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Strategy workshops: The fusing of the past and the future in the present

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Abstract

This paper draws on empirical data from a longitudinal study of strategy management in a large Swedish construction company. We examine strategy-in-the-making at the micro level of discursive practice during a two-day strategy workshop with middle managers. We show how strategic sense-making is achieved through creating a coherent link between past and future, staged as a rehearsal in the present. This collective, informal strategising rehearsal provides middle managers with a liminal space, time and mediating tools to make sense of and appropriate the information and knowledge embedded in new strategies. We suggest that by conceptualising strategy workshops as ritual backstage rehearsals of future actions, managers may enhance the success of the intended strategy outcomes. Studying strategy-in-the-making at the micro-level contributes understanding of how actors avail themselves of institutional practices and mediating tools to construct meaning.

Keywords: liminal space, rehearsal, ritual, strategy workshop, time

1. Introduction

Studying processes and practices at the micro-level provides insight into how people use institutionally established practices to construct meaning and relate to each other over time (e.g. Bakhtin 1986; Harré and van Langenhove 1999; Pearce 2007; Räisänen 2002; Räisänen & Linde 2004). Studying the unfolding of an institutional practice such as a strategic workshop at the micro-level can help us understand how an organisation's "forelife" (Räisänen et al 2011) and the anticipated outcomes or "afterlife" (Pearce 2007) of the practice influence the enactment of that practice. In other words, what impacts do an organisation's past history and its strategic vision and goals have on the present planning and implementation of an event such as a strategy workshop. Paying attention to strategy-in-the-making at the micro level can provide us with a possibility of tracing acts that may or may not result in strategic actions in the future.

The perspective adopted in this paper draws on the broad and philosophical views of Bakhtin (1984, 1986), who sees discursive practices as composed of utterances in continuous interplay, responding to past utterances and anticipating future ones. In this interplay, individuals construct their tacit knowledge of the "multifaceted and multi-voiced

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realities situated in culture” (Markova et al 2005), and in time. Thus discursive practices are sense-making practices in a socio-cultural space which have various temporal relations to other practices in other times – past and future, and where coordination of perspectives and voices are crucial dimensions for their uptake.

Insufficient attention in the strategy literature has so far been paid to the dialogic unfolding of organisational meaning making and its dialectic relationships to past discourses and actions and to potential future ones. Chia and Rasche (2010: 35) have recently critiqued much of the current strategy research as belonging to a “means-ends logic” where action is seen as a result of the meanings and intentions of individual actors i.e. top managers in the present. They advocate a “dwelling worldview” that accounts for the tacit dimensions of knowledge, i.e. the deployment of *phronetic* (*practical wisdom*) and *mētīc* (*know-how*) intelligences in day-to-day strategy practices over a longer duration. Such a worldview needs to consider the immanent, shifting and transient episodes, which, although ephemeral, remain as unconscious impressions wielding influence on ongoing practices. We argue that impressions are dependent on various aspects of time, e.g. timeliness and duration, and dwell in “what is not said”, bridging the forelife of a practice to its afterlife. Taking our point of departure in a specific strategy practice, namely a strategy workshop in a construction company, we examine how strategic sense making is mediated through action-based, interactional and contextually interdependent discursive practices that fuse past and future in present interaction.

2. Theory

In our analysis of a strategic workshop, we use the theoretical framing of “strategic episode” (*initiation, termination and conduct*), which enables a systematic and specific analysis of salient organisational phenomena (Henry and Seidl 2003). We also draw on Johnson et al’s (2010) model of strategic workshop dynamics, which is based on theories of “ritualisation” (*liminality, communitas and anti-structure*), to describe the performative dynamics of the strategic workshop. Bucher and Ruegg-Sturm (2008), drawing on Henry and Seidl, depict strategic episodes as “protected interruptions” from the day-to-day processes and practices of organising. The protection is provided through the CEO’s sanction of the interruption, by the design of participative activities that momentarily suspend hierarchical status, and by fostering collective and open reflection on the organisation’s strategic organising. Johnson et al (2010) compare strategic workshops to rituals, where a change of location in combination with a predefined liturgy or script produces a state of *liminality*. The suspension of time and space generates a temporary *anti-structure*, which for the duration of the workshop “flattens” status inequalities. These two affective states create *communitas* or communal commitment, which if strong enough, may work as drivers to carry the insights from the workshop into the daily practices of the organisation.

