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Strategic practices as enablers and disablers of championing activity

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Abstract

Research into the practice of organizational strategy is centered on the work of individual strategists. Strategic champions, individuals going beyond their operative responsibilities in strategic issues, are key stakeholders in research into strategy-as-practice. In this article, interview accounts of 158 champions from 12 organizations are analyzed for how strategic practices enable and disable strategic champions in their work. A tension is discovered between recursive practices contributing to ontological security, achieved through predictability, and adaptive practices contributing to individual ownership of strategy, achieved through personal interpretation.

Key words • agency • ontological security • sensemaking • strategic champions • strategic practice

Introduction

Although the strategy of an organization can be presented in abstract terms and numbers, strategy is also a social practice, present in the everyday lives of organizational members. This social, everyday aspect of strategy still remains largely unexplored. Who are the strategists, the individuals whose practices should be studied? The answer I propose is: the champions of strategy. Champions as defined here are individuals trying to influence strategic issues larger than their own immediate operational responsibilities.[1] A champion is an individual who reports taking action in trying to influence the organization to affect strategically important issues. What makes an issue strategically important? Here, such issues are defined as both issues an individual agent calls strategic and issues the agent reports as crucial for the organization's success, survival or completion of its mission. What does influencing mean? The activities involved in influencing strategic issues are quite varied: seeking to affect the opinions or activities of superiors, peers and subordinates, seeking to change the organization or its systems, seeking to secure resources and so on. The potential ways and objectives of championing cover the whole process of strategy: the formation of the content of strategy as well as the process of implementing strategic contents.

In this article, I will analyze strategic practices as enablers and disablers of championing. By strategic practices, I am referring to first, concepts, tools and techniques involved in making strategies (Whittington, 2002), such as techniques for analyzing competitive environments and competencies, tools for planning, target-setting, organizing and projecting; and second, social routines which strategy workers regard as central to strategy formation and implementation, such as recurrent meetings, processes, traditions, rituals and so on. Strategic practices structure the flow of everyday strategy work. According to Whittington (2002), practices are: 'the "done thing", in both the sense of accepted as legitimate and the sense of well-practised through repeated doing in the past' (Whittington, 2002: 3).

I regard the question of which practices enable and disable strategic championing as the essential question regarding agency in strategic practice, which in turn has been defined as a key question for the strategy-as-practice paradigm (Jarzabkowski, 2004). In this study, individuals at all organizational levels are allowed to decide whether they have tried to act as strategic champions. Concentrating research efforts solely on managers or even on middle managers promotes ideological managerialism, a risk to strategic management (Shrivastava, 1986; Knights and Morgan, 1991). But studies of micro-strategy such as this should avoid the risk of treating all individual action as strategically relevant, that is, 'avoid observing individuals flipping hamburgers'[2] (Westley, 1990; Johnson et al., 2003; Whittington, 2003).

The strategy-as-practice paradigm seeks to understand strategy as the work content of strategists, that is, the various practices that strategists engage in (Whittington, 1996, 2003; Johnson et al., 2003), as well as the nature of the practice itself (Whittington et al., 2003; Jarzabkowski, 2004). Based on theories associated with the practice turn in social science, the focus of the strategy-as-practice paradigm lies between organizational macro structures and individual activities, in the practices (routines, tools, techniques, etc.) that enable and constrain activity, and which in turn are reproduced in micro-activity (Giddens, 1984; Schatzki, 2001; Whittington, 2002). A central motivation for the strategy-as-practice paradigm is that, while strategic management has a history spanning half a century, our knowledge of what strategists actually do is alarmingly limited (Whittington, 2003).

Strategic champion as a social position

What does it mean, in theoretical terms, to be a strategic champion? It is possible to treat championship as a functional role for an individual, role being defined as the totality of expectations directed toward an individual within a social structure (Katz and Kahn, 1966). The problem with regarding championing as a functional role is that such a view does not give proper attention to individuals who are willing, but unable, to champion issues they regard as

strategically important. While championing activities have been discussed by a variety of literatures, within or closely related to strategic management, including internal evolutionism (Burgelman, 1991; Noda and Bower, 1996; Lovas and Ghoshal, 2000), innovation management (Schön, 1963; Chakrabarti, 1974; Howell and Higgins, 1990; Day, 1994), strategic learning (Crossan and Berdrow, 2003) and strategic renewal (Floyd and Lane, 2000; Floyd and Wooldridge, 2000), this discussion has not yet addressed those champions willing, but unable, to play a role. Issue-selling authors (see Dutton et al., 2002 for the latest discussion) have sought to 'unravel and make sense of the microprocesses that compose strategic change' (Dutton et al., 2001: 732). The issue-selling discourse has provided us with important knowledge about the characteristics of successful championing processes. This article seeks in part to extend this work by elaborating the linkages between individual championing activities and organizational strategy, using the language of strategy theorizing.

It is reasonable to assume that many strategy processes are not completely functional in the roles people play: some people who could have contributed are left out. As Westley (1990) has reminded us with her discussion of the inclusion and exclusion of middle managers, in real life all sorts of contingent phenomena keep individuals from realizing functional roles. Some champions are enabled in their championing activities, others are thwarted, prevented from channeling their activity in a way they regard as corresponding to organizational interests.

To be able to account for both types of champions, I will treat champion as a social position instead of a role. In his theory of structuration, Giddens (1984) replaces the deterministic concept of role with social position, by which he means the nexus of an individual agent and social structure – both the expectations placed externally and the volitions arising subjectively. The theory of structuration recognizes the knowledgeability of agents as they interact with social structures, allowing agents a degree of self-determination. In the structuration context, I can reach beyond functional frameworks (a possibility suggested by Ranson et al., 1980) of ideal role distributions toward the practices that constitute strategy, the enablers and disablers through which knowledgeable champions become either enabled or thwarted.

The goal of this article is to explore the enablers and disablers of the championing of strategy practitioners. Enabled and thwarted champions at all organizational levels are granted a voice about what practices enable and disable their championing. Utilizing a framework introduced by Jarzabkowski (2004), I will analyze the enabling and disabling strategic practices as either adaptive or recursive, thus linking my results firmly into the discussion of strategy-as-practice, as an empirical exploration of one of its central theoretical frameworks. Jarzabkowski's framework has been influenced by structuration, and reflects the central notion of structuration that social structures reproduce certain practices in social action (recursivity), but are themselves transformed (or adapted) in social action.

