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Building Consensus: Workplace Myth-Building as a Unifying Rhetorical Strategy

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Building consensus: Workplace myth-building as a unifying rhetorical strategy

by

Jacob D. Rawlins

A dissertation submitted to the graduate faculty in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Major: Rhetoric and Professional Communication

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Iowa State University
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2013

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To Laura; that is all.
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Finally, thanks to my family for their encouragement, my children for their patience, and to my wonderful wife, Laura, for her many hours of support and her neverending patience.
ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores how managers and leaders build consensus in the workplace through creating rhetorical myths. A three-year long ethnographic study of Iowa State University’s Printing Services as it went through a change to its central print management system reveals a concentrated effort by leadership to create and maintain a rhetorical myth. This dissertation defines the three main elements of rhetorical myth: *chronographia* (or an interpretation of history), epideictic prediction (defining an action for the present by assigning praise and blame to the past and the future), and communal markers (using concepts of Burkean identification and rhetorically-defined boundary objects to create a unified community). It also documents the three stages of myth-building: Creation, Acceptance, and Re-creation. Through examples and discussion from meeting observations and interviews, this study shows how the rhetorical myth at Printing Services was created and accepted over several months and then re-created in response to missed deadlines and frustrated expectations. The dissertation concludes with a forecast of future directions to expand the study of rhetorical myth in workplace settings.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION: A WORKING DEFINITION OF RHETORICAL MYTH

In December 2010, more than a year after I started observing the committee charged with buying a new print management system (PMS) for Iowa State University’s Printing Services department, the members of the committee finally got to see a demonstration of the new system in action. Several members of the committee and other key employees drove two hours to the University of Iowa, where the new PMS was already installed and running. The trip, designed to allay concerns and answer questions, did not have the desired unifying effect. In fact, rather than building consensus among the employees, the fact-finding mission simply raised more questions. In a contentious committee meeting the day after the trip to Iowa City, most of the people in the room were still not convinced the upgrade would be a good move. Some members of the committee and nearly all of the staff saw an upgrade to the PMS as an expensive, time-sucking threat to their jobs. It would, after all, change how they worked: it involved new equipment, new software, new processes, new pricing structures, and new standards. For the employees who worked in the previously semi-autonomous copy centers, the new PMS would also bring a change in culture and, possibly, consolidations and cuts that could lead to layoffs.

Throughout the difficult meeting, however, one phrase kept coming up: “Zach has assured us that everything will be okay.” Zach, the resident technology guru, had been playing a key role (along with Rob, the assistant director) in building and
maintaining a rhetorical myth, a concept which I develop in this dissertation as a narrative that interprets the past, prescribes an action for the present, and presents a vision for the future to unify employees or build consensus. In the case of Printing Services, Zach and Rob created a rhetorical myth to help the department accept the decision to undergo this difficult technological change. Zach’s constant reassurances to his fellow employees before, during, and after the excursion to the University of Iowa helped to remind each individual of the rhetorical myth and its promise for an improved future in the department: greater efficiency, fewer stoppages, increased ease of use, and better relationships within the department and with its customers. With each question or doubt they raised during the meeting, the staff members turned to Zach’s assurances as almost concrete handholds to guide them through the process of accepting the new technologies. In this meeting, as in many other instances throughout the long process of change, the committee reached consensus not through examining evidence, but by constantly returning to their commonly held belief in a rhetorical myth. In my dissertation, I examine the process of creating and maintaining rhetorical myth at Printing Services. In this chapter, I provide an overview of the project at Printing Services and then build a working definition of rhetorical myth based on key concepts from the academic literature.

Overview of the New PMS Project

For the members of the management team at Printing Services (Rob, Steve, and Zach), the reasons to replace the PMS are clear. The first time I met with Rob in
November 2009, he told me that their PMS needed to be replaced. The PMS is the technological brain of any printing company. It coordinates communication, schedules, pricing, billing, and job output among all of the different people and equipment working in the printing offices and the print shop floor. When the PMS slows or stops working, the entire system crashes. The current PMS being used at Printing Services is an amalgamation of three separate systems that each perform different functions, held together by custom databases and constant work by Zach and his assistants. At fourteen years old (which is centuries in computer years),\(^1\) the primary PMS has put in its service to the university. Its aging software infrastructure is no longer able to run on modern systems and even the sporadic updates that had kept it running stopped coming when the company that designed the PMS was purchased by a rival organization. Now, running old software on outdated hardware, the PMS is a source of constant frustration for management and staff at Printing Services, who are forced to deal with frequent errors and work stoppages. And with constant complex printing orders and dozens of employees at 10 different physical locations, work stoppages can be catastrophic. Since our initial interview in 2009, Rob has worked to win approval from his department and the university to pursue a more modern PMS. But now he and the management team face their next challenge: building consensus for the change within their own department.

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\(^1\) Different websites calculate the ratio of computer years to human years differently, but it is usually in a range between 10 and 20 computer years to each human year, making the 14-year-old software between 140 and 280 computer years old.
The road to consensus is not easy and requires focused attention on staff concerns. The management team sees the problems with the current PMS, and Rob and Steve have worked in printing long enough to have been through a number of these system-wide changes. But most of the other employees in the department have only known the one PMS and are reluctant to accept—or are even actively resistant to—changes in technologies, particularly where those technologies threaten their jobs. Even on the purchasing committee, where all of the members volunteered to work on the project to upgrade the PMS, many of the individuals express skepticism about or resistance to the possibility of change. The employees outside of the committee are even less receptive to the changes.

To address these challenges and find consensus, Rob and Zach have been working to build unity and support for the changes through meetings, emails, formal memos, and private conversations to persuade the other people in the department that the new PMS is both necessary and desirable; that it represents an upgrade not only to technology, but also an upgrade to the future of the department that builds on their shared community. The new PMS, they argue, will help Printing Services achieve its purposes while maintaining and improving its core organizational identity. As I have observed their persuasive messages over the course of my study, I have determined that their strategy includes the primary elements of what I define as rhetorical myth—a created history, a clear vision of actions in the present, a shared view of the future, and a strong organizational identity. In the three years of my study, I observed Rob’s and Zach’s efforts to develop and maintain this rhetorical myth, which they did by carefully
building on the foundation of shared worldviews to address concerns, overcome obstacles, and encourage consensus.

Later in this dissertation, I will return to my case study to examine the creation, maintenance, and re-creation of the rhetorical myth and its effect on the employees of Printing Services. To provide a foundation for that discussion, for the remainder of this chapter I will draw on concepts of myth from literature studies and rhetorical theory to create a working definition of rhetorical myth.

Defining Rhetorical Myth

The concept of myth has been explained in many different ways in different fields. In popular culture, *myth* is most often synonymous with misconceptions or falsehoods. For example, even though the first two definitions of *myth* in the Merriam-Webster online dictionary deal with a broad understanding of myth as a “traditional story . . . that serves to unfold part of the world view of a people,” all three examples given after the definition use *myth* in a negative sense, as a lie or misconception: “It’s an enduring *myth* that money brings happiness.” “I don’t believe the *myths* and legends about this forest.” “Contrary to popular *myth*, no monster lives in this lake” Using this popular definition, *myth* becomes a pejorative term that equates myth with fairy tales, misunderstandings, or outright lies.

The negative connotations associated with the word *myth* carry over into many academic attitudes toward the study of myth, particularly in business management and leadership studies. When I have described my case study and its focus on rhetorical myth
to faculty in business schools, their almost universal initial response is to wonder why and, more importantly, how a manager could hope to build and maintain consensus in a department through lying to the employees. In fact, to many people, “myths” are simply mistruths that need to be disproven. Therefore, the process of leading by creating an overarching unifying narrative (which I am describing) is often called “storytelling” (Boje; Boyce; Isabella) or “sensemaking” (Fiss and Zajac; Foldy, et al.; Gioia and Kumar; Roleau; Tumminia), thereby avoiding the negative implications.

Even with these negative connotations, I believe that the word myth best describes the attempts to build consensus I observed in my case study. Although “storytelling” and “sensemaking” are useful concepts, they don’t necessarily capture the complexity of myth, which involves a narrative of the past, present, and future, and includes characters and themes that all work together to create a worldview with “philosophical truth” (Moore 296). Using the term myth also allows for a deeper discussion of how a rhetorical myth is created and spread by prophetic figures, and how rhetorical myth shapes the identity of managers, employees, and organizations.

The concept of creating and using myths has a rich history in both literature studies and rhetorical theory. Together, these studies provide a definition of myth that can help us gain a richer understanding of how managers use myths rhetorically to build consensus. Although there are many concepts in the literature that could be helpful in understanding myth, there are three ideas that I use to form my definition of myth for this dissertation project. I explain these ideas, which I term chronographia, epideictic prediction, and communal markers, in detail in the sections below.
Chronographia

The word *chronographia* means to write or create time, and is often used to denote an invented or false reality. In rhetorical studies, chronographia is a rhetorical figure that vividly describes, according to the Silva Rhetoricae website, an “illusion of reality.” For my purposes, I have chosen to expand the meaning of chronographia beyond the rhetorical figure to describe one of the most important features of a rhetorical myth: the creation of a reality that ties narratives, characters, and events together with an overall worldview that imposes meaning and structure on a chaotic world. Chronographia provides the myth with a specific illusion of reality, but it is a reality designed solely to introduce order to random events, to show how past, present, and future are connected through people and their thoughts and actions.

Philosopher Stephen H. Daniel wrote, “Nothing other than chaos exists prior to the world that the myth reveals, and what the myth reveals is the ability of discourse to order experience and expression in such a way as to make possible a world to be known” (4). We see this definition used especially in reference to classical myths: the religious and foundational stories that have guided civilizations throughout history by making their pasts meaningful and their futures glorious. In order to provide shape to chaos, a myth alters, omits, conflates, or even fabricates historical facts and real individuals until each element in the myth contributes to its overarching goals. The facts of the narrative become less important than the goals of the myth. Moore wrote, “Myth, therefore, conveys moral and philosophical truth, not historical fact. While speaking metaphorically, myth also alters time and space” (296). To convey “philosophical truth,”
myths must form their own reality—a place where time, space, individuals, logic, and causality work together to advance the truths of the myth. Myths don’t simply shape relationships, they create the individuals, places, and objects that act in the relationships—and then define and give purpose to the interactions.

In Homer’s *Odyssey*, for example, the Greek war hero Ulysses travels for ten years on his way home from the Trojan War, meeting fantastical creatures and performing impossible tasks along the way. This ancient myth uses metaphor extensively to create a new world—one where Cyclops roam and men could be turned to swine. But it does not stop with creating an alternate version of the world. The *Odyssey* also creates (or re-creates to fit its version of reality) all of the characters in the world and defines how they interact. There is some ancient evidence to support the events of the Trojan War and the existence of a person named Ulysses, but their tie to the myth created in the *Odyssey* is tenuous.

Modern myths, particularly in workplaces, perform a similar function in creating a different world—one where Printing Services is the modern heir to the press of Gutenberg and villainous, outdated software threatens not only the efficiency of the organization but also the continuance of a noble professional identity and mission. Like in the *Odyssey*, some of the ties to historical evidence are tenuous, but the purpose of the rhetorical myth at Printing Services is not to recount history; the purpose of the myth is to function rhetorically to build and maintain consensus in a professional setting.

Chronographia, therefore, has a rhetorical purpose beyond creating an interesting story. By employing chronographia, the creator of a myth can add rhetorical power to a
narrative that will influence the actions and beliefs of the individuals who accept the myth. A conventional narrative draws connections between past, present, and future events and people to create a coherent story with a logical and interesting progression (see figure 1, part A). In a myth, on the other hand (see figure 1, part B), the author employs chronographia to reorder, rearrange, and emphasize certain events or data points to draw a direct, linear connection between the events of the past, the actions of the present, and a goal for the future. This chronographic manipulation yields powerful results: a compelling mythic story that specifies how a shared history leads to present actions and connects those actions with achieving goals for the future.

**Figure 1.** Conventional narratives (part A) draw connections between events and people to tell a coherent story. Rhetorical myths, on the other hand, employ chronographia (part B) to reorder, rearrange, emphasize, or even create events to draw a direct, linear connection between past, present, and future.
This focus on the present and the future differentiates myth further from other kinds of narrative. The purpose of myth is not to recount an accurate or factual history; rather, the purpose of myth is to affect the future by influencing actions in the present. Through chronographia, the authors and purveyors of myths can arrange and manipulate history rhetorically because in a myth it doesn’t matter whether the events and chronology are “true.” The goal of myth isn’t to communicate or establish what we would consider literal “truth.” Rather, the goal of myth is to create action in its believers by “convey[ing] moral and philosophical truth” (Moore 296), and historical accuracy is important only insofar as it contributes to that goal. The historical creation that happens as myth-creators use chronographia lays the foundation for the rhetorical interpretation of the present and prediction of the future. In the next section, I will turn from a discussion of how rhetorical myth creates the past through chronographia to discuss the second piece of my definition of rhetorical myth, epideictic prediction, or how myth affects the present by predicting the future.

**Epideictic Prediction**

In Aristotelian theory, epideictic rhetoric is ceremonial oratory focused on gaining favor with the audience by building on existing conceptions of heroes and villains. In Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*, he writes that in *epideixis* “the present is the most important; for all speakers praise or blame in regard to existing qualities, but they often make use of other things, both reminding [the audience] of the past and projecting the course of the future” (*Rhet.* 1358b). Epideictic rhetoric is focused on the present, calling
for action by assigning blame or praise to the past and guiding the audience toward the future. In my study of rhetorical myth, I have chosen to expand the term *epideictic* to include the word *prediction*. In creating, maintaining, and re-creating rhetorical myths, speakers constantly remind their audiences of the successes of the past and contrast those successes with the failures. The successes are intertwined with the communal identity, while the failures are challenges to that identity. Using praise and blame of the past, speakers propose actions the audience can take in the present to restore or surpass past successes in the future. In other words, in using myth, speakers create a future-focused epideictic rhetoric that ties present actions—with the accompanying praise and blame—to a glorious future or destiny.

Once again, we can turn to academic studies of myths in literature to gain insights into how epideictic prediction functions. Historically, humans have created myths to explain foundational events (such as the creation of the world or the origins of Rome) and address overarching themes (i.e., the relationship between mortals and divine beings or codes of interaction and morality). These myths are more than fantasies, however. Wellek and Warren wrote that myths are “the explanations a society offers its young of why the world is and why we do as we do” (191). In this sense, a myth is an extended narrative that ties a mythical past to an interpretation of the present and looks forward to an idealized future. Myths define origins—of the universe, a civilization, or a philosophy—and offer hope for the future: redemption, Heaven, Utopia, or, as in the case of the mythic Ulysses, simply arriving at a longed-for destination. These two ends of the mythic timeline are tied together in the present, where the speaker is inviting the
audience to an action that will help them progress toward their collective destiny. To this end, narrative myths have heroes, villains, and storylines that represent and illustrate the Big Questions about life: How did we get here? What should we be doing? Where are we going? What are the appropriate ways to solve problems? Myths answer these questions in ways consistent with their internal goals.

It is because of their extended timeline and specific goals that myths go beyond simple storytelling or narrative. Myths are created with a purpose—to call the audience to some sort of action. But myths do not propagate themselves. Myths need a speaker (or speakers) and an audience willing to believe. In traditional myths, this speaker is often a prophet or seer of some kind; someone who has communed with a power beyond human understanding to gain insight into both the past and the future. The prophetic figure is vital to the creation and maintenance of the myth. Take, for example, Moses, whose acceptance as a prophetic figure has shaped the worldview of adherents of three major religions. His version of the creation of the world and prophecies about its ultimate purposes were brought together by a set of laws and guidelines for the present; commandments rooted in a divine history that would lead to an exalted future. Moses’s epideictic prediction guided the ancient Israelites out of Egypt, inspired the prophet Muhammad, and provided a foundation for modern Christianity. Indeed, Moses’s mythic vision was so powerful that it still affects discussions in politics, science, and justice millennia later. For Moses’s myth, he employed praise for a collective past and communal identity in the stories of Adam and Eve, Noah, and the patriarchs. He assigned blame to the Egyptians for weakening and corrupting the “chosen people.” And
he predicted a future in a promised land, where the Israelites could regain their identity and achieve a glorious empire.

In modern rhetorical myths, such as those created in workplaces, the past, present, and future are limited by time, space, events, and the practical limitations of the community. But the myths still employ the same rhetorical features. In a workplace, for example, a manager in a struggling organization may act as a prophetic figure as she creates a myth that ties the history and identity of the company with predictions for future successes. She may assign blame for current struggles to poor management, the bad economy, or inefficient processes. She will praise the company’s history and talk about the virtues of the company’s mission, values, and culture. And she will likely talk about ways the company can achieve greater things. And this is the point at which the myth becomes fully embodied, by requesting an action in the present: complying with rules, increasing sales, accepting a change in policy or technology, or supporting organizational restructuring. By using epideictic prediction to shape her discourse, she is creating a myth not to tell history, but to shape present actions to point toward a specific future. In the next section, I will discuss how rhetorical myths act as communal markers to create a sense of identity and unity among their followers.

**Communal Markers**

The third element of my definition of rhetorical myth is communal markers. In providing answers to questions about the past, present, and future, myths go beyond providing guidance. They build a community through creating and reinforcing
organizational and individual identities. Rhetorician James L. Jasinski wrote that “[m]yth functions as reference points or cognitive coordinates for the members of a culture or community” (383). In other words, through myths, individuals and communities define the outside boundaries of their identities. The myths answer questions about who can be part of the community, how to behave within a community, and how a person can join the community. The myths provide ways to differentiate between “us” and “them” or “insiders” and “outsiders.” Through the complex narratives of past, present, and future contained in rhetorical myths, individuals and communities define their relationships with their entire history, other individuals and communities, and ultimately the universe. The myths people in a community accept and the “philosophical truths” those myths contain set up the communal markers that determine membership and activity within the community.

There are two essential theories that work together to support my concept of communal markers in myths: Burkean identification and boundary objects as rhetorically defined by Greg Wilson and Carl Herndl. Kenneth Burke theorized that we identify with others when our “interests are joined” or when we are “persuaded to believe” that they are joined (22). Because no two individuals are ever perfectly aligned, most identification comes through persuasion or, as Diane Davis argued, “conscious critique and reasoned adjustment” (123). George Cheney added that we “express our uniqueness (our individuality) principally by aligning ourselves with other individuals, collectivities or social categories” (13). This identification with other individuals or communities “grant[s] us personal meaning” and “place[s] us in the matrix of the social order”
(Cheney 16–17). As an integral part of identification, we divide ourselves from others whose interests are *not* aligned with ours. Cheney wrote, “[S]imilarity and difference mutually implicate one another, exist in an ongoing dialectical tension, and provide the formative context for what we call our ‘identity’” (13). In other words, we determine our own identity by how we perceive our relationship with others—both those who are similar to us and those who are different from us.

