staging a difference and it is a part of the collective self-view.
When talking to people in the IKEA organization and listening to the corporate saga, you are struck by the “ad hoc way” things seem to have developed. No market researches, no formal training, common sense solutions, jeans and wooden shoes, etc., characterize IKEA’s stories and sagas. And Swedish IKEA managers do readily describe the IKEA-way of doing things as a kind of “tuta och kör” (an expression that in English could be translated to a sort of “just do it” mentality. Stories such as the one about when IKEA was established on the Swiss market flourish among the Swedish managers, especially in talking about IKEA’s beginnings and the rapid international expansion. IKEans often describe themselves, and especially the early pioneers, as doers, rather than thinkers;

“At Ingvar’s time he had a bunch of ‘doers’ working with him. There were few with any academic background, it was more learning by doing, you know...You shouldn’t plan, you should act...being a doer!”

Nils, an IKEA manager in Humlebaek.

**IKEA Goes International**

On my first visit to an IKEA store outside Scandinavia, the first thing that struck me was that it was so very Swedish. The blue and yellow buildings and Swedish flags blowing in the wind. Inside the stores I encountered beautiful room settings in a Scandinavian style. Light, blond, simple and functional. Carl
Larsson paintings and Swedish accessories in the bookcases. The restaurants invite you to taste the Swedish cuisine, and the shelves in the Swedish "food shop" are packed with Ramlösa mineral water, Absolut Vodka, Swedish coffee, gingerbread and stuffed cabbage in the Swede shop. Back stage, in the offices, I found walls decorated with Swedish tourist posters, conference rooms named Vetlanda and Malmö, and at some places I could even hear the Swedish language spoken.

So very Swedish, but still so very un-Swedish. How many Swedes abroad actually wave with Swedish flags, flaunting out their "Swedishness" and Swedish culture? The common Swedish approach is often to adapt, to assimilate, to avoid sticking out (c.f. Salzer, 1992; Daun, 1983; 1986; 1989 Arnstberg, 1989).

Since the 70's, IKEA has experienced a rapid internationalization under a "Swedish banner", teaching not only its customers in various countries to furnish their homes in a Scandinavian style, but also its employees to say "tu", to fly tourist class, to eat meat-balls, and even to speak Swedish (at least the store managers and the managers at the Service Offices are encouraged to learn Swedish). In a rather local business, IKEA has become an international home-furnishing chain, operating in more than 20 countries. Today, IKEA's stores around the world are visited by almost 90 million people annually.

"Das unmögliche Möbelhaus aus Schweden"
Starting in Switzerland, IKEA worked its way into the European market as "the impossible furniture store from Sweden". IKEA was promoted as typically Swedish, with a cheerful, laughing moose, that soon became a long-lasting symbol for IKEA in Europe. A symbol that the marketing people at IKEA have tried to get rid off several times. Once I brought the moose subject up in a discussion with a marketing manager at IKEA in Canada. With distaste he declared; "the moose is dead".

"Don't bring that moose up. It makes me crazy. He's been shot dead! I've been killing him several times. I suppose he was useful when we came to Germany, because he symbolized..."
the Swedishness... But it went too far. There were even cartoons in magazines with the moose, and the kids, you know, shouting: 'mom, look, there's IKEA', when they saw the moose. You take a symbol and forget the company..."

On entering the German market, an assortment of light pine wood furniture was focused together with the use of the Swedish quality labelling, the so called Möbelfakta, to further accentuate the Swedish image. The aim was to find a specific niche on the market: the Swedish furniture store. Möbelfakta early became an important IKEA marker for communicating that low prices can also involve high quality. Whereas in Sweden this quality labelling is a well-known concept, it was something new outside Scandinavia. I even heard a customer in Canada ordering a "Möbelfakta" at one of the order desks, assuming that it was one of those funny Swedish names on the products!

IKEA's expansion in Europe went fast. In a few years during the 70's, IKEA opened a number of stores in Germany, and then reached Austria, The Netherlands, France, Belgium, the United Kingdom and Italy. In more recent years IKEA has opened its first outlets in Eastern Europe (Hungary, Poland and Yugoslavia). IKEA's establishment on a new market has always been surrounded by big, spectacular campaigns that have drawn massive attention. Huge outdoor billboard campaigns and special happenings have attracted crowds of people who would queue for days outside the stores, tempted by the opportunity to win new furniture. Humorous advertisements, and special events such as the "Rent-A-Christmas-Tree", have given IKEA a lot of publicity and awareness.

**The Wild and Crazy Years**

Those were the wild and crazy years when Kamprad's boys, the young generation of new managers, travelled from Älmhult into the world to build up IKEA in Europe. They came to expand the IKEA world. Just listen to how Karl, a Swedish IKEA manager who now works in Canada, describes his first years with IKEA:

"I've been with IKEA since 1974... I'd studied business administration in Lund, and then there was an IKEA ad, seeking for assistant purchasing agents. I applied and I got the job. I
was sent to Köping to learn what IKEA was...it was meant to be for half a year...but then I received a phone call. They needed people in Germany, so I got a ticket to Germany in order to meet some guys down there, some Swedish guys, you know, and then I had an interview in Almhult, with Paul, maybe you've met him? He's still with the company...Well, I guess he gave me half an hour to think it over. And he asked: 'do you speak German?'. Well, I didn't. And so I started. I went to Hanover...it was a launching team...you know, Swedish guys that stayed for about one year to make sure that it all got started, to make it work, and meanwhile we should find some locals that could take over...

It was more of rolling up the sleeves then, work, jeans, wooden clogs, snuff, ehhm, that way you know...

And then an address tag arrived - we were supposed to go to Holland, so we packed our things in a pick-up, it was me, Jens and Bosse, and then we had an intensive course in Dutch for a couple of weeks...And so, we sat there in the barracks and started to recruit people...Every day, you know, we had lunch at a restaurant called Bellevue, and there was Hans, a waiter, and it was something special about that waiter, he always stood there like a penguin with his towel like this, of good cheer, you know, so once when he served us we whispered in his ear: 'are you interested in a new job, why don't you come and see us?'. Because we liked Hans, and we needed a restaurant manager...It was of course a little bit foolish to think that a waiter could manage the kitchen...but it went so well that he's still at IKEA...

It was like that back then, you see, fast moves...you should be a doer rather than a thinker!

Stories and Myths

There are several myths and legends that appear in these accounts. Allaire & Firsrotu (1984), define a myth as a fictional narrative of events expressed in symbolic terms and endowed with a sacred quality. The “sacred quality” can be both of a “deterrent” or a “successful” character (c.f. Alvesson & Berg, 1988). The mythical content lies in how the stories are put forward as presenting some general truth (see Bormann, 1983).
A common theme in IKEA’s stories is how one or a couple of the “early pioneers” (often being closely related to Kamprad) just went to a foreign market and became successful. The “truth” promoted in such stories is that Ikeans are doers rather than thinkers. In a way, it expounds a kind of derogatory view of formal training and education. In many interviews in the press, Ingvar Kamprad has further accentuated this attitude, talking about himself as an illiterate person suffering from dyslexia. Instead of planning and implementing “as others do”, “real Ikeans” just use their common sense and unorthodox methods. The themes from the corporate saga, launching IKEA as an unconventional company, reappear and are strengthened in these stories.

When IKEA’s “old-timers” (they are mainly Swedes) gather, they love to recite these stories. The stories are also told to newcomers and younger co-workers, for whom they become a sort of example of the glorious past and heroic achievements of the “different company”. The heroes come to symbolize the values or norms that are praised in the organization (c.f. Alvesson & Berg, 1988).

The entrepreneurial spirit and the “learning-by-doing” attitude is still something that is nurtured within the group. The myths and stories about the “doers” still persist and are passed on to newcomers. And Ingvar Kamprad is the main symbol that personifies that “truth”. It is a general belief in the Swedish store, as well as in the French and Canadian stores I visited, that IKEA is a company where your formal education is less important and that it is a company where everyone has the opportunity to work himself up. The fantastic pathway of Ingvar Kamprad is open to everyone. It is like the “American Dream” but in a Swedish version...

The Kraft 80 Project
Gradually IKEA has become more “reflective” and formalized. The starting point for this development could well be found in the “Kraft-80” project mentioned earlier. In order to fight bureaucracy and to encourage the constant questioning of everything, “the why”, IKEA launched Kraft-80 as a year-long internal activity throughout the organization. A special “power central”
(“Kraftcentralen”) was established in Älmhult, from where the project was led and a special newsletter for the project, “IKEA-Match”, was produced. Efficiency competitions were organized between the stores all over Europe, “idea banks” were created and rewards were given for new ideas. Campaign groups for the different business areas, the launching of an “anti-bureaucracy” award were also among the different activities in the Kraft-80 that involved the whole company.

The projects and the results of the Kraft-80 were constantly followed up and reported in the “IKEA-Match” newsletter. Reading the newsletters is an interesting retrospect into the IKEA history. The reports bear witness to the turbulence and growing pains in the expanding organization. Many of the articles and projects concern the constant “out-of-stock-problem” and what should be done about it. Deterrent examples are given, as in the story about the Norwegian who rented a big van and drove 150 km to the nearest IKEA store. He entered with the catalogue in his hand and wanted to furnish a complete home. When he left the store he was empty-handed. Nothing of what he wanted was in stock!

Other reports give evidence of unclear rules and policies. The “textile group” in Kraft-80, having visited eleven stores in Europe, identified an important question:

“...where are the borderlines between order and disorder? We have so many different experiences from different stores, that all solutions cannot be ‘IKEA-mässiga’. This concerns an important policy question. We must have the framework described. In writing!”

IKEA Match, No.2, September 1979.

The internal overhaul of the organization raised many issues. How should the IKEA logo be used; should the group use one consistent logo on all markets? Do we need more personnel on the sales floor? What do we mean by customer service? How should the employees in the warehouse be dressed? What kind of managers do we need? Etc., etc. Many of the issues concerned the problem of internal information, such as the contacts between Älmhult and the stores and
the exchange of ideas and experiences between the different markets. How would the expanding organization be kept together?

"Vi är oss själva nok"

"Vi är oss själva nok", is one of the favourite expressions among Swedish IKEA managers. In English it could be expressed as "we're sufficient unto ourselves". For a long time, the development of the IKEA group was characterized by "self-dependence" attitude, where internal recruitment, working oneself up the long and hard way, and finding own solutions, have been the "IKEA-way" of doing things. Many IKEA managers hold, however, that this has changed in the last years. As the company has grown, management has come to identify a need to open up the company and become more "structured". Anders Moberg, Ingvar Kamprad's successor as Group President, and the management group that Moberg has gathered around himself in Humlebaek, have then come to be the persons that are said to be leading this change.

"We are very much sufficient unto ourselves, so to speak...And IKEA can be perceived as a rather non-academic company, especially on the retail side...And you know, earlier on it could be like when Ingvar bought a hot-dog in a small village, ehm, 'nice guy' he would say to the hot-dog man, 'wouldn't you like to become a store manager at IKEA?'...Today it's different. We know how to appreciate formal competence now...and we have become more open to external impressions...Consultants and so on..."

Sten, an IKEA-manager in Humlebaek.

Still, you do not meet many people with an academic background at IKEA. Those that have one, would rather not talk about it. As a young trainee working in the Swedish IKEA store told me: "you don't have so much support in that, you know. It's what you do that counts".

The outcome of Kraft-80 was, among other things, that the need for and the development of some new policies and guidelines began to rise. The definition of IKEA as a "concept company" was taking shape. Maybe we could see this as the break-through for the "modern IKEA", where a certain "professionalism"
and a more conscious way of developing the company entered in the management group.

In the years following Kraft-80, IKEA started to produce written policies and manuals. "Meeting the customer" became the world-wide manual on how to run an IKEA store. The layout of the store, the display of the goods, how the IKEA system works, the self-serve concept, and the "IKEA-way" of selling were all described in the new binder, which launched slogans such as "retail is detail", and "the IKEA store - a highly efficient sales machine". Furthermore, a trademark manual was developed, and market communications became structured in IKEA's own "marketing mix pyramid". What hitherto had been carried out rather ad hoc was now becoming formalized in manuals and guidelines. In the Älmhult and Humlebaek management groups, the formalization was a desire for co-ordinating the growing company.

The 80's was also a period when IKEA started to introduce its own training programmes. The management group identified the provision of goods and managers as the two key issues for the future expansion of the group. To meet the needs of new managers, personal development and internal management training programmes came into focus. IKEA Way, IKEA Retail Training Centre (IRTC), introduction programmes and trainee programmes were all started in the 80's. Some years later a similar training programme was introduced at the purchasing sector of IKEA (IPDC). A further example of this formalization was the writing down of a central document on IKEA's human resource idea in the early 90's.

**No Manuals or Documents**

Even though IKEA has gradually become more formalized, IKEA managers often describe the company as a company with very few manuals and policies. The existing manuals, such as the one about how the store works, can be seen as the written-down experiences of those who have developed the concept over the years. But much of the work is never documented. To document one's work is not regarded as important within IKEA. The company relies more on direct experience than following guidelines.
Most experiences are passed on through the "oral tradition" and learning on-the-job. No manuals or written guidelines are used in the everyday life in the stores. For a newcomer it is mainly the on-the-job training that teaches you the "IKEA way" of working.

"We're in an age of models"
Whereas IKEA appears to be very informal in Sweden, with the absence of written down manuals and guidelines, at IKEA Canada you find papers on "everything". In the stores you find long lists of written down rules for the co-workers, job-descriptions, organization charts, descriptions of each department, etc. Extracts from "Meeting the customer" are used in training seminars.

In the store, each department has a "communication centre"; a billboard and mailboxes where information about store activities, schedules, vacancies, department meetings, campaigns, etc., are pasted. All new information is supposed to be read and signed by the co-workers.

At the Service Office in Canada almost every manager provides me with a document that he or she had written for that particular function. A management booklet for "the IKEA manager in Canada", a document on internal quality service, an analysis of the latest image survey, etc.

All the managers use a lot of models. Some are adapted from Sweden, such as the marketing mix pyramid, while others have been developed in Canada. A manager at the Service Office says laughingly; "we're in an age of models at IKEA Canada". Some of them have existed for a while, but several have been introduced by Martin, the new Swedish country manager in Canada. "You've got to have a theory behind everything", he says, drawing a model on the white board.

It is obvious that the kind of "just do it" stories are not so recurrent in Canada as in Sweden. Rather, Canadians talk about IKEA's first years in Canada in
terms of “dis-organized” and “un-structured”. Many managers describe their first impression of IKEA as “chaotic”, a company that needed more professionalism and that should leave behind that “naive farm-boy attitude” that the Swedes represented. “To be professional” is a key word. “That is how it works in retail in North America”. The reasoning is not so much rooted in IKEA and its (Swedish) history, as it is in what they define as the “North American way”. Explanations are derived from the nationality and the “retail business” rather than from the company. When Canadian IKEA managers describe why certain things are done, they explain their reasoning as being “the retail way of doing things”. The meaning of the company is defined in terms of the North American and retail contexts.

**Chaos & Order**

The differences in meanings used at IKEA in Canada and Sweden to me stood out as a difference in the world views in the dichotomy of chaos and order. Different conceptions and world views have different ideas of what is chaos and what is order. Ehn & Löfgren point out that this duality is a central theme in most cultures:

> “This opposition seems to be a fundamental principle of organization in all cultures in the sense that the own way of life is defined and delimited through its opposite; chaos. The culture is defined in opposition to the chaotic non-culture...”

Ehn & Löfgren, 1982 (p.34, own translation).

There is no chaos if there is no order. The states presuppose each other. However, a culture can also be “chaotic” (see Ehn & Löfgren, 1982). On a corporate level and generally at IKEA in Sweden, chaos stands for something positive. Chaos is the daring to be different, the questioning of the “normal” and traditional, the creativity of finding new solutions. Here chaos is the “counter-culture” of an outsider; a positive alternative to the established “order”. The avoidance of formal planning and written manuals, the informality in recruitment, the search for unconventional solutions, etc., can all be interpreted as such a “positive chaos” that is promoted within IKEA. At IKEA, the word “bureaucracy” is one of the most negative words you can use.
Both in the corporate saga and in the various stories and myths that circulate within IKEA, these are values and attitudes that are put forward. Talking about themselves as “crazy” and “impossible” in external communications when entering new markets also reflects this view of themselves and the world. IKEA's slogan when entering the French market was; “Ils sont fous ces suédois”... And it is not only something that is emphasized by managers in depicting IKEA, but also many co-workers at all levels talk about IKEA as “crazy and fun” as a distinguishing character.

The physical artefacts, such as the display of the goods in the store, reflect this “positive chaos” as an organizational principle. The stores are often regarded as an “organized chaos” by customers. Goods are stapled on each other and bins are full to overfull to get the right “bulla-bulla” look, as the IKEA expression describes overfull bins. Thus, IKEA's chaos is not a dis-organized chaos, but rather an organized chaos as opposed to the “others”’ organized order.

In Canada, however, it appears as if this “organized chaos” is a conflicting organization principle to the “North American” organized order. In their broader cultural context, chaos threatens order.

A Changing Self-View?
Several of the myths and stories that circulate within IKEA, promote an image of IKEA as an “organized chaos”, a crazy and wild company, that has used unconventional solutions and common sense, instead of relying on more orthodox methods and formal training. The early IKEA is described as a bunch of “doers”; pioneers for whom nothing was impossible.

Still, IKEA is a highly professional company. I doubt if many companies know as much about how customers walk around in stores, how they pick their goods, and how they decorate their homes as IKEA does. IKEA have their own courses, training programmes, experimental stores, etc., through which this knowledge is developed and passed on to new organizational members. Nevertheless, there are few myths or stories about this part of the company,
and these sides of IKEA have seldom been promoted in the official talks and
documents about the company. Rather, the "just do it" mentality has been
promoted as the philosophy that characterizes IKEA.

But the new generation of IKEA managers more often talk about their company
as being professional rather than crazy. As the company is becoming bigger,
their view of themselves is changing, even though the old myths and heroes
still are praised. In North America the "positive chaos" has been rejected, since
the IKEA managers in Canada rather want to stress the professionalism that is
said to be the "logic of retail". Since the 80's this professionalism and
development from "doers to thinkers" has started to be a recurrent theme in the
IKEA managers' description of the company. And the "professionalism of
retail" is spread from North America to the centres in Humlebaek and Älmhult.

This change in the view of the self is also created and reflected in the product
range. In Chapter 7 I described the widening of the product range, and the new
description of the company as "a serious furniture dealer". On a corporate
level, IKEA managers are redefining the company; from "doers to thinkers"
and from "fun to serious". The reasoning is that IKEA must "grow with its
customers", and not only be a fun and crazy furniture dealer for young first-
home buyers.
Chapter 10

"Culture Making"

Even though sense-making is an interactive process, constantly going on at all levels in the organization, we can find special "culture-makers" within organizations (c.f. Ehn & Löfgren, 1982, "the active shaping of cultures", and Kunda, 1992, in describing the culture of culture management). Some possess the "cultural power" for picking up symbols and giving them officially approved significations.

The socialization of individuals is for instance regarded as an important task for those involved in the "management of human resources" (c.f. Berger & Luckman, 1967, on the socialization of individuals into the institutionalized world). Organizations strive to make newcomers share the organizational reality or "culture" as defined by the managers. To create a sense of "we-ness". It is, as Christina Garsten argues, "a fabrication of culture".

"In response to the promising ideas of having a 'strong culture', organizations take measures to try to integrate new employees into the environment, to transmit a common perspective, common values, goals and strategies. In this they often draw individuals from different locations, departments, and positions together. In sharing with the newcomers their view of reality, organizations are involved with the construction and distribution of meaning, with the fabrication of corporate culture".

Introductory classes, co-worker handbooks, newsletters, etc., are often used as formal communicative means for presenting new members with culturally approved perspectives.

IKEA is a company that is highly involved in the fabrication of culture and the conscious transmission of perspectives. As has been described earlier, in connection with the “Kraft-80” project, IKEA’s headquarters started to “nurture their own culture” and introduced various training programmes and official scriptures in order to safeguard the special “IKEA spirit” in the organization.

**IKEA Way**

In the 80's, IKEA introduced a special training seminar called “IKEA Way”. Today IKEA Way seminars are held a couple of times each year, as a week-long seminar in Älmhult. Managers from all IKEA units will meet Ingvar Kamprad, the founder of the Group, who on the first evening talks about IKEA’s philosophy. During the following days the participants are given lectures on IKEA’s history, the product range, the distribution system, the human resource idea, etc., along with group sessions on different projects, and excursions in the surroundings of Älmhult.

On the last day, there is a small ceremony at which the participants receive a pin which is a miniature IKEA insert key. This is a token of having become an “IKEA ambassador”, a “culture-bearer”, with “a licence” to spread the IKEA culture at “Mini-IKEA Way” seminars in his or hers own organization. Some 350 “IKEA ambassadors” are today acting as missionaries around the world, and in all IKEA stores there are regularly IKEA Way seminars for all the co-workers.

**A Self-Conscious Culture**

Starting in the 80's, various efforts have been introduced to deliberately spread the “IKEA culture”. “We’re rather self-conscious about that, our culture I mean”, as Jim, a Canadian IKEA manager said. At all levels in the organization, people
talk about and ponder upon the “IKEA spirit”. It is one of the most characteristic parts of IKEA, this self-consciousness.

As an “outsider”, entering the organization you are struck by all the effort and energy Ikeans at all levels dedicate to the discussion of and reflection on their “culture”. They talk about their culture as an asset. They talk about their symbols, as the tie-less dress code, no special lunchrooms for managers, etc., and how they create their special “culture”. And your also struck by all the ways managers in the company actively try to promote the “official company culture” within the organization. Various activities are constantly arranged on a corporate level in order to “spread the culture”.

1990 was proclaimed the “IKEA-culture year” on the initiative of Ingvar Kamprad. This was a year of “introspective” reflection on the IKEA culture. At IKEA International in Humlebaek some documents on the IKEA culture were produced. “We needed to make sure that we talked the same language”, and Jan, one of the pioneers in the organization, even wrote a small IKEA “glossary”, in which some central IKEA words such as humbleness, simplicity, common sense, etc., were explained. Throughout the organization managers were encouraged to discuss IKEA’s culture with their co-workers, and various “IKEA-values” and norms were discussed, such as being cost conscious:

“The IKEA-culture year, well, you were supposed to discuss the culture with your personnel...so I had some seminars with my co-workers, and I posed different questions that we discussed. Such as, for instance, ‘if you had a Mercedes, would you then drive your Mercedes to a supplier?’ Most persons said ‘no’, of course, but some said ‘yes’, and then we discussed why that wasn’t the right thing to do. You know, you send out double messages if you come to negotiate about every single penny and then arrive in a flashy car...”

Sven, a Swedish IKEA manager at a trading office.