Data production and analysis

Because the issue of thwarted champions is largely unexplored, I chose an inductive approach to producing empirical evidence. Since I was interested in microphenomena, I wanted to gain an accurate understanding of my topic, even at the cost of simplicity and generality (Langley, 1999). Langley (1999) argues that, of the approaches in process research, grounded theory suits this purpose best. She argues that grounded theory 'demands a fairly large number of comparable incidents that are all richly described' (Langley, 1999: 700). I needed a large set of interview texts (rich description), produced using the same interview outline (comparability), drawn from many individuals from many organizations (large number).

Data

The data set from which champions were identified consists of 301 semi-structured interviews of individuals from 12 organizations. The interview data were produced by four researchers (myself included) in a research project intent on understanding what we at the time thought to be the central problem in strategy implementation. Our central objective was to understand how organizational strategies meet, or fail to meet, with everyday work. To understand this fundamental implementation dilemma, we wanted to form an understanding of the strategy processes of our case organizations, as well as the content of their strategies.

Each of the four researchers[3] conducted an equal portion of the interviews. I personally conducted 76 interviews. We created a semi-structured interview outline wide enough to facilitate the needs of four researchers with various viewpoints on organizational strategy. In addition to a large number of questions related directly to the interviewees' strategic activities (e.g. 'How do you participate in your organization's strategy process?'), the interview outline contained questions screening the interviewee's conceptions of strategy in general (e.g. 'What do you understand by the term strategy?'), as well as issues affecting work practices in general (e.g. 'Have there been changes in your work lately?' 'What kinds of changes?').

The semi-structured interview outline that we created remained stable through the 301 interviews. The same outline was used in all 12 organizations. In order to arrive at everyday examples of the practices of strategy, we included a section in the interview outline which discussed an organization-specific strategic content. The content represented a key objective in the official strategy for the organization and was selected from the official strategy statements in cooperation with a group of people representing different interest groups (top management, personnel and organization developers). The content was especially useful in discussing strategy-related issues with operative personnel members who felt less comfortable with the specialist language of strategic management.

The content of the interview outline was therefore quite firmly based on the formal strategy of each organization. Whittington (2003) has suggested that current strategy-as-practice research would benefit most by concentrating on the formal practices of strategy because they are more easily traceable empirically, and because strategy practitioners widely practice these formal aspects, of which little is known. Yet it must be admitted that the choice to concentrate on formal aspects in the interview outline somewhat limits my ability to account for emergent phenomena.

Context, site and interviewee selection

The selection of the interviewees within the 12 organizations was randomized, ensuring, however, that different tasks, work groups and departments were represented. The interviews were conducted in privacy, in most cases in a meeting room of the particular organization. The duration of the interviews ranged between one and two hours. The interviews were tape-recorded with the approval of the interviewees, and transcribed verbatim. In addition to the interview texts, contextual data were gathered in the form of documents related to the organization's strategy process: graphs, strategy documents, annual reports, goal definitions, memos, etc. These data were used in forming a pre-understanding of the specific context against which the account of each individual interviewee could be considered.

The organizations studied operate mainly in northern Europe. They are mainly professional service organizations, consisting of eight companies from finance, retail and telecommunications sectors and four government/municipal organizations. We wanted to find organizations in which operational employees have a component of independent decision-making in their daily work. The educational background of the interviewees reflects this delimitation since many have university backgrounds. The size of the organizations or the organizational units[4] under study was 100–500 employees. The level of operative personnel forms the largest group of interviewees, corresponding to the lack of research utilizing them as informants when discussing strategy. Middle managers are also well represented for similar reasons. Our choice to include the operative personnel and middle management in our interview sample provided me with abundant data for exploring the reasons why the frequency of champions and especially enabled champions lessens the lower you go in the organization, as can be witnessed in Table 1.

Table 1 demonstrates that the frequencies of champions and enabled champions vary to a great degree between organizations. However, this variance cannot be explained through the field of business the organization is in, or through any other single variable. Table 1 demonstrates this to a certain degree, as does my experience gained through being involved with these organizations in the design and implementation of our research. I would argue that the reason for this variance is deeply context-dependent, reflecting the history of strategy

Table 1 Frequency of champions in the interview sample

Organization	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	Total
Sector	Telecommunications			Banking & finance				Retail	Governmental/Municipal				
Interviewees (N)	25	25	25	25	24	25	25	27	25	25	25	25	301
Champions (%)	64.0	80.0	80.0	44.0	54.2	48.0	48.0	55.6	36.0	32.0	52.0	76.0	55.8
Enabled champions (%)	40.0	40.0	16.0	32.0	20.8	36.0	40.0	48.1	32.0	24.0	44.0	28.0	33.4
Top managers (N)	2	2	3	2	5	3	3	3	5	3	4	4	39
Champions (%)	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	80.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	80.0	66.7	100.0	100.0	93.9
Enabled champions (%)	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	20.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	80.0	33.3	75.0	50.0	79.9
Middle managers (N)	7	6	6	9	11	5	6	12	5	6	5	5	83
Champions (%)	100.0	83.3	66.7	77.8	54.5	80.0	66.7	100.0	40.0	100.0	80.0	80.0	77.4
Enabled champions (%)	42.9	66.7	16.7	55.6	27.3	80.0	33.3	83.3	40.0	83.3	60.0	20.0	50.8
Operative personnel (N)	16	17	16	14	8	17	16	12	15	16	16	16	179
Champions (%)	43.8	76.5	18.8	14.3	37.5	29.4	31.3	0.0	20.0	0.0	31.3	68.8	31.0
Enabled champions (%)	31.3	23.5	0.0	7.1	12.5	17.6	25.0	0.0	13.3	0.0	31.3	25.0	15.6

discourse in these organizations. A proper explication of this variance would require a multiple-case setting and therefore falls out of the scope of this article and left to future pursuits.

