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THE RELATIONAL DYNAMICS OF ISSUE-SELLING: ENACTING DIFFERENT GENRES FOR DEALING WITH DISCONTENT

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Actors without formal power can initiate and shape organizational change through issue-selling as a means to address their concerns about organizational practices. The literature has emphasized the need for perspective-taking and found discontent to be associated with inhibiting fear. Based on a longitudinal field study of middle managers trying to instigate strategic renewal in six different manufacturing companies, we find that discontent can also energize issue-selling, particularly if sellers and -recipients also engage in perspective-taking. We identify three different genres of issue-selling and enacting discontent that are jointly shaped by sellers and -recipients: (a) productive confrontation, (b) avoiding escalation, and (c) collective moaning. In a process model of issue-selling as framing, mobilizing, and pursuing, we illustrate how the genres form part of an organization's collective repertoire of initiating and responding to change. Our findings have implications for pursuing change, as well as for managers seeking to create a constructive environment for expressing discontent.

Actors without formal power can initiate and shape organizational change through issue-selling to direct the attention of more powerful actors to the relevance of a given issue (DiBenigno, 2020; Dutton & Ashford, 1993; Dutton, Ashford, O'Neill, & Lawrence, 2001; Howard-Grenville, 2007). Such bottom-up contributions to change may be driven by actors who either pursue an opportunity that later becomes rationalized as part of corporate strategy (Burgelman, 1983; Floyd & Wooldridge, 1992) or express discontent because of serious concerns about organizational practices (DeJordy, Scully, Ventresca, & Creed, 2020; Gehman, Treviño, & Garud, 2013; Gutierrez, Howard-Grenville, & Scully, 2010). As we show in this study, there can be marked differences in

the collective repertoire of how issue-sellers and -recipients jointly deal with such discontent. Discontent is a matter of cognitive disagreement about strategic choices paired with emotional commitment to an issue as part of one's values or professional identity (Courpasson, Dany, & Clegg, 2012). Whether their efforts for change succeed depends on mobilizing others and shaping their interpretation of what is strategically relevant and how it can be achieved (Ashford, Ong, & Keeves, 2017; Dutton & Ashford, 1993; Nigam, Huising, & Golden, 2016). Pursuing strategic change is also risky, as it is associated with high stakes and emotional involvement (Huy & Guo, 2017; Kunisch, Bartunek, Müller, & Huy, 2017). Those who expose themselves by proposing novel, nonconforming ideas or by expressing discontent run the risk of being ridiculed, sidelined, or ignored. If their issue-selling attempts are unsuccessful, they may become disillusioned and exit the organization (McClellan, Burris, & Detert, 2013).

While discontent could be a motor for change (Floyd & Wooldridge, 2000; March & Simon, 1958), some of the issue-selling literature has concluded that negative emotions such as anger or discontent are associated with fear of negative consequences that paralyzes rather than mobilizes internal actors

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(De Clercq, Castañer, & Belausteguigoitia, 2011; DeCelles, Sonenshein, & King, 2020). Rational persuasion and privileging the perspective of the recipient have been seen as more successful than drawing on one's own emotions (Ashford et al., 2017; DiBenigno, 2020). Yet our study of issue-selling processes in six organizations shows that the opposite can also happen: discontent can energize issue-sellers. We analyzed issue-selling *in vivo* in meetings between issue-sellers and -recipients in six organizations. In some companies, the accepted issue-selling practice was to adopt a rationalistic approach and suppress discontent to avoid an escalation of underlying conflicts. In other companies, articulating discontent and direct confrontation became productive, and issue-sellers were able to utilize their anger to make their point and convince their superiors. In the third group of organizations, it was acceptable to mention discontent, yet it resulted only in collective moaning and a shared sense of futility. We seek to explain how these different patterns arise by investigating the relational process between issue-sellers and -recipients (DiBenigno, 2020; Howard-Grenville, 2007) and by investigating the question: How do issue-sellers and -recipients jointly shape how discontent is enacted or circumnavigated over time?

Our analysis shows that whether discontent energizes or hampers issue-selling not only depends on the moves of the issue-seller but also results from the collective interaction and the relational history with the recipients. We refer to this collective understanding of how issue-selling is to be enacted as genres. We identified three genres that differ in how issues are framed and articulated. In the *productive confrontation* genre, issues were framed as an opportunity for the future and addressed explicitly, with discontent serving as a motivational force to fight for a solution. In the *avoiding escalation* genre, issues were framed as a technical matter while high power distance and fear led to discontent being suppressed and to important underlying conflicts not being addressed, which shaped a pattern of implicit maneuvering and deferring. In the *collective moaning* genre, issues were framed as avoiding errors from the past and alluded to generic, unspecific terms, with discontent expressed as fundamental complaints of collective self-depreciation that recipients left unaddressed.

We contribute to the issue-selling literature by showing that discontent can indeed be a motivational force for change—on the condition that the relational history has been characterized by collective problem-solving and members can resort to a shared repertoire of open conflict resolution. In these situations, the

recommendation that issue-sellers should regulate their emotions to maintain a business tone (Ashford et al., 2017) does not hold—their emotional involvement can actually energize the issue-selling process in a positive manner. Conversely, displaying only rationalist plans or alluding indirectly to one's concerns in a way that hides one's true involvement was found to be less successful than prior issue-selling literature would suggest. Here, we identified a new pattern of collective moaning, which involved issue-sellers raising complaints and launching implicit attacks, compounded by recipients not responding to issues. This occurred when the relational history was shaped by accumulated frustration and the issue was framed as avoiding errors from the past. The pattern of moaning and recipients not responding perpetuated the collective sense of futility. Our results also confirm previous findings that discontent can be associated with fear that hampers effective issue-selling; however, we only found this pattern in cases where the relational history was characterized by high power distance and a collective framing for moderate renewal rather than radical change.

We conceptualize the emerging process stories as genres of issue-selling in the sense that actors in the same organization share a collective expectation of how such proposals for change should be enacted (Downing, 1997). Issue-sellers and -recipients jointly enact and reenact their respective pattern of issue-selling over time. Akin to literary genres that are based on underlying assumptions about human nature and social reality (Hernes, 2016), these different genres form a repertoire that organizational members share of how proposals for change should be enacted and dealt with and which forms of expressing discontent are seen as acceptable and unacceptable.

ISSUE-SELLING AS RELATIONAL PROCESS

Issue-selling is the process by which actors shape an organization's strategic actions by directing attention to particular issues they regard as important (Dutton & Ashford, 1993). As a concept, it zooms in on attempts to initiate endogenous change through upward influencing: actors inside the organization voice their concerns and utilize their insider knowledge to frame their claims and direct their lobbying efforts (Briscoe & Gupta, 2016; Lauche, 2019). The concept invokes two metaphors (Ashford et al., 2017; Dutton & Ashford, 1993): that of a strategic agenda, which is a limited set of issues on which top managers focus their attention, and that of a marketplace in which issue-sellers sell their ideas. At any given

time, there are always multiple issues, and sellers compete for attention in a “cacophony of complementary and competing change attempts” (Dutton et al., 2001: 716). Issue-selling is inherently linked to strategizing (Ashford et al., 2017): actors need to negotiate the strategic relevance of their proposals to gain legitimacy (Deken, Berends, Gemser, & Lauche, 2018; Kannan-Narasimhan, 2014). They engage in “framing contests” about how to interpret trends and possible solutions (Kaplan, 2008). Their strategizing efforts are informed by interpretations of the past and the future as they negotiate what is currently at stake and what might be possible (Kaplan & Orlikowski, 2013). The success of such bottom-up change attempts lies in attaining resources and continuity through shaping organizational routines (Nigam et al., 2016) and turning *ad hoc* interactions into more formalized structures (Soderstrom & Weber, 2019).

From its inception, issue-selling has been conceptualized as a relational process to exert influence between issue-sellers and -recipients: the likelihood that someone initiates issue-selling depends on how successful they think they will be given their relation to the recipient, and the recipient's response impacts whether the seller will try again (Dutton & Ashford, 1993). The literature initially focused on the issue-seller's personal predictors and willingness to sell using surveys and retrospective interviews (Dutton, Ashford, Lawrence, & Miner-Rubino, 2002; Dutton et al., 2001), without explicitly investigating the process and outcome of issue-selling (Ashford et al., 2017). More recent studies have emphasized the interaction between seller and recipient as a relational process that takes place over time. Howard-Grenville (2007) observed how a small team of environmental engineers became more successful over time in convincing their mainstream engineering colleagues by building up credibility and perspective-taking. DiBenigno (2020) followed how mental health experts in the army convinced commanders to adhere to their advice by preempting their concerns, making grand commitment gestures, and privileging the commander's culture. DiBenigno (2020) drew on Emirbayer's (1997) notion of relationality: Citing Dewey's example of “hunting” and Elias' example of “game playing,” Emirbayer conceptualized agency as an unfolding, dialogical process, which can only be understood by looking at the changing pattern that is jointly created by all players. This relational process is not limited to a dyad of one issue-seller and recipient; by following how ideas are pursued over time, Satterstrom, Kerrissey, and DiBenigno (2021) found that those eventually implemented had

been kept alive and cultivated by other team members by raising, amplifying, developing, or legitimizing the issue. Collective issue-selling efforts can even span across organizations to sustain issue-selling efforts in protracted contestations in an ecosystem: activists can provide solidarity and support and learn even both from more radical approaches and from thwarted attempts (DeJordy et al., 2020). By following the evolving pattern between issue-sellers and issue-recipients, we can see how the temporal structure of social practices produces change (Langley, Smallman, Tsoukas, & Van de Ven, 2013).

