Dancing in the dark: Making sense of managerial roles during strategic conversations

Florence Allard-Poesi*

Paris-Est University, Institut de Recherche en Gestion (EA2354), France

ABSTRACT

This article explores how managers make sense of their strategic roles when confronted with contradictory expectations from top management. Relying on Edwards and Potter's version of discourse analysis (DA), we analyze extracts of conversations between a director and a team of managers as they strive to elaborate a strategic project for a large association within the social sector. Our research complements prior research on managerial roles in (1) showing that the sensemaking of managerial roles relies on the construction and contestation of scripted descriptions of the organization and its environment, (2) demonstrating how the managers and the director both contribute to the fabric of contradicted versions of the managerial roles and (3) how participants' will to power contributes to the "dance" observed.

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1. Introduction

This article aims to understand how managers make sense of their strategic roles during conversations. Research in strategic management has emphasized the key role that middle managers play, particularly in terms of strategic renewal. Middle managers need to make sense of the strategic orientations given by top management, that is to interpret and enact these orientations through the creation of the adequate structures, systems and personnel. They also have to make sense of experiences and information from the field and possibly champion these strategic orientations (Mantere, 2005; Regnér, 2003). These contributions of middle managers to strategizing, which may be referred to as their strategic role, depend on their understanding of who they are in the organization and what is expected of them, i.e., on how they make sense of these strategic roles.

Following an interactionist perspective, a role may be defined as an intermediary translation device between oneself and others (Simpson & Caroll, 2008; p. 33–34) of how one should act in a particular situation. Roles are intermediaries between personal identity (i.e., the more or less temporary stabilization of one's own definition of who I am, Alvesson & Willmott, 2002) and others, be they specific persons (i.e., the boss, some colleagues) or more

generalized others[1] including professional or occupational identities (i.e., the more or less temporary stabilization of some abstract and institutionalized conception of one's own profession).

This definition calls attention to the discursive and political dimensions of managers' roles. Roles, write Simpson and Carroll (2008; p. 33), "sit as boundary object[s] in the middle of intersubjective interactions" and "translate[s] meanings backwards and forwards between actors" (p. 34). They are the object of continuous negotiation between individual strivings and external prescriptions, personal conceptions and organizational or institutional discourses (Mantere & Vaara, 2008). As such, roles are the locus of power struggles and the dynamics of control and resistance (see Laine & Vaara, 2007; Thomas, Sargent, & Hardy, 2011), where power, following a conversation analytic view of a Foucauldian conception (Foucault, 1982), is understood as relational and exercised in talk-in-interactions (Samra-Fredericks, 2005; p. 811; Heritage, 1987). In this perspective, the sensemaking of roles in organizations does not rely exclusively on the actions (i.e., the decision taken, the communicative practices) of those who

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[1] While managers' contribution to strategizing can be regarded as part of their occupation as managers, we prefer to talk about the manager's strategic role (and of managers' roles) rather than managers' occupations, considering that being a manager conveys a much more ambiguous, unstable and contextual definition compared to what is usually referred to as an occupation (e.g., doctor, firefighter, see Bechky, 2006, 2011).

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are in a superior hierarchical position, but depends on both the superior's and the subordinates' communicative actions (Schneider, 2007) through which they create, assemble, produce and reproduce the social structure through which they orient (Heritage, 1987; p. 231).

While the managers' identity construction processes has received much attention in the last decade (see Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Alvesson, Ashcraft, & Thomas, 2008; Ybema, Keenoy, Oswick, Bevereungen, Ellis, & Sabelis, 2009), and while recent strategy-as-practice research has contributed to the understanding of manager roles in the sensemaking and enactment of strategy (see Rouleau, 2005; Balogun & Johnson, 2004; Mantere, 2005, 2008), the actual construction of the managers' strategic role has been neglected.

We consider this problematic in so far that while managers are the *maître d'oeuvre*[2] of strategy, they often face ambiguous if not contradictory expectations from top managers (Lüscher & Lewis, 2008; Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003). As "Who we think we are (identity) as organizational actors shapes what we enact and how we interpret" (Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld, 2005; p. 416), managers may be incapable of making sense of the strategic orientations and how to act, if they do not know what role they have in the strategic process and in the organization (see Balogun & Johnson, 2004). Lack of clarity of participants' roles in a strategic project may also encourage useless struggles for territory, thereby impeding structuring and collective sensemaking (see Patriotta & Spedale, 2009, 2011).

