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(article starts on next page)

# The value of communicative skills for developing an energy strategy

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# The value of communicative skills when developing a strategy for energy-efficiency

## **Abstract**

Based on a case study including field observations of 13 meetings, various documents, and 25 interviews, this paper presents an account of how a public client organisation handled an a political directive on energy efficiency in buildings. The paper explores the value of communication skills of built environment professionals during a strategic change process. Taking an interpretative approach, we account for talk and interaction between mainly a senior engineer (energy expert), the management team and officials. It demonstrates how the political directive led to a politically set ambiguous energy target, which in turn was framed, contextualised and anchored within the organisation. It shows how this change process was shaped by involved actors' personal ambitions and ability to convince others that they may gain from the changes needed to meet the energy target, i.e. use of discursive competence. The focus on the role of a senior engineer, rather than top management, provides a novel perspective on how strategies develop in organisations.

**Keywords:** Energy efficient buildings, energy target, public organisation, construction client, energy expert, sensemaking, discursive activities, case study

Number of words: 7784

## **1. Introduction**

A new EU directive states that the energy use in buildings should be reduced by 20% from 1995 to 2020 (DIRECTIVE 2010/31/EU, 2010). How to meet this directive is thus an important topic discussed on national, regional and local levels all over Europe. The public sector is expected to take a pivotal role in this development (DIRECTIVE 2010/31/EU, 2010), which in Sweden for example has resulted in a national energy- efficiency and energy-smart building programme aiming at reducing the energy use in buildings by half by 2050 compared to the 1995 energy use (Dalenbäck and Mjörnell, 2011; Sweden's Second National Programme for Energy Efficiency, 2011). For public organisations involved in construction and/or refurbishment of their building stock, meeting energy targets will, besides technology development, require changed strategies, practices and behaviour (Rohracher, 2001). Hence many organisations, private and public, are currently struggling to find ways to reduce the energy use in their buildings.

Recognising that the main barriers for a change towards energy efficient building rather lie within policy, process and social aspects than in technology (Häkkinen and Belloni, 2011; Oreszczyn and Lowe, 2009) academics have recently paid attention to strategic and policy perspectives on the climate and energy challenges facing the built environment. We have for example seen three special issues in *Building Research and Information* (2007, 2010, 2012) dealing with this issue. However, based on a critical review of research within the field, Schweber and Leiringer (2012) conclude that studies that go beyond a positivistic approach is still missing. It is also stated that the scope of 'social' aspects in the non-technical

articles has often been limited to “*individualist analyses of occupants and occupant behaviour*” (Schweber and Leiringer, 2012, p. 489). As observed by e.g. Guy and Shove (2000), studying energy-efficiency in buildings needs a sociological approach that considers aspects such as roles, responsibilities and strategies. However, so far little attention has also been paid to built environment professionals’ knowledge, communicative skills and how their actions relate to and influence various norms, systems, structures and established conventions (Gluch, 2009; Gluch and Räisänen, 2009; Guy and Shove, 2000; Whyte and Sexton, 2011). Moreover, Bordass and Leaman (2013) even question if built environment professionals have appropriate knowledge and skills needed to meet the challenges of sustainability. This stresses the importance of carrying out research on the value of communicative skills related to strategic change processes for energy-efficient building.

During the last two decades, sensemaking has received significant attention in studies of strategic organisational change processes (cf. Balogun, Gleadle, Hailey, and Willmott, 2005; Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991; Rouleau and Balogun, 2011), and has been applied as an approach to understand and explain how individuals initiate, get acceptance for and implement organisational changes. In order to implement changes, managers need to influence how others make sense by dispersing their own understanding of the change (e.g. Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991; Maitlis and Lawrence, 2007). Top management has long been in focus of change and strategy studies, however, recently research has also highlighted the strategic role that middle managers have in creating and distributing understanding

of and acceptance for organisational changes, and discursive abilities are suggested to be critical for the ways managers influence others (e.g. Rouleau and Balogun, 2011; Maitlis and Lawrence, 2007; Maitlis and Sonenshein, 2010). Although lacking top managers' authority, middle managers need to influence upwards, laterally as well as downwards in the organisations. As stated by Maitlis and Sonenshein "*top management provides important details about the change, while middle managers are left to construct their own meaning of it, and therefore play a crucial role in how change ultimately gets passed on to front line employees*" (Maitlis and Sonenshein, 2010, p. 559).

