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# Making a consultancy slideshow "rock solid": a study of pragmatic efficacy

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**Abstract:** The paper examines the pragmatic efficacy of a paradigmatic representational device used in the work of management consulting: the diagrammatic presentation of managerial problems in a consultancy slideshow. We present an ethnographic analysis of a consultancy mission, focusing on the moments in which presentation is crafted, altered and discussed before reaching a stage of relative felicity. We analyze the conditions for this felicity as they are made explicit through the consultants' ordinary work. We found that consultants manage three types of constrains when producing the representational device: (1) to create an appropriate effect on the target, (2) to be faithful to the "reality" of the situation and (3) to maintain an internal coherence of the representation. We further discuss these three aspects in the light of a pragmatist approach.

**Introduction**

What follows is an examination of the type of reality that is conveyed through one paradigmatic device within the practice of management consulting: the consultancy slideshow. We interrogate the pragmatic, performative features of a demonstrative diagram that consultants put forward in order to describe the problem of the client organization. By investigating the elaboration and use of a slideshow (the electronic visual document also often referred to as a "PowerPoint presentation" in reference to the Microsoft software) in the context of a consultancy assignment, we show that consultants manage several constraints to elaborate a representation that is finally coined as "rock solid", i.e. expected to perform a state of the world that is suitable for the client to take actions. This specific order is materialized in a document that can be pointed at, recalled and which stabilizes a reality which is considered as appropriate by the relevant parties.

It has been argued that recent literature on management consulting extensively draws from sociological neoinstitutionalism, that is "on the argument that it is belief in the efficiency of particular practices or solutions, rather than any proven efficiency, that determines or influences economic action" (Armbrüster 2006, p. 7). In this respect, the cultural features of management consulting have been extensively investigated through a rather critical angle (see, for example, Clark and Fincham 2002). Consultants are depicted as outsiders relying on both non-codified (Alvesson 1993) and fashionable knowledge (Abrahamson 1996), evolving in ambiguous environments "where clarifying means-ends relationships or exercising qualified judgment becomes seriously reduced" (Alvesson 1993, p. 1001). Their concern is to "persuade" clients of their value to gain legitimacy and ensure further selling (Clark 1995, Clark and Salaman 1996, Sturdy 1997). Storytelling, drama, authoritative arguments, packaged instruments, branding, managerial myths are considered as many "tactics" used by

consultants to manipulate clients' perception of what is real, efficient, valuable, problematic and so on. Fincham considers, for example, that consultants demonstrate value to their clients "through what is latent in [their] discourse: its range of rhetorical techniques, ways of controlling the image that clients receive, the definition of client problems" (1999, p. 336). If visual rhetoric is the theme of this paper, however, we do not venture into such critical path, except for the purpose of noticing concern on how reality is expressed, depicted, imaged or imagined in consultancy accounts, and on how reality responds to these images and depictions.

Little attention has been given in this and comparable literatures to material aspects of the consulting practice, a practice which is mostly seen as an intangible service (Clark 1995). A notable exception would be the work of Irene Skovgaard Smith (2010) who points the crucial role of consultants in "materializing the organization" (p. 1). According to this author, "an important part of consulting activity is to objectify problems and what is going on in the organization" (p. 1), consultants being agents "positioned by internal actors as truth tellers and pen holders" (p. 2). Indeed, when observing consultants *in vivo* and *in situ* one can realize their job is foremost a "writing job" where the production of "intellectual technologies" (Latour 1987, 2005, Miller and Rose 1990) in the form of reports, memos, minutes, reviews, presentations, charts and so forth represents a significant workload. These material inscriptions have the virtue to "show while finalizing" consultants' work (Boni Le-Goff 2010) and clients ought to bear in hands concrete "deliverables" at the end of almost any assignment. Consulting techniques are developed as proprietary systems (Fincham 1999) so as to be transferred or sold to clients in tangible forms.

Microsoft PowerPoint software has become today a favored tool to create these inscriptions and to mediate consulting advice. Displaying an expert use of PowerPoint has itself become a crucial skill for consultants (Kaplan 2011). A growing literature puts forward

the role played by PowerPoint in the creation of a pervasive business cognitive style that cannot be limited to its well-known shortcomings (Gabriel 2008, Stark and Paravel 2010, Kaplan 2011, Yates and Orlikowski 2007, Knoblauch 2008, Beaudoin 2008, Gaglio 2009; Doganova and Eyquen-Renault 2009). For example, in her in-depth study of PowerPoint use in the making of strategy, Kaplan (2011) found "that PowerPoint mediated two discursive practices: collaborative efforts to negotiate meaning and cartographic efforts to adjudicate interests" (p. 327). Strategy is about industry structures, product differentiation, operational performance, resource allocation, and so on, but it is also about using visual and discursive technology to provide materiality to unclear ideas and create spaces for negotiation of meaning. Giving insight on how both elements intermingle in practice, through the case of a diagnosis assignment, is the purpose of this paper.

Thus, this study connects with perspectives inspired by Actor-Network Theory which takes tools of representation as entry points for the analysis of organized actions (e.g. Law and Hassard 1999, Czarniawska and Hernes 2005, Callon, Millo and Muniesa 2007). In this vein, Cooren (2004) examines the agency of written, oral and iconic texts in organization. According to this author, "signs, memos and contracts display a form of agency by doing things that humans alone could not do. Created by human beings, these texts participate in the channeling of behavior, constitute and stabilize organizational pathways, and broadcast information/orders" (Cooren 2004, p. 388; see also Cooren, Taylor and Van Every 2006, Bencherki and Cooren 2011). The performative aspect of texts and visuals is also underlined by recent works which explore the role and effect of business imagery in organization, investigating rhetoric, visual and methodological aspects (Quattrone 2009). Indeed, "imagining business" (Puyou, Quattrone, McLean and Thrift 2012) could be considered as one of consultants' main functional task. But the very process by which this imagining is done still lacks in-depth analysis. By focusing on this aspect, this paper also goes along the lines of

ethnographic and longitudinal studies of practice that present management consulting in its complex, varied and dynamic form (Sturdy 2009, Whittle 2008), drifting away from a common opposition in academic literature between critical and functionalist approaches (Whittle 2006, Armbrüster 2006).

Our contribution concerns one particular problem of management consulting communication that we call the problem of pragmatic efficacy. In the case set out to be examined here, we observe that the consultancy diagram stands as a description of a firm's problems and of sound directions for solution, but that its elaboration is mostly characterized by concerns about the layout, the visuals, the keywords, and the smack of seriousness. Is the diagram true? Or is it a trick, a decoy? We attempt at avoiding this line of interrogation, and rely instead on a pragmatist approach in the sense that we focus on what the slideshow does rather than on how it represents and external reality. We follow a diagram, through ethnographic materials on one consultancy mission, from a state of artifact to a state of relative felicity (i.e., it works).

