



Exploring team mental model dynamics during strategic change implementation in professional service organizations. A sensemaking perspective

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to provide a deeper process understanding of team mental model dynamics in a context of strategic change implementation. To do so, we adopt a change recipient sensemaking perspective with the objective to identify salient determinants of team mental model dynamics. We aim to contribute to the managerial and organizational cognition literature by identifying critical micro-foundations that shape team cognition and interpretation processes during strategic change implementation. This adds to the field's understanding of the under-researched collective dimension of strategic processes in general and strategic change implementation more specifically. Through an explorative case study conducted at a professional service organization, we identified five determinants of team mental model dynamics: coherence between ostensive and performative aspects of organizational routines, equivocality of expectations, dominance of organizational discourse, shifts in organizational identification and cross-understanding between departmental thought worlds. Case findings reveal that implementation processes of strategic change become intricate and difficult if change recipient sensemaking is not effectively acted upon. The five determinants identified require adequate managerial attention in order to avoid slipping into organizational inertia. As a consequence, professional workers are unable to 'drop their tools' and fail to integrate the strategic change effort in updated team mental models.

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Introduction

Strategic change is a highly complex process that receives much attention from various fields in the social sciences. Within organization sciences, and more specifically strategic management, the field's understanding of the processes that enable organizations to successfully change their strategies, remains nevertheless suboptimal. As a consequence "we do not know enough about how change is actually accomplished" (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002, p. 568). More specifically, surprisingly little knowledge is available on how employees contribute to the implementation process of strategic change (Sonenshein & Dholakia, 2012). In this context, strategic change can be defined as a shift in the content of an organization's strategy in an effort to align with or enact upon environmental opportunities and threats, resulting in a cognitive reorientation of the organization (Gioia, Thomas, Clark, & Chittipeddi, 1994; Rajagopalan & Spreitzer, 1997; Van de Ven & Poole, 1995). Strategic change is both highly equivocal and paradoxical (Daft & Lengel, 1986; Lusch &

Lewis, 2008; Weick, 1979). As a consequence, strategic change comes with complex interdependencies: unintended outcomes, unexpected twists, simultaneity of different change waves, paradoxical perspectives of change agents and change recipients, and separation in time and space of causes and effects of strategic change, to name a few (Balogun, 2006; Balogun, Gleadow, Hailey, & Willmott, 2005; Balogun & Johnson, 2005; Bartunek, Balogun, & Do, 2011; Chia, 1999; Chia & Holt, 2009; Tsoukas & Chia, 2002; Van de Ven & Sun, 2011). The joint effect of these factors calls for a deeper process understanding of how strategic change can effectively be implemented.

We argue in this article that better process knowledge of strategic change requires an understanding of the factors at play during the process of 'cognitive reorientation' that represents the backbone of strategic change (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). Mezas, Grinyer, and Guth (2001) argue that for any strategic change to have potential impact, an organization requires changes in group cognition in order to change the reality that the organization is facing. More specifically, we focus on understanding collective cognitive process dynamics of organizational agents during strategic change implementation. To do so, we concentrate on the role of team mental models (Klimoski & Mohammed, 1994; Mohammed, Ferzandi, & Hamilton, 2010), and more precisely their emerging dynamics dur-

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ing strategic change implementation. Despite the increasing dominance of cognition research in the area of strategic management, there has been insufficient attention devoted to collective cognition in organizational settings. Scant research on collective cognition is furthermore restricted to upper echelons and top management teams (Narayanan, Zane, & Kemmerer, 2011), losing sight of the broader context of strategic change implementation processes. This article therefore concentrates on shared cognition dynamics among 'lower echelons' or change recipients rather than 'upper echelons', and addresses (Narayanan et al., 2011, p. 337) call to deepen the field's knowledge on the "link between lower level sensemaking and strategic action".

This article adopts a change recipient sensemaking perspective in analyzing team mental model dynamics during strategic change implementation. More specifically, we aim at developing a mid-range theory of team mental model dynamics during strategic change implementation in professional service organizations, by scrutinizing sensemaking processes of change recipients.

The following research question is addressed: What factors determine team mental model dynamics during strategic change implementation processes from a change recipient sensemaking perspective? We hereby seek to contribute to the managerial and organizational cognition literature by providing a richer process understanding of team mental model dynamics during strategic change implementation. This adds to our understanding of the under-researched collective dimension of strategic processes in general and strategic change more specifically. We explicitly focus on process dimensions of strategic change implementation, irrespective of the specific strategic change content, and irrespective whether the outcome of the new strategy can be labeled as successful or not.

