Micro-Practices of Strategic Sensemaking and Sensegiving: How Middle Managers Interpret and Sell Change Every Day*

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ABSTRACT   This paper looks at the workings of ongoing primary sensemaking and sensegiving micro-practices by which middle managers interpret and sell strategic change at the organizational interface. Through middle managers' routines and conversations related to the implementation of a strategic change in a top-of-the-line clothing company, the article shows how they contribute to renewing links with stakeholders, in particular clientele, by drawing on their tacit knowledge. Interpretative analysis of these routines and conversations highlights four micro-practices of strategic sensemaking and sensegiving: translating the orientation, overcoding the strategy, disciplining the client, and justifying the change. The paper outlines a practice perspective of sensemaking and sensegiving. It ends by suggesting the necessity of looking at middle managers' role as interpreters and sellers of strategic change at the micro level for a better understanding of their contribution in sustaining competitive advantage through their everyday activities.

INTRODUCTION

Since Gioia and Chittipeddi's (1991) seminal article, sensemaking and sensegiving – two interrelated concepts – have become part of strategy literature (e.g. Dunford and Jones, 2000; Gioia and Thomas, 1996; Hill and Levenhagen, 1995). Until now, scholars have concentrated their efforts on understanding how top managers create meanings around an intended change and negotiate it with organizational members. And yet the creation and diffusion of meaning surrounding a strategic change cannot only be associated with top managers' actions towards internal members (Balogun et al., 2003; Johnson and Huff, 1998). At the early stages of strategic change, meaning surrounding change must also be created for outside

actors and shared with them. Middle managers are often closer to external stake-holders, in particular to clientele, than are top managers (Dutton et al., 1997). Being on the front line of change, they have to explain to people from the outside, in their own words and in various everyday situations, why the company has decided to change its strategy and what its new strategy is. This article is intended to illustrate how, in practice, middle managers interpret and sell, through their daily activities, strategic change at the organizational interface.

Research on strategic sensemaking and sensegiving has mainly had a macro-process orientation, centred upon iterative and sequential models that culminate in the interpretation of strategic discourse (Craig-Lees, 2001). These processes have mainly been described as resulting from the conscious activity of top managers, and the importance of managers' tacit knowledge has been neglected (Huisman, 2001; Jameson, 2001). Moreover, the process of constructing and diffusing meaning in strategic change is generally defined within the self-referential context of change, as if it were separated from the social context in which it is embedded (Wright et al., 2000). In this article, I adopt a complementary point of view inspired by a new stream of research holding that success or failure in strategic change depends on how managers interpret and enact the new orientation during their interactions and conversations (Johnson et al., 2003; Samra-Fredericks, 2000, 2003). I examine how strategic sensemaking and sensegiving patterns are produced and reproduced daily and I demonstrate how these processes are anchored in managers' tacit knowledge and how they are embedded in a broader social context.

I propose a 'third-order explanation' of the processes of strategic sensemaking and sensegiving, which illustrates how they are carried out in practice. Referring to a case study of a strategic change in a top-of-the-line clothing company, I con-tribute to the understanding of strategic sensemaking and sensegiving processes in four ways. First, I direct attention to the workings of ongoing primary sensemak-ing and sensegiving micro-practices through the analysis of routines and conver-sations produced during the early stages of change. Second, I demonstrate how managers draw on their tacit knowledge to make sense of the change and share it with others. Third, I target middle managers, rather than top managers, to study strategic sensemaking and sensegiving. Fourth, I study these processes at the orga-nizational interface, emphasizing renewal of links with stakeholders, in particular the clientele.

The paper begins by identifying gaps in the literature on strategic sensemaking and sensegiving processes. Following the presentation of the research design, the routines and conversations of two middle managers who have played a key role in a strategic change are described. The paper then proposes an interpretative analysis of these routines and conversations. It ends by outlining a practice per-spective of strategic sensemaking and sensegiving processes and by advocating the necessity of looking at middle managers' role as interpreters and sellers of strate-gic change at the micro level.

STRATEGIC SENSEMAKING AND SENSEGIVING

Gioia and his colleagues (Gioia and Thomas, 1996; Thomas et al., 1993, 1994) define strategic sensemaking and sensegiving as two complementary and reciprocal processes. Sensemaking has to do with the way managers understand, interpret, and create sense for themselves based on the information surrounding the strategic change. Sensegiving is concerned with their attempts to influence the outcome, to communicate their thoughts about the change to others, and to gain their support. Although these processes appear to be conceptually different, the boundaries of each are permeated by the other. As discourse and action, sensemaking and sensegiving are less distinct domains (Hopkinson, 2001) than two sides of the same coin – one implies the other and cannot exist without it.

Over the last decade, the literature on strategic sensemaking and sensegiving has evolved in two directions. On the one hand, authors have attempted to draw out the general pattern of sensemaking and sensegiving in regard to different dimensions of strategic change. They have, for instance, pointed to processes (e.g. information seeking, meaning ascription, action) to demonstrate how managers make sense of change despite a high level of ambiguity and uncertainty (Hill and Levenhagen, 1995; Pratt, 2000; Wagner and Gooding, 1997). On the other hand, at the end of the 1990s, many works on strategic sensemaking have taken a narrative turn. Authors became interested in how top managers construct and diffuse stories surrounding strategic change (Berry, 2001; Shaw et al., 1998; Taylor, 1999). Using individual and collective narratives, they described how managers make sense of the past, cope with the present, and plan for the future (Dunford and Jones, 2000; Huisman, 2001; Jameson, 2001).

By capturing the richness of the symbolic elements of strategic change, these scholars provide a more contextual and active view than the one offered by cognitive approaches, which are generally limited to the managerial mindset (Thomas et al., 1994). In general, these works, mainly case studies, provide a good understanding of how sensemaking and sensegiving are socially constructed through time (Hopkinson, 2001). By referring to a constructivist epistemology, they refocus the production of knowledge in strategy on agents and their actions (Craig-Lees, 2001). However, our concern is that the general application of sensemaking and sensegiving constructs in strategy is centred on the conscious meaning structures of top managers, and that it presents an asocial view of these processes. The way managers draw on their tacit knowledge to make sense of change and share this meaning with others as well as the extent to which these processes are embedded in the broader social context, are still largely unexplored. However, in a complex world where competitive advantage lies in details, symbolic resources and intangible assets should definitely be investigated.

In current research, strategic sensemaking and sensegiving processes generally appear as though they were the result of symbolic rationalizations based on objec-

tive knowledge (Huisman, 2001; Jameson, 2001). Managers make sense of a new strategic orientation through schemas of thought surrounding the change. These schemas are used rationally and are consciously known in the enterprise. However, sensemaking and sensegiving also result from unconscious processes that are related to actors' practical experience (Gioia and Mehra, 1996). In fact, tacit knowledge seems to be as important to sensemaking and sensegiving as is the explicit, conscious knowledge that surrounds the intended strategic change. According to Castillo (2002), semantic tacit knowledge precludes managers from having to explain many of the words that form a given message. Frequently, the message core is contained in the full implicit meaning of abstract expressions that managers refer to (Nonaka, 1994). This use of semantic tacit knowledge matters as much as formal discourse in gaining legitimacy for implementing strategic change.

