

STRATEGIC INTENT AS A RHETORICAL DEVICE

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Note: the authors wish to state that they have made an equal contribution to this paper. Saku Mantere would like to acknowledge financial support received from the Finnish Work Environment Fund. Stewart Clegg, Paula Jarzabkowski and Jouni Virtaharju have provided many helpful suggestions concerning the paper. Our editor, Professor Juha Laurila and the three anonymous reviewers deserve our gratitude for their disciplined, thoughtful and thorough work.

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Abstract

Strategic intent is a useful concept in accounting for purpose and continuity of goals in an organization adapting to internal and external developmental pressures. Yet, extant literature on strategic intent does not account for heterogeneity of goals within an organization. Indeed, there is confusion over who possesses strategic intent. In this paper, we seek to revitalize the concept of strategic intent by exploring its potential as a rhetorical device. Based on philosophical theory of collective agency, we argue that to realize the integrative promise of strategic intent in organizations, achieving coherence between multiple intents is the most viable option. Drawing from rhetorical theories, we investigate the processes involved in diffusing intent and building coherence between multiple intents.

Keywords: Strategic intent; rhetoric; agency; coherence; strategy

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Introduction

In this paper, we propose a reorientation in the discussion regarding strategic intent in organizations. Strategic intent, defined by Hamel and Prahalad (1989) as "...a [sustained] obsession with winning at all levels of the organization", was originally created as a concept for a managerial audience (Hamel Prahalad, 1989; 1994; Prahalad & Doz, 1987) but the concept has been taken up in academic discourse of organizational strategy (Burgelman, 1996; Lovas & Ghoshal, 2000; Noda & Bower, 1996). The managerial role of strategic intent is to go beyond environment-sensitive strategic planning to represent objectives "for which one cannot plan" (Hamel & Prahalad, 1989). As such, strategic intent represents a proactive mode in strategizing, a symbol of the organization's will about the future, which energizes all organizational levels for a collective purpose (ibid.) Strategic intent reflects the 'corporate context' in which bottom-up business ideas are weighed (Noda & Bower, 1996, Lovas & Ghoshal, 2000). It directs the accumulation of necessary competencies (Hamel & Prahalad, 1989), giving the intra-organizational evolution processes a common target, "something to 'aim' for" (Lovas & Ghoshal, 2000: 885).

In this paper, we introduce the notion of intraorganizational heterogeneity in the discussion of strategic intent. We explore the possibility of balancing between the various tensions experienced *within* an organization through the creation of an organizational strategic intent. Extant literature has largely treated strategic intent as monolithic. Indeed, we will demonstrate through conceptual analysis that extant literature on strategic intent

exhibits unexplored internal conflicts regarding the issue of who possesses organizational strategic intent. Some authors (e.g. Noda & Bower, 1996; Lovas & Ghoshal, 2000) present it as a set of long-term goals, shared by the top management team, while others such as Hamel and Prahalad (1989) ascribe it to “all levels of the organization.” Yet, no accounts exist regarding how strategic intent is established at the intraorganizational level, and how the conflicting pressures are dealt with.

In an attempt to make strategic intent stand on firmer ground, we will first employ the philosophical theory of action to make sense of the possibilities of meaningfully speaking of collectivity in strategic intent as an ontologically robust entity. Intent is a psychological concept which is possessed by a conscious actor (Searle, 1983). Organizations are not conscious and cannot possess intent in a strict sense, i.e., organizational intent needs to be possessed by some or all of its members. Speaking of organizational intent runs the risk of obscuring the actor in possession of the strategic intent. Organizations are often pluralistic and fragmented, which underlines the necessity to be explicit regarding subjectivity when addressing mental phenomena on the organizational level of analysis. Key to making sense of collective intentionality is the question of what is meant by the pronoun ‘we’ (Tuomela & Miller, 1988; Gilbert, 1989; Searle, 1991).

After demonstrating that in organizations, an organization-level strategic intent is weakly supported by philosophical theories of agency, we explore the issue of establishing an intra-organizational strategic intent from the perspective of *rhetoric*. We will treat strategic intent as a rhetorical device for creating coherence between intents possessed by

multiple intra-organizational actors. We argue for a view of organizational strategic intent as coherence between multiple intents.

What is strategic intent?

Intent, a psychological concept, is held by a conscious subject, capable of forming intentional states, mental states connected to an external reality (Searle, 1983). Intent contains a conviction to achieve a certain state of affairs in the future (Bratman, 1999; Searle, 1983).¹ In the field of management, there exist a number of concepts which are used by members to discuss such future-oriented behavior. We will begin by positioning strategic intent among two of the most relevant of these, goals and visions. *Goals* state what is to be achieved and when. Although goals do not usually state how results are to be achieved, they should be achievable (Quinn, 1995: 5). Strategic intent is different from goal in being superordinate to it (Hart, 1992: 337), long term or very long term (Prahalad & Doz, 1987: 52; Hamel & Prahalad, 1989: 64; Burgelman & Grove, 1996: 8; Hart, 1992: 337), uncertain in its achievability (Burgelman & Grove, 1996: 8, 15-16), linked to core competences (Prahalad & Hamel, 1990) and of high significance. Both goals and strategic intent are prospective (Burgelman & Grove, 1996: 25) and inspirational (Hart, 1992: 337).

