

# ISSA Proceedings 2002 - Improvisation In Organizations: Rhetorical Logic And Rhetorical Skill



*What do you want? Everything we've learned  
has become false. We have to relearn our calling  
from top to bottom (Colonel Pétain, 1914)*

“Everything we have learned has become false” has the ring of a eureka moment, of an organizational actor *in situ* suddenly seeing the need to think outside the proverbial box, and an illustration of Stephen Toulmin’s (1964) view that we show our rationality by how we change our minds. It seems like an unusually startling argument, enthymematically presupposing as it does, the evidence of recent events, the Battle of the Frontiers in Alsace-Lorraine (August 14-22, 1914) which had been an unmitigated French disaster. But for Pétain, this famous quotation was a rhetorical move aimed at subordinates and superiors alike; it was his distinctive way of arguing, the “we” being his alternative to “I told you so.”

Henri Philippe Pétain (1856-1951) was something of a maverick, the sort of organizational actor likeliest to see the need “to relearn our calling from top to bottom,” and thus a powerful case-in-point of why organizations should value their dissenters (Willard, 1987; Willihnganz, Hart, and Willard, 1993; Hart, Willihnganz, and Willard, 1995; Willihnganz, Hart, and Willard, in press). Unlike most French and British generals, long before the Great War, Pétain understood the implications of the second wave of the industrial revolution that had blossomed around the army; he appreciated the new firepower of the modern battlefield, the new artillery and machine guns. He rejected the crown jewel of French military wisdom, the *offensive à outrance*, “offensive to the limit,” in which elan and guts were expected to prevail over firepower. His heretical view was that “artillery conquers, infantry occupies” (Pétain, 1930), an obdurate truth

of the Western Front that most Great War generals would never grasp. As Mary Douglas (1986) might say, they were imps of their institutions, compelled to think in deep ruts, thus lending to the First World War its unsavory reputation for mindless slaughter.

The pre-war French army treated Pétain the way organizations often treat their mavericks. Someone wrote in his personnel file that he should never be promoted above the rank of brigadier general; he was tolerated but stigmatized in the military schools; he was banished to a small coterie of renegade “firepower fetishists,” a label that was not meant as a compliment. And he seemed destined to be a permanent colonel (King, 1951).

But even the most hidebound organizations can be battered into change. French military operations of 1914 and 1915 were catastrophes. Even 1914’s fabled “Miracle of the Marne” owed more to German timidity than French flexibility. And by 1917 the offensive à outrance mind-set had buried more than 1.3 million French soldiers. Amid this train of disasters Pétain’s star glittered. He was the only French general (1914-1917) who succeeded with every task assigned him with minimal casualties (Carré, 1962). To higher commanders minimal casualties were objects of suspicion. It was the surreal logic of the day that commanders with the highest casualties were the most competent because they were pressing the offensive à outrance (Lottman, 1985; Ryan, 1969). Yet *despite* his low casualties, Pétain’s successes couldn’t be challenged. So at 58 in 1914, about to retire as a colonel, he rose to full general in eight months, the most meteoric rise in the history of the French army.

Pétain was a very unusual French general. He was flexible, open-minded, and attentive to the opinions of subordinates. Indeed where most Great War generals believed that subordinates were better seen than heard and that subordinates pointing out difficulties with upcoming plans were bad for morale, Pétain encouraged argument and debate among his staff (Griffiths, 1972; Lottman, 1985; Ryan, 1969); and as a battle commander he encouraged subordinates to speak frankly about local difficulties; where the majority of French and British generals saw the mention of difficulties as a sign of weakness, and often sacked such complainers; Pétain saw complainers as a source of vital information. He also possessed a profound understanding of the psychology of combat soldiers and thus was, by all anecdotal evidence, highly admired by the “poilus”**[i]**, French slang for ordinary soldiers.

