

## 10 Making sense of strategic change

### How academics perceive a renaming of their university

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Academic institutions are increasingly engaged in a competitive environment, struggling for funds, scholars and students. In order to be competitive, universities have to prove their quality and uniqueness compared to other universities, home and abroad. In 2004 the Catholic University of Nijmegen changed its name into the Radboud University Nijmegen. This change of name reflects a strategic change in mission and priorities of the university and symbolises a new strategy the university adopted to unify what was often perceived as a segmented organisation. The purpose of this chapter is to explore (a) what meanings academic staff assigns to both the old and new name, and (b) to the renaming process. A qualitative interview study was conducted among academic and non-academic staff. The study shows that initially the scientific community was rather sceptic about the necessity and effectiveness of the university's new name, but over the years accepted and incorporated it.

#### 10.1 Introduction

“You have brought irreparable damage to the university. That's why I feel obliged to refuse to carry out your decision. After September 1, 2004 I will still use the old name Catholic University Nijmegen, in my teaching activities, my letters and publications, and I will call on my colleagues and students to do the same.”

A professor's letter to the university magazine *Vox* (December 2003).

This was one of many immediate reactions after the Executive Board of the Catholic University Nijmegen announced by the end of 2003 that they intended to change the name of the University into Radboud University Nijmegen by September, 2004. The letter shows that renaming an organisation is a radical alteration and often raises many questions and even firm resistance. The change of name was planned and implemented, more or less overnight, by the top management in order to cope with national and international challenges. It reflects a strategic change in mission and priorities of the university and symbolises a new identity the university adopted in order to unify what was often perceived as a segmented organisation. Unity among different faculties, research groups and departments was emphasised and symbolised by the new name and logo.

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Nelissen, P., & Van Selm, M. (2009). Making sense of strategic change: How academics perceive a renaming of their university. In R. P. König, P. W. M. Nelissen, & F. J. M. Huysmans (Eds.), *Meaningful media: Communication research on the social construction of reality* (pp. 134-144). Nijmegen, The Netherlands: Tandem Felix.

### 10.1.1 Renaming as an expression of a new identity

Contradictions between a management's perspective and a work floor perspective on an organisational identity such as illustrated above are also reflected on in the literature. In the marketing literature the concept of *corporate identity* represents the ways the management expresses its views on the company in certain strategies especially in visualisations: "A visual identity is a part of the deeper identity of the group, the outward sign of the inward commitment, serving to remind it of its real purpose" (Hatch & Schultz, 1997, p. 358). The new name and logo of the university are an example of the expression of the key ideas of the management to external audiences. The discussion of identity within organisational literature has developed around the concept of *organisational identity*: "Organizational identity refers broadly to what members perceive, feel and think about their organizations. It is assumed to be a collective, commonly-shared understanding of the organization's distinctive values and characteristics" (Hatch & Schultz, 1997, p. 357).

In addition to the distinction between corporate and organisational identity another debate focuses on the inconsistent treatment of the concept's distinguishing properties: "in some cases organizational identity is portrayed as a subjective property of observers, whereas in other cases, it is described as a verifiable property of organizations" (Whetten, 2006, p. 220). Furthermore some authors emphasise the highly stable character of identity while others depict it as a relatively flexible property, readily altered to reflect changing internal and external conditions. Gioia, Schultz, & Corley (2000) also accentuate the fluid nature of identity and differentiate between an enduring identity and an identity having continuity. They believe that the difference is subtle, yet theoretically important: "The notion of an identity that is enduring implies that identity remains the same over time, that it has some permanency. An identity with a sense of continuity, however, is one that shifts in its interpretation and meaning while retaining labels for 'core' beliefs and values that extend over time and context" (Gioia et al., 2000, p. 65). The organisational identity that is expressed in a new name and the underlying values may have permanent labels, the interpretation of those values is not necessarily fixed or stable.