Most works on sensemaking and sensegiving take little account of how managers use their implicit knowledge to make sense of a change, partly because they generally target the action of top managers. When they formulate a strategy, top managers consciously construct interpretation schemes in order to anticipate the future. Constructing and telling stories around strategic change appeals to what Giddens (1984) calls the discursive consciousness of agents. The way middle managers participate in strategic change is different. Given their hierarchical position, they do not share the same level of consciousness of corporate strategy as top managers (Floyd and Lane, 2000; Westley, 1990). Moreover, because they often have to 'put out fires' during the implementation of change, much of their action calls on their practical consciousness (Huy, 2002; Thomas and Linstead, 2002). An interesting way of understanding how tacit knowledge is part of strategic sensemaking and sensegiving processes is to closely examine middle managers' participation into these processes.

Processes of constructing and diffusing meaning in strategic change are often defined within the self-referential context of strategic discourse (Wright et al., 2000). Most authors who study these processes look at how managers, alone or in small groups, make sense of strategy. They thus give little importance to the wider context in which managers interpret strategic change. Studying strategic sensemaking and sensegiving processes cannot be dissociated from the real-life of the individuals who are interpreting change (Huisman, 2001; Wright et al., 2000). Indeed, giving meaning is intrinsically connected to socio-cultural context. What allows managers to give multiple meanings to objective facts, thus lies in the roots they share within social structures – gender, ethnicity, profession, and so on (Whittington, 1992). In fact, sensemaking and sensegiving cannot be dissociated from socio-cultural form of tacit knowledge as much as from its semantic form (Figure 1).

Until now, sensemaking and sensegiving have been mainly studied inside the organization, which could possibly explain why most works on this topic under-
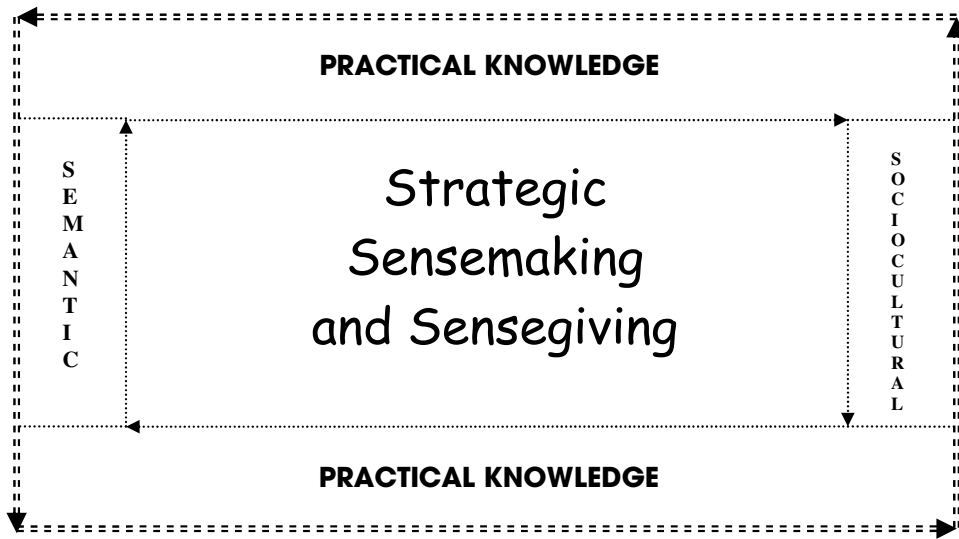
Figure 1. Strategic sensemaking and sensegiving

emphasize the role of the socio-cultural forms of implicit knowledge. Nowadays, organizations are increasingly characterized by openness towards their environment and by the promotion of a client orientation that frequently brings managers into close contact with people from the outside (stakeholders, customers, suppliers, etc). It is in these day-to-day encounters at the organizational interface that they enact the strategic positioning of the enterprise in its environment (Johnson et al., 2003; Whittington, 2003). Thus, the organizational interface constitutes a privileged location for looking at strategic sensemaking and sensegiving.

By moving the study of strategic sensemaking and sensegiving processes to the organizational interface, the socio-cultural context cannot easily be ignored. The possibility of creating meaning and influencing others in a context of interaction that is not clearly defined by the organization presupposes subtle knowledge of others and of social conventions. Of course, implicit knowledge of socio-cultural structures is constantly in play in every interaction (Giddens, 1984) but it becomes more obvious when the behaviours are not well bounded by some shared organizational rules. In interactions with outside agents, managers, by implicitly referring to the many contradictory social structures to which they belong competently use their socio-cultural tacit knowledge as symbolic resources in order to legitimate their actions and convince others.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The examined strategic change concerns the product-market domain of a Canadian manufacturer of top-of-the-line women's clothing. Until the mid-1990s, the

company's strategy was based on the reputation, distinctive character, and quality of its clothing. However, strong foreign competition in top-of-the-line clothing has made this position difficult to maintain (Steedman, 1998). In addition, economic difficulties during the 1990s have contributed to eroding the company's overall profitability. Under pressure from one of its financial backers, a Francophone development corporation, and after strong negotiations, top management gave a new strategic orientation to the company by widening its product line downwards. The implementation of this new orientation begins with the launching of a new collection aiming at democratizing the product so as to reach a broader clientele.

Located in Quebec, the company results from the merger, in the early 1990s, of one of the last Canadian manufacturers of top-of-the-line women's clothing with a Quebecer design firm whose reputation is well established in that province. The manufacturing division serves the Canadian market while the design division's clientele is mainly from Quebec. It is a small company with sales of about $6 million (Canadian) and around 200 employees. The management team is made up of 15 people including top managers (the president, two vice-presidents, and the comptroller), middle managers (four sales managers and two collection managers) and lower managers (two heads of customer services and three persons respectively in charge of accounts, information processing, and operations).

The single-case design of the study was built upon the use of an exploratory research approach (Stake, 1995) of the ethnographic type (Atkinson and Hammersley, 1994). During a six-month period, I spent four days a week in the enterprise, participating in activities related to the strategic change and following managers in their operational tasks. In exchange for their time, I helped them in different support activities (searching information, giving management advice, analysing data, and so forth). The triangulated research design included semi-participant observations, semi-structured interviews, and document analyses.

The case constituted an appropriate context for exploring how strategic sensemaking and sensegiving processes are anchored in middle managers' tacit knowledge and how they are embedded in social structures in two ways. First, the company was experiencing a strategic change. Therefore, being there from the beginning to the end of the planning process gave me the opportunity to observe the official strategic meetings held by top managers and the ways in which middle managers integrated or not the new orientation in their day-to-day activities. Moreover, the small size of the management team made it easier to gain a deeper comprehension of how middle managers daily made sense of the strategic change and diffused it through their interactions at the organizational interface.