Rhetorical myths provide us with tools to define our identities. The mythic history, whether it is of the creation of the world or simply the origins of a company or department, provides a communal marker: a reference point that separates people within the mythic community from people outside. For example, in my case study I am writing about people within the printing industry. The unifying myth recounts the chronographic history of the printing/publishing industry—an industry that traces its history from Johannes Gutenberg through the independent presses of the Reformation and the American Revolution, the literary and newspaper presses of the nineteenth century, the publishing giants of the twentieth century, and the modern, technologically advanced publishers of the twenty-first century. This myth involves traditions, rituals, and language unique to people within the community that are maintained not necessarily because they are practical for everyday work but because they provide tools for identification and division. I will discuss some of the identification tools used in the rhetorical myth at Printing Services in chapter 4.

The Burkean approach to identification in communal markers can be enhanced by giving attention to the boundary work that happens around those communal markers.
According to Wilson and Herndl, “[b]oundaries are lines of demarcation and differentiation. They are also shared social, organizational, and discursive spaces. Rhetorical boundary work as it is typically understood is a rhetorical struggle to differentiate groups, to contest the legitimacy of the other” (131–32). In many ways, boundary work seems closely allied with Burkean division: we set up criteria for determining who and what can be included in our community and who and what should be excluded. Wilson and Herndl, however, argue that the boundary work that goes on in modern disciplines is much more complicated. Rather than simply being driven by a “demarcation exigence” (132), where other communities are excluded, boundary work also involves “integrative exigence,” where members of different communities find common ground around the communal markers in order to work toward shared goals. In this way, “boundary work can sometimes become a struggle for understanding and integration rather than a contest, controversy, and demarcation event” (132). This boundary work is especially important in modern workplaces, where different departments with different histories and goals overlap on projects. For example, in my study at Printing Services, the upgrade to the new PMS includes at least five groups:

1. Employees of the main printing plant, who share an organizational identity deeply rooted in the history of printing and publishing.
2. Employees of the satellite copy centers, who, though part of the structure of Printing Services, have a unique culture and distinct organizational identity.
3. Employees from other university departments, including IT Services and Purchasing.
4. University administration, who represent the larger community.

5. Clients from outside the university, who use Printing Services to print or copy documents, signs, and other materials.

Each of these groups brings their own interests and goals to the conference table. Their guiding principles and discourses conflict at times. Through integrative boundary work, however, the different communities have found ways to build a shared space, with shared interests for the overall project. I will return to the importance of this boundary work in chapter 4, where I will discuss the sometimes complex relationship between the employees of the main printing plant and the employees of the copy centers.

Rhetorical myths function as communal markers in that they both define internal relationships and give guidance for external relationships. In other words, the myths we choose to believe, or are persuaded to believe, determine in part who we are and how we interact with others. In religious and foundational myths, these guidelines for interaction are often explicitly stated as part of defining the culture or identity. For example, Moses told the Israelites, “Thou are an holy people unto the Lord thy God: the Lord thy God hath chosen thee to be a special people unto himself, above all people that are upon the face of the earth” (Deut. 7:6). As part of his instructions for dealing with people outside of their community, Moses wrote, “Thou shalt smite them, and utterly destroy them; thou shalt make no covenant with them, nor shew mercy unto them” (Deut. 7:2).

Modern workplace myths may not employ measures as dramatic as those of the Mosaic language in providing guidelines for interactions with other communities, but they do use similar rhetorical themes of creating an identity and governing outside
interaction. Consider these two excerpts from the About page of the Printing Services website: “Printing is unique among services and commodities at Iowa State, in that both the existence of the internal printing facility, including copy centers, and the subcontracting of printing are specifically authorized or regulated by the Board of Regents, State of Iowa.” This identification statement is given as justification for the policy that “Printing and Copy Services provides all printing-related functions to academic, administrative and support departments; faculty members; staff-affiliated organizations; and students. . . . Departments are to contact Printing Services before utilizing outside vendors for printing or copying services.”

Table 1. Identification Statements and Rules for Interaction in Deuteronomy and the Printing Services Website

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Identification Statement</th>
<th>Israelites</th>
<th>Printing Services</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Thou are an holy people unto the Lord thy God: the Lord thy God hath chosen thee to be a special people unto himself, above all people that are upon the face of the earth.</td>
<td></td>
<td>Printing is unique among services and commodities at Iowa State, in that both the existence of the internal printing facility, including copy centers, and the subcontracting of printing are specifically authorized or regulated by the Board of Regents, State of Iowa.</td>
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| Rules for Interaction | Thou shalt smite them, and utterly destroy them; thou shalt make no covenant with them, nor shew mercy unto them. | Printing and Copy Services provides all printing-related functions to academic, administrative and support departments; faculty members; staff-affiliated organizations; and students. . . . Departments are to contact Printing Services before utilizing outside vendors for printing or copying services. |
If we compare the excerpts from the Printing Services website with the biblical excerpts (see table 1), we see the foundational myth working to (1) provide a unique identity, based on unique characteristics (i.e., “holy people,” “special people,” “unique among services”) recognized by absolute authority (i.e., “the Lord thy God,” “the Board of Regents”); and (2) define the community’s place in the world, along with absolute restrictions on contact and interaction (i.e., “smite . . . destroy . . . make no covenant with them,” “provides all printing-related functions. Departments are to contact Printing Services before utilizing outside vendors”). As part of a rhetorical myth, communal markers provide a community with a clear space in which to operate—a space where the community’s chronographic timeline is valid and epideictic predictions from prophetic figures can shape values and govern actions.

When I look at chronographia, epideictic prediction, and communal markers together, I can build a working definition of rhetorical myth—a practical way to organize my observations of the persuasive discourse at Printing Services. This working definition of rhetorical myth also acts as a foundation for discussing different kinds of rhetorical myths, from the overarching cultural myths to the smaller, more limited myths that influence workplaces and other small communities. While both larger and smaller myths employ similar strategies and features, distinguishing between the kinds of myth can help us understand how to apply a definition of rhetorical myth in a specific situation. In the next section, I will examine in more detail the differences between societal/cultural myths and workplace myths.
Workplace Myths

Up to this point in this chapter, I have been discussing myths in general and applying my definitions to religious, cultural, social, and workplace myths. In the bulk of this dissertation, however, I focus on the specific workplace myth I observed in my case study (which I will discuss in detail in chapters 4 and 5), and the implications of my observations for building consensus through rhetorical myth in other workplaces.

The workplace myth is somewhat unique among myths. It differs from other myths in two key ways: (1) the size and scope of the myth, and (2) the methods of creating and communicating the myth.

First, workplace myths are limited in size and scope. If myths, in the general sense, are making sense of the cosmos, workplace myths do the same for a microcosmos. Rather than attempting to define the universe and everything in it through metaphor, workplace myths define the past, present, and future of a company, a department, or even a committee. Workplace myths provided structure and meaning for localized chaos rather than general chaos, and are particularly powerful for building and maintaining consensus and unity in limited communities undergoing drastic or difficult changes. Workplace myths are bounded by time, space, and situation. So, for instance, a workplace myth may have a timeline of a few decades or only a few years. In the case of Printing Services, the myth built on an extended history of several centuries, but the actions and the predictions were limited to the specific history of the existing PMS and the months and years of the project to upgrade the PMS. These limitations to workplace
myths make their study more accessible to researchers, because their creation, propagation, and fulfillment or failure all happen within a relatively short time.

Second, workplace myths are created and communicated in ways different from larger societal myths. Societal and cultural myths are usually formed through public oral and written discourse. Adolf Hitler, for example, began to craft the national myth of post-WWI Germany in Mein Kampf, and expanded the myth through many public speeches over nearly two decades (Sumison). Other politicians, like Ronald Reagan or Barack Obama, build and sell their visions for society through many public appearances and carefully crafted advertising and other discourse (Moore). These public speeches are complemented by innumerable smaller, harder-to-document speech acts that build, retell, and ultimately reify the myth by reminding individuals of the public speech and persuading them to believe in it. In Hitler’s Germany, for example, Nazi Party members held cottage meetings and private conversations where they repeated the Hitler myth and reinforced it with their own experiences and testimonials (Kershaw).

In the professional world, myth building can be more subtle. Most companies have relatively few public discourses—websites, meetings, memos, newsletters—in which to create a unifying myth, and that myth may not even be the governing myth for every situation. Departments, committees, and workgroups create their own myths that may build off the company myth, but are unique to a situation. Because of these subtleties, workplace myths are not necessarily created by public discourse like traditional myths. Moore argued that certain myths are built “in fragments but also from multiple sources” and therefore draw “from a deeply embedded framework of
understanding, it expresses itself in a truncated or dissociated manner that actually invites individuals to engage in and complete the storytelling” (297). The bulk of the work of creating and selling the workplace myths happens in private communications—conversations, emails, water-cooler discussions, or casual comments. In contrast to societal myths, where public discourse is the primary method of creating and spreading the myth, in workplace myths, public discourse then takes on a complementary function—it reminds workers of the private conversations that have already taken place.

These two main differences—size and scope and method of communication—make workplace myths both attractive and frustrating for researchers. Attractive, because the timeline of the myth is finite and the researcher can design a study to observe multiple stages of the myth-making process. Frustrating, because documenting the actual work of creating and spreading the myth is difficult and sometimes impossible. As an outsider, a researcher cannot hope to be privy to all of the discourse where the workplace myth is constructed and reinforced. I will return in chapter 3 to this discussion of how I conducted my study of the workplace myth at Printing Services to take advantage of the opportunities and overcome the challenges.

Conclusion

Rhetorical myth can be a powerful tool for managers and business leaders to build and maintain consensus in the workplace. In this dissertation, I will examine a case study at Printing Services through the lens of rhetorical myth to describe how a myth was created, propagated, and re-created in a specific workplace. In chapter 1, I have
defined the three main ideas I use to define rhetorical myth: chronographia, epideictic prediction, and communal markers. I have also discussed the primary differences between generalized societal myths and workplace myths. In chapter 2, I will continue this discussion of the transfer of ideas about general myth into more localized rhetorical myth by drawing on three sets of academic literature: rhetorical power, political myth-making, and discussions of storytelling and sensemaking. In chapters 3, 4, and 5, I will return to my case study of the rhetorical myth at Printing Services to show how rhetorical myth functions in a practical workplace setting. In chapter 3, I will detail my methodology for conducting the study and provide an overview of the situation and individuals at Printing Services. In chapter 4, I will describe the findings from my study to show how the rhetorical myth has been created and accepted through the first phases of the project at Printing Services. In chapter 5, I will discuss what happens when a workplace myth fails to reach its goals and the implications of that failure for both managers and employees.
CHAPTER 2
APPROACHES TO RHETORICAL MYTH

In chapter 1, I outlined a working definition of myth that focused on three core elements: chronographia, epideictic prediction, and communal markers. These elements can be used to describe and explore the details of almost any myth. In this chapter, I will explore three conversations from the academic literature that provide a foundation for moving past discussing any myth to analyzing a specific rhetorical myth in a localized situation such as a professional workplace. While there is a wealth of academic literature on generalized myths, including religious, societal, and political myths, much less work has been done on localized myths—those myths that help individuals and organizations make sense of limited situations.

The most common discussions surrounding myths in both literature studies and rhetorical studies deal with generalized myths: creation stories, foundational events, and heroic or religious epics. These myths make sense of the universe and provide individuals and communities with communal markers, shared histories, and common goals for the future. In the twentieth century, however, some rhetorical scholars began to pay more attention to smaller, more limited myths: those myths created and perpetuated in the public discourse that surrounds things such as politics, athletics, or entertainment.

In my study of Printing Services, I am taking the concept of rhetorical myth one step further to focus on a myth in an extremely small and localized community, where the rhetorical myth is limited in time and space. This specific workplace setting offers a
chance to examine the applications and implications of using rhetorical myth to build consensus in a single organization, where leaders are attempting to define a microcosmos, not a cosmos. While the setting, scale, and scope of a workplace myth are limited, these rhetorical myths share important features with their generalized mythic siblings: they are powerful persuasive tools that can be used (or manipulated) in discourse to build consensus within a community. Therefore, before I return to my study of Printing Services in chapters 3, 4, and 5, I will review in this chapter some of the key concepts that provide insight into creating and maintaining a rhetorical myth in a workplace.

In developing an understanding of rhetorical myth in the workplace, I have drawn on three distinct conversations in the broader academic literature: (1) the issue of power as it can be applied to rhetorical myths (Lévi-Strauss; Althusser; Foucault); (2) studies of rhetorical myth in the public sphere (Moore; Sumsion); and (3) alternative terms and ideas used to discuss mythic persuasion, as discussed in business and management research (Boje; Boyce; Isabella; Fiss and Zajac; Foldy, et al.; Gioia and Kumar; Tumminia; Barley; Faber; Greenbaum; Kahn). Drawing on these three diverse sets of literature provides a deeper, richer understanding of rhetorical myth. These different conversations have informed and strengthened my study while connecting my view of rhetorical myth in the practical setting of Printing Services with foundational academic work. In this chapter, I will provide overviews of the three conversations and draw connections among them to build the foundation for my dissertation research.
Myth as Power

Myths are designed to define communities and provide guiding principles. In effect, they are created explicitly to affect and, in many instances, change behavior. The fact that myths have the power to change or even control thought and behavior makes them a topic worthy of serious academic consideration. Throughout history, political and religious leaders have grounded expressions of power relationships, such as laws, commandments, and concepts of moral thought and behavior, in rhetorical myths. These myths, whether accepted by the people as historical fact or philosophical truth, provide the leaders with power to influence, teach, guide, govern, oppress, and even kill—all justified and empowered by rhetorical myth.

In the twentieth century, scholars in literature studies and mythic criticism have explored myths in this context of power. Scholars such as the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss and the philosopher Louis Althusser have argued that because myths involve grand narratives and fundamental ideas, they are incredibly powerful, deeply ingrained in both individuals and societies, and therefore available to guide or manipulate an individual’s thoughts and actions. Though Lévi-Strauss and Althusser disagree on the meaning and consequences of mythic power, they agree that myths have the power to shape societies and influence individual actions when used discursively by political, moral, social, or popular leaders.

To Lévi-Strauss, the inherent power in myths provides an opportunity for leaders and society to teach morality and govern action. In comparing myths to music, Lévi-Strauss wrote that both music and myth have “extraordinary power to act simultaneously
on the mind and the senses, stimulating both ideas and emotions and blending them in a common flow, so that they cease to exist side by side, except insofar as they correspond to, and bear witness to, each other” (28). Myths use this power (or their power is used by others) to “bring man face to face . . . with conscious approximations . . . of inevitably unconscious truths” (17–18). Lévi-Strauss argues that myths are powerful tools to connect individuals and communities with already-existing truths, which in turn promote common identity and govern thought and behavior.

In building from Lévi-Strauss’s work, I argue that myths’ primary goals are to create or encourage both correct thought, which in Greek is called *orthodoxy*, and correct action, which has the complementary Greek term *orthopraxis*. By creating a communal identity and getting the individuals within the community to accept both the chronographic history and the epideictic prediction of the future, the creators of the myths exercise power to connect orthodoxy and orthopraxy with the potential for both individual and communal future success. This connection is made narratively by showing that the actions of the heroes and villains have consequences tied to the moral “truth” of the myth. In most myths, the connection between orthodoxy/praxy and consequences is simple and direct: obey the laws and gain the promised future; disobey and be punished. For Lévi-Strauss, these simple, direct lessons provide positive guidance and governance for everyday actions and decisions; they connect the hearer of the myth with a communal truth.

For Althusser, however, the power of myths is more sinister. He argues that myths are essentially tools of oppression, used not just to teach morality and correct
actions, but also to manipulate and control individuals by creating and spreading dominating ideologies. He wrote:

They “forged” the Beautiful Lies so that, in the belief that they were obeying God, men would in fact obey the Priests and Despots, who are usually in alliance in their imposture, the Priests acting in the interests of the Despots or vice versa, according to the political positions of the “theoreticians” concerned. There is therefore a cause for the imaginary transposition of the real conditions of existence: that cause is the existence of a small number of cynical men who base their domination and exploitation of the “people” on a falsified representation of the world which they have imagined in order to enslave other minds by dominating their imaginations. (141)

Althusser’s view of myths as negative or oppressive power echoes earlier theories of power, such as that proposed in 1957 by Robert Dahl, who stated that power exists in relationships, is observable, and is oppressive because it is based on what Jasinski calls the ability “to control the will or decision-making capacity of another person or group” (443). In many societies and communities, myths create this kind of negative, observable, and oppressive power structure. Through the narratives and messages contained in a myth, a leader can misuse power to deceive, oppress, and create negative change in a society or community (see my discussion of Hitler’s use of myth in Nazi Germany later in this chapter). In these kinds of myths, the power is observable in
public discourse, such as in public oratory, published writings, and the visual and ceremonial trappings of the power structure.