Based on a case study in a public construction client organisation in Sweden we focus on how an energy target set by regional politicians (i.e. the owners of the case organisation) was made sense of within the organisation. The target, which aimed at significantly cut the energy use in public buildings, stating "*By 2030, we will reduce the energy use in buildings by half*" was formulated in rather general terms, and did neither specify which year's level the target was based on, nor whether the energy use for operations within buildings was included or not. To make the target more tangible, an Investigation project was initiated by the case organisation. The Investigation was carried out by a team led by a senior engineer, an internal energy expert, with the aim to contextualise the target and to develop a strategy and action plan for how the organisation should meet the target. In carrying out this task the senior engineer's role resembles the middle manager's role in strategic change processes as described by Maitlis and Sonenshein (2010). As in all organisations, this organisation consisted of individuals that made sense

of their situation out of their specific context and pre-understanding (cf. Clegg, Kornberger and Pitsis, 2011). This implied that management had to find ways for the political directive as well as set energy target to be made sense of by involved individuals. Drawing on Rouleau and Balogun's (2011) work, this paper explores how discursive competences, defined as "*ability to knowledgeably craft and share a message that is meaningful, engaging, and compelling within his/her context of operation*" (Rouleau & Balogun, 2011: 971), of an energy expert was used to influence the development process within the public construction client organisation. The paper presents an account of what happened in the organisation from the point when the target was initially discussed up to the point when the target was anchored in the organisation.

Following calls for studies with more focus on actions and understanding of actors and stakeholders involved in sustainable development of the built environment (Phua, 2013; Summerfield and Lowe, 2012; Whyte and Sexton, 2011), and especially regarding energy use in buildings (Schweber and Leiringer, 2012), this paper contributes to construction research in several ways. Firstly, our case provides an opportunity to show how a political directive and a set energy target were framed, contextualised and anchored within an organisation. Secondly, the focus on the role of a senior engineer and energy expert, rather than top management, provides a fresh perspective on how strategies develop in construction organisations. Third, with an interpretivist research approach it also adds to a type of studies that largely has been missing within the field, studies that aim at identifying the meanings that mediate behaviour in a specific context

(Schweber and Leiringer, 2012). Finally, since public construction client organisations all over the EU face the same directive as our case organisation, the study also gives a broad spectrum of practitioners within the construction sector, such as policy makers, managers, and energy experts, insights regarding long-term strategy processes.

## **2. Sensemaking and discursive activities**

With sensemaking we mean the cognitive process of how we construct meaning of what is going on around us. The concept is often accredited to Karl Weick, who developed the theory of sensemaking (e.g. Weick, 1995, Weick, Sutcliffe and Obstfeld, 2005). Some of the inherent characteristics of sensemaking, as defined by Weick (1995), embrace for example that sensemaking is a continuously ongoing, social process where people search for plausible, though not necessarily the most accurate, understanding. In this sense, sensemaking is conducted when individuals scan their environment and decide on what new information is relevant to interpret and take action on. Hence, it is the process where people generate what they then interpret (Weick, 1995:13) and not the interpretation in itself. Although closely linked and often misused as a synonym, interpretation should not be used interchangeably with sensemaking (Weick, 1995). For the purpose of this paper, sensemaking is defined as *“a social process of meaning construction and reconstruction through which managers [and others, our note] understand, interpret, and create sense for themselves and others of their changing organisational context and surroundings”* (Rouleau and Balogun, 2011, p. 955).



Sensemaking has been applied as a means to understand and explain how managers at different organisational levels initiate, get acceptance for and implement organisational change (e.g. Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991; Rouleau, 2005; Rouleau and Balogun, 2011; Stensaker, Falkenberg and Grønhaug, 2008). In this paper, we pay attention to how middle managers in a public client organisation develop mutual understanding of a political directive regarding energy-efficiency of buildings as well as to how they influence people in their surroundings to adopt their views. The latter is referred to as 'sensegiving' (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991; Maitlis and Lawrence, 2007), which is defined as "*the process of attempting to influence the sensemaking and meaning construction of others towards a preferred redefinition of organisational reality*" (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991, p. 442).

Although middle management has to make sense of top management directives, implement and deliver accordingly, they lack the formal role of authority that top managers have (Rouleau and Balogun, 2011). Furthermore, scholars have addressed the way middle managers interpret and communicate strategic changes (Rouleau, 2005) and how middle managers use discursive competences (i.e. comprehensive and generic communicative skills, such as network building, adjusting language to the situation, understanding the agendas and needs of others and arranging the occasions for communication) when implementing organisational changes (Rouleau and Balogun, 2011). As shown by Rouleau and Balogun (2011), middle managers do not only use conversations to influence people, but a range of different discursive activities to set the scene for where

these conversations should be held, when and how. Discursive competences concern how individuals are able to craft and disperse their message in order to influence the meaning-making of others. It is not just about the language that is used, but also how the language is adjusted and used in specific contexts with specific stakeholders (Rouleau and Balogun, 2011). The ability to tell the right story at the right place for the right people is thus a key (Maitlis and Lawrence, 2007). However, the activities referred to by Rouleau and Balogun (2011) are by no means new or unique for their particular context. Similar competences and activities have also been discussed in literature, regarding for example organisational change (e.g. Balogun *et al.*, 2005; Kezar, 2012) and strategic planning (e.g. Nordqvist & Melin, 2008).