Second, the ethnic and gendered composition of the company's management team was significant for taking social context into account. The management team of the manufacturing division were Anglophones, while the design division was made up of Francophones. In Quebec, this situation constitutes a microcosm of

historical and political debate between English and French speakers. In order to ensure the survival of Quebec's French-speaking society in North America, the government gave priority to French (Bill 101) and developed in collaboration with other collective actors different financial structures for promoting the survival of the 'French fact' in Canada. Financed by a Quebec French-language development corporation, the company became part of that collective movement. In addition, the structural gender relations which characterize the fashion industry (Phizacklea, 1990) were also in play in the small company investigated. While the design side presents a seductive world of glamour, a large part of the enterprise belongs to a manufacturing universe in which men generally hold senior positions while women occupy lower ones. In fact, the division of management tasks is clearly gender-based: men make decisions and run internal operations, while women initiate, coordinate, and are responsible for taking care of client[1] relations.

DESCRIPTION OF ROUTINES AND CONVERSATIONS

Data analysis was based on reconstituting representative episodes related to the strategic change (meetings, events, discourses). These episodes consisted of different sets of routines and conversations that are units of meaning (Weick, 1995) through which actors' practical consciousness became manifest in their daily interactions (Brockmann and Anthony, 1998). Routines and conversations are elementary forms of daily life and, despite their mundane nature, they relevantly link the micro and the macro (Feldman, 2000). Just as using a microscope helps understanding of the whole through its tiny parts, routines and conversations offer an interesting insight to examine strategic change. The routines and conversations presented here were produced by two middle managers – the sales manager and the collection manager – who played a key role with outside actors, in particular clientele, during the early stages of the change (uniqueness criteria; Morse, 1994). These routines and conversations were chosen to provide an overview of the events surrounding the preparation and presentation of the new collection (representativeness criteria; Stake, 1995).

Preparation of the New Collection

During preparation of the new collection, a sales manager with a ten-year experience in middle-of-the-range women's clothing in Quebec was hired. Her sales philosophy was clearly centred on the client. She used to say: 'For me, everything about the client is important. My salespeople have to be dynamic, they have to smile, and they have to listen to the client. That's money in the bank right away.' While the new collection was being prepared, she modified the routines surrounding selling in three ways: (1) by building the product symbolically; (2) by calling clients; and (3) by exploring the 'feel' of the market.

Routine 1: Building the product symbolically. According to the sales manager 'to sell a collection, you have to give it a soul'. She therefore rubbed shoulders with the design team to enrich her vocabulary with regularly-used expressions when talking about the new collection (e.g. 'a look that's more like everyday reality', 'a no-compromise collection at low price', etc). Through this, the sales manager 'learn[ed] how to talk about the collection to sell it well'. She also created a new atmosphere in the showroom, choosing music and lighting that fit with the message surrounding the new collection. She even transformed her image by wearing clothing from the collection in order to project its new look.

Finally, she composed the written presentation for the collection, giving a name to the groups in the collection and describing them briefly. This fashion rhetoric would then be used in publicity material to promote the new collection (photos, media events, etc). Given it was a summer collection, she identified different groups of clothing as 'fleurs d'un lieu' (city flowers, island flowers, and desert flowers):

> I got the idea while having lunch with friends who have been in clothing for a long time, like me. We get together from time to time to keep up with the latest news. Like me, these girls started from nothing. We've worked hard to make ourselves a place in the industry. Clothing is a world in itself! It's a world that's a bit macho, and it's a bit closed because there are lots of immigrants, and working in both languages isn't always easy either!

Routine 2: Calling clients. While the collection was being prepared, she made a list of people, mainly current and potential clients, whom she called systematically. Most of them were women who were either boutique owners or buyers for department stores. Every day, she made a dozen telephone calls that generally had three parts: (1) she explained why she had changed companies; (2) she presented the new collection; and (3) she discretely collected information about the client's interests and needs. She described this routine as follows:

> I call them one by one because I know that it's important to make the collection work. I don't get ready ahead – when I see the name I know how to begin, what I should say about my new job and about the collection. With some of them you have to play the big sister to convince them, with others you have to be more interested in them. It's different with each person. For each of them, there's a way to present things so that it works. I know my clients. Many of them have been with me for a long time. I've been working for them for ten years – they'll come for me because they know that if there's a problem, I'll personally take care of it.

When talking to a new client, the conversation took on a more formal tone. According to her:

When I don't know a client, what I try to sell first is what I'm sure she'll buy . . . For example, with Ms Tremblay, I focus on the reputation of [designer's name], while with Ms Smith, I think it's better to put the accent on the quality of the fabric, on the company's long history and its nationwide reputation in the world of manufacturing.

Routine 3: Exploring the 'feel' of the market. Throughout the preparation of the new collection, the sales manager stayed in regular contact with a few clients so she could get what she called the 'feel of the market':

When I have the chance, I bring the creation out of the design room. I like to show the sketches and fabric samples to the people who will be selling directly to the woman who is going to wear our clothing. For example, I've known Francine for years – she knows what her clients want. She's going to tell us if long sleeves sell better, if it's better to put elastic at the back of the waistline of pants, etc. This gives me arguments to use to convince the design team . . . When I go by reception or customer service, and I see clients or even people I know well, I slip a word to them about the new collection being prepared, and if they seem interested, I take them into the design room. They're always happy to see how [designer's name] works and one out of two times, they give us good ideas.

In regard to this, one client made the following comment:

I enjoy giving my opinion of what sells and what doesn't sell before I place my order. By seeing how the collection is set up, I think that I'm going to be better able to sell it.

Presentation of the New Collection

The new collection's manager was a designer belonging to the generation of Quebec fashion creators who began their careers in the 1980s. With over twenty years' experience, his collections were recognized for their distinctive character and targeted the sophisticated Quebec woman. Nevertheless, he had tried at different times to make a few mass-market oriented collections, but they did not really take off (e.g. *Zut*). His success was largely based on his visibility and accessibility to the media. Everyone in the company agreed that he knew the power of words and had a knack for telling stories. Thus, he often found himself explaining the turn that the company was taking to people from the outside. Here are some extracts of conversations in which he presented the collection to: (1) the media; (2) a private client; and (3) a stakeholder.

Conversation 1: With the media. At the beginning of the sales season, the company organized the launching of the new collection. In addition to clients and some friends of the company, fashion journalists from the various French and English-speaking media were invited. A few minutes before the show, the manager of the new collection along with other managers met the journalists in the design room. Sketches and photos of the collection had been added to the decor, as well as sumptuous bouquets of flowers whose style was reminiscent of the collection's sub-themes. A folder, in either English or French, containing publicity material about the collection and its design team was distributed. Cocktails were served while the smiling collection manager was holding flowers and generously distributing them to the women present, not forgetting to slip a word to each person.

In an informal manner, the manager answered questions and explained how the collection was created. Here is an extract of a conversation with French-speaking journalists:

> The collection that I'm presenting this evening is the result of a teamwork. People have been following me for twenty years already. We asked our clients what would make them happy. They answered, 'We really liked it when you said, *Zut*!'. So, with the collaboration of [name of the manufacturing division], we decided to make them happy!