In the following section, we sketch out our approach to the problem of pragmatic efficacy. In section 3, we present the research methodology and Effictio Consulting, the company in which field work was conducted. In section 4 and 5 we present our empirical materials, which are discussed in section 6.

**A pragmatic reading of symbolic efficacy**

Considering management consulting in the terms of the anthropology of remedial rituals is now perhaps a *lieu commun*. The consultant as shaman or witchdoctor stands as a legitimate resource in the repertoire of business ethnography and also in the ordinary vocabulary of consultancy proper (Woodworth and Nelson 1979, Clark and Salaman 1996). Notions of incantation, storytelling and the manipulation of symbols populate both the

critique of managerial culture and its ordinary practice. But it is interesting to observe that one of the classical texts in the anthropology of remedial rituals is precisely one that tries to clarify more drastically the problem of what we call pragmatic efficacy.

In his classical study of "symbolic efficacy" (*i.e.* of the efficacy of symbols, their practical effectiveness) in shamanistic cure, Claude Lévi-Strauss develops an understanding of incantation as a practical instrument for therapy (Lévi-Strauss 1949). Chants are first said to be a "psychological manipulation of the ill organ" (ibid., p. 12, our translation), but then a matter of "introducing a series of events of which the body and the internal organs constitute the stage" (p. 13). Very much like the psychoanalytical cure, Lévi-Strauss writes, the shamanistic cure is about "provoking an experience" (p. 21) and therefore requires an enlargement and a positive understanding of the notion of manipulation: "it is sometimes about the manipulation of ideas, sometimes about the manipulation of organs, but in all cases through symbols, that is, through significant equivalents of what is signified, pertaining to a different order of reality" (p. 22). Lévi-Strauss refers there to Marguerite Sechehaye's psychoanalytic method of symbolic realization. As Lévi-Strauss makes clear, efficacious symbolic manipulation is not about lying to the patient. It is about provoking an event in which the organs are mobilized through their participation in a simulacrum – but a simulacrum that effectuates reality.

Calling Lévi-Strauss a pragmatist can be quite at odds with the legacy of structuralism. But, as Hennion (2010) has rightly suggested, the work of Lévi-Strauss contains a series of intuitions that gain in strength if considered from a pragmatist angle. The idea of "symbolic efficacy" is indeed quite compatible with the notion the empirical action of the sign developed by pragmatist philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce in his theory of signification, also with Austin's notion of the performative utterance or Searle's speech acts theory (Hoopes 1991, Searle 1969, Austin 1962). The chants and invocations are performative insofar as they refer

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to states of affair that are provoked by the act of statement, or are meant to be so with greater or lesser success. Success, indeed, or felicity (as John Austin would have it) depends on a series of arrangements that are not yet fully described in Lévi-Strauss' account but that are likely to be connected to the "manipulations" undergone within the situation and that could be illuminated by ethnographic investigation.

When translated into our subject matter, this pragmatist take on symbolic efficacy allows us to tackle how well the consultancy slideshow diagram refers to the states of affair it contributes to constitute. Our hypothesis, thus, is that the felicity of this referential process depends more on the crafts of the consultants in the process of manipulating symbols than on any natural adequacy of their designation apparatus to the object of consultancy. The idea of manipulation requires being taken here in its most natural sense, not as an indication of some kind of deceitfulness: it means to handle with the hands, to arrange and to assemble. That said, something can be handled more or less felicitously, and what we explore in this research are precisely the conditions in which the referential process undertaken by the consultants do hold together. In our concluding discussion below, we isolate three constraints that the production of a consultancy diagrammatic presentation undergo (effect, accuracy and layout) and we connect them to a pragmatist viewpoint on symbolic efficacy (and, more concretely, to Peirce's theory of signification).

**Methodology and context**

In this article, we draw from an ethnographic study conducted at Effictio Consulting (pseudonym), a company based in France that employs 150 consultants and operates in a variety of sectors, from banking to healthcare. Empirical materials were gathered by the first co-author during eight months of active observation, while he was himself working as a consultant in 2010. Comprehensive access to organizational activities was granted by regular,

professional participation to consultancy assignments and other day-to-day activities. The analyzed materials were gathered through a range of methods: document collection (including emails, notes and reports), participation in meetings and conversations, and field notes written on a continuous basis.

Our focus is on one single consultancy mission. The assignment concerned Aeger Hospital (pseudonym), a healthcare institution resulting from the merger of two smaller hospitals. Effictio Consulting had to carry a mission of analysis and restructuration of the support functions of the organization (the medical departments were out of the scope of the analysis), these tasks being formulated as follows in the assignment letter:

"Aeger Hospital is carrying out a reflection on its strategic positioning [...]. Three major objectives are set: to exceed a critical size [...], to develop new activities [...], to better take into account the legal environment [...]. To achieve these goals, it is necessary to align the administrative organization of the [new hospital] with its strategy and to provide all the necessary means for the top management team to succeed. In this context, Effictio Consulting's mission is to analyze the current organization, to evaluate the extent to which the organization is adapted to the challenges of the future, to define an administrative target and to suggest steps towards its achievement." (Field document, "Assignment Letter", October 2009, our translation)

As one can see from this excerpt, the client does not give precise indications of what is expected in terms of outcomes for the assignment. The situation reminds of Schein's (1969) "doctor-patient" model of consulting in which the client barely feels a need for change, but relies on the consultant to precisely define a target and the means to reach it. In this type of mission, the "diagnosis phase" is very important. The diagnosis is in itself a form of

intervention that modifies the characteristics of the observed system (ibid.). Spotting the problem (the "real" problem) and pointing it to the client in a demonstrative manner, so it can be acknowledged and taken into account, is halfway to recovery.

The assignment involved two consultants: a junior consultant that we call Tony (pseudonym, one of the co-authors) and a senior consultant, Camille (also a pseudonym).[1] The team was led by a Partner at Effictio Consulting, who stepped in sporadically for formal presentations.

The mission had two particularities. First, the post-merger situation required major organizational adjustments which brought about strong political tensions among the hospital directors. Second, the restructuration undertaken by Effictio Consulting had to align with a strategic planning led at the same time by another consultant, Mister K (pseudonym), who had a long track record of past collaborations with Aeger and benefitted from the CEO's trust. Camille expected to interact with him during the assignment, which she felt put her in a delicate situation given that he was a competitor.