A *vision*, on the other hand, is defined as a set of desired goals and activities (Gardner & Avolio, 1998: 38). It has connotations of encouraging strong corporate values in the

¹ Intent is only one form of intentional states. Beliefs and desires are prominent examples of other intentional states, which are intentional, i.e., 'about the world'.

strategy process (Conger & Kanungo, 1987) and so is similar to strategic intent in its emotional effects. Moreover, like strategic intent, it goes beyond mere planning and strategy – by challenging organizational members to go beyond the status quo – and it offers long-term direction (Nonaka, 1988).

The most striking difference between visions and strategic intents is the degree of collectivity, as many authors ascribe a strategic intent as a phenomenon diffused at multiple organizational levels (see Table 1 below), while a vision is more clearly a top management leadership tool (Kotter, 1995), often ascribed to a single visionary leader (Mintzberg & Waters, 1985).

Strategic intent and future-oriented agency

Based on the previous discussion, the key to understanding strategic intent is in understanding future-oriented agency, maintained by a large number of organizational members over a long time period. Intent is not a problem-free concept in theories of agency, as a view of agency, based on intent, can be criticized as being overly rationalistic. Everyday agency consists of a semi-reflexive flow of praxis (Giddens, 1984), in which reasons for actions are formulated only in retrospect (Weick, 1995). We acknowledge this critique, as well as the notion that human agency is largely habitual or ‘semi-reflexive’ (Giddens, 1984). Indeed, in literature on strategic planning, the notion that realized strategies could be understood by studying strategic plans has been severely challenged (see Mintzberg, 1994, for critique and reorientation).

However, while intention does not determine agency, there is an intentional, planning element to human agency. Human actors *do* plan for their futures and such planning

constitutes an essential, future-oriented element to human agency. Emirbayer and Mische (1998) argue that agency consists of a ‘chordal triad’ of three elements, iterative agency (past-oriented), practical-evaluative agency (present-oriented) and projective agency (future-oriented). The element of impacting on one’s fate through planning one’s future is essential for a sense of having agency, that is, being able to do things differently (Giddens, 1979). Similarly, at the level of analysis of an entire organization, plans and other statements about the future *are* being made, even if they do not sufficiently explain alone what an organizational strategy really is. Strategic intent concerns desired future direction, toward which explicit planning is not possible or even desired (Prahalad & Doz, 1987). There is a lot of room for interpretation and improvisation in determining how that intent is realized.

We accept the critique of intentional action as rationalistic, if intentionality is taken to mean that agency can be explained simply by referral to prior plans. However, to extend this critique to argue that intentions have no role in agency is misleading. We take strategic intent to represent the projective (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998) aspect of organizational strategic action. Many of what are regarded as key strategy actions may be emergent, yet some of them are planned or intended (Mintzerg, 1994).

Collectivity and strategic intent as ‘we-intent’

An organizational intent is bound to be *collective* to a degree, because organizations consist of multiple members. The concept is not without precedents in the sociological literature: classical sociologists use the phrase ‘collective consciousness’ (Durkheim, 1964) to indicate a widely shared strategic intent, such as where, in traditional societies, argues Durkheim, the *collective consciousness* entirely subsumes individual

consciousness because collective norms are strong and behavior is well-regulated. One example that Durkheim provides is increasing division of labor, which sees individual consciousness emerging as something distinct from collective consciousness and often finding itself in conflict with collective consciousness. The rapid change in society due to increasing division of labor thus produces a state of confusion with regard to norms, leading eventually to the breakdown of norms regulating social behavior; Durkheim labels this state *anomie*. If anomie is the most likely characteristic of traditional societies becoming modern, when modern organizations become hyper-modern then they create a new form of collective consciousness, a new *gemeinschaft*, in the terms of Tönnies (1974: see Kono and Clegg, 2001).

Recent philosophical literature on the conditions of collective agency has been based on the inquiry of ‘we-intent’. After the linguistic turn philosophical problems have been phrased in terms of language. In the present context, when the nature of collective intent is explored, the relevant question is “when can one meaningfully speak of ‘we’?”