[Insert Figure 1 here]

**Figure 1:** Discursive activities applied by middle managers in sensegiving processes (modified from Rouleau and Balogun’s model, 2011, p. 972).

Based on two studies of middle managers’ practices in change processes, Rouleau and Balogun (2011) developed a framework of discursive activities that are applied by middle managers in sensemaking processes (see Figure 1). Rouleau and Balogun (2011) identified two main sets of activities that middle managers use in order to influence other stakeholders’ sensemaking. First, middle managers carry out the conversation with stakeholders. This activity is described as the “*multiple interactions middle managers engage in through formal and informal conversations with their peers, subordinates, superiors, and customers or other*

*stakeholders, to draw others into their agenda*” (Rouleau and Balogun, 2011: 958). The second activity regards how middle managers set the scene, that is, *“what is done to set up the context for, background to, and occasion for the conversation performance”* (Rouleau and Balogun, 2011: 958). The success of both sets of activities are dependent on how well the middle managers can draw on the context, which means how well they understand and make use of contextual factors, such as history and knowledge of stakeholders, context-specific rules, language and terminology. The study by Rouleau and Balogun (2011) thus suggests that middle managers need to be aware of organisational politics and act politically in order to engage in sensegiving. This means that who is given the opportunity to influence others in a specific context, depends on how well that person can translate and apply contextual knowledge and discursive competences, rather than formal power received by hierarchical position. Moreover, based on a study of what triggers and enables sensegiving activities, Maitlis and Lawrence (2007) proposed that individuals are more likely to engage in sensegiving when they possess issue-related expertise and/or legitimacy as well as when provided with the right opportunities. Further, what triggers an individual to influence how others understand an issue relates to whether the issue at stake is perceived as important for him/her, for his/her colleagues and/or for the whole organisation. Drawing on Rouleau and Balogun (2011), it is possible to identify how a senior engineer, in his role as energy expert, deployed discursive activities in order to influence the organisational interpretation and management of the political directive on energy-efficiency of a public construction client organisation’s building stock.

### **3. Method**

The paper is based on data gathered in a research project carried out between December 2010 and August 2011. Taking an interpretative approach, the story of how a Swedish public construction client organisation, here called Alpha, made sense of a political directive is based on interviews, field observations and written documents. This in-depth study posed an opportunity to study how meaning was made over time and how it was contextualised. Furthermore, the study enabled for a continuous dialogue with the respondents, made it possible to compare their contexts of actions as well as identify how they structured their worldview and practices, that is, taking an interest in how they view themselves and how they tell stories about their practice. As such the study took on an approach that is understudied in construction research (Schweber and Leiringer, 2012), that of a more interpretive type of analysis.

The empirical data set consists of field observations of 13 meetings (e.g. Investigation project-team meetings, and the project-team's meetings with Alpha's Management Team), various documents, 25 interviews and extensive field notes, thus giving a rich understanding of the organisational context. In-depth interviews with seven respondents have been of primary use in this paper. One of the respondents, here labelled "energy expert" since it corresponds to how other respondents referred to him in interviews, a Business Developer in Operation and Maintenance, was interviewed on eleven different occasions. Thus, a large part of our empirical data stems from one respondent where, besides being given significant space in terms of the frequency of interviews, he also participated in all

of the observed meetings. To handle possible biases, his narratives/perspectives have been closely compared with the other respondents' narratives about events and activities. Applying a thematic interview approach (Aspers, 2007), six additional respondents (i.e. three members of Alpha's Management Team, one Business Developer in Customer Relations, and two external Consultants) were interviewed once and were encouraged to narrate: (1) activities and decisions taken in order to investigate implications from the target to halve energy use in buildings by 2030 and (2) perceptions of the energy target per se. All interviews, which lasted from one to three hours each were recorded and transcribed in verbatim.

The analysis was an iterative process altering theory with empirical data (cf. Dubois and Gadde, 2002; Langley, 1999), which made it possible to identify and understand organisational sensemaking within the organisation. In particular, the empirical data was scrutinized to find patterns regarding how the respondents influenced the strategy development process. From the field observations for example, we could see how they talked and interacted during the meetings, but also how non-present individuals were presented and discussed by the participants. Identified characteristics and/or events were analysed by applying the framework of discursive activities (Figure 1). The paper presents a retrospective account for these events since they occurred before the starting point of the study (in December 2010). Accordingly, the story presented is based on the respondents' retrospective narratives.

