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Source: *Strategic Management Journal*, Sep., 1991, Vol. 12, No. 6 (Sep., 1991), pp. 433-448

Published by: Wiley

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2486479>

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SENSEMAKING AND SENSEGIVING IN STRATEGIC CHANGE INITIATION

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This paper reports an ethnographic study of the initiation of a strategic change effort in a large, public university. It develops a new framework for understanding the distinctive character of the beginning stages of strategic change by tracking the first year of the change through four phases (labeled as envisioning, signaling, re-visioning, and energizing). This interpretive approach suggests that the CEO's primary role in instigating the strategic change process might best be understood in terms of the emergent concepts of 'sensemaking' and 'sensegiving'. Relationships between these central concepts and other important theoretical domains are then drawn and implications for understanding strategic change initiation are discussed.

What is the nature of strategic change and the CEO's role in instigating it? In general terms, change involves an attempt to alter the current way of thinking and acting by the organization's membership. More specifically, *strategic* change involves an attempt to change current modes of cognition and action to enable the organization to take advantage of important opportunities or to cope with consequential environmental threats. Organizational change has received significant study over the years; the distinctive character of strategic change, however, remains significantly under-studied (cf. Dutton and Duncan, 1987). In particular, the role of the CEO in the critical initial stages of the strategic change process have not been adequately described. Similarly, and in a directly related vein, the nature of processes used to launch a strategic change effort have not been well articulated.

Typically, the CEO is portrayed as someone

who has primary responsibility for setting strategic directions and plans for the organization, as well as responsibility for guiding actions that will realize those plans. This portrayal has given rise to the characterization of the CEO as one whose foremost roles involve the formulation and implementation of strategies. Characterizations of the CEO's role range from a view in which the CEO is seen as dominating these activities (Andrews, 1971), to one in which the CEO is viewed as influencing the context within which formulation and implementation take place (Bower, 1970), to a more intermediate and integrated depiction of CEO roles and repertoires in strategic action (Brodwin and Bourgeois, 1984; Quinn, 1980). Although the formulation/implementation terms are apt descriptors for most applications, they necessarily tend to emphasize certain aspects of strategic management and to de-emphasize other potentially important aspects. Specifically, these descriptors do not seem to capture the richness of the symbolic elements of strategic management (cf. Alvesson, 1990; Peters, 1978; Pfeffer, 1981; Quinn, 1980), perhaps

Key words: Sensemaking, sensegiving, strategic change, symbolism, ambiguity-by-design

0143-2095/91/070433-16\$08.00
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Received 10 April 1989
Final revision received 7 February 1991

especially those that pertain to the crucial niche in time when strategic change is just being instigated. Thus, as a point of departure, we wondered if some viable alternative way of viewing the initiation of strategic change might emerge by using a grounded approach.

INSTIGATING STRATEGIC CHANGE: A GROUNDED OVERVIEW¹

What are the central features of the beginning phases of a strategic change effort? How does the leadership of an organization set the stage and actually launch the strategic change process? First, at a basic level, any substantive change leads to the alteration of existing value and meaning systems (Gioia, 1986). Given that strategies often reflect the values of top managers (Bourgeois, 1984; Bower and Doz, 1979; Hambrick and Mason, 1984; Quinn, 1980), an initial focus is on the values or meaning system of the CEO him- or herself.

Organization members, including the CEO, need to understand any intended change in a way that 'makes sense' or fits into some revised interpretive scheme or system of meaning (Bartunek, 1984; Ranson, Hinings and Greenwood, 1980). Toward this end, the CEO must first develop a sense of the organization's internal and external environment (Thomas and McDaniel, 1990) and define a revised conception of the organization (via a process that is labeled as *sensemaking*). Following this interpretive work by the CEO (or top management team), some abstract 'vision' of the changed organization evolves and is disseminated to stakeholders and constituents (via a process labeled as *sensegiving* (cf. Whetten, 1984). Typically, symbols and

symbolic action are used to communicate that the existing interpretive scheme is no longer appropriate (Frost and Morgan, 1983; Pfeffer, 1981).

Such actions imply the creation of instability in members' ways of understanding the organization, and demand that they make some new sense of it (Poole, Gioia and Gray, 1989). Disconfirmation of an existing interpretive scheme, however, requires some revised scheme to take its place (Ranson, Hinings and Greenwood, 1980). Therefore, an opportunity is created for the CEO to articulate and advocate his or her vision or preferred interpretive scheme for the stakeholders (leading to another 'sensemaking' activity, this time by the stakeholders). Given that change efforts seldom happen by decree, but often hinge on consensus-building, a round of negotiated social construction is likely (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). Here the affected stakeholders try to negotiate revisions to the proposed vision (Strauss, 1978; Walsh and Fahey, 1986), thus attempting to influence either the need for the new vision or the shape of it (another 'sensegiving' activity, this time from the stakeholders to the CEO or top management team). As a result of the sensemaking and sensegiving efforts, the original abstract vision is likely to become more well-defined and undergo some modification (at least concerning espoused manifestations of the vision or processes used to achieve it). After that, the CEO and the top management team can make some adjustments and then push for a concerted effort towards a realization of the vision by the organization's stakeholders.

In the light of this conceptual overview, the launching of a strategic change effort represents a critical time when several important processes that guide the entire change venture begin to coalesce. The initiation of strategic change can be viewed as a process whereby the CEO makes sense of an altered vision of the organization and engages in cycles of negotiated social construction activities to influence stakeholders and constituents to accept that vision.

In addition to this fundamental concern with the study of processes underlying the initiation of strategic change and the CEO's role in it, this research project also was aimed at considering two corollary issues: first, the process by which the CEO and/or the top management team

¹ In this conceptual overview we have used the theoretical framework and labels ('sensemaking' and 'sensegiving'), that actually emerged from the subsequent analysis. In the interpretive research approach used, the theoretical framework is grounded in, and emerges from, the data (instead of being derived from prior theory that drives data collection and analysis). As a consequence, however, a 'purist' rendering of interpretive reporting unfortunately requires the reader to work through lengthy qualitative data presentation before learning what the major contributions of the research are likely to be. Therefore, we have employed these labels in this introductory overview to foreshadow the major findings and the conceptual framework that emerged from the study, and also to provide a way of succinctly summarizing complex notions in descriptive terms.

evolves a scheme or vision that serves as an interpretive framework for the strategic change effort; and secondly, the means by which the evolved vision is communicated, championed, and influenced in the face of possible indifference or resistance by stakeholders and constituencies.

