Study explores workplace mythmaking

November 7 2017

At Jacob Rawlins's first job, he learned he would be preparing food for "guests," not "customers." And to straighten up he'd use "cleaning cloths," not "rags." It's language, he said, that the company's management encouraged to foster a particular kind of culture among employees and customers—scratch that: guests.

That intentional culture shaping—which happens in notable ways at companies including Disney, Google and Chick-fil-A—is often bolstered by managements' use of myth, said Rawlins, now a BYU linguistics and English language professor. For a study recently published in *Enculturation*, Rawlins explored the ways companies use myths to promote team unity and support during times of change.

"Myth-making is when you create a story to affect the decisions people make," he said. "Managers will often create these stories and place their employees into them. Just like classical myths there are heroes and villains, and everyone understands their place in the story."

As an example, Rawlins points to Disney, which does extensive training to teach their employees about the history of the company, the legacy of Walt Disney and the current culture of the organization. The Disney parks, he added, offer additional visual reminders of the mythology. "Every item in the park, from trash cans to the largest rides, and every employee in the park, from the ticket takers to Mickey Mouse, are carefully controlled so that park visitors have the Disney experience."

And Disney isn't alone: "It happens all the time," Rawlins said. "Every

organization has a story that gives meaning for why we're here in this office doing what we do. And when they put it into a certain context, it's because they want me to act a certain way as an [employee](#)."

For this project, Rawlins spent three years observing a printing company as it underwent a major transition to a new and technologically challenging print management system.

To help facilitate the change, the group's manager created a myth in the context of the company's history, labeling the old technology as the villain and praising the new technology as the hero. The employees were placed into the story as key characters capable of helping the hero triumph.

"The manager could have talked about the history of printing, and it's a fairly dry history," Rawlins said. "Instead he told his employees, 'We are a part of this noble work of disseminating this information to mankind, with a legacy going back to Johannes Gutenberg, and you're a part of that. And this [new technology](#) is the next step for that legacy.'"

An effective company [myth](#), Rawlins said, will answer such questions as How did we get here? What should we be doing? Where are we going?

In exploring those questions, Rawlins said, companies can both define acceptable behavior and discourage behavior that will lead to the villain's triumph (whether the villain is a competitor, an unmotivated workforce or an outdated technology that hinders productivity).

"It's especially helpful when there's conflict in the community," Rawlins said. "Myths remind people that they're wearing the same jersey and fighting for the same cause."

Rawlins hopes to continue his research by analyzing how people react

when their [company](#) myths fail.

Provided by Brigham Young University