A few minutes later, in deep conversation with representatives from the English-speaking media, he slipped the following sentence:

> The collection that I'm presenting this evening is the result of a project that the people at [name of manufacturing division] and I have been wanting to do for a long time. I've been in this business for twenty years. We asked clients what would make them happy. Based on what they said, we decided to create a collection that is closer to modern women, to working women. It's a no-compromise collection at a low price!

A while later, he announced that the show was about to start.

Conversation 2: With a private client. During a conversation with a private client, a local artist, the manager of the new collection explained the nature of the changes surrounding the ready-to-wear collections. The context of the conversation was as follows. The manager of the new collection left a meeting with members of the company's board. The meeting, in English, had been stormy since the company's future was threatened. As he was leaving, he stopped to greet a client who was examining pieces from the new collection. When he saw her, his face lit up. Slowing down, he opened the conversation in French.

After the usual courtesies, the client took a piece from the collection and held it towards him, giving him a quizzical look about the change in the cut. Smiling, he said without hesitation:

> It came about in a very curious sort of way. We had a marketing consultant and groups were set up to analyse the clients' wants, and all the women said the same thing: 'It's pretty, but it's hard to wear!'. So, we showed them some pieces from the collection and they said, 'That is, too', and they adored it! So, we decided to create a new collection that is more practical and closer to 'real' women for the next season. I want as many women as possible feeling beautiful and comfortable when they wear my clothes!

Upon this, the client showed her approval of the collection. The manager of customer services then joined them and the conversation slipped naturally to the long acquaintance between the client and the new collection's manager. Remembering their first meeting at a Barbara concert in the 1970s, they went on talking about this period and hummed bits of songs. A few minutes later, as he was leaving her, signs of preoccupations reappeared on his face.

Conversation 3: With stakeholders. A few weeks after the collection was put on sale, a meeting involving the executive board members took place at the company's offices. The goal of the meeting was to evaluate what had been done so far. The meeting was important because it had to do with the development corporation injecting new funds. Before the meeting, the board members strolled around the company to see the new showrooms. Among these board members were a private investor (an English-speaking man) and the agent from the development corporation (a French-speaking woman). When they got to the racks holding the clothing from the new collection, the manager of the new collection joined them. The agent from the development corporation showed interest for the collection.

Joining them, the manager of the collection, spoke English. First addressing himself to the investor, then looking at the development agent.

> All these meetings, all the discussions we had . . . in the end, it was a good thing . . . I think everyone understands now. The people here are behind us. More and more, our clients also understand. The challenge was to convince them that [designer's name] isn't just for one type of women, it's also for all women. And I think that from the moment they saw the collection, where they met [name of new sales manager], they understood that they could trust us once again!

Turning to look at the development agent, he added: 'They are unanimous, our product resembles them'. The investor nodded and said, 'I wonder what [the

founder of the manufacturing company] thinks of what we're doing'. After looking at a few pieces from the new collection, they headed towards the meeting room.

ANALYSIS OF ROUTINES AND CONVERSATIONS

The routines and conversations reported here underwent a first-level interpretative analysis (Feldman, 1995). They were broken down into units containing one action (e.g. compose a message surrounding the collection). In total, 39 actions were identified (Tables I–IV) and each of these actions was then examined using the following questions: (a) What is the meaning of this action for the actor? (b) What is its meaning for the interlocutor? (c) What are the underlying professional rules? (d) What are the underlying social rules? Through this procedure, four micro-practices of strategic sensemaking and sensegiving were identified: translating the new orientation; overcoding the strategy; disciplining the client; justifying the change.

Translating the New Orientation

At first glance, the routines and conversations drawn from the daily life of these middle managers appear to be taken for granted and they do not seem the slightest bit 'strategic'. However, if closely examined, they make it indirectly possible to explain to outside actors what the company's repositioning involved and why managers had decided to make a strategic change. Among other ways, middle managers accomplished this by putting into action a set of micro-practices for 'translating' the company's new orientation (Table I). Translating involves telling

Table I. Routines and conversations related to the micro-practice of 'translating the orientation'

		Sales manager		Collection manager
R1		Compose the message surrounding the collection using middle-of the-range fashion rhetoric	C1	Use metaphors that evoke the range of the collection (the '*Zut!*' collection for the modern working woman)
R2		Construct a different story around the new collection for each client	C2	• Use metaphors that evoke the range of the collection (a collection that is more practical and closer to 'real' women; as many women as possible . . .) • Associate the strategic planning exercise with holding a focus group
R3		Pre-test the sketches and fabric samples with a few clients	C3	Associate the strategic planning exercise with meetings and discussions with stakeholders

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people the stories they want to hear and comprises two superposed actions (Hopkinson, 2001): (1) the elements used to translate the message must be chosen (selecting); (2) the material and discursive symbols that belong to the language of the other person must be used to transmit the message (connecting).

Translating is an act of authoring, because the translator selects the relevant elements of the situation and brings these disparate elements together (Jameson, 2001). The choice of dimensions made by the actor to translate a message is not neutral (Meyer, 1995). When the two middle managers explain why the company has decided to make a new collection, they never relate all of the events that led to this strategic decision. They never mention that the decision was difficult to make. Instead, they choose elements that give a positive image of the new orientation. They compose a new story around the collection every time. For example, when the manager of the new collection described in his own words how the new collection came to be, he gave different reasons to each interlocutor (a collection that is closer to the modern woman, a marketing consultant, numerous meetings of the management team). Each story presented a plausible and credible explanation in light of the tacit knowledge managers had from previous relations with their interlocutors.

These routines and conversations provide information about strategic repositioning using discursive symbols situated in the interlocutor's register. For example, by composing the message around the new collection using a simple rhetorical model (flowers from different settings), the sales manager gave clients an indication of the collection's line of clothing. This fashion rhetoric, evoking subtlety and softness (flowers), while emphasizing the clothes practical, utilitarian dimension (it can be worn anywhere), translated the new strategic orientation by creating meaning that could reach a large number of women. The manager of the new collection did the same thing when he talked about the new collection. His reference to *Zut*, an earlier middle-of-the-range collection, provided the journalists with some indications regarding the line of the new collection. Likewise, by telling a private client that his collection was intended for every modern woman, he adopted fashion rhetoric that fitted a low-end product and that translated the company's new orientation into fashion language. As vehicle for sensemaking, fashion rhetoric establish connections and relationships between the actors and explain the change by skilfully referring to shared meanings.

All individuals put micro-practices of translation into action every day, but as Jameson (2001) asserts, although the choice of words may be natural, not everyone does it with the same ability. The effect of micro-practices of translation in strategic sensemaking depends on the ability of actors to use their stock of tacit knowledge to grasp the meaning of events at the moment that they happen and reflexively evaluate the consequences of even their most ordinary gestures and words (Fisher, 1987). The new sales manager and the manager of the new collection demonstrated a great capacity, of which they weren't necessarily conscious,

to modify the language games that they used, according to their shared experiences with others, and to recompose the same story in multiple forms. Both these middle managers operated multiple translations while conserving their self-integrity and their integrity *vis-à-vis* others since their translations of the situation corresponded to their personalities, making the facts presented seem natural and transparent. According to Giddens (1984), this self-transparency results from a complex act of the consciousness divulging and hiding the elements of a situation.