Selling Issues through Perspective-Taking

Some of the literature has capitalized on the idea that “selling” issues requires perspective-taking to make the issue attractive to the recipient. Perspective-taking is the ability to adopt another person's viewpoint (Parker & Axtell, 2001), and it appears that issue-sellers use this to achieve their goals. Successful issue-sellers translate their concerns into those of the recipient by adopting the latter's worldview, bundling the issue with established goals, linking it to the values of the organization and key constituents, and tailoring the message to different audiences (Bansal, 2003; Dutton et al., 2001; Wickert & de Bakker, 2018). To increase perceived legitimacy, issue-sellers adopt the dominant organizational logic and provide public justifications in economic language even if their own concerns are of a different nature (Sonenshein, 2006, 2012). Issues are seen as more convincing if they are supported with rational arguments and evidence (Dutton et al., 2001; Howard-Grenville, 2007) and gain higher approvals if novel ideas are accompanied by illustrations or prototypes (Lu, Bartol, Venkataramani, Zheng, & Liu, 2019). Issue-sellers “read the wind” to decide when to push forward or when to exercise restraint, and whether to do so publicly or privately (De Clercq et al., 2011; Dutton, Ashford, O'Neill, Hayes, & Wierba, 1997). In the absence of formal power they temper their own aspirations, seek to take away fear, and accumulate internal influence (Wickert & de Bakker, 2018). If the conditions are unfavorable, they may adopt more secretive forms of promoting strategic issues (Toegel, Levy, & Jonsen, 2021). If actors are in a marginalized, less powerful position, they may have to use more deferential strategies of privileging the position of the recipients (DiBenigno, 2020; Nigam et al., 2016). Over time, they may be able to build up more authority and relational capital (Howard-Grenville, 2007) and to draw on the success and failure of others in

their surroundings (DeJordy et al., 2020). In most situations with high power distance, issue-selling may require some form of adopting the recipient's values and logic and regulating one's emotions, as too much personal involvement may be disadvantageous—Ashford et al. (2017) recommended sticking to a business tone.

Articulating Discontent and Emotional Involvement

While the consensus in the issue-selling literature has been that it helps to frame messages positively and to present solutions (Alt & Craig, 2016; Ashford et al., 2017), negative emotions such as discontent or anger can also be a driver of change (March & Simon, 1958). We conceptualize discontent as cognitive disagreement about strategic choices paired with emotional commitment to an issue as part of one's values or professional identity. The broader literature on bottom-up change efforts has clearly shown that if actors are deeply concerned about organizational practices that violate their own values, but still feel loyal to the organization, they may seek out like-minded people and build coalitions at the fringes before expressing their concerns and proposing alternatives in the open (Gehman et al., 2013; Gutierrez et al., 2010). Infringements of professional values can also trigger bottom-up change efforts if managerial plans threaten one's own achievements: a research and development (R&D) team that saw its most important project being canceled by new evaluation criteria turned toward "productive resistance" to convince managers otherwise (Courpasson et al., 2012). In these examples, discontent and emotional involvement formed the driving force for upward influencing.

In the issue-selling literature, it remains an open question whether discontent serves as a motivational driver. De Clercq et al. (2011) postulated as such based on March & Simon (1958) but empirically found the opposite. DeJordy et al. (2020) recounted examples in which relating personal emotional experiences—not being able to visit one's partner in hospital—made the quest for recognition of LGBTQ partnerships accessible to a straight manager. Others have argued that pursuing change internally means that issue-sellers need to balance their desire for advocacy against their fear of potential negative consequences (Briscoe & Gupta, 2016; Dutton et al., 2002; Dutton et al., 1997). While anger can motivate external actors, for those inside the organization it has been found to be associated with fear, which can have an immobilizing effect (DeCelles et al., 2020).

The absence of psychological safety can lead to inhibition and silence, and ultimately burnout (Sherf, Parke, & Isaakyan, 2021), while those who do voice concerns risk being left disillusioned and may decide to exit the organization (McClean et al., 2013).

Seen from a relational process perspective, the role of discontent should not be framed as an either-or question, but as resulting from how issue-sellers and -recipients jointly navigate negative emotions over the course of their repeated interactions. Generative dialogue with collaborative strategizing can lead to conflicts being resolved through conceptual expansion and reframing, while degenerative dialogue with confrontational exchanges can lead to polarized reproduction of existing meanings without reconciliation (Liu & Maitlis, 2014; Thomas, Sargent, & Hardy, 2011). If interactions are experienced positively, issues are more likely to be transformed from informal contacts to formal policies (Soderstrom & Weber, 2019). In this build-up of issue-selling over time, actors can support each other to cultivate an issue (DeJordy et al., 2020; Satterstrom et al., 2021) and develop shared expectations of what is seen as acceptable forms of raising and responding to issues in their organization, akin to the concept of voice climate (Morrison, 2011). In some settings, emotional language and rhetoric may be useful to challenge established practices and elicit change (Zietsma, Toubiana, Voronov, & Roberts, 2019), while other settings may be more characterized by fear. In his analysis of "rituals of complaints" in a British bank, Weeks (2004) found that even when employees expressed concerns with an earnest desire for redress, they used indirect depreciations and hints rather than directly addressing their concern. As the bank placed a high value on discretion and avoiding embarrassment in customer interaction, both managers and employees had developed a cultural repertoire of raising issues indirectly or as generic comments about the bank as a system. Our aim in this paper is to examine how such shared repertoires of issue-selling shape how discontent and emotional involvement are enacted or circumnavigated over time.

METHODS

Research Approach

We adopted an inductive approach (Locke, 2001), initially driven by the idea of investigating collective ideation processes in the early stages of new product development initiatives. We found that the actors in our sample were not simply engaged in creating ideas for new products, but were consciously striving

for strategic change. Their proposals involved transitioning from products to product services systems, approaching new markets, adopting new business models, or changing their company's innovation-management approach. Such initiatives for strategic renewal require more resources and better linkages to other departments than simply developing a new product (Dougherty, 2016; Taylor & Helfat, 2009). Our actors were not only involved in envisioning ideas, but simultaneously engaged in selling the strategic relevance of their initiatives. We decided to zoom in on their issue-selling moves and were struck by the fact that the interaction pattern differed quite remarkably between organizations despite similar goals. Using cross-case comparison and replication (Langley, 2009; Langley et al., 2013), we inductively built up insights on how these issue-selling trajectories evolved.

Research Setting

We searched for initiatives in their early stages of defining the scope so that we could trace the dynamics of the interaction over time (Langley, 1999). The study was part of a publicly funded, two-year interdisciplinary research project into the early phases of product innovation. The first author contacted eight companies as potential industrial partners that at the time actively pursued product innovation, using the research team's network of long-standing personal contacts with technical directors and senior innovators in different industrial sectors. The proposal stipulated that companies would join a network of similar partners, gain access to a novel digital visualization tool and receive feedback on their innovation processes in return for granting access for observations and interviews. Companies regarded the required contribution as adequate, as the meetings would have taken place anyway, and welcomed the proposal as an opportunity to reflect upon and professionalize their innovation processes without consultancy fees. Over the course of the two-year project, the researchers quickly gained the trust of key informants and in two cases also helped to organize and facilitate specific workshops. Two cases were excluded from the analysis because we were only able to gain access rather late in the innovation process, or only for a limited time period.

Table 1 shows an overview of the six cases included in the analysis. All names of firms and individuals are fictitious. For each case, we provide some contextual background on the company, the team, and the strategic initiative. We provide an overview of

the participants, the types of meetings we observed, the duration of our involvement in months, and the hours of video recording included in the analysis. In total, we observed 108 participants consisting of 75 product developers from mechanical engineering ($n = 33$), design ($n = 19$), and software and electrical engineering ($n = 15$), as well as 16 marketing and sales personnel, 14 managers, and 11 people from other functions, such as after-sales and manufacturing.

Data Collection

The first author followed the initiatives by attending several meetings and conducting formal and informal interviews for each case over the course of 7–12 months. Meetings became our primary source of data, as they present naturally occurring “episodes of contact” (Raes, Heijltjes, Glunk, & Roe, 2011) between innovators and senior managers. As both groups work under heavy time restrictions, these infrequent meetings constitute one of the means of “coordinating and adapting the behavior of the other party for the periods in which there is no contact” (Raes et al., 2011: 106). The first author was present at all meetings, in most cases as a nonparticipant observer and in two cases also as coorganizer and facilitators for some of the meetings who had been asked to facilitate a meeting (for BETA and ZETA, see Table 1). She took notes on the issues being discussed, as well as the emotional quality of the discussions.

An advantage of our data is that we were able to video record the meetings we observed. Video recordings offer specific affordances to capture audible and visual information and to return to the data for repeated, fine-grained analysis (LeBaron, Jarzabkowski, Pratt, & Fetzner, 2017; Liu & Maitlis, 2014). Having gained the trust of the teams such that we could record the meetings despite their sensitive content, we were able to investigate not only the verbal exchange but also the interpersonal interaction in the group, which can be difficult to follow in audio recordings of larger gatherings. The fact that video recordings are dynamic and audiovisual also made them particularly suitable for capturing the ongoing process of issue-selling and the innovators' embodied interactions with materials such as flipcharts, drawings, or prototypes (LeBaron et al., 2017).