GROUND ASSUMPTIONS AND METHODOLOGY

Because the development or revision of organizational interpretive schemes is typically a subtle and evolving process, traditional survey methods and even in-depth interviews cannot adequately reveal the nature and sequence of changes taking place. Instead, research approaches designed to investigate such processes must be non-intrusive, longitudinal, and capable of tracing the unfolding changes (cf. Fredrickson, 1983; Mintzberg, Raisiinghani and Theoret, 1976; Whyte, 1943). Such research needs to be 'interpretive' in nature (Rabinow and Sullivan, 1979), which implies an alternative paradigm applied to the study of strategic change (Burrell and Morgan, 1979; Kuhn, 1970).

The interpretive approach

Broadly stated, the interpretive approach turns on the assumption that human understanding and action are based on the *interpretation* of information and events by the people experiencing them (Rabinow and Sullivan, 1979). Understanding and action, therefore, depend upon the meaning assigned to any set of events (cf. Daft and Weick, 1984). Meaning, however, is a *socially-constructed phenomenon* (cf. Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Weick, 1979). Thus, meaning is not only unavoidably subjective, but is also constrained by the context of goals that the human actors seek to achieve. Understanding and action, including strategic action, thus derive from the framework of meaning ascribed by the organization's members.

The implications of these assumptions are that: (1) the study of interpretation and meaning systems, and the processes whereby those systems are altered, is of fundamental importance to the study of strategic change; (2) understanding the phenomenon of strategic leadership under conditions of desired change requires an account-

ing of the meanings ascribed by *the members of the organization* (i.e. not solely by the researchers studying those members); and (3) understanding any such subjective organizational phenomena requires that the researcher be grounded in the organization's culture. This last point implies the necessity for involved interaction with informants who are experiencing the strategic change effort, and thus suggests an ethnographic approach.

Ethnographic research

Participant-observation often characterizes ethnographic research. The researcher adopts the simultaneous dual role of active participant in the organization's activities and observer of those activities (Spradley, 1980). The ethnographer typically enters a new cultural (organizational) domain with little familiarity about its inner workings. By trying to suspend *a priori* assumptions, the researcher attempts to understand the social world by first discovering the conceptual lenses that the members of the organization use to see and interpret their experience. The researcher attempts to avoid implicit hypothesis-testing, and instead allows inductive reasoning to prevail.

The ethnographic approach involves immersion in the social context being studied. Every interaction and experience constitutes data to be interpreted as a member of the organization—and as a researcher. The ethnographer thus relies on prolific record-keeping. The initial report of an ethnographic effort is usually a journalistic narrative or story, often rendered mainly in the words of the organizational members (Agar, 1980). The reporting of the ethnographic account is framed around the dominant themes expressed by the participants and represents a *first-order analysis*. The researcher only later attempts to derive an explanatory framework to put the story into a more theoretical perspective by means of a *second-order analysis* (cf. Van Maanen, 1979). It is for this reason that ethnographic, interpretive research often appears 'inverted' when compared to the more traditional style of strategy research; rather than theory driving the data gathering, the theoretical perspective is grounded in, and emerges from the first-hand data (cf. Glaser and Strauss, 1967).

Given the ethnographer's immersion in the data, his or her main problem is that of 'going

native' i.e. completely adopting the interpretive view of the organization members, and thus losing the dispassionate view required for a more theoretical, second-order analysis. Ideally, then, a second researcher who has not been exposed to the direct, subjective, inside experiences is desirable (although seldom employed). This outside researcher takes on the role of a more detached investigator who analyzes the data more 'objectively', and helps the ethnographer with his/her debriefing efforts.

In this study we employed both an 'insider' and an 'outsider' researcher (Evered and Louis, 1981). The inside researcher was a bona fide participant in the strategic change process who conducted the ethnography. The outside researcher conducted a more objective analysis of the data. We used this dual-researcher, grounded approach (Glaser, 1978; Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss, 1987) as a means of generating insights about the instigation of strategic change. In an overarching sense, the research was also intended to bring a multiparadigm perspective to bear on the study of strategic change (Gioia and Pitre, 1990).

The research context, background, and sources of data

This research took place in a large, public, multiple-campus university. Universities in general, and large public universities in particular, are useful research sites for strategic process researchers. They are characterized by a multiplicity of goals, diffused power, seemingly chaotic decision making processes, and are frequently politicized in their workings (Cohen and March, 1974; March and Olsen, 1976). 'Managing' these organizations is often difficult because the professionals in them are not well-disposed to being managed and zealously guard their autonomy and right to participate in major decisions affecting their organizations (Mintzberg, 1979).

The research project began with the arrival of a new President, who immediately launched a strategic change effort. On-site research ended 2.5 years later and was followed by a period of 'distant observation' of outcomes and follow-up interviews with informants. The stated aim of the strategic change effort was to make the university a 'Top 10' public university. Part of

this effort was to be made ostensibly by selectively matching internal capabilities with external opportunities; another part was to come from altering the structure of the university to better conform to the academic and societal 'market' of the late 1980s and the 1990s. Although the President was the main architect of the strategic change effort, he did appoint a university-wide Strategic Planning Task Force (SPTF) [a pseudonym] within his first year to design a strategic planning process for the university.

The President had a short list of projects that he labeled as 'advanced planning projects'. These were strategic initiatives in which he had a strong personal interest, and on which he wanted to get quick momentum, most notably the creation of a new School of Communication. He felt that there was enough justification for acting on these initiatives, that they were politically and economically viable, and that they would symbolize publicly his determination and vision for change at the university. Figure 1 summarizes some of the initiatives, and also provides an overview of the strategic change process and the ethnographer's location within.