Overcoding the Strategy

The routines and conversations are produced in a social context strongly tainted by cultural differences between English and French speakers, and between men and women. In practice, middle managers participate in reproducing this context while they are using these structures as resources to create meaning around strategic change. The act of inscribing words and actions around the strategy in the appropriate professional and socio-cultural codes of the interlocutor is called over-coding (Sfez, 1984). Beyond the clothing being described or the idea that is sent out, using other socio-cultural codes is intrinsic to interaction and communication in order to create meaning (Watson, 1995). Here, the two middle managers unconsciously put a varied set of cultural and gender codes into action to reinforce the meaning created around the new collection (Table II).

Among other things, these middle managers used different arguments depending on their interlocutor's social belonging. When the interlocutor was French-speaking, they created meaning around the collection by using their implicit knowledge of a common culture to bolster the meaning created around the new collection. For example, the conversation between the collection manager and the private client is in French, whereas the dominant language of work in the company is English. Discussing the new collection in French inscribes the collection and, therefore, the new strategic orientation, in the client's socio-cultural context. Evoking common cultural roots in a context in which the collection manager is recognized as a pillar of authentic Quebec fashion, is a way of symbolically contributes to the creation of meaning and reaffirming the importance of encouraging local production. When the interlocutor is an English-speaker, they both refer to characteristics of the manufacturing division, which is well known in the English community. For instance, when the sales manager meets a new English-speaking client, she is conscious that it is better to put the emphasis on the quality of the fabric or on the company's history and reputation.

These middle managers also used gender as a resource for creating meaning. The sales manager symbolically organized her relations with clients using a complex set of relations of complicity that ensure the reproduction of gender relations among women. Her client philosophy fitted in with the feminine archetype of being attentive to details and empathetic towards others (Lane and Crane,

Table II. Routines and conversations related to the micro-practice of 'overcoding the strategy'

		Cultural belonging	*Gender*
R1	Sales manager	• Describe the world of clothing as being closed • Bring up the difficulty of working in both languages	Qualify the world of clothing as being 'macho'
R2		Focus on the designer's reputation or on that of the manufacturing division, depending on the client's cultural background	• Use a 'woman-to-woman' tone • Focus on details and personal service
R3		Pre-test the collection with boutique owners who are French-speakers	Choose long-standing female clients
C1	Collection manager	• Hand out press folders in French and in English • Modify the discourse according to the journalists' cultural background	Give flowers to the journalists to call up the spirit of the collection and woo the audience
C2		• Converse in the native language • Reminisce over common cultural references	Seduce the client by associating women's beauty with the designer's clothing
C3		• Privilege the English-speaking shareholder's language • Invoke an identity dimension around the product	Get into a conversation with men

2002). As for the manager of the new collection, his recurrent use of various fashion rhetoric was tangled up with the way he subjectively positioned himself as a man *vis-à-vis* others, in particular women. He used gender as a resource to entice his private client. By telling her that he wanted women to feel beautiful when they wear his clothing, he gave a man's view of a woman's appearance to legitimize the new collection. In these routines and conversations, both were 'doing gender' (Gherardi, 1994) by performing a culturally defined script of 'friendliness, sub-servience and flirting' (Hall, 1993) in order to reinforce the meaning created around the new collection.

The practical use of diverse codes related to culture or gender in these routines and conversations contributes to bolstering the meaning that these middle managers in action create around the new collection. Creating meaning around the new strategic orientation took place using information drawn from different social systems that middle managers and the people they meet use to define themselves. In fact, sensemaking in everyday life is created through this amalgam of a finished set of information related to an organization's resources (e.g. technical, financial, and symbolic data surrounding the new collection) and other elements of semi-finished systems (e.g. rules of sales or design) or unfinished systems (e.g. socio-

cultural and gender rules). By positioning themselves within the social order, middle managers increase their capacity of agency (Whittington, 1992). Tacit knowledge of actors belonging to social structures provides openings for joining the conversation and also provides reference points for making sense of the reality (Wright et al., 2000).

Disciplining the Client

Beyond the meaning that middle managers created around the new collection, they also attempted, through these routines and conversations, to convince people outside the organization, particularly clientele, to support its repositioning in a new niche by buying clothing from the collection. To communicate the new orientation, they combined their tacit knowledge of sales and design in a goal to 'discipline' clients and to subtly gain their support. According to Foucault (1977), discipline comes from a meticulous organization of gestures, words, and objects that permits optimal use of space, bodies, and thought. Disciplining the clients means that middle managers, through their routines and conversations, produced subjective and emotional effects whose objective is insidiously to 'sell' the new strategic orientation to the client (Table III).

By creating in the showroom a universe in harmony with the spirit of the collection, the sales manager defined a panoptic set of images and impressions that made the clients feel like selling this collection. At the same time, she was subtly and indirectly providing clients with different ideas for organizing the collection's physical presentation in their own boutiques. During the official presentation of the collection, the atmosphere created in the design room was regimented through a meticulous organization of space and time to enlist journalists in promoting the company's new strategic orientation. Beyond space, the sales manager – wearing clothes from the collection – also brought body into play to discipline clients. In

Table III. Routines and conversations related to the micro-practice of 'disciplining the other'

	Sales manager		*Collection manager*
R1	• Decorate the showroom in keeping with the collection • Wear clothing from the collection	C1	• Create a fashion show around the new collection • Prepare design room for journalists
R2	Telephone each client and invite her to come see the new collection	C2	• Mask negative emotions • Use fashion rhetoric to make client want to wear the new collection
R3	Present the collection being prepared to clients	C3	Convince stakeholders that the new collection is the result of a good strategic decision

the showroom, she answered clients' questions based on her own daily experience with clothing from the new collection. In fact, organizing a fashion show constituted the ultimate use of body to convince the clientele to buy clothing from the collection.

This use of space and body was combined with emotions displayed by the two middle managers with clients to energize them and, thus, influence them. By systematically calling each of her clients, the sales manager exerted subtle pressure to make them at least look at the new collection. On the telephone, she activated various emotional registers to subjectively engage the client in a future business relation. In the encounter with the private client, the manager of the new collection put into action different forms of emotional work (Hochschild, 1983). First, when he saw her, his face changed. His look of irritation suddenly became one of delight. The display of positive emotions while masking negative ones being a common way of communicating in an organizational context (Kramer and Hess, 2002). Moreover, fashion rhetoric used by the manager of the new collection in the same conversation was meant to create desire in the client to be among the women who would have the chance to wear his clothing. Inciting desire, as an emotional technique used to discipline and control (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1993), was competently performed by theses middle managers to sell the strategic change.

Disciplining clients therefore consists of using diverse tactics – symbolic, corporal, and discursive – to subjectively influence them and succeed in convincing them to adopt the new product embodying strategic change. Through their implicit knowledge of sales and design, these managers are creating sense for others and diffusing meanings around the change. This management of meanings is not a coherent, clear, or even a conscious project. It results from a web of tactics which are intricately interwoven in the multiple routines and conversations that produce and reproduce a complex engineering of selling products and issues in the enterprise.