Table 1 demonstrates that, as expected, top managers mainly regarded themselves as champions, as did a large majority of middle managers. It is noteworthy, however, that almost a third of operative-level personnel members regarded themselves as champions. While this ratio is certainly lower than at upper levels, the fact that there has been little or no discussion on operative personnel roles in strategy literature is disturbing. This concern is heightened by the perception that two-thirds of the middle managers and only about a half of the operative employees who were active in championing strategic issues were able to perform the roles they sought in the strategy process. Furthermore, it must be asked whether the lower ratio of champions at lower organizational levels is at least partially related to the lesser possibilities of enabled championing at lower levels. While calls made on behalf of middle management involvement in strategy (Westley, 1990; Floyd and Wooldridge, 2000) are relevant, the role of operative personnel needs to be explored further.

Analyzing the data

As I started reading the interviews, my research question was still largely unformed. The question of champions with their enablers and disablers came about when, having read a number of the interview texts, I realized that many of the interviewees spent a lot of time discussing how organizational strategies impacted on their personal work, i.e. not just on large-scale organizational activities. I started to read the interviews as miniature life stories about an individual and his/her organization's strategy.

I started my analysis by detecting the champions among the interview mass, categorizing the accounts as either enabled or thwarted. Next, I identified enablers and disablers to championing in their accounts and analyzed them as either adaptive or recursive practices, inspired by Jarzabkowski's (2004) adaptive/recursive framework for strategic practices. I continued by analyzing how these practices enabled and disabled individuals in their championing. Finally, I analyzed the variances between the organizational authority positions: top managers, middle managers and operative personnel, in what they reported as enabling or disabling.

Selecting the champions

The interview data set of 301 interviews consists of approximately 3000 pages of transcribed talk. How does one approach such a large corpus of text? First my mindset was emphatic (Patton, 1990), which means that I tried to understand what the interviewees were trying to communicate about their social positions, trying to relate to the situations of my informants. I had already started to read the interviews as life stories, so I structured this approach by

writing a micro-narrative of each interview text (Boje, 2001), describing the agent's social position from the viewpoint of organizational strategy, and the reasons leading to that position. By doing this, I attempted to unlock the narrative knowledge (Polkinghorne, 1988; Bruner, 1996) the agent possessed of his/her own social positions.

The selection of champions was the first pressing question. The champions presented here are people who report trying to influence issues they regard as central to their organization's success or survival, issues not belonging to their immediate operative responsibilities. This means trying to influence, for example, other people's opinions, larger organizational systems. Of the 301 individuals interviewed, 158, a surprisingly high number, were analyzed as champions.

In the selection of champions, my epistemological approach was subjectivist in the sense that I did not seek to formulate external criteria for champions, but relied on their own perceptions of their personal activity level. I did not, for instance, try to reason whether an individual was justified in calling herself a champion. In methodological terms, I thought along the lines of Harré and Secord (1972), who regard individual agents as the best source of information in the quest to elucidate subjective frames of reference underlying social phenomena. This approach enabled me to account for thwarted champions as well as enabled champions.

The key issue for distinguishing enabled and thwarted champions in each micro-narrative was whether the individual had the ability to influence issues related to organizational strategy. Influence is defined here as a specific form of power[5] (Lukes, 1974), being defined as 'the ability to affect another's attitudes, beliefs or behaviors' (Huczynski, 1996: 6) in explicit decision-making processes (as in Dahl, 1957), as well as in the ability to 'mobilize bias', to bring issues into the decision-making agenda (Bacharach and Baratz, 1962). Micro-narratives were devised in which individuals who were content with their influence possibilities were coded as enabled champions, whereas the narratives in which individuals were unhappy with influence possibilities were coded as thwarted champion narratives.

Finding enablers and disablers

My next task was analyzing the micro-narratives, identifying practices enabling and disabling champions, and interpreting the practices as recursive or adaptive. Whenever individuals made reference to recurrent social activity in their organization which they regarded as a key to their enabled or thwarted champion position, such references were coded as enabling or disabling practices. Instead of emphatic, my mindset was analytic (Patton, 1990), as my key interest was not in understanding what my informant was going through but in categorizing the practices I encountered.

Early on, I had noticed that all thwarted champion interviews contained explanations why the champion regarded him-herself as thwarted. These explanations can be called 'narrative causes', following Polkinghorne (1988).

Narrative causes are explanations which make sense in a story. As Weick (1995) would put it, such explanation is driven by plausibility rather than accuracy. I chose to call such explanations that referred to a strategic practice disablers. Enabled-champion accounts, however, contained references to practices that were regarded as an explanation of their successful championing. I chose to call them enablers. As I went through the interviews, I noticed that micro-narratives were not black and white, in the sense that both enablers and disablers could be encountered in both enabled and thwarted champion groups. I coded all champion micro-narratives as seeking for enablers and disablers.

Assuring credibility

The use of a semi-structured interview outline enabled the collection of a large, relatively coherent, mass of interview data, while nevertheless enabling an interviewee to actively address emergent topics within the theme (Patton, 1990). While it must be recognized that an interview situation is never politically neutral (Alvesson, 2003), the fact that judgements concerning the interviewee's championing activity and his/her influence possibilities were drawn hermeneutically by reading complete interview texts instead of relying on explicit questionnaires or even isolated interview questions decreased potential biases produced by impression management or over-positive self-attributions on the part of the interviewees.

In conducting the interviews, the four researchers agreed as their guiding principle that care should be taken to avoid question begging. When the first interviews had been conducted, we listened to recordings of each other's interviews and discussed what questions and styles of posing them were suspect and should be avoided. We sought to be critical of our own biases during the interviews, and through our awareness of them, to remove their effect on the data.

In the interpretation of data, awareness of what Patton (1990) refers to as the evaluator effect is a central part of the credibility of the researcher's interpretation of his/her data. A researcher is always trapped in his/her personal interpretive horizon to some extent. In the following text I have sought to address this concern by making my inferences as transparent as possible and illustrating my analyses with quotations. I also wanted to conduct an external test of the credibility of my analyses. I asked an independent reviewer, unaware of the results of my coding, to read 31 interviews (approximately a tenth of the mass of 301 interviews), selected at random, and write his/her own micro-narratives concerning the interviewees' social positions. Of his/her judgements, two are relevant here:[6] whether the interviewee was a champion or not, and whether the interviewee was satisfied with the degree to which he/she found it possible to influence issues in the strategy process (enabled/thwarted champion). In the first judgement, the overlap between me and the secondary coder was 82 percent, while in the second judgement, it was 76 percent. Considering the fact that a secondary coder could not accompany me through the whole journey of

analyzing the data, as well as the complexity of the task of interpreting complete micro-narratives, I think the overlap is satisfactory.