Pétain's status with the poilus was so high that his reputation survived Verdun, 1916's horrific "Mill on the Muse" that in ten months resulted in (by the lowest estimates) 377,000 French and 337,000 German casualties. The poilus could see for themselves that Pétain was trying to win the battle by artillery, to be "lavish with steel, stingy with blood"(Carré, 1962, 172; the translation is Watt's, 1969, 244).

On May 1, 1916 Pétain was promoted to Commander, Army Group Center. It was a kick upstairs. The French generalissimo, Joffre, had tired of Pétain's cautiousness, the indecisiveness of a battle of material, and Pétain's constant demand for fresh troops to rotate in and out of the lines at Verdun. These rotations were meant to minimize the psychological effects of ceaseless bombardment, an idea completely alien to Joffre. So, "the savior of Verdun" was promoted *away* from Verdun, where Joffre fully intended that he become a glorified clerk. His successor was Robert Neville, who reputedly shouted from the steps of city hall at Souilly, "We have the formula." The "formula" was same old offensive à outrance. For that, Neville needed a specialist in ill-conceived offensives - his III Corps commander, General Charles-Marie-Emmanuel Mangin, whose most admiring biographers admit, had a sociopathic indifference to casualties. Mangin's men called him "butcher" and "man-eater," terms of endearment that doubtless explain why there were more suspected fragging attempts on Mangin than all other French generals combined. Under Neville and Mangin there would be no more coddling of the men and no more squeamishness about casualties (Brown, 1999; Horne, 1993).

By June there were disturbing early warning signs of a phenomenon that would challenge even Pétain (Horne, 1993, 318). *Poilus* by the thousands marching past staff officers started to "bah" like sheep and shout "down with the war." Generals were greeted with shouts: *Embusqués* (shirkers). French President Raymond Poincaré's car was pelted with rocks. Signs appeared along what French journalists called the *Voie Sacré* (Sacred Road) leading into Verdun saying *Chemin de l'Abattoir* (Slaughter House Road). The poilus were not happy warriors.

Still all might have been well. On July 1, 1916 the British launched their own disastrous offensive in the Somme River region, a meat grinder that drew Germans away from Verdun and gave the poilus breathing room. But where one might imagine that three years of maximum casualties and minimum results

would lead the politicians to sack Joffre, they in fact sacked him for neglecting the defenses of Verdun. They had good generals to choose as his successor (Pétain, Ferdinand Foch, and some others), but they picked Robert Neville, a vain, arrogant, and dishonest man caught in a great existential nightmare: He was in way over his head, and clueless (Painlevé, 1919).

To make a long and complicated story short and simple: Neville planned to attack well-entrenched Germans on a long, high ridge. On his orders his officers oversold the campaign to the poilus; the attack would be a war-winner; French artillery would destroy the German defenders. By all accounts this rhetoric of high expectations was successful; enthusiasm for the attack had been whipped up. But all these hopes were dashed. A Lieutenant later told a secret army commission of the Chamber of Deputies “at 6:00 AM the battle started, and at 7:00 AM it had been lost” (Watt, 1969, 250).

Casualty figures are unreliable for political reasons, but the minimum estimate of French casualties is 120,000. About these casualties, GQG (*Grand Quartier Général* – the French high command) made a fundamental mistake, though a common one for Great War armies. It first refused to release any figures, then weeks later issued unbelievably low figures. Basil Liddell Hart (1930, 45), who fought in the war and became one of its great historians thought the British erred in muzzling its press, “followed by the equally stupid practice of issuing *communiqués* which so veiled the truth that public opinion became distrustful of all official news and rumor was loosed on its infinitely more damaging course.” By all accounts, this cynical distrust of the official and heightened trust of the unofficial was pervasive in the French army; so the rumor mill embroidered the truth, 100,000 killed and 200,000 wounded (Watt, 1969, 184).

High expectations made for elaborate disappointment. Shortly after the battle, the politicians sacked Neville. And the poilus’ rumor mill went wild, exaggerating the casualties by triple, saying everyone but Neville had predicted disaster, that Neville didn’t care how many died, that Vietnamese soldiers were raping French women in Paris, that factory workers were making 15 Francs a day.

