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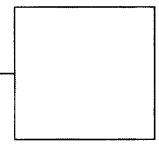

SOAP BOX
EDITORIAL ESSAYS

The work of strategizing and organizing: for a practice perspective

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It takes a lot of work to make a strategy or design an organization. Consider just the formal side. Data are gathered and analysed, documents are written and presentations made. There are project meetings, board meetings, conferences, workshops and away-days. Midnight oil is burnt and weekends lost. The work is expensive. It calls on senior managers, middle managers, strategic planners, organization development experts, management consultants, communications specialists and sometimes lawyers and investment bankers. And there is even more work in getting these strategies or organization designs actually implemented. The work of strategizing and organizing is a serious business.

My argument here is for the importance of this work to the remit of *Strategic Organization*. Seeing strategy and organization as achieved by the labour of highly skilled workers brings to the new journal at least six sets of research questions: briefly, where and how is the work of strategizing and organizing actually done; who does this strategizing and organizing work; what are the skills required for this work and how are they acquired; what are the common tools and techniques of strategizing and organizing; how is the work of strategizing and organizing organized itself; and finally how are the products of strategizing and organizing communicated and consumed?

These questions are practically important. They are also in tune with the 'practice turn' in contemporary organization and social theory (Brown and Duguid, 2001; Orlikowski, 2002; Schatzki et al., 2000). The next section introduces the practice perspective on strategizing and organizing, distinguishing it from the process tradition and making the case for starting with the formal side. I shall then return to the six questions around the who, where, how and what of strategic and organizational work. Besides offering rich opportunities in terms of research, I shall argue that these kinds of questions are particularly pressing for those of us who are workers in business schools ourselves. My closing remarks start with a personal confession; they go on to consider the implications of the practice perspective both for testing theory and for the relationship between strategy and organization.

Process and practice in strategizing and organizing

We are long familiar with Weick's (1969: 44) call for organizational researchers to 'become stingy in their use of nouns, generous in their use of verbs, and extravagant in their use of gerunds'. For Weick (1969), the point of privileging verbs over nouns was to re-envisage organizations as processes rather than states. Since then, the verb form has helped establish processes of strategic decision-making and strategic change as central issues within strategy and organizational research (Garud and Van de Ven, 2002).

But my six questions at the start interpret the verbs of strategizing and organizing at another level. Brown and Duguid (2000: 95) have recently called for attention to what they call 'the internal life of process', the practices by which work is actually done. As in Orr's (1996) study of photocopying engineers, this kind of practice can be in tension with the formal processes of organizations. In practice, Orr's photocopying engineers often fix the machines despite the process, not because of it. The practice notion implies a close attention to the work done by people *inside* organizational processes.

This attention to people's actual activity follows a broader 'practice turn' in social theory since the 1980s (Bourdieu, 1990; Schatzki et al., 2000). The notion of practice is interpreted in various ways, but a common thread is an appreciation of the skill by which people make do with the resources they have in their everyday lives (de Certeau, 1984). There is a stronger focus on people than organizations, the routine as opposed to change, and situated activity rather than abstract processes. The intellectual orientation is Aristotelian, interested in the practical wisdom that gets things done as well as the detached truths of conventional science (Tsoukas and Cummings, 1997).

This practice perspective has developed in accounting (Hopwood and Miller, 1994), innovation (Dougherty, 1992), technology (Orlikowski, 2000) and learning (Brown and Duguid, 2001). In each of these spheres, the objective is to uncover how people actually get on with their work inside organizations. The concern is principally for the performance of practitioners in terms of their local effectiveness, only indirectly for the performance of organizations as wholes. Effectiveness typically involves a mastery of the routine and skilful adaptation at the edge of standard procedures. My argument is for equivalent attention to the work of strategizing and organizing.

Here we can draw on a long tradition of research on managerial work (Dalton, 1959; Mintzberg, 1973; Kotter, 1982). I want to signal one difference. A characteristic of this tradition is its emphasis on how strategy and organization emerge informally from managerial activity. Important though emergence is, I am proposing to start with the formal work of strategic and organizational design, for two reasons.

First, even if formal design is loosely coupled with ultimate outcomes, we should not discount the wide range of other functions and impacts it may have (Langley, 1989; Oakes et al., 1998). As Merton (1957) observed of the Hopi Indians, it is not necessary that rain-dances produce rain for them to be important. Formal design certainly wins for itself large investments by organizations in terms of time and expense. It is moreover the work that many of our business school graduates actually do, with the tools that we teach. While many outcomes might be emergent, managers routinely endeavour a good deal that is formal, analytical and systematic. They go through annual strategic

planning cycles; they redraw and display their organizational charts. We should take this kind of work seriously for the intended and unintended consequences it has and the resources it consumes.