Already in 1976, Ingvar Kamprad talked about the special IKEA spirit in his testament. He was worried that the old spirit, that had grown in Älmhult, would disappear as the company expanded. But still, in the testament he was confident that it would survive:
"...the true IKEA spirit is still founded on our enthusiasm, on our constant will to renew, on our cost-consciousness, on our willingness to assume responsibility and to help, on our humbleness before the task and on the simplicity in our behaviour. We must take care of each other, inspire each other. One cannot help feeling sorry for those who cannot or will not join us."

Ingvar Kamprad in the “Testament of a Furniture Dealer”.

As IKEA has grown and employed new people with different backgrounds, new perspectives and ideas have of course entered the organization. Not everyone working in the company can be born in Ålmhult. So Ingvar Kamprad and his co-managers feared that the organization would “lose its heart”. Hence, certain conscious measures have been taken to safeguard the “cultural hegemony” (c.f. Ehn & Löfgren, 1982). In the booklet “The future is filled with opportunities”, Kamprad says clearly what he wants: “IKEA does not just want to win your brain. IKEA also wants to win your heart.”

New perspectives and meaning systems can threaten the dominant or approved world view. Hence, organizations' efforts to socialize individuals into the existing world and legitimize taken-for-granted practices (c.f. Berger & Luckman, 1967).

Training or “Brainwash” - In a Swedish Store

It is often said that formal training is less important at IKEA - it is the individual that counts. The co-workers believe that IKEA is a company full of opportunities. It is a company where you can “work your way up” without having any formal education. The IKEA-world is a world where you can become something if you have just got the ambition. “It is up to you” is a common expression. In-house training and internal recruitment are the paths to an IKEA-career, for which many of the younger people are looking.

In the Swedish store, the majority are young: in their twenties, although all age groups are represented in the store. About 30 people have been in the store
since the beginning. Nowadays, the personnel turnover in the store is low, around 2-5%.

The “oldies” form a core of very loyal Ikeans who know the house inside out. They refer to Ingvar Kamprad, the founder of the company, as “our Daddy”, and many of them have met him several times. Few of them have made a career within the company; most of them are quite satisfied with working “on the floor”. These are the people who Ingvar Kamprad in his testament call the “society supporters”. They have seen store managers come and go, and they have been through changes and store renewals. That is what IKEA is like; “changes all the time. Today we do like this, tomorrow we do like that”, the veterans tell me. IKEA is “on the move” and “you have to be open to change”.

Almost everybody in the store has been through the internal “mini IKEA Way” seminars in which IKEA’s history and values are presented\(^1\). The seminars are finished by a written exam. As a newcomer you are also given a special binder with information about IKEA and a copy of Kamprad’s testament. In consequence, there is a high awareness about IKEA’s history, values, etc. The co-workers often talk about “our culture”; quoting the theses, the business idea, and so on. Everybody I meet in the store knows the IKEA business idea. Some can rattle it of, word by word\(^2\), while others express the essence of the business idea in their own words.

Many Ikeans in the store call it indoctrination or brainwashing. I am surprised that so many use such strong words. But they always say it with an embarrassed laugh, adding at the same time that it is nice to know about the company. The word “indoctrination” is most often used when talking about a certain Christmas present. During my stay in the Swedish store I often ran into discussions about this Christmas present. A couple of years ago, all the co-

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\(^1\) In the last year there have not been any IKEA Way seminars at the Swedish store. According to a manager: “IKEA Way doesn’t have a too high priority here - it’s probably more important abroad. I mean, the IKEA culture do we already have in Sweden. ‘Möjligeternas tid är inte förbi’ - that’s the Swedish culture.”

\(^2\) “We shall offer a wide range of home furnishing items of good design and function, at prices so low that the majority of people can afford to buy them.” (The IKEA business idea).
workers received a tape-recorder with a tape as a Christmas present from IKEA Sweden. The tape was a recording of an interview with Ingvar Kamprad from a radio programme called "Nära örat" ("Close to the ear"). And for many, this tape was going a step too far:

"Well, it was last Christmas we got a tape of a radio interview with Ingvar Kamprad, and I think that everybody laughed about it... you know, it was going a little bit too far... I haven’t listened to it. We just talked about the tape, the fact that we got it. There was a period when he often was on TV, so you have seen as well as heard that... He says the same things all the time, about IKEA’s philosophy and history, you see, so you know that stuff..."

Christina, a co-worker in the Swedish IKEA store.

There is a lot of talk about that tape. Many of the younger employees took offence, feeling that the tape was an attempt of indoctrination. However, few have listened to the tape. One guy says that he uses to play the tape when he has parties; "it gives us the laugh of the year...". But many of the older people in the store did not find the tape indoctrinating or offending; they say that it was a nice gift that taught you about IKEA. They are the true "society supporters".

**Keeping One’s Distance**

For many, “having a strong culture”, is one of the main properties of IKEA. That is what make the company different. They are self-conscious about their "culture", it is an asset that differentiates IKEA from other companies. “Our culture makes us unique”. Anna, a young girl at the “marketplace” in the Swedish store explains:

“If we didn’t have that, if we didn’t have something as a guideline, then we would look like Åhléns. And who the hell want to work at Åhléns?... At Åhléns they hardly know each other, they don’t have anything of what we got here, you see... So the more you know, well, you know what you’re doing here...”

For most people, and especially the younger ones, however, it is important to point out that they are not fanatical; “we’re not religious about this, you know.”,
they say with reference to newspaper articles and myths. They want to show that they have kept their distance to “all that”.

Still, most co-workers in the Swedish store think that if you want to make a career within IKEA and become an “aspirant”\(^3\), you must buy in on these ideas and accept the IKEA philosophy. And for some of them who have been through the aspirant programme, IKEA becomes a “lifestyle”, something that is bought into the heart. As an aspirant puts it: “you really believe in IKEA and this idea, otherwise you quit”.

The case of the Swedish IKEA store illustrates how various efforts are made to “fabricate an identity” and to socialize the organizational members into the dominant perspectives of world views. By selective recruitment, introductory classes, IKEA Way, co-worker handbooks, and by “giving them a culture”, IKEA managers strive to promote a pre-defined interpretation of the organization to new co-workers. These are the formal means of socialization, i.e. transferring existing meanings and definitions of the organizational reality to new generations of participants. It is a way of assimilating new members.

However, as managers explicitly impose meanings on others, organizational members might “counter-react”; trying to create a distance between themselves and the imposed meanings. To joke about “the culture” is one way of distancing oneself from what is felt as a pressure (as in the example of the “indoctrinating tape” in the IKEA store). And it becomes obvious that the acceptance of certain meanings does not mean that organizational members necessarily identify with those meanings, neither do they have to be internalized. Thus, “having a culture” might be a part of what organizational members view and define as the “self” of the organization. Still, it is not self-evident or necessary, that organizational members “buy into” that “culture,” or that they uncritically take it into their hearts.

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3 An “aspirant” is a trainee for becoming a future manager or department head, who has been trained in the store during one year. The training is focused on IKEA’s philosophy, the IKEA system, leadership and personal development. Each year about 8-10 persons attend the aspirant seminars in the store. After the exam, they often become vicarious department heads.
The Importance of Being Swedish

The “IKEA-way” of doing things is often viewed as a “Swedish” way. Cost-consciousness, team-spirit, informality and egalitarian relationships are all regarded as values emanating from the Swedish or “Smålandish” culture. For many Swedes, most parts of IKEA’s official policy feel quite natural; it’s is a part of how we are (c.f. descriptions of what has been called “Scandinavian Management” in e.g. Edström et al, 1985; Lindkvist, 1988; Sjöborg; 1986). Outside Scandinavia, however, it is not quite as natural. A Swedish girl working for IKEA in Canada talked about a Canadian manager as “playing” Swedish:

“Most people here have no idea of what IKEA is or what it stands for. You’ve got to be Swedish to understand that. The new country president, he is a real IKEA person. He is very Swedish. But our manager...oh yes, he’s been to Sweden, and all that, but he is someone who tries to be IKEA, it’s funny how he runs around trying to act as if he was a Swede...”

Nina, a Swedish IKEA co-worker in Canada.

And the “Swedishness” is something that IKEA accentuates abroad, both in external communications and in promoting the “IKEA Way”. I spend some time in a French IKEA store. As you walk around in the store you encounter many Swedish markers. At the “bureau”, the open office area upstairs in the big yellow and blue store near the autoroute, Swedish tourist posters along with copies of the IKEA-soul advertisement adorn the walls. In the staff lunchroom you find a collage of photos from the annual Sancta Lucia celebration in the store. And during the time for my stay, the Swedish Midsummer night feast is held. There are a couple of Swedes working in the store, and the store manager speaks some Swedish.

Going the French Way

The Swedish traditions were brought in by the Swedes. IKEA came to France at the beginning of the 80’s with a Swedish launching team. A smaller “test store” was opened in Bobigny in the North of Paris, and two years later the Paris store I am visiting was opened. There is a small number of persons who have been in
the store since the beginning. They often talk about the “old times”, how it all started with the Swedish team which stayed in the store for some 6 months. And as always, the entrance on the market is referred to as “a crazy time” marked by quick decisions and temporary, unconventional solutions. Such as when the office area in the small start-up store had to serve as the showroom for office furniture!

But many Ikeans in France hold that the “Swedishness” has gradually vanished over time. “It used to be much better” is constantly heard at IKEA in France. Most people miss the “Swedish epoch” and the Swedish managers; now it is becoming more French. The French Ikeans talk about themselves in terms of their national identity rather than the corporate identity.

Sylvie, 1er vendeuse: It was all more Swedish before than now...Early on it was super! You really felt that you were in a Swedish store, because you worked with Swedes, and there were several Swedish persons in St Germain, at the Service Office, you know. You lived in a Swedish atmosphere... it was more laughing, more fun...

Valerie, co-worker: Yeah, some eight years ago, we had the Swedes...and it was another atmosphere, it was totally different. You know, everybody worked together, we had breakfast together, and there were never any controls, they had confidence in us, you see...But now, it’s more everyone does his job, it’s not the same team spirit anymore...

Marie-Claire, co-worker: It’s because of the French mentality. It’s more individualistic. “Chacun son truc”, you know. There’s got to be Swedes as managers if you shall keep the spirit. The French managers, you see, they never come down to us on the floor.

Valerie: In the beginning it was like “IKEA Way”, but now that doesn’t correspond with the reality anymore.
Veronique, dept.head: They say it's a Swedish philosophy, but I'm managed by French people, with a French mentality, a French spirit. And it's more and more the French way. But now we'll get a new CEO in St Germain. A Swede. I think that will be different.

Pierre, co-worker: I think that all managers should stay at least one year in Sweden, at least the senior managers, such as the department heads, to learn what the real IKEA spirit is all about!

But for some French managers the “Swedishness” is not so positive. “Why does everything have to come from Sweden?”

For many Ikeans in France, the “Swedish way” is a part of what they perceive as the “real IKEA”. As the “Swedishness” become blurred, there is a lot of talk about losing the identity. The “French way” is not “IKEA-mässig”, or as they say in France; “c'est pas IKEA”. More supervision, less teamwork, more individualism are described as parts of the “French way”.

Many co-workers are critical, they question the “IKEA-spirit”. In an IKEA Way seminar in the store the debate is vivid. The seminar is a full-day event held in the “salle de direction” downstairs by the staff entrance in the store (the conference room is called that by the co-workers since the management group use to have their weekly meetings in there). There is a mixture of both new co-workers, and co-workers who are doing the IKEA Way a second time.

The first point on the programme is a presentation of Sweden. Monica who teaches Swedish at the Service Office, shows slides from Sweden and talks about Swedish traditions and the Swedish societal system. “It really makes you wanna go to Sweden”, several of the co-workers comment during the break up in the restaurant.

In the afternoon we discuss the nine points and Ingvar Kamprad’s philosophy. We have been divided into groups, each group presenting and discussing one of the points in Kamprad’s testament. It is an open atmosphere, and most persons seem to feel free to express their feelings. After all the presentations, Pierre, a young co-worker, concludes: “it’s not like that here - that’s a utopia!”
The Midsummer feast
I agree with Pierre; to me IKEA France is not like “IKEA Way”. During my stay at the French store, it is a rather calm period. It is the beginning of the summer, there is a general economic recession, and a new IKEA store has just opened rather close to this store. In addition there are a lot of worries and uncertainty about IKEA’s “uniqueness” and waiting for a new country manager. What I learned to be the “IKEA spirit” in Sweden seems very different to me in France. But one day it all suddenly is changed. Chaos breaks out. The store is crowded, everyone is working and sweating, and with enthusiasm co-workers give each other a helping hand, hurrying around in the crowded store. It is the Midsummer feast!

Around in the “IKEA world”, Swedish traditions are often celebrated. And the Midsummer feast has become a tradition in the French stores where everybody works together, and even the people from St Germain come out to give a hand in the stores.

The Midsummer feast is a big event in the store, with a big sale and a lot of happenings from early in the morning to midnight. Fireworks, musicians in the store, a special Swedish salmon menu in the restaurants, outdoor sales at impossible prices, etc., are offered to the customers at the Midsummer feast.

There are a few Swedes working in the store, and together we build and decorate a May-pole that is placed by the entrance. It receives a lot of admiration from the customers. Few seems to know what it is all about, but it is fun. Both the co-workers and the customers enjoy themselves. Christine, one of the department heads, runs into me as she hastily tries to make her way through the store with a pallet packed with carpets, and yells laughingly: “Oui, ils sont fous ces suédois!”

Transmitting “Culture”
Through various means, IKEA managers on a corporate level work with IKEA’s “culture” as a management project. Like many other companies, they are involved in what can be called the fabrication of meanings. Introductions
classes, co-worker handbooks, the written down corporate saga, IKEA Way seminars, and the training of “cultural ambassadors”, are all parts of this effort to socialize individuals and to transmit “official” meanings from the headquarters out to the different units at various locations in the “IKEA world”. IKEA even has a prepared box, which can be ordered from Humlebaek, containing videotapes, slides, manuals, etc., for carrying out the local IKEA Way programmes. This is the “for-public-consumption culture” from the top of the organization (Louis, 1985).

However, even though the symbols, such as rites, ceremonies, documents, and sagas and stories, are easily transmitted, the meanings assigned to them are constantly being created and recreated at each local outlet. Organizations as “cultures in creation” (Garsten, 1991), means that the fabrication of meanings is not a one-way process. Rather, sense-making take place at all levels in the organization and meanings are created in different contexts, may it be at the local store in Sweden or in France. Thus “culture as a project”, as the IKEA Way, is only one part of the sense-making that constantly occurs when individuals interact. The IKEA Way is not the same thing in Sweden as in France. Nor is the IKEA Way the same thing in Humlebaek as it is at the local Swedish IKEA store.

Still is seems as though the closer you get to the “heart”, i.e. Älmhult, the higher is the awareness of the “culture”. In the Swedish store everyone is familiar with the “official culture”. They have read Kamprad’s testament, they can quote the business idea and talk about “their culture”. Most co-workers accept these values, and some even have internalized them as a “true” picture of their organization. In France, the awareness is also quite high, but many co-workers are rather sceptical towards the “culture”. They question the myths and the idealistic description of the company. The ideas do not coincide with their self-view. “This is not how we are”.

In Canada, finally, the awareness strikes you as being much lower. Few of the co-workers on the floor have ever heard about the business idea and the testament is seldom mentioned. And no one in Canada feels that IKEA in any
way try to impose any "culture" on them. The "culture as a project" has hitherto been rather limited.

It should also be noted that the "official culture" is not a stable and fixed pattern. Even the official policies and philosophies are constantly renegotiated and interpreted. Slogans, policies, documents, etc., are constantly being reconstructed on a managerial level. Even though Kamprad's testament seems to be carved in stone, managers at all levels all the time interpret and assign meanings to that document.

And IKEA, being a somewhat introspective company, continuously pondering and reflecting on its "culture", is all the time discussing its different conscious symbols and looking out for finding new ones. As in Canada where several managers vividly discussed whether buying cheap flight tickets, which meant that you had to stay away over the weekend, was an "up-to-date" symbol. "But if we take that away, you know", a manager explained, "we got to find a new symbol that communicates the same thing".

Thus, neither "culture as a management project" nor "culture as an on-going process of reality construction" are established patterns of meanings that are set once and for all. Rather, all sense-making appears as interactive processes of interpreting and defining "the world".
Chapter 11

"We're Like a Big Family"

One of the first things I was told as I entered IKEA, was “here we’re like a big family!”. A “big family” - what does that mean? Why do Ikeans describe their company as “a big family”?

One way of grasping organizational identity is to reveal the metaphors organizational members use when describing themselves. A metaphor is an explanation of a thing in terms of another. “The understanding and expression of one phenomenon in terms of another” (Clancy, 1989). It is a way of seeing and thinking about the world (see e.g. Krefting & Frost, 1985; Morgan, 1986).

The “family metaphor” is one of the most recurrent metaphors Ikeans use when describing how they view themselves and the organization. They often describe IKEA as if it were “a big family”. However, viewing the company as a “family” is not a unique metaphor for IKEA. On the contrary, “the family” seems to be a rather common metaphor in many organizations (see e.g. Roderick’s description of The Body Shop, 1991). The interesting aspect is what organizational members put into this metaphor. Why is it a family, and what characterizes that family?

A Special Type of Persons
In the stores, everybody know each other by name. Everybody wears a name tag with their given name printed in black. When answering the phone, only
first names are used. Many co-workers express that interacting on a first-name basis and knowing everybody is something they believe is special or typical for IKEA and which is a part of the “family-thing”. In France, this is considered to be very different from the more formal relationships in other companies. The co-workers all know each other, they socialize, and “to care about” and “support” each other are commonly used words when describing the “family”.

“IKEA is that kind of a company where we should help each other. It’s more like a family, sort of speaking...When you’re new I think it can be difficult, there are some that can come here... but, you know, IKEA shapes you. IKEA is like a poison. It just gets that way, you know.”

Gunnel, an IKEA co-worker in the Swedish store.

After having been spending some time with IKEA in Sweden I get a feeling that you should be in a certain way to fit into the “family”, and I sometimes catch myself thinking of persons as not being “IKEA-mässiga”! There is a certain way of being and acting in the store that somehow impinges on you, more strongly in Sweden than in the other countries.

Describing themselves, adjectives such as “positive”, “simple”, “open” and “willing to work” are often used. And it is a common conception that those who do not fit in the company, they quit, just as they who do fit in tend to stay for a long time within the company. When I ask how you should be to fit in, most people find it hard to answer. It is easier to describe the characteristics of a person who does not fit in. You should not be snobbish, or want it to be a little bit more dashing. Then you are “out”. At the “office” in the Swedish store I am told that recruitment is about finding the right person with the right values; “people who are simple, humble, straight-forward and honest” as one of the managers put it, and he continues: “we don’t want to have any yuppie-types”.

The same belief is found on a corporate level. “If you do not fit in, you quit”. External recruitment of managers has failed because of what they call the “rejection mechanism”. Those who do not fit into the family are cruelly repelled by the organization within a year.
In the Swedish store, the “family” is not only a metaphor. As I talk to people in the store I discover that many of them are relatives in some way. It’s a “family company”. There are married couples, boyfriends, mothers and daughters, sons, sisters in law, etc. Many persons comment on that; that there is a lot of “in-breeding”. A number of couples have met in the store. When I ask the personnel manager in the store, he frowns and says that the large number of relatives sometimes can be problematic; “it’s a little bit too much, you know. We have to handle too many family problems within in the store.”

In Canada, however, you do not find any co-workers being related. The humans resource manager refers to a policy stating that “employing relatives is not allowed”.

The Hall of Fame
As in all IKEA stores, the average age of the co-workers in the Canadian store is low, around 29. Many of the co-workers are college students who work part time in the store. One of the big problems for IKEA in North America is the high personnel turnover. It is common in retail, I am told. The turnover for IKEA Canada has been as high as 60%. During my visit, however, it has decreased to around 25%. Several co-workers have been at least three years in the store, which is regarded to be a rather long time.

Down in the hall near the staff entrance, next to the changing rooms, there is a wall filled with framed photos of some co-workers. It is the “Hall of Fame”, or the “Hall of Shame”, as some co-workers jokingly call it. Having worked five years in the store, you get your photo there after a small ceremony in the restaurant. To stay a long time in the store should be rewarded. There is a certain pride involved in getting your photo here, even though some co-workers express their distance by joking about it. The family-feeling is enhanced, and the feeling is promoted with a North American symbol à la Hollywood.

As in Sweden, many of the co-workers in Canada talk about IKEA as a big family. Interacting on a first-name basis and the more casual dressing are
mentioned when talking about the family. Moral boosting activities such as Christmas parties with Christmas presents, Thanksgiving parties, contests in the internal newsletter, a customer service award and the celebration of birthdays, are often talked about in the store as something that create "a sense of community". Some of the younger co-workers compare working at IKEA with going to college: "it's like college, you got all your friends here, and we go out together and have fun".

The Canadian "IKEA family" is a "miscellaneous collection". In the store you meet co-workers from all cultures and nations. You hear several accents. Working in the store are people from Scotland, England, Czechoslovakia, Sweden, Denmark, etc. And Canada is a nation of immigrants. Still many talk about a "Canadian culture", a multi-culture with big regional differences between the French and English parts. A culture which at the same time is nationalistic, with a unifying sense of "we-ness" in face of the big neighbour. "Living next to US is like sleeping with an elephant". A general belief at IKEA Canada is that Sweden and Canada are rather similar; they share the same "concern" and "family-orientation".

The Family Shop
The family-orientation is even extended to the customers. In the IKEA stores there is a "Family Shop" that promotes products for the family. With safety products, travelling accessories and leisure products, IKEA strives to take care of the family in the "IKEA Family-concept". If you shop for more than 500 crowns, you can automatically become a family member which entitles you to special offers in the store, as well as taking part in cultural activities and a vacation exchange programme. The IKEA customers should be a part of the family...

"Family? For us it's more of a card in the wallet, you know, than 'a family'... that family-thing is probably more for the employees. They seem to be a young team, having a lot of fun..."  

A family visiting the Swedish IKEA store.
The customers are however not really let into the “family”. Even though there are marketing attempts to draw the customers closer to the company and creating a loyalty through such a “family club”, they are not embraced by the metaphor. The customers remain outsiders, both in their own and the organizational members' view. A clear distinction is made between the customers and co-workers.

Celebrations
During my stay in Canada, I am participating in a week-long IRTC-seminar. In the course of a year, all the store managers, and some other managers from the Service Office, participate in regular seminars and lectures. This week the focus is on communications and image. The seminar starts at eight o’clock in the morning. A Swedish manager who takes part in the seminar says that this is a “cultural marker”. The Canadians want to start at nine, “but we want to show them the Swedish way”.

In all there are some 20 people attending the seminar. At eight o’clock, when we all are gathered in the conference room at the hotel, the country manager opens a bottle of champagne. It is one of the store managers' birthday. A toast is proposed and we sing “Happy Birthday”, and it strikes me that I have never before in my life celebrated so many birthdays as I have at IKEA. At all IKEA outlets I have visited there have been birthday celebrations. “Is this the ‘family-thing’?”, I meditate as I sip champagne at eight o’clock in the morning.