On April 17 the men of the 108th Regiment walked away from their trenches. Frightened officers corralled them, arrested a handful, and hushed the incident up. On May 3 the 21st Division of Colonial Infantry (which had served especially hard duty at Verdun) refused to budge. Some men were arrested, and the division went into action and was virtually annihilated, so rumors spread that the division

had been deliberately destroyed by French artillery. There were many variations on the rumor, whole units annihilated by French machine gun companies, or by poisoning, or by gas. No historian has uncovered evidence that any of these rumors were true or even partly true; but rumors scarcely need a grain of truth; they need only be believed (Shibutani, 1966). Shibutani sees rumors as a kind of collaborative problem solving especially in contexts of uncertainty exacerbated by low information.

On May 5, as if by spontaneous combustion, one after another French regiment mutinied. By May 19 Pétain (who had replaced Neville as generalissimo) was getting seven or eight reports of serious incidents a day. From April through July (by the French army's official estimate), 16 army corps (54 divisions, half the French army, more than a million men) were in a state of open mutiny (the army's euphemism was "collective indiscipline," the mutineers' euphemism was "strike"). The War Minister told President Poincaré there were only two reliable divisions between the Germans and Paris.

Most units said they'd defend their lines but no more. Others refused to return to the front, and refused emphatically to charge against undamaged machine guns, uncut barbed wire, and intact German trenches. Others threw down their arms and walked away. One battalion marching in good order toward the front mysteriously vanished into the trees. They hid in a cave and came out only after their general threatened to blow the cave's entrance, walling them in. Some tried to get to Paris, to join the thousands of deserters said to be walking its streets. By 1917 the desertion rate was 30,000 men per year (Watt, 1969, 199). Others wandered off and got drunk. Others were rounded up by cuirassiers (light cavalry) and herded back. Some units elected councils of NCOs and called themselves "strikers." Others set up Soviets (workers councils). One unit took over a town and set up an anti-war government.

Troops on leave grew increasingly rowdy, waving red flags, breaking train windows, trashing train stations, stealing food from restaurants (because they couldn't afford the high prices), and savagely beating policemen and train conductors.

Suspected fraggings had been common since Verdun, but given the heat of that battle it was impossible to confirm Mangin's suspicion that his "best" NCOs and junior officers were being shot by their own men. From the official record at least, the mutinies involved little violence. One group sacked its commander's office. Others refused to show up for reveille. The worst incident involved the near-fatal

beating of an officer whose caduceus were probably the reason (the French medical system was an ongoing scandal, the worst of all the allies).

Despite these behaviors, still the troops evidenced loyalty. Even deserters didn't tell the Germans the secret. Lower ranking officers who shared the risks of combat with their men were generally treated respectfully. The headquarters of ranking officers were often sacked, but no high-ranking officers were killed. The thousands of statements by the mutineers varied in wording and socialist lingo, but they can be captured in a single composite sentence: *We don't want revolution; we want the government to understand that we are men, not beasts to be led to the abattoir; and we want peace.* A military policeman asked strikers what would happen if the Germans attacked. Their answer was Verdun talking: "*Le Boches ne passeront pas,*" The Germans will not pass (Pedroncini, 1996, 237). Grasping at everything except the possibility that GQG was to blame, GQG fire-breathers wanted executions, ruthless suppression, and a hunt for propagandists. Pacifist propaganda had to be kept from reaching the troops. *Papillons* (peace leaflets) were more prevalent in French lines and billets than toilet paper, and General Neville had an exaggerated fear of their powers of persuasion. Some French generals would blame the *Papillons* for the mutinies. Aside from naivete about persuasion effects, a central flaw in this alibi was that the *poilus* themselves were generating the best pacifist propaganda. There were almost too many trench newspapers to count, certainly too many to effectively censor. Despite their increasingly bitter content, they were one measure of morale, and, Pétain suspected, though he didn't use the phrase, they were opinion leaders better courted than censored.