The meetings took place on location at our industrial partners in offices, meeting rooms, or special conference locations they had chosen for away-day workshops. At the start of the meeting, team members were informed about the purpose of the observation, and once the group had given permission, the

TABLE 1
Data Sources and Case Context

Case	Company Context	Team Context	Strategic Initiative	Participants	Observation	Author Involvement	Video length (hrs)
ALPHA	Precision instruments; Market leader recently gone public at stock market	Established R&D team, members assigned to multiple projects in matrix organization, project overload	Addressing new markets: Novel application and transition to product service system requires more dedicated resources	17: product developers and marketeers, incl. 3 middle managers; external: 2 designers and 2 facilitators	3-day workshop with 2 half-day preparation and follow-up meetings	3 months as nonparticipant observer	32
BETA	High-end consumer goods: SME with international design awards, owners directly involved	Small internal design team, short-term collaboration with young professionals as idea-generators	Addressing new markets: Novel business model with pay-for-use requires fundamental change of business ecosystem	13: two teams of young professionals, designers, marketeers, CEO	Week-long workshops, 2 follow-up meetings	3 months, first author as external facilitator	48
GAMMA	High-end consumer goods: Medium-sized company with international design awards, part of larger corporation	Internal product development, strategic design and marketing team, brand under pressure from better-performing parts of corporation	Addressing innovation process: Professionalizing portfolio management requires change in CEO's decision-making style	12: CEO with executive team of product development, marketing, sales, and corp. communication staff	4 review meetings on portfolio of innovation projects and communication strategy	7 months as nonparticipant observer	14.5
DELTA	Machining centers, medium-sized company recently merged with former competitor	Two engineering teams, post-merger integration of product portfolio	Addressing product portfolio: Defining scope for new product line requires decisions on resource allocation	19: product developers, sales and procurement staff, CEO, and board member, plus external facilitator staff	Two away-day meetings, one follow-up workshop	12 months as nonparticipant observer	23
EPSILON	Machining centers; Medium-sized company owned by two different sales organizations in United States and Europe	Small, in-house engineering team, collaboration with external engineer	Addressing innovation process: Defining scope for new product line requires reconciling market requirements and change in decision-making	16: product developer, sales manager and technical director; interim director partially involved	2 review meetings, 1 briefing for new product, 1 workshop with new team	12 months as nonparticipant observer	10
ZETA	Machining centers and specialized tooling, part of larger corporation, several product lines	Small, in-house R&D team, collaboration with multiple external partners	Addressing innovation process: Digital innovation process requires support from other departments	17: product developers, sales managers, product line representatives, 2 external product developers; technical director, 2 senior managers; first author as external facilitator	2 project meetings, 1 review meeting	12 months, first author as external facilitator in 1 meeting	16.5

video recording was started. We used a single mobile camera and positioned it in an unobtrusive position at the back of the room. This cinematic decision meant that we adopted an outsider perspective (LeBaron et al., 2017). It enabled us to study the interactions in the team as a whole, but meant that not all faces were always visible at close range. For shorter meetings of two to three hours, the entire videos were transcribed verbatim. As the meetings were largely convened in a set of regional dialects, transcribing them involved translating the spoken word into the corresponding standard language, which often creates a more formal account than was the case in the actual verbal interaction. For longer workshops of one or several days, an overview of the meeting was created based on field notes from which critical situations were identified in the video for transcription that were influential for the further development of the process.

Prior to, during, and after the meetings, the first author conducted numerous informal conversations with participants ranging from spontaneous comments to conscious deliberations as they confided in us in preparation or follow-up phone calls. All partners also presented their experiences with innovation processes during the network meetings organized by our research project, which served as an additional opportunity for exchange and reflection with the issue-sellers. In addition, she followed up on how projects developed after the observation period through more formal semi-structured interviews. We interviewed the project leader and one or two key team members for each initiative face to face 12 to 15 months after the observations. The interviews consisted of a narrative account of how the innovation project had progressed and questions on how the innovators had attempted to address their concerns in the further course of the project. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. In addition, company documents such as meeting minutes, records of internal presentations, and product catalogs were used as background information about the nature of the innovation and the internal discourse about it.

Data Analysis

We inductively analyzed our data in several rounds. In the first round, the first author created case descriptions based on transcripts, field notes, and documents and validated these with the participants. In the second round, the second author joined the research and the analysis was conducted collaboratively. As the

first author was the only one familiar with the language and the regional dialects of the participants she dealt with the raw data, while the second author acted as a sparring partner for making sense of the data and testing different interpretations. As our analysis progressed, we decided to zoom in on issue-selling strategies and the response from recipients, and the first authors coded the transcripts accordingly.

We came to realize that our data were particularly informative for understanding when and why issue-selling might go pear-shaped. While all issue-sellers started out with a sense of discontent about the status quo and their senior managers' limited appreciation of their initiative, they articulated their concerns differently and with varying success. In those instances when their issue-selling attempts did not get the desired response from senior managers, the concerns continued to linger and their repeated efforts led to accumulating frustration. These unsuccessful issue-selling attempts also seemed to be associated with long-term adverse effects: some of the frustrated issue-sellers decided to quit their jobs, and because they could not convince their senior managers of the strategic relevance of their proposal their initiatives were also stunted—delayed, only partially implemented, or resulted in missed opportunities.

In the third round, we decided to zoom in on how these social and emotional dynamics evolved over time (Berends & Deken, 2019; Langley, 2009), and to return to the original video recordings for a more detailed analysis of the verbal and nonverbal interactions (LeBaron et al., 2017; Liu & Maitlis, 2014). We focused our analysis on specific episodes that had come up as prominent instances of issue-selling in our previous analysis. We define an episode as a sequence of interactive turns between issue-seller(s) and -recipients about a specific issue, starting from the moment that the issue was first mentioned until it was either resolved or the discussion moved on to another topic. The duration of an episode varied between a few minutes—if an issue was mentioned but not picked up—to intense discussions of an hour.

Given the nature of our recordings, it was not possible to analyze the facial expressions of all members at all times. We therefore attended to the tone of voice, bodily movements, and verbal cues of emotions. We also noted the absence of the public display of emotions when issues were presented as if the speaker had no personal involvement with the issue despite sharing their frustration and discontent with us in private conversations afterward. Since the

first author had been at the scene in all cases, the video recordings also served as a means to link back to her embodied experience of sitting through these meetings, and allowed her to reconnect to her own visceral and emotional reactions of sensing tensions and conflicts (de Rond, Holeman, & Howard-Grenville, 2019), which became an important vehicle for analyzing the observed interactions in the video recordings.

By analyzing potential turning points in the dynamics and comparing the trajectories across cases, we identified three different patterns of issue-selling. We labeled them as “productive confrontation,” “avoiding escalation,” and “collective moaning.” These patterns were fairly consistent over time within the same organization. Table 2 provides an overview of the three patterns and the associated issue-selling moves, with exemplar quotes. We mapped out these patterns over time against what we had learned about the relational history between issue-sellers and -recipients. Our interpretations were consolidated in several rounds of analysis and communicative validation with different academic and practitioner audiences.

FINDINGS

As we compared how actors enacted issue-selling over time, we found different trajectories of how sellers initially framed their issue, how they sought to mobilize it, how recipients responded, and how sellers pursued their issue when faced with resistance. We identified three trajectories: productive confrontation, avoiding escalation, and collective moaning. Productive confrontation involves explicating and escalating discontent while both issue-sellers and -recipients engage in perspective-taking. Avoiding escalation involves foreshadowing potential consequences and implicit fighting without articulating discontent and acknowledging each other’s perspective and concerns. Collective moaning involves indirectly alluding to generic problems from the past with discontent being minimized through appeasing and leaving open. Figure 1 illustrates how these trajectories evolved over time.

For each issue-selling episode, the relational history—in particular the power distance, underlying conflicts, and quality of previous encounters—provides a backdrop of how this collective process unfolded and which forms of issue-selling appeared suitable for sellers. The trajectories also differed in how issue-sellers and -recipients framed the issue: as an opportunity for radical change with a focus on the far future, as renewal with a focus on the near

future, or as avoiding errors from the past. The process was further shaped by how recipients responded to the initial proposal, how sellers further mobilized their issue, whether recipients acknowledged the issue or responded by deferring or leaving open, and how sellers pursued their concerns further. For each trajectory, this interaction between sellers and recipients resulted in either a resolution, a downfall, or a futile continuation, which in turn created the relational fabric for the next encounter.

We refer to these trajectories as genres, as they constitute distinct, recognizable forms of issue-selling that members of an organization share and consistently reenact. We see them not as deterministic but as part of the organization’s collective repertoire for dealing with change initiatives and expressing discontent.

Given the space limitations, we have chosen to illustrate each genre with two types of evidence: a narrative account of one exemplar episode from each genre, and a more summative overview. The narratives outline the background of the respective project, a fine-grained analysis of the episode (in present tense), and a summary of the further development. Table 3 contains an overview for all six cases of how the trajectories evolved from framing, mobilizing, and pursuing; how recipients responded; and what the individual and organizational outcome was.

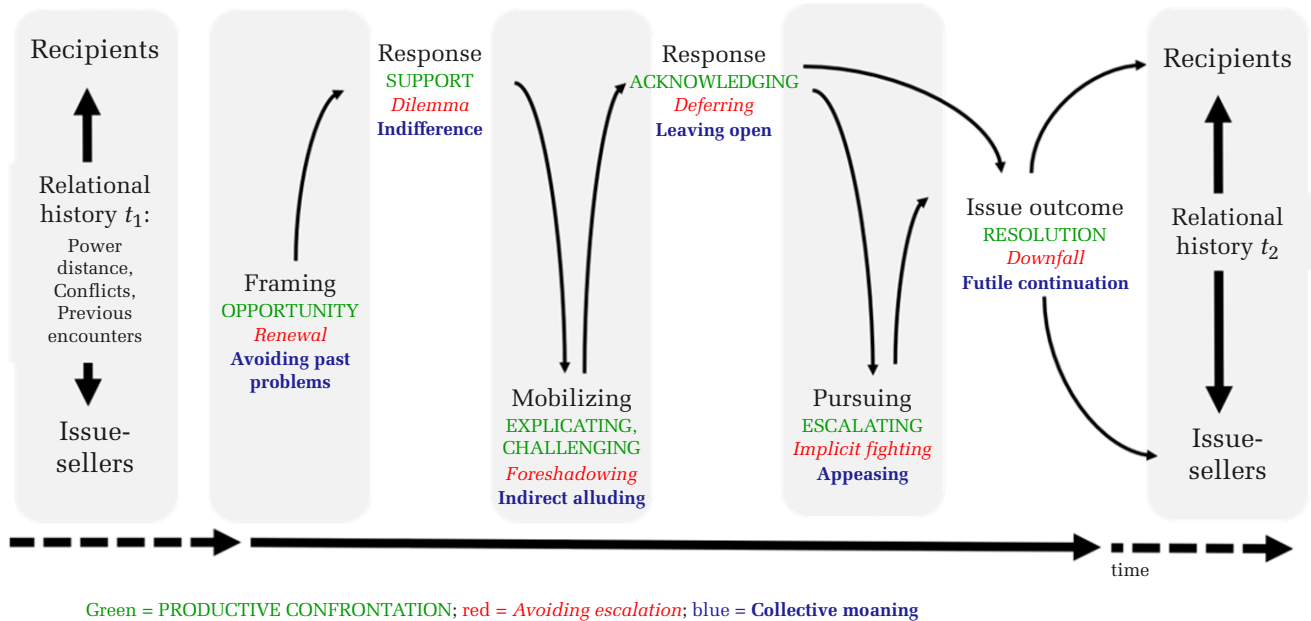
First Genre: Productive Confrontation

In the productive confrontation genre, actors framed their issues as an opportunity for the future, seeking radical change and looking several years ahead, and emphasized shared goals. The initial response was supportive: issue sellers were given time and resources to further develop their ideas. They mobilized their issue by explicating their strategic ambition, by openly challenging each other to further strengthen their proposals, and by articulating underlying resource issues when they realized that the complexity of their initiative required more time than they had at their disposal. As they pursued their issue, they further escalated their concerns. Their discontent and personal involvement served as a motivational force to fight for a solution. The issue-sellers were unafraid to challenge their superiors, their courage driven by a sense that urgent action was needed to achieve what they believed in (Gutierrez et al., 2010; Quinn & Worline, 2008). The confrontation became productive because the entire team engaged in a collective diagnostic effort with ongoing perspective-taking, acting as a “creative collective” (Hargadon & Bechky,