Enablers and disablers

My research problem can be broken down into three key research questions: first, what practices enable and disable championing; second, how these practices enable and disable championing; and third, who these practices enable and disable.

What practices enable and disable championing?

When I had coded all the champion micro-narratives, the first thing I did was to create a typology of practices the champions made reference to. All the practices could either enable or disable the champions. When a practice was referenced as a disabler, the champion either complained that a lack of the practice disabled championing, or that the existing practice was defective in some way. Letting the data guide me, I coded instances of practices, first forming a large number of rough categories, gradually forming more and more fundamental categories. This approach is called the constant comparative method by Glaser and Strauss (1967). I grouped the practices into three main categories, which arose from the data: strategy formation practices, organizing practices and control practices. The categories do not represent discrete stages in strategy processes, or ontologically unconnected phenomena, but practice-level viewpoints on strategy.

For strategy formation practices, the key question is how participants come to understand strategy and its relation to their work, i.e. the process by which they make sense of how their activities are related to organizational strategy. Here, I follow Mintzberg's (1978) view that organizational strategy is formed (as opposed to being formulated) through the actions of multiple participants. Formation encompasses both strategy implementation and creation, since strategy emerges as a coherent pattern of collective activities, some executive and some operative.

Organizing practices lead to the legitimation of activities: what is agreed as the proper way of acting according to strategy, how the tasks of individuals and units correspond to strategy, who is obligated and who is allowed to act and so on. Such legitimation is necessary, if organizing, defined by Weick (1979: 3) as 'a consensually validated grammar for reducing equivocality by means of sensible interlocked behaviors', is to succeed. As Weick argues, organizing requires people to do different things in an interlocked manner, which requires the legitimation of action. Indeed, strategy can be regarded as a key determinant of what activities are regarded as legitimate, and only strategies regarded as legitimate have a possibility of succeeding (Neilsen and Rao, 1987).

Control practices determine how resources, such as money, work and knowledge, are distributed in organizations. These practices are needed because it is not enough for a champion to be able to make sense of his or her actions in terms of organizational strategy (formation), to know what sort of behavior is expected or discouraged in his or her position (organizing). He/she also needs to be able to leverage the necessary resources to accomplish the behaviors he/she regards essential. I follow Giddens (1984), who defines control as the distribution of resources.

As I analyzed the categorization of practices I had come up with, I realized that there were tensions between the practices, especially in terms of which practices the champions reported as beneficial to their organization. For instance, claims can be made that in strategy formation, on the one hand, strategy should be operationalized into tightly explicated, measurable targets; while on the other hand, it is as easy to argue that individuals should have a measure of freedom in making sense of what organizational strategy means for them. This dichotomy fits perfectly with Jarzabkowski's (2004) notion that strategic practices are recursive or adaptive. An emphasis on operationalization fits perfectly with the idea of a single-loop organization, seeking stability and control in its strategic pursuits, typical of a recursive view on strategic practices. However, the emphasis on sensegiving/sensemaking (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991) suggests an emphasis on adaptive practices, typical of a double-loop organization, in which fluidity and reflexivity replaces stability (Jarzabkowski, 2004). The division into adaptive and recursive was compelling, first because I felt the narrative causes could be clearly interpreted as corresponding to one or the other, and second because the division is one of the main theoretical frameworks in the strategy-as-practice paradigm, the empirical testing of which has a potential for contributing to knowledge creation in that field.

I analyzed the practices, labeling each practice type as either adaptive or recursive, leaning heavily on the interview texts. After adapting my practice categories and coding to facilitate this dichotomy, I arrived at the classification in Table 2.

Formation practices

Sensegiving practices form the largest group of formation practices. They consist of communication activities between superiors and subordinates at various organizational levels in which a shared understanding of strategy is being created in interactive discussions. The topic of these discussions was what current strategy meant for an organization and the individual.

> I at least feel a pang of guilt about communication. I think strategy has not been communicated well enough; there have not been enough strategy discussions. I don't think strategy can be communicated by writing it down and saying: 'That's it.'

Table 2 Strategic practices as enablers and disablers

Practice	Type	N enabling	N disabling
Strategy formation			
Official feedback mechanisms	Recursive	21	12
Official information dissemination practices	Recursive	10	3
Strategy operationalization practices	Recursive	47	39
Sensegiving practices	Adaptive	106	33
Organizing			
Cross-organizational development projects	Adaptive	9	2
Continuous negotiations of responsibility	Adaptive	11	19
Organization design practices	Recursive	12	4
Personnel development practices	Recursive	7	0
Task definition practices	Recursive	11	7
Control			
Influence practices through social networks	Adaptive	12	3
Official participation practices	Recursive	42	18
Performance evaluation practices	Recursive	47	19
Resource mobilization practices	Recursive	10	19
Rewarding practices	Recursive	8	8

Sensegiving practices can be regarded as adaptive because they allow an individual to creatively interpret strategy in daily activities. Organizing is adapted through such sensemaking (Weick, 1995). But meaning can also be created through the use of recursive practices intended to create a unified conception of strategy throughout the organization through planned and structuralized activities. Information dissemination practices are used with the goal of sharing explicit and objective information on organizational goals through the use of pre-planned channels such as internal bulletins, CEO speeches, the intranet and so on.

> These [strategy documents] are accessible for everyone to read on the [Intranet] … they pop up in the screen first when you open the Intranet. They are accessible to everybody, but of course it is up to the individual whether he/she reads them or not …

Another type of practice mentioned in a recursive context was the use of feedback channels. Feedback channels were mentioned as pre-planned practices through which opinions of official strategy could be communicated back to the official strategists. Both electronic media such as intranets, or even mobile SMS applications on the one hand, and official meetings and other spatial-temporally fixed practices on the other, were mentioned as feedback channels.