In this study we explore the correspondence between a university's management's view on the corporate identity, symbolised and visualised in a new name and logo, and the employee's perception of the organisational identity. We conceptualise identity in line with Gioia, Schultz & Corley (2000). They argue that "the seeming durability of identity is actually contained in the stability of the labels used by organization members to express who or what they believe the organization to be, but that the meaning associated with these labels changes so that identity actually is mutable" (Gioia et al., 2000, p. 67).

### 10.1.2 Renaming as a strategic organisational change

To effectively compete, or even survive, in a market environment, frequently requires organisations to undertake a process of dramatic, and often traumatic, strategic change (Gioia, Thomas, Clark & Chittipeddi, 1994). Increasingly, this type of change is seen not just as a shift in norms, structures, processes and goals (cf. Ginsberg 1988), but as a form of 'second-order change' (Bartunek, 1984) involving "a radical, discontinuous

shift in interpretative schemes: organizational paradigms are reframed, and norms and world views are changed” (Bartunek, 1984, p. 356). This view suggests that strategic change involves, at its essence, a cognitive reorientation of the organisation (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991); one that reflects an acceptance of perceptual, structural, and contextual discontinuities that occur through the shifting interplay of deliberate and emergent processes (Mintzberg and Waters, 1985; Tichy, 1983). From this cognitive perspective, the success of strategic change efforts depends not only on the organisation's ability to undergo a significant shift in direction, vision, and values, but also the ability of employees to understand and accept a new conceptualisation of the organisation (Smircich, 1983).

Although the role of strategic change in affecting organisational outcomes has been well documented, the processes involved in promoting cognitive understanding, acceptance and institutionalisation of a new organisational reality during strategic transitions, have not been adequately studied (Gioia, et al., 1994; Gioia et al., 2000). In this study we explore the perceptions of employees on a strategic organisational change regarding the organisational identity.

### 10.1.3 Background: The University of Nijmegen

In our study we focus on the renaming of the University of Nijmegen. The Executive Board announced the renaming from ‘Catholic University Nijmegen’ into ‘Radboud University Nijmegen’, and presented this strategic change as the completion of an identity change that had taken place since the beginning of the new millennium.

At the end of 2003, the executive board announced the renaming of the university in September 2004. This announcement came more or less overnight and the organisation was presented with a *fait accompli*, with drastic consequences. Not only were employees supposed to accept the new name, they also had to apply the new name and new logo in their everyday life and agree to the underlying corporate identity.

By changing the university's name into Radboud University Nijmegen, the executive board tried to affirm the alliance between the University and the Academic Medical Centre St. Radboud which was symbolised by a common logo: “The name ‘Radboud’, expresses the cooperation between academic disciplines and underlines that the University performs within all alpha-, beta-, gamma and medical sciences” (strategic plan ‘The Power of Quality’). The name ‘Radboud University Nijmegen’ refers to the ‘Saint Radboud Foundation’ who promoted Roman-Catholic higher education at the beginning of the last century, which led to the establishment of the Catholic University Nijmegen in 1925. Saint Radboud was a bishop, scholar and poet who lived around 900.

With the new name and logo the management tried to achieve a prominent place in the national and international academic arena with the profile of a broad-based, student-oriented research university with an ambition to maintain and expand its high quality. For Radboud University Nijmegen, the cohesion between academic education and research has high priority. This cohesion forms the cornerstone of a student-oriented research university. The core-values held by the top management, that represent their perception of central, enduring and distinctive features (Albert & Whetten, 1985) of the Radboud University Nijmegen, are formulated in the strategic plans as follows: “Radboud University Nijmegen will continue to maintain its choice of profile as a *broad-based, student-oriented research university* together with an *ambition for high quality*.”

Rooted in the rich tradition of Catholicism, Radboud University Nijmegen seeks to be a *close-knit academic community* providing an *innovative academic climate* as scholarly breakthroughs which benefit the innovative climate of society as a whole, occur more readily in a *free and untrammelled research climate*.”

In this case study we explored reactions and perceptions of employees on the renaming process and the underlying corporate identity.

#### 10.1.4 Research Questions

We addressed the question as to how a renaming process in an academic organisational setting is experienced by organisation members, and how these experiences can be typified. More in particular, we examined what meanings academic and non-academic staff assign to both the old and new names and the renaming process as a strategic organisational change.