#### **4. The story of how Alpha managed a political directive**

The studied organisation, Alpha, is part of a Swedish public organisation governed by democratically elected regional politicians. With 350 employees and an annual turnover of 1,800 mil. SEK (~200 mil. EUR) in 2011, Alpha owns, rents and manages public facilities such as health care buildings, museums and other public premises. More than 80% of Alpha's energy use relates to operation and maintenance of nine large emergency hospitals. Several of these hospitals were built between 1950 and 1975, and the buildings as well as their technical systems are now reaching the end of their technical life span. Moreover, the operation of care has changed over time, which put new requirements on the premises. Accordingly, these buildings are in need of major refurbishment. In addition, new health care buildings are planned or under construction.

In this story of Alpha, we give voice to different individuals in order to illustrate how they developed a mutual understanding of the energy target, i.e. to halve the energy use in their building stock by 2030, as well as how they influenced people in their surroundings to adopt their view. Thus, the key characters need a short presentation. The most central character was a senior engineer with the formal position as Business Developer in Operation and Maintenance, hereafter referred to as the Energy Expert. With thirty years of experience within the field, he had for example executed numerous "reduced energy use" initiatives, and developed an extensive professional network – both internally and externally. Several respondents in the study witnessed that 'everyone' had great confidence/trust in him and perceived him as Alpha's energy expert. Other salient characters in this

story were the Business Developer in Customer Relations, and three (out of eight) members of Alpha's Management Team; the General Manager, the Director of Development and one District Manager. In common for these characters were their engineering backgrounds, an expressed interest in and support for energy efficient measures and a common history at Alpha since all of them had been working in the organisation since it was formed in 1999. The last key character was an external Consultant, with advanced technical competence in the energy-efficiency field. In addition, two groups of officials in the Regional organisation played minor roles in the initial phase of the story; the Executive Officials that supported the regional politicians, and the officials at Regional Environmental Department (RED), which were responsible for general environmental issues.

#### **4.1 Facing a new energy target**

In the beginning of 2010, as a consequence of new national political directives on energy (Sweden's Second National Programme for Energy Efficiency, 2011), a new regional energy target for buildings was about to be formulated by the Executive Officials. At the time, some officials at the Regional Environmental Department (RED) who cooperated on a daily basis with the Energy Expert advocated him to the Executive Officials as 'the expert to talk to' regarding energy issues in buildings. Moreover, as expressed by the Energy Expert, sharing an agenda for increasing the energy-efficiency in the region, the RED made use of his expertise to strengthen their case by opening up, or set the scene for, a dialogue between the Executive Officials and the Energy Expert. The RED officials saw the Energy Expert as a spokesperson for energy issues, which further increased his

influence in the dialogue and strengthened his status as energy expert in the region. This dialogue, which also involved Alpha's General Manager, lasted until the formulation of the target was set. However, in retrospect the Energy Expert claimed that the Executive Officials did most of the talking while he himself took on a rather passive role.

*“The General Manager and I had made a presentation to the Regional [political] Board, when an Executive Official grabbed me and presented how they intended to write [regarding the energy target] and wanted to know if they had missed anything. During this time, the General Manager just listened. [...] I felt that the General Manager had great confidence in me. He laughed and said ‘It is great that you (i.e. the Energy Expert, authors’ note) take responsibility for this issue, otherwise it would have become a mess’.”*  
*[Energy Expert]*

Since the General Manager did not intervene in the dialogue, he gave the Energy Expert his passive support and the opportunity to influence the Executive Officials' formulation of the new energy target. Thereby, the Energy Expert could certify that the energy target provided an (from his point of view) appropriate message, i.e. it was a strategically formulated vision but still open to interpretation. By virtue of the Energy Expert's involvement in the target formulation process, the General Manager certified that it was 'crafted appropriately', i.e. that the formulation of the target would be beneficial not only for Alpha, but for the whole region. This support was important to the Energy Expert, as he knew that the benevolence of the Management Team would be crucial for a successful implementation of strategy to meet the target at Alpha.



Accordingly, he was very keen to informally inform and discuss energy issues with the General Manager and the Developer Manager on a regular basis.