At the inception of the strategic change effort,

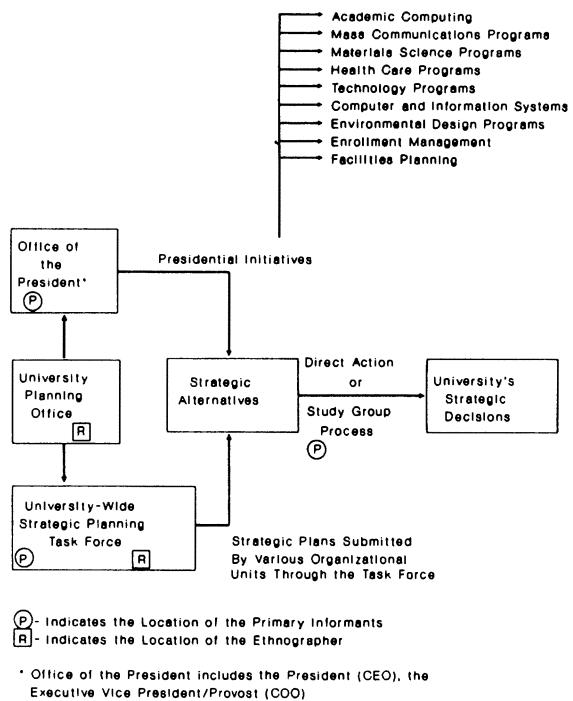


Figure 1. Overview of the formal strategic change context

the ethnographer was appointed as a staff member within the Strategic Planning Office at the university. He was also later made a full-fledged member of the Strategic Planning Task Force. These appointments provided formal legitimacy as well as access to informants and information that enriched the ethnographic effort. The President made these appointments personally, and did not establish any restrictions or expectations that would hinder the research.

The ethnographer had direct, often daily, contact with primary informants such as the President, the Executive Vice President/Provost, and other senior executives. Multiple tape-recorded interviews were conducted with each of these informants at various stages in the strategic change process. These ethnographic interviews (Spradley, 1979) dealt with the unfolding changes and the CEO's (the President's) leadership role in initiating and managing the strategic change process. The interviews were designed to let the informants engage in a stream of consciousness, and to provide rich, descriptive data on their perceptions about the change process and their efforts to manage it. In addition, the ethnographer kept a diary of events and activities during his in-residence period. He also obtained copies of relevant internal memos and confidential reports. Thus, the primary data sources were the interview transcripts and the ethnographer's diary, including personal observations. Secondary data sources included all internal documents and records relating to the strategic change process. The fact that the researcher was immersed in the strategic change process allowed him to cross-check the incoming data on an almost daily basis.

Finally, in addition to these data sources, a key member of the President's inner circle agreed to serve as a knowledgeable, independent reviewer of the data and their interpretation as findings and conclusions emerged. This individual was a trusted aide to the President who played a central role in the management of the strategic change process; in addition, however, he was also an active researcher who could analyze our emerging interpretations for their accuracy and credibility. He was not employed as a 'primary' informant, *per se*, but rather served as a 'hold-out' informant. In this role he could agree or disagree with the researchers' interpretations of events, thus either 'validating' research findings or suggesting avenues for further analysis or

consideration. Given his true insider status as a member of the top management team, he was able to fill gaps in the data and offer critical commentary on the evolving ethnographic discoveries and theoretical analyses that served to avoid the 'fiction' often associated with informant accounts (van Maanen, 1979). Taken together, these multiple data sources permitted a grounded, thick-description look at the initiation of strategic change and the CEO's role in it.

Analysis

As noted, both first- and second-order analyses were appropriate to our research approach. The first-order analysis was conducted using standard ethnographic analytical techniques to discover themes and patterns in events and informants' accounts. It employed descriptive, observational data that was meaningful to, and used by, the informants in the study. Given the purpose of the research, our particular focus was mainly on the interpretations by and about the President in his role as CEO and leader of the strategic change effort.² The first-order reporting takes the form of an ethnographic story that of the early stages of the strategic change effort. This narrative integrates the interpretations and experiences of the informants and the ethnographer.

The second order analysis moves to a more theoretical level, wherein the data and first-order findings are examined for underlying explanatory

² An example might illustrate the qualitative depth involved in first-order ethnographic analysis. One of the recurring themes in the secondary informant accounts was the notion of an 'activist' president who made snap decisions. The surface evidence for this assertion included his firing of senior executives, his quick launching of initiatives, his restructuring efforts, and his tendency to take unilateral action that led to turnover among the collegiate deans. Formal analysis, however, instead suggested that far from being a president who made quick decisions, he was better characterized as a careful and politically-astute individual. Data gathering and analysis required talking to his staff, looking at his meetings schedules, and analyzing his interview transcripts to infer what was actually taking place. As a result, actions that anecdotally had appeared impulsive and unilateral were instead seen as the result of well-thought-out ideas. When confronted with the discrepancy between the common wisdom and the ethnographic analysis, the President's response was that he wanted to signal his intention that it would not be business as usual. He wanted to shake the institution up, but do it with some foresight. Thus, formal analyses were necessary to gain a comprehensive understanding of his actions.

dimensions. This mode of analysis seeks to provide further insights that might be relevant for domains beyond the immediate study. As part of this analysis the ethnographer and the outside researcher examined the ethnographic data from a theoretical perspective to try to discern deeper patterns and dimensions of understanding. Such patterns are not necessarily apparent to organizational members, but are essential if the study is to be made meaningful to other researchers and have import for the conceptualization of the management of strategic change. The second-order analysis involved the following steps:

1. Examining each of the informants' accounts, via qualitative content analysis (cf. Miles and Huberman, 1984), to ascertain explanations for various events and activities that occurred
2. Determining whether the informants' accounts were internally consistent over time or were changing in some progressive fashion as the strategic change process evolved
3. Analyzing data *across* informants for significant patterns of convergence or divergence. The examined data were sampled based on their relevance to the research focus on the President's role in managing the strategic change process (a form of the 'theoretical sampling' method of Glaser and Strauss, 1967). This procedure was executed by repetitive or 'constant comparison' (Conrad, 1982; Glaser and Strauss, 1967), wherein the data from different sources and different times were repeatedly compared to discern the major themes or processes involved in the initiation of change
4. Extracting the theoretically explanatory dimensions from the emergent patterns in the data. In this step of the analysis, data related to emerging dimensions were constantly compared to other data until dimensional patterns became evident (Agar, 1980; Spradley, 1979: 1980)
5. Integrating these patterns into a theoretical or conceptual framework.