### 10.2 Method

To answer these questions, data were used coming from a longitudinal qualitative research project. The urge for longitudinal research is often emphasised in order to study the dynamics underlying organisational change (Armenakis and Bedeian, 1999; Klein, 1996; Nelissen & Van Selm, 2008). We expected that opinions of the employees on the renaming process would change over the years.

Over a period of three years (2005-2007), semi-structured interviews were held among full and (senior) associate professors, working in a variety of faculties. In 2006, these interviews were supplemented with interviews among executive managers of several services, such as the financial and personnel departments, the University Library, the University Restaurant and the University Sports Centre. Over 150 interviews were held, in which employees were asked to reflect on several issues about the planned and perceived identity of the University, including the renaming.

For this project we selected 41 interviews. First we made a selection among academic employees working in different faculties, who were interviewed in 2005 (9 full professors and 10 associate professors). As full professors are more involved in organisational politics and affairs, we expected them to be more outspoken about the strategic organisational change, compared to the associate professors. Secondly, we choose among academic and non-academic staff members who were interviewed in 2006. We choose these interviewees in executive positions in several faculties (11 full professors) and in supporting services and facilities (11 senior executives). Executives have a special responsibility as they are key-players in achieving the strategic changes by informing and motivating other employees. Staff members can be conceived as relevant internal stakeholders, as they belong to “any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organisation's objectives” (Freeman, 1984, p. 46). It is vital that these managers understand the objectives of the renaming process. Furthermore the academic executives play a central role in spreading the new corporate message, both for national and international external stakeholders.

In this qualitative research project, semi-structured interviews were conducted in order to reconstruct an actor-perspective on the new name of the university and opinions on the strategic organisational change. An interview guide was used in order to intro-

duce relevant topics regarding aspects of the strategic corporate change. Interviewers were trained to probe for meanings attached to the old and new names, the diversity of perceptions of the renaming process, and identity cues of the university held by academic staff as well as desired by the management.

### 10.2.1 Analysis

Verbatim transcripts were analysed by means of open coding (Wester & Peters, 2004). Open coding is the part of analysis “that pertains specifically to the naming and categorisation of phenomena through close examination of the data” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 62). The process of coding is led by the analytical procedures of making comparisons and asking questions (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The assignment of codes to the interview segments was guided by our research questions. This resulted in four clusters of codes, including codes referring to a) the objectives of the change of name as perceived by the respondents, b) the urgency of the change of name, c) how respondents assessed the new name in itself, and d) the renaming as an organisational process. By comparing these codes within and between the clusters (e.g., Boeije, 2002), we formulated categories.

## 10.3 Results

### 10.3.1 What's in a new name?

From the interviews, three dimensions could be derived that describe the way in which the respondents experience the change of name. These dimensions refer to a) the objectives of the change of name as perceived by the respondents, b) the urgency of the change of name, and c) how respondents assessed the new name in itself.

#### 10.3.1.1 Objectives of the change of name

Most respondents hold ideas about what is aimed at by the change of name. It is striking that these ideas cover a wide variety of objectives that range from disconnecting the university from partners in the pasts, to connecting the university to partners for the future. Interview quotations that refer to disconnecting the university deal, firstly, with breaking with religion. The new name abandons the connection between the traditional religious orientation and science, and also breaks up with the possible influence of old Roman Catholic institutions that contributed to the founding of this university decades ago.

In addition, respondents felt that by choosing the new name the university intended to leave behind its roots more in general. According to them, choosing a new name implies that the organisation wishes not to be associated any longer by what the university used to be famous for, or used to have a reputation for, for example being (extremely) left wing in orientation. It means a loss of all those meanings, both positive and negative, that once were assigned to the university. According to many of the respondents this is an impoverishment of the positioning of the university in general. They felt that knowing the university from something (either good or bad) should be preferred over the creation of a ‘blank’ university stripped from all its past associations.