And maybe the family metaphor makes it easier to understand why all traditional family festivals are so thoroughly celebrated at IKEA. Birthdays, weddings, Lucia Day, and Christmas. These celebrations can be seen as organizational rituals and ceremonies. The most important festivity is the Christmas party. In each store there is a special Christmas gathering up in the restaurant, where the employees have a Christmas meal and get Christmas gifts from IKEA. During the years they have been given outdoor barbecues, skis, bicycles, etc. In Älmhult the “family” has grown so big, that the traditional Christmas party, which is the event of the year, has to be performed in the huge central warehouse outside Älmhult.
This is a gigantic happening where a couple of thousand IKEA persons from Älmhult are served Christmas rice pudding from the fork lifts, and Ingvar Kamprad gives a speech and everybody gets their Christmas present from the company. And it was on such an occasion that Ingvar Kamprad in 1985 commented on the earlier announced decision that Anders Moberg was to succeed him as president for the group.

"When he stood there at the Christmas gathering, you know that event in the central warehouse when Ingvar comes with his sons and the Christmas speech, and all that...and when Ingvar made his speech and declared that he would retire and that Anders Moberg was the new president, people cried. And then they comforted themselves by saying; 'well, at least he's from Älmhult', and then they sobbed..."

Per, a Swedish IKEA manager.

"Kamprad - our Daddy"

If IKEA is a family, Ingvar Kamprad is its unquestioned "Daddy". It is a rather patriarchal family. A "mother" of the company is hard to find.

Ingvar Kamprad, the founder of IKEA, has visited the Swedish store a couple of times. I am often told about these visits. For those who have met him it is a great, unforgettable moment. And there is a lot of talk about him in the store; "Kamprad would have liked that..." or "what would Ingvar have said about that..." Especially for the "older" Ikeans, Ingvar Kamprad represents an important symbol; an example of the true and genuine IKEA spirit.

However, for many of the younger, he is just a "figure", a myth or a legend about which they hear a lot of stories. Jenny, a young girl who has been at IKEA for about one year, even question his existence:

"Kamprad? Does he exist? I hardly know who he is... We talk about him in a jokingly manner, you know, like 'it's Kamprad who gets the money' or 'be careful, Kamprad is watching you'..."
There are stories about his cost consciousness. On a visit in the store he wrote down an important message on a napkin; in the garbage he found a piece of wood that he said they could sell; he travelled in an old rusty Volvo; he had a hot dog instead of lunch in the restaurant, etc. And other stories are about his humbleness and simple approach: no one recognized him when he came to the store - he looked just like any ordinary old man; he always presents himself as if no one would know who he is, etc.

There are two central themes in the stories that circulate about Kamprad; what he ate and what he wore. His culinary excesses seem to be restricted to having a hot dog at the nearest hot dog stand. And his way of dressing is always commented (c.f. Chapter 8). He dresses very discretely; a t-shirt and gabardine trousers is a common description. But the story of what he was wearing at the last visit varies in the Swedish store. A guy talks about a t-shirt, someone else mentions a flannel shirt, while a third person would have seen him wearing and old worn-out tweed-jacket. But the general image is consistent: Kamprad dresses simply.

Meeting Kamprad is a great event which often is talked about. This is how Bosse, an employee in the warehouse in the Swedish store, describes his meeting with Kamprad:

"Kamprad, he’s our boss. You hardly know who Moberg is. I think I’ve seen him on TV once. But Kamprad, I’ve met him privately and I’ve shook hands with him... The first time he was here, it was when I was at school and worked extra here. And then he came, they had that kind of overhaul of the store... And first in the troop the country president and all these people came. And they were rather dressed up. Not that they were wearing suits and ties, you know, but still... And he came last. And I didn’t know who he was. He was wearing one of these flannel shirts... being unshaved, you know, and you were wondering: ‘who the hell is that?’, and then he came to me and said: ‘Hi there, what’s your name?’.

‘I’m Bosse, who are you?’, something like that you know, and he said: ‘Well, I’m Ingvar Kamprad’... You know, he walks around saying hello to everybody...”

In France and in Canada, Kamprad is not the same present “Daddy” as in Sweden. Few persons have met him, but for those who have met him the
encounter is unforgettable, and it is something that they love to tell. As Alain working in the warehouse in the French store:

“Yes, Ingvar Kamprad was here on a visit...and I had imagined that he would look like a Viking, with a big beard and all that, but he was really very nice, so very simple you know...we call him ‘Papi’ (grandfather) here...it’s very familiar, you know...(giggles)”.

If Ingvar Kamprad is “the Daddy” in Sweden, he is a more distant “grandfather” in France. The larger geographical distance, the more distant relationship is expressed! Few persons in France have actually met him, and when he is talked about it is normally as “our founder, who as a young boy started by selling matches”. A story circulates that when he visited the store some years ago he even said hello to the cleaners. “That shows how un-hierarchical he is, doesn’t it?”

**Kamprad as an Heroic Symbol**

In Canada, Kamprad is seldom mentioned. It is said that Kamprad has left North America to Anders Moberg. Moberg, however, has not become the same paternal symbol as Kamprad. Many claim that he still works in the shadow of Kamprad. And around at the stores, few persons have ever met Anders Moberg. He is a more anonymous leader, who only “appears on the annual video with New Year’s greetings from Humlebaek”.

Ingvar Kamprad is not only “the Daddy” of the family, but he is also an important “transmitter of meanings”. His extensive travels around the world and to different IKEA stores give him the role of a “missionary man”. By his way of dressing, acting and talking, he symbolizes for many the “true IKEA spirit” and becomes a living example of the IKEA “culture”.

In Sweden, Kamprad is also a “public figure”, a symbol that is identified by IKEA’s customers. This story, which a man in a bar in a Swedish village enthusiastically told me, is just one example of the stories that Swedes tell about IKEA and its founder:
“I know a guy who met Ingvar Kamprad in a small shop, it was that kind of a small grocery shop, you know, and there he was, Kamprad, staring down into the freezer box, and he stood there for quite a while, and eventually a guy working in the shop asked him if he needed some help, but Kamprad just answered; ‘I’m standing here and wondering where all the wool goes when they make the lamb chops. What do they do with the wool?’ And that’s typical for that company you know, that he thinks several steps backwards, how you get use of everything in the chain. That’s IKEA!”

The various myths and stories that circulate about Kamprad, especially in Sweden and on a corporate level, incorporate many of the values and norms that Kamprad is said to represent and which are expressed in his testament. The cost-consciousness, humbleness, simplicity, and the concern for people. Within in the company he is a living legend, a constant reminder of “why we are what we are”.

There is a lot of speculation what will happen “when the old man is gone”, as a Swedish business magazine expressed it. IKEA will be bereft of one of its most important symbols. In Älmhult some people hope that one of his sons one day will take over; “to maintain the family spirit”.

**Questioning the “Myths”?**
For many people in the Swedish store, Ingvar Kamprad is still regarded as “the boss”, even though he no longer is the Group president. “He has furnished the world...” They admire his great knowledge of the product range, his commitment to the company, and his capacity to remember people he has met in the store. He is a “guru”, a “good”, “Mr IKEA” - the epithets are many. But still, many of the Ikeans question the “myth” - is he really like that, or is it only an image, many Ikeans in Sweden ask themselves:

“He is very simple, you know. And very nice. I’ve been thinking about that when you see him on TV, I mean, he could just be acting, as a role, you never know. Since he has been branded as such a person, maybe they are just doing a thing, you know. But I think he really is like that...”
Starting in Boulding (1956), Dandridge proposes four life stages of a symbol (Dandridge, 1985). In the first stage people have a complete and unquestioned belief in the symbol. In the second phase, people acknowledge the possibility of having some other belief, while in the third stage people stop believing the myth. As Dandridge writes;

"The disintegration of subcultural groups, religions, or class differences, can be seen to follow this path from unquestioned acceptance to scepticism, and finally to rejection or disinterest."

Dandridge, 1985 (p.143).

However, in a fourth stage, people might choose to believe. Kamprad as a symbol in the “IKEA family” can be found to be in different stages within different groups at IKEA. The quote above about what Kamprad “really is”, can be seen as an example of a person who, even though having questioned the myth, chose to believe in the symbol. “Even though I do not know how it really is, I choose to believe in the myth”. The same reasoning can be found for many of IKEA’s symbols.

The family feeling is a wide-spread metaphor in the whole IKEA organization, and it is transmitted through the use of rituals such as the celebrations of birthdays, Christmas, weddings, etc.

However, in France, the “family” is a myth that is questioned. A stage two phase. As in the case of “IKEA Way”, there is a common feeling that it all has changed. It is a metaphor used by the managers; a metaphor that the co-workers do not believe in. Actions and events in the organization are not considered to be consistent with that metaphor.

“When you start here they tell you that it’s like a big family...yeah, they told me that it was a big family, but, ehm, to me, it’s not a family anymore as it was before. It’s just what they say, but really, it isn’t...”

Eric, a co-worker in the French IKEA store.
The family metaphor is thus not only a "label", but is a view of the "self" that embodies various symbols and meanings assigned to them. Celebrations, the "Daddy", a certain type of person, etc., convey a feeling of community; a sense of we-ness and care for each other. The family-metaphor is thus something that is strongly promoted by various IKEA managers. As a part of the "culture-making", managers promote a sense of we-ness, downplaying the individual and divergent views in favour of the unified collective (c.f. Kunda, 1992). However, the view and the metaphor are not universally shared. People at IKEA question the metaphor, and it does not appear to be one single IKEA-family, rather each outlet focuses on the own local organization when talking about the IKEA family.
Chapter 12

"IKEA-Mässigt"

During my stay in the Swedish store, a new manager from the Service Office visits the store. During the day he walks around in the store together with the store manager. They go through every department, scrutinizing every detail. Most co-workers notice his presence, wondering who he is and what he is doing in the store.

In the afternoon there is a meeting with all the department heads and managers. The meeting is held in the classroom. The new manager talks most of the time. The atmosphere is a little bit tense and expectant. The new manager talks about the strategy. One manager in the store asks about the future; will the expanding Accenten department become even more important, or should we focus on furniture? It is a strategic matter that concerns the whole group. The expansion of the product range and meeting the business idea; “for the majority of people”. It is the question of the “serious furniture store”. The new manager replies:

“If you are going to be a serious home furnishing company - and we have the ambition to be the best home furnishing company in Sweden - and if you want to be that, you have to be a furniture dealer, and if you are a furniture dealer then you should sell sofas. Anyone could sell forks... And it’s now that we are getting to become a serious furniture centre. Suddenly we have furniture for middle aged people, people like me. Not only for the ‘first-home’. So now we must be able to create room settings that appeal to middle-aged people...”
After the meeting, the expression “anyone could sell forks” becomes a common joke. After a few days almost everybody teases the Accenten department with the new expression.

But the meeting did not only create a new internal joke, it also aroused a lot of troubled feelings in the store. Many were upset by the new manager. I am frustrated too. Was it “IKEA-mässigt”? Margareta, a lady who has been in the store for 15 years said:

“Those who were here the other day, was it the manager for Europe? Anyway, the stupid way they were acting, I mean they just went out to the furniture department, the girls upstairs told me, and just tore away everything they didn’t like. They didn’t introduce themselves and said nothing... We don’t like that kind of thing. When Kamprad is here, he walks around talking to everybody, shakes hands and says hello... People who do like they did, do not fit in at IKEA, that’s not our style. It should be simple.”

Similar reactions are heard all around the store. The fact that the new manager did not introduce himself and say hello to the co-workers upset many persons.

“That he didn’t say hello, that’s damn bad... It’s not IKEA-mässigt. I’ve never met a boss before who didn’t say hello... I got mad...”

At a sales-leader meeting some days after the visit there is a long discussion about the new manager. Many of the department heads question the new manager’s manners and way of acting. The store manager tries to explain.

“He is, as I perceive it, a different IKEA-manager. Compared with what we are used to... This guy is very clear, if I’m honest. And that... I think that’s good. It’s okay with me. But it means that it’s a little bit unusual when he, as he sees something, says: ‘who the hell has done that, bring him here so that I can...’ (laughter). But of course he doesn’t mean that. It’s just his way of being, a jargon... And he has worked in other countries, you know...And if he hadn’t worked on details, those countries hadn’t been where they are today...”
The explanation is soon spread in the store. When referring to the manager's visit and what happened that day, they often say "but you must remember that he has worked in other countries where a boss is more of a boss, you know..."

"IKEA-mässigt is a poor excuse!"

During and after my stay in the Swedish IKEA store, my strongest impression is the concept "IKEA-mässigt". It even becomes a part of my own vocabulary. "IKEA-mässigt" for me somehow becomes a key concept that synthesizes what IKEA is and what it stands for. After a while you get a strong feeling of what is "IKEA-mässigt" and what is not. "IKEA-mässigt" is the guideline for how to act and be within IKEA. "IKEA-mässigt" is a word that denotes IKEA's values and assumptions. To be snobbish, dress fancy, stick out, point with the whole hand, look out for status, be wasteful, complicate things, etc., are not "IKEA-mässigt". And as you socialize into the group, there are strong pressures for conformity, for becoming "IKEA-mässig".

But to my surprise, the word "IKEA-mässigt" is an excommunicated concept at some higher levels of the organization. It is a word that you should avoid. In the IKEA "glossary" from the "culture year", "IKEA-mässigt" is described as "our most abused expression". It should not be used as a pretext. Hans, a manager at the Swedish Service Office in Helsingborg, puts it in a way that many IKEA managers do when the word is brought up.

Miriam: What does "IKEA-mässigt" mean to you?

Hans: IKEA-mässigt? I try not to use that word. It's a poor excuse. It's like when you cannot explain why different things are right or wrong, you say it's "IKEA-mässigt", but for me, I feel that people use it when they have no real explanation...that's bad...

Miriam: But out in the stores people often talk about things being IKEA-mässiga and so on...
Hans: That's rubbish! Tell them to stop saying that... There should always be a real explanation for why we do different things. And then of course you can say that it's not IKEA-mässigt to travel first class... and that's because first of all it's expensive, you know, and there is no extra value in sitting in front of that curtain on the plane, you see. It's money poorly used...

Miriam: So you shouldn't say "IKEA-mässigt"?

Hans: Well, instead of explaining why we do like this you might use that as an excuse... I think it often is used because you don't know better... And there is a risk with that word... when we have newcomers, and all the time they get to hear that 'that's not IKEA-mässigt' and so on. It is rigid... as if we all should be the same way, you know...

Miriam: But aren't you very much the same way, "IKEA-mässiga"?

Hans: Well, no... Ehh, I think we're rather different. And I think that's okay too, you know. And I feel, when I look at my colleagues, that we're very different. Some point with the whole hand, well yeah, if you ask someone in this organization they would say that 'Hans, he points with the whole hand' (giggles)... and you're allowed to do that here you know, and sometimes you got to...

**A Distinctive Language?**

According to Evered (1983), every organization has its own characteristic language system. It is through the language that organizational members create their reality. The language system characterizes the organization in terms of a) its similarities to and differences from other organizations, b) its societal role, and c) the world view and reality definition (Evered, 1983). However, I don't think that IKEA's entire language system is so different from that of any other
business organization, or from language in society on a whole. But even though we cannot talk about distinctive language systems, we can find words and vocabularies that appear to be more or less specific or typical for people working at a certain company, in a certain profession or in a certain industry.

One of the most striking examples of an IKEA-word is the term "IKEA-mässigt". It is a word that for many Ikans in Sweden has come to denote "what IKEA really is". In that small word lies a whole world of connotations and meanings. It embodies how you should be, how you should act, how the products should be, how the stores should work, etc. It is a clearly normative concept. It points out how things should be, not what they are. To master that word, means to dominate the culture, at least in the every-day life of the stores. At management levels, however, the word is somewhat taboo as the example above illustrated. Still, for many co-workers the word "IKEA-mässigt" expresses who they are and it is a guideline for how things should be.

The same concept is used in the daily language in France and Canada as well. In France, they often say "c'est pas IKEA" or "c'est pas le concept", as the concept and IKEA have come to denote essentially the same thing (see the discussion in the chapter "A Day at the Store"). And in Canada, managers and co-workers sometimes explain things as "the IKEA way of doing".

"Le tutoiement"
However, there are also other aspects of IKEA's language that lie in their perceived distinctive character. As the "tutoiement". At all levels and in all countries, IKEA has introduced the "du-form" (the familiar form of you) as the way of speaking to each other.

For me, saying "du" to people comes quite natural. It is a part of the Swedish model of removing hierarchical distances and stressing egalitarian relations (the "du-reform was launched in Sweden in the 60's). In France, however, "le tutoiement" is something both different and difficult. But saying "tu" is a part of IKEA's philosophy, regardless of where you are. And IKEA teaches its employees to "tutoyer" in France. It is a recurrent theme in the French IKEA
store. "Le tutoiement". When describing IKEA it is the first thing that almost everyone mentions.

Miriam, interviewer: What is it like, working for IKEA?

Sylvie, 1er vendeuse: My first impression as I started here was the "tutoiement"... They told me that, well, here we say 'tu'. Even to the managers... But even though we say "tu" to each other, I'll always keep a certain respect for people who are my superiors... And in the beginning I had real problems in saying "tu", but you learn...

Miriam: But why do you have to say "tu"?

Sylvie: You see, it's because it's a young company, it's cool, it's really young. I think that's IKEA's image. An image of being young, cool, dynamic... that's it... and well, being simple as well.

The "tutoiement" and the absence of ties and suits make IKEA a "cool" company in the eyes of the French. "IKEA - c'est cool" is a common expression, both among Ikeans and customers. But still, "le tutoiement" is a mere rule which does not change the hierarchical distances between leaders and led. You say "tu" because you should.

**The Written Language**

IKEA also appears to have a special written language. As you read Ingvar Kamprad's testament, one of the first official written documents from IKEA, you are struck by its very special language. Maybe it is the language of Ingvar Kamprad himself. The language is very simple and rather abrupt. It is close to the spoken language. The sentences are very short, affirmative and not always complete.

In the booklet "The future is filled with opportunities" the same writing style is exposed, giving the impression that it is "the master's voice" that lies behind
the text. Nevertheless, the booklet was written by an advertising agent. And since then the same tone of voice has been developed and sustained in internal documents as well in external communications. Brindfors, the advertising agency, has been the promoter of that tone in all IKEA's advertisements in Sweden.

The style is so characteristic that you after a while can recognize if it is an IKEA document or an IKEA ad that you hold in your hand. The language style thus becomes one of IKEA's distinguishing features.
Chapter 13

Defining the "IKEA-World"

Ikeans often talk about the "IKEA world" as if they had a world of their own. And maybe they have. But it is a big world, with some 20,000 organizational members, and outlets in more than 20 countries. IKEA is an international organization in which activities and individuals are spread over vast geographical areas. How then can such a world be held together?

However, even though some managers and outsiders often talk about the "IKEA world" as a single "entity", each outlet to me appears to be a rather isolated world of its own. For most Ikeans, IKEA is the same thing as the local store. There are no or few connections with the "outside IKEA world", and sometimes not even with any "outside world". Each store and each country forms a world of its own, although there are some cross-border interactions at some levels.

"It's a Closed World..."

In the Swedish store I am visiting, the local store is the Ikeans' own IKEA world. Almost everything circulates around that world. The young majority in the store form a rather out-going group that socializes a lot. Many meet after working hours for various social activities. Some of the social activities are of a "private" character. Different groups in the store meet and go out. In some departments they have dinners in each others' homes. Social activities are also
organized by the store. Recently a personnel club was started with wine-tasting, badminton, bandy and squash on the programme.

For many of the Ikeans, regardless of age, their social lives tend to circulate around their work and the people in the store. You are here, you work here, you party here... Some describe themselves as being a little “maladjusted” by IKEA. There is a lot of IKEA, and IKEA gets on your mind. Janne, a man in his early thirties who describes himself as a dedicated “true” Ikean, says:

“...And your social life is only IKEA. I don’t think that there is anyone here who socializes with people from the outside. You finish at 8.00 p.m., and then around ten o’clock you start to get ready, and then your IKEA friends come over... So sure, it’s a closed world. And we work every second weekend. But many of them who are a little bit older, ehh, many who have been here for a long time, they think that there only is IKEA. They don’t think there is anything else, that there isn’t anything outside. Well, yes, I think there is something outside... Like when we were in England and there was one lady from here who asked about IKEA then, and it was like that English girl just must know what IKEA is, but she just laughed; ‘what is IKEA, is it a kiosk or something?’...”

For many Ikeans in the Swedish store, the IKEA-world is thus the same thing as the local IKEA store. When referring to other parts of IKEA, they mainly refer to the IKEA store in Stockholm, which is considered to be “a big chaotic place with no true spirit”, and to Älmhult, which is described as the “Mecca” in the IKEA world. Some have been on excursions with their departments to IKEA in Älmhult, and there are many jokes about how “everything is IKEA over there”.

However, all in all, the co-workers on the floor have few contacts with any parts of the IKEA organization outside their own store. Managers and
department heads have more often been to other stores, e.g. in the IRTC programmes; and they have more frequent contacts with the Swedish Service Office since they have regular contacts with the leaders for the different business areas in the store. For the majority of the co-workers, IKEA outside the store, is just a complex, ever-growing organization. As Rikard, one of the young aspirants, points out during a discussion in the lunchroom about IKEA's expansion:

"Today IKEA is so big, it's expanding so fast, that you get to read in the newspapers about what's happening in my company. We are just in our little IKEA-world..."

"You don't have IKEA printed on your forehead"

At IKEA in Sweden the lives of many co-workers seem to circulate around IKEA. Working and social life are closely connected. At IKEA in France, however, most people make a sharp distinction between their private lives and working at IKEA. One weekend I am having dinner in an Ikean's house, and to my surprise (and disappointment), IKEA is hardly mentioned during the whole evening.

"IKEA is a job...you work here...but you don't think about IKEA after you get home... You have your private life, you know. You don't have IKEA printed on your forehead".

Alain, an IKEA co-worker in the store.

There are about 230 persons working in the store I am visiting. Most of the employees are young, and there are several part time students working in the store. Compared with in Sweden, the personnel turnover in France is rather high: 15-20%. Even though the majority at IKEA are young, it is not so common to socialize outside working hours. But a couple of times a year there are organized social activities. At each store there is a "Comité d'Entreprise", a group of co-workers that is allocated a sum of money so that they can arrange different activities.

Few of the co-workers have been to any other IKEA stores, except the decorators. At the Service Office, however, many of the managers have been to
Älmhult in Sweden. And in some business areas there have been meetings with
the sales managers from the other countries within the region. The IKEA-world
in France is thus mainly a French or local IKEA-world.