Overall, this methodology was designed not to confirm or refute hypotheses, but to provide a thick description of events, and also to allow for an alternative 'way of seeing' the role of the CEO in instigating strategic change. It supplies

phenomenological richness by reporting direct evidence of emergent themes. The findings actually represent three different perspectives: (1) a first-order view from the ethnographer's perspective; (2) a related first-order view based on the informants' perspective; and (3) a second-order view from the outside researcher's perspective that is induced from the raw data and the first-order findings.

FIRST ORDER FINDINGS

In the stream of reporting that follows, the two first-order views have been integrated into a single narrative stemming from the accounts of the informants and the experience of the ethnographer. The ethnographer's perspective is framed according to different temporal 'phases' that emerged during the instigation of the change effort. These phases covered about 12 months, a period that essentially defined the duration of the initiation stage of the entire strategic change process. The informants' perspective is represented mainly by direct ethnographic data, depicting themes derived from the analyses, and framed around verbatim quotes from the primary informants (the President [CEO], the Executive VP [COO], and an affected Dean). These data reveal the interpretations of the influential players who were managing the strategic change process. Other relevant observations and inferences were drawn from the ethnographer's own experience, the secondary informants, the archival sources, and the 'hold-out' informant.

Strategic change initiation phases

The initial stage of the change effort progressed from an 'Envisioning' to a 'Signaling' to a 'Re-Visioning' and eventually to an 'Energizing' phase. The labeling of the phases derives from the ethnographer's experience in interaction with the informants and other organization members.

The Envisioning Phase

This phase ran from approximately 3 months prior to the assumption of office by the new President until about 1 month after he became CEO. Thus, the strategic change process actually began *before* his formal term. Information-

gathering visits to the university and many of his early job tenure activities were devoted to assessing potentials and possibilities. He quickly began to evolve an embryonic strategic vision for the university, which was based on a personal interpretive scheme derived from his prior institutional experience and applied to the university's current and historical context:

President (CEO): When my appointment as President was announced I began to make trips to the university almost immediately. I met with all the Deans, got to know the place, read a great deal, talked to people here and elsewhere about this university. So, by the time I came on board I had a good idea of how the strategic planning process might be launched, and second I had an idea of how *I* thought it might come out.

The Signaling Phase

This phase overlapped the envisioning phase slightly and lasted approximately 3 months. It commenced with the arrival of the new President and was defined mainly by the public declaration of the strategic change effort. These virtually simultaneous events provided an ideal context for disrupting the status quo:

President: It was important during my first year to indicate that the university was going to change, and to begin some of that change for a couple of reasons. First of all it was my mandate to lead this university. I was told in no uncertain terms by the people who hired me that they wanted strong leadership, and that they wanted the university to move to another plane. This meant that I couldn't wait for two or three years to demonstrate to the Board of Trustees that I had begun the next moves.

The announcement of the strategic change effort injected ambiguity into a heretofore stable, even complacent, university community. It infused the organization with some measure of anxiety, but also gave the CEO leverage in influencing desired changes. This leverage resulted not only from his position, but also from his ability to provide his own interpretation on the atmosphere of ambiguity that *he* had created by initiating the change effort. This *ambiguity-by-design* was at least in part intended to

symbolize the reality of change. Although it was intentionally used by the top management team, they rather fortuitously discovered its potency as a tactic for facilitating change. They were somewhat surprised by the positive effects of the ambiguity created, but soon became cognizant of the dangers of mismanaging it:

Executive V.P. (COO): The [strategic change] process involves stirring everybody up, making everybody talk and think and worry and look around, and consider some of the assumptions we are making about the university, so we can develop a common understanding [as to where the University is headed].

It is a mechanism for central administration to force or encourage some changes, and to have the political justification to do so—the political justification being that if you are going to do all this stirring up, then you'd better make some changes. We have to give a sense, a reassurance, that what we are engaged in is controlled and managed, not just chaos.

Thus, it became clear that a new framework for understanding was intended to supplant or re-frame existing conceptions. It also was clear that *action* was important both substantively and symbolically. The President met with various stakeholders to discuss their hopes, concerns and expectations; these meetings generated goodwill for the new President because the previous incumbent had created a perception of inaccessibility. At the same time the President was able to allay some of the anxiety about the ambiguity he had fostered by constructing an assuring and inspiring vision for the renewal of the organization (A 'Top-10 public university'). This Top 10 vision served to guide the strategic change process in the desired direction. The dismissal of several 'old guard' administrators and the reorganization of the senior administrative levels also served as signaling devices for the president's serious intent.

The Re-Visioning Phase

This phase commenced from about the fourth month and ran approximately 6 months. During this phase the CEO was a vivid symbol for the change effort. Individuals and key stakeholders inside and outside the university attempted to assess the actions and motives of the CEO, trying to infer the new institutional values and goals. As a result of frequent presidential usage, the

term ‘strategic planning’ became a watchword. The top management team sought to legitimize decisions and actions under the rubric of this metaphor, even though strategic planning as a formal activity had not yet begun. The declaration of the process, however, allowed the President to pursue his initiatives, and also signified action to the affected stakeholders.

Not surprisingly, some vested interests began to object to aspects of the espoused change, including questioning whether the *status quo* had to change at all. Pockets of opposition emerged, threatening the young momentum for change:

President: Opposition comes from those whose ox is being gored. If you don’t push on something, things just never happen, because decision making in faculty groups is notoriously inefficient.

As a consequence of this resistance, some tension developed within the top management team concerning differences in preferred approaches to managing the change process. The President favored a strong, somewhat directive leadership process, whereas the Executive Vice President (who was worried about the long-term costs of bypassing traditionally influential groups) argued for a more consultative process.

President: Any time you change a massive institution, and do it within a reasonably short time span, people are going to be critical of [the leadership]. When a leader comes in with a bucket of goodwill, he spends it as he has to. If you do anything unilaterally, you lose some of that goodwill. I am perfectly prepared to see that happen.