The answer, entertained by various theorists (see, e.g., Bratman, 1999; Gilbert, 1989; Tuomela & Miller, 1988)², is that collective intent involves an interconnection of

² There is wide-spread consensus among key authors on collective intent regarding the generic principle that collective intent requires knowledge or beliefs of some sort regarding the intents of other members of the collective sharing the intent. An influential formulation of ‘we-intent’ was proposed by Tuomela and Miller (1988: 382): “A member A_i of a collective G -conditionally we-intends to do X if and only if there is a condition C_i such that A_i intends to do his part of X , given that C_i obtains; A_i has a belief to the effect that the joint action opportunities for X will obtain, especially that at least a sufficient number of the full-fledged and adequately informed members of G , as required for the performance of X , will (or at least

individual intents. For such interconnection to take place, individuals need to be aware of, and adjust to, intents of other members of the collective. Gilbert (1989) uses the term ‘pool of wills’ to characterize this interconnectedness. Our criterion for collective intent, widely shared by philosophers of action is therefore the following:

For collective intent to be created, each member of a collective needs to be able to formulate a conception of, and adjust to, the intentions of a significant number of other members in the collective.

We will refer to the philosophical criterion of collective intent presented above as the *criterion of ‘we-intent’*. The criterion of we-intent presents us with a dilemma. In its terms, it is extremely difficult to regard strategic intent as a collective intent in large organizations: in an organization consisting of hundreds of members, not to mention large multinational corporations consisting of tens of thousands of people, organizational members can only be aware enough of a small group of persons to formulate spontaneously held beliefs about their intentions, due to cognitive and physical barriers.

Authors on organizational collective mind (Weick & Roberts, 1993; Weick, 1993) and distributed cognition (Hutchins, 1991) seem to recognize the criterion of ‘we-intent’, because in such theories of group cognition, the heedful activities in a collective organizational mind rely on an understanding of the “virtual role set” (Weick, 1993). Members of a multinational corporation are not likely to formulate a very deep understanding on the whole organizational role set, as there are simply too many roles to

probably will) do their parts of X; Ai believes that there is (or will be) a mutual belief among participants of G to the effect that the joint action opportunities for X obtain.”

make sense of. The case examples upon which the theorizing on collective mind is built are small organizational units, such as a fire-fighting team (Weick, 1993), groups of flight deck operators (Weick & Roberts, 1993), an airline cockpit (Hutchins & Klausen, 1998) or the navigation team of a warship (Hutchins, 1990). Indeed, studies of larger and more pluralistic organizational contexts portray strategic intent as a distributed, fragmented and contested concept (Blackler et al, 2000; Jarzabkowski, 2005).

In contexts where collective intent can be expected to take place in an ontologically robust manner, e.g., in soccer teams, collective intent is realized through the members' awareness of and adjustment to the intentions of all or most other members of the collective. The critical light the criterion of we-intent throws on monolithic viewpoints of organization reflects well on recent calls to understand intra-organizational tensions between function- and organization-level strategy making (see Laurila & Lilja, 2002), as intentions compete within organizations.

Based on the criterion of 'we-intent', if a single strategic intent is presented as 'organizational intent' for a large organization, such an ascription is bound to be more or less rhetorical, communicating more a managerial conviction than a true collective intent. The implications of the criterion of 'we-intent' leaves us with a dilemma: strategic intent may either exist as a unified, collective intent in organizations small enough to warrant each organizational member's knowledge of their organization's role-set as in Weick's (1993) collective mind, or as a collective intent in a *top management team* of a larger organization (Hambrick & Mason, 1984; Pettigrew, Ferlie & McKee, 1992; Denis, Lamothe & Langlely, 2001).

Yet, at the same time, in the strategy literature, strategic intent is also discussed as a feature of large, multinational organizations, such as Canon (Prahalad & Hamel, 1989), Komatsu and Phillips (Prahalad & Doz, 1987) as well as something that concerns all organizational levels – “it is not the cash that fuels the journey to the future, but the emotional and intellectual energy of every employee.” (Hamel & Prahalad, 1994: 127).

The ‘we’ in the strategic intent literature

In order to present the implicit confusion regarding who possesses strategic intent in key literature, we have presented in Table 1 quotes from key texts that define strategic intent. We did not seek to cover every text where the topic has been discussed, as it was only necessary to demonstrate that a confusion over collectivity regarding strategic intent exists. Therefore, we only selected a few landmark texts.

We searched the texts for passages explicitly referring to ‘strategic intent’. After identifying those passages, we conducted a thorough conceptual analysis in order to understand to whom (i.e., to which subject) intent was assigned. An early key finding was that while strategic intent is used in many papers in a loose way, very few papers give explicit definitions for strategic intent. It is as if the concept is taken to have a generally accepted, non-problematic meaning. Next, we found that actually the definitions given for strategic intent, in terms of who possesses it, are in conflict. Indeed, authors on strategic intent seem to be in disagreement over whether the ‘we’ of the strategic intent is the top management team, whether the ‘we’ is more plural and diffused (Table 1).