TABLE 2
Issue-Selling Moves and Responses, with Exemplar Quotes from Video Recordings

	Issue-Selling Moves	Examples from Cases
Productive confrontation	Framing as opportunity for the far future	“We believe that such a system is needed because mobility will be central in the context of patchwork living. Young people will be nomads who recreate their identity wherever they go. ... there could be different business models with renting, leasing, buying, membership, and service via Internet.” [BETA]
	Mobilizing through explicating and openly challenging each other	“The question is: will people really need this, something physical to hold on, or will it all be online?” ... “You really need to be aware that [your concept] has esoteric, if not colonial, overtones. You are imposing your culture on [the users].” [BETA] “Are you actually capable of doing this job? Can you write a product vision that captures what we have achieved here?!” [ALPHA]
	Pursuing through escalating concerns about resource issues	“I am not prepared to continue this project under these conditions. We need to have the conditions to work on this and not do 180 other things. It is my responsibility as a project leader to address this now” ... “So the underlying issue is the anxiety that on Monday you won’t be able to work on this with the same intensity next to your other work and the pressure is still there.” [ALPHA]
	Response: Acknowledging resource issue	R&D manager: “We are all afraid we won’t manage to accomplish what we have envisioned in these days.” [ALPHA]
Avoiding escalation	Framing as renewal for near future	“Unfortunately, it is already December and almost Christmas... at some point [in March] there will be [the trade fair].” [ZETA] “What is a meaningful deadline? End of summer? We want to be able to launch it at the end of this year.” [DELTA]
	Mobilizing through foreshadowing future problems	“We will end up at the kick-off meeting saying again we are onto something [without being ready]. We are losing credibility and the pressure from the market is increasing.” ... “We are further behind than we think. it needs more work.” [GAMMA] “How substantial is the development effort for that product?” ... “It can’t be that much, we are not selling that many.” ... “With an incremental change we won’t realize the [cost] reduction that we are aiming for.” ... “If we would prioritize it for the end of this year?” ... “That is not realistic given the delivery times of the parts” [DELTA]
	Pursuing through implicitly fighting for resources	Sales B: “The alternative would have been to lose the customer project.” CEO A: “That is a never-ending religious war on these transport mechanisms. It is ok for this specific customer project but I do not want this to pre-empt the strategic decision.” [DELTA]
	Response: Deferring decision on resource issue	CEO: “I don’t think it will be possible to make a decision today.” [GAMMA]
Collective moaning	Framing issue as avoiding errors from the past	“We are about to make the same mistakes as in the last project. We have a solid financial basis, there are no problems, but we still have the same communication problems.” [ZETA]
	Mobilizing through indirect alluding and generic complaints	“That is what I don’t understand. The company philosophy is wrong. We take any customer request irrespective of the price and then try to do a quick fix.” [EPSILON] “The human factor, that is really bad in my experience. It is really difficult to find the appropriate communication so that we don’t repeat the errors from last time.” [ZETA]
	Pursuing through appeasing and minimizing	“We will always have these problems.” ... “Let’s focus on the positive” [ZETA]
	Response: Leaving open	“Well, these are typical problems of a matrix structure. This is always a leadership problem, we should not try to institutionalize it and impose it on the culture.” [ZETA]

FIGURE 1
Trajectories and Plotlines



2006). Another vital element for confrontations to become productive was recipients acknowledging the relevance of the issue: it signaled to the issue-sellers that they had been heard even if the recipient could not promise an immediate solution.

We observed these dynamics in the ALPHA and BETA cases, which both had a relational history characterized by low power distance, which likely contributed to psychological safety and a positive voice climate (Ashford et al., 2017). In ALPHA, the initiative was implemented following additional issue-selling efforts higher up in the organization. In BETA, the temporary team of young professionals proposed a radical idea for a new, pay-for-use business model, which would have entailed a complete transformation of the business ecosystem. The recipients valued the initiative but felt its scope was beyond what they, as a medium-sized company, could initiate. The initiative was discontinued and the sellers dropped their idea without building up frustration. We will illustrate the genre with an exemplar episode from ALPHA.

Narrative ALPHA: “I Am Not Prepared to Continue under These Conditions”

In ALPHA, we observed a three-day workshop in a mountain retreat and the corresponding half-day preparation and follow-up workshops with 13 R&D

members from mechanical, electrical, and software engineering, as well as marketing, three senior managers, two external industrial designers, and two external facilitators. In terms of framing, the initiative was clearly positioned as a far-future radical change (“not $n + 1$ ”) for a new market, which involved a transition from products to a product–service system. The company was the market leader in precision instruments for the pharmaceutical and chemical industry and wanted to preempt losing market share. Members of the R&D team took it upon themselves to rethink their products as parts of an integrated product–service system. While the hardware remained largely the same, the products were to be embedded as sensors into middleware—information technology that would link them to enterprise resource-planning systems of production companies. The initiative required additional capabilities in consultancy services, customization, and software development that went beyond the firm’s core technical competences. On a more fundamental level, the idea of adding staff violated the deeply held assumption that being profitable required reducing headcount. Prior to the workshop, different members of the team carried out extensive preparation to explore technical possibilities, investigated market demands, and conducted their own user shadowing. The aim of the workshop was to get all members of the extended team on the same page and to consolidate

TABLE 3
Overview of Findings per Case

Genre	Case	Relational History	Framing	Response	Mobilizing	Pursuing	Response to Mobilizing and Pursuing	Outcome	Relational Impact	Organizational Outcomes
Productive confrontation	ALPHA	Low power distance, previous successful collaborative, encounters, strong sense of agency	Opportunity for radical change, far future: Novel application for new markets, transition to product service system	Support for innovative ambition	Explicating issues and strategic ambitions, openly challenging each other	Collective diagnosis, articulating resource issues, escalating concerns	Acknowledging issues, sharing concerns, promising support	Issue acknowledged, initiative succeeds: After further selling and substantiating, CEO recognizes relevance and grants additional resources	Strengthened sense of agency: Issue-sellers can affect change through perseverance, professional values restored	The novel product service-system is realized in collaboration with an established third party
	BETA	Low power distance, experimental space with openness to collaboration, new team with limited previous encounters	Opportunity for radical change, far future: Novel business model with pay-for-use implies fundamental change of business ecosystem	Support for innovative ambition and experimental space	Envisioning ideas, explicating implications, openly challenging each other	Collective diagnosis to improve proposal, resource implications not addressed	Acknowledging potential of idea, deselecting idea as too radical for firm to adopt	Issue acknowledged, initiative terminated: Issue-sellers and firm agree to not pursue the ideas further	Positive relations, idea dropped in mutual agreement, no hard feelings	Firm adopts methodology of involving externals in their innovation process
Avoiding escalation	GAMMA	High power distance, previous autocratic responses, limited sense of agency and fear of openly challenging or humiliating those in power	Renewal with focus on near future: Strengthening innovative brand image, professionalizing process, authorizing funds for external PR contract	Dilemma: Support for ambition but within corporate constraints	Foreshadowing future problems, translating own goals into recipients' concerns, implying loss of credibility	Implicit fighting for concerns, avoiding humiliating the boss	Deferring of decision on resources, concerns remain, return to autocratic responses	Issue not resolved: Strategic indecisiveness continues, governance structure abandoned	Issue-sellers disenfranchised, sense of agency diminished, two middle managers quit	Company returns to less innovative products, focus on incremental innovation of existing products
	DELTA	High power distance, previous competitors and autocratic responses, underlying resource conflicts, fear of openly addressing merger situation	Renewal with focus on current context: Issues framed as factual, technical problems, envisioning joint initiative, streamlining product portfolio	Dilemma: Focus on collaboration with protecting local interest	Foreshadowing future problems, explicating technical, but not organizational, implications	Implicit fighting to retain own assets	Deferring of decision on resources, autocratic response with violent outburst of anger to enforce obedience	Issue not resolved: Resource issue not resolved, joint collaborative effort fails, technical projects shelved	Frustration about failed collaboration, attempts to regain sense of agency under new ownership	Merger fails soon afterward, initiative continues under new ownership with massive time and cost overruns

TABLE 3
(Continued)

Genre	Case	Relational History	Framing	Response	Mobilizing	Pursuing	Response to Mobilizing and Pursuing	Outcome	Relational Impact	Organizational Outcomes
Collective meaning	EPSILON	Medium power distance, divided interests between different regional sales organizations, accumulated frustration	Avoiding errors from past innovation projects , renewal of organizational processes to overcome recurring problems with engineering capacity and portfolio (in)decisions	Indifference: Issues are publicly known but ignored	Generic complaints in the absence of those concerned, explicating technical, but not organizational, implications	Coalition-building, collective sense of futility	Leaving open: Interim manager acknowledges concerns but frames them as portfolio issue, no action agreed	Issue not resolved : Questions about positioning for current initiative and overall portfolio remain open	Issue-sellers become disenfranchised , sense of agency dampened, one issue-seller quits	Engineering capacity added through head-hunting external team, tensions between sales organizations and conflicting requirements persist
	ZETA	Medium power distance, previous failure due to lack of collaboration, accumulated frustration	Avoiding errors from past innovation projects , renewal of organizational processes toward digitization, overcoming recurring problems with insufficient support from other departments	Indifference: Issues are publicly known but ignored	Indirect alluding in front of those concerned in careful, indirect terms, concerns articulated in diffuse, generic statements with implicit blame	Appeasing recipients, minimizing own concerns, leaving potential acknowledgments unutilized	Leaving open: Senior manager acknowledges concerns but frames them as a “typical problem,” no action agreed	Issue not resolved : Additional R&D team members are hired, but also get frustrated about lack of understanding & support for initiative; resistance against digitization continues	Issue-sellers become disenfranchised but stay on ; feeling of learned helplessness between departments continues and hampers successful start	Novel product line is developed and launched; lack of collaboration between departments continues and hampers successful start

Note: Core terms from theoretical model (figure 1) emphasized in bold.

their findings into a definition of the scope of the project.