But myths are not necessarily always observable in their exercise of power, particularly the localized myths that function in workplaces and other limited communities. Therefore, myths can also function with the more invisible power proposed by Peter Bachrach and Morton S. Baratz. In their view, power is invisibly oppressive, through controlling which decisions individuals can make by “limit[ing] the scope of the political process to public consideration of only those issues which are comparatively innocuous” (948). In these more limited communities, myths may not be built or maintained in public discourse, but they do still exercise control over thoughts and actions. To offer a personal example, my first job as a teenager was at a local fast food restaurant. During my initial training, I was drilled in certain words and phrases that governed how I viewed the restaurant and its customers. We served “guests,” not “customers”; we used “cleaning cloths,” not “rags”; and saying “that’s not my job” would result in immediate termination. By defining acceptable language (along with my other training), my trainers also created an orthodoxic and orthopraxic view of my employment, based in a subtle and less-observable workplace myth. The myth exercised enormous power, especially over my teenage mind. In specifying that termination was the consequence of incorrect speech, my trainers deliberately helped me connect unorthodoxies/praxies with negative consequences. In essence, the myth they created limited my actions by limiting my abilities to consider options and make decisions.
Whether myths are positive and instructive, as argued by Lévi-Strauss, or oppressive and limiting, as argued by Althusser, depends in large part on their use by the creators/perpetuators of the myths and the acceptance or resistance by the individuals in the community. In this sense, I align my view of myths as a source/instrument of power with the more neutral view of power proposed by Michel Foucault, who wrote that power “needs to be considered as a productive network which runs through the social body, much more than as a negative instance whose function is repression” (Power/Knowledge 119). If myths, as both Lévi-Strauss and Althusser agree, are inherently powerful, I argue that myths function as a neutral force that permeate all relationships and can be used either positively or negatively to build consensus or to enforce and oppress. In Foucault’s “The Subject and Power,” he explained this idea of power neutrality further:

In itself the exercise of power is not violence; nor is it a consent which, implicitly, is renewable. It is a total structure of actions brought to bear upon possible actions; it incites, it induces, it seduces, it makes easier or more difficult; in the extreme it constrains or forbids absolutely; it is nevertheless always a way of acting upon an acting subject or acting subjects by virtue of their acting or being capable of action. A set of actions upon other actions. (220–21)

Power, therefore, is the ability to use action to control or influence other individuals or groups. As individuals, we are subject to intertwining networks of power—different structures that each have the ability to control or influence our actions.
And myths are part of those systems of power. Within each individual’s power networks there are a variety of intersecting, overlapping, and even conflicting myths—religious, societal, political, scientific, communal, and organizational—that affect or govern that individual’s thoughts and actions. In order to function in society or within a specific community, individuals must navigate through their different myths (which I should note are all myths accepted by the individuals, even if they are conflicting) and make decisions on which actions and thoughts are appropriate for a given situation. For example, a practicing physician may have three different myths that govern her view of end-of-life decisions: a religious myth that states God decides who lives and dies; a professional myth that states doctors have a responsibility to ease suffering and respect the wishes of the patient; and a political myth that regulates the legal and social implications of removing life support. In this example, none of the myths is exclusively oppressive or productive, but they each represent power to influence the physician’s actions. The degree to which she accepts each myth and acts upon it attributes more or less power to that myth.

The power of myths to influence individuals is one element that makes myths important for serious academic consideration, particularly in rhetorical studies. In both public and private rhetorical situations, rhetors can base arguments for affecting thought or behavior on existing myths or can use shared knowledge and values to create new myths. Whether either of these rhetorical strategies proves effective depends on how much the audience has internalized existing myths or how well the audience accepts new myths. In other words, the power of a myth depends on the interaction between rhetor
and audience, prophetic figure and congregation. Hannah Arendt wrote that “[p]ower is never the property of an individual; it belongs to a group and remains in existence only so long as the group keeps together” (143). To Foucault, this group interaction is the essence of how power is created and extended, through “the accumulation, circulation, and functioning of a discourse” (Power/Knowledge 93). And because of both persuasive discourse by the rhetor and reifying discourse by the audience, the myth becomes accepted “truth,” which then has power to affect both orthodoxy and orthopraxy. Or, as Foucault wrote, “‘Truth’ is linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it and to effects of power which it induces and which extend it” (“The Subject and Power” 133). As audiences accept and act on the myth, the myth—and, by extension, the prophetic figure—gains power to affect additional actions or wider audiences. When audiences reject the myth or refuse to act on it, on the other hand, the power dissipates. By studying the discourse of a community, we can piece together the elements of communal myths and the power structures that both create the myths and are created by the myths. Through the discourse, we can also see what happens when a myth fails and its power over its audience dissipates.

Rhetors have often harnessed the power of myth to persuade their audiences to action. A powerful speaker can inspire or calm a crowd, create a frenzy, or defuse a tense situation. Rhetorical myths have that power. Audiences recognize mythic features and respond emotionally to the values and goals contained within. Longer-term persuasion in order to build and maintain consensus, however, takes concerted effort and careful, deliberate planning to cultivate a rhetorical myth and encourage its long-term
acceptance. In the next section of this chapter, I will move from discussing the power of myth generally to examining studies of modern political myth. These studies show the increased attention scholars have begun to place on the role of rhetorical myths in society. They also hold implications for looking at myths that are localized, rather than generalized to a nation or society.

Rhetorical Myth in Public Discourse

Although there are a number of studies that deal with the use of myth in public discourse, specific studies by Kershaw, Sumsion, and Moore show how leaders have employed rhetorical myth to build and maintain consensus among their followers. As noted above, consensus-building through myth is a longer and more strategic process than simply inspiring immediate action. Leaders who wish to build lasting consensus use a combination of existing myths and created myths to craft a new, unifying myth that accomplishes their goals. In public discourse, this new, unifying myth is often centered on the leader, who becomes the embodiment of mythic promises for the present and the focus of hopes for the mythic future. In this section, I will look at two twentieth-century leaders who built lasting consensus through rhetorical myth: Adolf Hitler and Ronald Reagan.

Hitler: The Myth of the Führer

Historian Ian Kershaw argues in his book *The Hitler Myth* that Adolf Hitler built his rule over Nazi Germany on the strength of his own myth as a heroic figure destined
to save a struggling nation. While there were other German leaders who had more direct control over the actions of the Nazis, the central figure in Nazism—in its wartime successes and failures, the Holocaust, and the concentration camps—is always Adolf Hitler. Hitler was (and remains) the face of Nazism, the driving force behind the Nazi myth. Beginning in the early 1920s, the Nazi Party wove existing frustrations and xenophobia together into a rhetorical myth that included a chronographic history of a glorious past, a prediction of a Germany reborn as the heir to the great empires of history, a set of villains who could be easily identified by heritage, and a hero—a messianic figure—in the form of Adolf Hitler.

Hitler’s role in the rhetorical myth cannot be understated. By the time he assumed power in 1933, his popularity was unprecedented and has rarely been repeated among political leaders. Historian S. Haffner estimated that “nine Germans in ten were ‘Hitler supporters, Führer believers’” (qtd. in Kershaw 1). This popularity went far beyond just the members of the Nazi Party to include nearly all Germans and many prominent European, British, and American politicians, businessmen, and entertainers. Hitler’s personal image and popularity was fundamental to the myth being perpetuated by the Nazis. Kershaw wrote, “The adulation of Hitler by millions of Germans who might otherwise have been only marginally committed to Nazism meant that the person of the Führer, as the focal point of basic consensus, formed a crucial integratory force in the Nazi system of rule” (1). Laura Sumsion added that Nazism itself was “dependent on Hitler as the embodiment of Nazi ideals for its very existence” (8).
Hitler’s centrality to the Nazi myth did not happen by chance. It was a carefully crafted rhetorical strategy designed to create an image of the Führer as the savior of German civilization. From his earliest days in the Nazi party, Hitler crafted his public image as the one person who was indispensible to the success of the party and its ideals and, by extension, the ultimate success of Germany. Kershaw explained:

There is not the slightest doubt that the “Hitler myth” was consciously devised as an integrating force by a regime acutely aware of the need to manufacture consensus. Hitler himself, as is well known, paid the greatest attention to the building of his public image. He gave great care to style and posture during speeches and other public engagements. And he was keen to avoid any hint of human failings, as in his refusal to be seen wearing spectacles or participating in any form of sport or other activity in which he might not excel and which might make him an object of amusement rather than admiration. . . . And during the Third Reich itself, Hitler was evidently aware how important his “omnipotent” image was to his leadership position and to the strength of his regime. (3)

Hitler, and those around him in the leadership of the Nazi party (particularly his Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels), carefully crafted a rhetorical myth that built on the populace’s desires for a national identity and a stable economy. As Hitler was consolidating his power during the 1920s and early 1930s, he was also expanding the myth to include himself as the indestructible, indispensible hope for the future of Germany. His political and military successes in the country and in the early parts of
World War II reinforced the acceptance of his myth. Even the ineffective dissent of top officers and failed assassination attempts seemed to confirm Hitler’s omnipotence.

Hitler’s use of rhetorical myth supported his rise to power in Germany. Moreover, his massive public support—the general acceptance of his myth—allowed Hitler to implement his more radical policies step by step. As Kershaw wrote, “[T]he constructed ‘Hitler myth’ was indispensable in its integrative function, . . . in establishing a massive basis of consensus among the German people for those aims and policies identifiable with the Führer” (4). Those “aims and policies,” of course, included the subjugation of Europe under German rule, the promotion of “pure” Germanic bloodlines, and the eradication of the deficient from society—Jews, Poles, Africans, the mentally and physically challenged, homosexuals, and others who didn’t fit within the boundaries of the mythic identity.

Hitler’s use of rhetorical myth to build consensus and consolidate power is not unique by any stretch of the imagination. His contemporaries in Europe, Great Britain, and the United States employed similar strategies in their public discourse and personae to create and manage their myths. Franklin D. Roosevelt refused to be seen in a wheelchair and even had special train tunnels built to enter New York City so he wouldn’t be seen as weak in public (Roosevelt). Winston Churchill and the British royal family took extraordinary steps to be seen as exemplars of British steadfastness during the most difficult days of the war (www.britroyals.com). And in Italy, Mussolini crafted his own version of the “Führer myth,” to consolidate his power (Palmer). In fact, it could
be argued that any successful leader uses rhetorical myth to create a public persona and build public support.

**Reagan: The “Morning in America” Myth**

In Mark P. Moore’s study of myth in the speeches of Ronald Reagan and Barry Goldwater, he wrote that public, political myth “joins sacred customs and beliefs with programmatic commitments” (298). In other words, political myth builds on existing myths to create action, in the form of support for a candidate or for policies and ideals. These kinds of myths are built by many acts of public discourse by a candidate and strengthened by a myriad of other sources, including the news media and acts of private discourse. In the process of building political myths, “a heroic image typically emerges that reinforces the action prescribed by the myth” (Moore 298). This “heroic image” is the embodiment of the mythic ideals; the evidence that the myth could become reality.

In the presidential election of 1980, the United States found its embodiment of mythic ideals in Ronald Reagan. As a former actor, Reagan was literally myth come to life: the hero who stepped out of the silver screen to save a troubled country. And he seemed to be the ideal hero for the country, with his charm and wit, his mixture of glamorous movie star and rugged cowboy, and his clear, straightforward communication. More than any politician in a generation, Reagan created a believable myth for the United States. He set up an attractive chronographic history, clearly defined the heroes and villains, and established lofty unifying goals.
Reagan’s myth was wildly successful. He built a broad coalition of Republicans, Democrats, and Independents that gave him a landslide victory in 1980 (he carried 44 states and won by over 9 percentage points) and an even larger win in 1984 (he carried 49 states and won by nearly 20 percentage points). The enduring popularity of Reagan’s myth helped spur his vice president, George H. W. Bush, to a resounding win in the presidential election of 1988 as well. In spite of some failed policies and a string of high-profile political scandals (i.e., the Iran-Contra affair), Reagan’s presidency—and his mythic vision for the United States—is still viewed as a successful touchpoint in consensus-building politics. In fact, during the 2012 presidential campaign, Reagan’s policies and successful coalition-building strategies were invoked positively by both Republican and Democratic candidates (Jackson).

According to Moore, Reagan’s success was not simply a result of his own personality. Like other successful leaders before him, including Hitler, Reagan built his myth for the United States on the existing “sacred customs and beliefs” (Moore 298) of the American people. Reagan’s rhetorical strategy combined two foundational American myths—the Western myth and the myth of the birth of the nation—into a single myth that provided a unifying foundation and a clear vision for his audiences. The Western myth, according to Moore, “emphasizes individual freedom and heroic wayfaring but also depicts the continual rebirth of a people who share a common destiny” (298). The myth of the birth of the nation, on the other hand, “glorifies the revolution as the birth of a nation destined to protect God-given rights to freedom, justice, equality, and happiness” (299). In combining the two myths, Reagan created a new myth, one that
glorified American individualism and celebrated the role of the government as a protector and promoter of American ideals.

Reagan used his newly created myth as a tool to build consensus for his election and his policies. In his 1980 nomination acceptance speech, he stated that he and the Republican Party were “ready to build a new consensus with all those across the land who share a community of values embodied in these words: family, work, neighborhood, peace and freedom” (qtd. in Moore 303). He continued this theme throughout the campaign as he offered hope, unity, and peace to people and communities across America. Specifically, he “offered his audience the prospect of being granted the right to enlarge their individual shares of the already settled but infinitely expandable commercial and industrial realm” (Moore 306). As noted above, Reagan’s mythic vision for America gained wide acceptance and became a turning point in modern politics in the United States.

Both Reagan and Hitler succeeded by building new myths centered around existing ideals. By setting their policies and personalities against the prevailing dissatisfaction and disillusionment, they were able to offer hope based on a shared version of the past, a clear vision of the future, and specific steps that needed to be accomplished in the present. Through spreading their mythic visions, they became the embodiment of their myths to their audiences: Hitler as the unassailable might of the new German empire, and Reagan as the ruggedly individualistic spirit of America. Their myths inspired millions and built consensus for their leadership positions and policies.
While both Reagan and Hitler are excellent examples of building public myth, they also show one important—and potentially perilous—side effect of creating myth. For both Reagan and Hitler, the myth itself centered on national identity, including past, present, and future. But they both became symbols or embodiments of the myths they created. Their individual identities became intertwined with the mythic identities of their nations, and consequently all successes and failures for the nations and the individuals became meshed together as well. In chapter 5 of this dissertation, I will explore the links between leaders and myths more fully as I examine what happens when myths fail.

Executives and managers in the corporate world often look to political and world leaders like Ronald Reagan (they tend to avoid Hitler) for examples of effective leadership. In the next section of this chapter, I will move from a discussion of myth in public discourse to myth in localized settings. By looking at literature from management and business journals, I will explore how business leaders employ rhetorical myth on a smaller scale to build consensus in their workplaces.

Myth By Any Other Name

In emulating world leaders’ use of more generalized myth on a smaller scale, corporate leaders often employ localized myth-making in the workplace to build consensus among their employees. They use specific narratives in their communications to link their companies to organizational or occupational histories, create goals for the future, and define actions for the present that are consistent with the histories and goals. This workplace myth creation has not been extensively studied in the field of rhetoric,
but the ideas behind creating an identity or consensus through a unified narrative have been studied frequently in business and management research. As noted earlier in this dissertation, however, the word *myth* has negative connotations in business and management, and scholars in those fields prefer to use words like *storytelling* or *sensemaking* to describe principles and actions similar to those I am discussing in this dissertation. In this section, I will review some of the influential articles from business and management journals that provide insight into the practices of and research into storytelling and sensegiving.

*Storytelling*, as generally used in the literature, is the process of creating and maintaining an organization. Through using specific language, leaders create an organization’s history, its future, its boundaries, and, most of all, its identity. Boje et al. argued that “we can consider organizations as material practices of text and talk set in currents of political economy and sociohistory—in time and space. From this point of view, what an organization is and everything that happens in and to it can be seen as a phenomenon in and of language” (571). The language used in storytelling can be very formal and governed from the top-down, like the manufactured official history of the Disney Corporation (Boje 1995). Or the language could be less formal and spread through the organization by employees as they talk and work in day-to-day situations. In fact, Boje (1991) argued that “the performance of stories is a key part of members’ sense making and a means to allow them to supplement individual memories with institutional memory” (106). By telling and retelling stories, employees take part in creating the story
of the organization and, in turn, internalize the story to change their own perceptions of reality.

This participation by managers and employees in creating and sharing the story of an organization adds complexity to creation of meaning. Boyce wrote that storytelling represents socially constructed reality, out of a “universal need for meaning and order” (2). Individuals and organizations need order; they need a reason to exist. The stories and language used within the organization not only describe the work and the purposes of the organization, they also create the work and the purposes. The stories provide the meaning for the organization, its leaders, and its employees. In connecting the concept of storytelling with my study, I argue that in many ways, the stories of an organization, as a collective, become the organization’s governing myth, which guides the thoughts and actions of the members of the organization. Storytelling, then, is the ongoing process of myth creation, designed to shape the boundaries and identity of an organization by describing (or creating) its past, present, and future.

If storytelling aligns with myth creation, sensemaking or sensegiving aligns with my definition of the process of adjusting or recreating the myth in response to events and actions. Weick, Sutcliffe, and Obstfeld define sensemaking as “the ongoing retrospective development of plausible images that rationalize what people are doing” (409). In other words, people use sensemaking to define and understand their own actions and the events around them. Like storytelling, sensemaking takes place through language. People notice action, interpret action, and attribute meaning to that action through discourse.
Sensemaking is often evident—and is most important—when an organization is going through change. Change, whether organizational or technological, alters the view of the world shared by employees, managers, and clients. In many cases, these changes are initiated by the leadership of the organization. Gioia and Chittipeddi wrote, “The initiation of strategic change can be viewed as a process whereby the CEO makes sense of an altered vision of the organization and engages in cycles of negotiated social construction activities to influence stakeholders and constituents to accept that vision” (434). Fiss and Zajac argue that managers have the power to effect change by aligning proposed changes within the existing frameworks of understanding within the organization. And as the change is being made, managers and supervisors take the forefront of both creating and selling the change to employees, supervisors, and even customers. The managers are able to do this because of their own frameworks, their own experiences with the organization. As Rouleau wrote, “[M]anagers draw on their tacit knowledge to make sense of the change and share it with others” (1415).

The process of change almost always involves fluidity, however. Managers can’t simply find one explanation for the necessary actions and expect that explanation to work throughout the change process. Rather, managers must constantly be finding meaning and communicating that meaning to those around them. Isabella found that as the process of change went on, managers’ “concerns shifted, reactions varied, and perceptions were both similar and diverse” (13). Managers do this constant shifting of sense in order to maintain support and explain what the organization is doing and, more importantly, why the organization is doing it. As Gioia and Chittipeddi wrote,
“Organization members, including the CEO, need to understand any intended change in a way that ‘makes sense’ or fits into some revised interpretive scheme or system of meaning” (434).

I argue that sensemaking is akin to recreating myth. In a myth-making organization, such as Printing Services, there is an existing framework—an overriding myth that ties employees together and provides meaning to their association and their actions. When there are changes to the organization, those changes need to be defined and explained in relation to the overriding myth. And when the myth itself is challenged, because of difficult changes or internal dissension, managers and leaders can reinterpret or recreate the myth or redefine the changes in an effort to maintain consensus, unity, or organizational identity.