While information dissemination and feedback deal with communication, operationalization practices, another important recursive phenomenon, deal

with the translation of strategy into explicit targets. Many elementary accounts of strategy implementation regard this as a key step for the implementation of strategy. Ansoffian planning literature (Ansoff, 1984) and more recent accounts, such as the discussion on the Balanced scorecard (Kaplan and Norton, 1996), argue that only through explicit targets is the shared understanding of strategy possible. Issue selling authors also reverberate this argument in a top-down context, as they have shown how the packaging of bottom-up ideas in the language of the official strategy process is a key success factor for selling issues to the top management (Dutton and Ashford, 1993; Dutton et al., 2001).

> Well, I guess I have sort of a vague conception of [a key strategy content], but I guess it should be more detailed, at least when there are so many of us working here, it would seem that we would need more specific guidelines in quite a few issues.

> … these balanced scorecards they send us…This is the first one I have seen that you can actually take back and tell them that **this and this** really sucks. Until now we have had scorecards sent to us that were so weird that you could not find one item in them that was connected to the real world …

The tension between recursive and adaptive practices is quite visible in strategy formation. The recursive approach stresses a unified conception of strategy through the dissemination of information, i.e. objective knowledge, through pre-defined methods of giving feedback and through the operationalization of strategy into explicit targets. Adaptive practices, however, place their emphasis on a dynamic understanding of strategy built on individual interpretations of strategy, achieved through impromptu discussions between strategists and implementers. These two are clearly distinct ideals and may often be incompatible, since there is little room for individual interpretation of strategy if it is regarded as an objective phenomenon, existing as pre-explicated targets.

Organizing practices

In organizing practices, as with formation practices, a tension forms between recursive and adaptive approaches to organizing. The recursive approach means planned practices of organization design, as suggested by the maxim 'structure follows strategy' (Chandler, 1962), and correspondingly, the design of individual tasks to support strategy implementation. Some champions also mentioned personnel development activities such as training and the pre-planning and structuring of individual career paths as enabling if linked to the completion of organizational strategy.

> The problem was that there was no training given [a key strategy content] – we just talked the issue through with my colleagues …

Adaptive organizing practices were built upon a continuous negotiation of responsibility between individuals and units. The lack of adaptive organizing

practices was presented as disabling when new strategies conflicted with old task designs, which people sought to maintain as best as they could. A more structured form of adaptive organizing practices was presented by cross-organizational development projects that enabled champions to interpret solutions to strategic issues without having to rely on their pre-determined task designs.

> The key is to have a continuous discussion with the personnel regarding [our organization's] vision and the targets set for our unit. 'BANG! Our objectives are dropping on us from out of the blue!' We must not allow ourselves to be surprised like that.

Control practices

In control practices, again a clear tension is built between recursive and adaptive approaches. The recursive approaches clearly have an upper hand. Champions commended and yearned for explicit channels and procedures through which resources could be leveraged when needed. Likewise, they mentioned official participation practices in a similar manner. Many champions desired a fixed place to have their say in strategic matters and a clear sanction for having a voice in certain issues. For instance, strategy processes that had a bottom-up stage in which departmental plans were created before being synthesized into a coherent strategy by the top management team received praise, because champions clearly felt they could recognize their task and input into the strategy process.

A clear operationalization in the strategy formation dimension is reflected in the control dimension in the form of performance-evaluation metrics and associated rewarding. When targets are explicit, they can be measured. When measurements are explicit, performance can be rewarded. A yearning for this clear logic was present in many championing accounts, and in the cases where such practices existed, they were often regarded as enabling.

> Our strategy is not linked to our measurement instruments. You can make assumptions and say: 'Hey, you did a great job and reached all your objectives', but how that is related to the realization of our strategy or vision, that's the problem, I mean, those linkages.

While enabling control practices were typically seen in a recursive light, some champions also brought up adaptive control practices. Typically these were mentioned by individuals who did not have access to official control channels, but who still wanted to have an effect on issues they regarded strategically important. The adaptive option to control was to make use of unofficial social networks within the organization. Older employees clearly had an edge in using such practices because they had had the time to build such personal networks.

> The possibilities I have of influencing the strategy process are excellent because I know everybody at headquarters … I actually have to censor myself sometimes, because I am beginning to sound like an old fart …

How practices enable and disable championing

Having identified the practices and having built the typology, I was ready to start exploring the question of how strategic practices enable and disable championing. As stated in the methodology section, the practices were drawn from explanations why the champions saw themselves as enabled or thwarted, from the narrative causes presented in each champion's micro-narrative.

My original intent was to build a model of championing around the structuration dimensions of signification, domination and legitimation, but after extensive coding exercises, the narrative causes did not seem to bend to that form of explanation. While the three groups of practices have strong links to the structuration dimensions, the narrative causes presented by the champions often involved a more complex logic, involving many dimensions at once. This corresponds well to what Boje (2001) calls antenarrative, that is, in dealing with texts produced in discourse with real people in real organizations, we are not dealing with complete narratives with neat structural plotlines, but with bits and pieces, fragments of narrative. These fragments form an antenarrative, something preceding narrative but not quite reaching fulfillment.

I chose to use these bits and pieces of explanation to construct four types of antenarratives: two types corresponding to recursive practices as enabling and disabling, and two corresponding to adaptive recursive practices as enabling and disabling. The elementary narratives are further structured according to the three strategic practice categories of formation, organizing and control (Table 3). The stories are partial answers to why adaptive or recursive practices enable championing, and why a lack of proper examples of such practices leads to thwarted championing. The disabling properties are often rather complex because a lack of a practice, yet also an improper practice; they could both be regarded as a source of the problem. For instance, in some cases, the lack of a performance-based reward system could be reported as a problem; while in other instances the existence of a reward system based on strategically unimportant performance could also be a problem.

Is there a common denominator to the bits of antenarrative in Table 3? I would argue that the primary insight is psychological, and it can be reached by looking at the conclusions of the small stories contained in the cells. The conclusions in the recursive cells can be interpreted to contain a yearning for security through predictability, whereas in the adaptive cells, this yearning is directed towards personal ownership of strategy through freedom of interpretation.