Pétain cared what happened to his men and empathized with their plight. And he was an exceptional army man who could wince at the truth even in enemy propaganda: "Your offensive has pitifully failed!" said a leaflet. "It has caused you frightful losses" (Pedroncini, 1996, 47). The *poilus* scarcely needed to be told that, nor reminded of the glowing speeches by officers prior to the attack, the promises of decisive victory. It was one thing to over-sell a campaign to politicians, but quite another to over-sell it to troops. It was Pétain's special quality to understand the price they were now paying for lying.

His appreciation of the price of lying stemmed from his understanding of two interdependent yet distinct levels of conventional military communication. The most familiar labels – *formal* versus *informal* – form too sharp a dichotomy; they

blur the interdependence and interaction between the (at least) two levels of communication. So, purely as a literary device and emphatically not as a literal biological analogy, we prefer to speak of skeleton and sinew.

The skeleton of military communication is largely conventional, in Barbara O'Keefe's (1988) sense of the term[**ii**]. It functions within a strong culture whose rules, roles, and relations are designed with unusual explicitness. The goal of communication is cooperative achievement, which requires that each person behave appropriately within the context of his or her identity and role in particular situations. Conventional communicators follow rules and norms to shape their communication. They are mindful of the obligations and expectations associated with the roles they play, the roles others occupy, and any relevant rules governing interaction (e.g., when and how to salute an officer, deference to rank and norms of politeness, respectful disagreement). Armies have unusually explicit role definitions signified by rank, specialty badges, and achievement and award badges. As almost all military activities require closely coordinated teamwork soldiers play their roles with an eye to getting results. Their organizational rules are designed to produce smooth and error-free social interaction.

Overlaid on the skeleton is sinew, if you will, an equally conventional and highly theatrical communication system. The theatricality of military life is a necessary cliché among sociologists and literary critics (see Fussell, 1975). Conscripts fight in theaters, wearing costumes, observed by audiences, all overarched by a proscenium gut intuition that they are not in the "real world," an expression at least as old as the American Civil War and as current as the Vietnam era. The conventions of this communication system are vaguer than the skeletal conventions and more subject to whims and idiosyncrasies of individuals. Thus some individuals bellow obscenities at the top of their lungs - communication that seems at first glance to be prototypically "expressive" in O'Keefe's terms. To the superficial observer soldiers seem to be lashing out with whatever flits into their heads. But these outbursts are more analogous to ritual, the obscenity is grammatical (though sometimes a physical impossibility). Other soldiers develop very arcane argots designed to freeze their commanders out and to define an "in crowd." In this domain, formal rank is less important than perceptions of competence. Thus combat soldiers will ignore officers they don't respect regardless of rank, and combat medics respect their medical officers not because

they're officers but because they're physicians (see Stauffer, et al. 1949; Marshall 1978). The skeletal communications are based on authority; the sinew communications are based on legitimacy; and it was within this latter domain that the French army mutinies played themselves out.

Middle management, colonel to lieutenant, performed well. Finding themselves without legal control they capitalized on their legitimacy as fellow combat soldiers. Officers who shared the risks of combat were respected. These officers became complaint conduits upward and voices of persuasion downward. Up, they advised against rigid force, because the *poilus* had legitimate complaints. A colonel wrote that: "No rigorous measures must be taken. We must do our best to dilute the movement by persuasion, by calm, and by the authority of the *officers known to the men*, and acting above all on the good ones to bring the strikers toward the best sentiments." Thus, well-liked officers were sent among the mutineers both to listen, take notes, and to talk. They talked patriotism, duty, and law; they reminded the soldiers that Germany had invaded France without provocation; and they had an argument-from-fairness that by all accounts was listened-to intently: The strikers were condemning troops now in the front line into serving more than their fair share. This use of middle management was unprecedented in the French army. It violated the basic - skeletal - legal principle of military discipline, that authority-was-authority; officers were interchangeable. Readers who have found Anthony Giddens' idea of "structuration" (wherein organizational actors both follow structure and change it) somewhat vague, will perhaps see here a clear-cut case as French middle management moved from authority to legitimacy.