The relational history was shaped by previous successful collaboration and the atmosphere in the team was collegiate. For the participants, it was a rare opportunity to focus on their initiative and to interact directly with their senior managers. Most members had previously collaborated, some intensely and others more at a distance. The power distance was rather low and the three senior managers present were relatively close to the technical content and actively engaged in the project. They also saw their role as championing the project internally to higher echelons. The project leader was the main issue-seller and the two senior managers were the main recipients.

Over the course of the three meetings, we observed several episodes of issue-selling aimed at substantiating their initiative and the need for more dedicated resources. While the team received support and felt taken seriously regarding their professional values as innovators, the entire team was overcommitted and confronted with a virtually impossible timeline.

Early on, one of the engineers humorously hinted at these resource concerns, saying: “I am ready for this adventure and I hope that we have enough bananas on board—these journeys often take longer than you think. Actually, someone should check the bananas again.” During the closing plenary at the end of the three-day workshop the discussion escalated and the resource concerns came to the forefront.

Episode. The entire team is seated in a circle of chairs facing several flipcharts and listens to presentations on what their fellow team members have worked on in the last 24 hours. A team member from marketing presents their subgroup’s proposal for how to sell the initiative’s core idea. The team members first listen attentively, then start to mobilize their concerns that the current presentation does not yet capture well enough what their project is about. At first, some take issue with the abstract nature of the presentation: “I can see that you are not an engineer, the visualization does not work for me.” The project leader (who later becomes the main issue-seller but here is in the role of recipient) intervenes: “Stop—these last 15 minutes have been f*** complex for me. You are skipping ahead to your shiny marketing story. I just want to hear from you what the product will look like—that is what we need to work on next Monday.” The marketing member responds “Physically? We did that on the first day.” As the project leader alleges that the subgroup did not do their job properly, another member of the

subgroup also gets up to defend their work. The project leader demands in a more agitated voice: “Just tell me what is really new? Why does it create more business benefit, more sales, and which market segment are we targeting?” Other team members join in, saying: “After three days this is a bit too weak, not concrete enough.” The marketing member feels attacked and tries to defend himself, implicitly alleging that technical details are less important:

Such a picture is something we could have done on the first day. It will look like [our current products], it will work like it and most likely it will be like it—that is the boring bit. I am sure we can realize it technically, but how do we convince our bosses that we need to invest substantially in this project?!

Several team members join the discussion to offer their views on how to best articulate the core message of their initiative, interspersed with a meta-level discussion on what the subgroup should have done. There is an awkward tension in the room, and one of the senior managers seeks to mobilize the interpersonal tensions as an issue by saying in a quiet voice:

At this moment there is an awkward feeling in the group; at least I don’t feel good. Several people are not satisfied and I would like to sort this out. Could you [turning to the facilitators] please take the lead?

Yet the facilitators appear to be unsure how to respond and do not intervene.

The discussion escalates further and becomes more personal. The marketing member turns to the project leader, begging him desperately: “Please say what you expected. I am sorry to disappoint you.” The project leader rebuffs his request and suggests that his discontent with the quality of the presentation is a collective concern: “You don’t need to be sorry. But if I look around, nobody is really enthusiastic.” Again, the facilitators do not address the interpersonal tensions and instead offer a lengthy explanation on the “difficulty to visualize such abstract concepts.” The project leader now ups the ante and confronts the marketing member directly, expressing discontent about his personal qualifications and thereby violating their cultural norms: “Are you actually capable of doing this job? Can you actually write a product vision that captures what we have achieved in these three days with all the trivial details?!”

The atmosphere in the team is quite tense at this point, and team members experience the personal confrontation as painful. However, it becomes a turning point: While the marketing member retreats to his seat, several other team members engage in a collective diagnostic effort to fix the situation.

The project leader dismisses the idea of a personal conflict and instead now becomes the main issue-seller by explicating his underlying resource concerns: “We are dealing with something we cannot address. On Monday we will be back to our day-to-day work with lots of other projects ... we should really be much further”—now framing it as a matter of time constraints and project overload for the entire team, rather than a personal shortcoming or lack of technical abilities. As the group begins to digest the insight, the project leader turns to his superior, the R&D manager, to pursue the resource issue. He escalates his concerns and explicitly demands support:

I am not prepared to continue this project under these conditions. We need to have the conditions to work on this, we can't do 180 other things in parallel ... I feel that as project leader it is my damned responsibility to address this now.

The discontent is now clearly directed at a lack of time to work on the project, a concern they all share, as the earlier metaphorical reference to a lack of bananas for the journey indicated.

The project leader then engages in perspective-taking and appeals to his boss by drawing on their relational history:

In [the previous project], we had the chance because you made sure that we had the right conditions. Many didn't believe in the project, but we made it because you ensured we had the time and the infrastructure. I don't see that happening yet for this project.

The R&D manager responds also by perspective-taking and acknowledges his concern: “Ok, I understand that message and that you insist on that, but it is not easy. [raising his arms in resignation] I cannot promise you 10 people that I don't have.” The project leader is not satisfied and continues to express his discontent: “No, but you could say ‘this is all tough shit and we need to look for a solution.’” To which the R&D manager replies, “I said that, just not in these words.” This acknowledging response clears the air in the room. The marketing member who had earlier been the target of discontent is relieved, saying to the project leader, “I am extremely grateful that you articulated this concern.” Two other team members second the worry regarding unrealistic deadlines across several projects as an organization-wide issue they have tried repeatedly to raise. The R&D manager now acknowledges the resource issue as a shared concern: “We are all afraid we won't manage to accomplish what we have envisioned in these days,” which may sound helpless but creates an

emotional bridge to the issue-sellers' concerns. Relieved that the relational tensions are resolved and the resources concerns are on the table, the team decides to take a break and everyone gets up. The project leader and R&D manager agree to pursue the resource issue jointly with their superiors.

Further development. More issue-selling was required after the meeting: in the follow-up interviews the project leader recounted how they used numerous issue-selling strategies, such as substantiating their proposal with market evidence and showing the business impact of targeting new markets, to convince successively higher levels of managers, and eventually the CEO, about the strategic relevance of the project. Explaining, challenging, and escalating their concerns during the workshop helped them to collectively diagnose the underlying organizational constraints, which in turn allowed them to address these constraints in a productive manner later on. The team was eventually granted the resources to pursue the project and succeeded with their innovative breakthrough to launch a new product-service system.

Although in both cases—ALPHA and BETA—the confrontational interactions were at times hurtful, the positive relational history and the framing of the issue as an opportunity enabled the articulation of discontent. The sellers' discontent also resonated with the recipients' perspective, and both sellers and recipients contributed to the resolution by engaging in perspective-taking.

Second Genre: Avoiding Escalation

In the second genre, avoiding escalation, issue-sellers tried to pursue strategic change by presenting their initiative as a technical issue while avoiding upsetting those in power. We observed this genre in cases where the relational history was characterized by high power distance and underlying conflicts. Participants shared their discontent about their leader's decision-making with us informally, but these concerns were not articulated during the meetings. By choosing to not directly address their discontent, issue-sellers hoped to avoid upsetting powerful actors. In this genre, confronting senior managers would have been perceived as humiliating them, in line with implicit voice theories associated with fear, such as “don't embarrass the boss” (Detert & Edmondson, 2011). Instead, issue-sellers exhibited a rationalistic approach to change (Badham, Mead, & Antonacopoulou, 2012), portraying their initiative as something to be planned, designed, and executed. Issue-sellers used what Sonenshein (2006) called

“rationality tactics,” such as using logic, providing reasons for requests, presenting information, and writing detailed plans. While many of these tactics have previously been identified as successful, in our setting they occurred in a context of fear, which meant that the rationalistic approach was chosen to avoid addressing the actual underlying conflicts. Sellers mobilized their issues by foreshadowing future problems rather than explicating them, and pursued them via implicit fighting and bargaining for resources. An important element of this pattern that contributed to how recipients responded. They contributed to the dynamic by casting a dilemma of contradictory expectations to innovate without rocking the boat, and by deferring decisions that were badly needed to move the initiative forward.

We observed this genre in the GAMMA and DELTA cases, in which issue-sellers sought to professionalize their innovation processes without directly confronting their senior managers’ behavior, which they saw as irrational. In both cases, the initiative was framed as innovation projects for the near future—that is, in the upcoming months—with a focus on strategic renewal but without changing the current business model or market. In the DELTA case, two recently merged companies sought to consolidate their joint portfolio of products and projects with the help of an external facilitator. Instead of naming the elephant in the room—the resource allocation between the two merged companies—they circumnavigated the tensions by framing the issue solely in technical terms. While this would seem to be a rational strategy, it meant that important resource issues were not addressed, which, a few months after our observations, led to the collapse of the joint effort and the end of the merger.