While Table 1 should clearly demonstrate the confusion over collectivity, it also shows that authors appear to miss an important issue: the possibility that multiple intents exist

within an organization. Based on our previous reading of strategic intent based on action theory (that is, the criterion of ‘we-intent’), this appears to be a highly relevant possibility. The literature also misses a potentially important role for organizational strategic intent: the building of coherence between multiple intents, by acting as a “rhetorical umbrella”. We explore this potential in the next section.

Table 1. Strategic intent in previous literature

Authors	Definition for intent	The ‘we’ of the intent
Prahalad & Doz (1987)	Goal for which one cannot plan, long-term goal, long-term orientation <i>“”Intent” is used here to describe long-term goals and aims, rather than detached plans [...] strategic intent is crucial for a firm to aim for goals for which one cannot plan. It is important to separate that orientation (strategic intent) from strategic planning or strategies. Strategic intent allows for a firm to build layers of competitive advantage painstakingly, to accomplish long-term goals.” (p. 52)</i>	Top management <ul style="list-style-type: none"> no mention of employee involvement “firm action and intent” discussed only in singular form, e.g., “a firm’s strategic intent allows it to think of resources and competitive advantages differently and to deploy them with greater imagination” (p. 52)
Hamel & Prahalad (1989)	Shared obsession to win <i>“Companies that have risen to global leadership [...] began with ambitions that were out of proportion to their resources and capabilities. But they created an obsession with winning at all levels of the organization and then sustained that obsession over the 10- to 20-year quest for global leadership. We term this obsession “strategic intent”.” (p. 64)</i>	All organizational members <i>“It is hard to imagine middle managers, let alone blue-collar employees, waking up each day with the sole thought of creating more shareholder wealth. But mightn’t they feel different, given the challenge to “Beat Benz” – the rallying cry of one Japanese auto producer?” (p. 66)</i>
Hamel & Prahalad (1994)	A dream, an emotion, a distillation of strategy, a goal, a mission <i>“The dream that energizes a company [...] Strategic intent is our term for such an animating dream.” (p. 129)</i> <i>“As the distilled essence of a firm’s strategic architecture, strategic intent also implies a particular point of view about the long-term market or competitive position that a firm hopes to build over the coming decade or so. Hence, it conveys a sense of direction [...] It holds out to employees the promise of exploring new competitive territory. Hence, it conveys a sense of discovery. Strategic intent has an emotional edge to it; it is a goal that employees perceive as inherently worthwhile. Hence, it implies a sense of destiny.”(p. 129)</i>	All organizational members <i>“It is not the cash that fuels the journey to the future, but the emotional and intellectual energy of every employee.” (p. 127)</i> <i>“Strategic intent must be a goal that commands the respect and allegiance of every employee” (p. 133)</i>
Burgelman (1994)	A prophesy, foresight by the CEO <i>“Prahalad and Hamel (1990) have explained the success of companies such as Canon, NEC, and Ericsson in terms of the development of core competence. Their explanation depends to a large extent on strategic intent based on the chief executive officer’s (CEO’s) superior foresight” (p. 25).</i>	CEO <i>“based on the chief executive officer’s” (p.25)</i>

Burgelman & Grove (1996)	<p>Top management decision</p> <p>“Strategic dissonance [mis-alignment between a firm's strategic intent and strategic action], strategic inflection point [the change of one winning strategy into another], and strategic recognition [the capacity of top managers to appreciate the strategic importance of managerial initiatives after they have come about but before unequivocal environmental feedback is available] are the three interrelated key concepts that answer the question of how top management can decide on strategic intent in high-technology industries.” (p. 12)</p>	<p>CEO</p> <p>“the strategic intent of the CEO who sets ambitious targets within a 10 to 20 year time horizon,” (p. 8)</p> <p>“Apple Computer's CEO John Sculley was clearly in front of his organization when he pushed the strategy of developing personal digital assistants (PDA) and personally championed the Newton operating system. Sculley's strategic intent stretched beyond Apple's available innovative capabilities and the market's readiness”. (p. 15-16).</p>
Hart (1992)	<p>Mission (superior goal) for the organization,</p> <p>“the crafting of a long-term mission for the organization--an articulation of strategic intent ... This mission becomes translated into specific targets, either internal to the organization (e. g., develop capability) or external (e.g., overtake a competitor), which inspire organizational members to higher levels of achievement .. At Komatsu, for example, the mission is "Maru-C"--to encircle Caterpillar, its primary rival.” (p. 337)</p>	<p>Multiple organizational members</p> <p>“organizational members” (p.337)</p>
Noda & Bower (1996)	<p>Top management viewpoint on business, ‘corporate context’</p> <p>“Our field-based data provide evidence on (1) the role of ‘corporate contexts’ that reflects top managers’ crude strategic intent in shaping strategic initiatives of business-unit managers [...]” (p. 159).</p>	<p>Top management (showing intent in refereeing bottom up ideas)</p> <p>“The top manager’s role in determining strategic context is active, not passive [...] continuous, incremental learning of top managers during business development, and the resulting fine tuning of strategic context shift resource allocation and precede the articulation or change in official statements of the corporate strategy.” (p. 188)</p>
Lovas & Ghoshal (2000)	<p>A statement of goals articulated by the top management</p> <p>“By ‘strategic intent’ we mean those long-term goals that reflect the preferred future position of the firm, as articulated by its top management (Prahalad & Doz, 1987).” (p. 884).</p>	<p>Top management</p> <p>“as articulated by its top management” (p.884)</p>