A final aspect at this point refers to the university's association with the city of Nijmegen. The new name implies that Nijmegen is no longer part of the name. The connection between characteristic of the city, for example key city in the Ancient Roman Empire, or the oldest city of The Netherlands, is no longer referred to.

Apart from seeing the renaming as a process of disconnecting, the respondents also saw the renaming as a way to connect the university to something, and more in particular to the Academic Medical Centre. Respondents expressed both positive and negative aspects at this point. At the positive side, they emphasise the benefits of the Academic Medical Centre's high prestige and good rumour. The Academic Medical Centre is an innovative hospital hosting internationally recognised research and praxis. At the negative side, they mention that the university runs the danger of becoming overshadowed by (oppositional) hospital interests and the risk of image damage due to scandals and affairs taking place in particular hospital departments every now and then.<sup>1</sup>

#### 10.3.1.2 The urgency of the change of name

With respect to the dimension urgency it strikes that the change of name is seen, on the one hand, as inevitable and, on the other hand, as unnecessary and as a waste of resources. The inevitability is mentioned in particular in combination with the use of the university's old name abroad. Abroad, the old name, referring to religious roots, was met with scepticism, and therefore not beneficial for its scholars and scientists. For this reason respondents told that abroad they used the name 'University of Nijmegen' instead. Most respondents estimated that in the long run the elimination of the religious part of the name would be the only thinkable option. On the other hand, the change of name was perceived as something unnecessary. Rather, respondents saw it as a fashionable act of the management and as a hype by which only some external characteristics are modified but nothing genuine would change within the organisation.

#### 10.3.1.3 The name in itself

The respondents assessed the new name in itself in a variety of ways. These opinions vary from seeing the new name as a step forward, a stay put, or a step backwards. The new name is experienced as a step forward when respondents feel that the new name has something to offer, such as a better sound, more prestige or company pride amongst the people who work at the university. In addition, respondents see the new name as a step forward when they feel that it is the result of a proper and sensible managerial decision, for example as being the only compromise that is acceptable for all stakeholders.

Experiencing the new name as a step backwards is characterised by the counterparts of the issues just mentioned, such as the new name being unpronounceable by foreigners, the new name lacking positive connotations, being empty and non-inspiring. In addition, respondents who see the new name as a step backwards often propose better alternatives, such as Carolus Magnus University (named after the medieval emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, who lived temporarily in Nijmegen), Saint Radboud University (Radboud was a Saint; the hospital is also called Saint Radboud), or University of Nijmegen.

The new name is seen as a stay put when respondents feel that the new name really is a weak-hearted compromise: by having (Saint) Radboud in the name, the religious roots are not really dealt with. Further, they emphasise that the change of name had no consequences whatsoever to their jobs.

### 10.3.2 Renaming as a strategic organisational change.

As mentioned above the renaming of the university was introduced as the completion of a strategic change. By changing the name the Board aimed:

- to affirm the alliance between University and Academic Medical Centre St. Radboud;
- to achieve a prominent place in the national and international academic arena with the profile of a broad-based, student-oriented research university rooted in the rich tradition of Catholicism, with an ambition to maintain and expand its high quality.

Respondents were asked to reflect on these objectives and the way the renaming procedure was organised. Their assessment of the renaming process and the underlying object-