Security through predictability with recursive practices
Typical of an emphasis on recursive practices is a need for order and preplanning in strategy championing. Formal channels for information dissemination and feedback enable a wide audience for strategy-related matters and provide an equal opportunity to voice opinions. Operationalized targets and

Table 3 Ways in which adaptive and recursive practices enable and disable championing

	Why recursive practices enable championing	Quotations	Why lack of proper recursive practices disables championing	Quotations	Why adaptive practices enable championing	Quotations	Why lack of proper adaptive practices disables championing	Quotations
Strategy formation	Formal information dissemination practices ensure that individuals hear about strategy Formal feedback channels ensure that champions are able to voice their ideas Clearly operationalized targets and measurements allow for understanding of strategy and result in feelings of predictability and control	*N=78* '*the content of our strategy seems pretty clear because the same basic message is repeated in all official communications*' '*I feel my feedback is acknowledged in our annual goal-setting discussions*' '*I have a relatively good understanding of strategy because it is broken down into smaller targets*'	Lack of explicit targets results in strategy being regarded as a platitude or conflicting, and in confusions regarding application Lack of explicit information dissemination and feedback practices result in individuals feeling disrespected, resulting in demotivation	*N=54* '*I have to decide for myself which targets to strive for, because the official targets are so muddled*' '*it feels just great that I don't get to see our strategy process diagram before a university researcher [the interviewer] shows it to me*'	An individual is motivated to champion strategy because it provides purpose for her work Ownership of interpretation of proper work practices motivates an individual Interactive communication between strategists and implementers helps the latter implementers find applications for strategy and deepens the formen's understanding of implementation issues	*N=106* '*I am happy this is our organization's strategy because it allows me to make a positive contribution to our customers*' '*I've been able to contribute to my unit's strategy at a very deep level*' '*I've been lucky to have access to our CEO*'	Lack of sensegiving support of disseminated information leads to confusion regarding applications Lack of interaction between implementers and strategists leads to unrealistic objectives and demotivation Sensemaking failure concerning strategic direction leads to demotivation and feelings of insecurity and powerlessness	*N=33* '*The targets they send me – they make little sense. I don't even know who sets them*' '*you can discard most management communications as non-relevant*' '*I have trouble seeing what our top management thinks. [The BU vice president] only comes in once a year to give his Christmas speech*'

| Organizing | Changes in organization structure transcend talk, directing resources to proper areas

Designed career paths based on measurable strategic action motivate championing

Explicit task definitions allow for the comprehension of one's role as a part of a greater unity | *N=30*
'when people noticed that the organization was being changed, they also started showing an interest in [a key strategy content]'
'I feel my whole career path this far has been designed so that I could function better strategically'
'We have built a matrix that defines who works with whom in implementing [a key strategy content]' | Ambiguous or dated organization design leads to strategy being regarded as just talk

Over-specialization in strategic tasks undermines the feelings of responsibility of champions, leading to powerlessness and demotivation

Task design not reflecting strategy creates conflict in priorities | *N=11*
'our regional managers act like small kings in personal lagoons'
'our problem is that we keep hiring specialists when everybody should share the responsibility'
'I don't know what a person in my position should be doing to implement [a key strategy content].' | Continuous negotiation of responsibility leads to ownership of work and flexibility in the application of strategic ideas

Cross-organizational development projects challenge the status quo, leading to better cooperation between both implementers and organizational units | *N=20*
'to say that we ''communicate a.bout strategy'' is a bit grandiose . . . what we do [in my unit] is continuously agree who does what'
'our striving to get [a quality award] really acted as a symbol for collaboration' | An abundance of non-relevant development projects takes time from more crucial activities, leading to frustration

Individuals sticking to externally defined roles leads to poor cooperation in strategy implementation | *N=21*
'I spend so much time in development meetings that no real work gets done'
'we should place more trust on each others' competence. I should not be forced to make ten phone calls to convince others that an idea not falling under my [immediate job description] is valid enough for implementation' |

Table 3 Continued

	Why recursive practices enable championing	Quotations	Why lack of proper recursive practices disables championing	Quotations	Why adaptive practices enable championing	Quotations	Why lack of proper adaptive practices disables championing	Quotations
Control	Official participation practices create a feeling of ownership of strategy Performance evaluation based on operationalized strategic targets creates a sense of control over one's success and failure Rewarding based on performance evaluation creates a feeling of championing being valued	*N*=107 '*Participation in the discussion of [our unit's] strategy is not an optional activity – if you are not present in these discussions, you should have a good reason. We are all in this together.*' '*My personal motivation [to implement a key strategy content] stems from the fact that it is measurable and there is a possibility for tangible successes.*' '*at the end of the day, it's up to you whether you meet your objectives*'	Lacking official participation practices result in a feeling that the strategy is being dictated, or at least in a confusion about whether participation is sought after or not Lack of rewarding of strategic action, in terms of a lacking or a faulty rewarding system demotivates championing Lack of official practices to secure resources for strategic activities, especially in cross-functional contexts, demotivates championing	*N*=64 '*of course I'd like to have some say in the targets they set for me*' '*the rewarding criteria should be personal and linked to strategy. I understand what our strategy is but fail to see financial incentives for my implementing it*' '*Our organization is too compartmental-ized . . . it's really tough to secure resources across department borders.*'	Social networks possessed by an individual champion enables her to secure resources and influence the organization, past official structures	*N*=12 '*The personal connections I have acquired over the years have been priceless . . . I have been able to overstep many official boundaries by influencing old acquaintances*'	Lack of a social network leaves the champion feeling helpless about her chances of making things happen	*N*=3 '*not knowing the right people is a real problem around here*'

associated measures enable an individual to be an active player in creating strategic performance, as well as reap rewards from it. Explicit task designs and macro-structures, coupled with personnel development practices, create a sense that strategy is a legitimate practice. Official participation practices and channels of mobilizing resources empower championing. But lack of explicitness, an oblique sense of legitimate organizing and unexplicated forms of control, the enemies of the recursive standpoint, lead to confusion, powerlessness, demotivation and cynicism.

When one looks at the antenarrative excerpts in Table 3, there are certain commonalties between the conclusions of the stories: enabling practices lead to a feeling of security through being able to predict the possibilities one has of acting as a champion. Recursive practices seem indeed to draw on the champion's sense of control through predictability. This view corresponds well with the sociological notion of ontological security, i.e. that individuals build their identities on a sense of being able to predict how the environment will correspond to their activities (Giddens, 1991). The standard associated response to a breach in ontological security is existential anxiety (Giddens, 1991). The responses to a lack of proper practices in the recursive stories involve phenomena such as powerlessness, confusion, cynicism and demotivation. Nobody mentions feeling anxiety, but it can be hypothesized that expressions such as these can be regarded as ways of expressing the anxiety of not being able to predict the proper ways of working in the strategy process.