The assignment included four phases. In the first phase, the consultants had to gather and analyze information, either through interviews at Aeger Hospital or other methods. The second one consisted in delivering a report presenting an "analysis of the current state of affairs" at Aeger, a form of diagnosis of the situation as observed by the consultants. Based on this inventory, a third phase followed in which consultants laid out steps to solve observed problems and reach targets. Finally, the fourth phase was to implement a plan for change according to the consultants' advised course of action. Gathering data took the consultants about three months, plus one month to draft the analysis of the situation: a 120-pages PowerPoint report, accompanied with several digest presentations.

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[1] The reason for using the grammatical third person and a pseudonym for the first junior consultant (who is of us) is purely stylistic. We do not tackle here, for lack of space and of specific purpose, the reflexive aspects of participatory ethnography.

**Narrowing down to the slideshow**

We focus in this paper on the second phase of the assignment, the production of a situation analysis report. This was considered "decisive" by the client and represented most of the workload. The assignment letter mentioned that the solution-seeking phase would only start after a full validation of this first report, and that remedies would be co-produced by the consultants and the Board of Aeger Hospital during a special-purpose seminar. The report was the result of fifty semi-structured interviews with insiders, benchmarking with executive managers of three other hospitals to confront the findings, and in-depth analysis of best practices in operational management of healthcare institutions through literature review and data mining. When the consultants started to draft the report, they had reached a consensus on what the main dysfunctions were. The lack of efficiency of patient administrative management processes (which go from admission to billing, including medical coding and relations with health insurance companies) was identified as a core problem. Flaws in the human resources department (payroll management, hiring, and so on) and overall lack of governance were also diagnosed. The aim at this stage was therefore to find a way to organize and formulate an analysis that was mostly already made. Camille actually wanted to reuse the documents that had been produced along the first phase of the assignment:

"We have to be exhaustive, using all the information we obtained during the interviews. We also need to capitalize on the minutes that were already approved. There is a formal constraint: all needs to be very clear, adjustable, a PowerPoint presentation will do." (Field notes, December 2009, our translation)

The slideshow we analyze in-depth held a specific position in a report that required important preparatory work. The consultants decided to begin with a "broad frame of analysis" and to submit it to the client for comments ("testing it", as consultants said) before going any further in the writing process. The report framework had to revolve around two main points: "transversal dysfunctions analysis" and "department-by-department analysis of dysfunctions". In the "transversal dysfunctions" section, problems were to be presented in a general fashion without assigning responsibilities or going too far in details. The section "department-by-department analysis of dysfunctions" would be more detailed and, according to Camille, "more stigmatizing because pointing direct responsibility" (Field notes, December 2009). As a result, the first type of content was to be forwarded to top management, and widely communicated upon. The second type would only be accessible as a whole to the CEO and each section would be sent to the department director it concerns. The formulation of the "transversal dysfunctions" and its connection, or not, to responsibilities at each department's level remained a strong concern throughout the consultancy work, as expressed by Camille in an informal conversation:

"I'm still raking my brain, trying to come up with a way to present the transversal aspects. […] I was thinking that perhaps we could point out cross-department aspects talking about dysfunctions where departments interact ["*dysfonctions aux interfaces*" in French] in the administrative management of the patient. The objective would then be to spot problems about the perimeter of each department." (Field notes, December 2009, our translation)

But, Camille and Tony later thought, approaching all this in terms of "dysfunctions where the departments interact" was dangerous because it referred too visibly to "frictions"

between particular individuals. They finally had to come up with another strategy. This is where the particular slideshow we analyze enters the scene. How did this new framing come about? Did it "work" well on the audience? How consultants concretely put together a representation of the hospital's dysfunctions that would entail a positive change? In what follows we attempt at answering these questions by following the consultants in the drafting of the diagram that encapsulated the new strategy.

**Following a diagram's life**

*A systemic approach to dysfunctions*

Camille gave instructions to Tony so that he could start drafting the slideshow. She suggested him to "start with the merger, insisting on the fact that the merger is not over yet, no one will complain or deny that, and the result is that perimeters are fuzzy inside each department, and the organization suffers from a lack of direction" (Field notes, January 2010, our translation). On this ground, she asked Tony to make "formal proposals", i.e. to figure out a proper layout that would somehow put the merger forward in the representation but also take into account the conclusions of the audit. He made a first draft on PowerPoint which eventually served as the basis for a brainstorming meeting between the two consultants, which we describe in what follows. Several comments were handwritten during the encounter, as can be seen on Figure 1.

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Figure 1 about here

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**Figure 1: A rough first draft of the diagram, amended**

(Source: Field documents, reconstructed, translated and anonymized)

At first sight, Camille found the idea of a synthetic and graphical representation interesting, with different thematic "boxes" that could be developed further in the report:

"[Camille to Tony:] I like this approach because we need to show that problems are systemic. It is a good way not to be trapped in a silo-type of modeling, without a view on overall issues of governance. But we also need to show that the organization did not capitalize on good practices throughout the merger; what was right in each structure was not re-used." (Field notes, January 2010, our translation)

On this first draft of the diagram, the "uncompleted merger" is put forward (circle in the center) to comply with Camille's instructions. The other elements of the analysis are then dispatched on the page. The top management (represented by the red ["Management/project"] box) is also endowed with a central position. According to Tony, it is a way to manifest that the members of the board can be held responsible for major dysfunctions in the hospital and notably the failure of the merger in terms of systems integration and corporate culture.

Camille reacts to this representation by expressing concerns about the very content of the analysis. She asks Tony to provide concrete examples for each box, which he handwrites on the right of the page. He mentions "frictions at interaction points", gives examples of dysfunctions such as "adm patient mgt and store", quotes several information system tools used in the hospital. Camille herself pushes the analysis (handwritten remarks on the left) using the document as a "thinking aid" which fades behind actual considerations on the hospital's dysfunctions. Among other things, she gives details on what the consultants' have

come to consider as a lack of top management: "The size of the hospital calls for urgently implementing a formalized steering framework: strategic plan, management by objectives, reporting, etc." (ibid).

Camille and Tony also question the causal relations between the elements displayed in the boxes, as is shown by the multiple arrows handwritten on the page. They try to discern "real causes" from "symptoms" and Camille repeatedly asserts that "everything is in everything" and that "there is always something artificial in this kind of structuration" (ibid). However, the consultants spend considerable time discussing the relevance of the boxes' repartition, the appropriate titles for them, and the actual interactions between the elements of the system. As an outcome of this discussion, Camille suggests the inclusion of a new box, "structure", in which issues of managerial decentralization ought to be addressed. And because she is getting "fully convinced by this systemic approach", she warns Tony that the titles yet don't meet her requirements and they'll have to be better defined. The meeting reaches an end, and Tony is asked to keep on working on the diagram in that direction. But before he leaves the room, Camille adds this last remark: "I know it is important to you but it would be counterproductive to point out the top management in a straightforward manner. So I'd rather prefer you get this red box ["Management/project"] back in the rank, at the same level with the others" (ibid).