Justifying the Change

'Selling' a new strategic orientation at the organizational interface while carrying out one's everyday tasks requires to gain the trust of the interlocutor. Providing 'good' reasons for the outside actor to adopt the change corresponds to the micropractice of justifying. In the routines and conversations examined, justification of the change with outside people was based on the client discourse. More or less formally, these middle managers frequently referred to the client's interests and desires to legitimate changes in the product and to justify the company's repositioning on the market (Table IV). The sales manager was clear about her philosophy regarding clients and she adapted this client philosophy in her smallest gestures to restructure the day-to-day relations with the clientele. Similarly, the collection manager

Table IV. Routines and conversations related to the micro-practice of 'justifying the change'

	Sales manager		Collection manager
R1	Use fashion rhetoric focused on practical aspects and simplicity	C1	Use client discourse 'to make the clients happy'
R2	Focus on long-standing relations with clients	C2	Use client discourse ('what clients want')
R3	Integrate clients' opinion into the collection	C3	Use client discourse ('More and more, our clients also understand')

used the client's discourse to justify the new orientation with all the outside actors he met.

The discourse of clients enabled middle managers to accommodate ambiguities in the new collection and to diffuse the meaning of strategic change (Anderson-Gough et al., 2000). In the past, the company was centred on creating and manufacturing top-of-the-line clothing, and it focused on the uniqueness and distinctiveness of the collections. Lately, the aim of the new product was more client-oriented. However, moving from one market sector to another jeopardized the company's reputation. Drawing on the client discourse in their routines and conversations helped middle managers to communicate the new orientation while protecting this reputation. By insisting on the fact that the company is responding to what clients have requested, this discourse implicitly suggests that the company considered the client to be an 'active enterprising subject' (du Gay and Salaman, 1992). This discourse thus made it possible to communicate the company's new orientation to clients using justifications that sent them a positive image of themselves while at the same time maintaining an ambiguity between the line of clothing and its label.

To be symbolically and discursively client-oriented can constitute a source of control of the other (Sturdy, 1998). In the routines and conversations examined, the client discourse was also used to divert the outsider's attention from the company's problems to construct a new form of credibility. Many sources of justification might have served to 'sell' the new collection. For example, the characteristics of the product (quality of fabric) or of the company (well-made clothing, designer's reputation, etc) could have been used. However, the change in line was a response of the company to internal difficulties and fierce competition. Privileging client discourse let middle managers avoid discussing the company's internal problems with people from the outside. It contributed to masking the role of managers in the repositioning of the company.

The client discourse used by these middle managers to justify strategic repositioning went far beyond the context of this company. The 'cult(ure)' of the client

was being enacted in business, service work, and public administration through the managerial/neo-liberal corporate discourse (du Gay, 1993). It is their implicit knowledge of the power effects surrounding the client discourse that these middle managers put into action through their routines and conversations. When the manager of the collection diverted his look to the development agent and added at the end of the conversation, 'They [the clients] are unanimous, our product resembles them', he gave his justification a collective dimension, which is very important for a French-speaking Quebecer. By integrating the client discourse into the appropriate display of social rules (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1993), he was simultaneously enhancing and securing his own identity (Giddens, 1984).

STRATEGIC SENSEMAKING AND SENSEGIVING IN PRACTICE

By describing daily routines and conversations, I demonstrated how middle managers used their stock of shared-knowledge (such as words, phrases, and images) with external actors and how they used language games to create meaning and influence people at the beginning of a change. It appears that middle managers, through their tacit knowledge, strategize by enacting a set of micro-practices that are produced in each routine and conversation surrounding the change (Figure 2). In their daily interactions with people from the outside, particularly with clientele, middle managers, without speaking of strategy, were conscious of the strategic issues surrounding the launching of the new collection. Strategic sensemaking and sensegiving are thus built from a reflexive monitoring of conduct (Giddens, 1984) that comes from the practical consciousness of reaction to circumstances.
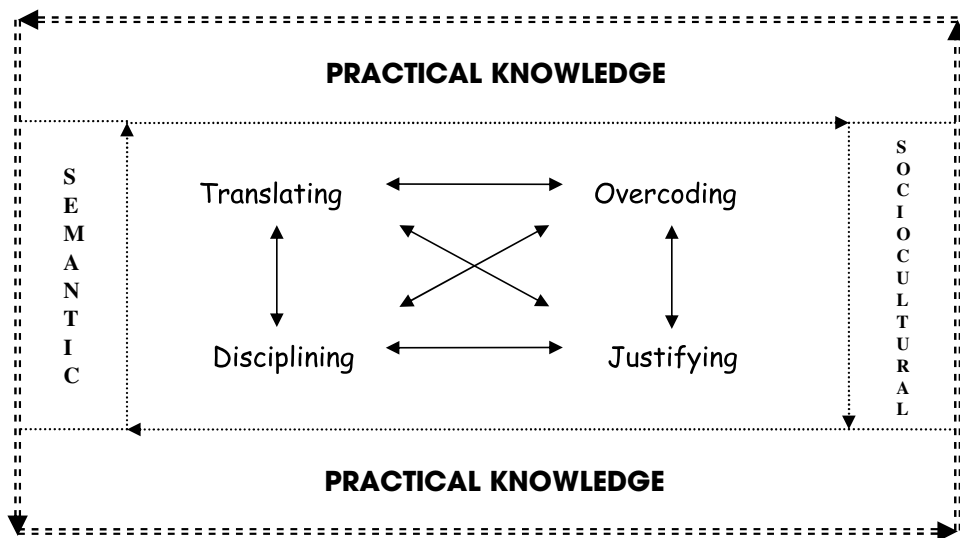

Figure 2. Strategic sensemaking and sensegiving in practice

All the routines and conversations examined combined synergistically the four micro-practices into arrangements of verbal and symbolic signs. They simultaneously involved telling people the stories they wanted to hear about the collection (translating), inscribing their speeches and acts in their interlocutors appropriate socio-cultural codes (overcoding), producing subjective and emotional effects around the change (disciplining), and providing a set of good reasons to adopt the product (justifying). This thickly layered texture of strategic sensemaking and sensegiving micro-practices was negotiated and socially constructed through non-verbalized, implicitly known meanings of activities and words. These micro-practices are intrinsic to the middle managers' capacity to tacitly decode or reflexively map out the multiple interpretations of the change. As competent social performers, the two middle managers displayed professional experience and social codes in an appropriate way and at the right time to influence change. More specifically, they were able to adapt the way they explained the change depending on their interlocutors and to show appropriate emotions in order to attract the attention of outside people. In other words, these micro-practices were produced through routines and conversations as the result of mundane human competence in action (Giddens, 1984).