Strategic intent as rhetoric

In this paper, we wish to explore the possibility that an organizational strategic intent might portray the collectivity that Hamel and Prahalad suggest, despite the ontological difficulties from the criterion of ‘we-intent’. Our solution is that while strategic intent can seldom fulfill the criteria of a single collective intent, it can be regarded as a rhetorical tool for creating *coherence* between multiple intents.

We define organizational rhetoric as a persuasion- and identification-oriented discursive practice, which is used by organizational members who promote their interests in their interactions within organizational contexts (Sillince, 2005; Watson, 1995), or by organizational spokespersons who promote organizational interests in extra-organizational settings (Cheney et al., 2004). Several scholars have noted the significance of coherent rhetorics in organizations. For example, Nath & Sudharshan (1994), Arogyaswamy & Byles (1987) and Pettigrew, Ferlie & McKee (1992: 293) have noted the important role of strategists’ rhetoric in creating compatible strategies. Laughlin (1991: 213) argued that coherent rhetoric acted to bind organization members together. Phillips, Lawrence & Hardy (2004) also suggested that coherent rhetoric is instrumental in the process whereby texts become taken for granted and thus their contents accepted.

Rhetoric offers a way to explore the potential of an organization-level statement of strategic intent of bridging between multiple intents held by individuals and groups through a process of creating coherence. We begin the exploration of this rhetorical process with the exploration of how strategic intent is *diffused* in an organization.

One possible starting point is to look at how a written statement of strategic intent, a rhetorical symbol, such as the slogan of a Japanese automobile manufacturer to “beat Benz” (Prahalad & Doz, 1987), or the statement “we want to become the favored partner of the world’s leading hearing clinics, by excelling at both technological leadership and the development of customized solutions to the most demanding segments of the market” of a hearing aid manufacturer (Lovas & Ghoshal, 2000), is transformed from text on paper into rhetorical coherence between multiple intents. Many accounts suggest that this diffusion begins at the top of the organization, while others suggest it may also involve middle managers (Floyd and Lane, 2000: 160), as illustrated by the case of Burgelman’s (1983) transformation of Intel from a memory company to a processor company.

Diffusing a TMT intent into a monolithic intent

The criterion of ‘we-intent’ leads us to problematize the assumption that strategic intent held by the ‘we’ constituted by a top management team can be diffused into an organizational, *monolithic* intent, i.e., a single intent shared by all members of an organization. Diagrammatically, we can represent the monolithic building of ‘we’ as a movement according to Lukes’ (1974) three-dimensional power, in which a structurally superordinate consciousness captures and colonizes the consciousness of subordinates so that its strategic intent stretches to the boundaries of the organization and not just the boundaries of the top management team (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. A monolithic model of strategic intent

However problematic, the monolithic model seems to be all that Hamel and Prahalad (1994, see Table 1) are suggesting: that the CEO says “Beat Benz” and the employees all follow to that directive. The problem for monolithic intent already noted is that, should the organizational size exceed the number of people needed to constitute a successful soccer team, or any other psychological group where members have reasonable possibilities of forming beliefs about the intentions of others, a collective intent will not be formed. The rhetoric of speaking of an organizational ‘we’, consisting of 10000 subjects runs the risk of sounding shallow, if no element of individuality is acknowledged, and a conscious effort made to bring coherence amongst the multiple intents within the organization.

A possible solution for escaping the problem of monolithic intent would be to treat the diffusion issue as irrelevant. As proposed by some authors (Noda & Bower, 1996; Lovas & Ghoshal, 2000, see Table 2), an executive board could constitute the organizationally plural subject and as such embody organizational strategic intent. The solution would be to treat the diffusion issue as non-important). This would mean that only the top management team is to be regarded as a collective ‘we’, while all other organizational members will be treated as objects.