Storytelling and sensemaking, and the wealth of literature that accompanies them, provide additional depth to understanding myth in the workplace. By aligning these concepts with a rhetorical interpretation of workplace myth, we can gain greater insight into the discourse and actions that shape meaning and understanding within an organization.

Conclusion

Myths provide shape and meaning to the universe, to societies, to politics, and to small communities and workplaces. Through myth, leaders can affect, direct, or oppress the thoughts and actions of those who accept the core ideas of the myth. Through
drawing from various academic traditions, I come to the following conclusions that can help as I turn to discussing my case study at Printing Services:

1. Myth is powerful and can be used to affect thought and behavior, both positively and negatively. It exists as part of a “network of power” to influence individuals.

2. Myth is built and spread through discourse, both public and private. Most of the academic literature to this point examines myth in public discourse. Myth in smaller, localized settings, like workplaces, offers a new avenue for academic interrogation.

3. Mythmaking is already happening in the workplace. Studies of storytelling and sensemaking show how managers and employees participate in the creation, acceptance, and re-creation of myths. By themselves, however, the terms storytelling and sensemaking do not capture the complexities and power inherent in rhetorical myths.

In order to understand their potential for rhetorical power, we need to study how myths are created, accepted, and re-created. In this dissertation, I approach the study of rhetorical myths by looking at the development of a single myth in a localized setting. This localized setting provides an opportunity for detailed glimpses of mythbuilding in action and the rhetorical myth’s reception by those it is designed to influence. In chapter 3, I will discuss my methodology for conducting my research study at Iowa State University’s Printing Services.
CHAPTER 3

STUDYING RHETORICAL MYTH AT PRINTING SERVICES

Communication in the workplace isn’t limited to formal documents and meetings. Rather, each workplace is a constant hum of communication—face-to-face conversations, phone calls, instant messages, e-mails, presentations, meetings, and written documents. Much of this communication is day-to-day business and work-related tasks, but a significant amount is devoted to personal relationships through casual conversations, jokes, disagreements, complaints, and conflicts. Taken all together—the formal and the informal, the work-related and personal—this workplace communication can provide an intricate view both of attitudes toward change and of efforts at persuasion. More importantly, the total sum of communication is essential to understanding not just the official version of a workplace myth, but also how that myth is understood, internalized, and used by the employees of an organization. As I designed a methodology for my case study, I paid particular attention to the complexities of communication in the workplace. Although I wanted to understand how the leaders of the department were using persuasion, I also needed to understand the culture of the community they were persuading.

Learning the culture of a community provides a greater understanding of workplace communication, particularly the creation and acceptance of workplace myths. As discussed in chapter 2, some management studies call the creation or propagation of a myth “storytelling” or “sensemaking.” The reception or acceptance of the myth by both
the employees and the organization, on the other hand, is often termed “culture.” In a recent interview published in the *MIT Sloan Management Review*, Vala Afshar claims that “culture is what happens when the manager leaves the room. That’s when you can feel and sense—in the absence of authority—whether you are aligned with the company’s core values and guiding principles” (2). For a researcher, this means that to understand the impact of a persuasive myth in an organization, he or she must expand data collection beyond official documents and communications to include the informal communications that make up the core of an organization’s identity.

Capturing the moments of communication that exhibit an organization’s identity, particularly in the midst of a complicated technological change, requires many levels of interpersonal connections between the researcher and the subjects. It also requires extended time to observe interactions outside of those that happen in formal meetings. Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw write that an “ethnographer participates in the daily routines of this setting, develops ongoing relations with the people in it, and observes all the while what is going on” (1). In my study of the Printing Services department, I used ethnographic methods over an extended period to document both the management’s creation of the workplace myth and the employees’ response to the myth. In the sections below, I will explain how my approach to ethnography allowed me to study the complex communication questions in the change to the new PMS at Printing Services. I will then describe my research site and discuss my methods for collecting and analyzing data. I will conclude with a brief section on ethical considerations and privacy.
Finding Rhetorical Myth through Ethnography

Rhetorical myth is a complex animal, particularly in a workplace. Unlike many traditional myths, which are clearly outlined in public discourse or writings, workplace myths are often left unarticulated, or articulated in pieces and segments over many different meetings and conversations. Workplace myths do not come prepackaged; they are created over time in response to difficult situations and with constant negotiation among managers, employees, and even clients. In the process of creating and accepting the myths through formal and informal communication, the ideas and values become thoroughly ingrained in the culture and identity of the organization. Therefore, ethnography provides the best tools for locating, documenting, and understanding the creation and acceptance of a workplace myth. As LeCompte and Schensul argue, “because cultural practices, beliefs, attitudes, and histories of constituent groups in the [research] setting can affect each situation, these must be documented and their intersections and mutual influences explored” (34).

Ethnographic research allows for the kind of extended contact required to understand the workplace myth associated with an organization. Additionally, it allows the researcher to find connectedness in the formal and informal communications. Glesne and Peshkin write, “everything you read and hear can be connected, or at least considered for connection, to your phenomenon” (55). For instance, on the surface the conversation at a typical meeting in Printing Services is standard communication: serious discussion of the meeting’s topic mixed with jokes, asides, and good-natured ribbing. Over time, however, patterns begin to emerge that connects the “standard”
communication with the organization identity, culture, and, ultimately, the workplace myth. In chapter 4, I will analyze several of these patterns and provide examples of how they connect each committee meeting with the workplace myth.

In the early parts of my study at Printing Services, I quickly realized that understanding efforts at building consensus and persuading employees would take more than discussions with the people doing the persuading. I needed to be on the ground, in the field, talking with both management and employees to see how the persuasion was happening and how effective those efforts were. I designed my study to take advantage of the access provided by Printing Services and to give myself the best opportunities to understand and connect the formal and informal communications with the overall rhetorical workplace myth.

Description of Research Site

Iowa State University’s Printing Services handles the offset printing, copying, and digital publishing needs for ISU administration, departments, employees, and students. Through cooperative agreements, Printing Services also manages some of the printing and copying for Iowa’s other Regents’ universities: the University of Iowa and the University of Northern Iowa. Its employees and equipment are constantly busy and often work on evenings and weekends to meet deadlines and keep up with demand. Over the past two decades, as many universities have shuttered their on-campus printing operations, Iowa State’s Printing Services has maintained its business—and the support
of the administration—through efficient operations and a savvy approach to new technologies.

As a business center attached to a university, Printing Services maintains a balance between sound business principles and contributing to the educational mission and cultural values of Iowa State. In practical terms, this balance means (1) operating at peak efficiency, to both justify costs and allay concerns; (2) controlling growth by limiting clients, jobs, and equipment to those specifically outlined in the mission defined by Printing Services, ISU administration, and the Iowa Board of Regents; and (3) deploying technologies that meet the demands of both (1) and (2) but also align with the environmental and other values of the ISU community. For example, Printing Services balances efficiency, budget, and the environment by using only cloth printing plates (rather than the traditional metal plates) because they are cheaper to produce, recyclable, and do not require the toxic acids used in the production of metal plates.

While the Printing Services department is extremely busy, it is actually only a mid-size department in comparison with other universities in the United States. The department employs 32 full-time employees in the main printing plant, 17 full-time employees in the 8 satellite copy centers, and a fluctuating number of student employees distributed through the main plant and copy centers. Other universities employ many more full-time and student employees in their printing services departments, but also serve wider purposes, such as publishing books and journals for academic presses and fulfilling printing orders for individuals and organizations outside of the university.
community. Iowa State’s Printing Services remains focused on its core clients: the administration, departments, and students of Iowa State.

The main printing plant houses full-time employees in administration, sales and customer service, design, pre-press, offset press, bindery, and the warehouse, shipping, and delivery. Part-time student employees assist in the work of all of these areas. The full-time employees represent a wide range of education, experience, and expertise. They all share, however, a background in and commitment to the printing industry. The administrators, who hold advanced degrees, have decades of experience working in and around printing. The equipment operators are trained and certified in ways very similar to the ways their predecessors were trained in professional societies and guilds for hundreds of years (see chapter 4 for a discussion of this traditional training and its place in the workplace myth). Even the customer service and sales representatives, whose training is administrative and secretarial, have become enveloped in the history, world, language, and identity of the printing industry.

The copy centers, on the other hand, house a very different group of employees. Each satellite copy center employs one or two full-time employees who are coordinated through the central plant. The full-time employees oversee student employees, who interact with customers and perform the tasks associated with printing, copying, binding, and laminating. The culture in the copy centers is different, separated from the culture of the central plant by background, experience, expertise, and connection to the printing industry. The copy centers are semi-autonomous, both administratively and culturally, and that becomes evident in their responses to proposed changes.
My work with the Printing Services department began in late 2009, when the management team began investigating the need to replace their central print management system software. The PMS software is used in all interactions between the different individuals and departments with Printing Services and is vital to their operations. The current system, however, has several weaknesses. The primary difficulty is that the PMS is aging and experiences frequent outages and malfunctions, which cause work slowdowns and costly production delays. But the current PMS is also designed only for offset printing plants, and not multisite operations and online services that include offset and digital printing, as well as copying, binding, and delivery. As a consequence, the copy centers have been operating using a different system, installed separately at each satellite location and with no automated interface with the central system. Under the current system, the copy centers transmit their statistics manually to the central office, where they are input manually into a database. The online services offered by the department are administered in a third system that does not integrate with the work scheduling or payment and accounting systems of the central plant’s PMS.

With these needs in mind, the leadership of Printing Services decided to pursue options for purchasing a new PMS. The decision to even consider options was a struggle between the managers, who both recognized the need for a change and worried about the effect requesting more than $100,000 for software, training, and implementation would have on their position in the university. In a tough economy where the university was being hit with budget cuts every year, the expense of a new PMS seemed to set a crash course with university administration. Additionally, the managers at Printing Services
understood the time and difficulties of implementing a new central technology. After some months of discussion, however, the necessity of a new system won out over the worries about the costs and implementation.

In early 2010, Printing Services’ management team formed a purchasing committee to evaluate the options for investing in a new PMS. The purchasing committee included twelve employees of Printing Services, who represented all of the functions of the office. Later in the process, the management team invited a representative from the university’s Purchasing Department. Some of the Printing Services employees were required to join the committee, but some volunteered after the management team issued a general invitation to participate. The meetings were also open for any of the employees from the central plant or the copy centers to participate. The table below details the permanent members of the purchasing committee and their jobs within Printing Services.

**Table 2. Purchasing Committee**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Primary Job</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rob (chair)</td>
<td>Assistant Director</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zach</td>
<td>Information Technology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steve</td>
<td>Director</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lana</td>
<td>Customer Service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christy</td>
<td>Customer Service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Judy</td>
<td>Accounting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ken</td>
<td>Print Buyer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alan</td>
<td>Digital Press</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laura</td>
<td>Copy Center Supervisor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nick</td>
<td>Bindery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jesse</td>
<td>Copy Center Supervisor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Renae</td>
<td>Digital Press</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2 In most of this dissertation, I will use the real first names of the committee members. See the section on Ethical Considerations and Privacy below for more explanation.
During my observations, the purchasing committee met at least once each week between March 2010 and March 2011. Their work progressed through six stages, which were set up as goals (or a to-do list) very early in the process:

1. Outline problems with current system (March–April 2010). The early meetings were essentially organized gripe sessions. Committee members were asked to focus on their complaints about the old PMS, but the meetings were often wide-ranging in their discussions of technology, operations, and personnel.

2. Create a wish list of features (April–June 2010). As the committee narrowed down the list of complaints to things that could be features of new software, they kept an active list of possible features. At this point in the process, the members of the committee had not yet seen or explored the alternatives for new systems. These meetings established the “ideal” PMS, the standard by which to judge the actual technologies available.

3. Explore options for new systems (June–August 2010). With the wish list in hand, the committee (led by Rob, who had gone through this process at least twice before in his decades of work at Printing Services) began contacting companies to discuss options for a new PMS. There are only a few companies that make this type of software, which is extremely expensive and tailored to narrow specifications determined by the client.

4. Obtain approval from the university to pursue options (August 2010). With a list of problems and a wish list, plus some options of companies to contact, Steve
and Rob approached university administration to ask for approval for the new
PMS. Through careful persuasive tactics (which are not included in my
dissertation case study), they gained approval. At this point, Iowa State’s
Purchasing department became involved in the process and mediated the contacts
between Printing Services and PMS companies.

5. Listen to sales presentations from companies (October–December 2010).
Purchasing contacted several companies and asked for bids, based on the wish
list of features. Purchasing selected three finalists and organized conference calls
and demonstration for the committee at Printing Services.

6. Conduct their own investigations of software options (October 2010–January
2011). Independently of the Purchasing department, the committee at Printing
Services conducted its own investigation by contacting other university and
commercial printers to ask about features, implementation, customer service, and
ongoing costs of the different PMS options.

7. Compare new software features with wish list of features and the outline of
problems (January–March 2011). None of the three finalists had created a PMS
that matched all of the desired features. The committee evaluated the possible
features and weighed the problems that wouldn’t be solved against the cost of the
purchase and implementation.

8. Make a purchasing decision. March 2011. After more conference calls and
negotiations, the committee chose a new PMS.
In March 2011, the purchasing committee settled on a new PMS. At this point, the management team disbanded the purchasing committee and formed a new six-person implementation team to oversee the transition to the new PMS. While the purchasing committee included representatives from every department and was open to volunteers, the implementation team was limited to those employees who would be involved directly in the implementation and oversight of the new PMS. The table below shows the names and job responsibilities for each person on the implementation team.

**Table 3. Implementation Team**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Primary Job</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rob</td>
<td>Associate Director</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zach</td>
<td>Information Technology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christy</td>
<td>Customer Service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Judy</td>
<td>Accounting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steve</td>
<td>Director</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jon</td>
<td>Prepress</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The implementation team also brought in representatives from other areas when the situation required specific expertise. The implementation phase was much more detailed and technical than the purchasing phase had been. This team went through five steps, again set up in the early meetings as a list of goals:

1. Basic orientation to the software (March–May 2011). In the beginning phases of implementation, a representative from the PMS company led each team meeting through a WebEx interface. The team became familiar with the software, the features, and the options for installation and customization.

2. Training (June 2011). Zach and Judy flew to the company’s headquarters for two days of in-depth training on the new PMS, using the customized features chosen
in the basic orientation. When they returned, they reported on their training in a committee meeting and began the process of training the other members of the committee in the essential features of the new PMS.

3. Software setup (June–July 2011). The initial software setup began in March, as Zach installed the PMS and became oriented to its abilities (and quirks). After the on-site training, however, he re-installed the new PMS with customized features he worked on with the company during training, imported the data from Printing Services, and began to set it up for use.

4. Testing (July 2011–present). The new PMS and its features are still being tested and adjusted to work efficiently with the personnel and processes at Printing Services.

5. Going live (????). At the beginning of the project, the goal for implementation was before fall semester 2011 (in late July or early August). Very early in the implementation discussions, however, the team realized that goal was unrealistic, and the deadline for going live was changed to before spring semester 2012 (in December). The complexity of the system and the limited resources available once again pushed the goal to summer 2012. The goal now, according to an email from Rob on January 30, 2013, is to go live in three stages: (1) live, but limited to certain personnel (including accounting and IT) on February 4, 2013; (2) live to the entire central printing office on July 1, 2013; and (3) live to the entire system, including the copy centers, sometime in fall semester 2013. I will discuss these moving goals and their effect on the rhetorical myth in chapter 5.
Throughout the processes of researching, buying, and implementing the new PMS, I observed meetings, conducted interviews, and had access to email and other communications. I will describe my data collection in the next section.

Data Collection

I conducted my first interviews with Printing Services employees in November 2009 under a limited IRB-approved study to examine technological change in the publishing/printing industry. During an interview with Rob, then the interim director, I learned that Printing Services would be beginning the process of purchasing and moving to a new PMS early the next year. With Rob’s invitation, and under the direction of Professors Lee Honeycutt and Greg Wilson, I designed this dissertation case study and obtained IRB approval for a formal extended study early in 2010.

My data collection involved three primary forms of interactions and observations with the managers and employees of Printing Services:

1. Observing committee meetings
2. Conducting individual interviews
3. Interacting informally with employees

I will describe these data collection methods in more detail below. The goal with all of the methods, however, was to record both formal and informal persuasion methods designed to encourage unity within the department and to facilitate employee acceptance of the new technology.
Observing Committee Meetings

From March 2010 until the final decision in March 2011, I attended almost all of the purchasing committee meetings. These meetings were generally held once or twice a week and often stretched over two or three hours. During these meetings I occasionally recorded audio, but I always kept minutes and ethnographic field notes of the process. Although I was usually a silent observer in the meetings, by late 2010, committee members would sometimes ask for my input or opinions and (more often) request that I review my minutes and observations from earlier meetings.

After Printing Services purchased the new PMS and formed the implementation team, the management and employees pushed for a quicker process. Consequently, the meeting schedule increased to two or three longer meetings (2–3 hours) each week. I continued attending these meetings as much as possible, particularly in the early stages. By September 2011, the majority of the employees in the organization had accepted the change and were giving it support (although some were more reluctant than others). The meetings became very technical as the committee worked through the minute details of customizing the software to fit with the operations at Printing Services. At that point, I scaled back my attendance at meetings although I continued collecting data through the other methods.

Conducting Individual Interviews

In addition to the meeting notes and observations, I also conducted interviews with members of the committee at important points in the process. I interviewed some of
the management team before the process began, in November 2009 and January and February 2010. I interviewed several members of the purchasing committee in January of 2011 (when the committee was shifting its focus from whether they should upgrade the software to evaluating actual companies and software), and again in September 2011 at the formal beginning of the implementation process. In these interviews I asked for personal and departmental reactions to the reasons and results of the technological changes. See appendix A for the structure of the interviews and the questions I asked.

**Interacting Informally with Employees**

As I argued in chapters 1 and 2, in contrast to popular, cultural, and societal myths, which are created, shared, and reinforced in the public sphere, workplace myths are created and reinforced in private conversations. Although the details of the myth are referred to in the public meetings, the primary work happens in informal emails, water-cooler conversations, and less-formal meetings. For my study, I visited Printing Services regularly to chat with employees, participate in discussions, and to observe interactions. I found that some of the most important conversations regarding the myth, including conversations between the managers planning their persuasion tactics, happened during these “off” times. For example, Rob and Zach would hold informal discussions after the official meetings to assess the response to their arguments and plan their strategies for the next week. Because of the nature of the conversations, I rarely took audio recordings or real-time notes of the discussions. After leaving the office, however, I would write down my recollections and impressions of the interactions that day. Additionally, I kept
records of as many informal email exchanges as possible between the management and employees of Printing Services.