Ownership through freedom with adaptive practices

Adaptive practices such as interactive impromptu discussions concerning strategy, continuous negotiation of responsibility and exerting influence through social networks enabled champions to express their ideas and create a feeling of ownership about their work. Adaptive practices, through which organizational strategy adapts to internal and external pressures, also seem to be a source of creative freedom and joy in the work of individuals interested in strategy, although one can also freely hypothesize that placing an emphasis on adaptive practices, even at a conscious level, may lead to harmful effects on ontological security through the lack of recursive practices.

Whereas recursive practices deal with an individual's sense of ontological security achieved through predictability, adaptive practices seem to feed on an individual's sense of self-achievement through creativity and personal expression. Adaptive practices, being based on distributed of control of strategy work to communities of practice throughout the organization (Jarzabkowski, 2004), are directly related to feelings of psychological ownership, because distributed control means more control for individuals over strategy. Furthermore, freedom to make sense of strategy also leads to more intimate knowledge of strategic issues for an individual, as the content of strategy is personalized through individual sensemaking. A sense of control and intimate knowledge have both been

traced as sources for psychological ownership of organizational factors (Pierce et al., 2001).

A key success factor for adaptive practices seems to be the champion's ability to make sense of strategy on one's own terms, by interpreting what strategy means in context. Weick (2001) argues that 'any old map will do' as a strategy, i.e. strategy is driven by plausibility rather than accuracy. Champions who emphasize adaptive practices as enablers seem to agree. They are not interested in an explicit strategy content broken down as targets, 'an up-to-date and specific map', but in 'any old map' which acts as a launch pad for sensemaking, allowing for individual interpretation.

Who do the practices enable and disable?

I have demonstrated earlier how the number of both champions and especially enabled champions lessens the lower one looks in an organization (Table 1). Therefore, I was curious to see whether top managers, middle managers and operative employees were enabled and thwarted by the same practices. The enablers and disablers are cross-tabulated with authority position in Table 4.

The first asymmetry between authority positions to be noted is that operative employees seem to be disabled by a lack of recursive practices in strategy formation. This means that at the lower levels of the organization, champions seem to feel a lack of structured and pre-determined ways of acquiring information and giving feedback, as well as explicit definitions. At the higher levels, on the other hand, the emphasis is much more on adaptive formation practices, as top and middle managers felt much more enabled by adaptive practices. The reason for this asymmetry may be that since top and middle managers are expected to do a larger amount of thinking and problem solving in strategizing, they also relish the creative freedom through the sensemaking activities enabled by adaptive formation practices. The fact that they report few adaptive formation disablers communicates as conclusion that in many organizations: first, strategy formation is regarded a creative sensemaking task for higher organizational levels and a task of conforming to explicit targets for lower organizational levels; and second, structured practices for informing, feedback and target operationalization are regarded more lacking than sensegiving practices. However, recursive formation practices were reported as significant enablers by all positions.

A similar sentiment is repeated slightly modified with organizing practices. Recursive organizing enablers such as personnel development, task definition and organization design are reported more as enablers at the lower levels of the organization. An interesting counterpoint is provided by middle managers' frustration about lacking adaptive organizing practices. Whereas personnel members seem to emphasize stability in organizing, middle managers seem to yearn for more flexibility. The middle management, often responsible for carrying out the strategic direction set by the top management, is more likely to be in need

Table 4 Enablers and disablers for champions with different positions of authority

	Strategy formation				Organizing				Control				Total enablers	Total disablers
	Recursive		Adaptive		Recursive		Adaptive		Recursive		Adaptive			
	Enabler	Disabler	Enabler	Disabler	Enabler	Disabler	Enabler	Disabler	Enabler	Disabler	Enabler	Disabler		
Top managers	23	6	41	7	8	2	3	3	27	8	3	0	105	26
Middle managers	33	18	47	13	9	4	10	13	50	29	4	0	153	77
Operative personnel	22	30	18	13	13	5	7	5	30	27	5	3	95	83
													353	186
Top managers %	21.9	23.1	39.0	26.9	7.6	7.7	2.9	11.5	25.7	30.8	2.9	0.0		
Middle managers %	21.6	23.4	30.7	16.9	5.9	5.2	6.5	16.9	32.7	37.7	2.6	0.0		
Operative personnel %	23.2	36.1	18.9	15.7	13.7	6.0	7.4	6.0	31.6	32.5	5.3	3.6		

Note
Percentages calculated as the number quotations in the individual cell/sum of enabler or disabler quotations on the row. The percentage reveals the weight of each category as an enabler or a disabler.

of a malleable organization than top managers, galvanized from the mundane details of organizing, and personnel members, often responsible for operational activities.

Recursive control practices in general seem to be quite crucial, both as enablers and disablers. Adaptive control practices such as influence networks seem to form a weak counter-discourse for recursive practices – in many instances they were mentioned as 'a way out' in cases where recursive practices were lacking or defective. Again, the middle managers are most hampered by the lack of proper recursive control practices for such issues as rewarding, performance evaluation, resource mobilization and participation.

To sum up the profiles of the three organizational positions, top managers seem to be enabled by many things, especially adaptive formation practices, and disabled by few. For middle managers, control is the key issue both as an enabler and disabler, while formation is a close second. The biggest obstacle for middle management championing seems to be a lack of proper control practices. Organizing seems to be a special concern for middle managers. The operative personnel are in a similar position as the middle management in terms of control, yet their greatest concern is a lack of an explicit and predictable position in strategy formation. They do not know where to get their information, where to voice their feedback and where to get clarification for objectives.

Ownership or security? A key choice in strategy processes

What is the ideal repertoire of strategic practices for an organization? Scholars and practitioners seeking to answer this question seem to be in a tight spot. Recursive practices, which bring predictability in their wake, take away creativity and ownership as adaptive practices lose ground. For some champions, a tight set of recursive practices results in a sense of ontological security which enables the focusing of attention on a repertoire of strategic activities. For others, having to march to a pre-written score extinguishes creative energies and personal sensemaking.