At GAMMA, a team of middle managers wanted to streamline their product portfolio and professionalize their innovation management against their CEO’s will, yet without directly confronting him. While this approach helped to avoid publicly humiliating their boss, it did not prevent issue-sellers from becoming disenfranchised and frustrated—two of the middle managers involved in the episode below quit their jobs soon after.

Narrative GAMMA: “We Will Lose Credibility”

Project background and meeting context. Like BETA, GAMMA designed and manufactured high-end consumer goods. The company was part of a multinational corporation on which it depended for major budget decisions and sales targets. It had

positioned its brand through a number of design awards but also faced pressure from the corporation, as other brands outperformed it in terms of sales figures. We observed a series of portfolio review meetings with middle managers from product management, marketing, and sales as issue-sellers and their CEO as recipient. Through our repeated informal interactions with the issue-sellers, we learned of their desire to strengthen their innovative brand image and to professionalize their innovation management. The CEO as their recipient sent a double-bind signal: he encouraged their ambition but also impressed on them the need to conform to corporate performance measures. His own way of pursuing their brand interests was to navigate the complexities and constraints in the corporate universe in an implicit, intuitive manner. Many of the meetings that we observed were inconclusive: rather than decisions being made explicitly with the team members in attendance, decisions were deferred and communicated afterward via the meeting minutes. In our informal conversations, middle managers told us about their discontent with this management style and explained that this was part of the corporate culture: the group’s chairman saw design-related decisions as intuitive and was not interested in evidence such as market analysis, or in other people’s perspectives. People were afraid of his rather autocratic leadership style. Driven by their discontent about this management approach, the middle managers tried to counteract it by establishing an explicit governance structure with regular review meetings within their own realm of GAMMA. Given the relational history characterized by high power distance and fear, their strategy was to avoid publicly humiliating their boss and to gently coax him into what they saw as better management practices, rather than to directly confront him.

Episode. The middle managers—heads of marketing, corporate communication, product management, and sales—have liaised before the meeting and agreed on their approach for coaxing their boss into making a decision without being too confrontational. Now, they sit together with the CEO in a meeting room for a three-hour review meeting. On the table are samples of visual communication materials. The head of marketing, who chairs the meeting, and the head of communication act as the main issue-sellers. The first topic is a decision about two external proposals for a corporate communication concept. The decision implies a content issue about the brand identity, which the issue-sellers would like to be more innovative, and a resource issue about the associated costs for the external agency. The CEO initiates the

discussion by summarizing that most people are in favor of one concept from a renowned corporate design office, but that “the cost implications are not clear. [To communications director:] You made some inquiries.” Rather than answering his question, the communications director frames the issue as needing to come to a decision quickly given that an important trade fair is approaching in a few months. She is seconded by the marketing manager: “We really need to make a decision now, also toward the agency, otherwise they lose interest. We can’t afford to miss that moment.” The two issue-sellers mobilize the issue by foreshadowing potential consequences and avoid direct mention of the sensitive issue of costs. The marketing manager says, “We will end up at the kick-off meeting saying again we are onto something [without being ready]. We are losing credibility and the pressure from the market is increasing.” The communications director raises another point of discontent, namely that they are behind schedule, hinting at time being a precious resource:

We are much further behind than we think. They have clearly shown what they are capable of, but we have only seen a few examples. We have an indication of their fees, but for a real estimation of the costs we need to know more.

The CEO as recipient responds with deferring, as he is worried about additional hidden costs: “I don’t want to give green light now and then be inundated with invoices.” The middle managers package their discontent in terms of expectations at the corporate level, thereby engaging in perspective-taking, assuming that corporate expectation would also be a concern of the CEO: “We have now involved [corporate HQ] and they will expect to see results. We know they don’t like our current campaign.” However, their attempts do not quite match the CEO’s perspective: “Yes, they will expect results, but also financially. These are two sides, we need to consider that.” As he continues, the CEO signals that he is hesitant to come to a conclusion—precisely the indecisiveness that the issue-sellers had tried to overcome: “I don’t know if we can reach a decision on that now—we need to be concrete.” Although they presumably understand each other’s concerns, neither side explicitly acknowledges this or engages in perspective-taking. Instead, the communications manager continues to pursue the issue without explicating the fees: “The agency is very concrete. There are no hidden costs.” The CEO demands more detailed information:

CEO: “So can we talk about a sum?”

Communications manager: “Which sum?”

CEO: “The agency costs, so that we have the figures on the table”

Communications manager: “There was some sort of contract.”

Confronted with the possibility of again not reaching a decision, the communications manager starts digging in her bag for the contract. The CEO inquires, becoming somewhat impatient, “Have you shown me that contract?” Ignoring his irritation and need for control, the communications manager responds, “No, there is no point, we need to go over it with them. We are an unusual client for them.” When she finds the contract and quotes the one-off fees and annual fees, the costs are indeed much higher than expected. The group discusses possible implications, and the CEO again responds by deferring the decision.

Yet another meeting has ended and the issue-sellers have failed to achieve their goal: it is not clear whether the collaboration with the agency will go ahead and whether the costs are acceptable. Neither side has engaged in sufficient perspective-taking or acknowledged the other’s concern as legitimate. The underlying tensions between their own innovative ambitions, the responses from their retail partners, and the expectations from corporate headquarters remain unaddressed.

Further development. Over months of unsuccessful change attempts, the middle managers’ discontent continued to build up. The governance structure they had tried to establish started to disintegrate and the CEO seemed less supportive of their initiative. One of the issue-sellers reflected on this period in the retrospective interview as “a revolt that was not intended, and now it is back to dictatorship.” Apparently, they had fallen from grace: “It is like a kingdom, and the good princes have become bad princes.” Rather than trying to engage with the CEO’s perspective and change their approach, two of the issue-sellers felt that their issue-selling efforts would not succeed, and quit their jobs in frustration. The firm resumed a less innovative brand image and drifted toward more mainstream products.

In both examples of avoiding escalation in GAMMA and DELTA, the relational history of fear dominated the interactions and prevented openly addressing the sellers’ discontent and the recipients’ reservations. The sellers’ discontent did not resonate with the recipients, and the rational arguments put forward were not paired with sufficient perspective-taking to actually understand the concerns of the other side.

Third Genre: Collective Moaning

In the third genre, collective moaning, the issues were framed as avoiding errors from the past that arose from divergent goals between parts of the organization. The relational history was shaped by conflicts and repeated experiences of concerns not taken seriously. The power distance was pseudo-egalitarian—low enough for issue-sellers to feel free to voice their concerns, but still too high to feel safe to actually address the underlying problem and confront recipients. Actors mobilized their issues by expressing unspecified, generic complaints, often with a cynical, self-deprecating undertone and by indirectly alluding to recurring problems in the organization. While this succeeded in creating a shared sense of the problem, no concrete action plan was developed. In terms of Weeks's (2004) typology of complaints, the issue-sellers enacted "depreciations," criticisms that expressed an earnest desire that something may be averted or removed. These "solicitations of redress" (Weeks, 2004: 73) had to be cloaked in language that would not embarrass the recipient. Recipients contributed to this genre by responding with indifference and leaving open, rather than acknowledging the concerns. As a result, the issues were not resolved and participants experienced a sense of futility. There are a few instances in our data when collective moaning was interrupted by either the issue-sellers themselves or a facilitator explicating their concerns openly. However, the breakaway from the genre was temporary, and the disillusioned individuals either continued to plow on, or left the organization.

We found this genre in the cases of ZETA and the EPSILON, two engineering companies developing machine centers. In both cases, the issue-sellers struggled with content and resource issues as a result of a lack of organizational support and insufficient collaboration from their marketing colleagues. At EPSILON, a group of middle managers bemoaned that their CEO was unwilling to commit to a set of requirements and that "the company philosophy is wrong." At ZETA, the project leader convened a special meeting to garner support from other departments and senior managers for his initiative, but the discussion repeatedly descended into moaning. In both cases, issue-sellers learned that it was acceptable, but ultimately futile, to voice concerns. Two issue-sellers quit their jobs while others continued to plod on despite their ongoing frustrations. The problems and the moaning continued even when new people joined the organization, indicating that

collective moaning had become the way in which issue-selling was jointly enacted by issue-sellers and -recipients in these companies.

Narrative ZETA: "We Are About to Make the Same Mistakes Again"

ZETA was part of a worldwide corporation that developed and produced machining centers. Such machining centers are engineered to order, with new types of machines being developed every five to 10 years. The strategic renewal initiative concerned the digitization of the entire process from virtual prototyping and simultaneous engineering to transforming the engineer-to-order process. This digitization constituted a substantial organizational change that required much closer linkages and collaboration from other departments than the more sequential innovation processes that the company had followed before. A small number of internal engineers worked with many external collaborators on the content. While the technical challenges were manageable for the team, the organizational resource issues proved difficult to address. They also faced a legacy of insufficient collaboration between departments in previous R&D projects.

After frustrations had been building up for several months, the project leader as the main issue-seller took it upon himself to address his discontent by setting up an issue-selling event—a day-long workshop focused on the question, "Why do we have such problems with innovating?" and represented an unprecedented episode of contact between the innovators and senior managers. He sought the support of an external facilitator and the technical director as his direct line manager. Two external engineers who had been involved in the early phase were also asked to provide their perspective. The main recipients were two senior corporate managers and the marketing and sales manager, who had been reluctant to cooperate. All participants were aware of the discontent, as they had either personally experienced it or had read the internal report about the organizational problems surrounding the previous innovation project, which had created serious cost overruns and delays due to lack of collaboration.