[The strategic change process] will create a sense of motion at the University, but it can’t be a totally democratic process. You leave room for lots of participation, and you leave room for the constituency to change your mind—if it can. A CEO who leads a strategic change process has to have some idea of where it ought to go, or the process lacks motivation.

The Dean of a college affected by the strategic initiatives commented on the need for top management activism, while being sensitive to faculty involvement:

Dean: At this university the President plays an instrumental role while the Executive Vice President plays a socio-emotional role. The President’s focus is on large scale changes while

the EVP has an eye on keeping the place together. If their positions were reversed they might assume different roles.

The Executive Vice President had his own perspectives on the President’s style.

Executive VP: I never know quite how much the President worries about relationships. What he wants is action. Essentially, there is a certain cheerleading quality in him. When he says, “By God, we are going to have it done in six months!” what he really means is that we are going to press on. His approach is that he thinks he can do it, he gets in there, and gets as much out of it as he possibly can. And, if he doesn’t get it all, that’s fine too, so be it. One of the ways of finding out about the culture of an institution is to do something and see what falls out of the woodwork.

As a resolution to this internal debate, the President continued publicly to push for a continued fast pace of change, while nonetheless encouraging the other members of the top management team to engage in more consultation.

As noted, during the Envisioning phase the President had launched a series of proposed strategic initiatives or ideas for change involving specific units or programs (Figure 1). Some of these initiatives called for restructuring, others called for growth, and still others called for retrenchment. The multiplicity of these initiatives had a significant and perhaps unexpected benefit in dealing with the resistance that emerged during this Re-Visioning phase. Because the different initiatives had different objectives and affected various stakeholders differently, they had the net effect of diffusing the opposition and thus prevented the resistance from coalescing into a united front. For instance, the President’s interest in establishing a School of Communication significantly affected only one existing college. Other colleges offered no objection to this proposal. Only the college likely to lose several departments to the new school resisted, but could garner no organized, broad-based support.

The upshot of the Re-Visioning phase was that the President had to accede to some ‘organizational realities’ (including his Executive VP’s preference for consultation) and settle for a somewhat slower pace of change. Eventually, he also modified some of his initiatives based on feedback from stakeholders and constituents (including his ‘loyal opposition’). These moderate

adjustments became more obvious in the final stage of the change initiation.

The Energizing Phase

This phase overlapped the opposition period of the previous phase to some extent (because some resistance continued even after widespread commitment to the change effort became solidified), and extended up to and beyond the CEO's first anniversary. It was marked initially by the first substantive activities on the part of the formal Strategic Planning Task Force (SPTF)³ and the widening circle of consultation and feedback from the various stakeholders affected by the proposed changes. The resulting consultation process began with the smallest and highest level groups and progressively expanded to include larger, more lower level audiences.

As an example of how this process began and expanded, the President during meetings of the senior policy advisory groups would offer 'hypothetical scenarios' in circumspect language such as: 'We need to consolidate our communications programs which seem to be too diffused at present,' or 'Our material sciences programs have slipped in their national reputation, and need to be upgraded'. In fact, these scenarios stemmed directly from the initiatives that he had articulated earlier (Figure 1). He would then ask for reactions to the scenarios from the members present, listen to the responses, and revise his thinking, if he felt necessary. Thereafter, he would take the process a step further by broadening the number of groups that became privy to these hypothetical ideas. The net effect of the widening circle of idea sharing and consultation was a further reinterpretation of ideas and initiatives by the top management team. No publicly-stated initiative actually was abandoned, however. They were mainly fine-tuned and revised to facilitate future action. The

team continued to push for changes, even though the domain of consulted parties was now much larger than in the initial phases. Now, more stakeholders could influence some specifics of the change effort under the aegis of the 'Top 10' vision and framework established by the President and the top management team:

Executive VP: The priorities for the university are going to emerge in different ways. Some are going to be spotted by the administration and touted; others are going to have to be wrenched out of the colleges. There ought to be confidence, however, both on the part of the faculty and the Board of Trustees, that we aren't just careening through this place making changes at will. And, you can't do it in 6 months, unless you have a crisis. We don't have a crisis.

The reciprocal influence that characterized this phase resulted in a wider commitment and stronger impetus for the entire change effort because virtually all stakeholders and constituents were now included. Although this energizing phase ran long beyond the 12 month mark, this point marked the effective end of the initiation stage of the strategic change, because at that time the actions of the SPTF generated "Strategic Study Groups" that made formal recommendations relating to the formulation and implementation of specific plans (and thus a 'strategic planning process' could be said to be under way).

Overall, then, the activities of the CEO and the top management team during the initiation stage of strategic change focused on figuring out new directions and communicating a renewed interpretive scheme and organizational resurgence to various stakeholders. Those activities, however, are not well captured in traditional conceptualizations of strategic management. We turn now to an alternative conceptual framework for describing these distinctive processes.

SECOND-ORDER FINDINGS

The first-order findings provide a rich narrative of events, disclose elements of the informants' meaning systems, and reveal insights about the management of strategic change. However, they do not necessarily suggest an obvious or clear theoretical framework for understanding the instigation of strategic change. Nonetheless, these

³ The Strategic Planning Task Force was composed of faculty, staff, students, and administrators. Neither the President nor the Executive VP were direct participants in its deliberations, but the chair of the SPTF was also the special assistant to the President. The agenda for the SPTF was controlled by top management and the strategic planning process eventually was linked to the budgetary process. The budget hearings were chaired by the Executive VP and the President was often present at these hearings. Most of the final recommendations from the SPTF were based on the Presidential initiatives.

findings provide the basis for explicating an informative analytical framework. If we now reconsider these data with a more theoretical (rather than descriptive) view, a second-order analysis can be conducted. Such an analysis is aimed at discerning possible underlying dimensions or patterns in the data and first-order findings; it attends to constructs relating to the structuring and sequencing of activities and to the deep structure of the experiences and interpretations of the informants. In this fashion a theoretical view, grounded in direct ethnographic observation, can emerge. Thus, the second-order analysis is also aimed at providing a perspective that might be relevant for a domain beyond the immediate organization studied. The second-order analysis employed qualitative content analyses of the informants' and ethnographer's accounts using 'theoretical sampling' and 'methods of constant comparison' (Conrad, 1982; Glaser, 1978; Glaser and Strauss, 1967, 1970; Strauss, 1987) (Refer to the Analysis section) to reveal an underlying structure to the events surrounding the initiation of the strategic change.