*"Entering through the merger": a diagram of attribution*

After that brainstorming meeting, Tony drafted a new version of the diagram taking into account Camille's comments (Figure 2).

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Figure 2 about here

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**Figure 2: Second draft of the diagram**

(Source: Field documents, reconstructed, translated and anonymized)

This next version of the diagram (Figure 2) is more sophisticated: the causal relations are formalized, the boxes' titles more segmented, and for each one of them, a short text explains what it refers to. Besides, the "governance" box is less salient as asked by Camille, even though its color, its position at the top of the boxes and the causal relations represented by the arrows (on the right) still explicitly point to the responsibility of top management. Camille, the senior consultant, greeted the new draft with positive comments:

"It is much better, we really have to go all out on the merger […], entering through the merger is an ideal way to indicate the hospital's flaws without stigmatizing anyone […]. Frankly, it is sure that the day the merger will be fully reached things are going to be much easier at Aeger." (Field notes, January 2010, our translation)

The diagram has the function of attributing responsibility to selected targets, the function of assigning agency. In a sense, it organizes a program of action in the semiotic sense studied by, for example, Bencherki and Cooren (2011). Camille mentions a necessity to "enter through the merger" as a way to step in the argumentation, to step in a world performed by a representation that contributes to distributing accountabilities for the hospital's dysfunctions. That's where the difficulty lies: attributing responsibility without really doing so, displaying problems without overburdening anyone, so as not to turn the targeted people against the analysis. The fact that the consultants chose a "non-human", the merger, a sort of process

without subject, as the first cause for dysfunctions, is considered a way to "gently get the message across" (ibid).

At that point Camille suggested to Tony an exercise that consisted in a sort of a simulation of the rhetoric capacity to describe the diagram, much like a rehearsal. Camille asked Tony to explain the boxes, to make explicit the content, the message, the intention as if he was talking to the client. Tony, who was not used to this type of method, felt slightly embarrassed, almost as if he was participating in some sort of breaching experiment. Again, the aim was to provide examples for each box and discuss the relations between them. On several occasions during the exercise, Camille repeated the same sentence, as a leitmotiv of their consulting work: "what do we want to say, what do we want to show, what is the effect we want to have on the client" (Field notes, January 2010). In the end, mostly out of exasperation, Tony responded straightforwardly:

"The answer is simple: we want to say that everything is wrong in this organization and that everything is linked. We do not want to stigmatize the top managers, in particular the head of human resources who is already in a bad position, and the top management. But, frankly, their responsibility is total. We have decided to use the merger as an entry point. And then we have a pile of very clear things to say, but we need to dose them: outdated processes, lack of motivation, absence of field management, wrong deployment of information systems, flaws in the store logistics, administrative management of patients, well, I don't need to tell you all." (Field notes, ibid, our translation)

This kind of questioning was a way for Camille to make sure that the representation as it appeared in its material form corresponded to the message the consultants wanted to display. Because once created, the artifact travels, takes a life of its own and can be misinterpreted (or interpreted without the control of the consultants). It also met one of Camille's expectations about the conception work of a narrative artifact. In her view and as she often said (quoting the French poet Boileau-Despreaux) "what is conceived well is expressed clearly": the enunciation style was then treated as a mark out for the redaction work.

*A complex network of publics*

As we mentioned earlier, Effictio Consulting's assignment had to align with the work of another consultant, Mister K, a longtime collaborator of Aeger Hospital. At this time, Camille and the Partner at Effictio who headed the mission had an important meeting with Mister K to discuss the reorganization in regard with the strategic planning he was carrying out. Camille reported to Tony on the outcomes of the meeting:

> "[Camille]: 'the meeting with Mister K is going to have an impact on the structure of the report and the diagram, an important impact. We need to organize things so as to make sure that Mister K's input is taken into account. Otherwise he is going to tackle us down'. She said she felt judged, though the objective of the meeting was rather to discuss the information system master plan and to position Effictio Consulting with respect to Mister K's strategic planning. According to her, Mister K asked the Partner: 'Tell me what you are going to present to the CEO and to the other members of the Board'. Camille did so. Mister K reacted: 'You have to go beyond symptoms and start addressing human resources, processes, organization and tools'. […] Camille found

Mister K's analyses rather hard, even peremptory. […] [Camille said:] 'I have the impression that Mister K and the CEO are fond of each other and that he is there in order to challenge us. I have discussed with the Partner at Effictio whether or not we should be aggressive in front of the CEO, saying that Mister K's proposal is rubbish. We don't know yet. I am going to talk to the CEO to gather some impressions on the topic'." (Field notes, January 2010, our translation)

At that stage in the drafting process, the diagram was embedded into a slightly novel context. It had to cope (critically or not) with the criteria and vocabularies put forward by a competing consultant. Camille indicated to Tony that Mister K's "little boxes" (i.e. the titles used in the boxed texts inside the diagram) needed to be used: "Human Resources" (skills, capabilities, size), "processes" (issues of fluidity and clarity), "organization" (that is, who is responsible for what) and "tools" (information systems and work methods). We see here that the diagrammatic representation works as a collaboration device "that allows for the achievement of agreement around information being communicated" (Kaplan 2011, p. 331). The document is the result of an iterative process between competitors; it becomes a means through which "distributed knowledge got negotiated and embodied" (ibid, p. 332).

*Representational sources of inspiration*

With these elements in mind, Camille asked Tony for new improvements in the diagram:

"[Camille to Tony:] I really think that the idea of the diagram is good. We will work further on the boxes to be sure they are right and that they fit Mister's K analysis. But the diagram is not nice. It's actually quite dumpy. We know that everyone in the

hospital is going to read this particular slide: it's a global diagram on Aeger's dysfunctions… so it really needs to be a killer." (Field notes, January 2010, our translation)

As we can observe, the next remarks of the senior consultant thus turn slightly aesthetic and communicational. We are now moving from the ground of precautious attribution and interested collaboration to the ground of efficacious communication. The amusing thing to notice is that, in Camille's view, "not to stigmatize" is about not having an effect, but then what about "being a killer"?