"To us IKEA is IKEA Canada"

On my first evening in Canada, I have dinner with Bengt, a Swedish IKEA
manager, who has been with IKEA for almost 20 years. He was hired by Ingvar
Kamprad himself as an assistant purchasing agent in the beginning of the 70's.
In the 80's he came to Canada, where he has stayed ever since. During the
dinner I am eager to get to know more about IKEA and how it all works
outside Sweden and I start asking questions. After a while he abruptly
interrupts my inquiring:

Bengt: You talk about IKEA all the time, as if there was somebody
somewhere knowing everything and making decisions. As
some omnipotent 'IKEA'. But IKEA is us, we who work right
here. If something is gonna happen we've got to do it. No one
will tell us what to do or do it for us...

Miriam: But Humlebaek, I mean, the corporate or central decisions,
aren't you guided from Denmark and Sweden?

Bengt: Sure there are some central decisions that we cannot influence.
The product range, the restaurant concept, policies... But I
never feel that we are controlled from above. We have an
enormous freedom. IKEA is not a company that gives you a
fixed policy and says 'do like this now!'. That wouldn't work.
All countries are in different phases. Take the IRTC
programme, for instance, we wouldn't have been able to
introduce that here before. We weren't mature enough...

Miriam: So all countries are in different phases?
IKEA as "IKEA Canada" turns out to be a central theme during my stay in Canada. For most co-workers out in the stores, IKEA is IKEA Canada, the rest of the "IKEA-world" is distant and hardly present. Canada is far away from Älmhult and Humlebaek. At the IRTC-seminar, Martin, the new country manager, repeats over and over again that IKEA Canada must "stand on its own":

"If we get problems, we got to solve them. There is no one else than we that will take care of IKEA Canada. No one else! Humlebaek will do nothing!"

Almost everyone at the Canadian Service Office has been to Sweden. Several have visited the fair in Älmhult, and some have gone through IKEA Way. Few, except the Swedes, have however been to other countries in the "IKEA world".

There is not much exchange between different countries. The interaction is mainly through the memo system. In some functions there have been world-wide meetings with managers from all over the world, but with the new market unit structure it is believed that the exchange mainly will be focused on North America.

Jane, a manager at the Service Office points out that IKEA Canada somehow is a "closed world". "To us IKEA is IKEA Canada" and there is not much exchange with other countries. Each country has to reinvent the wheel all the time...

"It's a pity we don't have more contacts with other countries. You know, it would be nice to know how they solve similar problems in Europe, for instance. As it is now, we're reinventing the wheel all the time in the IKEA world..."
Transmitting Meanings Across Borders

IKEA's international organization has grown fast, and there are few formal structures for exchanging ideas between different countries. Most flows go via Älmhult and Humlebaek, or through the informal network of Swedish managers around the world. An important messenger has been Ingvar Kamprad who has travelled extensively in the different IKEA countries.

Already in "Kraft-80", IKEA's internal overhaul of the organization, the problem of exchanging information and communication was identified. And there are various managerial efforts for facilitating the cross-border flows of communication. The recent creation of market units with a regional company co-ordinating and guiding the retail and distribution activities in different regions, can be seen as one way of facilitating exchanges between countries, at least within regions.

Another measure has been to create a new newsletter; "IKEA Ideas". The newsletter is produced by Inter IKEA Systems, the company that owns the concept. The first issue came out in 1992, and was dedicated to a description of IKEA Delft, Ingvar Kamprad's latest project. IKEA Delft is an "experimental" IKEA store in Holland, in which new ideas and concepts are to be developed and tested. On the first page of the newsletter there was a special letter from Ingvar Kamprad, explaining the new idea:

"Historically, one of the greatest difficulties has been to spread good ideas between various IKEA countries and stores, and to take advantage of the best ideas. Over the years I have made hundreds of visits to IKEA stores, and I have always tried to be a messenger of good ideas between various stores - even between stores in the same country....

Though there is an honourable competition between the stores, it should not prevent us from exchanging ideas. For this reason Inter IKEA Systems B.V. has been assigned the task of tracking down, collecting and documenting the best of good IKEA ideas made in the IKEA world every year, and then to make this information available to all IKEA retailers in an orderly form".
"Bombers’ Crew"
IKEA’s most important means of transmitting meanings and perspectives in the "IKEA world" is the informal network of Swedish managers. When entering new markets, IKEA always used to send out a group of Swedes as a build-up team. Swedish managers and decorators did build up the store and train the new personnel. Normally a Swedish manager will run the store for the first six months to a year, and then hand over the operations to a local manager.

Many of the young Swedish managers who in the 70’s and the 80’s established IKEA in Europe are still in the company. Several of them are to be find in high positions in Älmhult and Humlebaek, or at the Service Offices that head the operations in different countries. At each Service Office, there is at least one Swedish manager, who has often worked in several other countries.

This group of Swedish managers form a rather informal network. The same names turn up everywhere. They know each other, they have worked together, and they have connections with the managers in Älmhult and Humlebaek. It is like a "bombers’ crew", they explain.

"Our network...it’s that group... they who maybe were in some corner of Germany, building up the operations there, and now one of them is perhaps in France, someone else is in Älmhult, and so on. So if I want something in the organization, I rather contact someone in my network instead of calling the formal manager for that...It’s like a ‘Bombers Crew’ you know, have you read about that?"

Krister, an IKEA manager in Humlebaek.

The “bombers’ crew” is a group highly dominated by men. And overall there are few women at top positions within IKEA. This is not something very unusual in many business corporations today, but many Ikeans, mainly women but also some men, directed my attention towards this in-equilibrium, self-critically talking about IKEA as a company “run by a bunch of men, a boy Mafia”. In Humlebaek they talk a lot about the lack of women as examples and heroes in IKEA’s organization.
"Swedish is our cultural language"

Many foreign managers feel that it is hard for a non-Swede to make a career, to break into the network. I once met an IKEA manager whom I asked about his future ambitions within the group. "Unfortunately", he said, "I was born in the wrong country. I've reached as far as I can..."

But foreign managers are encouraged to learn Swedish; "English is our corporate language, but Swedish is the cultural language", as they say in Humlebaek. Knowing Swedish is almost a prerequisite for advancing in the company.

When you come to IKEA abroad, almost all the top managers you meet and hear about are Swedes. There are a few country managers who are non-Swedes, who have worked within IKEA long enough to have become "Swedish". Still, at a corporate level, IKEA denies that having Swedish managers should be an elaborated policy. On the contrary. A personnel manager says that the ambition is rather to find local managers on the different markets; managers who understand the local market conditions.

Especially in recent years, IKEA has more and more identified the need for being locally adapted. Whereas the "concept", the product range and the layout of the stores are more or less identical in all countries, the advertising is decentralized to each country. Searching for local managers, and the widening and "internationalization" of the product range are new further steps towards a certain degree of local adaptation and changing the position of a Swedish niche-company into a broader global furniture chain.

Using the "Cultural Technology"

In the "IKEA-world" you find both so called "formal" and "informal" control systems. Both can, however, be understood as symbolic activities, being essentially communication processes of social interaction. However, in the international organization, sense-making through direct social interaction is impeded by geographical distance. Even though communication through direct social interaction is impeded by space and time in the international
organization, "cultural technology" has given the international company alternative ways of communicating across borders (see Hannerz, 1989).

At IKEA there is a transnational computerized information network through which "memos" are sent between entities. At the Service Offices, managers have frequent contacts with managers in other countries, mainly in Sweden. As a Swedish manager said: "On the memo there are no holds". It is used as the telephone. There is even a story about how a couple started a relationship over the "memo"! This mail system is also frequently used within countries, where the managers in the stores exchange information with the Service Office through the same network.

Another process for transmitting meaning is the transfer of managers. The transfer of managers from subsidiary to subsidiary creates interpersonal information networks (Edström & Galbraith, 1977). At each of IKEA's Service Offices in different countries, there is at least one Swedish manager, who often has worked in several other countries. There is a great deal of transferring Swedish managers between countries. This group of Swedish managers form an informal network, the "bombers' crew", which can be said to constitute the core of the company. They share more or less the same "top management" system of meanings, sustained through their common stories, myths and rituals.

However, at lower levels in the organization, there are few such contacts with the rest of the "IKEA world". The world is limited to the local outlet. It is here where local meanings are developed in the day-to-day interactions.
Chapter 14

Ikeans, Image & Identity

Have you met Kamprad? ... pushing pallets ... cost-consciousness à la Småland ... red-shirts and no ties ... elks and Vikings ... Swedishness and meatballs ... ambassadors and society supporters ... it's a big country - someone's got to furnish it ... being different ... “Swedish for common sense” ... there is a screw missing ... “A Richer Life” ... hot dogs, hot dogs, hot dogs ... “we're like a big family” ... beautiful living ... “Swedish for out of stock” ... “for the many people” ... “it's a closed world” ... “Ils sont fous ces suédois” ... “we're going the French way” ... Bombers' Crew ... a serious furniture dealer ... “Hall of Fame” ... IKEA-mässigt ... “nothing is impossible” ... “it's like a poison” ... The IKEA-world!

My time with IKEA was a fascinating period. The impressions are many, overwhelming, amusing and sometimes confusing. A total experience in a new world. And I am trying to get an understanding of how organizational members construct definitions of the self across borders... As was discussed in Chapter 1, organizational identity can be understood as an organization's self-view; organizational members' conception of the collective “self”. A shared self-image. How do the Ikeans define their organization; what is IKEA's identity? And how do these definitions of the self become constructed?

The aim of this chapter is to identify and highlight some central characteristics in IKEA's self-view and what make up this self-view. It is a further interpretation of the key themes constructed in the fore-going chapters (see Chapter 4-13). Thereby I will try to identify the communicative practices and processes through which organizational identity becomes constructed across borders, and these processes will be further developed and analyzed in Chapter 15 and 16.
An Egocentric Company
Many Ikeans I have met love to talk about themselves and their company. They talk about their soul, they nourish their image about themselves. As an act of narcissism they define and discuss the "ego", and self-consciously mirror themselves in the customers, the competitors and the media. They produce and reproduce an image of the self. "This is how we are", "this is how we do", "this is what makes us unique", etc.

Various symbols, such as actions, slogans, buildings, clothes, language, metaphors, etc., both define and express IKEA's self-image. Such symbols are constantly interpreted and given meanings in the making sense of the world and what the organization stands for and is all about.

A Sense of We-ness
There is a pronounced sense of "we-ness" within IKEA. People often refer to the group, talking about "we" and "us". IKEA is the collective. As was described in Chapter 5, the only marked "I" in the company is Ingvar Kamprad, IKEA's founder, who performs the role of a spokes-man for the collective "we". His spoken words, letters, documents, etc., become the voice of the organizational self. He is the person that symbolizes IKEA's origins, way of being, acting, etc.

In the organization you find few traces of the individual. There are hardly any personal markers in the offices or in the changing rooms in the stores. The uniforms and the conformist dressing style mould the individual into a collective "we". You should not stick out or try to profile yourself - it is important to fit into the group. A kind of social control makes you pondering on and carefully choosing the way you dress before you go to the office in the morning.

The family-metaphor contributes to and reinforces this sense of "we-ness". Ikeans often describe their company as "a big family". "We care for each other" and various traditional family celebrations are promoted and sustained within
the group. Everybody should work side by side, being ready to give a hand where needed. Especially in the Swedish store, this is a very strong feeling among the co-workers. This is what is “IKEA-mässigt”. To work together, managers and co-workers being all alike. No special lunchrooms for managers, few hierarchical levels and low barriers between managers and co-workers. “Here we’re all alike”. In the French store I am visiting, however, the family-feeling is questioned by many co-workers. It is more a vision of how it should be, than it really is, according to many French Ikeans.

There are also managerial efforts to keep the members in the “family”. In North America, where the personnel turnover is high, the “Hall of Fame”, has become a ceremony for encouraging organizational members to stay with the family. Among Swedish Ikeans there are also a number of stories that spread the message of how IKEA “gets into you” - “it's like a poison”. If you do not fit in - you quit. But once a member of the family, you return to the “fold”, as several stories and myths bear witness of. Such stories reinforces the sense of we-ness and create a feeling of being a strong and unified collective. The family sticks together...

Defining the “we” involves the defining the “others”. Constructing an identity thus becomes a process of drawing borders between the self and the outside world. The “we” embraces all Ikeans, they who are a part of the “IKEA-world”. They are insiders, being a part of the collective we. Everybody else, then, become the “others”. They who are not a part of the self of the organization.

Traditionally, Ikeans have had a rather narrow definition of the organizational self. Keeping “outsiders” at a distance is a way of guarding one’s identity, of sustaining the “self” against the outside world (c.f. Morgan, 1986). IKEA’s expression of “we’re sufficient into ourselves” reveals a kind of closure around the self. Relying on self-dependence, with internal recruitment, own solutions, etc., and a rejection of consultants, formal training etc., has been a means of keeping the “self”; of preserving the identity. As a rather closed company, IKEA has had very few external recruitments at management levels, and the group has remained closed and self-supporting.
Several Ikeans I've met in Sweden even talk about their "IKEA-world", as if they had a world of their own. IKEA's more than hundred stores, trading offices, service offices, distribution centres, etc., are conceived as a world of their own. As you enter into IKEA, you get the impression that it is a rather closed world. In the Swedish store, everything circulates around IKEA - there are few contacts with the "outside world". The company has put up borders as a closure around their identity.

In IKEA's corporate saga (see Chapter 4), IKEA's whole development in the somewhat glorious history expresses a process of defining the "we" as opposed to the "they" of the outside world. IKEA's paths from Älmhult to a successful conquest of the world are dressed in the expressive language of an organization which all the way long has had to fight the outside world, to question the normal and challenge the established "they". In the saga, IKEA is depicted as a rebellious "outsider" that becomes a threat for the "establishment". IKEA is clearly different from "the others". This definition of the collective "we" also reappears in many of the stories and myths that circulate within the organization (see for example Chapter 9), where IKEA comes to represent a form of "organized chaos" in a world of more boring and ordered traditional companies. Staging such borders between us and them creates a feeling of distinctiveness (c.f. Goffman, 1959). It produces a feeling of being unique, of sharing a distinguishing identity.

**Being Different**

In many Ikeans' view of the company lies a pronounced image of IKEA as being different. Ikeans often talk about their company as being different. In the corporate saga (see Chapter 4), IKEA's unconventional solutions and questioning of the "normal" are depicted as distinctive features that make IKEA different. No special lunchrooms for managers, the informal dressing style, the absence of traditional status symbols, etc., are not only symbols that create a sense of "we-ness", but they are also symbols that create a self-image of being different from other more traditional and hierarchical companies. Especially the informal dress code is something that Ikeans often use as an
example when depicting how different they are. At all IKEA outlets I have visited, the dressing style appears to be an important feature in their self-view;

Anti-bureaucracy and the "just do it" approach are other parts of this self-image. Being different, more casual and "cool" than other companies. IKEA as an "organized chaos" is not only expressed in various persons' accounts and myths and stories, but also in external communications promoting IKEA as a "crazy" and unconventional company. Interestingly enough, this self-view of being "crazy" which often is expressed in Sweden, is hardly mentioned in Canada. Instead, IKEA managers in Canada more often talk about themselves in terms of "professional" and being a highly professional retail company.

The corporate saga makes sense of why IKEA is what it is. IKEA sides with the many; giving IKEA a "social mission". In contrast to other business corporations IKEA is given the role of not only selling a product, but also of being a "reformer of the world" (similar "social missions" can be found in e.g. Kunda's description of "Tech company" in Kunda, 1992, and in Body Shop, Roderick, 1991). IKEA makes "beautiful living" possible for everyone. And the product range is the symbol that make this philosophy visible. But at the same time, there is a striking commercial aspect of the self-view. The stores are described as highly efficient selling machines, weekly sales are announced and compared, sales records are celebrated, etc.

IKEA's product range of modern, functional, inexpensive, simple and youthful furniture has both for Ikeans and outsiders come to symbolize IKEA's philosophy of living. It is the style of "modernism"; light, blond and functional. A better living for the many people. The special product range makes IKEA unique. But now, when the product range is changed, in the on-going broadening of the product range to include more a "traditional furniture style", this is viewed by many Ikeans at lower levels in the company as a threat to the identity. They feel that the uniqueness is being diminished; the IKEA identity is being challenged.

In Canada, IKEA's uniqueness is often defined in terms of the "concept". The self-service concept, being unusual in the home-furnishing business in North
America, is what makes IKEA unique and different, both for Ikeans and customers. This is a new concept, and a concept that needs to be explained to be understood. Whereas in Sweden this self-serve concept has become an established model, on other markets, the IKEA way of selling furniture is still quite new and different. "How do I shop at IKEA?". In Canada, the store-concept is "what makes us different from the competitors in retail".

Among Swedish Ikeans, IKEA's "distinctiveness" is often summed up in just one word: "IKEA-mässigt". In Canada they talk about the "IKEA way of doing things", and in France a common expression is "c'est pas IKEA" or "c'est pas le concept". Things, that are "IKEA-mässiga", are those things that are "truly IKEA"; things that make IKEA unique. And in the often used reverse sense, not being "IKEA-mässig" means that "this is not how we do at IKEA, this is how others do...".

"Swedishness"
IKEA can not only be understood as an "egocentric company". I would also say that IKEA is a very "ethnocentric company". IKEA was born and still has its roots in Älmhult, Sweden. These Swedish origins are something that IKEA managers at the top (most of whom are Swedish) nourish and promote. Many Ikeans in Sweden have a strong national identity; i.e. a collective view of themselves as being Swedish.

Blue and yellow stores, meatballs in the restaurants, posters with Swedish tourist views, may poles, etc., are visible symbols of this Swedishness at IKEA outside Scandinavia. Bringing managers to Älmhult, encouraging them to learn Swedish, the employment of the familiar "thou" form of you, removing hierarchical levels, teaching Ikeans in Swedish culture and traditions, etc., are other parts of what Ikeans describe as their distinctive "Swedish philosophy".

IKEA's Swedish "style" could fit into what in several writings has been labelled "Scandinavian Management" (see e.g. Lindkvist, 1988; Sjöborg, 1986; Salzer, 1992; Andersson, 1993). Equality in terms of small distances between leaders and led, informality in relations, and open and straightforward
communications, together with a focus on managing through values and visions, have been described as characteristics of a "Scandinavian Management style".

IKEA's international expansion has been a "tour of the Vikings". On entering new markets, Swedes are sent out to build up the stores and the local organization. Swedish practices and traditions are introduced. The product range has traditionally been the same as in Sweden; with practically no local adaptation. The concept has just been extended to new markets. IKEA managers and marketers have explicitly wanted to spread the Swedish philosophy of living to the world. It is "the Swedish way".

And for many of the Ikeans I met outside Sweden, "the Swedishness" is something that is embraced in their self-concept of being unique and different. Being "Swedish" is different from being "French" or being "international". For many Ikeans in France and Canada, the "IKEA-way" of doing things is the same as a "Swedish way". Even though the perceived Scandinavian style of managing differs from what they describe as the "normal style" in their countries, the "Swedish way" is highly appreciated among many Ikeans. Working side by side and a high degree of informallty is often described as being something different from, for example, "the French way", but at the same time it is the way they think IKEA "should be". Especially in France, this Swedishness has been strongly emphasized in constructing a uniqueness. And as some now feel that "Swedishness" diminishing, many co-workers talk about IKEA "losing its identity".

**Culture-Making**

In Chapter 1 it was outlined that in today's world with complex organizations, organizational identity has become a managerial concern (c.f. Alvesson, 1990). Organizations are becoming introspective in reflecting on and defining what the organization stands for and what it is all about. And IKEA is no exception. A great deal of time is spend on defining and expressing what IKEA is and passing on this self-view to new-comers. The identity has become a management project. It started with Ingvar Kamprad's testament of 1976, and
since in the beginning of the 80's IKEA has more and more been working on its "culture". Special "culture years", IKEA Way seminars, films about Sweden and Småland, etc., are different aspects of this "culture project".

IKEA's "culture project" can be understood as a part of managers' efforts for defining the self. The fabrication of culture as it is carried out at different levels in the IKEA companies is the conscious project of staging a difference, of creating a common notion of IKEA's distinguishing features (see Chapter 10). Through introductory classes, IKEA Way seminars, co-worker handbooks, copies of Ingvar Kamprad's testament, etc., officially approved definitions and views of what IKEA is all about and its role in the world are passed on to new members in the organization. It is a way for managers to share with newcomers their view of reality (see Garsten, 1991).

A strong emphasis is put on the socialization of individuals into the "IKEA-world". By spreading the "culture", new members should come to share the sense of "we-ness"; becoming a part of the family. "If you do not fit in - you quit", as many IKEA managers often say, and several myths and stories witness of how newcomers who do not fit in rather quickly are pushed out of the company. Such stories reinforces the idea of a very different, special and unique company.

Ikeans in Sweden and on a management level call the official documents and expressed corporate values and philosophies their "culture". To have this "culture" is a part of what makes IKEA unique. Having this "asset" is a part of the self-view. Posters with "IKEA's Soul" can be found on almost every wall within the IKEA companies. And many Ikeans are very self-conscious about their "culture". It is something that they discuss and consciously work with. One of the most important parts, I think, of this fabrication of meanings, was the writing down of IKEA's own "autobiography" in 1984. In the booklet "The future is filled with opportunities", central corporate managers constructed a reading of IKEA's "glorious past". This corporate saga provides organizational members with a retrospective construction of how IKEA came into being and why it is as it is.
Within IKEA, you find several ways through which managers in the company consciously try to transmit and spread their definitions of reality in the form of the “culture”. In Sweden both co-workers and managers sometimes talk about indoctrination. The culture project is so strong and omnipresent. In the press, IKEA’s “culture” is often described as a religion or as being like a sect, and various Ikeans say the same thing, but always adding “I’m not like that - I keep my distance”;

Keeping one’s distance, joking about the “culture”, etc., shows how values and norms that are promoted as being the distinguishing feature of the company do not have to be internalized. Organizational members can share the idea that these are a part of the group’s characteristics - still they need not “buy into” these characteristics.

Even though managers at IKEA are highly involved in the fabrication of meanings and the conscious exploitation and dissemination of various symbols, these official myths, stories, etc., are all the time interpreted locally, and sometimes they are questioned or even rejected. “This is not how we are”. In France, for example, “the IKEA Way” and Ingvar Kamprad’s testament were vividly discussed and rejected; “it’s not like that here - that’s a utopia!”.

**Looking in the Mirror**

IKEA is a very public company, constantly exposed to the public through its stores. Here Ikeans have contacts with the outside world. But the outside world is not so much a source of external influence as it is a mirror in which IKEA constantly reflects its ego.

The daily interactions with the customers appear as a part of the process of defining the organization’s “self”. As customers ask questions, comment on the products, make complaints, etc., the Ikeans are given feedback on their view of themselves.