This analysis suggested two major dimensions for an explanatory framework: *sensemaking* and *sensegiving*. In the context of this study, '*sensemaking*' has to do with meaning construction and reconstruction by the involved parties as they attempted to develop a meaningful framework for understanding the nature of the intended strategic change. '*Sensegiving*' is concerned with the process of attempting to influence the *sensemaking* and meaning construction of others toward a preferred redefinition of organizational reality. We found that these processes took place in an iterative, sequential, and to some extent reciprocal fashion, and involved not only the President and his top-management team, but also the internal and external stakeholders and constituents of the university.

Sensemaking

To demonstrate the relevance of the conceptual lenses suggested by the *sensemaking/sensegiving* labels, some recapitulation is helpful. First, we again note that the new President made frequent trips to the university before assuming office, trying to develop an overall impression about

its history, culture, strengths, and weaknesses. During this period he compared the university to the previous university at which he had been Chancellor and decided on programs that might feasibly be replicated. In the early stages of his tenure he also hired consultants, met with key members of the Board of Trustees and other important stakeholders, attended seminars on key initiatives, listened to feedback from lower-level members about their opinions of the potential of the university, and read position papers and feasibility studies developed by key aides. All of these activities indicate a *sensemaking* process in action—a strategic image for the university was gradually crystallizing. This image was not expressed necessarily in product-market terms but in visionary and evocative terms. In this case, the President expressed his vision as moving the university into the ranks of the top-ten public universities.

Similarly, *sensemaking* processes were evident on the part of the lower-level members of the university and external constituents. All were trying to figure out the meaning of the proposed strategic change effort, what its effect on them would be, and what their role in it would entail (which in some cases led to resistance to the proposed changes). These audiences attended to the President's speeches and actions to discern the nature of the espoused changes. The central image of a 'Top 10 public university' became the main focus of the early *sensemaking* efforts. What was this ambiguous phrase supposed to mean? What did it imply about changes in behavior, process, and structure? (In the final phase of the change initiation, the Strategic Planning Task Force engaged in similar *sensemaking* and interpretation efforts in trying to define what a top-ten university meant in terms of program thrusts).

Sensegiving

Within the first few weeks of being in office, the President announced the strategic change effort, made personnel changes at the top levels, and met with many groups in the organization to espouse his vision. He also made a number of key decisions (quickly, through executive fiat) that involved restructuring some programs, putting resources into others, and eliminating a few

others. Furthermore, he met frequently with important stakeholders, held meetings explaining key initiatives, disclosed intentions through 'hypothetical scenario' presentations at meetings of top level advisory groups, and controlled the charge and membership of various study groups.

These activities indicate that the President had adopted a sensegiving mode. Now he was taking staged actions that conveyed to the university the nature of his vision, the values underlying it, and the actual changes that he wanted to achieve as a result. The clear intent was to provide a viable interpretation of a new reality and to influence stakeholders and constituents to adopt it as their own. Thus, rather than making sense of an ambiguous situation for himself, he was now in a mode of making sense for others, i.e. of supplying a workable interpretation to those who would be affected by his actions.

Conversely, the targets of the President's sensegiving attempts would make their own interpretations or sense of these proposals and actions, and attempt to communicate their revised understanding of, or preferences for, the new organizational reality back to the President and the top management team. Ultimately, however, these sensegiving efforts from stakeholders to the CEO showed an inclination to agree with the essence of the proposed changes, allowing the President to energize the process and forge ahead. As noted, these sensemaking and sensegiving processes occurred essentially in a sequential and reciprocal fashion that encompassed progressively expanding audiences in the strategic change effort, as represented in Figure 2. Perhaps more importantly, if one considers the 'phases' revealed in the first-order analysis (Envisioning, Signaling, Re-Visioning, and Energizing), their close correspondence to the basic cycle of sensemaking and sensegiving becomes evident. Thus, it becomes possible to sketch a process model that integrates the first- and second-order analyses. In skeletal form a model of the processes involved in the initiation of strategic change at the university comprises the prototypical sequences and stages represented in Figure 3. In the figure sensemaking is represented symbolically by converging lines and sensegiving by diverging lines.

Stage 1 is a sensemaking effort by the CEO, wherein the President seeks to make sense of the new situation by creating some guiding vision for the university ('Envisioning'). Stage 2 is a

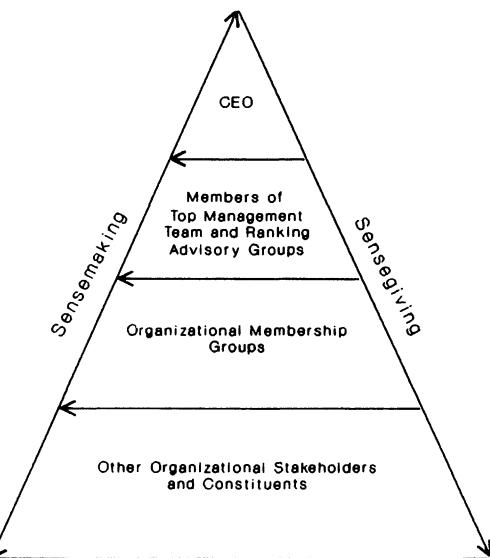


Figure 2. The sequential and reciprocal cycle of sensemaking and sensegiving to expanding audiences

sensegiving effort by the CEO, wherein he attempts to communicate this vision to the university's stakeholders and constituencies ('Signaling'). Stage 3 is a sensemaking effort by the stakeholders, wherein they try to figure out the meaning of the proposed vision to them and revise their understanding ('Re-Visioning'). Stage 4 is a sensegiving effort by these stakeholders, wherein they respond to the proposed vision and attempt to influence its realized form, but it also is a stage marked by the emergence and communication of an organization-wide commitment to action toward the vision ('Energizing'). (The feedback loop indicates that the sensegiving activities of the various stakeholders also leads to some modifications to the espoused vision [revisioning] on the part of the CEO and top management team).