Episode. The project leader, the technical director, two members of the corporate management team, the marketing and sales manager, three middle managers from other departments, two external engineers, and a facilitator are seated in the main meeting room around a set of tables facing a projection. The project leader as the main issue-seller kick-starts the

workshop with a presentation of his concerns. He uses generic terms without directly confronting the underlying conflicts. Early on, an exchange between the issue-seller and one of the recipients exposes the discontent and the different mindsets about the digitization initiative and its implications: As the project leader explains the initiative, the marketing manager, who has been reluctant to embrace the idea of digitization, is shocked to hear they are still in the virtual realm, saying “So you have not ordered any physical units yet?!” and thereby implying a negative judgment about the project and the capabilities of the project leader—these parts have long lead times and if they have not yet been ordered the project will be tremendously delayed. The project leader responds with an implicit negative judgment—“No, that would make no sense if we want to do more [digital] iterations: we cannot order physical parts if we haven’t finished the virtual reality testing”—suppressing his discontent that the marketing manager apparently does not understand the initiative’s digital approach. The parties’ implicit attacks on each other’s competence signal their conflicting perspectives, which have also characterized previous interactions. Neither side articulates these explicitly or engages in perspective-taking. The opportunity for pursuing the issue passes, as the technical director appeases the marketing manager that physical tests will still be done at a later point in time.

The project leader mobilizes the issue by complaining in generic terms about his discontent, in particular the lack of organizational support, insufficient communication, and the fact that “marketing was largely absent,” without directly confronting the marketing manager who sits across from him at the same table. His issue-selling attempts are weakened by his own use of appeasing through minimizing phrases such as “I will leave it at that,” as well as through patronizing interventions from the technical director. In a sweeping statement, the project leader frames the issue as avoiding errors from the past: “We are about to make the same mistakes as in the last project. We still have the same communication problems.” In an act of collective self-deprecation, he bemoans the lack of innovation culture and resources (“The entire company is overstretched, nobody has time”) and the fact that no one dares to say what they think, again without addressing anyone in particular. Other participants join in and offer their interpretations. While participants share their discontent with the fact that the organization has problems getting innovation off the ground, the collective diagnosis remains abstract. The issue is

labeled as “typical problems of a matrix structure”—with the implication that any attempt to fix it may be futile.

A potential, yet unutilized, turning point is the reaction of one senior manager who acknowledges the impact of the initiative: “What I have now understood from a distance is that this project is larger in scope than anything we have done before.” By including himself in the collective “we,” the senior manager engages in perspective-taking and shows understanding of the issue-seller’s ambitions. Yet he also presents himself as an outsider (“from a distance”), which creates mixed messages about the relational dynamic. The issue-seller does not pick up the recipient’s acknowledgment and understanding as an opportunity to pursue his concerns, and does not try to mend the signaled distance with further perspective-taking. Thereby, the recipient’s response remains inconsequential. The senior manager engages in further perspective-taking and acknowledges the need for more interdepartmental linkages:

But this time we have the ambition that we develop in an integrated effort, not only the technology, but also reducing the engineering effort by 50% and reducing the sales efforts to a fraction with all these additional tools that we are creating. So the integration with the rest of the company becomes even more important.

His response also contains an implicit reprimand of the marketing manager for his refusal to collaborate. In response to this implicit attack, the marketing manager remains silent, yet the video recording shows that he is visibly impacted by the threat of becoming marginalized. He moves awkwardly in his seat, but shrugs it off and does not respond verbally as to whether he will indeed collaborate. The project leader again misses the chance to build on the senior manager’s statement to request additional resources. Instead, he posits that the organization will “always have these problems,” thereby reiterating the mindset of collective learned helplessness. The episode ends with appeasing: the technical director concludes with “let’s focus on the positive,” and the project leader adds that he is optimistic about his team—both statements effectively undermine the issue-selling attempts for which the meeting has been convened.

In the latter half of the workshop, participants discuss possible solutions under the guidance of a facilitator. At some point, two participants again engage in generic complaints:

Participant 1: The question is who is in charge of product management? The line staff always have the tendency to make modifications [themselves].

Participant 2: The problem is that people don't understand each other."

The facilitator interrupts them: "this is no informal conversation" and redirects the attention to the organizational problems. This helps to shift the focus, at least temporarily, and the underlying issues are addressed more openly. Our analysis thus shows that it is possible to interrupt moaning by focusing the discussion on explicating concerns and searching for solutions, although such interventions would need to be repeated to really change the conversation.

Further development. Although some of the concerns were addressed and a larger R&D team was eventually established, the fundamental problems of insufficient collaboration and missing linkages remained. Collective moaning actually helped to perpetuate the situation: actors could get their quarrels off their chest, which helped to create a shared sense of misery, but the underlying issues were not confronted. The outcomes were negative on both an individual and an organizational level: The issue-sellers became disenfranchised but stayed on, nurturing a feeling of learned helplessness that one described in the follow-up interviews as follows: "We from R&D recognize what needs to be done, but we can't do anything about it." The digitization initiative was only partly successful—the new product line was eventually launched, but the marketing department did not support the digitized process, thereby hampering a successful start.

In both cases of collective moaning in EPSILON and ZETA, the problematic relational history and the collective framing of the issue as avoiding errors from the past formed a difficult backdrop for articulating concerns and for perspective-taking. The fact that issues were publicly known but ignored meant that the sellers' discontent did not really resonate with the recipients—their indifference and leaving open contributed to a situation of learned helplessness. While the issue-selling attempts were meant to address the source of discontent, the way they were enacted actually contributed to the futile continuation of the practices that sellers were discontented about.

DISCUSSION

We set out to investigate how less powerful actors pursue an initiative for strategic change and whether

discontent energizes or hampers this process. While most of the issue-selling literature has proposed rationalistic strategies with which sellers connect their concern to the recipient's goals without explicitly showing their own discontent, we demonstrate that articulating discontent and showing personal involvement can also be productive in situations of low power distance. *Productive confrontation* involves issue-sellers using discontent and emotional involvement to frame their issue as a potential for radical change, mobilize them in an explicit manner, and pursue them by escalating concerns. Recipients contribute to the success of issue-selling by acknowledging the concerns and both sides engage in perspective-taking, which leads to a resolution and strengthens sellers' sense of agency in future interactions. We conceptualize this interactive pattern as a genre of issue-selling that constitutes an organization's collective repertoire for dealing with discontent.

Next to productive confrontation, our comparative analysis of change attempts in six different organizations also identified two other genres of issue-selling. Each genre is characterized by specific forms of framing, mobilizing, and pursuing issues; by different levels of perspective-taking; and by recipients' response patterns. *Avoiding escalation* involves framing issues as renewal within the current remit, mobilizing them through foreshadowing of future problems, and pursuing them implicitly to navigate away from underlying organizational conflicts. Issue-sellers use a rationalistic approach with packaging and bundling moves, but neither side engages in sufficient perspective-taking to actually achieve shared understanding. Recipients respond with deferring decisions, which leads to a downfall of collective efforts and the exit of some of the frustrated issue-sellers who feel they cannot overcome the challenges. The third and final genre, *collective moaning*, involves framing the issue as avoiding errors from the past, mobilizing them through indirect alluding, and pursuing them with appeasing. Recipients respond with leaving open, which disenfranchises issue-sellers—who nonetheless continue, albeit with a sense of futility. Neither side engages in perspective-taking.

We contribute to a growing body of research on the collective, social process by which proposals for change from lower-power members are mobilized in repeated interactions in which relationships and resources are built up over time (DeJordy et al., 2020; DiBenigno, 2020; Howard-Grenville, 2007; Satterstrom et al., 2021; Soderstrom & Weber, 2019). We specifically address how actors who are concerned about organizational practices that violate their

professional values enact their discontent and emotional involvement. While there has been a long-standing argument that discontent can serve as a driving force for issue-selling (De Clercq et al., 2011; March & Simon, 1958), some studies have found that discontent is associated with fear and thus leads to silence (DeCelles et al., 2020; Sherf et al., 2021). The more successful strategy seemed to be to avoid showing personal involvement, to adopt a business tone and to “sell” one’s issues in terms of goals of the recipient (Ashford et al., 2017; Nigam et al., 2016). While most prior work has been conducted in a single organization, our research design enabled us to compare different response patterns across organizations and to show that the effect of discontent is not an individual, dyadic process: Discontent can both energize and hamper issue-selling, and the effect depends on organizational practices of issue-selling jointly enacted by sellers and recipients. We propose that DeCelles et al.’s (2020) explanations of issue-selling as “fight,” “flight,” or “freeze” responses to powerful others can also be understood as collective responses. Individuals will fight if the threat seems conquerable, flee if it is not, and freeze—that is, become stiff and emotionally absent—if no other option is available. Using these neurophysiological responses in a metaphorical sense, we explain the three genres as collective patterns.

Different Patterns of Framing, Mobilizing, and Pursuing Discontent

The most surprising, and also encouraging, contribution lies in the finding that a confrontational style of issue-selling (“fight”) that utilizes discontent and emotional involvement to invigorate issue-selling can be productive both for the issue-sellers and the organization. In this genre, issue-sellers sell their issues without selling their soul. While this confrontational style worked well in settings with low power distance and few conflicts, we believe the patterns of framing, mobilizing, and pursuing can also be applied in other contexts, particularly if they are combined with perspective-taking as in our case. Framing the initiative as an opportunity for the future and emphasizing shared goals can help to draw recipients into the search for solutions. Mobilizing the issue through explicating ambitions and challenges is more likely to elicit a response from recipients than the implicit and indirect approaches. Pursuing the issue through escalating may be a painful process—it certainly was in our cases—but it helps issue-sellers to retain a sense of agency and a

commitment to their professional values. Such forms of productive resistance can help to build a sense of community (Courpasson et al., 2012; DeJordy et al., 2020; Gutierrez et al., 2010) and build up relational resources for future interactions (DiBenigno, 2020; Howard-Grenville, 2007; Soderstrom & Weber, 2019). Managers who are seeking to encourage productive forms of issue-selling can show support for initiatives and acknowledge concerns without having to promise rose gardens.