Another feature closely connected to the conceptualisation of strategy workshops as a ritual performance is Goffman’ (1990) conception of impression management. Individuals during rituals perform different identities to manage and/or control the impressions they make on the participants or audience such that, if the performers are successful they exert influence

on the way in which the participants or audience view themselves within the enacted context. Goffman's (1959) analogy of social interaction with dramaturgical performance has been used here to explore the interaction between strategists and strategy followers as they, together, perform the strategy workshop. In social settings, actors, i.e. the strategists, attempt to manage the impressions of organisational members, by enacting the plot and roles expected of or ascribed to the situation and to the intended impression. Through this social interaction, according to Goffman, the audience will usually conspire with the actors thus helping them uphold the interaction and consequently also enable the actors to control the audience's impressions and affective states.

According to the strategy-as-practice literature, intended affective states are easier to create in small homogeneous groups consisting of top managers (e.g. Bucher and Ruegg-Sturm 2008; Johnson et al 2010; Macintosh et al 2010). Creating a meaningful strategic episode capable of generating positive and lasting affect in a large group of employees has, to our knowledge, yet to be reported. This paper contributes rich empirical data and some preliminary findings from the analysis of a two-day strategy workshop for a large and mixed group of middle managers of a construction company.

Data collection and case

The empirical data is part of an on-going longitudinal case study at one of the largest construction companies in Sweden, referred to here as ConstCorp. A case study approach was chosen since the aim was to increase understanding of the unfolding of complex phenomena at the micro level. The data was collected through participative observation of a strategy workshop in November 2007, in which extensive field notes were taken. Interviews were carried out pre and post workshop with several members of the strategic executive staff and with participating middle managers. This is an on-going longitudinal study, and positive allusions to the 2007 strategy workshop are still being voiced in current interviews.

ConstCorp is a well-known large constructor in the Swedish market. Following a period of turbulence, change of CEO and of strategic priorities, the CEO chose an off-site event to communicate the new strategies downstream in the organization. The event was planned by the strategic executive unit, consisting of five closely knit organisation-development experts, and facilitated by the CEO in collaboration with top-management.

The off-site strategy workshop targeted the organisation's middle management, including approx 190 participants, which means that this workshop was much larger than any of the off-site events hitherto reported in the literature. Middle management in this context consisted of managers responsible for districts, geographically spread throughout the country. Project managers were not included in this group. Answering the call for empirical research concerning the process and practice of off-site events, we found the case a viable point of departure to try and "distinguish the more effective from the less so" (Hendry and Seidl 2003: 192) and to try and identify the factors that implicated success or failure.

3. The unfolding of a strategy workshop practice

3.1. The workshop's forelife

An event does not take place in a vacuum. In order to make sense of what is going on, practitioners and researcher need to tap into other contexts and bring these to bear on their understanding in and of the moment. For us as researchers, it was therefore important to acquire a sense of past events through document analysis and elicited retrospective narratives. To frame the strategy workshop analysis, the forelife spans the five-year period prior to the workshop, when a new CEO made his entry.

This CEO was deeply engaged in fundamental strategic re-organisation, consisting in the centralization of hitherto highly distributed and relatively independent units. His rationale for this change was to enable better use of economies of scale and standardized work processes. A feature of this “new” organization was the development and implementation of a framework for measuring and assessing performance, which included systematic and frequent evaluations of tangible as well as intangible assets. The novelty of the new framework was the importance ascribed to intangible assets such as customer and employee satisfaction. The in-house performance assessment framework and tool had been tailored to align with the existing culture, becoming a part of the repertoire of discursive practices (Orlikowski 2002; Orlikowski and Yates 1994) and values of the organisation, while at the same time generating a “new” integrated performance self-assessment framework (Samuelsson 2006). Thus, although focus on profit prevailed, the way to profit was re-drawn.

One of the prerequisites of the assessment framework was that it would create a virtual representation of the organisation's reality. Thus the organization's performance would be visible and transparent to everyone, triggering motivation for improvement and alignment of the numerous units with the organization's strategies. Another prerequisite was that the framework be simple and constitute an on-going means of “conversation” between the units and top-management.

The CEO's strategic direction was summarised as a motto in the form of a simple linear image depicting a causal chain shaped by four successive arrows directed toward a circle. The motto was that “Sound Leadership” (arrow 1) leads to “Engaged Co-Workers” (arrow 2) leads to “Quality and Efficiency” (arrow 3) leads to “Satisfied Customers” (arrow 4), which culminate in “Predictable Profit” (circle). This image was widely communicated by the CEO personally and by his executive development team and became an internal iconic symbol for the organization: it was used as a starting point for strategy meetings; it figured in the strategic documents; it was used in internal training courses. The arrow image came to function as a boundary object in the organization: specific enough to indicate top management's strategic direction, but plastic enough to allow for local interpretations of actions. The arrow can be seen as a future perfect, linking past and present to emergent future benefits for the organisations (Weick 1996; Pitsis et al 2003).