At this stage, Tony is looking for sources of inspiration to make the presentation more aesthetically fit, that is, for what he calls "diagrammatic templates" that can be used as examples. He searches Effictio Consulting databases, but also examines examples from a competitor he obtained a few months before from a colleague and discretely reuses sometimes. Figure 3 illustrates an example that came out of this diagrammatic modeling process based on formal exercises:

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Figure 3 about here

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**Figure 3: Draft for diagrammatic improvement**

(Source: Field documents, reconstructed, translated and anonymized)

Camille reacted to this layout proposal with mixed feelings. It was considered as nice, as "being a killer", but it looked "too consultant" in her view, i.e. difficult to "swallow" by the Board of a hospital, too distant from the culture of the CEO. She forwarded to Tony another model "much simpler in terms of form […] basically it is a circle in the middle with several

boxes around "(Field notes, January 2010, our translation). It also had hardly anything to do with the assignment terms of content as it was entitled: "the advantage of training mapping for training managers" and discussed issues of organizational learning. A widespread criticism of management consulting focuses on the fact that consultants use the same models over and over, irrespective of the context of the consultancy mission and the specify of the situation. In the case analyzed here, this mimetic fashion appeared as appropriate, but as an aesthetic of structuration, not as an analytical device. Camille considered the slideshow as "a source of inspiration" for organizing thoughts regardless of its meaning.

*Tinkering with boxes and arrows*

On the basis of this model, Tony drafted a new version of the diagram (Figure 5).


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Figure 4 about here

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**Figure 5: Fourth draft of the diagram**

(Source: Field documents, reconstructed, translated and anonymized)


This new version of the diagram displays a yet higher level of sophistication. The "uncompleted merger" is put forward (in bold at the center of the page), Mister K's analytical categories are mentioned in the boxes which are further explained with details of the analysis. The use of bullet points to align the examples is also considered a way to reinforce and better target them.

The problem of managerial stigma and the attribution of sharp responsibilities surfaced again at this point in discussions between Camille and Tony. The color code (red) for

the upper "management" box was too garish and therefore "still stigmatizing" for top management. It was decided that all boxes should use the same color code. The light arrows had to be revised too. According to Camille, the arrow between "organization" and "process" introduced an annoying asymmetry in the diagram and was to be removed. She then came to the conclusion that the extensive use of other arrows was also confusing and asked for them to be entirely removed. Pinto (1987) argues that using arrows in a graphic representation is equivocal, because the nature of the relation between the terms "is tacitly conceded to the act of reading. So far as possible, what is suggested is […] a causal relation: in this case the global configuration may seem to work as a sort of explanatory model of reality. But if the reader does not accommodate with a strong (causal) interpretation of the arrow, he can still put up with a weak interpretation, that consists in taking the sign for a formal and empty indication (X "has to do with" Y) impossible to reject, for the very reason of its indetermination" (p. 97). In our case, one can see indeed that the figuration of causal relations is abandoned by the consultants in favor of a circular and all-comprehensive structuration (see Figure 6), that ought to speak for itself, prevent the audience from confusion and foster personal interpretation.

Moreover, Camille considered that there was too much text on the page and that it would be sound to simplify the examples, or even to erase the upper texts that actually "did not bring about much added value". Figure 5 is the next version of the diagram, which includes the last comments.

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Figure 5 about here

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**Figure 5: Seventh draft of the diagram**

*A matter of wording*

Camille scheduled a meeting with the Partner to run the latest draft of the diagram past him. He found the idea of the diagram interesting and its formalization efficient. However, he made several comments regarding the choice of words, the "wording" as even French consultants usually say using the English language. First, he insisted on the fact that the diagram had to be "freestanding", i.e. capable to speak for itself and to be understood by a neophyte without a simultaneous oral explanation by the consultants. As a result, any jargon or non-explicit terms had to be expunged, such as "orphan tasks" for example.  Second, he argued that there were too many negative words in the slideshow and summoned the consultants to avoid putting forward a negative vision of the organization:

"[Partner]: I find the report way too violent. You see, there are two ways to get the message across. Either we say 'this is lame, you're all good-for-nothings', either we use the managerial approach, that means we say 'you are good but you still have areas of improvement to consider' […] you don't need much to tone down the topic […]; I am convinced that the client is smart enough to understand the message without us saying it.

[Camille]: I agree with you but I was trying to meet the client's requirements, he asked for the report to hurt, for us not to be easy with them… it is an explicit request from the client.

[Partner]: beware what the client asks you Camille, he comes from the public sector. He fosters a culture of confrontation. We must be better than that. We must

challenge him and not take a share in spreading his mistakes." (Field notes, May 2010, our translation)

To challenge the client by bringing him softly toward positive change is one of the effects the Partner expects from the diagram. But as he further explains, this implies drifting away from the client's requirements, which also has to do with the consultants' logic of self-preservation. Indeed, they will be directly associated with the artifact they produce, and will have to cope directly, as service providers, with the effects it might produce:

"[Partner:] We have to know to which extent we are ready to put up with the after-effects of violent words, especially during a meeting. The executive manager is smart enough to have his own weapons against us, after 8 month of assignment, this makes no doubt." (Field notes, May 2010, our translation)

*Reaching a "rock solid" diagram*

The next version of the diagram was then amended accordingly. The details for each box were, for example, slightly modified. In the case of the "human resources" box: "few specialized profiles" is replaced by "insufficient number of specialized profiles"; "employee discouragement" by "strong risk of employee discouragement"; "no shared culture in the new organization" by "no shared culture in the new organization yet". This type of softening of the wording can also be observed in the other boxes such as "governance" (where the proposition "flaws in the steering of support functions" is simply removed) and "tools". In the same vein, the Partner insisted on the fact that the term "uncompleted merger", at the center of the page, was "too strong and too connoted" and needed to be replaced. All the more, for him, the crux of the problem was not the fact that the merger was ill-completed, but the fact that the

organization had increased in size, which were two very different things, which he discussed extensively with Camille (see Figure 6).

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Figure 6 about here

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**Figure 6: One of the final versions of the diagram**

(Source: Field documents, reconstructed, translated and anonymized)

Both Tony and Camille were satisfied with that final version. While considering the job done so far before going to a meeting with the clients, Camille remarked: "our diagram really shines… even though we can say it is a two man-day diagram, at least now it is 'rock solid' ["*béton*" in French]". Perceiving the diagram as "rock solid" was for the consultant the result of a series of iterations and compromises: promote a systemic approach to dysfunctions, enter through the merger not to stigmatize anyone, display an aesthetic layout with coherent causal relations, remain thorough in the analysis, provide in-depth and well-structured examples, enhance a positive discourse and challenge the client, secure the consultants' mission, and so on. All these elements, incorporated in the representation, were part of the recipe to compose a visual rhetoric that could perform a new state of the world. Now, the diagram had the strength to resist further iterations and circulate in wider circles of public in felicitous conditions. Now, it may generate a suitable reality for the client.