Pétain listened to his middle management: Indeed his Directive Number One met more than half the mutineers' demands: No more assaults. He would wait for the Americans (who had declared war on Germany in April) and tanks. Commanders will ask only useful efforts from their troops. Officers were to understand the emotions of their men, to care about them, to reward them, to tend to their needs of all kinds. They were to be vigilant in inspecting food and sacking bad cooks.

Then Pétain went to the trenches - in itself an almost unprecedented rhetorical act. As Commander-in-Chief, Joffre saw enlisted men only at awards ceremonies behind the lines. Nearer the front, he visited only generals, so most *poilus* had never seen a Commander-in-Chief. So quite apart from anything he said or did, simply by going to the front, by *being there*, Pétain told the *poilus* they were



important. It was an almost perfect, completely unstated syllogism: The Commander-in-Chief is important; he is here; therefore we're important. Being there was, as anarchists of the day called their assassinations, the *propaganda of the deed*, an act of *coalescent argumentation* (Gilbert, 1997), an intuitive, visceral act that changed the role of Commander-in-Chief. Instead of an invisible, distant authority, he became a flesh and blood person. Only a few other Great War generals understood the rhetorical impact of senior commanders visiting the front (Britain's Herbert Plumer, for instance). But World War Two era generals, like Britain's Montgomery and America's Patton and Bradley, would mimic Pétain's model. In this they typify O'Keefe's (1988) rhetorical communicators who determine the identities and roles that will allow themselves and others to reach goals and then they create situations where these identities and roles can catch hold. They do not see situations, identities, and roles as pre-defined; rather, they see them as fluid and flexible - a resource, not a constraint.

Another resource, which played a larger role in military life than is often appreciated, was Pétain's personal appearance. He was tall, with the physique of a career-long mountain trooper; he had extremely pale skin, a token of his *Pas de Calais* origins, and impressed people as a living statue: "a marble statue; a Roman senator in a museum. Big, vigorous, an impressive figure, face impassive, of a pallor of a really marble hue" (Pierrefeu, 1920, 9; translation by Barnett, 1964, 197). His piercing eyes seemed color-coded to his horizon blue uniform. He was taciturn, even cold, yet this old bachelor attracted women in droves. It was partly looks; though in the grainy, black and white photographs of the era, he seems unimpressive; but it was chiefly a feminine side, a remarkable capacity for empathy.

Visiting some 500 units, including front lines, often standing in mud, sometimes standing on the hood of his car, sometimes on a tree stump in the middle of a field, Pétain cashed in all the credibility he had and created more in the bargain. No transcripts exist of his speeches; but observers (Carré, 1962; Pedroncini, 1996; Serrigny, 1959) kept rough notes that permit rough generalizations. He typically began by pointing out that he never made promises he couldn't keep. It was his reputation; it was deserved; but the radical departure from the French norm was that it needed to be said and that he actually said it. He then addressed the *poilus'* legitimate grievances: no more suicide charges, we'll wait for the Americans and tanks, better food and rest areas, improvements in the medical

system, and reliable leaves. The leave policy was risky: soldiers could easily not return and if they disappeared in great numbers, it would be impossible to find them. But because everyone knew it was risky, the poilus took it as a sign of trust (Carré, 1962). With these promises, he basically talked them back into the army. But far more important, he made good on his promises quickly. Within a month, rest areas for the first time had tents or huts, cots, showers, hot food with a varied menu, places to write letters, and even entertainment. All these things were conspicuously missing in the pre-Pétain army. French attacks virtually ceased, and when they ultimately resumed in late 1917 they were conspicuously successful because Pétain kept his most famous promise: Artillery conquered, then and only then, the infantry occupied.