Strategic sensemaking and sensegiving processes have traditionally been studied by taking into account two orders of explanation (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991). A first-order explanation of strategic sensemaking and sensegiving refers to objective facts and events that describe the structural phases of change (Gioia and Thomas, 1996; Hill and Levenhagen, 1995; Thomas et al., 1993). Concerned with the official procedure and interpretations around strategic change made by and about top managers as instigators of change, a first-order explanation aims to reveal how the central features of the strategic plan have been defined in the initial phases of change. According to Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991), a second-order explanation tries to discern a deeper comprehension of these processes by looking at the evolving patterns of narratives, stories, and discourses presented by top management to different stakeholders about strategic change. Researchers studied how strategic sensemaking and sensegiving processes occurred in sequential and iterative cycles of negotiation around the definition of strategic rules which made them seem like coherent, consistent, uniform, or even monolithic meaning structures.

In this paper, a so far ignored third-order explanation of strategic sensemaking and sensegiving is demonstrated (Table V). This third-order explanation explores how strategic sensemaking and sensegiving processes are constituted through communication and action in daily routines and conversations. The focus is on the way managers – not only top management but middle and lower teams and by extension every organizational member – provide information and influence people around them by modifying their daily routines and adjusting their discourse to the new strategic orientation. Strategic sensemaking and sensegiving in practice means looking at how these processes are routinely constituted, how they are

Table V. Three orders of explanation of strategic sensemaking and sensegiving

	First-order explanation	*Second-order explanation*	**Third-order explanation**
Strategic sensemaking and sensegiving	Phases of change	Patterns of interpretation	**Set of micro-practices**
Unit of analysis	Facts	Narratives, stories, discourses	**Routines, conversations**
Process	Evolutive	Iterative, sequential	**Co-present, mundane, practical**
Context	Strategic plan	Strategic rules	**Strategic and social rules**
Individual	Top managers	Top managers in relation with internal and external stakeholders	**Managers (top, middle, low) in relation with internal and external agents**

accomplished on a daily basis, and how they occur over time throughout the organization. Strategic sensemaking and sensegiving processes are the result of a complex set of mundane micro-practices embedded in tacit knowledge and social contexts.

Far from being contradictory, these three orders of explanations complete one another by providing a different view of strategic sensemaking and sensegiving. Examining strategic sensemaking and sensegiving micro-practices allow the researcher to better understand how the stabilized effects appearing in the interpretative patterns (second-order) and in the structural phases of the change (first-order) are generated. Likewise, it provides an in-depth understanding of how phases and patterns are produced and reproduced daily through these micro-practices. Strategic change is a continuous process, a chronic feature of organizational life, it is therefore important to take into account this third-order explanation that holds practical dimensions which are intractably related to strategic outcomes. Even though micro-practices are invisible for managers and researchers, everyday interactions and conversations matter as much as formally orchestrated events or strategy documents when it comes to change.

ENRICHING THE UNDERSTANDING OF MIDDLE MANAGERS' ROLES

At first glance, the micro-practices found in this analysis broadly resonate with prior works on middle managers' roles in strategic change, considering them as strategic assets (Table VI). For example, 'translating the orientation' and 'overcoding the strategy' are two micro-practices reminiscent of the way authors define

Table VI. Illustrative works on middle managers' roles in strategic change

	Roles	Micro-practices (links with roles)	Level of analysis	Influence direction	Context
Balogun (2003)	Change intermediaries (undertaking personal change; helping others; implementing necessary change; keeping the business going)	*Translating* (interpretation of the change intent into tangible actions for themselves and others)	Perceptions of middle managers through their diaries	Co-construct links with senior managers and their teams (lateral interactions)	Reorientation of a privatized utility company
Currie (1999)	Purveyors and recipients of change	*Justifying* (question the legitimacy of business planning)	Change process (longitudinal, interviews – middle, top managers)	Upward–downward	Introduction of business plans – Hospital–NHS
Dutton et al. (1997)	Pivotal role in detecting new ideas and mobilizing resources around these new ideas	*Disciplining* (impression management of others)	Issue selling process (interviews – 30 middle managers)	Upward	Hypercompetitive environment (regional telecom company in transformation)
Floyd and Wooldridge (1992–94)	Potential reservoirs of core capability (championing strategic alternatives; synthesizing information; facilitating adaptability; implementing deliberate strategies)	*Translating* (select business opportunities) *Overcoding* (saturate information with meaning through personal evaluation) *Disciplining* (encourage employee involvement through emotion) *Justifying* (promoting new capabilities)	Middle managers' involvement and performance (large-scale, statistical survey − 259 middle managers)	Upward–downward	Innovative and reengineered organization (25 companies representing a wide variety of industries)
Huy (2002)	Loci for emotion management during radical change (maintaining continuity)	*Disciplining* (emotional support for employees) *Justifying* (emotion management to drive change)	Emotional commitment to change (interviews, observation, archival data)	Work group level	Large service providing company in information technology (strategic renewal)

Table VI. *Continued*

	Roles	*Micro-practices (links with roles)*	*Level of analysis*	*Influence direction*	*Context*
Nonaka (1988–94)	Agent for change (combine macro and micro information; eliminate chaos; team leader; mobilizing knowledge)	*Translating* (process of unifying individual visions and creating a larger one) *Overcoding* (synthesize tacit knowledge of both frontline and top managers)	Information creation (case study – Honda City)	Middle–up– Down	Strategic self-renewal process at Honda (team project – SED system)

middle managers' role as interpreters (Balogun, 2003; Floyd and Wooldridge, 1992, 1994; Nonaka, 1988). At the organizational level, these micro-practices could be linked to middle managers' ability to interpret and synthesize the knowledge of both top and frontline managers. 'Disciplining the client' and 'justifying the change' are two micro-practices that recall the mechanism of issue selling documented in the literature on middle managers (Currie, 1999; Dutton et al., 1997; Floyd and Wooldridge, 1992, 1994; Huy, 2002). The routines and conversations described are composed of various issues selling tactics aimed at creating specific impressions and involving others through emotions and persuasive communication (Dutton et al., 1997; Floyd and Wooldridge, 1992; Huy, 2002).

However, these findings differ from prior works by providing an in-depth understanding of middle managers' role as interpreters and sellers of strategic change. Through the examination of detailed practices undertaken in day-to-day conversations and routines, the paper is different from previous studies concerned with the discrete and conscious strategic activity of middle managers (Table VI). By focusing on tacit knowledge rather than examining middle managers' explicit perceptions of change and their roles in it, this analysis reveals the underlying micro-practices inherent to the skill accomplishment of knowing agents (Orlikowski, 2002). This micro approach provides some relevant insights on how middle managers interpret and sell strategic change for outside people through their ongoing interactions. In other words, it brings out the strategic significance of activity that would not normally be considered 'strategic'.

The findings also differ from previous works by looking at the middle managers' sensemaking and sensegiving roles at the organizational interface. As Table VI shows, research on middle managers' role as interpreters and sellers of strategic

change are about engaging lower managers and subordinates in change implementation or about grabbing top managers attention. Floyd and Wooldridge (1997) figure amongst the rare researchers who have examined the external boundary-spanning role of middle managers. They demonstrated that middle managers with formal positions in boundary-spanning sub-units reported higher levels of strategic influence activity than other managers. However, they did not explore how middle managers who are not in a formal boundary-spanning position create sense of the change and informally work toward gaining support from external actors such as clients or stakeholders in their day-to-day operational activities.