According to the Energy Expert, the dialogue with the Executive Officials was informal and off the record, which was exactly as he wanted it to be. For the Energy Expert, it was vital that his colleagues at Alpha did not see him as the driving force behind the new energy target. Instead, it was important that the target was viewed as the ‘work of the politicians’ as it gave the new energy target the needed legitimacy. However, for the Energy Expert, this dialogue was an opportunity to set the scene for an increased focus on energy issues at Alpha. During spring 2010, the General Manager invited an Executive Official to a Management Team meeting for an information session regarding the forthcoming new energy target. During his regular discussions with the Energy Expert, the General Manager had understood and accepted that an ambitious target was coming up. However, most members of the Management Team heard about the target for the first time at this session and their reactions were mixed. For example, when the Executive Official did not have all the answers about the background of and details about the target, the District Managers was very sceptical of the whole idea and considered the new energy target as ‘a passing fancy’ by the politicians. However, the General Manager appeared to have become a bit flattered by the tough target, stating;

*“If the politicians set a target that we should meet... Well, we take it as a compliment that they set such a tough target, because it signals that they believe in our capabilities!”*

*[General Manager]*

The General Manager told the Management Team that the target was not negotiable; it was a specific request from the politicians and should be treated as such. Thus, he did not allow for any other positions than accepting the energy target.

*“The initial reaction [from the Management Team] was ‘Now we must devote every effort to change the politicians’ minds because they are off track completely’. Well... then [the General Manager] put his foot down and said ‘This is an owner demand and we just have to adjust to it’.” [Energy Expert]*

The Energy Expert often retold this episode in conversations with colleagues in order to emphasise that the new energy target was supported and legitimised by the General Manager.

## **4.2 Initiating an Investigation project**

During summer 2010, the Energy Expert had continuous discussions with the Management Team about how to approach the new energy target. He was very well aware of whom to direct, the General Manager and the Developer Manager, and what to tell them, i.e. stressing again that the energy target must be taken seriously. The Energy Expert realized that extensive measures were needed to meet the target, and he foresaw a need to influence and create action among actors outside his formal area of responsibility. Therefore, he took the initiative to carry out an investigation focusing on opportunities and threats of the target. These preparations were a way of setting the scene for an Investigation project aiming at facilitating for Alpha to achieve the target. In fact he paved the way for the

Management Team to allow him to develop and also later implement an energy strategy for the organisation. Accordingly, in autumn 2010, the General Manager gave the Energy Expert 'free hands' to initiate and conduct an Investigation project, i.e. he was responsible for formulating the task description, including setting the budget and defining the scope and goal. Further, the General Manager expressed appreciation that the Energy Expert was Alpha's spokesperson and driving force for energy issues, called him 'our Energy man' and stated that Alpha was "lucky to have someone that suitable to do this kind of work". The Management Team members did not reflect upon the consequences of giving one single individual, the Energy Expert, so much power over the agenda.

Thus, due to his past experiences, contextual understanding, issue specific competence and the trust he had from others, the Management Team allotted the Energy Expert to design and conduct the Investigation project as he liked. This gave him large influence over the process of framing and managing the political directives as well as Alpha's energy target, both afflicted with a high degree of complexity and uncertainty. Once given 'green light' from the Management Team, the Energy Expert started to form a team that could assist him in the Investigation project. In this process, his personal network was essential and, as he stressed in an interview, he considered personal attributes, common interests and characteristics more important than titles and organisational belonging. Thus, he identified what competences he needed to complement his owns, and searched for enthusiastic individuals with an expressed interest in energy-efficiency work. Soon the Consultant was identified as a valuable partner, due to his technical

competence and good records, but also due to them having fun working together. He also had experience from design plans for Alpha's new hospital building, which resulted in significantly lower energy use than for conventional buildings.

According to the Consultant, the Energy Expert knew already from the start what result he wanted from the Investigation project, i.e. to radically increase the organisation's interest into energy-efficiency. Drawing on his experiences of what had been missing in previous energy initiatives, the Energy Expert was this time very anxious to make sure that the energy target was to be the entire public organisation's concern, i.e. not only Alpha's. As he saw a need to take on a long-term perspective on the whole building stock, he realised that the Investigation team lacked knowledge to achieve this goal. Accordingly, new members were gradually invited to join the team, e.g. an internal Real Estate Economist who knew the 'language of economy', and the Business Developer in Customer Relations who brought the customer perspective into the discussions. By choosing people whom he enjoyed working with, the Energy Expert set the scene for conducting the Investigation project in his own way.

This Investigation team had an idea of *what* to achieve, but *how* to reach the goal was still open. To secure that Alpha would get necessary prerequisites to meet the energy target, the Director of Development stressed the need to also anchor the Investigation process with different stakeholders outside Alpha, such as the Regional Finance Department, the Regional Politicians and the Region Council. However, the different communicative activities were to a high degree accomplished by the members of the Investigation Team, and in particular by the

Energy Expert, that deliberately identified whom to contact and when, and also crafted customised information. The major challenge was thus to create commitment and understanding for the energy target among various stakeholders, both within (e.g. Management Team, employees at different levels) and outside Alpha (e.g. regional politicians).