Data Analysis

My meeting notes, field notes, interviews, interaction notes, and copies of formal memos and emails provided me with mountains of data to sift through and analyze. There are a number of themes I could explore using this data, and several that I plan to write about in articles that follow my dissertation. For this study, however, I coded my research data for six themes, three of which focus on the myth-building process (creation, acceptance, and re-creation), and three of which focus on the elements of rhetorical myths (chronographia, epideictic prediction, and communal markers).

Stages of the Myth-Building Process

My initial interest in the project at Printing Services was to document the methods of persuasion used by management to build consensus for technological changes. As my study progressed, this broad goal was refined into looking at how the management built and maintained a workplace myth that functioned rhetorically to bind the employees together with a common identity, which in turn facilitated consensus for the technological transition. Over the course of my study, I defined four distinct stages of the myth-building process: creation, acceptance and reification, dissension and challenges, and re-creation. In analyzing my data, I focused on the creation, acceptance, and re-creation because those three could be documented as parallels, with the
management as the primary actors/rhetors. I included discussion of the challenges to the myth as a secondary stage that creates the need for re-creation. I will discuss each of the three primary stages of myth-building below.

1. Creation. In coding for creation, I looked for instances where the management team built the rhetorical myth. This includes their discussion of the history, mission, and values of Printing Services; the faults and weaknesses of the old system (setting up a villain and assigning blame); the promises and expectations of the new PMS (creating a hero and giving praise); and promises and goals for the end date and outcomes (providing a vision of the future).

2. Acceptance and Reification. As the myth was introduced, I looked for how it was accepted among the employees and how the managers built on and reinforced that acceptance. Specifically, I coded for (1) places when the management team looked for common ground or elements of the myth that were already accepted to help them build a case for additional pieces of the myth, or (2) times when the management specifically reminded the employees of accepted details of the myth in order to reify its position as their guiding principles or to maintain consensus.

3. Re-creation. Every myth has challenges to its promises and authority. A workplace myth has additional difficulties because it makes specific promises and ties the values and identity of the organization to those promises. As the decision and implementation processes dragged beyond the expectations and promises, some employees began to resist the change or challenge the myth. In response, the management team re-created the myth in a way that deemphasized
some of the time-sensitive goals and emphasized the overall goals of the myth. I coded for instances when the management responded to criticism by re-creating the rhetorical myth.

**Elements of Rhetorical Myths**

In chapter 1, I define the three elements that I use to define rhetorical workplace myths: chronographia, epideictic prediction, and communal markers. As I coded my data, I also looked for these three elements in the formal and informal communications gathered from Printing Services. These statements provide evidence that the communications go beyond simple discussion or even narrative to creating a unifying workplace myth.

1. **Chronographia.** To code for chronographia, I looked for instances where the rhetorical myth involved altering time and space in support of the myth. By drawing connections and discussing the history of the organization in connection with present actions and future goals, the management team at times created a different version of reality: a mythic reality that encouraged employees to identify with the myth and act on its promises.

2. **Epideictic Prediction.** Epideictic rhetoric calls for action, based on assigning praise and blame to people and things in the present and past. Epideictic prediction ties those present actions—with the accompanying praise and blame—to future goals or a glorious future. In my study, I coded for instances of assigned praise and blame, particularly associated with the current and prospective PMSs.
I also coded for how the management team envisioned a specific future, tied to both the past and the present through the identity and values of Printing Services.

3. Communal Markers. Rhetorical myths provide reference points or communal markers to help individuals define their relationships with other individuals and organizations. These communal markers often appear in statements of identification. I coded for how employees and management identified with each other, with Printing Services, and with the publishing industry. I also coded for how those communal markers changed over time, with the acceptance and re-creation of the rhetorical myth.

**Bringing the Stages of Myth-Building and the Elements of Myth Together**

The six themes for which I coded my data have overlaps and connections that reflect the complexity of the interactions at Printing Services and the difficulty of mapping a workplace myth. As I conducted my research and analyzed the data, I found (1) the chronological stages of the myth-building process could be charted by the rhetorical discourse of the management team and the employees on the committee, and (2) the elements of myth show up in different ways during the different stages of the myth-building process. These connections between the stages and the elements of myth help create a rich picture of how rhetorical myths are created in the workplace. To show the connections visually, I created table 4, which maps how a myth’s creation, acceptance, and re-creation can be seen in the ways managers use chronographia, epideictic prediction, and communal markers.
Table 4. Stages of Myth-Building and Elements of Myth

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ELEMENTS OF MYTH</th>
<th>STAGES OF MYTH-BUILDING</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Creation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chronographia</td>
<td>Managers shape how their employees view the past, present, and future and set up the characters of the myth.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Epideictic</td>
<td>Managers assign blame and praise to the characters of the myth in order to predict or set goals for the future.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prediction</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communal</td>
<td>Managers create a communal identity by identifying boundary markers and qualifications to be in the community.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Markers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

During the Creation stage of myth-building (the first column of Table 4), managers work to establish the elements of the rhetorical myth they are trying to build. In this stage, as I will discuss more in chapter 4, managers use chronographia to connect the created myth with the shared history and identities of the community, set up the major characters of the myth (including the Hero, the Villain, and the Prophet), and begin to associate those characters with either praise (for the Hero) or blame (for the Villain). In the process of setting up the myth, managers also create a vision of the future, based on the opportunity to act correctly in the present. Additionally, managers
articulate qualifications to be in the community and set up boundary markers to guide interactions with those outside the community. While these communal markers may be based in part on existing concepts of identity, they are refined, restated, and reinforced as part of the new rhetorical myth.

During the second stage of myth-building, Acceptance (the second column in table 4), managers build on the foundation they created during the first stage. In this stage, the employees have accepted the rhetorical myth and have begun to act and think according to its principles. The work of the managers during this stage is primarily maintenance, although it may also include expanding the myth, based on the already-accepted elements. During the Acceptance stage, discourse about the myth shifts from open discussion and overt persuasion of shared history and future goals to brief references and reminders about the shared belief in the rhetorical myth.

The third stage of myth-building, Re-creation (the third column in table 4), is necessary after managers experience setbacks, challenges, or dissensions that affect the unity or consensus built by the original myth. These challenges often happen when predictions fail to come true or deadlines built into the structure of the myth pass without success. During the Re-creation stage, managers may alter the chronographia to reinterpret the past or focus on different goals for the future. They frequently reassign praise and blame to offset criticism and rebuild unity (for example, blame which was placed on malfunctioning software in the Creation stage may shift to poor data design or university bureaucracy when the problems aren’t solved by implementation of the new software). Throughout the Re-creation stage, however, the managers focus additional
emphasis on the communal markers, which function as standards for unity when the rest of the elements of the myth may be shifting.

In chapter 4 of this dissertation, I will detail the first two columns based on my observations at Printing Services during the Creation and Acceptance stages. In chapter 5, I will go through the third column (Re-creation) as I address what happens when myths fail and need to be reformed to maintain consensus in an organization.

Ethical Considerations and Privacy

In my initial proposal to Printing Services, I wrote “I will enact strict measures to keep the information I gather private and confidential. I will protect the documents and other artifacts and I will use them only for research. The research site and the individuals who choose to participate will not be identified by name, unless explicit permission is provided” (Appendix B). In addition, the informed consent document each participant signed promised confidentiality of “all paperwork, transcriptions, minutes, and other written materials” and “audio and video files” (Appendix C).

Early in the research process, however, the management team gave me explicit permission to use the name and location of Printing Services and the names of the individuals on the committees. Their reasoning was that all of the meetings, communications, and information discussed were public record and should be open for both academic research and public knowledge. In my data collection, storage, and analysis, I have tried to balance these two competing ethical considerations: the privacy of the individuals promised by the research study and the open knowledge desired by the
participants. In this dissertation, I identify each of the participants by their real first name and position within Printing Services. The only exceptions are in chapter 4, when I provide some specific examples that could be damaging to certain individuals’ reputations or careers. In these cases I have simply omitted the identifying information from their quotations.

In all other matters concerning privacy and confidentiality, I have complied with the regulations and guidelines provided by federal government agencies, auditing departments of Iowa State University, and the Institutional Review Board.

Conclusion

The research methods I have employed in my study of Printing Services have helped me to capture the complexity of the organization in a way that exhibits the development and acceptance of the rhetorical myth. By engaging in a long-term ethnographic study, I have documented the formal and informal communications essential to myth-making and consensus-building in a professional environment. In chapter 4, I will show how these methods produced data that supports my argument that rhetorical myths can be powerful persuasive tools in building consensus in the workplace.
CHAPTER 4
CREATING AND MAINTAINING A RHETORICAL MYTH

In October 2010, after months of meeting, griping about problems with the current print management system (PMS), and creating a wish list for a new PMS, the purchasing committee at Iowa State University’s Printing Services was finally talking to salespeople about the possibilities for upgrading their systems. The university’s purchasing department had arranged for conference calls with the three top choices. Each of the calls, which lasted over an hour, ended with roughly the same conversation. The salesperson wrapped up his presentation, answered a few questions, and then asked, “Is there anything else I can answer for you?” At this point, Rob grinned around at the people in the room before saying, “I hope you have included the Slow Print Module and the Fatal Error Module in your pricing.”

The befuddled salesman on the other end of the line went silent. The other members of the purchasing committee smirked at each other; they’d heard versions of Rob’s joke many times before. “I’m not sure what you mean,” the salesman answered finally. Rob laughed. “Well, we’ve just enjoyed those modules so much on our current PMS, and we were hoping you could throw them in with the rest of your package.” The committee laughed, even though they had heard Rob use the same joke on the other sales calls, and variations of the joke in committee meetings dozens of times. This joke was not simply wordplay at the expense of the hapless salesman. This joke, along with other key phrases, expressions, and actions, was a conscious reminder to the purchasing
committee of their unifying rhetorical myth—their belief in a shared vision of the past and future of the department that built consensus for the committee’s actions in the present. Rob’s joke, as bad and overused as it was, acted as part of a pattern of discourse that created, maintained, and then re-created the rhetorical myth at Printing Services.

In this chapter, using my observations of committee meetings, interviews with employees, and other interactions, I examine how patterns of discourse show the rhetorical myth at Printing Services being created and maintained through the first eighteen months of the project to implement a new PMS. I will show through vignettes and examples how the management team used rhetorical myth to build consensus among the employees for a difficult and time-consuming change. In this chapter, I will address the first two columns shown in table 3 from chapter 3: the Creation stage and the Acceptance stage. As I narrate how Printing Services progressed through the stages, I will review how the management team used each of the elements of myth: chronographia, epideictic prediction, and communal markers. At the end of the chapter, I will show that the rhetorical myth at Printing Services has six specific characteristics.

Creating and Accepting the Myth at Printing Services

By the time I met with Rob for the first time in November 2009, much of the groundwork for the Creation stage had been established, and the Acceptance stage of the rhetorical myth at Printing Services was already underway. Many key beliefs that became essential to building consensus through rhetorical myth were in place, including a common history, organizational identity, and frustration with the PMS. Rob’s role in
creating the myth was to take those shared beliefs and piece them together into a rhetorical argument. His core argument was that a complicated change to an expensive new PMS not only fit within the worldview of Printing Services but also was essential to the continued success of the department. Before I discuss specific examples, however, I need to address two points that complicated my observations of the stages of rhetorical myth: (1) public discourse vs. private discourse, and (2) rhetorical consciousness.

As noted in the earlier chapters of this dissertation, the creation of rhetorical myth in the workplace happens primarily through private discourse. Whereas political and societal myths are created, shared, and accepted publicly, localized myths are discussed and shared in private conversations, informal chats, and myriads of small communications that shape identity, build boundaries, assign praise and blame, and create hopes and goals for the future. Because of these many private pieces of discourse, public discourse in the workplace generally reminds employees of an already accepted myth, rather than explicitly stating the parameters of a new myth. So a manager like Rob may spend most of his effort convincing people privately to support the change to the new PMS, but in committee meetings will only make jokes or casual comments about the reasons for the change.

As a researcher, I came into the committee meetings as an outsider who could only observe a small part of the total discourse about the rhetorical myth. Even if I could have spent all day each day in the offices, I could have captured only a fraction of the conversations where the rhetorical myth was being created. Therefore, I looked for patterns of discourse in the areas I was invited to observe: committee meetings,
interviews, and conversations; specific phrases and ideas that both management and employees repeated. What I found was that, though employees differed in their approaches to and opinions about the new PMS, there were some ideas that they all seemed to agree upon. More convincingly, when challenges arose, those shared ideas shifted to new shared ideas for all of the employees at roughly the same time. In chapter 5, I will discuss one of those shifts in shared ideas when I detail the Re-creation stage.

As I analyzed the meetings and interviews, however, I realized that most of the discourse fit into the Acceptance stage rather than the Creation stage. However, I believe that, in a localized rhetorical myth such as the one at Printing Services, the Creation activities and the Acceptance activities are closely intertwined and often happen concurrently. With only months to craft and communicate a rhetorical myth, Rob was often creating and sharing the myth on the fly while encouraging the acceptance of the myth at the same time. Therefore, in this chapter, I provide summaries and narratives of meetings along with ethnographic evidence from interviews to show the development of the myth through the first two stages.

The second point that complicated my observations of the myth at Printing Services was the idea of rhetorical consciousness. Was Rob consciously creating a rhetorical myth? Did he intend to use myth to persuade employees and build consensus? In order to establish this idea of rhetorical consciousness, I turned to Rob’s statements and actions throughout my observations. From my first meeting with him, Rob stated a belief that it was his duty to see the future, help people accept the need for change, and
then unify employees in support of the actual change. In written answers to questions about his role in the organization prior to the interview, Rob wrote:

Since I have been in this business, we have gone through many such changes. I think being able to foresee new technologies and implement them when they become financially feasible is an extremely important function of a person in my position.

Rob stated explicitly this same thought throughout the project: his position in the organization required him to “foresee new technologies” and be an advocate for them. For Rob, this meant persuading university administration to allow new technologies and to convince employees to accept those new technologies.

Rob’s consciousness of his rhetorical role continued throughout the project. After committee meetings, he would remain in the conference room with Zach (who quickly became Rob’s strongest supporter and helper in creating and sharing the myth) to evaluate the statements he had made during the meeting and the reactions of the other members of the committee. Rob and Zach frequently turned these discussions into post-meeting strategy sessions, where they would discuss specific challenges, plan to target certain individuals to gain support, and look forward to the next meeting. Rob often framed these post-meeting sessions as “getting our stories straight.” Within the context of rhetorical myth-creation, however, I saw the post-meetings as evidence of rhetorical consciousness—an active management of the rhetorical myth to adjust and focus the persuasive elements in order to address concerns and build consensus. In the sections below, I will discuss how Rob actively created a rhetorical myth and encouraged its
acceptance at Printing Services by “getting his story straight” through chronographia, epideictic prediction, and communal markers.

**Chronographia**

One of the first elements of rhetorical myth I observed at Printing Services was how Rob and other employees drew connections between the history of printing and the present circumstances involving the failing PMS. Creating a chronographic history for the rhetorical myth involved emphasizing points of common history and setting up the core characters of the rhetorical myth: the Hero, the Villain, and the Prophet.

**Common History**

Even though chronographia involves invented reality, that reality is not necessarily false or created *ex nihilo*. Rather, the chronographic reality is a version of reality that involves a mixture of historical fact and interpretation that gives “order [to] experience and expression” (Daniel 4). To create a mythic history, the creator of the myth draws on historical events already accepted by the audience and draws connections between those events to create meaning and order. Therefore, chronographia is more effective when the audience already has a strong sense of common history for the creator of the myth to draw upon to make connections and inspire action.

To build the rhetorical myth for the employees at Printing Services, Rob drew upon a powerful common history: the history of publishing. While many industries have strong historical ties, the publishing industry is particularly close-knit. In one of my pilot
studies to prepare for my dissertation work, I investigated Burkean identification in the publishing industry. As I interviewed seasoned professionals at all levels (and in many different roles) of the publishing process, I found a strong affinity for the history of their occupation. They saw themselves as part of a “noble” tradition—a guild or craft that traces its roots to Johannes Gutenberg’s invention of the modern printing press. That tradition came with a strong sense of occupational identity, specific training, and a language or jargon unique to publishing.

Contrary to many long traditions that may be resistant to change, however, the publishing industry’s accepted history is built on a series of technological changes that, according to the chronographia, changed society as well. Gutenberg’s invention in the mid-1400s started the printing revolution that fueled the Protestant Reformation and contributed to the political revolutions of the eighteenth century. Further advances in printing, including iron hand presses, steam roller presses, and electric presses, sped up printing while advances in transportation took publishing from small local shops to giant, powerful nationwide publishing corporations. In the second half of the twentieth century, publishers adopted computers and sponsored the development of specialized software to increase efficiency and speed up production. And now, in the early twenty-first century, publishers are exploring the world of e-publishing to find a way to continue their traditions in the electronic age. Because of this history of changes, the publishing industry seems to be open to change, and some individuals, like Rob (as described below) push publishers to be at the forefront of change.
For the rhetorical myth at Printing Services, then, most of the history was already in place. Publishing has changed many times and continues to adjust to new technologies. Rob’s challenge was to take that history and make it specifically applicable to a local setting, where the change to the PMS meant disruptive changes in workflow, processes, reporting, and, for some, negative changes in their employment and compensation. Rob accomplished that application in two ways: (1) he articulated the change in PMS as the next step in the ongoing technological evolution of publishing, and (2) he connected his own history with introducing new technologies to the success of the new PMS.

For the first point, Rob would frequently talk about the history of publishing technology; it is one of his passions and he has seen a lot of the changes of the past three decades personally. As he would talk about the history of publishing, he would then add the change in PMS as the next logical step in the process. For example, in our first interview, he talked about his role in bringing desktop publishing to Iowa State University’s campus in the mid-1980s, connecting computers through networking, finding better ways to create the photographic film used in offset printing, replacing inefficient and polluting presses with more modern, greener machines, and introducing digital printing to the print shop. He then began to talk about the need for a new PMS immediately following his discussion of digital printing. This future change, which Rob had not yet received permission to pursue, was part of the technological history of Printing Services and, indeed, the history of publishing.
Rob’s version of the past became the basis for the chronographia of Printing Services. In my interviews with members of the search committee, I always asked for a reason why they were making the change to the new PMS. In the early parts of the project, I got very similar answers that the change was necessary because (1) the old PMS was breaking down and not being supported, and (2) the new PMS would restore the department’s efficiency. Some even went further, like Rob, to connect the change in PMS to the historical changes in the publishing industry. For example, Ken, the department’s print buyer, said in one interview, “It’s such a dramatic thing to the point where, really, in just a few hundred years, you’ve gone from being able to print on paper to who needs paper anymore, eliminating it. The thing has evolved so quickly and most of that has been in the last 15 or 20 years. . . . [talking about the current PMS] We’ve outgrown that to the point that it’s time for us to do something else.” Ken, like others in the department, connected the upgrade to the new PMS with the chronographic history of Printing Services.