IKEA also reflects its identity in the light of its competitors. At all levels in the company that are regular visits to the competitors to compare the product
range and the price level. The companies that are defined as the competitors become a point a reference for comparing the self to others. When describing what IKEA is like, references are often made to “the other companies”. For example, “We’re not Léons or Brick”, or “If I worked at Eaton’s I would not be like this”, or “That’s what distinguishes us from Åhléns”. Referring to the competitors is a part of drawing borders between “them and us”, and it also a part of reflecting and confirming the own identity. You reflect yourself in others.

The press becomes another such mirror in which IKEA reflects itself. At most IKEA outlets you find books with press clippings and Ikeans at all levels keep track of what has been written about IKEA in the press. At the service offices in the different countries IKEA often subscribes to press cutting services that look for everything that is written about IKEA in the country. And there is a lot written about IKEA in the press. As a highly public company - in Sweden you can probably find something from IKEA in almost every home - IKEA is not only the issue of traditional business articles, but has also been discussed on the cultural pages and been a topic for columnists' chatty articles.

It appears as if the media willingly and with a joyful mystification readily depicts IKEA as a company of myths and “peculiar methods”. Hundreds of column inches have been printed on IKEA’s so called “culture”, and the “success-story” of the small Älmhult company that conquered the world reappears in columns all over the world. IKEA is a company that fascinates and amazes. The press thereby contributes to the myths, stories and jokes that surround IKEA, expressing the same combination of “hate and love” that many customers give evidence of when talking about the company.

A gleaning on the headlines from IKEA press clippings gives you an idea of the “media image” of IKEA; “How can he make 12,000 employees think ‘smålandish’”, “The key for success”, “Success by design”, “Le phénomène IKEA”, “Le roi de meuble en kit...”, “The fantastic saga about IKEA”, “IKEA gets ready for 4 wild days”, “It’s crazy as IKEA opens”, etc.... The articles are filled with anecdotes about Ingvar Kamprad, funny stories about IKEA’s peculiar cost-consciousness, irritated columns on missing screws and articles out of stock, and amazed descriptions
of IKEA's exotic Swedishness that has found its way to distant markets and captured customers.

All these articles and columns form an often referred to image when Ikeans describe themselves. During my stays with IKEA, Ikeans often spontaneously handed me some articles and news-items; “have you read this?” Many press-clippings are included in the internal newsletters, and some of the articles have even become a part of the official self-view. These articles are copied and distributed both to insiders and outsiders, as a sort of accepted definition of what IKEA is all about.

The egocentric organization collects outside impressions of the identity. “This is how others view us”. And this outside image contributes to and confirms Ikeans view of themselves. The media is an mirror in which IKEA struts and reflects its self-image.

**Corporate Image**

Being highly concerned with the impressions they make, IKEA managers and marketers consciously work with creating a positive corporate image. Marketing departments, decorators and advertising agencies in each country actively try to shape the customers' impression of IKEA. Both in the stores and in the catalogues, IKEA marketers try to communicate what IKEA is all about to the customers. “IKEA-mässiga” room-settings, posters on the “IKEA's Soul”, extracts from IKEA's history, signs that explain how the IKEA concept works, etc., are all parts of IKEA's profiling activities for managing impressions. IKEA managers do not only promote the “corporate soul” to the insiders, but it is also something that is sold to outside audiences.

IKEA's ads are often easy to recognize. IKEA's advertising has over the time developed a style of its own which is rather similar throughout the “IKEA-world”, even though advertising and publicity are decentralized to each market. The only fixed central policy lies in the trademark manual, which regulates the use of the IKEA logo;
Traditionally, IKEA’s ads have often had a humorous tone, with a funny and sometimes provoking headline. The ads do not only make fun of trends in the society or the expensive competitors on “High Street”, but often they do also make jokes about IKEA itself. As for example in the big ad of the thumb in bandage with cartoon symbols for expressive oaths - “even if your thumb gets blue, you’ll save money!”.” “IKEA - Not for the rich. But for the wise”... A similar ad has been run in Germany; “Verdammtes IKEA - Geliebtes IKEA”. No wonder that this is a company that we love to hate! The provocative ads have often caused discussions and debates in various contexts. But they have also received a lot of attention and awards in the advertising world.

While the traffic ads display a number of products and offers with the aim of creating traffic to the stores, the image ads seldom expose a specific product but rather sells a message, explaining some of IKEA’s philosophy and “way of being”. Many of the slogans in IKEA’s ads have become expressions of common knowledge and are often quoted and made fun of both by customers and Ikeans. “Swedish for common sense” became “Swedish for out of stock” in Canada, and “Il sind fous ces suedois” is a recurrent expression in France ever since IKEA’s massive campaigns. “The impossible furniture store from Sweden” is not only a slogan for the “crazy” IKEA, but can also be heard from frustated customers on their second lap around the myriad of stands and aisles in the IKEA store.

Even though promotions and ads mainly are directed to outside audiences, as a means for defining what the company is on the market, these external communications also become a part of how Ikeans define themselves. Ads and promotion are often discussed by Ikeans in the lunchroom, on meetings, etc., and when they describe IKEA, they often use the slogans as a part of their own language. In that way, promotion can be understood as a sort of communication to the “self”. Messages to outsiders are also interpreted and made sense of inside the organization, thereby contributing to their self-view.
Just as Ikeans make sense of their company, defining what they are and what they stand for, so do external “audiences”. Shopping at IKEA, meeting the red-shirts, reading the catalogue, looking at the products, following IKEA in the press, being exposed to IKEA ads, etc., are all parts of the communications through which outsiders make sense of the company and come to create the public image of what IKEA is. And through the use of various expressive strategies, IKEA marketers try to influence and manage these impressions.

There is however not a single public image of IKEA. On the contrary, we can see how IKEA comes to stand for different things in different local settings. As was outlined in Chapter 7, even though IKEA is a rather standardized “concept company”, the image of the company varies on different markets. On an overall level, IKEA is often viewed as a “funny, youthful and different” home furnishing company: an image very similar very similar to the “fun and crazy” company promoted in IKEA’s ads and store activities. But while in Sweden IKEA has become a sort of institution, a self-clear and not too exciting part of the Swedish “folkhem”, in France, the company is regarded as something very trendy and modern, while in Canada for many people IKEA is perhaps too modern and exotic for their more traditional tastes.

By carrying out market researches, image surveys, and collecting opinions from the customers in the stores, IKEA managers in the stores and at the Service Offices constantly search for getting to know their public image. It can be understood as a search for feedback. This feedback contributes to and sometimes confirms IKEA’s view of itself. This is a part of the mirroring of the identity in the outside world.

**Differentiation of Meanings**

So far I have talked about IKEA almost as if it was “one organization”, and of a sense of “we-ness” on an overall level. As if there was one self-view, embraced by everyone. And maybe that was my naive view of IKEA as I started my “journey”. Bengt, an IKEA-manager in Canada, abruptly alerted me;
"You talk about IKEA all the time, as if there was somebody somewhere knowing everything and making decisions. As some omnipotent 'IKEA'. But IKEA is us, we who work right here.... for us IKEA is IKEA Canada. I don't know what's going on in Europe or in the rest of the IKEA-world..."

IKEA, as a "concept company", is in many aspects a rather standardized company. There are several central solutions that are sent out from Älmhult/Humlebaek to the periphery. The layout of the stores, the self-service concept, the catalogues, the product range, the "philosophy" (in terms of Ingvar Kamprad's testament and a few central policies on, for example, the human resource idea), are centrally constructed and defined concepts that are transmitted all over the "IKEA-world". Thus, wherever you see IKEA, you are struck by the homogeneity. The stores, the offices, the products, the uniforms, etc., look very much the same whether you are in Älmhult or in Toronto.

Many IKEA symbols thus reappear across the "IKEA-world". Still, the meanings assigned to them vary. For instance, interacting on a first-name in basis and using the familiar form of you is in Sweden considered to reduce hierarchical distances, making people all alike. In France, on the other hand, "le tutoïement" within IKEA is merely a rule. "It does not feel right to say 'tu' to a manager, but I do it since that's the rule. Still, you always keep your distance".

In France "le concept" is a way of presenting and displaying the goods in the stores, and is also refers to a certain furniture style, while in Canada "the concept" means the "IKEA-way of selling" with the self-service areas. "IKEA-massigt" is for many co-workers in Sweden an often used expression that defines what "IKEA is", while among managers at central functions it is an "excommunicated" word that only is a "poor excuse".

At the same time as we can find many symbols that are common in the "IKEA-world", there are also several local symbols. For instance, the "Hall of fame" and customer service awards are symbols that I only found in the Canadian store.

Even though all the entities within the IKEA group go under the same IKEA label, "IKEA" stands for many different things. There is not one single sense of
organization, but rather many various systems of meanings that do not necessarily coincide with the formal organizations or the structure of the companies. We find several self-views, and not one company-wide IKEA identity.

**Geographical Differentiation**

As discussed earlier, the sense of "we-ness" creates certain in- and out-groups (c.f. Bormann, 1983). It constructs a feeling of "we" and "them". However, as in any complex company, borders are not only drawn on an overall level between what is IKEA and the outside world, i.e. what is not IKEA. Within a corporation we can also find borders between different groups. They who share a world of their own, may it be in a certain department, an office, a store, a professional group, etc., create a feeling of a collective "we" which distinguishes them from other groups.

The most obvious example of different groups that express their own self-view are the outlets in different countries. "To us IKEA is IKEA Canada". Separated by space and time, the people at IKEA outlets in different countries come to create and share a world of their own. IKEA Canada is not the same thing as IKEA Sweden. Since meanings are developed in social interactions, where people are close to each other, being able to meet and interact on a daily basis, shared meanings can develop in the everyday sense-making. So it is not strange that Ikeans in Canada construct a view of themselves and their world of their own. Having few face-to-face contacts with the rest of the "IKEA-world", IKEA to many of them is IKEA Canada. And the same goes for France and for Sweden. Since constructing an organizational identity is a process of intersubjective definition of the organization and its world, we could expect meanings and self-views to be different at different spots of the world. It is a geographical differentiation of meanings.

When Ikeans in Canada talk about IKEA and its role in the world, they talk about customer service. In the stores I found several symbols that focus on customer service. The local fabricators of meanings, i.e. the Canadian managers, launch slogans, customer service awards, training programmes, etc.,
that contribute to this self-view of being a company of “customer service”. It is all very different from IKEA in Sweden, where the products and not the customers appear to be focused.

The predilection for order, formal policies, clear responsibilities, are other things that characterize IKEA in Canada. Whereas IKEA stories in Sweden often bear witness of the unique “just do it” approach, Ikeans in Canada more often talk about themselves in terms of “professional”. “That is how it works in retail in North America...”. The Swedish “positive chaos” is labelled “disorganized” and “un-structured” in Canada. When they express how they view themselves they often make references to the business they are in: retail.

When Ikeans in France describe their organization, their descriptions are very much characterized by a questioning of the official culture. To many of them, “going the French way” has led to a “deviation” from what they perceive as the “IKEA-culture”. “IKEA is becoming more like the others” was a common description during my stay in the French IKEA store. IKEA has for the French Ikeans traditionally been a certain furniture style: modern and trendy. With the broadening of the product range this self-view is now being questioned.

IKEA Canada and IKEA France are far away from Älmhult and Humlebaek. It is far away from the centre where most of the corporate fabrication of culture takes place. The culture-makers, at least most of them, are concentrated to Sweden and Denmark. They are the ones who write down policies, produce videotapes, design IKEA Way seminars, etc. No wonder then that the official culture is not so strongly present in Canada or in France, while in the Swedish store, for instance, the view of IKEA and its world is not so different from that in Älmhult. IKEA Sweden is “closer to the heart”; and interactions with the culture-makers and the official self-view are more frequent. Still however, we can find meanings that are locally bounded to the Swedish store.

“Local Worlds”
However, we need not to draw borders between nations to find differences in meanings and different self-views. Each physical local world within the
organization - a store, an office, a department, etc. - are settings where face-to-face contacts are frequent, thus enabling organizational members to meet and interact. To quote Louis (1985, p.79), each such setting “serve as breeding grounds, if you will, for the emergence of local shared meanings”.

In the stores, for instance, we can see how the physical distances between those working upstairs and those working downstairs, create different characterizations of themselves. “They who work upstairs are different - they think they are a little bit finer than us...”. And each store talk about themselves as a unique IKEA store. “We’re not like the Stockholm store - they are not like us. They do not have the same spirit, they’re too big”. All the time within IKEA you find such comparisons between different entities and different groups. There is a constant definition of one’s own group as opposed to other groups. The rich flow of sales statistics that circulate within IKEA, is a source of constant comparison. The stores, the departments, the business areas, etc., compare their sales in an internal competition, thereby constructing a view of themselves as opposed to other groups within IKEA.

Within IKEA, we can also find a vertical differentiation of meanings. Different hierarchical levels might share specific views of themselves, and various positions and categories in an organization are assigned various meanings. Those who I have called the culture-makers, the central corporate managers in Álmhult and Humlebaek, as well as the local managers at each outlet, are those who construct and constantly renegotiate the for-public-consumption definition of IKEA (c.f. Louis, 1985): the official identity that is presented to outsiders and to the co-workers. They share a set of meanings which become constructed on management meetings, in writing down policies and guidelines, and interpreting the past. They come to share the official definition of the self, that is promoted to insiders and outsiders.

**Cross-Border Meanings**

IKEA’s fast international expansion has contributed to a differentiation of meanings. New hierarchical and geographical distances have led to the development of different local worlds with varying identities. For many Ikeans,
their local IKEA world has become their “IKEA-world”. They know their little corner in the complex company but have very little sense of the “whole”.

Nonetheless, at the same time as Ikeans express several different systems of meanings and varying identities across borders, within IKEA we can also find systems of meanings and a sense of sharing that transcends geographical borders. For instance, the descriptions of IKEA as an unconventional, informal, more casual company, a company that is different from other companies, reappear at many different sites. And the family metaphor and the “special Swedish style”, are recurrent traits in Ikeans collective self-view. But that this mean that Ikeans share a global identity? That is, can we say that there is a common definition of the “self” and its role in the world which is embraced by the “whole IKEA”?

As the differentiation of meaning reveals, there are several local identities, each formed in a local setting as a locally set of shared meanings on what “their IKEA” is all about. But these identities also include definitions of IKEA that are global, i.e. meanings that seem to be shared across borders.

Just as it is interesting to understand how meanings are differentiated in complex organizations, one might ask oneself how meanings come to be homogenized in organizations where face-to-face contacts are rendered more difficult by distances.

How do meanings come to transcend national and cultural borders? Within IKEA, I think we can find one clue in the “managerial elite” that can be said to form the “core” of IKEA. Many of them call themselves the “bombers’ crew”. This is a group of some hundred Swedish managers who work all over the “IKEA-world”. It is an informal group of men who all know each other, who have worked together and who have strong connections to Älmhult and Humlebaek. The same names reappear everywhere in the company. Many of them were the young Swedish managers who in the 70’s and the 80’s established IKEA in Europe, working closely with Ingvar Kamprad and the top management. Today they form a rather homogeneous “elite”, working at the
Service Offices in different countries or in high positions at Humlebaek or Älmhult.

This group shares many experiences and the dominant set of meanings. They are important actors in the meaning fabrication, spreading their common stories, myths and rituals from IKEA's earlier years. Through the memo system, meetings in Älmhult, and an extensive travel and transfer of management positions around the IKEA world, they create and sustain a transnational informal network of personal relations.

And this network becomes an important group for transmitting meanings across borders. They stand for the global flows of meaning as they move across the “IKEA-world”, sharing and spreading a common definition of IKEA, very much in line with the for-public-consumption view. They bring their global identity to their local settings.

Ingvar Kamprad is another such link that brings the “IKEA-world” together. He has become a central symbol for many Ikeans all over the world. Since he dedicates much of his time to travel around the “IKEA-world”, he is a “living example” that disseminates meanings on what IKEA is all about. His very central role is often discussed; “what will happen when the old man is gone?”. Still, his presence appears to be more strongly felt in Europe than in North America, where he more seldom is mentioned.

The decorators can also be understood as a group that is a transmitter of meanings. As a professional group they share a collective view of themselves across borders. All over the “IKEA-world”, they share more or less the same view on how to create “IKEA-måssiga” room-settings and how to present the product range to the customers. Just like the “ bombers' crew” they travel a lot, often participating in the build-up and opening of new stores, thereby coming to spread the “concept” and the “IKEA-style” of the stores.
A Change Self-view

In exploring IKEA it becomes evident that an organization's self-view, its identity, is not something given for once and for all. On the contrary, the definition of the self and its role of the world is rather something that is constantly constructed and reconstructed in the interaction of organizational members. Nonetheless, a collective self-view often involves, as we have seen, the drawing of close borders around the definition of the self. It is a kind of closure towards the outside world. However, over time this close definition might become questioned and even challenged.

In Chapter 9, I talked about IKEA as undergoing a metamorphosis. There is an on-going redefinition of the self. "From doers to thinkers", "from funny to serious", from "Swedish to international". Recently I ran into an Ikean at a local IKEA store who with a look of frustration told me; "now we’re in a period of questioning all that we’ve held sacred...". IKEA’s closed definition of the self is opened up, the company is becoming somewhat less egocentric. The widened product range, closer co-operations with the suppliers, external recruitment, etc., can be seen as reflections of this change.

Maybe we can trace this change to the mirroring of the identity in the outside world. IKEA managers did not like what they saw in the mirror. The image of IKEA as a “fun” company but with cheap and youthful products, and “North America as the big awakening”, have contributed to the redefinition of the organizational identity on a corporate level.

Since a couple of years, IKEA of Sweden in Älmhult, has initiated an extensive broadening of the product range. By including traditional, international as well as more IKEA-typical styles in the product range, IKEA now aims at capturing broader segments at the market. There is an ambition to become a “serious furniture dealer” with products for all tastes and styles.

The new product range appears as a big revolution within IKEA. It involves reinterpreting the “testament”, a document that for long was considered to be cast in concrete. It involves redefining what we mean by being for “the many”. Does it mean that IKEA should have inexpensive furniture so that the majority
can afford them, or is it intended to attract "the many" with various styles? The "top identity", as the for-public-consumption meanings are being reinterpreted and redefined. Even though Ingvar Kamprad still plays a central role in the company, the new generation of managers in Älmhult and Humlebaek, have started to open up IKEA's narrow definition of itself.

Even though the new product range is well anchored among the "top layers" of IKEA, many Ikeans meet the new products with scepticism. "What has happened to IKEA's unique style?". "We're losing our uniqueness...". Changing the product range is something that many co-workers I met feel threatens the identity.

The widened product range has also been accompanied by a redefinition of IKEA's promotion activities. Slogans of being "crazy", "impossible" and "fun" are being replaced by a softer and more sophisticated approach. "A Richer Life" promotes IKEA as a "serious furniture dealer". And as a sort of auto-communication, this promotion also influence how Ikeans internally define the "self". They struggle with conflicting images...

Becoming a "serious furniture dealer", as the expression goes among IKEA managers, also involves being "professional". Gradually, IKEA's image of itself as a fun, crazy and "common sense" company, is being replaced by a self-view of being a highly professional furniture dealer.

Since the beginning of the 80's, personal development, training programmes, external recruitment, the hiring of consultants, etc., have marked a step towards an increasing openness of IKEA. Self-reliance, "just do it", "we're sufficient into ourselves", in fact the whole of IKEA's glorious history, is now being questioned. IKEA's past, which has played a central role in forming the "official identity", is now reinterpreted. Old symbols are given new meanings. It even involves questioning the idea of "IKEA-mässigt". It is considered to denote too a rigid definition of the organizational self (see Chapter 12).

The tough North American market opened the eyes on IKEA's management. Common sense had to be complemented with professionalism, "because this is how it works in retail in North America".
North America has also come to change IKEA’s somewhat rigid approach to work on foreign markets. For the first time, in North America IKEA was not the immediate success they have been so used to. The non-adapted extension of the concept to new markets is thus being questioned. As a consequence, IKEA managers developing and selecting the product range have started more and more to lean towards local adaptation. Customer service à la North America, which in some aspects is a deviation from the original “concept”, is a redefinition of the self. The widening of the product range is also a move towards being more locally adapted.

As IKEA has “matured” on the international markets, the strong focus on Sweden and “Swedishness” can be seen as to be diminishing little by little. On entering new markets, the Swedish launching teams after a while hand over the management to local managers. In France this is expressed as “we’re going the French way”. This is a threat to the identity, of what the French Ikeans hold to be the “true IKEA”.

The identity of being “Swedish” changes. Even though IKEA still has a very “Swedish style”, the other countries within the IKEA Group are now beginning to get their voices heard. IKEA is becoming more international. The Swedish dominance over the definition of IKEA is diminishing. The direction of the flows of meaning within the Group changes. A new IKEA is constructed. New identities evolve. I attended in an IKEA Way seminar, and after a week of total immersion into “Swedish culture” in the Mecca of Älmhult an American IKEA manager pointed out:

“We talk a lot about IKEA’s culture as being Sweden, Småland... But another part of the IKEA culture is the international part... that we, people from all over the world meet and interact... we mix together and create something.”
Chapter 15
Organizational Identity
Across Borders

As was outlined in Chapter 2, organizations can be understood as on-going processes of sense-making and systems of shared meanings (see e.g. Smircich, 1983a). Organizational identity as a "self-concept" can then be defined as a collective self-view of the organization. Through social interactions, individuals interpret, negotiate and arrive at mutually accepted definitions of what the organization "is all about". In the process of sense-making, shared meanings are constructed that make up the organizational identity.

The process of sense-making is a process of using symbols to convey meanings and understandings in making the world meaningful (Gioia, 1986). Identity can thus be understood as a symbolic construction. Through the use of symbols, organizational members express and define how they view their organization. In fact, as Morgan (1986, p.245) writes; "the whole process of organizing is the realization of an identity". But how is an identity realized? Even though several writings have focused on the processes of sense-making in making the organizational reality, few (if any) have further developed how these processes are realized.

In the foregoing chapters I have discussed how Ikeans in different settings through various symbolic modes construct a view of their organization. Even though the content (or the meanings) of these self-views varies, there seem to
be some recurrent processes through which definitions of the organizational self become constructed. The processes that were identified on the basis of the sense-making processes within IKEA in Chapter 14 will, in this chapter, be further developed theoretically. In this chapter, I will thus try to create an understanding of how organizational identity is constructed by identifying the processes through which organizational members create a collective view of the self across borders.

**Drawing Borders**

A personal identity as a self-concept involves defining the self: who am I? Defining oneself implies distinguishing oneself from others. To find out who one is as opposed to others. To draw borders between the self and the "non-self". Where do I end and the others start?