The second reason for starting with the formal work of strategic and organizational design is the relative ease with which we can trace it empirically. Committees minute attendance; consultants log hours; project teams have budgets. It is hard to capture moments of emergence, but we can at least observe the activity of project meetings or strategy awaydays. Starting with the formal thus opens up a range of methodologies for research. While the instinct of the practice perspective is ethnographic, the formal work of strategic and organizational design offers units of analysis that are small and defined enough to allow for comparative case and even quantitative analyses (Johnson et al., 2003). Methodological pluralism will make for faster progress.

What we can take from the managerial work tradition is the prospect of helping managers in practical ways. As Mintzberg (1974: 54) said: 'The first step in providing such help is to find out what a manager's job really is.' The practice perspective on strategizing and organizing is similar but more specific, concerned with finding out what strategists' and organizers' jobs really are. Building this knowledge is a step towards creating practical wisdom.

Six research questions on strategizing and organizing

The argument so far has been for more attention to the work involved in making strategies and designing organizations. This prompts at least six sets of questions for empirical research, each with a practical bent. On some of these questions we are already accumulating quite large bodies of research, but they come from disparate traditions, ranging from institutional theory to the study of learning. On others, we have intuitive knowledge based upon experience, but little that is hard. Framing these six questions within a practice perspective offers a common identity that may motivate research in nascent areas and give coherence where existing researchers do not yet recognize shared interests.

1 How and where is strategizing and organizing work actually done?

We know more about the work of strategy-making than the work of organizational design. The most intimate account of organizing work remains that of General Motors' divisionalization between the wars (Chandler, 1962; Sloan, 1963; Freeland, 2000). The strategic decision-making and planning literatures do tell us a good deal about the use of analysis, information and formal procedure in strategizing (Nutt, 2001). But in concentrating on processes, these literatures still leave out the sheer labour of strategy (Whittington, 1996). The practice perspective is interested in situated, concrete activity. This is the work in boardrooms and awaydays, on phones and in front of computer screens. Only recently have researchers begun to uncover the work of boards and awaydays in action (Mezias et al., 2001; Hendry and Seidl, 2003; Samra-Fredericks, 2003). The research opportunity is to discover more about how to structure and intervene effectively in this kind of situated activity, both for strategy-making and organizational design.

2 Who does the formal work of strategizing and organizing and how do they get to do it?

The practice perspective is interested in the workers of strategy and organization. Here we do have a growing body of knowledge on managerial elites and how their expertise and interests can influence the nature of business strategy and organization (Fligstein, 1990; Pettigrew, 1992). There is an increasing recognition too of the role of middle managers in strategy-making (Floyd and Lane, 2000). Management consultants are also coming under scrutiny (Kipping and Engwall, 2002). But from all this at least two things are not yet clear. First, we do not know much about how managerial elites, middle managers, consultants and all the other possible participants actually work together in making strategies and designing organizations. The division of labour in strategizing and organizing is still obscure. Given the issues at stake, this division of labour is likely to be fraught. When and how different groups of participants take a larger and more influential share are important questions. Second, we know little about how people become strategists and organizers. While there is a good deal on the formation and selection of managers in general (Gunz and Jalland, 1997), relatively unknown are the education and career paths of the specialists in strategy and organization – corporate planners, strategy consultants, OD professionals and the like. These are questions that motivate the business school students in our classes, and we should have more to tell them.

3 What are the skills required for strategizing and organizing work and how are they acquired?

As we learn more about the work and workers of strategic and organizational design, so we shall know more about the skills involved. In the field of strategy at least, the emphasis is on the ability to enter strategic 'conversations': it is important the strategist can talk strategy with the senior team (Liedtka, 1998). We can imagine something similar for the organizational designer. Here there is a direct link to the 'communities of practice' approach to workplace knowledge, where legitimate participation within the community entails learning the 'proper speech' of that community (Wenger, 1998). Strategists and organizers have to be able to master the discourse of strategy and organization. While the communities of practice tradition typically emphasizes situated learning through experience and exchange, to the extent that strategy and organizing involves more general tools and discourse, then some of this learning will rely on access to external, formal sources of knowledge, for instance business schools and text books (Brown and Duguid, 2001). We do not know, however, about the balance between the formal and the experiential in the making of strategists and organizers. Again, it seems incumbent upon business school scholars to know more about the skills their students will use and how they acquire them.

4 What are the common tools and techniques of strategizing and organizing and how are these used in practice?

Researchers are beginning to compile inventories of common strategy and organizational tools (Rigby, 2001; Malone et al., 1999). We also know from the institutionalist literature how managerial tools are diffused over time and across borders (Abrahamson,

1996; Djelic, 1998). What we know much less about is how such tools are used in action (Jarzabkowski, 2003). Orlikowski's (2000) close analysis of the use of Lotus Notes in two different offices shows workers' active and creative engagement with apparently standard software, demonstrating a clear distinction between 'designed technologies' and 'technologies-in-use'. The same is likely to be true for the technologies of strategy and organization. How do managers actually use such common-or-garden techniques as SWOT analyses, portfolio matrices or organization charts? The managerial cognition literature at least suggests that shared understandings of such techniques and their outputs can be problematic (Porac et al., 2002). We need to know more about strategic and organizational technologies 'in-use', and to appreciate the demands they place on their users and the range of artful improvisations made in practice.