*Presenting the diagram*

It would be quite perilous to evaluate the concrete effects of such slideshow beyond its observable reception by clients. Connecting the process of diagrammatic composition to the

transformations that occurred afterward in the hospital, on a relatively long timescale, would be highly contestable, unless an ethnographic work similar to the one conducted on the slideshow's production could reveal the phenomenon that allow the connection to be asserted. A few clues regarding its reception by clients may, however, hint to some effects and contribute, in a sense, to the closure of our work on the slideshow's production.

Camille recalled the way she handled the presentation (Tony was not present), "entering through the merger" as decided:

> "[Camille to Tony:] I first said positive things, and I explained: 'You were two small-scale organizations, you managed to function with a particular way of doing things, and while today you are a single organization, you still inherit from these two cultures, process, resources, and that is not adapted anymore'. I then showed the diagram, and everyone was very impressed, and I zoomed in for each box. […] And I ended up with what hurt the most: the bosses, the governance." (Interview with Camille, October 2010, our translation)

According to the Partner and Camille, who were in charge of the presentation, the diagram caused a "strong impression". Two types of remarks were put forward. First, a notion of clarity and order attributed to the format of the slide itself was valued by clients. A member of the Board would say for example that the diagram "gives a good picture of the situation of the hospital, now at least all is clear". Another said that the consultants "put a name on every problems and some sort of clear relation between all of them". This naming and ordering quality is common in such types of representation which create a common ground for people to discuss and build upon (Quattrone 2009, Kaplan 2011). Other would directly point out the material aspects of the representation as one of its major effects. For example, in discussions

with Camille and Tony, the Head of Information Systems would add: "There is nothing new, but now it is written in stone and nobody will be able to say that we didn't know" (Field notes, May 2010, our translation).

Other reactions referred to the hospital's situation as such, as if representation (the diagram) had gradually substituted itself to the world, in a chain of reference: "These are management methods of another age, how come we don't use management by objectives". One Board member also indicated: "I refuse that this translates into a witch hunt," for it seemed, despite the consultants' efforts, that the diagram was still attributing responsibilities for the dysfunctions in the hospital.

**Discussion**

*Three constraints for pragmatic efficacy*

As we have seen in this empirical account, the diagram is not a blank representation: it says things about the world, about the way consultants interprets problems and clients' expectations, even their own condition. What it says, and how, has to be understood in relation to particular constraints, which govern its evolution to a great extent. We identify three main constraints that affected the work of Camille and Tony for the drafting of the diagram: (1) to create an appropriate effect on the target, (2) to be faithful to the "reality" of the situation and (3) to maintain an internal coherence of the representation. Of course, these three constraints were intertwined in practice. For example and as we have seen, if the consultant removes an arrow from the diagram for the sake of graphic symmetry, it is also an explanatory link that goes off the analytical edifice, and a managerial responsibility that is not spotted anymore. When the consultant wonders if he can use such word as "uncompleted merger" to describe the situation, he bears its relevance as a signifier for a dysfunction in the hospital, and also its potential appreciation by the clients. But these three constraints are

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analytically distinct and allow for an understanding of the empirical issues raised by the problems of the felicitous consultancy presentation.

*First constraint: considering effects*

The first constraint is to produce expected effects on the target. At any given moment in the process of writing the report, we observe, the consultants were acutely aware that they were in a "communication situation", and that their recommendation would have a strong impact on the organization. The impact was mostly seen in terms of "political consequences", especially because the message displayed attributed responsibility for the lack of efficiency of processes. As a result, the different arguments carried by the diagram have been worked on and hierarchically ordered by the consultants. Two messages are put forward: first, the merger is responsible for dysfunctions in the organization; second, dysfunctions are systemic. In both cases, the idea is to avoid pointing directly at someone's particular responsibility, especially that of top management. Furthermore, the expected "political effect" not only involves the client organization, but also the consultants, as part of an interacting system. Consultant bears the possible counter-productive effects of their message in terms of image and commercial matters. And yet there is a third target: Mister K, the other consultant, who was in charge of strategy for Aeger Hospital, and whom Camille and Tony had to deal with. The titles of the boxes displayed in the slideshow were borrowed from his analysis, in order to seek adhesion. The diagram then works, partially, as a coordination device between consultancy service providers, and the sought effect is approval from a potential competitor.

This, of course, points to a performative understanding of managerial devices, or of economic instruments in general. For example, the consultancy slideshow plays here a role comparable to that of the business models analyzed by Doganova and Eyquem-Renault (2009). These are considered not as simplified descriptions (accurate or not) of a company,

but as demonstrations, as performances which seek at provoking situations and initiating courses of action. The felicitous consultancy slideshow (that is, a solid one, one that works) is characterized thus in part by attention to the effects it may have inside a strategic, often delicate configuration. These effects have not only to be understood in the sense of making the organization change in a direction closer to the one depicted by the consultants, a sense often associated to a narrow understand of performativity in the construction of markets (MacKenzie, Muniesa and Siu 2007). What the authors of the diagram want to create, above all, is a situation in which their position inside a network of strategic actors (managers inside the client organization, competitors in consulting, and partners within the consultancy firm) is kept relevant.

*Second constraint: considering accuracy*

The second constraint consists in providing a representation that is faithful to reality. We observe that the construction of the diagram results from constant transfer and exchange between what is referred to and what refers to it, that is, between the consultants' conclusions on the functioning of the hospital (their vision of its problems) and the diagram that shall represent them. In our case, the reference process, considered both as account-taking and molding of the world, is perhaps most visible, for example, in a will to be "exhaustive", i.e. to encompass every aspect of a rather finite reality, to produce detailed examples behind any assertion or at least be "ready to illustrate" orally what has been stated, or use appropriate qualification for the titles of each part of the diagram. Consultants here seek to be accurate, to be faithful to their analysis of the reality of the client organization. It is intriguing to observe how consultants, when they are in the heat of the action, do share and put to work a tacit agreement on the reality of their claims. At no point was the veracity of the diagram put into question by Camille or Tony. Rather, the status of the diagram as an intermediation towards

reality fades away in favor of a sense of transparency with which the consultants talk about reality through the diagram.