In the corporate setting of IKEA, we could see how various groups defined themselves by staging borders between the own group and other groups. The own store, the department, the country, IKEA as a company, are used as such categories in distinguishing the "organizational self", from the "non-self". In the organization, making sense lies to a great extent in drawing boundaries between the organization and "the others", between "order and chaos", between "us" and "them". There is the "organizational self", and the rest of the world that is defined as the "non-self". Thus, creating a sense of organization appears to be very much a process of drawing borders. Organizational identity is in this sense an issue of group integrity in that it distinguishes the organization from the outside world (c.f. Selznick, 1957; Pfeffer, 1981; Alvesson, 1989).

However, there are no clear and unambiguous boundaries between an organization and its outside world. In Kunda’s description of the “Tech Company” (1992), there is, for example, a sharp border drawn between the full-time engineers and the temporary workers, as a distinction between us and them; while in the IKEA store in Sweden even the sub-contracted cleaners are included in the “family”. Instead Ikeans often categorize the customers as a distinct out-group. Boundaries are continually staged and imposed between the
organization and the world (see Garsten, 1991). Where a wall might be seen as a material barrier between the organization and its environment, organizations can indeed in many cases transcend physical as well as social boundaries.

"Just as the skin is a misleading boundary for marking off where a person ends and the environment starts, so are the walls of an organization". Weick, 1979 (p.91).

Boundaries are thus not anything objective that can be taken as given (Schneider, 1991). Rather these boundaries are constructed as differences in the perception of the self and the others are staged. The boundaries are the result of the symbolic process of staging a difference. As organizational members make sense of themselves, their activities, their world, etc., boundaries are constructed between the organization and the others; between the self and "non-self".

**Inclusion and Exclusion**
Drawing borders is a constant distinction between what is inside and what is outside; a process of inclusion and exclusion (c.f. Christensen, 1991; 1994). By sharing a notion of who "we" are, organizational members come to define at the same time who "they" are; i.e. they who are not insiders. As organizational members talk about certain actors as "us", other actors are excluded from that definition of the collective "self". A sense of "we-ness" creates a collective self-view, an identity that distinguishes the own organization from others.

At IKEA, such a sense of we-ness is often expressed in various groups as a sort of "family-feeling". There is however not a company-wide family-feeling. In the French IKEA-store, for instance, many Ikeans questioned the family metaphor. Other empirical studies reveal that this family metaphor is a recurrent symbol in constructing a sense of we-ness within the own group (see e.g. Martin's description of the "OZCO-company" in Martin, 1992; and the "Tech-company" in Kunda, 1992). Often this metaphor is launched and promoted by the fabricators of meanings, as an official definition of the self that emphasizes unity and community.
By using the pronoun "we", people construct a feeling that there is a common view. The one who says "we" tends to assume that his or her own definition of reality coincides with the group's (see Kleppestdö, 1993). At the same time as the use of "we" creates a "we-group", it also excludes those who are not a part of the we, i.e. the "others". Such categorizations make distinctions between insiders and outsiders, between us and them. The use of the collective "we" also subordinates the individual to a part of the collective.

The distinction between insiders and outsiders is partly constructed through physical borders. By restricting certain areas in offices, stores and other buildings, to insiders only, outsiders are kept at a distance. Their access to the clandestine backstage areas are cut off by walls, guards, special entrance cards, etc. In most organizations we find such physical borders through which the outside world is kept out (see e.g. Alvesson & Björkman, 1992). An enclosure is formed around the inside world.

The inclusion and exclusion process is also realized by staging a difference between insiders and outsiders. The way of dressing is one mode of expressing an identity and a closure around the group, which makes anyone not belonging to the group a visible outsider. The red-shirts at IKEA distinguishes the co-workers from the customers, but also the co-workers from managers in the stores.

Staging a difference involves sharing a view of the collective self as being different. "This is how we do things around here". "We don't do like the others". As organizational members make sense of their organization and their world, certain meanings are assigned to the organizational world, giving the organization features of being unique and different. Corporate sagas, myths and stories, making sense of the organization's activities and decisions, often depict the company as a unique and different entity. Hence, we can understand organizational symbols such as sagas, myths, stories, language, etc., not as mere "folk-loric cultural expressions", but as symbols that both construct and reflect organizational identity.
The stories shape and construct how organizational members view the organizational self and create borders against the outside world. IKEA's saga about a company that has challenged the conventional and been an outsider, creates a view of a company that is different from the "others". Suppliers, competitors, and the whole "establishment" become a hostile outside world that IKEA had to fight against. Depicting the organization as different, sagas and stories often create a view of the organization as a distinctive entity that is clearly defined against the outside world (c.f. Martin et al, 1983).

One characteristic of such verbal symbols is that they often contain several self-enhancing elements. As organizational members construct a corporate saga, and sometimes even write it down in the form of an autobiography, organizational members make sense of their past and produce the myth of the self (see Ramanantsoa & Battaglia, 1991). It is a form of staging the "self" as a distinctive and original character; the organization as something that has developed and been given a "soul" by being different from the "others".

Stories and myths in organizations promote images of the "self" as being distinct and different. They make sense out of the past and become a guidance for future sense-making. They provide the organization with some sacred qualities that construct views of the self as an ordered reality as opposed to the chaotic outside world. "We're Swedish", "we're an unconventional company", "we're like a big family - we care for each other", can be viewed as different expressions of such a self-view of a distinctive collective self that embraces a group and distinguishes it from other groups.

**Making the Outside World**

By defining the self, organizational members at the same time define who "the others" are. Exploring organizational identity thus enables us to understand organizational "environments" as in fact being extensions of the organization itself. The environment is enacted (see Weick, 1979). Organizations enact their environments as projections of their own view of themselves. Thus, there are no separate objective environments. Rather, environments are put there by the process of making the environment (Smircich & Stubbart, 1985). Organizational
members make the world they impose meaningful by assigning meanings and definitions to events and actions, or as Smircich & Stubbart (1985) say:

"Strategists create imaginary lines between events, objects, and situations so that events, objects, and situations become meaningful for the members of an organizational world."

Smircich & Stubbart, 1985 (p.726).

As Weick (1979) states, environments are in this sense rather outputs than inputs in the process of organizing. It is through the process of making sense and defining the organizational self that the organization's environment comes into being. Through staging a difference between "us" and "them", the organizational members construct a definition of the organization's domain (see Morgan, 1986).

By saying that "we're a home-furnishing company", "we're in retailing", "we exist for the many people", etc., organizational members define the environment in which it chooses to exist (c.f. Berg, 1985). A specific position is enacted which implies a definition of who the competitors and the customers are.

In redefining the self, e.g. in going from a "fun" to a "serious" furniture dealer, IKEA managers reconstruct the company's domain. It involves meeting new customers and facing new competitors. Hence, any business idea, strategic plan, corporate mission, etc., is a means for organizational members to define themselves, and at the same time define the environment:

"We choose and operate in environmental domains according to how we construct conceptions of what we are and what we are trying to do, e.g. 'be an organization in the computer industry', 'produce and sell automobiles', 'be a leader in our field', 'whip the competition'. And we act in relation to these domains through the definitions we impose on them."

Morgan, 1986 (p.137).

Maturana & Varela (in Morgan, 1986), emphasize that the environment is a reflection of any living system's own organization and cannot be regarded as
something external. The enactment is a part of the self-referential process ("autopoiesis") through which an organization produces and reproduces its own image of itself. In a self-referential process, the environment is not external, but rather a reflection of the organization itself. It is a created distinction between the self and non-self. Thus enacting an environment is a projection of the own identity. By defining who one is, one is at the same time defining who the "others", the environment, are.

**Egocentrism**
Earlier I talked about IKEA as an "egocentric organization" (see Chapter 14). IKEA is not unique in that aspect. Organizations can be characterized as being inherently somewhat egocentric (see Morgan, 1986). Drawing close boundaries around a narrow definition of themselves, distinguishing the self from the non-self, organizational members construct closed identities, being centred around the "ego"

"No man is an island"... - still we can find many organizations looking at themselves as discrete entities "that are faced with the problem of surviving against the vagaries of the outside world..." (Morgan, 1986, p. 243). The egocentric organization draws close boundaries around itself, imposing and guarding its identity at all costs.

"This kind of egocentrism leads organizations to become preoccupied with and to overemphasize the importance of themselves, while underplaying the significance of the wider system of relations in which they exist... When we look at ourselves in an mirror we create a relation between 'figure', the face that we see, and 'ground', the context in which our face is located. When we focus on our face, our context is pretty well eliminated from view."


The self-referential process of constructing and sustaining an identity can thus be regarded as a kind of closure, delimiting the organization from the "outside world" (c.f. Christensen, 1991). Even though the staging of boundaries is necessary for the realization of an identity, it also makes us see the risks with
egocentric organizations. A narrow definition of the self might be an impediment to change.

To maintain one's identity means to resist transformations, to protect the ego from new definitions that might threaten the self-view. Too egocentric organizations can become blind, unable to understand how they are a part of the world they are enacting. They think of themselves as an "isolated island" that fights against the world, as in IKEA's description of the company's history in the corporate saga.

A reliance on self-dependence with a closure towards the outside world creates a closed identity which resists change. "We cannot do that, it's not in line with our identity". Changes become a threat to the self-image. "We cannot sell rococo chairs - it's not what you expect from IKEA". The broadening of the product range at IKEA involves a new definition of the self. For change to take place then involves a reinterpretation of the self, of what the organization is all about. As IKEA is opening up its narrow definition of the self, becoming perhaps less egocentric, the history in the saga, the myths, the business idea, Kamprad's testament, policies, etc., are reinterpreted. New actions lead to reinterpretations of earlier sense-making, and new meanings change the future actions.

In this way, understanding how organizational identity becomes constructed helps us understanding how organizations evolve and change, and how the self-image is a significant shaper of any organization's actions and relations to the outside world. And even though a closed, egocentric identity can be a hindrance to change, the construction of identity can also contribute to our understanding how change is triggered. As organizational members reflect themselves in the outside world, the self-view is confirmed or sometimes challenged. In the following I will discuss the relation between an organization's identities and its outside images and how they interplay in the construction of the organizational "self".
Mirroring the Identity

Any identity needs to be reflected outside itself in order to be confirmed. One's view of oneself is largely shaped in one's interactions with others. The organizational identity is also defined in relations with the environment through external interactions (see e.g. Albert & Whetten, 1985). As organizational members meet and interact with external groups, such as customers, suppliers, authorities, or other groups outside the own organization, the view of the "self" is confirmed and contributed to.

In the case of IKEA, we could see how the customers, the competitors and the press constitute a mirror for self-reflection (see Chapter, 14). The competitors become a point of reference for comparing the self to others. They constitute the point of comparison for defining the self and staging a difference. "We're not Léons or Brick..." By constantly comparing themselves to each other, organizational members make sense of the organizational self and enhance the unique features of one's own self. A similar mirroring can be found in Kleppestø's (1993) description of two organizations in a merger, where the two companies constantly were defined as opposed to each other. By mirroring the self in other organizations, the organization has a point of reference for constructing the self.

Others' images of the organization as it is expressed in, for example, the press, image surveys and customers' opinions, become another such mirror in which organizational members constantly reflect their view of the organization. At IKEA we could see how there was a systematic collection of outside impression, and Kunda's description of the Tech Company reveals a similar process for bringing outside views into the company (c.f. Kunda, 1992). Just as organizational members make sense of the organization, outsiders also try to make sense of the organization. Through direct contacts with the company, various communications from the company, and communications from outside sources such as the press, the outside world comes to construct an image of what the organization is all about.

Through interactions with the outside world, organizational members constantly reflect their view of themselves in others' image of the self. Such
reflections give organizational members an idea of how others view and define the organization. And these outside images contribute to and confirm the organizational identity. The impressions of outsiders are a part of the process in which organizational members make sense of the "self".

Managing Impressions

The outside mirror is not something that is left untouched by the organization. Rather, many organizations actively try to shape outsiders' view of the company. Through various expressive strategies or profile communications, some people in the organization try to control and manage the meaning of the company seen from the outside world.

Profile communications are the conscious efforts marketers and others undertake to manage impressions. Often, the more public an organization is, the more concerned it will be with how it appears to others (see e.g. Goffman, 1959; Morrison & Bies, 1991; Schlenker, 1980). IKEA, as a very public and image-conscious company, is inhabited by a number of persons whose purpose is to manage the outside impressions of the company, and advertising agencies in various countries become the spokesmen for selling IKEA to outside audiences. There are different acts of communications through which the organization presents its self-definition to various publics. Through ads, slogans, commercials, design, sponsoring, official statements of mission, purpose and values, etc., the organization seeks to "ensure the 'external' recognition of its self-image" (Christensen, 1991).

Business organizations are in this way highly involved in the promotion of meanings in society (c.f. Berg, 1989). Not only are managers engaged in the fabrication of meanings to organizational members, but great efforts are also put into the fabrication of images to the external world. Organizations strive to legitimize themselves and their activities in the wider society. Through expressive strategies, managers in organizations thus try to shape the impressions of what the organization stands for and its role in the society.
The Search for Feed-Back
Promoting an image is not only an effort for managing impressions, it can also be understood as a feed-back seeking process (see Morrison & Bies, 1991). By reflecting the self in outside images, the organization searches for feed-back on its own self-view. As was stated above, the image both confirms and contributes to organizational members' own perception of the ego. The outside world is here a "mirror"; a mirror through which organizational members can evaluate and confirm their collective self-view.

Market communications followed by market research, for instance, become a feed-back seeking process, as the communication of the ego is reflected back to the self. The external image of the organization provides the organization with feedback, which confirms and contributes to the self in a self-referential process (c.f. Broms & Gahmberg, 1983; Christensen, 1994). When organizational members meet their customers, visit competitors and read about their company in media, they get feed-back on their view of themselves.

Thus, any organization's interactions with external audiences, image surveys, market researches, etc., can be understood as a search for feed-back. It is a means for creating and enhancing the organizational identity. At IKEA, as in other companies (see e.g. Kunda, 1992), you will find books with press clippings, results from image surveys, etc., through which outside perspectives on the company are imported.

At the same time, the feed-back to be found in external images also constitute a trigger for change. Inconsistent inner and outer pictures can lead to a redefinition of the organizational self. As Dutton & Dukerich (1991) point out, the outer image of the organization influences the identity and directs action to change the identity:

"In this way, organizational image and identity and their consistency and inconsistency help to explain when, where, and how individuals become motivated to push for or against organizational activities."

IKEA's metamorphosis from "funny to serious", from "doers to thinkers", and from "Swedish to international", can be seen as a redefinition of the self that was partly triggered off by the mirroring of the identity in the outside world. The organization's identity is sometimes questioned and challenged in the outside world and the external image becomes an input for change. This change means redefining the self and what the organization is all about. It involves reinterpreting the dominant systems of meanings as expressed in the business idea, policy statements, the corporate saga, and several of the myths and stories that circulate in the organization.

The images held by different external groups with respect to a publicly exposed organization can thus be conceptualized as a mirror in which the organizational identity is reflected, confirmed and contributed to.

The relation between an organization's image and identity in the self-referential process can be visualized as above. The organizations' self-view (identity) is constantly communicated to outside audiences (image). Conscious as well as unconscious communications reflect to outside publics the organization's view of itself. At the same time, the feedback seeking process implies that the outside images contribute and confirm to the organization's identity.

There are thus ongoing flows of communications with the exchange of meanings between the inner and outer pictures of the organization, both influencing each other all the time. The construction of organizational identity
can then be understood as a process of mirroring the self in the outside world. It is a process of reflecting and seeking feedback on the self in the outside world.

Communications is to be understood here as the interactive process of constructing meanings. As insiders interact with outsiders, there is a mutual process of making sense of what the "organization is all about". And outsiders' sense-making of the company becomes a mirror in which the organization reflects itself and at the same time the mirror becomes a part of how insiders make sense of themselves as a group.

As you may have noticed, there is also an externally directed arrow in the picture that is bent back to the identity. This is thought to symbolize how external communications sometimes are directed to the "self". In the next chapter, I will go further into the different types of "communications to the self" that appear to be a part of the process of making sense of the organization and constructing an identity.

"Talking to the Self"

Hitherto we have seen how organizational members make sense of the self by drawing borders between the organization and its "outside world". And how the "outside world" is used as a point of reference and a mirror in making sense of what the organization stands for and its role in the world.

Sense-making in organizations is often described as being both prospective and retrospective. Retrospective sense-making enables the organization to frame new experiences and to form systems of meaning which then are the basis for prospective sense-making (c.f. Gioia, 1986). A corporate saga, for example, makes sense of past actions, explaining what the company is and why it came into being. As it is spread, quoted, and discussed, this saga becomes a point of departure for future actions. It gives a sense of how "things are done around here", and can thus be a guide for future sense-making. Such stories, sagas, myths, etc., do not only retrospectively make sense of what the organization is
all about, but become a form of norm for guiding new actions and a framework in which actions are interpreted.

**Introspective Sense-Making**

Sense-making activities concerned with the organizational identity are often introspective; i.e. making sense by reflecting upon oneself. Intuition, imagination, visions, insights, etc., can be examples of introspective sense-making (Gioia, 1986). Communications to the self, or what Broms & Gahmberg (1983) refer to as auto-communication, can be seen as a part of the process of introspective sense-making. Auto-communication is different from “traditional” communication in that sender and receiver are the same person or group. It is a form of communication from I to I (see Broms & Gahmberg, 1983; Christensen, 1991). By sending messages to oneself, the ego is enhanced and the myths of the self of the organization is produced (c.f. Ramanantsoa & Battaglia, 1991).

Writing down the organization's history can be understood as a common form of retrospective sense-making, through which events in the past become explained and justified and future actions get their meanings (c.f. Weick, 1979; Ramanantsoa & Battaglia, 1991). The narrative about IKEA illustrated how writing the autobiography, the production of myths and stories, retelling the corporate saga, the “making of events”, such as celebrations, etc., can be seen as different forms of self-enhancing symbolic activities that make sense of previous experiences and guide future sense-making. In that way it is also a form of communication to the self; a type of introspective sense-making that enhances the self and construct the identity.

As was indicated before, I think that external image communications can also be understood as a sort of auto-communication. Not only does the image provide the organization with feedback, which confirms and contributes to the “self” in a self-referential process, but the communication in itself becomes a part of the sense-making efforts of organizational members.
An ad presenting the unique features of an organization communicates as much to organizational members as it does to external audiences. Ikeans often discuss the company's ads and use the slogans as a part of their vocabulary in describing their company. Seeing one's company presented with resplendence in a magazine contributes to the organization's self-view. The ad, the slogan, or the president's speech, is interpreted, perhaps rejected as a "false" image, negotiated, adapted, and sometimes accepted in the sense-making processes of organizational members.

The issue of internal marketing, found as an important concept in e.g. service management (Arndt & Friman, 1983; Grönroos, 1983), can then be understood as form of "talking to the self". The communication of the desired corporate image internally is considered to enhance the company's external image communications, ("Take care of the inside and the inside will take care of the outside"), and to influence the attitudes and behaviour of the employees. Such communications can be characterized as parts of the fabrication of the self. By communicating to the self, the ego is enhanced.

Much of the fabrication of meanings that we can find in organizations, where general managers, marketers, human resource managers, etc., consciously try to promote meanings, can then be characterized as a form of introspective, self-reflective sense-making. These fabricators construct and spread the myths about the "self", in the forms of sagas, celebrations, rites, stories, slogans, etc., in an effort to guide organizational members' sense-making in constructing the organizational self.

Many of an organization's activities are in fact self-reflective. Messages are created and performed in various ways with the primary concern of producing and enhancing the ego.

**Drawing Borders, Mirroring and Talking to the Self**

To sum up, I find three distinctive sense-making processes that can be understood as constructing the "organizational self". First of all, constructing an organizational identity is very much a process of drawing borders.
Organizational members create a collective “we” as they construct borders between “us” and “them”, between “insiders” and “outsiders”. Drawing borders is realized through the inclusion and exclusion of various actors. Symbols, such as artefacts, stories, myths and sagas, both create and reflect how organizational members view themselves, and what is defined as the outside and inside world. A difference is staged between the self and “non-self”, and thereby the outside world is created as an enactment from the organization’s definition of the self.

The second process involves mirroring the identity in the created outside world. The images of the organization held by external audiences become a mirror in which the organizational identity is confirmed and contributed to. Managing impressions and interacting with the external world, can here be understood as a feedback seeking process through which organizational members make sense of themselves. There are thus constant flows of communications with the exchange of meanings between the inner and outer pictures of the organization, both influencing each other all the time.

Third, the construction of organizational identity is to a large extent an act of introspective sense-making. It involves reflecting on and defining the “self”. Many symbols are in fact self-enhancing, producing the myth of the self. Organizational communications, both internal and external, are often a form of talking to the self. It is a form of communication from “I” to “I”, where organizational members introspectively make sense of the self and construct a collective identity. Management’s efforts in fabricating meanings can in this sense be understood as a self-enhancing communication to the self in producing a view of the collective “ego”.

The idea of identity makes us see that organizational members in the very process of organizing, constantly make sense of themselves and their world, thereby coming to construct a shared view of the collective self. This collective self-view then becomes a significant shaper of any organization’s actions and relations to the outside world.
Heterogenization of Meanings

In the international organization, activities and individuals are spread over vast geographical areas. Here, sense-making through direct social interaction can be rendered more difficult by distances. Can then a sense of organization be created and sustained across cultural and geographical borders? How is organizational identity constructed in international, complex organizations?

In any organization we can find various differentiating forces. The social structures make different groups' experiences different (see Hannerz, 1982), leading to a heterogenization of meanings. The division of labour, hierarchical structures, organizing around different tasks and functions, geographical location, etc., all contribute to a heterogenization. In complex organizations it is hardly the rule that "all members face the same problem, everyone communicates and all share a common set of understandings" (Van Maanen & Barley, 1985). Thus locally shared meanings might create local identities. While in the literature on international business most studies have focused on how to integrate the international company, little attention has been paid to the differentiation of organizations (see Melin, 1992).

The process of drawing borders means that we can find borders between different groups or organizations. Ikeans working at IKEA Canada look at themselves as a discrete entity in the IKEA Group. We have also seen how the different stores share a view of themselves as opposed to other stores, and even how different departments might share a sense of identity. Furthermore, the decorators at IKEA, appeared as a group with a specific sense of sharing; a professional identity that transcends geographical borders. In each setting or sphere where people have interactions with each others, there is thus a possibility for shared meanings to develop. A department, an office, a professional group, a hierarchical layer, etc., might form a group that shares a world of its own. In doing so, borders are often set up against other groups.

For instance, the formal structures divide, delimit and demarcate different groups from each other. Each department might then develop a feeling of we-ness, of being different from other groups within the organization. Borders are
staged between "us and them" internally, just as they are staged between the company and its outside world (c.f. Bormann, 1983).

Through such divisions and borders, sense-making in complex organizations must be understood as taking place in different local spheres. Hence, we could expect the organization to develop locally shared meanings and several local identities which involve a heterogenization of meanings.