Our research refines the team mental model literature by exploring process dynamics of cognitive reorientation during strategic change. Through the five determinants identified, we contribute to the team mental model literature by integrating diverse theoretical perspectives from organizational routines, expectations, discourse, identity and cross-understanding literatures respectively. As such, team mental model theory is 'refined' (Snow, 2004) by exploring micro-processes of team mental model 'deep structures' and embedding the team mental model concept in a broader set of relationships (Ridder, Hoon, & McCandless, 2009) from a change recipient sensemaking perspective. Through the use of a revelatory case study (Yin, 2009), we contribute to team mental model theory by adopting an interpretive epistemological lens to capture informant meanings and search for understanding (Langley & Abdallah, 2011). Our theoretical contribution thus corresponds to developing new insights into the understudied process dimension of team mental models, adding a sensemaking-driven process perspective to the more established antecedent, moderator and outcome literatures of team mental models (Mohammed et al., 2010).

Furthermore, whereas existing mental model mapping techniques have proved useful (Fiol & Huff, 1992; Huff, 1990) we deliberately adopt a sensemaking perspective in order to generate a deeper process understanding of team mental model dynamics of strategic change processes. Following Bartunek, Rousseau, Rudolph, and DePalma (2006, p. 186)'s assertion that "it is through the meanings recipients form regarding a change that change initiatives have the impacts they do", we adopt a change recipient sensemaking lens to unveil team mental model dynamics during strategic change. These mental model dynamics, and in particular changing collective representations, enable the change process to unfold (Bohm & Nichol, 2004).

Finally, we want to stress the importance of the rigor-relevance debate (Hodgkinson & Rousseau, 2009; Weick, 2001a). For a strategy theory that will work in practice, we argue that this theory

needs to take into account the constructed realities of organizational members. These realities, however, are constructed through complex, multilevel, idiosyncratic and highly dynamic processes, driven by cognitive and affective determinants. Therefore we suggest to leverage sensemaking and interpretation perspectives which are tightly coupled to organizational realities as experienced by organizations and their members, rather than designed or reduced to fit the scientific straightjacket and losing practical relevance.

This article is structured as follows. After briefly touching upon the cognitive turn in strategic management and the relevance of the team mental model construct in strategic change processes, we elaborate on the change recipient sensemaking perspective proposed. The next paragraph presents the research methodology followed in terms of research design, data collection and data analysis, as well as the research context. Subsequently, the Profco case is analyzed and five determinants of team mental model dynamics are derived based upon the change recipient sensemaking lens presented. In the discussion section, these five determinants and their interdependence are related to team mental model theory in the context of strategic change implementation. The article closes with managerial implications and avenues for further research.

Theoretical background

The cognitive turn in strategic management and strategic change

Strategic management has increasingly researched cognitive processes in understanding organizational capabilities and processes (Hodgkinson & Healey, 2011). Cognitive perspectives have been adopted in analyzing dynamic capabilities (Adner & Helfat, 2003; Teece, Pisano, & Shuen, 1997), entrepreneurship (Alvarez & Busenitz, 2001), absorptive capacity (Lane, Koka, & Pathak, 2006), capability development (Gavetti, 2005), inertia (Tripsas & Gavetti, 2000), and organizational learning (Winter, 2000; Zollo & Winter, 2002).

The cognitive turn is specifically relevant in analyzing strategic change in order to unveil the complex intricacies inherent to strategic change, as articulated by Van de Ven and Sun (2011, p. 59): "In many situations, change agents would do better if they paid more attention to reflecting on and revising their mental models to fit the change journey that is unfolding in their organization. (...) change agents are more likely to be successful when their mental models of change match the complexity of the change processes unfolding in their organization". The embeddedness of strategic change in complex organizational systems, the multiplicity of changes unfolding in organizations, the different conceptual perspectives used to interpret change, as well as different interpretations of change agents and recipients, all contribute to the relevance of focusing on cognitive processes to inform research on strategic change. It is in this context that cognition proves to be particularly relevant in understanding and explaining how organizational teams perform complex tasks under changing conditions (Lim & Klein, 2006; Mathieu, Heffner, Goodwin, Salas, & Cannon-Bowers, 2000).

The cognitive turn in strategic management has been pioneered by research on individual level of analysis, whereby individual knowledge frameworks or mental maps have been studied in an effort to explain organizational performance and competitiveness. These streams of research have much focused on individual cognitions of CEO's and upper echelons. Indeed, the ability to directing attention to shifts in the organization's environment and competitive position has been advanced as a major dynamic

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