Literature on middle managers generally focuses on managers hierarchically located below top managers and above first-level supervision in large bureaucratic organizations (Table VI). This paper takes a slightly different orientation. Working in a small business, middle managers examined here could possibly be qualified as 'hybrid managers' (Currie and Procter, 2001) given that they assume supervisory tasks, have professional backgrounds (in selling and design) and have some years of experience which confers a higher degree of responsibility to them (Dopson and Stuart, 1990). However, they both indisputably belong to the middle management of their manufacturing company and assume the line function and challenges associated with the difficult task of mediating strategic and operational levels while implementing change (Dopson et al., 1992; Floyd and Wooldridge, 1997).

Of course, all middle managers are not as socially competent as the two in this study. The middle managers examined here are not reluctant managers with cynical orientations; they are championing change through situated interactions in a specific historical context. Moving the analysis of strategic sensemaking and sensegiving roles to another level necessitated first choosing an 'ideal type' of middle managers in order to reveal their underlying practices. Further research should now transcend this methodological imperative. Even though the close resonance of these findings with prior works supports the usefulness of the results for others contexts, the relevance of the insights provided by this interpretive approach needs more empirical evidence from a variety of middle managers working in different size settings.

Prior work provides some basic elements for discerning middle managers' strategic sensemaking and sensegiving roles. It does not, however, examine the nature of these roles in detail (Balogun, 2003). When researchers demonstrate that middle managers are championing alternatives, synthesizing information, facilitating the change, and so forth, they don't show how these roles are practically enacted and performed. These findings, therefore, suggest moving forward research on middle managers' role in strategic change by opening the 'black box' of these roles in examining their ongoing daily activities (Currie and Brown, 2003; Sims, 2003; Westley, 1990). Further research on middle managers as change intermediaries needs to be more focused on their experience and agency (Balogun, 2003; Thomas

and Linstead, 2002). In a fast moving economic environment, it is necessary to recognize that every interaction that a middle manager has with an external constituency is potentially relevant to how the external actor interprets the focal organization's strategy.

CONCLUSION

This paper described and analysed routines and conversations of two middle managers involved in implementing strategic change in a top-of-the-line clothing company. It appears that strategic sensemaking and sensegiving processes are made up of a complex set of four micro-practices that middle managers daily put into action in their interaction with people outside the organization. By addressing how middle managers in their day-to-day activities assume their strategic roles as interpreters and sellers of change, this paper improves our understanding of their roles in four ways.

First, by directing attention to the workings of ongoing primary sensemaking and sensegiving micro-practices, the paper demonstrates that it is not only through consciously selecting and manipulating from a defined menu that these processes are produced. Sensemaking and sensegiving are more than just clear patterns constructed by top managers. They are in a permanent flux and constantly being reconstituted in daily experiences of agents. By proposing a third-order explanation focusing on the practical and social dimensions of strategic sensemaking and sensegiving, this study provides a stronger picture of these processes. To ensure competitive advantage in a fast moving economic environment, first and second order explanations of sensemaking and sensegiving are insufficient.

Second, the paper demonstrates how managers draw on their tacit knowledge to make sense of change and share it with others. The analysis of routines and conversations demonstrates how mutual knowledge or tacitly understood procedures that middle managers draw on in strategic sensemaking and sensegiving exist deep within their memory as familiar features of their professional, cultural, and social praxis. This account of middle managers' conversations and routines points to their history and experiences instead of their personal interests (Dutton et al., 1997) and political agendas (Dopson and Neumann, 1998). By bringing out the strategic significance of middle manager' activity that would not normally be consider 'strategic' either by an observer or by the actor, the paper opens the way in a vast territory that the existing literature has left almost unexplored. Yet, middle managers' tacit knowledge used throughout their sensemaking and sensegiving micro-practices, constitutes them as strategic asset in a world where value creation lies in details.

Third, the paper shows how the semantic frames used by middle managers to connect strategy to the external actor are embedded not only in organizational goals but also in social context. Traditional research on middle managers pays little

attention to social context in which they intervene and to differences such as gender, age or ethnicity. According to Thomas and Linstead (2002), middle managers are generally portrayed as a single, univocal, and homogeneous entity. Individual differences and their social diversity are generally denied. Yet there is a strong recognition that social interactions and contexts are central to their capacity to interpret and sell strategic change (Balogun, 2003; Floyd and Wooldridge, 2000). This research highlights the way middle managers socially position themselves in their day-to-day interactions and use their tacit knowledge of social structures, which is at the core of strategic outcomes, as resources for implementing change.

Fourth, the paper studies strategic sensemaking and sensegiving processes at the organizational interface, emphasizing renewal of links with stakeholders, in particular, clientele. Looking at strategic sensemaking and sensegiving roles at the organizational interface provides a deeper understanding of how, in practice, middle managers participate through their day-to-day activities in the formation of strategy (Whittington, 2003). In their daily encounters with people from the outside (e.g. clients, journalists, stakeholders, etc), they are shaping their environment (Weick, 1995), or, as Johnson et al. (2003) would say, they are strategizing on a micro level. In a complex world where organizational frontiers are more and more ambiguous, sustainable advantage partly lies in micro-practices through which the links with outside are daily constructed.

These findings have implications both for researchers who wish to untangle the complexities of strategic sensemaking and sensegiving processes and for practitioners who want to improve middle managers skills to enact their role as interpreters and sellers of change. Research should focus on ongoing and primary micro-practices of strategic sensemaking and sensegiving. More empirical evidence is needed to confirm the simultaneous presence of the four micro-practices in various contexts and at different organizational levels. Additionally, some authors have recently pointed out that the boundary-spanning role of middle managers is also enacted cross-functionally (Balogun, 2003; Currie and Procter, 2001, 2005), making it interesting to examine if middle managers reproduce these micro-practices when they are interpreting and selling strategic change to their lateral colleagues. Research should also verify the existence of other micro-practices that might be operating in these processes. Finally, further research should try to better grasp the links between the three-order explanations of sensemaking and sensegiving. Some of these micro-practices might have a different degree of influence depending upon the stage of change.

For practitioners, these findings provide some useful insights about the skills middle managers require to daily fulfil their strategic sensemaking and sensegiving roles. As we saw, successful middle managers employ a variety of practical skills including creative and emotive capabilities related to their professional and social competences. Practitioners should facilitate the enactment of these interpreting

and selling micro-practices by enhancing middle managers' opportunities to acquire and update their relational and social competences. Likewise, helping middle managers understand the socio-cultural mapping of their industry would make them better navigators in the selling of strategic change to clientele and others. For instance, seminars for developing greater self-knowledge, acquiring communication skills, and developing middle manager's sociological analysis ability might be appropriate. Moreover, the organization should recognize the importance of tacit knowledge, particularly at its interface, and support formal and informal practices established by middle managers with shared experience and local collective knowledge for ensuring the implementation of strategic change.

NOTES

[1] The word client is mainly used throughout the text for two reasons: (1) it is the word generally used in a mixed French and English context; (2) it describes a specific type of customers namely, boutique owners or buyers for department stores.

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