### **4.3 The Investigation project taking off**

Due to his formal role as Business Developer in Operation and Maintenance, the Energy Expert had regular contacts with a large share of Alpha's employees regarding energy issues in general, and during this particular time, the new energy target in particular. Although the Management Team's attitude towards the new energy target had become positive in summer 2010, informal conversations with other employees within Alpha made the Energy Expert aware of a general skepticism and negative attitude within Alpha. Especially project managers expressed their concern, as they were worried that the organisation would not give them enough financial resources to reach the target. As response to these doubts the Energy Expert masterminded an event in early in autumn 2010, the 'Energy Day', inviting all employees at Alpha. To increase the legitimacy of and interest in the energy target he was very particular about that the Management Team should be viewed as leader of the process and the one sending out the message to the organisation. Thus, he insisted on the General Manager as sender of the invitations for the day. The Energy Expert also deliberately made sure that he and his energy-dedicated colleagues, i.e. those that were generally regarded as driving energy-efficiency within Alpha, did not appear as key players that day. Drawing on earlier

experiences of how important the management's commitment was for successful implementation, the Energy Expert stressed the importance of having the Management Team on stage.

*“When I presented the agenda of the day to the Management Team, I told them that I would not be centre-stage that day. I have arranged the day and I have put your names on the different presentations. Then [the Management Team members] looked at me and asked: ‘Can you do it please, because we do not have the proper knowledge? Can you make the presentation instead?’ No, I said, I will help you, I will prepare the presentation for you, I will do everything for you, but I will not present.” [Energy Expert]*

Initially the team members were reluctant to the Energy Expert's request, referring to their lack of knowledge in energy issues, but in the end the management team members accepted the task.

Not only did the Energy Expert initiate the Energy Day, he also set the agenda for the event and invited speakers, thus he set the scene by fully mastering the event. During this event, a majority of the employees learned about the energy target for the first time, and with an ambition to reach all, focus was not on technological aspects of building energy systems, which according to the Energy Expert would have bored a majority of the audience. Instead, focus was on possible synergy effects of the new energy target, and the employees were also told how the target related to other national and international energy-related initiatives. The Energy Expert described how he experienced the Energy day;

*“I think it was important that the [staff] saw the Management Team bringing the message across. [...] We also had external guest speakers, such as representatives from the National Energy Agency. In the afternoon however, we had our own people presenting examples and we discussed how to meet the new demands. And then [the staff] probably realised that this is something that pervades the entire society. This has to be taken seriously! And since that day things have actually changed continuously. In fact, today I think everyone is on track.” [Energy Expert]*

Thus, the Energy Day was an important event for the organisation in several ways. Firstly, the new energy target was made everyone’s business. The message communicated by the Management Team during the Energy Day was that the new target affected all employees, and in order to reach the goal, they were all required to contribute in different ways. Previously, primarily technical personnel and energy-enthusiasts, such as the Energy Expert, had been working with energy initiatives within Alpha. Secondly, the renewed focus on energy became legitimised by the presence of and presentations made by the Management Team. As such, through this event the Energy Expert set the scene for and triggered a sensemaking process within the organisation.

#### **4.4 Epilogue**

During spring and summer 2011, the Investigation Team had put lots of effort on how to ‘package and present’ the energy strategy, and they used their personal networks to formally and informally inform and/or anchor various aspects with different actors, both inside and outside Alpha. Thus, the ‘pedagogic’ aspects in presentations (e.g. briefings for owners and the Management Team) and dialogues

with stakeholders was considered a continuous and important task by the Investigation Team and much discussed in their project team meetings. In autumn 2011, the Management Team accepted the Investigation team's proposed energy strategy and action plan. In line with the initial idea of the Investigation (i.e. to identify expected organisational consequences and required conditions for meeting the target) the Management Team presented the outcome of the Investigation to the Regional Political Board, which approved the strategy. At that point in time, due to the Consultant's double roles as both member of the Investigation Team and consultant in specific investment projects, the energy target had already been included in several project descriptions (in terms of specific target of energy use in new and existing buildings) in strategic investment projects within Alpha. That is, by simultaneously anchoring and implementing the target in the investment projects, the Investigation Team allowed for a flying start to reach the goal.