Table 10.1 Perceptions of the renaming as strategic change

2005: <i>full professors (n = 9) versus ASSOCIATE PROFESSORS (n = 10)</i>			
	Renaming process	Underlying objectives	Personal and corporate outcomes
Ally	<i>I was well informed</i> <i>Well planned surprise</i> EXECUTIVE BOARD HAS ACTED REASONABLE	<i>Profile will be supported by new name</i> BETTER CHANCE TO ACHIEVE OBJECTIVES	<i>Higher PR-value</i> <i>More unity with Medical centre</i> <i>Beneficial for publications abroad</i> ADVANTAGE FOR WORK
Loyalist	<i>Taken note of process</i> <i>I was surprised</i> <i>Smart move of E.B.</i> TOP DOWN TIME WILL TELL IF IT'S SUCCESSFUL	<i>SOME UNDERSTANDING*</i>	<i>Nothing / not much has changed</i> <i>NO EFFECTS*</i> NO INFLUENCE
Rebel	<i>Completely superfluous</i> <i>E.B. didn't listen and enforced renaming</i> I WAS TAKEN BY SURPRISE A PURELY COSMETIC ENTERPRISE	<i>Alliance with medical centre is no good idea</i> <i>Marketing blur</i> <i>No coherence between name and profile</i> NO URGENCY ARGUMENTS ARE NOT CONVINCING	<i>Too much money wasted</i> HUGE INVESTMENTS
2006: <i>academic staff (n = 11) versus NON-ACADEMIC STAFF (n = 11)</i>			
	Renaming process	Underlying objectives	Personal and corporate outcomes
Ally	<i>Quiet, professional change</i> EXECUTIVE BOARD SHOWED THE COURAGE TO DECIDE PLEASANT SURPRISE WELL COMMUNICATED	BETTER PROFILE ABROAD	<i>Cultural shift</i> PEOPLE IN TOWN ARE PROUD OF RADBOD UNIVERSITY NIJMEGEN EMPLOYEES ARE CONNECTED BETTER AMONGST EACH OTHER
Loyalist	<i>Nicely done</i> LISTENED TO WITH A SHRUG TOP-DOWN COMMUNICATION WAS INEVITABLE	<i>Glad about removal catholic identity</i>	<i>Everybody gets used to it</i> UNIVERSITY HASN'T CHANGED
Rebel	<i>Unexpected</i> <i>Process was impractical, rash and unethical</i> <i>E.B. is narrow-minded and immature.</i>	<i>Objectives not achieved</i> <i>No connections between faculties</i>	<i>ABSOLUTELY NO CHANGE*</i> <i>WASTE OF MONEY*</i>

\* This opinion was found among both professors and associate professors, and both academic and non-academic staff

ives varied but can broadly be seen to fall into three categories: allies who support the process and objectives; rebels who oppose against it; and loyalists who undergo the renaming more or less as a *fait accompli*. In Table 10.1 we describe how these categories of perceptions were expressed and how they changed over the years (2005 versus 2006) and varied between different groups of employees (academic and non-academic staff members).

Whereas perceptions of respondents often fell into different categories, we found that, compared to the academic staff, opinions held by non-academic staff (managers of supporting services) belong mainly in the allied camp. Differences between full and associate professors are less obvious—they are more spread throughout the different acceptance categories.

Although differences are visible, especially with regard to the change process and the underlying objectives, most employees agree on the outcome: the renaming of the university caused hardly any change, and was widely accepted. Another general feeling was that interviewees hardly have knowledge about the underlying objectives of the renaming process. When unveiled by the interviewers, employees appeared to be more or less ambivalent about the connection between University and Medical Centre and ignorant of the core values, and disagreed with the expectation that by renaming an organisation, core values and objectives are altered. As we did not interview the same employees in 2005 and 2006, changes over the years are hard to make out from these results. Nevertheless, Table 1 shows a gradual development into less scepticism and more acceptance of the new name among full professors. Besides that, all respondents in 2006 have put aside their objections against the renaming and use the new name in their everyday life without much objection.

## 10.4 Discussion

We started our study on the renaming of the Catholic University Nijmegen into the Radboud University Nijmegen with a brief reflection on the literature on organisational identity and strategic change. We emphasised the social actor conception of organisational identity and its implications for this study of the renaming process of an organisation (Whetten & Mackey, 2002). In order to understand how this organisational change was experienced and evaluated, we interviewed academic and non-academic staff in which they were asked to reflect on the renaming process.

Due to the subjective character of sense-making we expected and found a variety of reactions to the renaming process. The diversity of interpretations were described in two steps. The first step represents different dimensions or interpretive schemes that flesh out the way in which the respondents experience the new name in itself. In the second step differences among respondents regarding the evaluation of the renaming process, the underlying objectives and the personal and corporate outcomes were described.

