The Anatomy of Superiority. On Alexey Stakhanov and Michelin-starred Restaurants

Dr Pawel Krzyworzeka
pkrzyworzeka@alk.edu.pl
Kozminski University, Poland

Introduction

Receiving awards and being engaged in awarding them become more and more important aspect of organizational life. People approach this phenomenon intuitively as from the early childhood we are socialized into using recognition rituals (Whitehouse 2005). Each of us has in mind some cultural scripts (Jemielniak 2002) how to behave when accepting an award and even how the ceremony should be organized (Bell 2008). However, so far within the organization theory not much analytical and theoretical attention was given to this important phenomenon (Trice & Beyer 1984; Islam & Zyphur 2009; Smith & Stewart 2010; Krzyworzeka 2011b; Krzyworzeka 2012). This paper aims at providing a set of basic analytical categories, and showing relations between them that have some level of explanatory power. The proposed model is a result of a research project in which the following research questions were formulated: Which aspects of organizing are influenced by recognitions rituals? What are the practical effects of recognition rituals? What are the elements of recognition rituals' structure? How diverse organizational actors are realizing their agency in recognition rituals? The paper tries to show in most fundamental categories: how recognitions – seen as organizational rituals – work. Conclusions are based on multiple-case study, a set of analyzed cases include: Stakhanovite movement (Davies 1989), Multi-level marketing (Krzyworzeka 2011c; Krzyworzeka 2011a), and Michelin-starred restaurants.

Main arguments

My main argument is that putatively competitive systems of awards are structures and actions that create accepted and justified social inequality as well as paths for upward and downward social mobility; however, awards have also other profound consequences that are less evident due to predominance of meritocratic discourse. Easily overlooked broader implications of awarding include: 1) awards create reciprocal relations between awarding body and recipient; 2) the awarding body gains honor and - in many cases - money; 3) awarding gives those interested in an award a routine to follow that also gives administrators power to prescribe their actions; 4) administrators gain indirect control over those who are under award recipient's influence; 5) awarding creates organizational, professional and other boundaries; 6) logic of justified by recognition of merits social inequality is mirrored in the realm of commodities.

Above listed consequences of awarding emphasize administrators' agency and control they gain, however, for more accurate picture of the phenomenon it is necessary to account for participants' agency and the fact that it is not possible to fully control and predict their actions. People often: 1) are not interested in specific awards or in awards in general; 2) use circumstances created by awarding for their own aims, contradictory to administrator's aims; 3) could misinterpret symbolic content bound to particular practices of awarding; 4) take control over awards or influence the verdict.

Hence, awarding gives administrators a huge dose of potential control over the recipients (and broader social reality), recipients do not usually oppose openly because of their honor and material gain and because there are strategies that they employ to use the system for their own purposes, in some cases it ends in gaining full control over an award.

Importance

My main conclusions answer two important questions. First, why do people not only easily accept awards but are also keen to engage in establishing and administering them? Second, which elements of awarding are the most unpredictable, why, and what administrators do to minimize the likelihood of failure? Answering these questions is very important because of the popularity of awarding phenomenon in contemporary world. During the 20th century the number of awards and recognitions offered by different organizations has been growing rapidly and now the total amount of existing awards is overwhelming (there are at least 16000 awards in the US according to the "Awards, honors, and prizes" catalog published by Gale Research Company). However, predominance of discourse that emphasizes fine-tuning evaluation criteria, pursuing awards' fairness, equality of opportunities, etc.; cover social and economic consequences that need critical examination if we are interested in economic development, social change, and social justices.

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