In all of the successful implementations of new technologies at Printing Services, Rob’s goal has been to become more efficient and connected with the mission of the university. The new PMS, when added to the end of the list of historical changes in the publishing industry, both corrects current problems and increases the department’s overall efficiency and productiveness.

The second point is closely tied to the first: Rob not only connected the change in PMS to the history of publishing, he also connected the change to his personal history. Frequently in meetings or private conversations, he would bring up earlier changes he
had implemented to reassure the members of the committee: “I’ve done this sort of thing before, you know.” Rob’s expertise and experience, along with Zach’s technological wizardry (“Zach has assured us that everything will be okay”), became a touchstone for the other members of the committee. They trusted Rob and Zach, so therefore they could trust the change to the new PMS, even though it could be a difficult implementation for individuals and the department. In an interview with Ken, he articulated how this trust in Rob and Zach affected the interest in the decision to upgrade to the new PMS: “I’m sure there were a lot of people that never reviewed some of that information, that they just never got a chance, or they figured, ‘As long as Rob and Zach are looking at it, we should be OK.’” I will discuss Rob’s role in the myth more as I introduce the characters of the myth in the next section of this chapter, and then again in chapter 5, when I discuss what happens when myths fail.

*Introducing the Characters of the Rhetorical Myth*

In this dissertation, I am not attempting to redefine or explore what Lévi-Strauss calls “mythemes”: elements and characters that are common to all myths. I am, however, using some common characters I see in traditional myths to organize and explain my observations of Printing Services: the Hero, the Villain, and the Prophet. In order to understand the specific rhetorical myth at Printing Services, it is valuable to review the general definitions of these three characters. Myths are designed to teach “philosophical truth” (Moore 296), not necessarily historical fact. Therefore, the individuals and objects associated with myths are simplified or created to fit into the message and themes of the
myth. Myths don’t generally deal in shades of grey; rather, myths present a black-and-white image of the created world. In the simplified world of the myth, there are good people with good thoughts who produce good actions and good futures. On the other hand, there are bad people, bad thoughts, bad actions, and bad futures. This binary sets up clear choices and sure consequences for the adherents of the myth. And while there may be many characters in the myth, there is typically one representative of good—the Hero—and one representative of evil—the Villain.

In the created world of a myth, the concepts of “good” and “bad” are boiled down into two archetypal characters: the Hero and the Villain. The Hero represents everything good, including the idyllic past and the glorious future. The Villain represents everything bad and is blamed for current problems that could prevent the community from reaching the hoped-for future glory. The third character that is important in a specific myth is the Prophet. The Prophet is the voice of the myth and the cheerleader for the Hero. Generally, the Prophet is a person who is (1) old enough to remember the successes of the past, (2) wise enough or gifted with supernatural abilities to foresee the possibilities for the future, and (3) dedicated to finding the Hero and teaching him or her how to save the community.

In the rhetorical myth at Printing Services, the archetypal characters are clear: the Villain is the current PMS, an aging software and hardware infrastructure that is threatening Printing Services’ ability to function. When I first visited Printing Services in late 2009 to interview Rob, the interim director, he explained the difficulties of working with the old system. In essence, the complaints about the PMS boiled down to
two flaws, which Rob called “the Slow-Print Module and the Fatal Error Module.”
While there were many underlying causes for the problems with the PMS (including the age of the software and the outdated equipment), the visible problems were (1) the system would take several minutes—and often up to half an hour—to print necessary forms and receipts; and (2) the PMS would frequently run into fatal errors that required a system-wide restart. Because everyone in the central office, including the customer service representatives, the accountants, the pre-press and press operators, and the administration, all worked on the same system, a fatal error stopped work for the entire department. In essence, the old PMS was disrupting the community and preventing the employees from doing their jobs.

The Hero at Printing Services, on the other hand, is the new PMS, a software package that will correct any and all current problems, restore efficiency, and set Printing Services on a path to future success that will surpass their historical success. In that same interview with Rob, he talked about the possibilities for a new PMS, one that would solve all of the current problems. I should note that at the point when I first interviewed him, Rob had done only preliminary research into new systems. He had vague ideas of what the newer PMSs could actually do, based on his own experience and his contacts with other print shops. But he had lots of ideas about what they should do and he had strong beliefs about what effect getting a new PMS could have on the organization. But others in the organization did not see the necessity for change, and some were actively opposed to it because of the cost and the effect that change would have on their own jobs. For Rob to succeed in building support within Printing Services
for this massive and expensive change, he had to create a myth, one with a powerful
Hero. The Hero he created was a mostly imaginary ideal PMS that did not become a
reality until the purchasing committee began contacting companies in the fall of 2010
(almost a year after my first interview with Rob). In this chapter and in chapter 5, I will
show how the Hero at Printing Services grew from a fairly practical, though imaginary,
PMS into an epic and almost infallible Hero, still imaginary but filled out with the
expectations and hopes of the committee and other employees.

The ideal PMS as the Hero was created and shared by Rob, who acts in the role
of the Prophet in the myth at Printing Services. Like most Prophets, he has ties to the
past, a vision of the future, and a quest to find and train the Hero. Rob’s role as Prophet
was already well established before he approached the PMS project. A 2008 profile of
Rob on the Inside Iowa State web site talked about his role as a Prophet for technology
in general:

Back in 1987, a couple of hotshot graphic designers housed in the old
ERI Building that stood west of Marston Hall were hard at work, affixing
a masking-tape footprint of a computer, keyboard and mouse to the top of
a desk.

Rob Louden and Kurt Plagge hoped the visual aid would help
convince Janet Rohler, their boss in the Office of Editorial Services (now
Engineering Communications and Marketing), to approve their request
for desktop publishing hardware and software. . . .
“I had a PC computer and PageMaker software at home and I provided all the information I could to convince [Rohler] about all the things we could do with it,” Louden said. “And finally we wore her down. . . . We were maybe the first on campus to have desktop publishing.”

Fast forward 20 years and you’ll find Louden still persuading administrators to keep Iowa State at the forefront of graphics technology. As computer publishing specialist for ISU Printing and Copy Services for 18 years, he has helped steer the campus community through an ever-changing maze of graphics software and hardware.

For decades, Rob has acted as the Prophet of technology for Printing Services. From introducing computers to building a network to various advances in printing presses to at least three changes in the PMS, Rob’s history with technological advancements and vision for the future of the department and the industry has established a prophetic ethos. That ethos inspires confidence and trust in the other employees, and allows Rob to use the chronographia to take the next step in the myth-building process: epideictic prediction, where he assigns praise and blame, describes a vision for the future, and prescribes a specific action for the present that will lead to the desired future. In the next section, I will describe how Rob used epideictic prediction to build the rhetorical myth at Printing Services.
**Epideictic Prediction**

While the past and the cast of characters provide an important foundation for a rhetorical myth, the myth itself is primarily epideictic; it focuses on the present. As Aristotle wrote, in *epideixis* “the present is the most important; for all speakers praise or blame in regard to existing qualities, but they often make use of other things, both reminding [the audience] of the past and projecting the course of the future” (*Rhet.* 1358b). In creating the rhetorical myth at Printing Services, Rob built on the past and charted a course for the future, but his central goal was always focused on action in the present. He wanted the committee to act on his recommendation to upgrade to a new PMS, and he wanted them to act as a unified group. His method for accomplishing this unity was to build on the chronographia to assign praise and blame, craft a vision for the future, and, most importantly, define a specific opportunity for action in the present.

**Assigning Blame and Praise**

An essential part of epideictic prediction is to shape the characters to highlight problems that require action. The Prophet of the myth calls out the Villain to remind the audience of past wrongs, bring to light current injustices or problems, and—most of all—to place blame on the Villain for the things that are wrong. In the rhetorical myth at Printing Services (as noted above), the Villain is the old PMS itself. Just like with the common history, Rob did not have to do much to convince the employees of Printing Services that the PMS was to blame. In my initial interviews with the members of the committee, they often cited the old PMS as a major cause of inefficiencies—from work
slowdowns to misprinted job tickets to problems with customer service. Many began their discussions of problems with “The system won’t let us . . .” as if the system were alive and actively preventing them from accomplishing their work.

The blame went beyond that initial frustration with the inefficiencies, however. As the rhetorical myth grew and spread, the employees and members of the committee began to attribute more of the problems in the workplace to the existing PMS. It became an almost malicious entity that malfunctioned on purpose to disrupt the work of Printing Services. In one interview, Christy described the system as limiting: “Our hands are kind of tied a little bit with our current system. I don’t think we were ever able to get it the way it needed to be for our print shop.”

In meetings and interviews, I heard blame placed on the PMS for everything from common shutdowns and printing problems to poor customer service, sloppy product tracking, job errors, missed charges, and even employee unity in the office. While some of these problems were certainly associated with the PMS, many of them also involved user error and department culture, rather than a villainous piece of software. But the blame placed on the PMS as the Villain had grown far beyond the actual problems the PMS caused, where it was no longer simply an outdated software program—it was an active Villain that was threatening the department’s success in the present and its possibilities for the future.

Blame is not complete, of course, without an accompanying assignment of praise. It wasn’t good enough for Rob to convince employees at Printing Services that the old PMS was a Villain; he had to introduce and constantly praise a Hero that could
solve the problems. Assigning praise was tricky early in the process. As I wrote above, when I first interviewed Rob, he had only vague ideas about the capabilities of the new software on the market. He had started talking with people and learning as much as he could, but Rob didn’t have approval to formally investigate a replacement system. He began to assign praise anyway, with phrases like “If we get a new system, maybe it could solve that problem for you. I don’t know, though.” Although he always couched his promises for the new PMS’s capabilities in uncertainty, his constant references to “a new system” built the idea of a potential Hero who could restore efficiency to Printing Services.

When Rob did get approval to move forward, the first months of the committee meetings were spent outlining the problems with the current PMS and creating a wish list for a new PMS. As noted above, the blame placed on the current PMS had expanded beyond the actual problems with the software. Similarly, the wish list for the new PMS set expectations that surpassed the capabilities of the commercially available software solutions. But the expectations were there. For some, the expectations of the new system were limited to bad experiences with the current PMS. Lana, a customer service representative, echoed Rob’s favorite joke in her expectations: “If it can print out job tickets faster and eliminate fatal errors it will be an improvement.” Others, however, went beyond solving problems with the current PMS to hoping the new system would improve their work. In an interview with Christy, one of the customer service representatives, she explained her expectations:
I have high hopes that the new system will be able to work a lot better for us. . . . Number one, I think it’ll make us more efficient, which I think is the goal of any print shop. I think that’s going to be the main thing that will help us. . . . I think that should be one of our main focuses when we start going with the new system, making sure we’re mainstreamed and that we can get from point A to point B a lot faster than we do now.

Christy’s expectations of the new PMS seem reasonable, and her specific hopes were echoed in many of the interviews and meetings. But still other employees wanted even more than maximized efficiency. Some expected the new PMS to solve additional problems not necessarily associated with the system. Consider digital press operator Alan’s expectations:

Hopefully this next system will be better for everyone. I’m hoping that it’ll be more user friendly, maybe free up a little more time. Especially like in my area where I spend a lot of time clocking in and out. Inventory-wise it’ll be a more of an overall picture for everyone. Maybe do away with the old system, and it’ll be good that way. Customer service? I’m not quite seeing everything that they do, of course hopefully that’ll help them fill out the tickets. It’ll be easier for us to understand and I can see that being a big plus. Because there’s been times when mistakes have been made just because I don’t read the whole ticket, if I don’t look ahead and look at somebody else’s part of it. Sometimes I’ll miss something and that’s happened more than once.
Again, some of Alan’s expectations are reasonable: The system is designed to be more user friendly and efficient. But some of Alan’s hopes are based on the PMS changing the behavior of the customer service representatives: “hopefully that’ll help them fill out the tickets.” He also expresses hope that the new PMS will change his own behavior, because in his words, “I don’t read the whole ticket. . . . Sometimes I’ll miss something.” Of course, some of those changes to behavior could be made through user-friendly design and effective display of information, but Alan’s praise, like many of the other employee’s praise for the future PMS, was not based on any sort of reality. At the time of his interview where he expressed his expectations, Alan had not seen any of the new systems demonstrated, and was basing his expectations solely on the wish list he had helped create in the committee meetings.

In the case of Printing Services, assigning praise and blame provided a focus for both frustrations and hope. Rob, through his constant reminders about the shortcomings of the old PMS and the possibilities of the new PMS, channeled the praise and blame of the employees and members of the committee into a desire for something better: an achievable future.

A Vision for the Future

The epideictic rhetoric of praise and blame bridges the past and the future in a rhetorical myth. By looking to a common past, we can see our identities and our successes and failures. By assigning blame, we find a focus for something that needs to
be changed to maintain our success and restore our identity. By assigning praise, we find a path to the future: a vision of where we could be, with the Hero’s help.

At Printing Services, Rob had established a consensus around a common past and the important identifying elements of the organization: efficiency and unique service to the university. In order to maintain that consensus, however, Rob had to create a clear vision of both the present and the future. Through assigning blame to the current PMS, Rob persuaded the employees of Printing Services to attribute struggles and difficulties to an ailing computer system. By assigning praise to a new PMS, Rob established a possible future with four key elements:

1. Printing Services’ efficiency would be increased and, therefore, its value to the university would be maintained.
2. Printing Services’ identity as an organization, which was being challenged by the current PMS, would be restored and enhanced.
3. Printing Services would be able to achieve future successes, in line with the mission of the university.
4. Printing Services would be united as one department, with fewer divisions between the copy centers and the main printing plant.

Rob articulated each of the four elements in meetings throughout the process, although his emphasis on which came first in the list changed as the committee faced challenges and skepticism. I will discuss his changes in emphasis more in chapter 5. Rob’s plan for the future was set out clearly to the committee, and it was closely tied to the other pieces of the rhetorical myth, which allowed the members of the committee to accept Rob’s
vision for the future based on their acceptance of the chronographic history, the blame for the current PMS, and the praise for the new PMS.

*An Action for the Present*

Once the committee had accepted the future, they needed a plan of action in the present to get them to that future. As Aristotle wrote, “The present is most important” (*Rhet.* 1358b). All of the steps in creating the myth and persuading the members of the committee to accept the myth were focused on convincing them to take action. Through the myth, Rob laid out an argument to the members of the committee that they had an opportunity to act to preserve the future of the department. He gave them opportunities to participate in defining the Hero in a way that would ensure the department continued, increased in efficiency, and added value to the university. In each of the meetings throughout the process, Rob would remind the members of the committee through jokes, asides, schedules, and specific assignments that they were there specifically to work for the future of the department, and the future depended on their decisions.

Through epideictic prediction, Rob helped the committee focus their chronographia on specific goals for the future by assigning praise and blame, detailing a vision for the future, and, most importantly, prescribing an action for the present. In the next section, I will turn from discussing epideictic prediction to show how the members of the committee at Printing Services used the rhetorical myth to define their interactions with people inside and outside of their community with communal markers.
Communal Markers

Six months into my research project where I had been attending committee meetings, participating in discussions, and interviewing members of the committee, I walked into the conference room at Printing Services for our weekly meeting. Rob, looking up, asked, “They let you back in?” Even though the committee had approved my research and had invited me to become part of their meetings; even though they asked for my opinion and took pains to include me in discussions; even though we joked and laughed as friends outside of the conference room, I was an outsider on the committee. As a researcher, I was not threatening, and the members of the committee were not hostile to my presence, but I certainly did not belong within the community. At nearly every meeting, Rob or one of the other members of the committee would draw attention to me as an outsider. Even a small statement such as “They let you back in?” sets a tone for our interaction by defining our places in relationship to the community of the rhetorical myth.

Communal markers play an important role in defining who has the opportunity for action within a rhetorical myth. As noted in chapter 1, communal markers are based in Burkean identification and rhetorical boundary objects. The members of the committee at Printing Services had aligned themselves with each other through accepting the chronographia and the epideictic prediction. Through this alignment, they created what Burke terms a “consubstantial community” (22) dependent on continued alignment of interests and goals. This alignment does not just provide consensus, though; it provides something more powerful: a personal and organizational identity
that, according to Cheney, “grant[s] us personal meaning” and “place[s] us in the matrix of the social order” (16–17). In other words, the alignment with other members of the committee provided each member with an identity—a deeply ingrained sense of who they are and what they could (and should) do.

At Printing Services, one source of shared identity is a common commitment to efficiency. From the management to the most junior employees and from the central printing office to the copy centers, all of the employees I spoke with mentioned efficiency. Part of the focus on efficiency is out of fear. Printing offices at other universities have been shut down in favor of outsourcing to commercial printing companies. In order to maintain their place in the university, the employees at Printing Services must be efficient to prove their value in an educational environment. The other part of the focus on efficiency, however, has its roots in institutional pride and communal identification. In their conversations with me, employees would say “we are efficient” and “we need to be more efficient.” Efficiency isn’t just something that they do or the manner in which they do their work; it is part of Printing Services’ central organizational identity.

I witnessed this identifying focus on efficiency on several occasions. In one particularly memorable project status meeting, representatives from all of the different departments reviewed the statuses of over 100 active printing projects, including discussing problems, making assignments, and congratulating successes. The meeting took exactly six minutes. In an astonishing display of coordination and consensus, the employees and management knew exactly what they were doing and moved through the
agenda as quickly as possible. This meeting and others like it provided evidence that they do not just talk about efficiency at Printing Services, they incorporate it into every aspect of their work.

Burke also argued that “identification is compensatory to division” (22). It is not enough for members of a community to align with each other; they also must identify differences between their community and other communities, to provide themselves with an identifying difference to set them apart. The Printing Services website provides one such identification statement: “Printing is unique among services and commodities at Iowa State.” This sentiment was echoed throughout my meetings and interviews with the employees and management teams. Printing Services isn’t just a valuable service, it is unique and therefore vital to preserve.