However, the large number of strategies in place (30) and their abstract formulations made it difficult for managers and operatives to align the performance indicators of the framework with the strategies. Moreover, the operative level, from the district managers and down, were largely excluded from strategic planning and formulation, which resulted in their marginalisation and lack of engagement in strategizing activities. This separation caused numerous mismatches between the intentions of top-level strategists and the strategic outcomes in the projects. As one of the strategists declared: *“The strategies are not formulated for the middle managers, only for top manager”*. The rationale for this decision was that top management should filter the strategies down to (their) middle managers, who in turn should do the same to (their) project managers (Samuelsson 2006). It is not so strange that meanings get lost or shift as the strategies pass through the various translation loops on their way from the top to the bottom.

A few years after the advent of the new CEO, he initiated a fundamental review of the strategies, reducing them from 30 to 8 strategies. In addition, awareness of the need to include middle managers in the strategising endeavours to enhance uptake and improve productivity was increasing. This recognition resulted in a two-day off-site workshop to introduce the eight strategies for 2008 to all the middle managers in the organisation and to create engagement and commitment.

3.2 Initiation – planning

The off-site strategy workshop was a familiar practice to all the middle managers, many of whom had attended or carried out similar events with their project managers. The 2007 strategy workshop, however, was intentionally planned as an event that would make a difference; as an event that would be remembered. To achieve such an impression the workshop had to be carefully orchestrated and enacted. For example, the middle managers received an invitation in which the purpose was stated as:

*Welcome to [event]
Days during which we hope to engage and inspire you.
Get you to contribute with your thoughts and perspectives so that we together more clearly see the picture of the ConstCorp we want to become. [mentions some of the strategies]
We are moving in this direction, but are not there as yet. We have a collective job to do, a team effort, and we need your active contribution! When these [two] days are over I hope that you will not be able to wait until you are back home to start doing your part in our teamwork.*

This short, receiver-oriented text addressed the middle managers directly and personally (*you*), highlighting their role as important contributors in a collective (*we*) strategic effort. The signature of the message consisted simply of the CEO's first name in an attempt to decrease the distance between their respective organisational place thus creating an impression of anti-structure, as well as to frame the setting. The tone and format of the invitation was the first distinctive feature that signalled that this workshop event would be different.

Another difference was the duration of the workshop; rather than the usual half to a full day, it would run over two full days. The chosen site was a large modern conference hotel located in a city about mid-distance between the three main company headquarters. The choice of location enacted one of the eight strategies: “To be an environmental builder of society”, since the majority of participants could reach the venue by train, and were encouraged to do so.

Attendance was very high (over 90%), probably because the workshop was counted as work days, and even though it was not explicitly compulsory, participants would have needed to account for non-attendance, e.g. illness, holiday or work trip.

Over the previous four years at ConstCorp, concentration on strategic change using the discursive practices of the performance assessment framework and the regular reviews of client and employee satisfaction, has clearly signalled top management’s intentions and expectations; however, actual use of the framework and tools differed among middle-managers. The current workshop was presented as a rally around a common strategic renewal: a kick-off to a “bright future”. So although the practice of the workshop was a familiar discursive practice, the effort, planning, preparation and execution time and cost spent, and the “mystery” surrounding its preparations raised middle managers’ curiosity and expectations.

The planning of the workshop was done in-house by the CEO and his executive team rather than commissioned to consultants. The CEO himself acted as the main facilitator throughout the workshop aided by the executive team and by top managers. The only outsider was a well-known sports coach who acted as the “comic relief”, facilitating collective reflection and dialogue among participants. The invitation letter sent out prior to the workshop was printed on the first page of a booklet that each participant received in a welcome package.

In the booklet, the organisation’s strategic concerns, its values, business idea, visions and goals were summarised with company-specific familiar cartoons. In addition, each of the eight strategies was elaborated by a one-page explanations: strategy in blue, action points in green. For each strategy, there was a blank page for the participants’ own notes and reflections. The booklet served both as a symbolic and a functional tool signifying that the participants thoughts and contributions were valuable, and more importantly that the inscriptions would travel in time and through space to be at hand for take-up. This of course in the best of worlds; here what is of note is that the notebook, a fairly simple workshop tool, was personalised.