**Local Spheres**

Creating and maintaining a sense of organization in the international company involves moving between different contexts. The international organization faces different national contexts, which in the area of cross-cultural management are assumed to present different national cultures. Differentiation of meanings in international, complex organizations are here explained by the existence of national cultures (see e.g. Hofstede, 1985; 1991; Laurent, 1986; Hampden-Turner & Trompenaars, 1993).

However, I think that the concept of national culture as a given background could be questioned. Even though we can see a geographical heterogenization of meanings in the IKEA company and in many other companies (see e.g. Hofstede, 1991), I would like to replace the idea of national cultures as an explanatory variable with the idea of different local spheres of meaning.

The concept of nations and states is just one level of abstraction. Setting the cultural borders at the national borders leads us to see differences, rather than similarities between different countries. If, however, we choose to draw the cultural border between for example the Western industrial world and Asia, we will rather see the greater similarities in the Western countries as contrasted to the overall differences in comparison with Asia. The assumption that each state is a culture tends to view the fictional territorial borders in the world as cultural borders. However, in today's global world we're seeing an increasing flow of meanings across borders. Flows of meaning are no longer restricted to a state or a geographical area. As Hannerz (1989a) points out; "only if interactions are tied to particular spaces, is culture likewise so".
"Much of the traffic in culture in the world, however, is transnational rather than international. It ignores, subverts and devalues rather than celebrates national boundaries."

Hannerz, 1989b (p. 70).

Thus, local spheres need not be geographical. We can find various spheres in which people interact and create locally shared meanings. Louis (1985) refers to this as different loci of culture; different settings that can be breeding grounds for locally shared meanings. Thus, "local" needs not to denote "belonging to a certain geographical place", but rather a certain sphere. The nation, the industry, the profession, etc., can be different spheres in which organizational meanings are created and reproduced.

These spheres are a part of organizational members self-view, of how they define themselves as a group. "We're a retail company", "We're Swedish", "We're decorators", etc., are examples of how the local spheres are used as definitions of the "self". Ikeans in Canada, for instance, often define themselves in terms of being "North American", or in terms of the business they are operating in, i.e. retail. "Retail-meanings" are used to define and explain what IKEA is.

Thus, the local spheres are not so much what they "are" as what they "are believed to be" (c.f. Czarniawska-Joerges, 1992). The spheres are not given "backgrounds" against which the organization can be understood and explained, but rather a part of organizational members' social construction of themselves and their perception of this self. The definition of these contexts reflect how groups define themselves.

Groups in organizations might have a collective view of themselves as an organization, e.g. "we're company X - we're different from other companies". At the same time, however, they might share a collective view of themselves as being for example "French". Or it may be a collective view of the group as being a part of a certain business or professional category; e.g. "we're a retail company", or "we're decorators". Within any complex organization there are
likely to be many such different collective identities, where organizational members are related to several spheres at the same time.

In an international, complex organization, organizational meanings vary across spheres. The creation, negotiation and interpretation of the organization's symbols take place within different spheres.

**Homogenization of Meanings**

At the same time as meanings in organizations are heterogenized due to the differentiation of various local spheres, many international, geographically dispersed organizations in fact transcend various borders and are kept together. Even though we have seen that in complex organizations, meanings are heterogenized, there is also a process of homogenization. How can we understand how meanings become essentially the same and a sense of sharing develops across borders?

Above I have tried to describe how meanings within IKEA are heterogenized and pointed out that there are several local identities. Still, organizational members within IKEA appear to share a sense of belonging to the same company. They are not only legally kept together in a complex corporate structure, but do also refer to themselves as being “Ikeans”. They talk about themselves as being a part of “IKEA”. But the “IKEA” stands for many different things in the different local spheres. It is a label, a name, under which we find several meanings.

However, at a corporate level within IKEA there are various efforts for homogenizing meanings and filling the label with a common content. In organizations we often find a search for grasping the whole, for understanding how it all hangs together. Setting overall common goals, creating a sense of “we-ness” across borders, sharing a history, etc., are different ways organizational members, often at the top, strive to integrate differentiated meanings. Those who represent the dominant set of meanings, the cultural hegemony, often consciously try to homogenize and incorporate the different systems of meanings that exist in an organization in the construction of an all-
embracing identity (c.f. Ehn & Löfgren, 1982). Those who I have referred to as fabricators of meaning, often strive to replace heterogenization with homogenization. Managers in the international company might strive to create an integrating global identity as a means for holding the diverse organization together (see e.g. Garbett, 1988).

Garsten (1991) argues that as long as effective communication can be sustained, a sense of sharing can be upheld. The limits for a sense of organization are thus neither geographical nor cultural. As long as social interaction can take place, meanings can be communicated and shared. As Hannerz states:

"The connection between cultural patterns and territory, we should remind ourselves here, is only contingent. As socially organized meaning, culture is primarily a phenomenon of interaction, and only if interactions are tied to particular spaces, is culture likewise so. When cultural technology allows alternatives to face-to-face contacts, and when people become increasingly footloose anyway, then it all gets more complicated. With the globalization of culture, that is certainly where we are now."

Hannerz, 1989a (p.7).

Even though communication through direct social interaction is impeded by space and time in the international organization, cultural technology has given the international company alternative ways of communicating across borders. In IKEA we can see how memo systems, the transfer of managers, etc., have become alternative ways of spreading meanings where people are geographically separated. Meetings are held across borders, organizational members meet and interact at fairs and seminars, managers travel around and hold training seminars, etc. Without such cultural technology, meanings would be tied to certain places, and there would hardly be any global organizations.

Telecommunications, computerized information networks with electronic mail, frequent flights, etc., are all different kinds of media used in international organizations for transmitting meanings between entities. Meanings are also conveyed in the various mechanisms of control and co-ordination used in international companies. Transfer of managers, selective recruitment, introduction courses and training seminars, plans and budgets, policies and job
descriptions, etc., constitute the various organizational processes that create and distribute meaning across borders (c.f. Garsten, 1991; Edström & Galbraith, 1977; Baliga & Jaeger, 1984).

As symbols and meanings are transmitted across borders in the international organization, we can also find a homogenization of meanings. We can find a sense of sharing that transcends geographical spheres. Especially within certain groups in an organization, there is a sense of being a part of the whole, an identity that embraces the whole company as a collective "we". The managers in the "bombers' crew" who travel around within IKEA, for example, construct a sense of organization, a global identity that embraces the whole of IKEA. They also become a form of transmitters of meaning.

Fabrication of Meanings
Even though meanings and definitions about the "organizational self" are constructed in the interactive processes of making sense, there is a certain power aspect by which meanings are created and shaped. In organizations we find conscious efforts to promote a global identity across borders as a means for integrating organizational members. There is a desire to offset heterogenization in meanings with homogenization. The conscious transmitting of meanings, as a fabrication of meanings can be understood as the endeavour of managers to create and maintain a sense of organization across borders.

In organizations we find people whose purpose is to make culture; to fabricate meanings. As Berger & Luckman (1967) points out, the division of labour in any society leads to a state where some people are freed from "hunting and forging weapons", and can be totally dedicated to the "fabrication of myths". For example, the Department of Human Resources and the Marketing Departments in modern business corporations are often involved in explicitly shaping and forming the "organizational world", both to insiders and outsiders through the use of slogans, policies, handbooks, training programmes, etc. The role of these persons is to promote and spread certain symbols and meanings. The external impression management and the internal culture making are both forms of fabrication of meanings.
The fabricators of meanings construct and spread the myths about the “self”, in the forms of sagas, celebrations, rites, stories, slogans, etc. The managerial ideology of culture as control, is an attempt to manage the “hearts and minds” of the employees (see e.g. Kunda, 1992). IKEA Way seminars, “culture years”, Ingvar Kamprad’s testament, introduction programmes, training sessions, etc., are all different media through which the official pre-defined meanings are launched and promoted to organizational members. As a form of introspective sense-making - talking to the self - managers define to organizational members what the organization is all about.

The fabrication of meanings involves defining the organization in “key words” and “strong images” (Kunda, 1992). The use of the pronoun “we”, the family-metaphor, talking about the “IKEA-world”, etc., are various ways that managers at IKEA fabricate a sense of community that downplays the individual and divergent sets of meanings. There is a desire to integrate the parts into the cultural hegemony. Newcomers are socialized into the organization and its definition of the self through training programmes, handbooks, seminars, ceremonies, etc., where the norms, values and perspectives defined by managers are passed on to the new organizational members. By promoting pre-defined meanings, often from the top, there is an effort to homogenize meanings, to guard the cultural hegemony of the top. Ikeans in Sweden sometimes talk about indoctrination, getting away from what they call the “religion” through joking and distancing.

In the culture-conscious international organization, managers try to guide local sense-making and create global sets of meanings that will ensure global homogeneity. There is a form of “cultural imperialism” in the flows of meanings in the international, complex company, with a desire to encapsulate local spheres of meanings into organizational meanings:

“Everyday life as an organizer of cultural experience must compete with more distant sources of cultural experience who organizers seek to spread as widely as possible. The culture-conscious MNC systematically replicates itself wherever it goes, given its
willingness to invest in such a project, by pounding away on those who work in its subsidiary units.”

Van Maanen & Laurent, 1993 (p.281).

“When the Centre Speaks, the Periphery Listens...”

In the international organization, flows of meaning are seldom symmetrical in that everyone is an equal producer of meaning systems. Rather, looking at the creation and distribution of meanings in the world, the cultural flow is more structured as an asymmetry, where the centre (at the moment the Western industrialized world) is the giver, and the periphery (the rest of the world) is the taker of meaning and meaningful form. “When the centre speaks, the periphery listens...” (Hannerz, 1989b).

“Because of the great increase in the traffic in culture, the large-scale transfer of meaning systems and symbolic forms, the world is increasingly becoming one...in terms of its cultural construction... This, however, is no egalitarian global village. What we see now is quite firmly structured as an asymmetry of centre and periphery.”

Hannerz, 1989a (p. 1).

A similar asymmetry can be identified in organizations structured in headquarters and subsidiaries, where the headquarters often form a centre for power, knowledge, resources and meaning, and the subsidiaries constitute the periphery.

Flows of meaning (Hannerz, 1989), resource flows (Kobrin, 1991), distribution of power (Forsgren, 1990), etc., are often described in terms of centre and periphery. The centre/periphery-concept thus conceptualizes the structural relationships and interdependencies between units: normally between headquarters and subsidiary.

In the international organization, the headquarters generally forms a centre for power, knowledge, resources and meaning (c.f. Forsgren, 1990; Prahalad & Doz, 1981). In an ethnocentric organization, meanings are created and distributed from a home-base perspective (c.f. Chakravarthy & Perlmutter,
At IKEA there has traditionally been a clear direction in the flows of meaning from Sweden and outwards.

Corporate meanings are created and defined at the headquarters and distributed across borders. Managers are sent from the centre to the periphery. The desire to homogenize the identity goes from the centre and outwards. The fabricators of meanings are often located in the centre, writing down the saga, promoting slogans, defining the business idea, developing training programmes, sending out corporate videos, etc.

Defining the organizational realities is thus not just an equal interactive process of sense-making, but a process which expresses a power relationship. As I have pointed out earlier, leadership lies largely in defining the reality of others. The leader becomes a centre, with the power to frame and interpret situations for the led (the periphery).

"Glocal" Meaning Systems
As has been argued above, in large, complex organizations we find both a heterogenization and a homogenization of meanings. As organizational members are differentiated, locally shared meanings make up local identities. Still, cultural technology allows sense-making to take place across borders. With new means of communication, people in organizations can come to interact and share global definitions of the organizational self, and the fabricators of meanings actively promote an all-embracing definition of the organization to offset heterogenization. There are the simultaneous processes for heterogenization and homogenization. In the process of organizing we can thus identify two co-existing and counter-acting processes; heterogenization and homogenization of meanings, and the search for constructing local and global identities.

While in the area of cross-cultural management, culture and meanings are considered to be always local, the focus on culture as a means of control in the international business literature depicts culture as something that can be controlled and exported as a global glue. I think, however, that in
understanding sense-making and the construction of organizational identity in the international organization, we must embrace both the local and global flows of meaning in organizations. Both are there, homogenization and heterogenization of meanings, co-existing and counteracting in the processes of sense-making.

There are certain centres and peripheries in a hierarchical relationship in the creation and distribution of meanings in the international organization. Within organizations we find managers/centres that strive for homogenization and the fabrication of a global identity. But we also find heterogenization and local identities.

Over time, however, in the international organization, this centre-peripheral relationship becomes less clear (see Forsgren, 1990). IKEA, for instance, is no longer a “pure Swedish” company. Meanings from entities abroad begin to mix with the Swedish hegemony. As the international organization develops, the subsidiaries in the periphery become less dependent on the parent company for strategic resources (see e.g. Forsgren, 1990; Prahalad & Doz, 1981). When local entities become more independent and strive towards local adaptation, new centres can be created in the “multi-centre firm” (Forsgren, 1990).

As long as the centre has the power to impose its meaning, the centre can transfer its definition of the organization. But as local entities becomes less dependent on the centre for different resources, the power bases change. Members in a local identity in the periphery might question the hegemony, fighting for their definition of the company. At IKEA, customer service à la North America and the widening of the product range towards more local adaptation appear as impulses from the periphery that change the self-definition in the centre. New definitions of the organization are developed and spread from the periphery to the centre.

The hierarchical centre-power relations do not imply that the centre’s meanings necessarily become global in that they are embraced by everyone. Rather, I want to stress the mutual part of sense-making. The periphery is no mere adopter of pre-defined meanings, but is in itself a creator and distributor of
meanings. Global symbols are interpreted locally. The creation of meaning is an on-going process of intersubjective negotiations, where meanings are created, interpreted, adopted and rejected at all levels in the organization.

Hence, the international organization is perhaps best understood as an array of local identities. In the figure below I have tried to visualize this by an array of circles within the IKEA group. Under the label of IKEA, there are various meaning systems. There is not one sense of organization, but rather many senses of organization made up of local meaning systems. Within IKEA we can see several such local identities, where some meanings are shared with other spheres within the organization, whereas others are more specific to the own sphere. And at the centre of IKEA, we find those managers who share a sense of a global identity which they try to promote to offset heterogenization.

![Diagram of Multiple Identities within the IKEA Label](image)

Organizations can thus be said to consist of many systems of meanings, constantly created and recreated in interaction between individuals in different spheres. In a world where flows of meaning can transcend cultural and geographical borders, meanings are increasingly mixed. And the relations between centre and periphery change. There are no mere givers, no mere takers. Are there any “pure” forms of global or local systems of meaning? In the complex organization, operating in various local spheres, maybe organizational identity is best understood as an array of meaning systems, where different “views of the self” meet and interact; some being global and some local, and still others are “glocal” as a synthesis of both?
Identity Within and Across Borders

With a cultural perspective on organizations, we can understand organizations as the process of making sense and systems of shared meanings. Organizational identity, then, is how organizational members make sense of the "self", defining what the organization is all about and its role in the world.

Throughout this text, I have not only wanted to give you a picture of organizational identity within IKEA, but also to explore the processes through which organizational members construct and spread a collective self-view across borders. I have argued here that organizational members make sense of themselves and their world. In doing so they stage borders between "the self" and "others", between insiders and outsiders. It is a process for distinguishing between the self and the "non-self". The outer world in form of the "others" become a mirror, a source of reflection of the self. By mirroring the "self" in others, the organizational identity is confirmed and contributed to. Making sense of the self also involves introspective sense-making, i.e. reflecting on and defining what the organization is all about. Through talking to the self, organizational members produce and reproduce the myth of the self; coming to create an intersubjective view on the "self".

However, there is not one system of meaning within large, complex organizations. Rather, I have wanted to point out that there are simultaneous on-going processes for heterogenization and homogenization of meanings. There are multiple identities. Departments, business areas, professional categories, informal groups, etc., as local spheres within the organization, might share common meanings, more or less specific for their particular area. Borders are staged between "us and them" also internally in the organization. Different local spheres differentiate organizational members' view of the organization and what it is all about in the creation of locally shared identities.

By studying international organizations, dispersed over national and cultural areas, we can also see how making sense transcends geographical borders. Organizing across borders involves upholding flows of meaning; as long as communication can be upheld, a sense of organization can be maintained. The
conscious efforts in the fabrication of meanings for creating a globally shared identity can be understood as a process for homogenizing meanings. Managers (in the various centres) fabricate meanings through various symbols with the aim of integrating local meanings in safeguarding the organizational whole.

Thus, there is a need to take the power aspects of sense-making into account in the study of organizations. Flows of meaning are shaped by power relations in centre-peripheral structures. There is an “export of meanings” from the centre to the periphery. But at the same time, interpretations and negotiations of organizational meanings are taking place within different local spheres. Organizations are not static phenomena, but rather dynamic processes of continuous sense-making.
Chapter 16

Beyond Borders

I started this text as a search for understanding and knowing. I am not sure if I know anything for certain, but I'm leaving this text with a sense of having reached a deeper understanding of organizations and collective self-views. In this chapter I will try to summarize these understandings and present some of my reflections in discussing what I think can be a contribution to the field of organization studies. However, "Most things still remain to be done - A glorious future!" (Kamprad, 1976).

Anthropology as an Approach
Throughout this text, one of my aims has been to give you a picture of organizational identities within IKEA. As I have searched for understanding how people in organizations make sense and construct systems of shared meanings, I have carried out my study from a cultural perspective. Through a partly ethnographic study in the corporate setting of IKEA, I have participated in the every-day life in parts of the company; trying to get "a sense of organization". To understand others' understandings has involved getting an inside-view of organizations. Instead of using the more traditional research techniques, looking at the organization from the outside, my aspiration to immerse myself into the organization has been a search for removing the borders between myself and the subject; to come close to those being studied.
This way of working has also drawn my attention to the problem of presenting my interpretation of others' interpretations, and the role of authority in constructing the narrative from the field, a problem which I think deserves further reflection in social science writings. Writing this whole text has given me "tangible proof" that I am making reality. It has made me understand that there are no "true" or "false" representations that can be evaluated against any "real" or "absolute" reality. Rather, this text, as any text, is a construction of my interpretations of others' interpretations of the world.

To me, this approach to gain an insight into the making of organizational reality and to write my impressions and interpretations has been an inspiring process of learning and reflection. It has involved a continuous reflection on, and uncovering of, my own role as a researcher in constructing and making the reality I am presenting.

With a cultural perspective we come to explore the symbolic reality and how people in organizations and elsewhere make sense and construct meanings. This way of working and thinking has contributed to my own learning about research and the construction of the "reality", and it has also turned me into an advocate of anthropological perspectives in the study of organizations. The fruitfulness of ethnography as a research method can perhaps be a contribution to field of business administration, where this approach still is not so common. By transcending traditional disciplinary borders, we can hopefully further develop our understanding of complex organizations.

**Identity and Sense-Making**

By getting an inside view of organizational life at IKEA, my purpose has been to explore the processes through which organizational members construct a collective self-view in an international setting. Even though some writings have focused on the processes of sense-making in making organizational reality, I think a contribution to our understanding of organizations can be found in my description of how these processes are realized. I have conceptualized here three different processes of sense-making through which identity becomes constructed; *drawing borders, mirroring, and talking to the self*. 
In the cultural perspective in which I have found my theoretical inspiration and defined my world-view, organizing can be understood as a process of making sense and conferring meanings to events, people, and actions. In contrast to more functionalist views on organizational identity and culture, I thus do not see organizational identity as a mere management project, but rather as an interactive process through which organizational members make sense of their organization. In the process of sense-making, organizational members make sense of what they define as their organization and come to define what the organization is all about. Through various symbols, organizational members provide the organization with some “sacred qualities”, that promote the image of the group as being distinct and different. In doing so they stage borders between the organizational self and others, between insiders and outsiders. It is a process for distinguishing between the self and the non-self.

By focusing on this process of drawing borders, we do not only come to see the outside world as enacted, but we also get an understanding of how organizational members make their outside world. Seeing the definition of the organizational self and the outside world as a self-referential process, shows how the definition of the self is a shaper of organizational members’ actions and relations to the outside world. While existing management literature on culture and identity often tends to view a “strong” identity as a unifying force, it seldom recognizes the identity as an impediment to change. The organizational identity becomes a guidance for what organizational members perceive that the organization can or cannot do.

Another process through which organizational members appear to construct a collective self-view is in what I have called mirroring. While most studies on culture and sense-making have focused mainly on the organization as a discrete, isolated entity and described sense-making as an essentially internal activity, I have in this study tried to show how organizational members make sense of the organization in their relations to and interactions with the external world, and not only in the social interactions within the organization. The metaphor of identity has drawn the attention to how inside pictures of the organization are formed in an interplay with the outside world.
In making sense of the organization, the outer world in form of the others becomes a mirror, a source of reflection of the self. By mirroring the “self” in others, the organizational identity is confirmed and contributed to. Hence, many externally directed activities in organizations, which seldom are included in so called cultural studies, such as the management of impressions, various forms of market communications, image surveys, and competitor studies, can be understood as a feedback seeking process through which organizational members make sense of their own organization. Making sense of the “self” thus transcends organizational borders as organizational members interact with external groups in defining what the organization is all about.

Most descriptions of sense-making in organizations have discussed whether sense-making is prospective or retrospective. However, I think that little attention has been put on introspective sense-making. In the study of the construction of organizational identity, I would argue that much sense-making could be characterized as being introspective in that it involves reflecting upon the organizational self. Just as individuals reflect upon themselves, organizational members reflect on their organization in defining what it is all about. Through talking to the self, organizational members produce and reproduce the myth of the self; coming to create an intersubjective view on the organizational self.

Hence, I would like to point out that much of the fabrication of meanings, i.e. managerial efforts to create and promote official definitions of organizational reality, can in fact be characterized as such talking to the self. This also implies that much of the communications we normally view as external (such as marketing), often convey meanings to organizational members. The writing of a corporate autobiography, the production of myths and stories, and the distribution of slogans and ads, are various means through which fabricated meanings talk to the self. In various ways messages are created and performed with the purpose of producing and enhancing the organizational self.

By using organizational identity as an analytical tool, and the analogies from individual psychology that come with it, we find new ways for analyzing
organizations and organizing. Out of this perspective, many processes in organizations can be understood as the construction of a collective, organizational identity. A large part of sense-making in fact appears as the process of making sense of the self. Much of the talk, actions, events, etc., we find in organizations are symbols that convey a sense of what the organization is all about. Drawing borders, mirroring and talking to the self are thus important parts of how groups of individuals create and sustain their reality and define what they are up to.

**Homogenization and Heterogenization**

In the beginning of this text, I stated that through the process of sense-making organizational members create systems of shared meanings which provide them with a sense of organization (see Chapter 2). It is as if all members of an organization could share one sense of organization. I talked about organizational identity in a rather unproblematic way, implying that there would be a shared, collective view of the organization.