It also becomes evident that the phases in this sensemaking and sensegiving cycle correspond to periods dominated by *understanding* and *influence* respectively (i.e. the sensemaking phases are those that deal primarily with understanding processes and the sensegiving phases are those that concern attempts to influence the way that another party understands or makes sense). Similarly, the phases can be seen as corresponding in a parallel fashion to periods defined essentially by cycles of *cognition* and *action* by the involved parties. These conceptual analogues (among

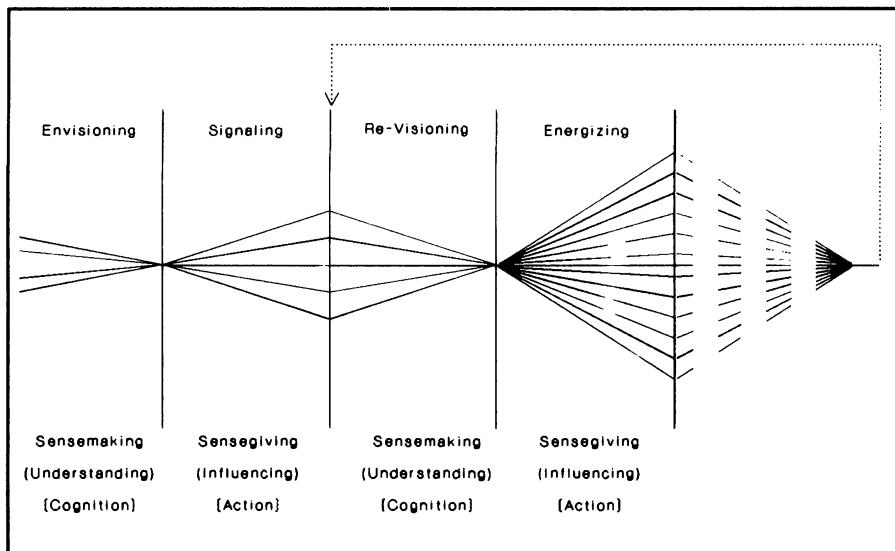


Figure 3. Processes involved in the initiation of strategic change

sensemaking/sensegiving, understanding/influence, and cognition/action) and their relationship to the phases of the strategic change initiation process serve to establish linkages between the early progression of strategic change and important theoretical concepts in the strategic cognition literature.⁴

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Instigating strategic change

The findings in this study suggest that the essential processes used during the instigation of the strategic change can be meaningfully described in terms of sensemaking and sensegiving, i.e. as involving processes whereby the CEO and top management team first tried to figure out and ascribe meaning to strategy-relevant events, threats, opportunities, etc. and then

to construct and disseminate a vision that stakeholders and constituents could be influenced to comprehend, accept, and act upon to initiate desire changes.

The launch of the change effort studied here had a distinctive character about it. It was fraught with uncertainty, ambiguity, and emotionality on the part of the organization's members because of a palpable concern about the initially obscure, but apparently significant, changes implied. The notion of 'strategic' change was ominous because it hinted at a potential for altering the accepted culture, practices, priorities, and goals of the organization. This beginning stage of the overall change effort was perhaps most notable because it involved a cognitive re-orientation of existing interpretive schemes (Bartunek, 1984; Poole, Gioia and Gray, 1989; Ranson, Hinings and Greenwood, 1980). A sensible, workable interpretation of a revised organizational reality needed to be proposed and accepted. Given these cognitive and contextual features, the initiation of the change effort can be distinctively conceptualized in terms of processes involving sensemaking-for-self and sensegiving-for-others. The sensemaking/sensegiving labels emphasize fundamental processes involved in managed organizational change and thus provide an alternative way of viewing the initiation of strategic change.

The first-order findings indicate that the initiation of the change evolved through four

⁴ Phenomenologically, of course, these processes and activities were somewhat less clear-cut than the linearity implied by the figure. Like all visual representations, the figure oversimplifies complex organizational processes in favor of conceptual clarity. Companion processes like sensemaking-sensegiving, understanding/influence, and cognition/action often overlap or occur more-or-less simultaneously. Cognition, for instance is often presumed or intended to precede action; yet, over time cognition-action sequences become almost indistinguishable, as action influences later cognition or both converge together (cf. Weick, 1979). Similar caveats apply to sensemaking/sensegiving and understanding/influence cycles.

phases, which were labeled as Envisioning, Signaling, Re-Visioning, and Energizing.⁵ These phases were found in the second-order analysis to correspond to the progressive iterations of sensemaking and sensegiving processes. The sensemaking/sensegiving cycles also were noted to correspond to cycles characterized by instances or periods of understanding and influence, or alternatively, as cycles typified by cognition and action, respectively.

Implications for academic organizations

There are a number of implications for the management of strategic change in universities that derive from the first- and second-order findings of this study. First, the literature on academic organizations has noted the symbolic powers of the presidency (Cohen and March, 1974; Lutz, 1982; Trachtenberg, 1981), but it has not adequately portrayed the potency of symbolism in the management of change. In this study, many presidential activities—the choice of the guiding image, speeches, memos, appointments of key personnel, selection of task force members and chairs, who he met with and did not meet with, as well as the timing of all these activities—had a strong symbolic component that served to inform, to direct effort, to motivate, and thus to facilitate the strategic change process. These findings emphasize the symbolic and meaning-construction aspects of the CEO role. In a previous era, the relatively ineffectual symbolic features of the role in part led Cohen and March (1974) to suggest that the university presidency was an ‘illusion’. In the modern era, that characterization no longer seems to apply.

In particular, perhaps the key occurrence in this case was the devising of an overarching symbolic vision, expressed in evocative imagery ('a Top-10 public university'). This vision provided an interpretive framework within which

thinking and acting could be viewed in terms of their consistency with the requirements for achieving such a vision. The president himself later said that this symbol ‘took on a life of its own’ and became a more powerful guiding image than he ever would have imagined.

These strong symbolic elements suggest implications related to the current context of universities. The environment of higher education has been undergoing a significant change that has required universities to operate more like businesses, and to think about such business concepts as competitive analysis, differentiation strategies, etc. This change has meant that universities now must ‘act strategically’ because of the increasing call for educational institutions to be made more accountable to society and to justify their ‘return on investment’. Consequently, strategic change in academia is likely to occur on a wider scale in the future. This study suggests that the effectiveness of such change efforts is likely to turn on launching the change process effectively, which implies that university CEOs should attend closely to developing a symbolic framework that can capture the necessity for, and nature of, an intended strategic change.