## **5. Discussion: The value of discursive competences and activities**

Diverse and sometimes contradictory professional discourses, agendas and interests, creating communicative barriers, have been identified as potential obstacles for implementing energy policies into practice (Ryghaug and Sørensen, 2009). The story how a political directive was framed, contextualised and finally anchored in Alpha shows that managing a new energy target was primarily a matter of influencing stakeholders and making them committed. That is, the discussions during the Investigation project meetings, for example, were less about technical issues and precise strategy formulations and more about *how and when* to communicate with different stakeholders in order to create wide commitment



for the energy target. Due to the inherent uncertainties and the interpretative flexibility (cf. Ryghaug and Sørensen, 2009) related to energy-efficiency, and in line with Gioia and Chittipeddi's (1991: 446) description of a strategic vision, the energy target in our story may be seen as a "*symbolic foundation for the stakeholders to develop an alternative interpretative scheme*", which aimed to facilitate the creation of meaning in the process of changing practice. As such, the target might have triggered and stimulated organizational sensemaking.

It has been suggested that a prerequisite for implementing changed practices is wide-spread and shared understanding of why the change is needed and what it would mean for the organisation (Kezar, 2012). Research suggests that using rhetoric in a strategic manner can enable individuals to influence others regarding sustainable building practices and to build useful alliances (Rohracher, 2001; Häkkinen and Belloni, 2011). By framing the energy target as a cross-organisational responsibility within the public organisation, the Investigation Team foresaw that they had to work across organizational boundaries to influence and create action among various actors in order to secure and speed up the future implementation of the energy strategy. Working across while at the same time striving to change the organisational structures has been described as "*shaking the organisational boundaries*" (Balogun et al., 2005). Balogun et al. argue, based on their study of strategic change management, that individuals who are given the task to manage strategic changes across, and, at the same time, shake the organisational boundaries, become "*conscious and deliberate manipulators of their organisational contexts and those they work with*" (2005: 276).

From our empirical account, it is clear that the Energy Expert had a most distinguished role in the process of anchoring the energy target as well as setting the agenda for future action. As a skilled user of discursive competences the Energy Expert was able to influence his surroundings in his preferred direction. He did this by deploying discursive activities, such as *crafting an appropriate message, choosing whom to influence when and adjusting the information to different stakeholder groups*. Moreover, he was aware of and able to handle *the specific interests and identities of different stakeholder groups*. The political set target was in line with the energy-efficiency work practice that he had strived to implement for many years in the organisation and therefore one could even say that the political target *came as a spark to his fire and fuelled his motivation* for the issue. Thus, he used the political target to legitimise an increased focus on, and create commitment for, energy-efficiency on a broader basis. This confirms what Maitlis and Lawrence (2007) found regarding what triggers and enables stakeholders to engage in sensegiving activities, as presented earlier. The Energy Expert was enabled to influence how the organisation made sense of the target due to his *expertise knowledge* in the area, his *communicative skills* and that the suggested activities were *legitimised* by top management. By continuously anchoring his understanding regarding the new target with the General Manager and the Director of Development, he certified that they understood and supported his interpretation of the target and as such allocated the responsibility to them. Thus, although talking and acting along informal decision routes he made sure to anchor his ideas the formal way.

However, similar to the professionals studied by Maitlis and Lawrence (2007), the Energy Expert was dependent on, and given opportunities due to, others' perception of him as a legitimate person. These opportunities strengthened him in his role, as he both could create and be given opportunities to exert influence regarding how the energy target was formulated and managed. Thus, the Energy Expert was enabled to engage in sensegiving processes when other people set the scene for him. This could, for example, be seen when the officials at the RED, sharing the sustainability agenda with the Energy Expert, set up a conversation between him and Executive Officials. Thereby, they participated in a further *built on the Energy Expert's image/identity* as the organisation's energy expert and as such gave him *issue-related legitimacy*. This finding correlates to what Maitlis and Lawrence (2007) found about *having the opportunity* to engage in sensegiving activities as an enabling factor.

## **6. Concluding remarks and future research**

The narrative presented in this paper shows that who an organisation gives the responsibility to manage strategic changes influences the outcome of the process of change (eg. Maitlis and Sonenshein, 2010). It is shown that an individual who can maneuver and make use of discursive competences has an advantageous position when it comes to influencing organisational sensemaking. This includes knowing how and when to talk to specific stakeholders, how to create and share appropriate messages, and how to build and use networks and coalitions. It is therefore concluded that discursive competences and activities play an important

role in strategic change processes towards energy-efficiency in the built environment.

Maybe a prerequisite for construction organisations is, at least initially, that some individuals have the courage, interest and legitimacy to take on a responsibility that reaches outside their own formal area of responsibility in order to manipulate their context and colleagues to accept and take on such a shared responsibility. As such, the ability to manipulate might be a valuable and even necessary ability in the case of implementing long-term targets across organisational boundaries. We can ask whether we see a new and empowered role in built environment organisations in the Energy Expert, a ‘sensegiving agent’, and if so, what implications that might have for the industry.