In practical application, I argue that identification within communities is shown primarily through statements of division. The opening statement to me as I enter the committee room reminds the committee and me of our places in this small community. They are insiders; I am an outsider. This sets up our roles and our opportunities for action during the meeting. For limited communities, these sorts of reminders are essential, because each member of the committee operates in other roles and other communities. By using identifying and dividing discourse early in each meeting, Rob was reminding the committee members of their community within the specific rhetorical myth and reestablishing the boundaries, limits, and expectations for interaction both inside and outside of the community. In this section of the chapter, I will provide two examples of identifying/dividing discourse from the committee meetings. These
examples show how Rob and the other members of the committee create a community through simple statements, jokes, and casual conversations. This discourse falls into two general categories: division from outsiders and division within the community.

Division from Outsiders

As I discussed above, the employees at Printing Services have a keen sense of their own identity and of those who do not belong in their community. Primarily, outsiders are those who are not formally connected with Printing Services. In some cases, the outsiders may have continued interactions, but are still not allowed into the community of the rhetorical myth. These outsiders include myself, the representatives from the university’s purchasing department, salespeople and trainers from the PMS company, customers, and maintenance workers and other people who do work for Printing Services, but are not involved with printing. In the example below, some members of the committee are discussing some technicians working to fix problems on the print shop main floor.

Example 1

Steve [coming in from the press room]: “The guy is just standing in there staring at the electric box with a blank expression.”

Rob: “Which guy? Is it the one that looks like a Neanderthal?” [leaves room to check; returns shaking his head] Nope. Different Neanderthal.”

Zach: “Is he the one who blew up the box last time? And sent himself flying across the room?”

[laughter from committee]
Within the consubstantial community, the members of the committee consistently reaffirm and reinforce their relationships and organizational identities. This process of identification requires, as Burke notes, division from those outside of the community. In this exchange involving the technicians, that division connects with the identifying features of the rhetorical myth, particularly operational efficiency. As I discussed above, Printing Services is incredibly proud of their efficiency. Their conversations and meetings are short and focused to enable each person to get back to their own work. This efficiency plays a vital role in identification with people inside of Printing Services.

The technicians, who work in the shop regularly, are divided from Printing Services for several obvious reasons, including the simple fact that they are not involved in the publishing trade. But the division the members of the committee note is efficiency. Steve opened with “The guy is just standing there . . .” To a busy print shop, where efficient action is a priority, just standing there is pejorative. In the midst of all of the day-to-day action, the technician is doing nothing—and slowing others’ work down in the process. But Steve did not stop with highlighting the lack of efficiency. He continued the sentence “. . . staring at the electric box with a blank expression.” Not only was the technician not doing anything, he also did not know what to do. His “blank expression” speaks volumes about his qualifications and, ultimately, his intelligence.

Rob answered Steve, “Is it the one that looks like a Neanderthal?” This statement expands on Steve’s more casual assessment of the technician. According to Rob, the technician is not merely unintelligent and incompetent, he is also something less than
human—a pre-evolution throwback with extremely limited capacities. In calling the technician a Neanderthal, Rob is further dividing him from the committee. This trend continues after Rob goes to check and returns: “Nope. Different Neanderthal.” This statement suggests that it is not simply the one technician who is pre-human; rather, all technicians are Neanderthals. Zach’s final joke about the technician blowing up the electric box and injuring himself during the last service call provides anecdotal evidence of the divisive discourse begun by Steve and Rob.

These kinds of statements in meetings serve to establish the identity of the members of the committee. They are more intelligent, more efficient, and even more human than others who work at the university. They are “unique . . . at Iowa State.” This conscious declaration of identity through division unites the committee under a single organizational identity, reinforces the central themes of the rhetorical myth, and prevents outsiders from participating in the identity or the myth.

Division Within the Community

One of the interesting things about Printing Services is that the rhetorical myth is designed to build consensus and unity in what have been two communities. The central printing plant is operated by a group of seasoned professionals who have long-standing ties to “real” publishing: the type of printing that traces its chronographic history back to Gutenberg. The satellite copy centers, on the other hand, are operated by what the employees at the central plant consider a different kind of employee who doesn’t have the same ties to the history or organizational identity. The copy centers have a different
culture, different processes, different employees, different management, and, until the PMS project, a different computer system for managing their interactions with each other, customers, and the central plant. Although Rob and other members of the management team have been trying to include the copy center employees in the rhetorical myth, there is still a strong division between the employees at the central plant and those in the copy centers. This division affects how the copy centers accept the rhetorical myth and, as a result, how they take action. In the example below, I am talking in an interview with one of the employees. I am omitting identifying information from this conversation at the employee’s request.

Example 2

Interviewer: There seems to be a real division between copy centers and the print people. How do you describe the relationship? You can shut the door.

Interviewee: [laughs] And this is confidential, right?

Interviewer: Yes.

Interviewee: There has always been a division. . . . When I started here, my supervisor was a lot more divided, I guess. I find myself doing this sometimes and I kick myself. But they were always her people and these people. Your people and my people. But I think we’re getting closer as technology has made us more similar. Customers, the type of work and all of that is more similar. We do more work closely together. We’re doing a lot more cross training. We bring in copy center people here so that they know more about what happens here. I think we’re getting closer. But there has and is still a division. It’s just one of those things. It’s had a history and it’s hard to move past that.

Interviewer: It’s the same thing that I saw. There’s an attitude on both sides that what we do is very different and more important, usually.

Interviewee: Right, right. Yeah, everybody thinks their stuff is the most important. It’s definitely “this is what we do and this is what you do” and “our customers are different than your customers.”
This example shows the deep division between the employees at the central plant and the employees in the copy centers. Although they all work in the same structure, the people in the different operations believe they are different and refuse to accept shared history or common goals. This division has been a rhetorical challenge to the management of the department. Each of the members of the committee has noted the division from the copy centers and has predicted that the copy centers would be the source of the primary resistance to the change to the PMS. One of the contributing factors is that changes in student behavior have reduced the need for copy centers. The new PMS, by increasing overall efficiency, will further reduce the need for as many copy center employees. So the copy centers feel attacked and defensive. Rob and the other members of the management team have attempted to bridge this division rhetorically by addressing needs, reassuring employees, and persuading the employees to accept the changes. Rob described his strategy for the copy centers in one interview:

There are really two sides to that whole thing. But we’ve really tried to make that clear to them that their jobs are not at stake. We’re going to find a place for you somewhere. We’ve got need for hands. There’s room for everybody and through attrition there’s going to be more room for everybody but your old job’s going away. Your goal needs to be what's best for this department and not what’s best for your copy center.

We’ve met with them. Last year, we’ve really nailed that. Steve and I met with all the copy center people over here and really tried to impress that
upon them. Some of them really get it. I’ve seen a real turn-around in some of them because that light bulb is coming on a little bit and they're saying, “Oh, yeah, that does make sense.” But part of the challenge is to keep drilling that into them so they keep remembering it.

The division within Printing Services is an additional communal marker that affects how the rhetorical myth is built and accepted throughout the department: the employees in the central plant are more open to accept the chronographia and, therefore, the change in PMS than the employees in the copy centers. In the process of defining their own identities and boundary objects, the employees in both the central plant and the copy centers are influencing how the rhetorical myth is presented to them. Rob’s ongoing negotiation with the employees using the rhetorical myth provides a fascinating example of how myths can be created and function in a localized setting like Printing Services.

Conclusion

The sum of the discourse at Printing Services—private and public, formal and informal—provides evidence of the ongoing Creation and Acceptance stages of the rhetorical myth. Through Rob’s efforts to establish and connect chronographia with the current situation in the department, he set the foundation for epideictic prediction, where through assigning praise and blame, envisioning the future, and determining action for the present he provided a unifying set of goals for the committee. And, through communal markers, the committee set up a unique identity that unites them with each
other and divides them from individuals and communities outside of their rhetorical boundaries.

During my review of the first eighteen months of the project, I found a strong rhetorical myth with six specific characteristics:

1. Printing Services has a unique identity, with a strong tie to the history of publishing.
2. Printing Services offers an essential service to the university.
3. Printing Services operates efficiently in order to maintain and emphasize its unique position in the university.
4. The old PMS, as the Villain, is threatening the efficiency, service, and identity of Printing Services.
5. The new PMS, as the Hero, will fix all of the current problems and restore Printing Services’ identity, service, and efficiency.
6. The purchasing committee has an opportunity to act now to save the future of the department.

In interviews shortly after that time, however, I noticed a major shift in the structure and characteristics of the rhetorical myth. In chapter 5, I will address this shift as I talk about the Re-creation stage of rhetorical mythbuilding. I will show how challenges to some of the features of the myth required the leadership of Printing Services to review and revise the rhetorical myth to maintain consensus for the change to the new PMS.
In October 2011, I was the first to arrive in the conference room for the committee meeting. It was six months after the purchasing committee had made its final decision to buy the new PMS, and nearly two months after the originally planned implementation date for going live with the updated system. The implementation team (which included only six members of the original purchasing committee, each of whom had a specific task in connection with the upgrade) had been meeting three times a week for several hours at a time in an attempt to complete the installation and customization of the software by the new deadline in early January 2012. A few minutes after I sat down, Rob stormed into the room with a black expression. “You missed all the action this morning,” he said. Apparently, after a particularly frustrating experience with the old PMS, one customer service representative marched over to Christy, who serves on the committee, to give her an angry checklist of the things the new PMS “had better do!” After a few minutes of complaining to Christy the CSR started back to her own desk, but then turned around and yelled, “You just better make sure that new system does everything you promised it would!”

The tension at Printing Services that morning was palpable. The implementation team felt the rising pressure of high expectations, set in part by the creation and acceptance of the rhetorical myth. As I noted in chapter 4, the blame assigned to the old system and the praise and hope placed in the new PMS had grown far beyond the actual
problems caused by the PMS or the abilities of the new PMS to correct those problems. When the first deadline in August 2011 passed without a successful implementation, and with the second deadline in January 2012 quickly approaching, frustrations were rising almost as high as the expectations. Employees and even members of the committee were beginning to question the rationale of implementing the new PMS and the ability of the committee to complete the project. In essence, the rhetorical myth that had built consensus for the change was being threatened by high expectations and missed deadlines. In order to rebuild consensus, the management team needed to re-create the myth to respond to concerns and manage dissent.

In this chapter, I will discuss the process of Re-creating the rhetorical myth at Printing Services. The Re-creation stage is built on the same three elements as the Creation and Acceptance stages: chronographia, epideictic prediction, and communal markers. Rather than structuring this chapter around those three elements, however, I will write about the Re-creation stage in the context of an idea proposed by sociologist Joseph F. Zygmunt, who studied the effect of mythic failure on the Jehovah’s Witnesses. I will first discuss the problem of specificity in myth, followed by an overview of Zygmunt’s study and a section on how the Re-creation of the myth at Printing Services works within Zygmunt’s concept of prophetic failure.

The Problem of Specificity in Myth

The primary features that differentiate a localized myth such as the one at Printing Services from traditionally conceived myths include a focus on a limited time
and space—an office, a company, or a purchasing committee. Additionally, where broader myths usually deal in generalities, a workplace myth deals in specifics: specific goals, specific deadlines, and specific tasks that can be checked off as completed, all contained within a broader rhetorical justification of unified organizational identity or shared vision for the future. The specificity of workplace myths can be both positive and negative: positive, because specific schedules and deadlines can help persuade employees to accept the larger principles driving technological changes; negative, because when the myth gets tied up in those specifics, and when deadlines or goals are not met, it may damage the credibility of the entire belief system. For example, if a manager justifies an expensive software upgrade by claiming it is essential to the traditional efficiency of a department, but the software upgrade is buggy and behind schedule, employees may question not just the software or its implementation, but the department’s overall efficiency—the essence of the myth.

Similarly, when a manager acts as the Prophet in creating the myth, defining the Hero and Villain, and setting specific goals to achieve a specific future, that manager becomes tied to the success of the rhetorical myth. In the case of Printing Services, Rob’s prophetic role in establishing the myth connected him with the success of the myth. Likewise, Zach, who supported Rob by providing assurances that he could solve any problems that would arise, became connected with the success of the myth. Rob’s and Zach’s rhetorical efforts both comforted and convinced the employees, particularly the reluctant copy center staff, who based their belief in the overall myth on their trust in the leaders. Like the specifics of the myth itself, however, the prophetic position is both
powerful and precarious. Powerful, because once a Prophet gains the trust of the employees through persuasion or competence, he can use that trust to build consensus for difficult decisions. But it is also precarious, because his personal ethos becomes tied up in that trust, and all of the specific goals, beliefs, and expectations that the employees have. And, like the myth itself, the Prophet stands the risk of falling when specific goals are not achieved.

To respond to the challenge of specificity, rhetorical myth has a third stage of development after the Creation and Acceptance stages. In the Re-creation stage, managers and other leaders reform the myth in response to challenges, situations, dissent, or (sometimes) poor planning. In the Re-creation stage, managers take the steps necessary to change and reframe the myth while simultaneously justifying the changes within the rhetorical myth to maintain consensus and manage dissent among their employees. The Re-creation stage can involve radical changes to the features, emphases, and goals of the myth while maintaining certain key elements of the myth, particularly the communal markers, which both define identity and also set boundary objects.

While the specificity of localized rhetorical myths highlights failures to meet goals and deadlines, many larger societal and religious myths encounter similar challenges. Those myths that survive and retain their adherents go through a Re-creation stage that allows the specific, failing goals or deadlines to be adjusted in order to maintain the overall integrity of the rhetorical myth. We find one example of this in Zygmunt’s 1970 study of the Jehovah’s Witnesses responses to repeated prophetic failure.
Prophetic Failure among the Jehovah’s Witnesses

Zygmunt’s study of the Jehovah’s Witnesses focuses on their ability to survive as a religious group in spite of the failure of key elements of their foundational myth. Like many nineteenth-century religious movements, the Jehovah’s Witnesses early success was built on predictions of an imminent end of the world. Over the course of more than half a century, the Jehovah’s Witness movement predicted five separate dates for the end of the world (1873–74, 1878, 1881, 1914, and 1925) before it suspended issuing date-specific prophecies. The years leading up to each of these dates were filled with an increase in religious fervor and missionary activity that fueled periods of growth and expansion. After each date passed without the prophesied events, however, the movement entered into what Zygmunt called “crises of faith in the broader belief system on the basis of which the prophecies had been ventured” (933). These crises “damaged the movement’s public image as well as its self-conception as a divinely directed group” (933).

The instances of prophetic failure were caused directly by the specificity of the prophecies. The end of the world was not prophesied to be soon or even in a range of years; it was going to happen in a specific year. This practice, as noted above, was not limited to the Jehovah’s Witnesses. Scores of religious movements of many sizes predicted specific dates for the end of the world. The difference, however, lies in the fact that the Jehovah’s Witnesses have survived as a community and continued to grow, in spite of the failed prophecies. Zygmunt wrote, “While the historical record does suggest that many such movements turn out to be short-lived because of their incapacity to meet
the hazards to which they are peculiarly vulnerable, it also shows that some have managed to surmount them and, indeed, to ‘institutionalize’ their millenarian outlooks” (927). The Jehovah’s Witnesses survived because they were able to re-create their myth in a way that maintained their communal identity but removed or explained the prophetic failures that challenged the myth.

In his study of the separate prophetic failures among the Jehovah’s Witnesses, Zygmunt outlined a pattern of five responses to the failures that helped the movement adjust and survive (933–34). These responses provide an excellent foundation for discussing prophetic failures in other contexts, such as in my case study at Printing Services. I will explain the five responses in detail below.

1. Disappointment, puzzlement, chagrin. Immediately after the prophetic failure, leaders and followers alike were confused and disappointed by the failure, and unsure of what to do next.

2. Explanations of why the prophecies failed. After the initial reaction, and the accompanying drop in membership and recruitment, the Jehovah’s Witnesses began to create explanations for why the prophecies failed. These explanations included redefining the prophecies, claiming they had in fact happened, or detailing that they had been delayed for some reason.

3. “Retrospective reinterpretation.” As an outgrowth of the explanations offered in the second response, eventually the movement “achieved a fuller resolution of its quandary” (934) by asserting that “some event of prophetic significance had
actually transpired on the dates in question” (934). The events provided as evidence “were supernatural and hence not open to disconfirmation” (934).

4. Redate the prophecies into the future. As a supplement to retrospective reinterpretation, the Jehovah’s Witness movement would issue new dates in the future where the unrealized expectations would be met.

5. Use rhetorical strategies to reaffirm faith in the identity of the movement. These strategies include interpreting world events as evidence of prophecy fulfillment, and interpreting “the experiences and achievements of the movement itself as confirming signs . . . of itself as an agency of prophetic fulfillment” (935).

Zygmunt argues that these five strategies not only functioned to stave off disappointment and despair after prophetic failures, but they also helped the movement grow and adjust to new circumstances. Indeed, these strategies provided “the context for changes in [the movement’s] own identity” (935). The Jehovah’s Witnesses’ ability to successfully re-create aspects of its rhetorical myth after prophetic failure allowed the movement to survive when many other similar movements did not.

When I applied Zygmunt’s observations about prophetic failure to the problem of specific deadlines in the myth at Printing Services, I found several interesting parallels. In the next section of this chapter, I will review the core pieces of the rhetorical myth at Printing Services and show how the employees and management experienced their own form of prophetic failure. I will then map the responses of the employees and management to those prophetic failures on to Zygmunt’s five strategies outlined above.
Prophetic Failure at Printing Services

As argued in chapters 3 and 4, the rhetorical myth at Printing Services was created based on a shared chronographia, epideictic prediction, and communal markers. Although the myth itself was a complex mixture of history, future, and action for the present, the most repeated themes in the first eighteen months of the project included six specific characteristics, as described at the end of chapter 4:

1. Printing Services has a unique identity, with a strong tie to the history of publishing.
2. Printing Services offers an essential service to the university.
3. Printing Services operates efficiently in order to maintain and emphasize its unique position in the university.
4. The old PMS, as the Villain, is threatening the efficiency, service, and identity of Printing Services.
5. The new PMS, as the Hero, will fix all of the current problems and restore Printing Services’ identity, service, and efficiency.
6. The purchasing committee has an opportunity to act now to save the future of the department.