We argue that, while the top management team is often instrumental in formulating expressions of strategic intent, treating other organizational members as objects may have serious repercussions for at least commitment and control. Such a notion is contradicted by evidence that organizational performance and strategy implementation depend on the involvement and engagement of other members. For example, the notion that the joint effort and participation of multiple stakeholders in strategy implementation is needed to

assure strategy implementation seems to be quite widespread (e.g. Beer & Eisenstat, 2000; Prahalad & Hamel, 1990; Kaplan & Norton, 1996; Weick, 1987; 1995; Bartlett & Ghoshal, 1994; Floyd & Wooldridge, 1992; Guth & MacMillan, 1986; Hart, 1992). Hart (1992) has argued that a form of strategy process that regards individuals as “sheep” is likely to result in worse performance than processes in which organizational members are “active players”. Such a view supports evidence that, for example, middle managers will be centrally involved in the determination of strategic context as part of a political process of identifying the content of new fields of business development (Burgelman, 1983). Guth and MacMillan (1986) have shown that middle managers who are left out of strategy processes are likely to be inefficient in implementation, or may even sabotage implementation efforts.

In addition to commitment issues, most organizations are too large and complex for control by prescription to be completely successful, and so top managers rely on lower-level managers’ practices of self-regulation to achieve control and coordinated action (Ashford & Tsui, 1991: 252). The more self-determining managers’ actions are, the more they must collaborate with others and in order to do this they will learn to perceive the needs and goals of the various organizational stakeholders, a key to successful implementation (Beer & Eisenstat, 1996: 598). Such capabilities are a key to managerial effectiveness (Kenny & Zaccaro, 1983). Managerial discretion, when enabling managers to set their own reachable goals, reinforces a sense of self-efficacy (Bandura & Schunk, 1981) as well as enabling managers to voice doubts about what they see as unworkable policies (Beer & Eisenstat, 1996: 598).

Multiple intents and fragmentation

If we regard the diffusion issue as relevant beyond the top management team, and take the criterion of 'we-intent' seriously, we need to acknowledge the notion that the diffusion of strategic intent breeds multiplicity. Strategic intent, when communicated to an organization, is reinvented as multiple intents as it is diffused among lower-level managers and operative employees (Rogers, 1995).

Although diffusion involves encoding and enactment, it is only completed when replication (repeated adaptation of scripts to settings) occurs, e.g., "Beat Benz" is enacted as patterns of behaviour calculated to maximise engineering quality in Production and as flawless organization in Logistics. An extension of enactment so that some sort of collective intent is diffused occurs when scripted behaviour exists. However, the enactment of an intent in diffusion also involves interpretation which transforms the intent into a local context. Labianca, Gray & Brass (2000: 237) observed that "All organization members may not share organizational schemas" and that "divergence" of schemas occurred during the period of organizational change. Balogun & Johnson (2004) also found evidence that individual schemas of the organization change when the organization itself changes. Assuming that most people take notice of the organizational changes that most closely affect themselves, different individuals and groups will experience organizational change in different ways. This gives rise to the existence of a number of variants of the strategic intent.

The risk involved in diffusion is *fragmentation* – a situation similar to that which Mintzberg and Waters (1985) call 'unconnected strategies' (Figure 2). In some cases, for instance when there is extreme environmental uncertainty, it can be argued that

unconnected or contradictory goals, or even ‘strategy absence’ (Inkpen & Choudhury, 1995) can be beneficial for an organization. Fragmentation is a situation that does not do the job intended for strategic intent. Rather, as noted in our definition, strategic intent is integrative, i.e., its job is to unify agency across the organization.

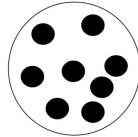


Figure 2. Fragmented strategic intent

Using strategic intent to achieve coherence between multiple intents

We argue that rhetorical coherence enables the portrayal of organizational strategic intent as a rhetorical entity integrating multiple intents through coherence (Figure 3). Indeed, rhetorical coherence may be conceived as a means of countering fragmentation.

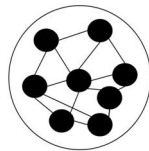


Figure 3. Multiple intents in coherence

There have been various suggested ways of achieving rhetorical coherence. Hinings & Greenwood (1988) suggested rhetorical coherence is achieved by referring to organizational design archetypes. Gioia (1998: 20) suggested this task could also be performed by common membership such as referring to a common professional or organizational identity.

Sillince (1999) used linguistic coherence theory (Grimes, 1975; Kintsch & van Dijk, 1978) to suggest two conditions for there to be coherent rhetoric in organizations: first, the creation of a representation which is a set of connected propositions; and second, the unfolding and transformation of new ideas in a comprehensible chronological development. This theory was applied to a comparison of the success of change in two organizations. In a different context, Sillince (2005) argued that coherence exists if, first, rhetoric is appropriate to contingencies. An example of such a contingency is when increased structural differentiation aimed at increasing local initiative leads to more requests by headquarters for advice from subsidiaries – an increase in differentiation rhetoric. Second, he argued that rhetorical coherence exists if the rhetorical processes of integration and differentiation are in balance with one another.