In a similar way, managers may find it difficult to commit themselves to any one course of action (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010) and so retrench themselves in a passive or cynical attitude regarding the top management's strategic initiatives (McCabe, 2009; Mantere & Vaara, 2008).

This article aims to understand how managers make sense of their strategic roles when confronted with contradictory expectations from top management. Considering conversations and interactions as the privileged medium through which people negotiate and make sense of their roles (Balogun & Johnson, 2004; p. 545), we rely here on Edwards and Potter (1992)'s version of Discourse Analysis, a variant of Conversational Analysis, to analyze conversations between a director and a team of managers who are in the process of elaborating a strategic project in a large French association within the social sector.

Our research contributes to prior research on managerial roles in three related ways. First, it shows that managers and the director make sense of the managers' strategic role by relying on descriptions of oneself and others (e.g., Simpson & Caroll, 2008; Edwards, 1994, 1995), and on the construction and contestation of scripted descriptions of the organization and its environment. Second, while previous research has underscored that different organizational actors may hold different discourses about their roles in the strategy process (Mantere & Vaara, 2008; Laine & Vaara, 2007), our research shows how the same actors may develop, and oscillate, between different and contradictory conceptions of their roles during the same meeting; thereby engaging in a sort of dance that contributes to the lack of clarity (*the dark*) in the definition of the managers' role. Third, while prior research has shown that power struggles during conversations may lead to trench warfare between actors and the loss of sensemaking of the task at hand (Patriotta & Spedale, 2009), our analysis show how participants may also oscillate among contradictory concepts of their roles as the result of their will to power during the conversation, leading

them to lose control over their argumentation. On the whole, the research shows how sensemaking of managerial roles evolves in, and is shaped by, discrete conversations between top management and middle managers in strategy meetings. It contributes to the understanding of how political and interpretative dynamics drive the sensemaking of managers' strategic roles in the organization during conversations among the actors.

This article is organized around four sections. First, we briefly review previous work on how managers make sense of their strategic roles. Second, we describe the context within which this research took place, and, the methods of data collection and analysis that were used. We then present the discourses of the director and the managers concerning the strategic roles of the managers, and conduct a detailed analysis of two sequences of conversations in which the managers and the director oscillate between different conceptions of their roles. Finally, we discuss the research contributions.

2. Making sense of manager's strategic roles

Three complementary strands of research may contribute to our understanding of how managers make sense of their strategic roles.

2.1. Managers' strategic roles: a reaction to top managers' sensegiving

A first research strand concerns the top managers' efforts to shape or frame other managers' understandings of their roles, in particular during strategic change. In this perspective, top managers are seen first as engaged in sensemaking activities so as to make sense of the strategic orientations and the organizational structure supporting this strategy, and second as committing to sensegiving activities so as to convince the managers and the other organizational members to embrace their vision (cf. Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). In an in-depth investigation of the effects of top management's discourse on managers' understanding of their roles in the strategy process, Mantere and Vaara (2008), and Laine and Vaara (2007) show two contrasting reactions from managers and other organizational actors. Whether promoting a participative or a hierarchical, disciplinary (non-participative) concept of the strategy process, managers generally adhere to the discourse promoted by top managers. However, a few managers do resist top manager's expectations, in particular when these are understood as an attempt from top managers to reinforce their hegemony (Laine & Vaara, 2007) or to keep managers in a rather passive or subordinate role of execution (Mantere & Vaara, 2008). Far from always taking on the expected role of a passive transmitter of corporate strategy, some managers even develop counter-conceptions through which they reaffirm their roles as strategic innovators (Laine & Vaara, 2007) or promote a more collective vision of the strategic process (Mantere & Vaara, 2008). These results confirm previous research on identity regulation (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002), which outlined that organizational members may either endorse or resist identity regulation[3] attempts from the organization.

While this research investigates both the top management's and the other's managers sensegiving/sensemaking, a second research strand focuses on the middle managers' sensemaking process during strategic change.

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[2] The *maître d'oeuvre*, literally the Master of Works, acts as a bridge, for example, between the architect and the end client and building companies.

[3] Identity regulation refers to the organization's discourses and practices that seek to shape the worker's identity (see Alvesson & Willmott, 2002).