However, in the study of the construction of identity within IKEA, I have come to question this integrative view by showing how meanings are heterogenized. There is not an organization-wide consensus. The complex organization could thus be understood as consisting of many systems of meanings, and, as I have shown in the fore-going chapters, we can then find multiple identities. In the complex organization there is not one sense of organization, but rather many senses of organization. In many of today's complex business organizations, people are unable to grasp the whole. Rather, the local sphere or setting becomes the part in which a sense of organization is created.

Complex organizations embody meanings that are not commonly shared by all. Departments, business areas, professional categories and informal groups, as local spheres within the organization, might share common meanings, more or less specific for their particular area. Borders are staged between “us and them” between different groups. Different local spheres differentiate organizational members' view of the organization and what it is all about in the creation of locally shared identities.
My idea of local spheres does not imply that the systems of meanings or identities are geographical, even if they can be. In the study of international organizations, local cultures are often described as being geographically bounded. Cross-cultural studies tend to define national cultures as independent, local systems of meaning. However, with the increasing flow of meanings across borders, we can find spheres of meanings that transcends and move beyond territorial borders. Hence, local does here not denote belonging to a certain geographical area, but rather a certain sphere. Thus, identities, as collective views of the organization, can be understood as being constructed in different local spheres.

However, I feel that this local sphere view on culture must be supplemented with a notion of how meanings also become homogenized. In organizations, those who represent a dominant set of meanings, the cultural hegemony, often consciously try to homogenize and incorporate the different systems of meaning. In the culture-as-control idea, lies a desire to offset heterogenization in meanings with homogenization, in order to integrate organizational members. I have here called this part of sense-making the fabrication of meanings. Managers in business organizations possess the power to define the reality of others, trying to promote official meanings.

Thus, I would argue that there is a need for taking the power aspects of sense-making into account in the study of organizations. Flows of meanings in the complex organization can be said to be shaped by power relations in centre-peripheral structures. There is an export of meanings from the centre to the periphery. Managers in the various centres of organizations actively create and promote their definition of reality. In this official identity, differences and divergent views are underplayed in favour of unity and similarity. The strong fabrication of meanings appears as a powerful tool for shaping organizational meaning systems which involves a deliberate effort for creating a global sphere of meaning.

While those who study culture as being local, tend to ignore the power aspects by which flows of meaning are shaped and homogenized, the global view that
we find in the literature on identity and culture as a management project, neglects the local spheres and the mutual part of sense-making. I would argue that there is a constant interaction between the homogenization process in the organization, with the fabrication of meanings from the centre, and the heterogenization process, with locally constructed meanings. Pre-defined meanings from the top in the fabrication of meanings, are interpreted, rejected or adopted at various levels of the organization. And meanings are also created locally, in the local spheres of meanings.

Thus, I have wanted to point out that sense-making in complex organizations can be characterized by both the processes of homogenization and heterogenization; co-existing and counteracting in defining organizational realities.

The idea of a managed “supra-identity” or “global culture” as a key for holding the complex international organization together, which is often proposed in the international business literature, thus still appears as an utopian idea. In this study I have not found any empirical support for the possibility of creating a “strong” global identity. The more speculative models of transnational forms and heterarchies for integrating international companies remain as speculations. Rather, my study has pointed to the multi-cultural and multiple identity aspects of international, complex organizations, where meanings are both homogenized and heterogenized, despite conscious attempts to fabricate a global identity.

The Organization as an Arbitrary Boundary

How can we then account for local organizational identities and systems of meanings within the organizational borders? In the identification of the simultaneous processes of homogenization and heterogenization of meanings in organizations, and the recognition of identities that are not purely organizational (as national and occupational spheres of meaning), I have started to reflect on and searched for a perspective in which we can understand organizations as cultural phenomena and link organizational cultures to other cultural spheres.
I have more and more come to ponder on how we can account for organizations as embodying many sets of meanings and identities, and the idea that meanings are both formed in the process of homogenization (the integrationist view) and in the process of heterogenization (the differentiation view) (see Martin, 1992). As a consequence I would like to conclude this text with a discussion on the cultural perspectives on organizations.

While the integration view on organizational culture regards organizations as a unitary “whole”, a differentiation view on organizations often understands organizations as a set of subcultures embedded within the borders of an organization-wide culture. This implies that there is a sort of “over-all sharing” that “floats” around or above the set of disparate sub-cultures. The subcultures are regarded as stable sets of locally separated meanings. However, in the view of multiple identities in the organization, we rather see different sets of meaning that occasionally intersect and occasionally do not. In IKEA we could see many local identities; some of which are intersected and others are not. I have talked about “glocal” meaning systems, with no pure global or local meanings, but rather a dynamic array of meanings that interact and mix. There is a homogenization and heterogenization of meanings at the same time.

Whereas Martin (1992) has developed a “fragmentation perspective” on organizational culture, where the focus is on ambiguity and the lack of clarity and consensus, my own lines of thought in search of a perspective for dealing with multiple identities and divergent sets of meanings in the study of organizations, share more traits with what Alvesson (1993) recently proposed as a “multiple cultural configuration view”. In this view, organizational culture is not to be understood as unitary wholes or stable sets of subcultures, but rather as a mixtures of cultural manifestations.

Whereas the common approach in the field of organizational culture has been to look at the organization as a culture of its own or as a micro-representation of the national culture, I think there is a need for relating organizational meanings to other spheres of meanings. I would like to replace the idea of organizations as being cultures with the idea of the organization as being an
arbitrary boundary around an array of various spheres of meaning. Instead of looking at organizations as unitary wholes or as a set of subcultures, I would rather see the organization as being merely an arbitrary boundary. Cultures can be understood as various spheres of meaning, overlapping and interacting. The organization, then, is an arbitrary and permeable boundary encapsulating various such spheres. Some of these spheres might be organizational in that they are made up of essentially organizational meanings; e.g. meanings that can be said to be “IKEA-specific”, while other spheres of meaning are rooted outside the specific organization; being merely manifested in various forms in the organization.

In the organization various spheres of meanings are co-existing and mixing. The boundaries between different spheres of meanings or collections of spheres can then be seen as the arbitrary borders we stage in constructing collective self-views, i.e. identities.

In the figure below I have tried to visualize my reasoning with the organization as a triangle, constituting an arbitrary boundary within and around a set of spheres of meanings (the ellipses).

The Organization as an Arbitrary Boundary

In this view, then, the organization can be viewed as one possible identity; i.e. one way of distinguishing the own group from other groups. What distinguishes a group of people from another is their collective view of being a distinct group. By constructing an identity, people come to share an
understanding of themselves as being a group; it provides them with a sense of organization. However, having the organization as the focal point is merely one way of approaching different spheres of meaning. Within the organizational border there are thus various spheres of meanings and various group views; there are multiple identities.

Many of the spheres of meaning are also external to the organization. People in business organizations spend their lives in several spheres of meaning, and not only in the company. The fabrication of meanings, as management’s endeavour for homogenizing meanings, can then be understood as an attempt to incorporate organizational members into the corporate sphere of meaning.

What is then the advantage of a view of organizations as an arbitrary boundary? To me, such a view directs the attention to seeing the organization not as a unitary whole, but rather as an arbitrary boundary around spheres of meanings. While the view of organizations as cultures tends to see the organization as a distinct entity, being a culture of its own, the arbitrary and multiple boundary view rather opens up the focus, linking the organization to its external world. It shows how various spheres of meaning exist both outside and inside the organizational borders. And the identity concept shows how people in different spheres create borders in distinguishing themselves from others.

As I have argued earlier, people in organizations make sense and create their organizational reality in interaction with their external world; the environment and the organization blend into each other. Thus, the business organization can hardly be understood as a closed world with purely organizational meanings, which seems to have been the implicit consequence in many descriptions of organizational culture. Rather, some of the meaning systems we find within organizational borders are also external to the organization, and meanings need not to be unique for the organization.

Even though there have been some attempts to link organizational culture to external cultural patterns, in the literature these “broader, societal cultures” have often been treated as a given background: a given national culture of
which the organization is a micro-representation. However, I think that such a view not only takes the national culture for granted, but also reduces organizational meanings to mere reflections of wider meaning systems, neglecting the active part organizational members have in shaping their reality.

Rather, if we see culture as the on-going construction of meanings and the various systems of shared meanings that people construct, we can say that people construct and deconstruct meanings in various settings or spheres, be it in the organization, the geographical area, the profession, various social groups, etc. People, interacting with each other, make sense, and we tend to draw borders around various settings in which people make sense. Hence, the organization can then be seen as an arbitrary boundary around a set of such local spheres made up by different meaning systems.

Sense-making goes beyond borders; the boundaries between different local spheres can be seen as arbitrary, and the local spheres overlap and are nested within each other.
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Appendix

To create a better everyday life for the majority of people

Once and for all we have decided to side with the many. What is good for our customers is also good for us in the long run. This is an objective which entails responsibility.

In all countries and social systems, eastern as well as western, a disproportionately large part of all resources is used to satisfy a small part of the population. In our line of business for instance, too many new and beautifully designed products can be afforded by only a small group of better-off people. IKEA’s aim is to change this situation.

Already after little more than two decades of operation we believe we have had some success. A well-known industrialist/politician once said that IKEA has had a greater impact on the democratization process than many political measures combined. We also think that our activities have inspired many of our competitors to work in the same direction. During the past two decades, IKEA has changed the face of the furniture industry in Sweden and, increasingly, throughout the world. Our revolutionary methods of design, manufacture, and distribution have made fine furniture available and affordable for the majority of people — for all those with limited budgets.

But we still have great ambitions. We know we can have an important effect on practically all markets. We know that in the future we may make a valuable contribution to the democratization process at home and abroad. We know that larger series provide us with new advantages on our home ground, while new markets allow for greater risk-spreading. That is why it is our duty to expand.

The means to accomplish our objectives are characterized by our unbiased approach, our different line, and our endeavour to relate simply and in a straightforward way to others and among ourselves. A better everyday life also means getting away from status and conventions — being freer and more at ease as human beings. It is our endeavour to become a concept also in this area, for our own pleasure and also as an inspiration to those around us. It is a question of freedom with responsibility, and here we demand much of ourselves.

No method is more effective than a good example.

Our contribution to the democratization process, I said before. To be on the safe side, I would like to add that by this we in no way take up a position concerning questions about equalization of wages, for instance. You might say that we also want to tackle these problems from a different angle.

The following sections describe our product range and price philosophy which is the backbone of our work. Furthermore, we describe rules and methods which have become important cornerstones in the world of ideas which has made and will continue to make IKEA a unique company.

1976-12-20

Ingvar Kamprad
The Product Range — Our Identity

We shall offer a wide range of home furnishing items of good design and function, at prices so low that the majority of people can afford to buy them.

Range
Our ambition is to cover the total home area, indoors as well as outdoors, with loose as well as fixed home furnishings. The range may also comprise tools and ornamental articles for the home and components for different degrees of "do-it-yourself" in the home furnishing area. Furthermore, the range may comprise a smaller number of articles for public buildings. This range shall always be limited so as not to jeopardize the overall price picture. Our energy will always be concentrated around essential products within each product group.

Profile
The centre of gravity shall always be in our basic range — the part which is "typical IKEA". Our basic range shall have a profile of its own. It shall reflect our thoughts, and be as simple and straightforward as we are ourselves. It shall be durable and easy to live with. It shall express an easier, more natural and freer way of living. It shall express design, colour and joy, and have a youthful touch for the young-at-heart of all ages.

In Scandinavia our basic range should be regarded as typically IKEA and outside Scandinavia as typically Swedish. An imperative requirement is that all articles should be suitable for the Scandinavian market.

In addition to our basic product range there may be a limited range of a more traditional character which is firmly established with many people and which may be combined with our basic range. This part of the range shall be strictly limited outside Scandinavia.

Function/technical quality
"Throw-away" products is not IKEA. The consumer should enjoy his purchase for years. That is why function and technical quality must be good. But quality should never become an end in itself. It should be adapted to the consumer's needs. A worktop should have a more durable surface treatment than a shelf in a bookcase. It costs more but gives the consumer a longer lasting product. An expensive surface finish on the bookcase shelf is bad for the consumer as it increases the price. Quality should always be adapted to the consumer's interests in the long run. Our guiding rules are the basic requirements of "Mobelfakta" or other reasonable standards.
The IKEA Spirit.
A Strong and Living Reality

Certainly you have experienced it. You have perhaps even given it your own interpretation. Of course, it was easier to keep alive in former days when we weren't so many, when we all reached each other, and could talk with each other. Certainly it is more difficult now when the individual is gradually wiped out in the grey gloominess of collective agreements and in the number register in the personnel department.

Before, it was more concrete, the will to help each other, the art of managing with small means — being cost-conscious almost to the point of stinginess, the humbleness, the irresistible enthusiasm and the wonderful community through thick and thin. But society as well as IKEA has changed since then.

Certainly the old spirit is still alive throughout IKEA. With old and new staff, heroic efforts are still made — daily — and many, many of us still feel and work in the same way. In a large group such as ours, however, not everybody can feel the same enthusiasm and responsibility. Some certainly consider their job as just a meal ticket — as any other job. Sometimes it is my fault and yours, for not always abaring our ardour with others. It is not always easy to give life and warmth to some of our more onerous daily tasks.

But the true IKEA spirit is still founded on our enthusiasm, on our constant will to renew, on our cost-consciousness, on our willingness to assume responsibility and to help, on our humbleness before the task and on the simplicity in our behaviour. We must take care of each other, inspire each other. One cannot help feeling sorry for those who cannot or will not join us.

A job must never be just a meal ticket. Without enthusiasm at your work one third of your life goes down the drain and can never be compensated for.

For you, with some kind of leadership responsibility, it is of crucial importance to motivate and develop your staff. Team spirit is something good, but then all members of the team have to have a feeling for their task.

As captain of the team you decide after having consulted the team. Then there is no time for arguments. Take the football team as an example!

Take care of those who keep our society alive! The simple, quiet and open-minded people who are always willing to give a helping hand. They do their duty and assume their responsibility without being noticed, and their concern and dedication often go beyond their particular responsibility area. I simply call them society supporters because they make the system run. There are so many of them in our company. They are everywhere — on the warehouse floor, in our offices, among the sales staff... They are the essence of the IKEA spirit.

The IKEA spirit is still here, but it has to be taken care of and developed with time. Development, however is not always equal to progress. It depends upon you, as a leader and a responsible person, to make development progressive.
**Low price with a meaning**

Most people have limited financial means. To serve the majority of people, we must always maintain an extremely low price picture. But it must be low price with a meaning. We must not compromise on either function or technical quality.

No efforts shall be spared to keep the price picture down. A substantial price distance from our competitors should always be kept, and we should be able to offer the lowest prices in every area of home furnishing. Within each product group there should be some “breathtaking” items, but our range should never grow to jeopardize the price picture. Low price with a meaning demands very much from all of us. From the product developer, the designer, the purchaser, the administrator, the warehouse worker, the personnel — yes, from all cost units which can influence our purchase prices and all other costs. Without low costs we will never accomplish our purpose!

**Changes in our product policy**

Our basic policy to serve the majority of people can never be changed. Changes of the guidelines for the composition of our range, as indicated here, may only be made by the person or persons having the total responsibility for all activities within the IKEA-group.
Profit Gives us Resources

A better everyday life for the majority of people! To accomplish our objective we must have resources — not least in the financial area. We do not believe in waiting for ripe plums to fall into our mouths. We believe that only hard and assiduous work can give results.

Profit is a wonderful word! Let us at once take the drama out of the word profit. Politicians often use and abuse this word. Profit gives us resources. Resources you can only get in two ways, either through profit or through subsidies. All government subsidies come about by means of state profit on some activity or by means of taxes in some form which you and I must pay. Let us rely on ourselves when it comes to creating the financial resources.

The aim of accumulating our financial resources is to obtain the best results in the long run. You know the prerequisites. We shall have the lowest price picture. And we shall marry it to good quality. If we charge too much, we do not keep the lowest price picture, if we charge too little, we get no resources. A wonderful problem! Forcing us to develop products in a more economical way, to purchase better, and to save on all costs persistently. This is our secret. The reason for our success.
An old IKEA-idea which becomes more and more interesting. Innumerable times we have shown that with small means or scanty resources we can get good results. Waste of resources is a mortal sin at IKEA. It is not very difficult to accomplish the objectives set if you can disregard the costs involved. To design a desk which may cost S. 1,000 is easy for a furniture designer. But to design a functional and good desk which shall cost S. 50 can only be done by the very best. Expensive solutions to all kinds of problems are often signs of mediocrity.

We have no interest in a solution until we know what it costs. An idea without a price-tag is never acceptable. Before choosing a solution, put it in relation to the cost. Only then can you assess it.

Waste of resources is one of humanity's most serious diseases. Many a modern building is more of a monument to human stupidity than a rational solution to a need. But small-scale waste is just as expensive: To file paper you know will never be needed again. To devote time to proving you were right anyway. To postpone a question to a new meeting just because you don't want to take the responsibility right now. To phone long distance when you might as well write a note or send a telex. The list may go on interminably.

Use your resources the IKEA way. You will get good results with small means.
If many people have to function together in a society or in a company there must be rules. The more complicated you make these rules the more difficult they will be to observe. Complicated rules paralyze!

Historical burdens, fear, and the lack of a sense of responsibility are the breeding ground of bureaucracy. Indecision leads to more statistics, more investigations, more meetings — more bureaucracy. Bureaucracy complicates and paralyzes!

Planning is often synonymous with red tape. Of course, planning is necessary to establish guidelines for your work and make the company function in the long run, but do not forget that exaggerated planning can be fatal! Exaggerated planning restrains your freedom of action and reduces your time for the actual performance. A complicated planning process paralyzes. Let simplicity and common sense characterize your planning.

Simplicity is an honoured tradition with us. Simple routines mean greater striking power. Simplicity in our behaviour gives us strength. Simplicity and humbleness characterize our relations with each other, with our suppliers, and with our customers. It is not only for cost reasons that we avoid the luxury hotels. We don’t need any flashy cars, impressive titles, uniforms, or other status symbols. We rely on our own strength and our own will!
If we from the start had consulted experts about building a company like IKEA in a small village like Almhult, we would certainly have been dissuaded from doing so. Nevertheless, one of the biggest establishments in the whole furniture business is situated today in Almhult.

**By daring to be different**, we find new ways. By refusing to accept a pattern just because it is established we get further. Not only concerning the big problems but also when we must solve the small daily problems.

The fact that our purchasers turn to a window manufacturer for table underframes and to a shirt manufacturer for seat cushions is no accidental occurrence but quite simply the answer to the question "Why must we do things in a traditional way?"

Our protest against the established order is no end in itself, but a purposeful will always to develop and improve.

Our development must always be vigorous and dynamic. Because of that, for instance, I hope that we will never have two stores completely alike. We know that the latest store will always show several imperfections, but still, taken all in all, it will be the best. A healthy appetite for experimenting shall lead us forward all the time. "Why" remains an important keyword.
Concentration of Energy — Important to Our Success

The general who splits up his forces inevitably fails. Even the multi-talented athlete faces problems. Where and how should he concentrate his energy?

We too have to concentrate — concentrate our energy. We cannot do everything everywhere at the same time.

Our product range must not exceed all bounds. We cannot satisfy all tastes. We must concentrate around our own profile. We can never promote our whole range at the same time. We must concentrate our energy. We cannot conquer all markets at the same time. We must concentrate on maximum effect, and while concentrating on important areas we must sometimes make do with scanty resources in other areas.

When we build up a new market we concentrate our energy on the marketing effort itself. We then have to work with temporary stocks and routines. Energy concentration means that we, at important stages, have to relax our demands on other things which are in themselves quite important — security systems, for example. That is why we have to make extra high demands on our staff’s honesty and loyalty.

Concentration of energy. The phrase itself implies strength. Use it in your daily work. It will give results.
To Assume Responsibility
— A Privilege

In every type of society and company and on every level there are people who make their own decisions instead of hiding behind others. People who dare assume responsibility. The more there are of such responsible people in a company or society, the less red tape. Meeting frenzy and endless group discussions are often a result of the inability of a responsible person to make a decision. Sometimes one puts the blame on democracy or the obligation to consult with others.

To assume responsibility has nothing to do with education, economy or position. Those willing to assume responsibility are to be found on the warehouse floor, among purchasers, sellers and office staff, yes everywhere. And they are necessary in all systems. They are important to every kind of progress. They see to it that the machinery works.

In our IKEA-family we want to keep the human being in the centre, and to support each other. We all have our rights but also our obligations. Freedom with responsibility. Your initiative and mine, and our ability to assume responsibility and make decisions are decisive.

Only while sleeping one makes no mistakes. To make mistakes is the privilege of the active person — the one who is able to start from the beginning again and put things straight.

Our objective demands from us that we perpetually train our capacity for decision-making and for assuming responsibility, and that we continuously combat our fear of making mistakes. The fear of making mistakes is the root of bureaucracy and the enemy of all evolution. No decision may claim to be the only right one. It is the drive behind the decision which determines its correctness. One must be allowed to make mistakes. The mediocre person is negative and wastes time to prove that he was not wrong. The strong person is always positive and looks forward. It is always the constructive people who win. They are always a delight to others around them and to themselves. But to win does not always imply that somebody else must lose. The most splendid victories are those where there are no losers.

If somebody steals a model from us we do not bring a lawsuit — because a lawsuit is always negative. We solve the problem by making a new model which will be even better.

Make use of your privilege — your right and your obligation to make decisions and assume responsibility.
Most Things Still Remain To Be Done.

A Glorious Future!

A feeling of having finished is an effective sleeping-pill. A person who considers that his share has ended when he retires declines fast. A company which considers its objectives accomplished stagnates quickly and loses its vitality.

Happiness is not to reach one's goal but to be on the way. Our glorious fate is to be at the very beginning. In all areas. Only by perpetually asking ourselves how what we do today can be done better tomorrow, can we make progress. Constructive delight in exploring will urge us forward also in the future. The word impossible is and remains, absent from our dictionary. Experience is a word to be handled carefully.

Experience is the drag on all evolution. Experience is used by many people as an excuse for not trying new ways. Still it is wise to rely on experience sometimes. In that case you should preferably rely on your own experience. It is often more valuable than long investigations.

The ambition to develop ourselves as human beings and in our work must remain high. The keyword is humbleness. Humbleness means so much to us in our work and for our leisure time. Yes, it is crucial to us as human beings. It does not only imply consideration and respect for our fellow-beings but also kindness and generosity. Will and strength without humbleness often lead to conflict. Together with humbleness, will and strength are your secret weapons in the development of yourself as an individual and a fellow-being.

Bear in mind that time is your most important asset. You can do much in 10 minutes' time. 10 minutes gone are irretrievably lost. You can never get them back. 10 minutes are not only the hourly wage divided by 6. 10 minutes are a part of yourself. Split your life into 10 minute units and sacrifice as few as possible to futilities.

Most things still remain to be done. Let us grow to be a group of constructive fanatics, who with unwavering obstinacy, refuse to accept the impossible, the negative. What we want, we can and will do. Together. A glorious future!
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