These characteristics were supported by a set of deadlines and dates that—while not necessarily part of the myth—initially became intertwined with the perceptions of the rhetorical myth. The dates that became tied into the myth included the following:
• March 2011. The purchasing committee decided to purchase the PMS and certain committee members with specific expertise were reconvened as the implementation team. The new PMS software was delivered to Printing Services.

• June 2011. In June, two members of the implementation team flew to the new PMS provider’s headquarters for two days of in-depth training.

• June–July 2011. Rob and Zach committed early in the purchasing process to set up the software quickly and efficiently over the course of the summer.

• August 2011. The initial deadline for going live with the new PMS was just before fall semester 2011.

• January 2012. Revised deadline for going live with the new PMS.

• August 2012. Revised deadline for going live with the new PMS.

• February 2013. Revised deadline for going live on a limited basis.

• July 2013. Revised deadline for going live to the central printing office.

• Fall semester 2013. Revised deadline for full implementation of the new PMS.

On the surface, these dates show only how complex it is to implement a central software system like the PMS. When connected with the overall rhetorical myth that built consensus for the change in the first place, however, the multiple revised deadlines show instances where specific promises failed.

While the purchasing committee was still working on its decision to upgrade the PMS in December 2010, many members of the committee and some of the more reluctant copy center operators drove two hours to visit the print shop at the University of Iowa. As I wrote in chapter 1, this trip raised more questions than it solved. But late in
the next day’s committee meeting, the discussion turned to the University of Iowa itself, rather than the PMS. The employees and management compared facilities (Iowa State’s building is nicer and larger), equipment (Iowa State’s presses are faster and more efficient), and even employees (Iowa State has people with more experience and expertise). When the conversation turned back to the PMS and one employee asked about implementation time, Zach answered, “Iowa said it took them eighteen months to get their system up and running.” Rob almost immediately replied, “Well, that means we can do it in about six!” In the context of the meeting, Rob’s declaration was a joke, based on the series of competitive statements. In his role as Prophet, however, the joke became a promise, which in turn became an expectation.

The committee as a whole was weary of the process. One of the core features of the identity of Printing Services is its efficiency. As I wrote in chapter 4, a focus on efficiency governed all of the meetings and discussions in the department. The drawn-out process of deciding to upgrade (from March 2010 to March 2011) was out of character for this community. Therefore, the promise of a six-month implementation process seemed like a return to the core values of the organization. Additionally, the implementation team would be led by Rob and Zach, who were the most trusted members of the committee and the embodiments of some characteristics of the rhetorical myth.

The purchasing committee supported the August deadline, and the implementation team worked feverishly toward it. But the software was complex and involved more customization and programming than anyone on the implementation team
had expected. It quickly became clear that August was unrealistic, and that even the backup deadline in January would be pushing it. The team continued to work, installing, testing, and tweaking the new PMS to work with the processes in place at Printing Services. In the meantime, however, tensions outside of the team were rising. The process was taking a long time and the conditions with the old PMS were just getting worse. Zach, who had previously spent time fixing and maintaining the old PMS was now spending the majority of his time working with the new PMS, but that had no tangible results for most employees. And as much as Rob and Zach attempted to explain the complexities and delays, the disappointment and frustration kept growing. By the time the CSR stood up and yelled at Christy in October 2011 (as described at the first of this chapter), the rhetorical myth at Printing Services was experiencing a crisis of faith. The employees who had joined in consensus now doubted their decision to support the new PMS and began to complain loudly.

Throughout the process and the delays, Rob and Zach continued to try to maintain consensus by returning to the central principles of the rhetorical myth. But when I interviewed employees in November 2011, I noticed a key difference in the major talking points of the myth. In every interview throughout the project, I asked a variation of the same question: Why are you upgrading the PMS? In nearly every interview prior to November 2011, the answers always included two points: (1) the old PMS was outdated and broken, and (2) the new PMS would increase efficiency. In November, however, the answers shifted almost universally to a new idea: The new PMS would create unity in the department. Consider these three examples:
I would hope that it would bring the copy centers and the main plant closer together because we’re all using the same process; we’re all talking the same language. They’re learning more about what we do here. Maybe, in turn, we’re learning more about what they do there. That would be an OK thing. (Lana)

Well, probably one of the most important [reasons] to me was to pull the copy centers and to unify this department. (Rob)

The other main reason was to tie in our copy centers with the main plant so we’re all on one system. The charges would be more uniform to all customers and we just want to make it one big, happy family instead of two, fragmented sections of this business. (Steve)

If one or two people had mentioned the idea of a “big, happy family” or “unifying this department,” I could have interpreted the answers as a defensive response to the failures of the team to meet the deadlines. Where almost all of the employees responded with the same idea, I interpret the answers as a rhetorical shift in the department that was communicated through unofficial channels and not in meetings. With this shift, it seems that the leadership of the department adjusted their central arguments to emphasize unity, which had previously been a minor theme, rather than efficiency when their claims to efficiency could no longer be supported by evidence. In other words, they missed their deadlines and had to change their stories.

The effect of this shift in the rhetorical myth was to rebuild consensus. The tensions in the department that I had seen rising while the employees were focusing on
deadlines began to fall back to normal levels. Employees still grumbled about the old system, but they were more willing to wait for the new system because they believed that the delays were an effort to ensure the new PMS was right and would indeed unify the department. In the next section, I will show how the response at Printing Services maps onto the responses to prophetic failure outlined in Zygmunt’s study.

Mapping Printing Services onto Zygmunt

Although the missed deadlines at Printing Services don’t approach the magnitude of the failed prophecies of the end of the world, there are a number of similarities in how the leaders and followers of the two rhetorical myths responded. I show how some of the behaviors I observed fit into the categories that Zygmunt described in table 5 below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Jehovah’s Witnesses</th>
<th>Printing Services</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Disappointment, puzzlement, and chagrin</td>
<td>CSR yelling at Christy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Create explanations for the failure</td>
<td>Rob and Zach explaining the complexities of the new system</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retroactive reinterpretation</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Redating prophecies</td>
<td>Move deadlines into the future</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confirm the faith of the group through rhetorical strategies</td>
<td>Shift the focus of the rhetorical myth to building unity</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Zygmunt observed the Jehovah’s Witnesses move through several stages of response to prophetic failure: disappointment, explanation, reinterpretation, redating prophecies, and confirmation of faith through rhetorical strategies. In my observations at Printing Services, I saw four of those response stages: (1) disappointment and chagrin,
which was exemplified by the CSR yelling at Christy, but was a general feeling in the department; (2) explanations for the failure; (3) redating prophecies into the future, and (4) confirming the faith of the community through rhetorical strategies.

The most intriguing of these four response stages to me was the final one, where the department shifted its views of why the new PMS was being installed in response to the missed deadlines. It represented a re-creation of the rhetorical myth that refocused attention to deemphasize the failures in implementation. The management team used existing characteristics and tensions in the department to craft a new vision for the future: “one big, happy family” in the department, united in consensus by the Hero PMS, which just happened to take a little longer than expected to save the day.
The process of choosing and implementing a new PMS at Iowa State University’s Printing Services provides an example of why localized rhetorical myths should be given additional academic consideration. Rob’s work in building and maintaining consensus for a long and difficult change was both framed by and made possible by the rhetorical myth he helped create. Rob’s efforts to connect the history of publishing and the efforts of the purchasing committee provided a strong chronographic foundation that allowed him to define specific goals and prescribe specific actions. The rhetorical myth, in other words, provided Rob with the persuasive tools he needed to convince management, employees, and even the university to support and accept the new PMS.

In this dissertation, I showed the development and implementation of the rhetorical myth at Printing Services. In chapter 1, I created a working definition of rhetorical myth with three main elements: *chronographia* (or an interpretation of history), epideictic prediction (defining an action for the present by assigning praise and blame to the past and the future), and communal markers (using concepts of Burlean identification and rhetorically-defined boundary objects to create a unified community). I also distinguished between traditional societal, religious, or political myths and the localized rhetorical myth I observed at Printing Services.
In chapter 2, I explored three distinct conversations from the academic literature that provide a foundation for moving past discussing any myth to analyzing a localized rhetorical myth. These conversations include (1) the idea of myth as rhetorical power, drawn from studies of myth from anthropology and philosophy; (2) the study of myth in public discourse, using the examples of Adolf Hitler and Ronald Reagan, who each created powerful rhetorical myths through their public speeches and writings; and (3) studies of storytelling and sensemaking from business and management studies, which provide a different view of the elements of myth in the workplace. Through these three conversations, I build a foundation for my discussion of myth in the workplace while connecting my observations with important scholarship in the field.

In the third chapter, I detailed my methods for conducting my study at Printing Services. I discussed the background and progress of the new PMS project and my observations of meetings and conversations and interviews with employees. In chapter 3, I also defined the themes I used to organize the data I collected during my study, which include the three stages of myth-building: Creation, Acceptance, and Re-creation and the three elements of myth as defined in chapter 1 (chronographia, epideictic prediction, and communal markers). In table 3, I showed how these six themes interacted in my study.

Through examples and discussion from meeting observations and interviews, in chapter 4 I showed how the rhetorical myth at Printing Services was created and accepted over several months. I also gave examples of how chronographia, epideictic prediction, and communal markers are manifested in practical situations.
Finally, in chapter 5 I discussed the challenges presented to a localized myth by missed deadlines and frustrated expectations. Using a study on prophetic failure by Joseph Zygmunt as a frame, I showed how the management and employees at Printing Services re-created the rhetorical myth to focus on departmental unity rather than efficiency when the implementation of the new PMS dragged on beyond promised deadlines.

The main intellectual contributions of this dissertation are (1) establishing a working definition of a localized rhetorical myth, which I argue includes three elements (chronographia, epideictic prediction, communal markers) and three stages (Creation, Acceptance, and Re-creation); (2) showing how my working definition applies in a practical setting where a rhetorical myth was created, accepted, and re-created within less than three years; and (3) arguing that failure to meet deadlines and expectations in a localized rhetorical myth equates to a prophetic failure, as defined by Zygmunt.

As I move forward from my dissertation research, I see at least three ways to expand and enrich the conversation surrounding rhetorical myth:

1. Conduct additional ethnographic research in different locations. Although the experience at Printing Services was both valuable and enlightening, it still represents a limited set of data about the function of rhetorical myth in the workplace. Conducting studies in other workplaces would provide additional insights and contrasting evidence on how rhetorical myths are created, accepted, and re-created in practical, local settings.
2. Conduct larger-scale studies of rhetorical myth. Printing Services is a small organization where I can observe many conversations and most of the meetings, and I can talk with all of the employees in a single day. Larger organizations face different challenges in creating and sharing rhetorical myths, but may go through some of the same processes and use the same strategies.

3. Conduct quantitative survey research on the effect of rhetorical myth. In conjunction with a larger-scale study, either at a larger organization or across several smaller organizations, I see a huge benefit in collecting quantitative data in addition to the qualitative data. The quantitative evidence (in the form of Likert-scale surveys of perceptions or similar study instruments) could test both management strategies and employee responses.

* * *

Rhetorical myths can play a vital role in efficient operation and decision making within modern workplaces. Myths provide members of a community with a unifying belief and give them focus and goals for acting on that belief. Leaders and managers can overcome differences in backgrounds, interests, beliefs, and motivations by creating a unifying rhetorical myth that provides an interpretation of the past through chronographia, a vision for the future and an action for the present through epideictic prediction, and, most importantly, a united community through communal markers. By studying rhetorical myth in the workplace, we can learn more about how managers and leaders build consensus through constant persuasive communication.
REFERENCES


Hand, Christy. Personal interview. 9 Sept. 2011.


Louden, Rob. Personal interview. 9 Sept. 2011.


Voga, Lana. Personal interview. 9 Sept. 2011.


Weigel, Steve. Personal interview. 9 Sept. 2011.


APPENDIX A
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Initial Interview Questions

1. What is your current position?
2. What are your job responsibilities?
3. What is your relationship with Print Services administration?
4. What has been your role in the decision to upgrade the Print Services system?
5. How much do you feel you were involved in the decision to upgrade the current software?
6. How have you participated (meetings, email, document review) in the process?
7. How do you feel your contributions have been received by other members of the staff and by management?
8. Where do you think the decision to upgrade these technologies originated?
9. How much do you think Print Services needs the new technologies?
10. Describe the communication from Print Services administration about the new technologies. Has it been effective?
11. Do you feel you have been a necessary part of the process?
12. What are you doing to prepare for the changes in technology?
13. What training procedures are in place?
14. How do you feel these changes will affect your job at Print Services?
15. How do you feel these changes will affect the jobs of others?
16. How will these changes affect your relationships with your fellow workers and the administration?

I will ask follow-up questions that will be determined by the responses to these initial questions. Follow-up interviews will test responses to these questions at different stages of the change process.
APPENDIX B

PROPOSAL TO PRINTING SERVICES

Project Description

Rapid changes in publishing technologies in the last three decades have redefined the publishing industry. The people involved in writing, editing, producing, and printing texts have been particularly affected by new hardware, software, and procedures that change not only how they work, but also how they view themselves and their position in the industry. The decision-making process and the quality of communication between administration and staff help determine how workers respond to changes and how well new technologies are implemented. As part of a possible dissertation project in the English department at Iowa State University, I propose to observe the implementation of new data collection and billing technologies at ISU’s Printing Services.

Request for Access

To facilitate my research project, I am requesting access to observe the implementation process. This access could include the following:

• Attendance at meetings where decisions about new technologies are discussed.
• Access to documents and correspondence about the new technologies.
• Interviews with administrators and staff before, during, and after the technologies are implemented.
• Observation of training meetings and procedures.

Privacy and Confidentiality

If this project is approved, both by ISU Printing Services and the Institutional Review Board, I will enact strict measures to keep the information I gather private and confidential. I will protect the documents and other artifacts and I will use them only for research. The research site and the individuals who choose to participate will not be identified by name, unless explicit permission is provided.

Research Questions

1. How does an organization decide to implement new technologies?
   a. How much are managers and workers involved in the discussion?
   b. How many of the decisions come from the managers? How many are recommended by workers?
   c. What kinds (or parts) of decisions come from outside of the organization?

2. How does the organization communicate changes in technology?
   a. How does the management shape the argument for the new technologies?
   b. How does the management communicate with the workers?
c. How does the organization go about training workers with the new technologies?
d. How do workers perceive the necessity for change, based on communication and training?

3. *How do people within the organization respond to new technologies?*
   a. What is the initial response to change? How does that response change over time and with communication?
   b. What is the response to the communication and training?
   c. How do workers implement the technological changes?
   d. How much is management involved after the initial communications?

4. *What are the relationships among decision making, communication, and response?*
   a. Does the way the decisions were made affect how those decisions are communicated?
   b. Does the decision-making process have any effect on the response to new technologies?
   c. How much does communication and training affect worker response to change?

**About Me**
I am a PhD candidate in the rhetoric and professional communication program in the English department at Iowa State University. I hold a master’s degree in public administration and a bachelor’s degree in history, both from Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah. Before coming to ISU, I worked for nearly a decade at a publishing unit attached to BYU, where I did editing, typesetting, and was the primary liaison with the press and other printers. My primary research interests are the history and future of publishing; communication issues in the workplace; and rhetorical issues of power, identification, and technology.
APPENDIX C

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Title of Study: Individual Responses to Technological Changes in the Publishing Industry

Investigator: Jacob Rawlins

This is a research study. Please take your time in deciding if you would like to participate. Please feel free to ask questions at any time.

INTRODUCTION

This study is intended to gather and analyze responses of individual publishing professionals to technological changes in the industry. Specifically, this study seeks to understand (1) how decisions about implementing new technologies are made, (2) how decisions about technologies are communicated to workers before and during the transition process, and (3) how workers respond to the new technologies. While this study deals particularly with the publishing profession, the insights gained from professionals facing a technological transition will be beneficial to professionals in many industries. Decisions about new technologies affect workflows, training, communication, workplace organization, formal and informal power structures, and, ultimately, how professionals identify themselves and their roles. Gaining a better understanding of the process and implications of implementing new technologies will provide a benefit to professionals in other industries that are facing similar challenges.

You are being asked to participate because you are a publishing professional who will be affected by changes in publishing technologies.

DESCRIPTION OF PROCEDURES

If you agree to participate, you will be asked to participate in interviews before, during, and after the new printing technologies are implemented. You will be asked (1) to describe your participation in the decision-making process, (2) how the new technologies affect your position, and (3) to explain your attitudes and reactions to the new technologies. I will also observe company meetings and training procedures in which you are participating and collect official email and other communications related to the project. I will occasionally use audio or video tapes to record our conversations.

Your participation will last for at least one year, until the new technologies have been implemented.
RISKS
There are no foreseeable risks from participating in this study.

BENEFITS
If you decide to participate in this study there will be no direct benefit to you. It is hoped that the information gained in this study will benefit society by helping us understand how technological affect professionals in all industries.

COSTS AND COMPENSATION
You will not have any costs from participating in this study. You will not be compensated for participating in this study.

PARTICIPANT RIGHTS
Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and you may refuse to participate or leave the study at any time. If you decide to not participate in the study or leave the study early, it will not result in any penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

CONFIDENTIALITY
Records identifying participants will be kept confidential to the extent permitted by applicable laws and regulations and will not be made publicly available. To ensure the confidentiality of all information, I will:

- Keep all paperwork, transcriptions, minutes, and other written materials in a locked file cabinet.
- Store all interview audio and video files on a password-protected computer for the duration of the project.
- Archive all audio and video files on portable hard drives that will be kept in a locked file cabinet once the project is complete.

However, federal government regulatory agencies, auditing departments of Iowa State University, and the Institutional Review Board (a committee that reviews and approves human subject research studies) may inspect and/or copy your records for quality assurance and data analysis. These records may contain private information. I will make every effort to ensure confidentiality. If the results are published, your identity will remain confidential.

QUESTIONS OR PROBLEMS
You are encouraged to ask questions at any time during this study.

- For further information about the study contact Jacob Rawlins at 509-6336 or Professor Greg Wilson.
If you have any questions about the rights of research subjects or research-related injury, please contact the IRB Administrator, (515) 294-4566, IRB@iastate.edu, or Director, (515) 294-3115, Office for Responsible Research, Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa 50011.

PARTICIPANT SIGNATURE
Your signature indicates that you voluntarily agree to participate in this study, that the study has been explained to you, that you have been given the time to read the document, and that your questions have been satisfactorily answered. You will receive a copy of the written informed consent prior to your participation in the study.