Another surprising finding is that the genre of avoiding escalation (“flight”) was less successful in our sample. The consensus had been that issue-sellers should avoid embarrassing their boss or being seen as whiner or rebel (Ashford et al., 2017), and should instead adjust their own agenda to the logic of the recipients in public reasoning (Sonenshein, 2006; Wickert & de Bakker, 2018) while hiding their discontent and emotional involvement. Adopting a more deferential approach certainly remains a useful strategy, particularly for less powerful actors (Ashford et al., 2017; DiBenigno, 2020; Nigam et al., 2016). However, we argue that the specific pattern that we observed is unlikely to succeed in other situations, for two reasons. First, our findings suggest that suppressing one’s personal involvement can come at the expense of not being able to draw on one’s emotion as a persuasive power. This means that issue-sellers deprive themselves of a source of energy and become more frustrated when their professional values are not taken seriously. Crafting such a public display can backfire if it fails to address the underlying resource issues and leave issue-sellers at a higher risk of exiting the organization (McClellan et al., 2013). The second reason that avoiding escalation as a genre is less likely to succeed is that it is associated with less perspective-taking on both the seller’s and the recipient’s side. Participants resorted to a rationalistic approach out of fear, but in neither of the observed trajectories did they really empathize with the other side. While the previous literature would assume that in settings of high power distance fear of negative consequences and lack of psychological safety will lead to inhibition and silence (Sherf et al., 2021), our findings show that issue-selling may still be initiated in a cloaked form: avoiding escalation means that sellers do not flee the scene at the start but leave when their repeated attempts to nudge those in power into the desired direction have failed.

The concept of genre also implies that the success of issue-selling can never be solely understood from the seller’s perspective. Had the recipients not

set the sellers up with a dilemma, and had they acknowledged the more carefully and implicitly presented messages as legitimate concerns, the same strategies could have led to more fruitful results.

The collective moaning genre (“freeze”) describes a previously unreported phenomenon: issue-selling attempts in the context of a collective sense of futility. While the issue-sellers attempt to initiate productive resistance (Courpasson et al., 2012) or voice cultivation (Satterstrom et al., 2021), their efforts to express their discontent only create a sense of shared suffering, but do not lead to successful proposals for change. Moaning might be perpetuated if people find “enjoyment in each other’s passively subversive company” (Harding, Lee, & Ford, 2014: 1230). Our analysis shows how issue-sellers and recipients both contribute to this pattern. Issue-sellers express their discontent but frame the issue as a recurring problem from the past, mobilize it through indirect alluding, and pursue it through appeasing recipients, which prove less suitable for involving recipients in the search for solution or in amplifying or substantiating their concerns. Recipients contribute to this genre being less productive by showing indifference and leaving open whether they supported the issue or not, in line with findings on how voicing is ignored (Satterstrom et al., 2021). Neither side engages in perspective-taking.

Genres as Socially Encultured Patterns

We expand on the previous explanation of issue-selling as individual responses by showing the relational and socially enacted nature of these patterns. Expressing concerns is not simply a matter of an individual’s assessment of the threat that determines whether and how issue-sellers decide to voice their concerns—as Satterstrom et al. (2021) have convincingly shown. Our contribution lies in conceptualizing these different forms of issue-selling as genres—we believe they are three universal behavioral patterns of how sellers and recipients jointly negotiate change efforts, and that the success of issue-selling cannot be conceptualized solely from what the seller does. Most likely, the selling strategies of productive confrontation also help to keep an issue on the agenda and facilitate pursuing it in other contexts—if only issue-sellers are able to overcome their fear and prior experiences. The concept of genre also implies that the success of issue-selling can never be solely understood from the seller’s perspective: we propose that if recipients respond with support rather than a dilemma or indifference, and if they

acknowledge the implicitly presented messages as legitimate concerns, a conversation that starts out as avoiding escalation or as collective moaning can also be turned around. That we did not observe such switching between patterns is no accident—selling and response strategies are empirically confounded because they mutually shape each other. Specifically, supportive responses foster agency and encourage productive confrontation, and double-bind and indifferent responses foster fear, frustration, and collective helplessness.

We propose that these genres represent repertoires of initiating and responding to change efforts that, akin to literary genres, are based on underlying assumptions about human nature. Productive confrontation resembles Aristotelian drama, or what Downing (1997) called “the quest”: we see the protagonists struggling for their cause, joining forces, and ultimately overcoming the obstacles. There is a developmental plotline with a clear turning point and a resolution. Avoiding escalation resembles the Realist drama of the early 20th century, such as works by Hendrik Ibsen, which portrayed humans as caught up in a web of dilemmas between their ideal and reality, maintaining a public appearance but ultimately failing (Garsten, 2016; March, 2007). The plotline typically shows a tragic development that exposes the spiral of demands, sometimes with actors renouncing their previous life and withdrawing from their obligations (March, 2007). Collective moaning resembles the worldview captured by the Theater of the Absurd, which illustrates how authority figures or bureaucracies exert pressure for submission and conformity from which there is apparently no escape—what “one might have thought to be amenable to reason ... turns out to be beyond the limits of rationality” (Starkey, Tempest, & Cinque, 2019: 593).

While the concerns and issue-selling strategies are specific to our context, we believe that these three genres hold broader relevance for how activists go about expressing and pursuing concerns in organizations. Our comparison of different organizational settings also indicates that organizations are social systems in which certain forms of issue-selling may or may not be seen as appropriate. In particular, the power distance between sellers and recipients, their previous encounters, and the collective framing of the issue as an opportunity for radical change, more modest renewal, or avoiding problems of the past provided a backdrop for which strategies sellers were likely to adopt. Productive confrontation occurred only when the relational history offered fruitful ground for assertive behavior and a sense of

agency for the issue-sellers. In less advantageous conditions with previous negative experiences, issue-selling took the form of either avoiding escalation or collective moaning. While the issue-selling literature has so far emphasized the role of persuasion with rational arguments, our study illustrates that such an approach might be limited in a social context of strong power difference and fear. Issue-sellers might want to consider how far they can deviate from the genre to articulate their true concern more openly or to try out private conversations that avoid humiliating the recipient but still get the message across.

Boundary Conditions and Directions for Future Research

Given the inductive nature of this study, and the fact that we followed projects as they evolved, our theoretical understanding evolved as well. This meant that we could not know in advance how trajectories would turn out or what to look for. We compensated for this potential shortcoming by making use of our video recordings, which presented a rare opportunity to return to the rich data and query it with novel insights as our theorizing developed. The inductive nature of the study also meant that our interviews focused on the issue-sellers, while our model clearly indicates that recipients also play a key role in the relational process. Future research should include the subjective experience of recipients to address the role of their emotional involvement in issue-selling trajectories.

Spreading the data collection across several companies provides a more solid basis for generalization, but also means that empirical differences between companies can have diverse causes. As our case selection at the time was mainly concerned with ensuring access to confidential meetings in the early stage of product innovation, the organizations differed from each other in a number of ways, including their innovation practices, the scope of the innovation and type of product under development, the team composition, the presence of a facilitator, and the role of senior management in the process. Productive confrontation was found in a market leader's established R&D team, while collective moaning occurred in companies with less established innovation practices. It may well be that the more professional R&D teams were also more aware of the need for issue-selling, and that their managers were better able to recognize the potential of the proposed initiative. Future research should examine whether the selling strategies and the responses of the three

genres are always empirically confounded, as in our cases. It would also be of interest to test in an experimental or intervention study whether the more successful strategies and responses could be utilized to improve the collective outcome. Based on a few occurrences in our data, it seems possible to counteract moaning through explicating content and resource issues. Team members could lose themselves in moaning but an intervention from a facilitator or the opportunity to address a senior manager could help them to articulate their issues in a more solution-oriented manner. Future research could test such interventions in experimental settings or as part of the professional practice of facilitators.

The fact that our study focused on issue-selling in the context of new product development may have shaped the timing of moves. Innovation processes can take years and require issue-sellers to persevere with an initiative for a long time. While DiBenigno (2020) found that it was important to establish relationality rapidly before a conflict occurs, we found that the early interactions were often a positive flow of collective creative activity—actors mainly engaged in issue-selling when resource issues became more salient. Given the future-oriented nature of product innovation, the issue-sellers first needed to work out their ideas into something they could show and substantiate before presenting it to senior managers. The nature of the issue may influence the appropriate timing for raising it. Future research should further investigate the temporal dynamics in different contexts.

Practical Implications

Our study has important practical implications for issue-sellers, managers, and facilitators. As our metaphor of the literary genres indicates, not all forms of issue-selling are equally likely to be seen as acceptable behavior in all organizations. The descriptions of the trajectories can help issue-sellers to diagnose their own context. Issue-sellers who find themselves in situations of low power distance are best served by framing the issue as a potential for the future and a collective problem, by articulating issues explicitly and taking the courage to escalate their concerns. Those confronted with high power distance and with a relational history of avoiding escalation and collective moaning will need to “read the wind” (Dutton et al., 1997) and navigate more carefully around politically sensitive issues. While direct confrontation might not be possible, they could engage more actively in perspective-taking and avoid self-depreciation. As we argue above, a dramaturgical

approach can also encourage issue-sellers to try out different roles and reshape the plot, for example by focusing on the potential for the future rather than problems in the past, and by articulating resource issues and reminding recipients of previous success.

Managers should recognize that their reactions contribute to the dynamics of issue-selling and to its individual and organizational outcomes. If employees propose an initiative or express concerns, these can constitute an important contribution or a warning worth heeding. We are by no means suggesting that all initiatives should be granted the requested resources—it can be a wise decision to terminate a highly risky initiative, as in the BETA case. However, if managers contribute to productive confrontation by listening to and acknowledging concerns, and by following up on them with clear decisions, they increase the chance of retaining valuable staff members and reaching positive effects for the organization. Deferring decisions and leaving things open risks alienating issue-sellers. Similarly, facilitators can shape the dynamics by helping teams focus on the shared object (Deken & Lauche, 2014) and recognizing and addressing signs of implicit fighting and collective moaning. A sole focus on the technical content and rationalist justifications, as in the avoiding escalation genre, risks overlooking underlying resource issues that, if left unaddressed, can also lead to negative outcomes for the individual and the organization.

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