For future research, it is interesting to deepen the understanding of how discursive competences emerge, develop and maintain over time. Implementing long-term energy-efficient building requires changes of current practices and improved communication between diverse stakeholders. Most likely, discursive competence and activities, as those presented in this paper will be useful to individuals taking on this role. In our narrative, power issues were sensed in the way the Energy Expert acted to guide the organisation. This points at another issue, which has not been part of the focus of this paper but that needs further examination, how power is executed and maintained in these types of strategy processes (Weick et al., 2005; Maitlis and Sonensheim, 2010).

Applying an interpretivist approach, our paper adds to a type of studies that largely has been missing within the field of construction management research, studies that aim at identifying the meanings that mediate behaviour in a specific context (Schweber and Leiringer, 2012). As observed by e.g. Guy and Shove (2000), studying energy-efficiency in buildings needs a broad sociological approach that considers roles, responsibilities and strategies of a wide range of factors. The focus on the role of an expert in a strategy development process for energy-efficient building has shed light on how long-term strategies develop in practice, who are involved (besides top management), their roles and what they do (e.g. Jarzabkowski, Balogun, and Seidl, 2007; Rosén, 2011). In line with work by for example Löwstedt (2012) and Regnér (2003), this study contrasts to the general views on strategy development, where strategy is considered as something that top managers are involved in and that the centre of strategic activities is found among the corporate management and board of directors. Thus, showing how individuals can exert strategic sensegiving in an organisation by applying discursive competences and by being given issue-related legitimacy, we have provided an altered view on strategy work in the construction industry. By giving an account of how an individual, in this case a senior engineer and energy expert, with a less hierarchical position acts when faced with the challenge of developing a new (energy) strategy, we have been able to detect social mechanisms that normally are not identified in traditional strategy management research. Furthermore, by adding the perspective of how others' trust and support can enable an individual to engage in sensegiving processes, this finding can provide a route for further studies and adds to Rouleau and Balogun's (2011) framework of discursive activities.

The in-depth case study approach in this study has provided very rich data about one organisation's efforts to meet an energy target. To be able to draw more profound conclusions, comparative studies in other organisations undertaking similar efforts to meet the need of more energy-efficient buildings are of interest. However, even if our empirical material is limited in terms of geographical, cultural and political dependencies (Summerfield and Lowe, 2012), and thereby making the conclusions tentative, our study may still contribute with important learning regarding long-term strategy processes to a broad spectrum of built environment professionals, such as policy makers, managers, engineers and energy experts. Currently, the whole construction sector in Europe faces similar energy challenges and due to its focus on target setting and change across complex multi-stakeholder organisational environments, this study should be of interest for a broad audience within sustainable development as well as in strategy management.

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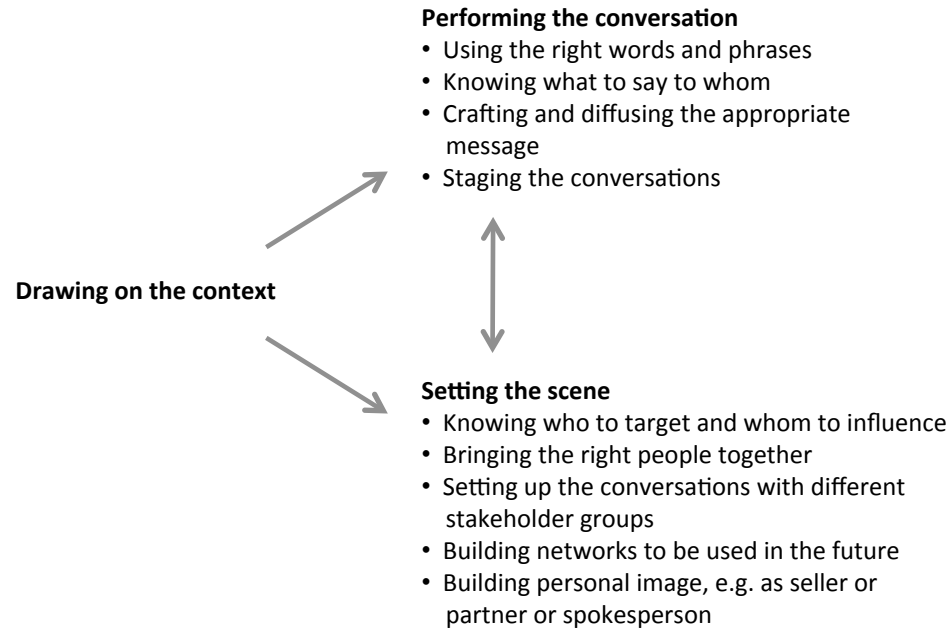
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**Figure 1:** Discursive activities applied by middle managers in sensegiving processes (modified from Rouleau and Balogun's model, 2011, p. 972).