This echoes a discussion initiated by Latour in his works on scientific reference (Latour, 1999). According to Latour, the sciences do not have a mirroring relation to world, but produce representations which contribute to building it objectively. Reference is not what can be pointed out from outside, a mere reflection of a world *per se*; it is "rather what remains constant through a series of transformation" (Latour 1993: p. 205 our translation). Unfolding these transformations sheds light on intermediaries that carry the work of translation and contribute to stabilize a suitable version of the reality. Reference is not a closed circuit where anybody can make up any fantasy and expect it comes true. It is an engagement with the world "out there", where one can identify at every stage, "a common operator, which belongs to matter at the one end, to form at the other, and which is separated from the stage that follows it by a gap that no resemblance could fill" (Latour 1999: 69). In our case, we see, the pragmatic efficacy of the slideshow relies on the tensions of proof: how to achieve the felicitous transportation of elements that back its claims?

*Third constraint: considering layout*

The third constraint is to put forward a fine internal, formal coherence. This refers in part to the coherence between the diagrammatic presentation and the accompanying documentation in terms of content, wording and analysis. But it also refers, perhaps more interestingly, to the visual coherence of the diagram proper. Here, coherence needs to be interpreted in terms of neatness and proportion. It is, for instance, about caring for symmetry in the layout of the representation and about favoring the harmonious arrangement of boxes, titles, arrows, words and sentences. This constraint is not considered by the consultants in the

terms of the purely sophistic craft of the smack of seriousness, but rather as a rule that governs the rigor of analysis-qua-communication and the consultancy *forma mentis*.

Along with Quattrone (2009) we identify a form of aesthetic of the methodology displayed in the diagram. Despite the content, the form itself plays a strong role of simplification, clarification, and ordering that finally make the diagram appropriable by the client. The representation becomes an object that can be used as soon as it is grasped by the audience as easily usable (Quattrone 2009); in our case, simple, schematic, clear. Other observers criticize this aspect of business schematic representation by considering it as a form of oversimplification that "maintains confusion between the register of science and the register of the aide-mémoire" (Pinto 1987, p. 93). Instead, Quattrone (2009) argues that "because it leaves the user free to enact that space" (p. 112) which is offered in the blank of the representation, it becomes performable. Using arrows or replacing them by a simple circle in order not to favor a too straightforward interpretation: this would be a particularly appropriate illustration of such concerns in the analyzed case.


*Pragmatic efficacy*

What is the kind of reality that is carried by the diagram? What kind of reality does it refer to? To interrogate the faithfulness of the representation of the real is a difficult business. The referential object is an explicit concern for the consultants. But concern for the real is not only concern for the accuracy of the referential object. The consultants do also care, in this direction, for the legitimacy of their analyses and proposals, for the (structuring or de-structuring) effects that the diagram can have for the organization, for the pedagogical capacities of the diagrammatic device and for its inner harmony. Pragmatic efficacy, considered as a positive, productive way of representation, is best encapsulated in the idea of solidity and resistance (*"béton"*) that the diagram reaches at the end of the drafting process.

We have observed the draft of the diagram evolve through a series of constraints. Coherence was sought. But coherence was a matter of tinkering and iteration, a matter of incorporation of aspects, a matter of trials of resistance. Coherence was, in our view, about producing a coherent match between layout, accuracy and effect.

Our analysis of the ethnographic material combines a grounded, inductive approach to a commitment to a pragmatist viewpoint on the problem of symbolic efficacy. The analytical outcome consists chiefly in the identification of the three constraints that we just isolated in this section and which correspond to occurrences in the empirical description. These three constraints connect to the pragmatist angle in a variety of manners. But the most salient connection is perhaps with the theory of signification defended by Charles S. Peirce. We conjecture that the three constraints communicate with three aspects of signification that Peirce emphasizes in his analytical distinction of the symbol, the index and the icon (Hooper 1991, Kockleman 2005; see also Muniesa 2007). Layout has to do with the iconic capacity of the diagram, that is with the ability to delineate a graphic rendering of the consultancy analysis. Accuracy relates to the indexical capacity of the diagram, to the possibility of tracing diagrammatic items back to the consultancy inquiry and its object. Effect connects to the symbolic capacity of the diagram, to its facility to enter and accompany a collective assemblage, a system of conduct, a socially organized space. If we consider, thus, the diagram in the slideshow as a sign in a pragmatist, Peircean way and we ask what this sign requires in order to signify felicitously, we can conjecture that it needs to act effectively as an icon but also, to a certain extent, as an index and as a symbol. The consultants, we can say, need to achieve this complicated task – complicated and at times contradictory, and definitely fragile.

What consultants do when they address the "organs" of the client organization definitely falls into the scope of the "manipulation of symbols" that Claude Lévi-Strauss alludes to in his essay on "symbolic efficacy" in remedial rituals (Lévi-Strauss 1949). Our

ethnographic analysis provides indications on how this manipulation is carried out in the work of management consulting. Consultants combine multiple constraints. They do not seem to rely on a univocal idea of how managerial reality should be signified, but are instead able to navigate within a plurality of signification modes that waver between layout, accuracy and effect. Our ethnographic analysis is of course contingent and limited, but we estimate that this insight can be of use for the interpretation of the pragmatic efficacy of management consulting in other situations.

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**Figure 1: A rough first draft of the diagram, amended**

(Source: Field documents, reconstructed, translated and anonymized)

**Figure 2: Second draft of the diagram**

(Source: Field documents, reconstructed, translated and anonymized)



The merger was not completed successfully: a global approach to transversal dysfunctions

Lowest cost logic for certain activities that contradicts the growth ambition of Aeger

**Governance**
**Steering**
**Management**
**Project organization**

The size of Aeger and its strategic ambitions make it necessary to implement a more formalized steering framework: a strategic plan, professionalization of departments and employees, reporting, etc.

**Culture**
**Communication**
**Feeling of belonging**
**Motivation**

To encourage employees to adhere to the new structure, simple tools of communication and an employment and expertise plan have to be implemented rapidly

Lack of manpower development and field management

**UNCOMPLETED MERGER**

A merger is a long and complex process. At Aeger, it was not carried out as a « project » (with the definition of a target and coherent stages to reach it), but like a flow of independent tasks.

Unfortunately, the merger didn't lead to a capitalization of best practices. For this reason, it is responsible for dysfunctions in the hospital, in all domains.

Informal organization of support services:

Lack of cost controlling, applicative software projects unconsolidated, outdated billing & payment processes, no departmental affectation of budgets, etc.