The significant difference between this strategic workshop and similar past workshops was that it was designed and labelled “a journey”. This journey consisted of visits to nine very different “stations”, each representing one of the eight strategies, and one representing global industrialisation within the construction sector.

3.3 Conduct – execution

The workshop was bounded by two plenum sessions of about three hours each: before lunch the first day and after lunch on the second day. The participants were divided into nine groups of about 20 participants according to their area of specialisation, e.g. housing or infrastructure. The nine stations of the journey were each facilitated by top managers relevant to the particular strategy, e.g. for the strategy concerning satisfied employees, the HR top-management team facilitated. Note: The first author, who observed the strategy workshop, joined one of the groups for the duration of the journey. During the plenum sessions, breaks and meals, she mingled with a large number of participants, and the field notes cover the whole workshop.

In the plenum session, participants sat at round tables in front of a large stage. The CEO with his strategic executive team and the sports coach remained on stage for the duration of the sessions. They were dressed casually and used an informal style of address. The CEO started by giving his own, very personal, view of the organisation's trajectory since he took over as CEO; he talked in "I" and "we" terms, always starting with the positive and giving credit to the efforts of the employees. The coach intermittently took over to engage the audience in the conversation by asking them to formulate and share their expectations for the two days.

Presentations by certain top managers concerning critical strategic issues were mixed with the audience reflections on their experiences. Key words were written on a whiteboard, which digitally transferred the text to a computer. Some of the issues middle managers were asked to reflect on collectively were: What has happened in the organisation over the last 60 years? What strategic changes have we managed to successfully implement? What three factors are most important for reaching our goal and vision (after the CEO had presented the eight new strategies)? These reflections evoked the company's long history and set sights for future achievements.

After the plenum and communal lunch, the groups started their journeys through the stations, each station being allotted approx. 45 minutes. The stations had different designs to suit the content as well as proclivities of the facilitators. The executive team and CEO saw the stations as enablers of collective meaning making of the strategies through hands-on demonstrations of the "what", the "why" and the "how". Each station provided middle managers with a platform and tools for querying the strategy and providing feedback to top-management. In a sense, they were able to "see", "feel", "sense" and "hear" the strategy in context. A few had a traditional format of power-point presentation and question-answer session; others used films, computer or paper quizzes, small case studies and demonstrations.

A novelty for this strategy workshop was a strong emphasis on affect, feelings and empathy. One of the eight strategies concerned professional behaviour: employees shall behave professionally in all their endeavours proclaimed the strategy text. The station that took up this strategy focused on inculcating a new construct, namely *empathetic professionalism*, abbreviated and talked about as EP. None of the 19 middle managers in the observed group were familiar with the construct, but after leaving the station, we doubt that the construct

would be forgotten in the first instance. It was presented, defined and described using examples, then the participants worked with three cases. The moderators were careful to emphasise that EP already existed in the organisation; the issue that the participants had to work with was how to make it visible and a part of the organisation's brand.

At all the stations participants were encouraged and given time to make notes in their workshop booklet. They also had to fill in an evaluation form and grade each station on a scale of 1 to 5. The EP station was rated 4.5 by the observed group. The only station that received a 5 was the one on managing projects, which was not only that of most practical relevance to the groups' every-day activities, but also the most dialogic station, where the participants had to solve a problem concerning waste in a real project. At this station an internal development project to enhance project communication was also presented and the middle managers were offered the possibility to participate.

3.4 Termination

The workshop ended with a long plenum session on the second day. The sports coach, who had not been active during the journey part of the workshop, initiated the session with a metaphor that he carried over from the first plenum. The CEO then recapitulated briefly the participants' reflections and key words from the plenum. Participants were now asked to further reflect individually and in their groups on their experiences from their journey. The CEO surveyed the statistics for 2007, pointing out indicators that needed to improve, e.g. health and safety and employee satisfaction interspersed with the coach's pep talk. The last task of the workshop was to reflect, using words and images, on how to improve their units. The CEO ended the workshop sending the participants on their way to implement the strategies using their new insight from the workshop.