The first dimension that described the way in which respondents experience the change of name, refers to the function that is ascribed to the new name in establishing a disconnection with the past and new connections for the future. Employees emphasise, on the one hand, the loss of religious roots, the loss of influence of Catholic institutions and the disconnection between religion and science. On the other hand, they emphasise the initiation and improvement of connections with the Academic Medical Centre and the international scientific community in the future. The latter was also a main element

of seeing the change of name as a step forward. In this dimension we can recognise what Nan (2007) describes as gain-loss framing: people construct different mental representations of the same information using a loss or a gain frame.

The second dimension represents different opinions regarding the urgency of the renaming process. The urgency of the change of name is labelled either as inevitable or as unnecessary. Here, the respondents seem to distance themselves personally from the renaming process as an enterprise planned and executed by the Executive Board, without employee consultation, which is regretted by some and ignored by others.

Third, respondents varied on opinions on the name itself: Radboud University Nijmegen. Roughly spoken, opinions differed from a step forward, a stay put, or a step backward. However, independent of how the new name was evaluated, in 2006 all interviewees accepted, or at least used the new name.

After reflecting on the different dimensions regarding the way respondents experienced the new name, we will discuss the reactions of respondents to the renaming process, the underlying objectives, and the outcomes of the renaming process. We discerned three groups of respondents with different interpretative schemes on these issues: allies, loyalists and rebels. Again, the gain-loss framing stands out in these results (see Table 1). Looking at the results, the Executive Board can find their allies among non-academic executives who they meet on a regularly base. Rebels are mainly located in the group of full professors. Professors lead research groups with links to the national and international scientific (disciplinary) community, and usually work at a distance from the corporate decision makers. The rebels are critical towards all corporate objectives that ideally would go along with the renaming process.

However, what stands out is an attitude of indifference and acceptance towards the new name in both groups. The rebellious professors continue their every day academic work, even though they are against the renaming. To them, the renaming seems too futile to spend too much time and energy on. In addition, we observed a decline of rebellion when we look at the personal and corporate outcomes. In 2006, all interviewees seem to accept the new name, and, at the same time do not encounter considerable changes in organisation strategy. This may point to the professors' professional autonomy that makes them 'hard to move'. Gornitzka (1999) analysed the ability and willingness to organisational change in higher education organisations and found that the function and objectives of universities and colleges are best served in an environment of academic freedom. He described these organisations as 'bottom-heavy', which makes the potency of collective action at an institutional level low, resulting in a weak role for institutional leadership (Gornitzka, 1999, p. 12).

The role and quality of institutional leadership regarding the definition of the organisational identity, is not only jeopardised by the rebels. With respect to the loyalists and the allies we noted that these groups seem not fully aware of the renaming process as a strategic change of the corporate identity. So, even though they go along, or even fully support the renaming of the university, they seem not to be informed properly by the Executive Board who initiated the renaming process.

Both observations point at a considerable gap between the organisational top management and work floor. Workers at both organisational levels seem occupied with the tasks they are hired for, that is developing and implementing management plans versus doing academic work, and are reluctant in seeing (the relevance of) developments that reach beyond the own domain.

Over the years the name of Radboud University Nijmegen has become a common property inside and outside the University. The underlying objectives are forgotten and put aside as they do not represent what members perceive, feel and think about their organisation. This study adds to our knowledge of corporate identity and organisational change that a strategic identity reorganisation (i.e., a renaming process) in itself can be considered as successful, without however the intended organisational consequences taking place. We studied the outcome of processes involved in promoting cognitive understanding, acceptance and institutionalisation of the new organisational reality during a strategic transition (Gioia, et al., 2000), and found that with respect to the cognitive understanding a manifold of meanings exists, which did not hamper the (internal) acceptance and institutionalisation of the strategic change.

## Notes

1. The alliance between University and Medical Centre came under pressure in 2006, when the department of Cardiology was closed temporary, due to the malfunctioning of the organisation and to quarrelling medical professionals. This received attention from the national and regional press. In 2008 the university's Executive Board proposed to sever the managerial connection in order to avoid the responsibility for insurance claims from patients.

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