**Functional Scope**
**Division of duties**
**Organization**

Cross-department dysfunction shows that department organization and the allocation of certain tasks need to be reconsidered

**Processes**
**Procedures**
**Professionalization**

Certain cross-department processes such as those at hospital stores and for administrative patient management present incoherencies and a global lack of structure

**Tools**
**Information Systems**

The tools used by support functions have to take into account user and business needs

**Figure 3: Draft for diagrammatic improvement**

(Source: Field documents, reconstructed, translated and anonymized)

**Figure 4: Fourth draft of the diagram**

(Source: Field documents, reconstructed, translated and anonymized)



**Summary: the major lessons for Aeger**

The merger was not carried out as a « project » (with the definition of a target and coherent stages to reach it), but like a flow of independent tasks.

Unfortunately, the merger didn't lead to a capitalization of best practices. For this reason, it is partly responsible for dysfunctions in the hospital, in all domains.

GOVERNANCE STEERING MANAGEMENT PROJECT MANAGEMENT

- Low employee morale
- No communication tools
- No incentive programs for top employees
- Etc.

TEAMS CULTURE COMMUNICATION MOTIVATION

**Uncompleted Merger**

ORGANIZATION FUNCTIONAL SCOPE DIVISION OF DUTIES

- Dysfunction where departments interact
- Ambiguity in the positioning of the quality management division
- Absence of a logistics and economics department to handle the buying and supplying process

- Absence of process formalization in all areas
- Failure of cross-department processes
- Few specialized profiles

PROCESSES PROCEDURES PROFESSIONA-LIZATION

TOOLS DASHBOARDS INFORMATION SYSTEMS

- Few steering tools
- Users dissatisfied with HR dashboards
- Users unsatisfied with IT applications

Today, Aeger is not able to run its major projects with assurance

**Figure 5: Seventh draft of the diagram**

(Source: Field documents, reconstructed, translated and anonymized)



Systemic approach to dysfunctions in Aeger Hospital

- No shared strategic plan
- No management by objectives and lack of commission
- Flaws in the steering of support functions

GOVERNANCE
STEERING
MANAGEMENT

- Few specialized profiles
- Employee discouragement
- No shared culture in the organization

HUMAN RESOURCES
SKILLS
CULTURE
MOTIVATION

UNCOMPLETED MERGER

ORGANIZATION/ STRUCTURE
FUNCTIONAL SCOPE
DIVISION OF DUTIES

- Dysfunctions where departments interact
- Difficulties in carrying out cross-department projects

- Informal "mom & pop" processes
- Orphan tasks
- Lack of processes' formalization

PROCESS
PROCEDURES

TOOLS
INFORMATION SYSTEMS
WORKING METHODS

- Lack of internal project methods & organization
- No steering tools and cost controlling
- Business application software not adapted to users' expectations

Currently, the entire administrative organization is too informal for Aeger to succeed in its future projects and reach its growth objectives

**Figure 6: One of the final versions of the diagram**

(Source: Field documents, reconstructed, translated and anonymized)



Systemic approach to dysfunctions in Aeger Hospital
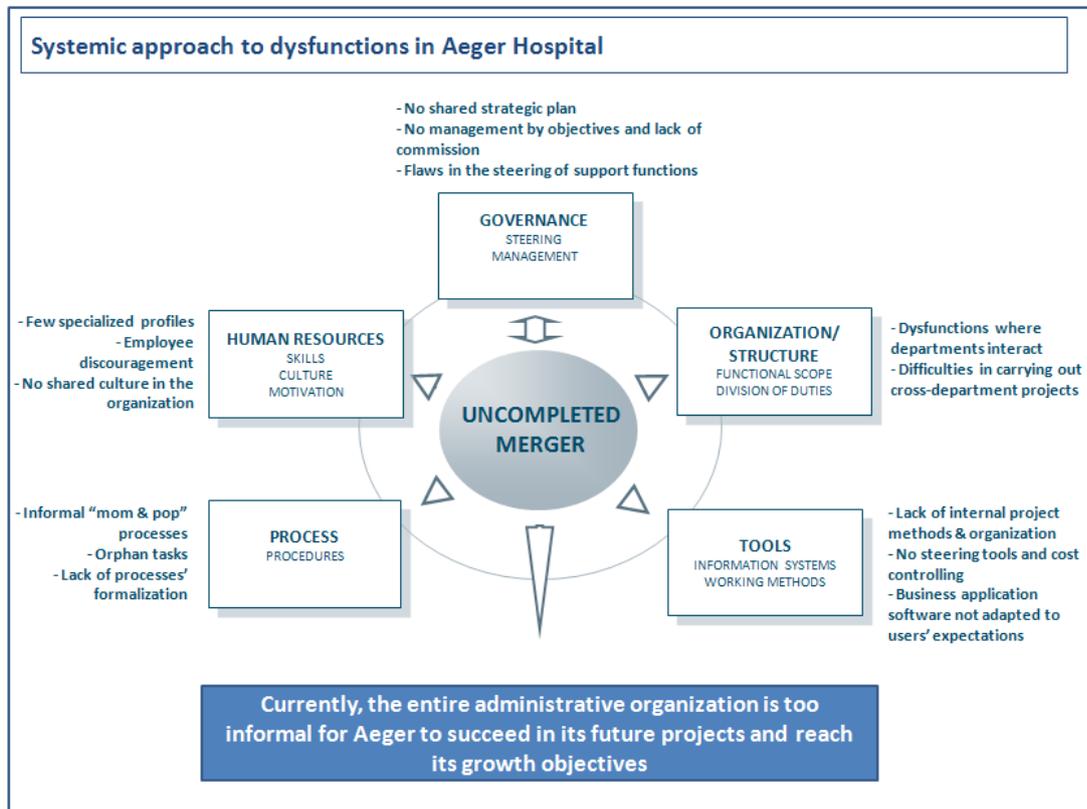
- Impossible to write a development plan before the end of the strategic reflection
- No management by objectives
- No managerial culture in the hospital

GOVERNANCE
STEERING
MANAGEMENT

- Insufficient number of specialized profiles
- Strong risk of employee discouragement
- No shared culture in the new organization yet

HUMAN RESOURCES
SKILLS
CULTURE
MOTIVATION

ORGANIZATION/
STRUCTURE
FUNCTIONAL SCOPE
DIVISION OF DUTIES

- Dysfunctions where departments interact
- Difficulties in carrying out cross-department projects
- Functional scope confusion

MERGER / NEW DIMENSION

- Lacking processes and unattributed tasks
- Informal "mom & pop" processes
- Lack of formalization

PROCESS
PROCEDURES

TOOLS
Information Systems
WORKING METHODS

- Few steering tools
- No cost controlling
- Business application software not adapted to users' expectations
- Lack of internal project methods & organization

Currently, the entire administrative organization is too informal for Aeger to succeed in its future projects and reach its growth objectives