This research also serves to note that strategic change need not be precipitated by crisis. More often perhaps, such change is required simply to maintain the long-term viability of the institution in the face of changing conditions as was the case here. Crisis facilitates change, but managing strategic change without crisis is arguably more difficult to accomplish because there usually is not a pressing rationale for altering the *status quo*, as the Executive VP pointed out. The non-crisis situation we studied, therefore, is different (and perhaps increasingly more common) than the more typically-studied case of organizations that must respond to threatening contingencies that trigger strategic change efforts (cf. Dutton and Duncan, 1987; Jackson and Dutton, 1988; Mintzberg, Raisinghani and Theoret, 1976; Poole, Gioia and Gray, 1989). Given the lack of a crisis, the creation of ‘ambiguity-by-design’ became a potent device for fostering an atmosphere of change. This tactic arose almost inadvertently, but allowed the top management team to reframe existing conceptions and interpretive schemes toward the espoused vision. (Simultaneously, it also had the side-benefit of helping to defuse some of the developing resistance to change).

⁵ The labeling of these phases parallels some of the stages identified by DeGeus (1988) and Gabarro (1987), although the empirical description of the activities comprising these phases differs somewhat. DeGeus identifies four steps in an institutional learning process: Hearing, Digestion, Confirmation, and Action. Gabarro identifies five steps in the process of a CEO taking charge: Taking Hold (3–6 months), Immersion (4–11 months), Reshaping (3–6 months), Consolidation, and Refinement. This study relates mainly to the first three of Gabarro’s stages, with some notable differences in the timing of actions.

Implications for a wider domain

The wider implications of the grounded view generated by this study stem mainly from the revised conceptualization of the leadership role of the CEO in terms of sensemaking and sensegiving, especially as it pertains to the management of strategic change. Pragmatically speaking, this reconceptualization implies that the CEO's role during this period might best be seen as one that involves calling into question an obsolete interpretive scheme, framing a new interpretive scheme in understandable and evocative terms, providing guidance for action toward the incipient change, and exerting influence to accomplish it. Here again, this research suggests that the notion of ambiguity-by-design might be an effective tactic for leading stakeholders to question the existing way of seeing. The implication for the management of changing organizations is that existing schemes that are entrenched by tradition can be eased toward fluidity by intentionally creating, but carefully managing, the ambiguity that comes with redefining an image of the organization. Ambiguity-by-design is a less radical concept than the idea of 'controlled chaos' that is associated with the current international political domain (for example 'perestroika', wherein a national leader dramatized the impression that present conditions were clearly unacceptable and that a radically new vision was the only alternative less frightening than pursuing the current course). Ambiguity-by-design constitutes a more manageable approach for altering existing interpretive schemes and launching a change effort that is more appropriate to business organizations.

This research also implies that a captivating vision is perhaps a key feature in the initiation of strategic change because it provides a symbolic foundation for stakeholders to develop an alternative interpretive scheme. On the basis of this study, it is clear that the symbolic role of the CEO during the initiation of strategic change can go beyond being merely 'expressive' of values, beliefs, actions, etc. as has traditionally been argued (cf. Edelman, 1964; Pfeffer, 1981). It also can be *instrumental* to the accomplishment of change. That is, the symbolic constructions used to create meaning for others (i.e. to give sense) are instrumental to the effectiveness of the critical stage of proposing and initiating an overall change effort. Symbolism is thus seen as an encompassing

feature of the role definition of an effective CEO, and not merely a desirable, but unessential, characteristic. In one sense, symbols are the currency of exchange in trying to manage the launching of a strategic change effort. Symbols mobilize action (cf. Dutton, Fahey and Narayanan, 1983).

Ultimately, strategic change is a negotiation process. The nature of the resulting change depends upon the kind of negotiated reality that the CEO and top management team are able to arrive at with other organizational stakeholders (cf. Smircich and Morgan, 1982; Walsh and Fahey, 1986). In this negotiation process each group tries to sell its vision of the future to the others (sensegiving), even as it is engaged in the process of trying to figure out what the others want and to ascribe meaning to it (sensemaking). Realistically speaking, the upper echelon members can dominate the definition of the negotiated reality because of the influence they hold over possible visions of change (cf. Hambrick and Mason, 1984). Concerned CEOs might devote more attention to the way in which this vision develops, the factors that influence it, the politics that modify it, and the way in which it becomes a shared organizational vision.

CONCLUSION

As a consequence of our revised perspective on strategic change initiation in terms of sensemaking and sensegiving, a different view of the top management role during the beginning stages of change emerges. The CEO (and ultimately the top management team) can be seen as architects, assimilators, and facilitators of strategic change. The acts of making sense of, and giving sense about, the interpretation of a new vision for the institution constitute key processes involved in instigating and managing change.

The imagery conveyed by metaphors like 'sensemaker' and 'sensegiver' broadens the conception of top management activities during this period. They also tend to complement and widen the scope of the concepts of formulation and implementation because they better capture the essence of the early stages of these processes as they relate to undertaking a strategic change effort. These metaphors also complement or subsume other related descriptive metaphors, such as 'visionary', 'teacher' (DeGeus, 1988), or

'symphony conductor' (Drucker, 1988), and can even serve to extend Mintzberg's (1987) strategic crafting metaphor by encompassing other organizational stakeholders who play an active part in reshaping the organizational image and identity (Albert and Whetten, 1985).

Taken as a whole, then, the findings of our interpretive perspective and ethnographic approach to the study of strategic change imply that the initiation of the process involves a set of top management activities that are key to the effectiveness of the overall change process. These activities are simultaneously symbolic and substantive, involve reciprocal processes of cognition and action, and entail cycles of understanding and influence, all of which can be usefully captured under the concepts of sensemaking and sensegiving.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank Roger Anderson, Jim Fredrickson, Jim Thomas, Linda Trevino, and three anonymous reviewers for constructive criticism and suggestions on earlier versions of this manuscript.

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