5 How is the work of strategizing and organizing organized itself?

Making strategies and designing organizations are laborious and expensive activities, often drawing on a wide range of workers and extending over long periods of time. The work of strategy and organization needs to be organized. For strategy, we have the impression that the large central planning departments of old are now defunct. But how firms organize strategy work in the centre and periphery of contemporary organizations remains obscure (Johnson and Huff, 1998). Yet the routines, committee structures and project groups that constitute the organization of strategy-making can make a substantial difference. For instance, Jarzabkowksi and Wilson (2002) attribute part of Warwick University's relative success to the detailed practices of its planning and budgeting cycles. Blackler et al. (2000) show that the different organizing principles of three strategy development groups had significant impact upon the stress of strategizing work and success in getting proposals adopted. We need more research across different organizational contexts and different strategizing and organizing tasks to establish patterns for the effective organization of strategic and organizational work.

6 How are the products of strategizing and organizing communicated and consumed?

Strategies and organizational designs must be communicated and acted upon in order to make them real. But the practice perspective emphasizes the creative, improvisatory nature of consumption as well as production (de Certeau, 1984). In the hands of their consumers – stakeholders within the organization and outside – strategies and organizational designs are precarious, indefinite products, whose interpretation is never secure. The means by which new strategies and designs are represented and communicated become critical to what is understood and implemented. For Blackler et al.'s (2000) strategy groups, representational technologies such as whiteboards and computer graphics were central to developing and communicating new strategies. Smith's (2001) insights into the role of textual nominalization in organizations suggests that even the lengthy reports of design, with their grandiose titles, can play an important role in coordinating people's work across time and locations, whether or not the detail is carefully read. Suggestive though this is, there remains a large research agenda here in the technologies of communicating strategic and organizational designs and the ways in which they are 'consumed' throughout the enterprise.

Conclusion

It is time for my confession. This essay is partly motivated by embarrassment. I have been teaching strategy and organization for about 15 years, but I know very little about how to *do* strategizing and organizing. When called in some small way to help with others' strategy and organization-making, I have hardly anything to say about how they should carry out the actual work of producing new plans and designing new structures. If looking for advice to pass on about how best to do this work, I turn not to the leading journals of strategy and organization – I can find little there – but to my wiser and more experienced colleagues. To the extent that readers share my embarrassment about this void in our practical knowledge, I hope they will help make *Strategic Organization* a place where people can turn for rigorous insights about getting strategic and organizational work done. We need to know more about such basic matters as how much it costs to make a strategy, how to use consultants, which tools work, how to organize organizing, and what it takes to be a good strategist or organization designer. These kinds of simple and practical questions deserve scientific investigation.

But a practice perspective can also shed light on some of the traditional questions of strategic and organizational theory. Our reflex is to test theory at a distance. For example, the debate between Porter's industry structure approach and the resource-based view is conducted via large-scale statistical exercises, with the key theoretical constructs represented by more or less remote proxies (Rumelt, 1991; Bowman and Helfat, 2001). The protagonists do not think to examine how industry structure and resource analyses are actually carried out in the field, with what costs, with what accuracy and with what consequences. Yet for practising managers, how these analytical tools work matters at least as much as the statistical averages. The Porterian approach relies not just on correlations between concentration ratios and profitability, but on its accuracy and facility in actual use. In what are ultimately applied disciplines, theories of strategy and organization are the better for being both practical and predictive. Whether concerned with game theory or contingency theory, Porterian analysis or the resource-based view, there is a scientific agenda in testing – and improving – our discipline's sheer practicability.

This practical insight on traditional theory can be brought close to home. There is a strong theoretical claim in the title *Strategic Organization*: that strategy and organization are fundamentally connected. From what we know so far, my instinct is that the practice perspective will discover this interconnectedness at another level. A good deal of strategic and organizational work will emerge as broadly similar in its practices of project teams, report-writing and Powerpoint presentations; the practitioners of strategy and organization will overlap in their careers and training; the kinds of technologies used in designing both strategies and organizations will be much the same. The extent of similarity is up for research, but meanwhile we can extend the implicit thesis of *Strategic Organization* to propose that not only are strategy and organization interconnected, but so too are strategizing and organizing.

As my six earlier questions suggest, there is plenty still to learn about the practice of strategizing and organizing. I believe we will learn better as we realize a common identity around these questions, at the same time as admitting plural theories and

methodologies. We will advance too as we draw inspiration and models from the wider practical turn in contemporary organization and social theory. Important audiences – not least our students who aspire to become strategizers and organizers – will be impatient to know about what we find. I hope that *Strategic Organization* will become an important vehicle for adding to both the practical and the scientific wisdom on strategizing and organizing.

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