Based on the previous literature on rhetorical coherence, particularly on Sillince's contingency approach, we define coherence as having an internal and an external component. The internal component of coherence, which is the focus of this paper, is "the coherence [i.e. similarity] of strategic choices across business and functional levels of strategy" (Nath and Sudharshan, 1994: 43). In Sillince's terms, this 'similarity' is taken to mean logical interconnection between propositions regarding strategy, and their logical temporal unfolding. The external dimension of coherence, which we do not develop further here, is the extent to which the functional strategy (Hayes & Wellwright, 1984) and the different levels of strategy (Hofer and Schendel, 1978) generate competitive advantage.

Strategic intent has potential as a rhetorical tool to achieve coherence as it can be used to fulfill many basic criteria for coherent rhetoric. According to Sillince (2005: 610)

coherence is achieved by distinct rhetorical processes that create consistency and purpose, as well as switching perspective and emphasizing context.

Rhetoric for creating *consistency* addresses contradictions and constructs coherence and thus achieves a reduction in cognitive dissonance and conflict. It fits together seemingly unrelated facts and is used by individuals when they want to perform the roles of coordinator, arbitrator or logical reasoner. Strategic intent creates consistency when it is used to rule one strategy option out and another option in, and when it is used to simplify and firm up future commitments. In doing this strategic intent creates coherence by eradicating uncertainty about future actions, or by eliminating options that are incompatible.

Rhetoric for creating *purpose* sets direction and makes some actions change from being 'possible' or 'of doubtful value' to being 'urgent' and 'necessary'. The increase in certainty of movement and direction represents an increase in coherence. It invokes organizational capabilities such as innovation, risk taking or uncertainty absorption and is used when individuals want to perform roles such as those of strategist, entrepreneur or inventor. Strategic intent creates purpose when it focuses people's minds on progress towards a distant objective and when it raises the stakes and lets people see a 'big picture' (Hamel & Prahalad, 1989) and objectives that are ambitious or noble. It creates coherence by relating actions to some future possibility.

Rhetoric for *switching perspective* relativizes and manages opinions and interpretations and thus regulates debates. It constructs coherence because it enables people to make sense of a babble of noisy opinions or undigested information. Rhetoric for switching perspective regulates the disturbing effect of differences of opinion and thus helps

individuals to perform the roles of advocate and analyst. Strategic intent switches perspective, and because it is long term, ambiguous and open-ended ,people can find many alternative means of achieving it. Indeed, strategic intent involves a future for which one cannot plan (Hamel & Prahalad, 1989). Strategic intent enables the switching of perspective and thus creates coherence by acting as a guide for discussion about strategy.

Rhetoric for *emphasizing context* enacts boundary maintenance functions of protecting commercial secrets and of enclosing specialized organizational capabilities and identities in separate compartments. Rhetoric for emphasizing context constructs coherence because individuals draw a lot of their meaning from the context in which they work. Strategic intent enables people to emphasize context when it provides alternative interpretations for different situations, departments, and environmental constraints, giving people freedom to use strategic intent seen from their own point of view.

Discussion

Coherence between multiple intents, established through strategic intent, has potential value for both strategy process and content. In terms of *strategy process*, the first important aspect is strategic change. In a four-year empirical study of the UK healthcare system, Pettigrew et al. (1992) discovered that receptivity to large-scale organisational change was enhanced by “coherence between goals... [which] complemented the service strategy with parallel functional strategies...” (Pettigrew et al., 1992: 276). A sense of direction and purpose was found to have a real effect on receptivity for strategic change in large organisations: “The ordering of...data within clear conceptual thinking helped frame strategic issues, especially where they were initially characterised by complexity

and uncertainty, and gave direction... managing incoherence is the most wide ranging challenge in producing change in...organizations” (Pettigrew *et al.*, 1992: 277; 292). There are several possible causes of incoherence including centre-periphery conflicts within multinationals (Rosenzweig and Singh, 1991), divergence between managerial and professional interests (e.g. Cohen and March, 1974; Denis et al, 1996) and divergence between middle and senior manager interests (Noda & Bower, 1996; Burgelman, 1994).

The two criteria of internal coherence that were suggested by Sillince (1999), the logical interconnection of propositions and their temporal unfolding, can be used to summarize the value of strategic intent as a tool for creating coherence between multiple intents. Both criteria make organizational strategy *understandable* to a wide range of stakeholders. The criterion of logical interconnection makes coherent strategic intent communicable (Pettigrew, Ferlie & McKee, 1992: 21), observable in strategic choices (Nath & Sudharshan, 1994), in implementation (Hayes & Wellwright, 1984), and at the different levels of strategy (Hofer and Schendel, 1978). The second criterion of temporal unfolding furthers understanding by placing experiences into a recognisable pattern (Mintzberg, 1978) which enables retrospective sensemaking (Weick, 1995).