3.5. Afterlife

A year later while interviewing a number (about 20) of top and middle managers in a follow-up study, one of the topics addressed was the 2007 workshop. All of the interviewed managers could still one year later provide detailed descriptions of the strategy workshop, and talked of it as a "divide" or a "turning point" for the organisation in general and for middle managers in particular. One of the top managers we interviewed toward the end of 2008, who had just before the workshop returned from two years abroad, described it like this:

It was the simple set-up that made it creative, you met people you respected; there was variation and a fundamental pedagogy. It was concrete with many examples. The groups were involved. No rocket science, but it was timely: Create awareness, make it interesting, encourage evaluation and the result will be to adopt!

According to him, the long-lasting and difficult strategy-communication bottleneck at middle-management level "disappeared" after the 2007 strategy workshop. It is interesting to note here that the organisation is now working toward eliminating the bottleneck at project-management level by including this level in the strategizing discourses and activities. In 2010 we initiated a new study in the organisation and found that many of our respondents still

referred to the workshop as an important milestone for strategic change, even though there has been a change in CEO since. This seems to indicate that the middle managers have inculcated the strategic discourse of the organisation and feel more involved in the strategising process.

4. Closing remarks

We have tried to maintain a “dwelling worldview” in our analysis of the strategic workshop by paying attention to how *phronetic (practical wisdom)* and *mētīc (know-how)* were deployed in practice in its design and implementation (Chia and Rache 2010). Studying strategy processes and practices at the micro-level provides insight into how strategists use institutionally established practices and tools pragmatically as well as creatively to manage impressions and construct meaning. Drawing on the strategy-as-practice literature, we have used Hendry and Seidl’s (2003) systemic framework and Johnson et al’s (2010) ritualisation model to analyse and structure the performative dynamics of the strategy workshop. Our focus in this study has been to show how the workshop event through careful design, preparation and use of material props managed to stage a “strategy rehearsal” that fused the company’s past with its prospective future in a coherent present.

Strategy workshops that are a part of a sequential set of workshops are more likely to result in change (MacIntoch et al 2010). However, it is not the frequency of the repetition that generates the change, but rather the ability to create a present that explicitly evokes a past and connects it to an anticipated future. A workshop thus becomes a part of an ongoing conversation held through many different established discursive practices in an organisation over time.

In agreement with e.g. Hodgkinson et al (2006), we found that the strategy workshop is an important practice for strategic planning and sense-making that is frequently used at top management level in this construction firm. However, as Hodgkinson et al also found, it can underpin the power at the top by excluding middle-management from participating. We have shown how ConstCorp created a space in which top *and* middle managers could engage together in future-perfect thinking (Weik 1995; Pitsis et al 2003). Through the mediation of human and non-human entities, the middle managers were able to visualise the means by which they could/would be able to successfully implement the strategies in the future. Future-perfect thinking during the duration of the workshop enabled the possibility to critique and co-construct cognitive and emotional perceptions, which facilitated understanding and decreased the abstraction of the strategy formulations (see also Eppler and Platts 2009). However, there is an important caveat to keep in mind; the middle managers’ impressions have been managed by the carefully crafted staging and performance of the top managers. That their impression management was successful could be due to the strong sense of adherence to a “construction worker” habitus among managers at all levels in construction firms (Löwstedt et al 2012).

For example, we found that the top-management team tapped into their own individual past experiences, both successes and failures, scrutinised results from past employee

questionnaires, discussed various pedagogical approaches to use before they started planning the workshop. Their concerns were that the workshop be timely, relevant and situated in the practices of the middle managers, and that it result in their appropriation of the new strategies, i.e. that middle managers make the new strategies their own. The literature on strategising promotes communication as a means of successful strategy implementation; however, what is usually meant by the term *communication* in the context of the literature is a top-down transfer of information rather than enabling understanding and collective sense making as shown here and argued for in e.g. Räisänen and Björnström (2006), Björnström et al (2007), Hodgkinson et al (2006) and Eppler and Platts (2009). In this case, ConstCorp managed impressions through a *backstage* performance (Goffman 1982), providing a space in which the middle managers could rehearse each strategy (its reason and implications) before they had to start implementing it *frontstage* within their own units

To sum up, the observed workshop was a strategic episode bounded both in time and in space; the participants were enclosed within the confines of the hotel premises, having symbolically surrendered control over their time and actions for a contracted duration. This two-day surrender was physically enacted through first *checking in* to the premises, and at termination *checking out*. The participants were thus removed from their habitual space and time pattern and relocated in a liminal space. However, as argued in Johnson et al (2010), to create a liminal state the forms and interaction have to be sufficiently different from those experienced in day-to-day practice. The CEO and his support team used the affordances of a variety of discursive practices and tools which maintained a sense of anticipation and surprise among the participants.

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