There would seem to be two radically different strategy processes (Table 5) that can be built upon these two counterforces, the recursive-driven and the adaptively-driven. Some practice-based authors have made strong and convincing arguments for an adaptive-driven strategy processes. A recent example is Dougherty's (2004: 44) finding that 'conventional approaches to organizing are anti-practice', because they de-legitimize activities in favor of outcomes. Based on results in the context of service organizations, a recursive-driven process, based on formal targets and measurable outcomes, would seem to be harmful to innovation. Yet we should be very careful about over-prescribing adaptive-driven processes to other contexts. I believe my results show that an increase in adaptive practices, while supporting creative freedom for innovation for some, undermines the ontological security of others. Jarzabkowski's (2004) insight

Table 5 Characterization of recursive and adaptive strategy processes

	Key practices in a recursively-driven strategy process	Key practices in an adaptively-driven strategy process
Strategy formation	Explicit operationalization of targets, mechanisms of information dissemination and feedback	Sensegiving as purpose creation hospitable to interpretation and improvisation, interactive discussions
Organizing	Explicit task definition	Continuous negotiation of responsibility
Control	Explicit practices for performance evaluation, resource mobilization, rewarding and participation	Influence practices through social networks

that many valuable strategic practices are recursive is well worth remembering, if we want to avoid falling into the trap of promoting an anti-bureaucratic organization as the model of an ideal strategic organization (see Barker, 1993, for an illuminating discussion).

While the choices involved in determining the correct strategic practices for an organization are difficult, I firmly argue that strategic practices as enablers or disablers of championing pose one of the key questions in understanding why organizational strategy succeeds or fails. Johnson et al. (2003) suggest that one possible performance measure for strategy is to look at immediate consequences of practices, often stated in subjective terms, for instance 'the perceived success of strategy-making episodes' (Johnson et al. 2003: 16). Following their argument, I argue that championing enablers increase the performance of strategy, while disablers reduce it. I have suggested earlier that champions are the key practitioners of strategy. A champion is not likely to regard a strategy-making episode successful if he or she is not enabled in it.

Suggestions for further research

Multiple fundamental issues affect the decision of seeking an adaptive or recursive orientation for the strategy process of one's organization, the identification of which must be left largely to future pursuits. Environmental dynamism affects the topic: Miles and Snow (1978) would no doubt argue that defender organizations are leaning towards a recursive strategy process, whereas prospectors have an adaptive orientation. Brown and Eisenhardt's (1997) notion of managing on the edge of chaos in dynamic environments would seem to suggest a small amount of recursive practices to hold a mass of adaptive practices at bay.

Organizational culture no doubt structures expectations of orderliness and pre-dictability that organizational members place on the strategy process. In the case of small organizations, the answer may even be found in the personalities of individual organizational members, that is, whether they are disposed to seek ontological security or creativity.

As noted in the discussion of Table 1, there were considerable variances of enabled and thwarted champions among organizations, yet those variances could not be reduced to a set of simple variables. I believe an ethnographic or an inductive research design has the most potential benefits for exploring this vari-ance, because the reasons seem to be embedded in context. Such explorations could be harnessed to increasing understanding of related organizational charac-teristics, suggested to enable championing, and studied elsewhere, such as a 'supportive culture and willingness to listen' (Dutton et al., 1997) or the 'robustness of culture' (Burgelman and Grove, 1996).

The enablers and disablers I have laid out can also be developed into testable hypotheses, with the intent of finding consistencies in the presence of different enablers and disablers in different organizations and environments. But one can go further into the area of microsociology, studying the development of the social positions of individual champions, a path outlined theoretically by Westley (1990).

Finally, the group of non-champions is left unexplored here. Among the interviewees there were individuals who, while reporting a positive affect toward strategy, saw strategy as 'someone else's job'. Giving voice to these indi-viduals, as well as those who are cynical of strategy altogether (Mantere, 2003), could provide us with answers on why certain people choose to disregard orga-nizational strategy instead of championing it.

Limitations

In this study, strategic champions were conceptualized based on an individual's own perception of their activity in strategic issues. This choice can be regarded as somewhat controversial, since other authors (e.g. Howell and Higgins, 1990) have built rigorous behavioral criteria for champions. Such an objectivist defini-tion for a champion would not, however, have enabled the study of thwarted champions. No doubt the interviewees discussed their position from their par-ticular frames of reference. No doubt some used power in their accounts – power to make reality seem the way they liked it (Alvesson, 2003). The Foucauldian notion (Foucault, 1980) that power cannot be escaped from is central here; how-ever, setting seemingly value-neutral external criteria for a champion runs a high risk of ideological managerialism (Shrivastava, 1986; Knights and Morgan, 1991; Hardy and Clegg, 1996). In this study, all interviewees were empowered in describing themselves as either champions or non-champions of strategy. A polyphony of voices (Hazen, 1993; Barry and Elmes, 1997; Boje, 2001) was heard instead of one grand narrative.

Grounded-theory approaches have problems in moving from substantive to general theory, since their strength is in accuracy rather than generality or simplicity (Langley, 1999). The strategy-as-practice field needs empirical accuracy right now (Johnson et al., 2003). Therefore, I hope my results contribute something useful to this discussion, even if we are left with many open questions.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1   It can be argued that operative personnel are less likely to be responsible for non-operational issues (e.g. those affecting other people and the organizational structure), while top management is usually responsible for exactly that. It is true that top managers are often supposed to be strategic champions. There is, however, no contradiction here. Even if I am arguing that strategic champions are not necessarily top managers, my definition does not seek to rule out issues determined by official authority position, but to discuss the individual social position as composed both by the official and unofficial component of her social position.

2   This figure of speech was used by Andrew Pettigrew in a strategy research workshop in 2001.

3   Petri Aaltonen, Heini Ikävalko, Saku Mantere and Mari Ventä.

4   If the organization to be studied was larger than 500 people, an organizational unit consisting of 100–500 members was chosen as the unit of study.

5   The third dimension to power, identified by Lukes (1974) as the ability to affect other stakeholders' perceptions of their interests, is left moot here.

6   She also conducted other judgements, the scopes of which fall outside the research topic of this article.

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