Coherence through strategic intent is also relevant to a discussion of *strategy content*. Strategic intent is available as a new solution to the old dilemma concerning whether organizations have strategic choice (Child, 1972), or whether strategies are determined by environmental contingencies (Donaldson, 2001) and/or by bottom-up championing processes (Burgelman, 1983). A common viewpoint seems to be that while organizations need to be sensitive to environmental changes (Miller & Friesen, 1980; Tushman & Romanelli, 1985; Boeker & Goodstein, 1991), and to be able to exploit bottom-up ideas

(Floyd & Wooldridge, 1992), a generic strategic intent should unite organizational action into a coherent and continuous pattern (Prahalad & Doz, 1987; Hamel & Prahalad, 1989; Noda & Bower, 1996; Lovas & Ghoshal, 2000).

While the tension between originality of strategic choice on the part of a firm on one hand and institutional tensions leading to isomorphism on the part of its environment has been widely discussed at the level of analysis of a complete firm, there is also a more recent, emerging discussion regarding the same conflicting pressures at the intra-firm level (see Laurila & Lilja, 2002). Institutional pressures conflict with strategic choices at the intraorganizational level of analysis as well. Organizations are not monolithic entities, but networks of actors composed of complex relationships between various internal and external stakeholders.

Conclusion

This paper can be regarded as an opening statement for a new line of research regarding strategic intent, sensitive to the recent developments in the strategy literature, promoting a heterogeneous view of the organization. Literatures such as the strategy-as-practice or micro strategizing authors (Whittington, 1996; 2003, 2006; Johnson, Melin & Whittington, 2003; Jarzabkowski, 2005; Whittington, 2006), as well as authors interested in intra-organizational dynamics (e.g., Laurila & Lilja, 2002) have started investigating strategy as a non-monolithic entity. Hamel and Prahalad (1989) defined strategic intent as "...a [sustained] obsession with winning at all levels of the organization". In this paper, we have sought to develop this idea of strategic intent as an integrator of intents across the organization to account for organizations as heterogeneous entities consisting of multiple actors entertaining multiple intents (see also, Balogun & Johnson, 2004;

Mantere, 2005). We have argued that, in the creation of strategic intent, the sharing of an obsession, strategy intent is a rhetorical tool for achieving coherence between multiple intents.

We have given a critical examination of strategic intent from the viewpoint of collective organizational agency, that is, when one can meaningfully speak of strategic intent of a truly collective intent. Formulating a criterion of 'we-intent', we have argued that from a strict ontological angle, strategic intent is beyond the reach of most organizations, as they are too large for different agents to entertain accurate beliefs about the intentions of all other members of the collective. The criterion, as well as theories of diffusion, indicate that an organizational intent is best regarded as a collection of multiple intents.

After demonstrating that there is indeed confusion in extant literature over the possession of strategic intent, we sought to remedy this confusion. To sketch a road ahead for a meaningful discussion of strategic intent, we have discussed the creation of *coherence* as the key task of strategic intent rhetoric in an organization, as it has the potential of realizing at least some of Hamel and Prahalad's promise of strategic intent as an integrator of efforts within an organization to realize a major objective.

In this paper, we have assumed an intra-organizational stance toward strategic intent. We have treated the question of what an intra-organizational strategic intent might be and how it might be regarded as coherence between multiple intents. We have not discussed the limits of the question of whether it is a good idea to strive for strategic intent in specific organizational environments, as our focus has been intra-organizational. It must be explicitly noted, that in specific environments, strategic intent may represent inertia, bringing more harm to the organization than the beneficial continuity of goals (Lovas &

Ghoshal, 2000) might suggest. When environments change, 'dissonance' between strategic intent and the environment has to be solved by changing the intent (Burgelman & Grove, 1996). In some contexts, for instance in very dynamic environments, the very concept of strategic intent may have little use. This paper has been built on the notion of building a strategic intent. We have presented the promises attributed by its creators to having one. Exploring the potential liabilities associated with the building of a strategic intent, or appropriate and inappropriate contexts for such pursuits, is left for future inquiries, preferably an empirical ones.

Furthermore, we wish to warn that an uncritical discussion of organizations as collective minds very easily leads to managerialism; the 'we' of a top management team is to be regarded as the only viable 'we' in the organization, with no polyphony (Knights and Morgan, 1991; Hazen, 1993; Barry & Elmes, 1997; Vaara, 2002; Mantere, Sillince & Hämäläinen, 2007). Strategy is certainly no stranger to managerialism, since it is often presented as the 'voice of reason' for which there can be no real alternative, resulting in the naturalization of managerial interests (Shrivastava, 1986; Knights & Morgan, 1991; Whipp, 1996; Lilley, 2001). Therefore it must be kept in mind that while we see the development of a widespread strategic intent as potentially beneficial to an organization, it is at the same time a problematic task because it may result in ideological control.

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