During his mid-mutiny visits to the poilus, Pétain made other rhetorical moves whose radicalness is hard to appreciate at 90 years' distance. Now standard practices, they were in 1917 startling, astonishing, even breathtaking (Pedroncini, 1996). For instance, Pétain often drew older enlisted men aside, sometimes small groups, or even individuals. He kept the skeleton of his convention identity: He never faked fatherliness, says Pierrefeu, or tried to be their friend; every inch a general, he listened intently and respectfully to them; his aides took copious notes; though the complaints from visit-to-visit were quite repetitious, Pétain gave no sign of it; his icy blue eyes would drill into a speaker, as if the speaker was the most important person in the world; then he would shake hands and slap them on the shoulders. Those men almost always became Pétain champions.

Then, most radical of all, all Pétain visits ended with the poilus in military formation; and Pétain would ask the poilus whether they had advice for him, though usually only junior officers and NCOs had the nerve to speak. Again, a member of his staff took notes on everything said from the ranks. This was a revolutionary redefinition of the relationship between the Commander-in-Chief and the poilus, the former was *accountable* to the latter. Officers like Charles "*Le Boucher*" Mangin (1920) thought it was a confession of weakness, but Pétain genuinely believed that commanders were accountable. And that accountability was a logical prerequisite for a new role definition for the poilus – from put upon to depended-upon – for accountability draws its strongest legitimacy when it is mutual.

In a campaign of carrots, there was also a stick – mutiny trials and firing squads. Smith (1994) argues that the trials and executions were largely reassertions of

state legitimacy, a purely symbolic muscle flexing by the power structure. But he misses, we think, an important functional element of military punishment. For the British and French armies executions were purely rhetorical events meant to convey an unmistakable threat. Executions were witnessed by as many troops as possible, and were by all accounts horrifying things to see. And to assembled troops elsewhere, crimes, sentences, and executions were read out in detail, as grim arguments-by-example. Within that tradition Pétain disciplined ringleaders with restraint, though exact numbers and their reliability are unknown. Ultimately, some 23,000 jail sentences were handed out, along with 400 death sentences, of which only 49 (Smith's estimate) to 60-some (Watt's estimate) were carried out. Twenty civilians were also shot. The post-mutiny search for "leaders" may have been self-deception. Many socialists had tried to be leaders, but a common theme in all narratives of the mutinies is that they were largely leaderless. At any rate, there is remarkably little evidence that the trials and executions produced the desired result. Indeed anecdotal evidence from diaries, letters, and interviews suggests the opposite, that executions especially made many poilus angry more than fearful. It was Pétain's carrots, not his stick, that brought the poilus back into the fold.

Pétain and his middle management gradually restored the French army. It was later able to mount modest offensives. It was ultimately able to resist and rebound from the gigantic German offensives of 1918 (though all commentators agree that the infusion of fresh American troops into battle in itself was immeasurable tonic for French morale). Though the French army would never again have the naive elan of 1914, it is nonetheless plausible to say that Pétain and his middle management saved the army. As strikes, riots, and peace demonstrations throughout France were rampant in 1917, it isn't inconceivable that they saved France. They did it by capitalizing upon rather than being constrained by a strong culture. The Archimedean point on which all their rhetorical moves rested was the common identity of the officers and soldiers who shared risks, which the officers transformed into a powerful resource (and without which the mutinies might have become a revolution). Pétain's special contribution was his re-definition of the role of Commander-in-Chief and his relationship with the poilus, and in making promises he could and would keep.

NOTES:

**[i]** This appreciation of Pétain is not meant to bear in any way on the debate

about Pétain's role as Marshall of Vichy. Pétain was sentenced to death for treason. Charles de Gaulle commuted it to life; and Pétain died in prison in 1951.

**[ii]** In analyzing messages designed to achieve multiple goals (e.g., criticize others yet allow them to save face), O'Keefe uncovered three implicit communication theories, or three message design logics - Expressive, Convention, and Rhetorical. Stimulated by immediate events the expressive blurts out of whatever occurs to him or her, unedited and often inappropriate. The conventional follows politeness norms. And the rhetorical tries to redefine identities so as to achieve social cooperation.

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