Strategic cultural change and local discourses: The importance of being different

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Summary   This paper analyses a strategic change implementation at call centre operations of an insurance company in Australia. The empirical findings illustrate how the macro-discourse of the culture change programme was in dialogue with alternative local discourses that organizational members drew upon to make sense of the organizational "reality". This meant that the strategic change was slowly watered down and had almost no impact on the daily life in the lower end of the organization. Still, management expressed it as a success, because there was limited overt resistance. The paper contributes to the development of a more nuanced understanding of strategic change programmes in which discourses are treated as dialogical and non-deterministic, rather than omnipotent or mono-logic. Non-participation or resistance towards change initiatives are then not necessarily ideological movements for or against the change, but rather locally specific constructions of the event based on available locally produced discourses.
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Introduction

Generally, the strategic change literature proposes changes to be rational and teleological (Durand & Calori, 2006). Change programs are top-down processes with assumed compliance from homogenous organizational members. The importance and strive towards homogeneity is perhaps best illustrated through the strategic organizational culture change programs. Albeit with their heydays during the 1980 and 1990s (see e.g., Deal & Kennedy, 1982; Peters & Waterman, 1982), these programs advocating the superiority of homogenous organizational cultures are still common contemporary phenomena. Thus, responses to change pro-

grammes are often analyzed in simplistic terms as either being for or against change — with especially negative comments reserved for the latter group as being "unreasonable" or "screwing up" (Ford, Ford, & D'Amelio, 2008).

This rather simplistic view of strategic change programs in the traditional perspectives has been challenged by the growing field of strategy-as-discourse (see e.g., Ezzamel & Willmott, 2008; Hendry, 2000; Laine & Vaara, 2007; Mantere & Vaara, 2008; Samra-Fredericks, 2003). This field had its directions set out by Knights and Morgan (1991), who argued that strategy can be seen as a discourse with locally specific conditions of possibility. Organizational members make sense of and act upon change differently depending on available local discourses. This leads to different views on the means, motives, and evaluation of change programmes. For example, in their longitudinal study of a change process, Brown and Humphreys (2003) found that managers made sense of the change and their role in it as epic (successful), while their

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subordinates made sense of it as tragic (unsuccessful). Ezza-mel and Willmott (1998) analyzed a case where a top-down change initiative had to be negotiated with, and was confronted by, existing sensemaking narratives which made a distinction of employees as ''machinists'' or ''mates''. These studies have successfully illustrated how various groups of employees make sense of strategic change programs differently. There is, however, still limited knowledge of how strategic change programs are in dialogue with alternative locally available discourses when different groups of employees attempt to make sense of the event (Laine & Vaara, 2007). We aim to contribute to the strategy-as-discourse literature by responding to the following guiding research question: what local discourses are drawn upon, at different levels and in different areas, to make sense of a strategic change program and what are the implications for the change process?

We respond to the question by investigating how different levels and areas of organizational members discursively make sense of a senior management change initiative at call centre operations of an insurance company in Australia. The paper first turns to the discourse literature in an attempt to follow in the footsteps of those who have suggested a more nuanced picture when analysing change and resistance in pluralistic organizations like hospitals (e.g., Denis, Lamonthe, & Langley, 2001; Mueller, Sillince, Harvey, & Howorth, 2004), universities (Brown & Humphreys, 2003), and companies (Knights & McCabe, 2000). Second, we describe the two departments in which the study took place, the ethnographic study that followed the everyday life of lower management and front line call centre staff, and how the empirical material was analyzed. The following findings show how managers and employees in different sub-units in the organization discursively construct a sense of distinctiveness in the face of an organizational culture change programme aimed at homogenizing different parts of the organization. Finally, we discuss the resistance to the change program and explain the lack of participation by outlining competing local discourses.

The paper contributes to the strategy-as-discourse literature by showing the detailed negotiation of competing local discourses (Mantere & Vaara, 2008; Palmer & Dunford, 2002). The discourse surrounding the strategic change is in dialogue with local alternative discourses, which are drawn upon by organizational members to make sense of the change initiative. Further, we contribute to the literature by showing the complex processes that constitute resistance towards the change programme at different discursive and hierarchical levels (Laine & Vaara, 2007; Mumby, 2005). The analysis provides evidence for lower level managers' discursive struggle in supporting the organizational change program that undermines their local position. These types of struggles by organizational members to accommodate alternative, and at times competing, available discourses can explain the lack of participation or resistance towards change initiatives.

The discourse of organizational culture

With the term ''discourse'' we refer to an ordered, although not necessarily coherent, collection of texts embodied in the practices of talking and writing that construct how people make sense of their surroundings through producing, disseminating and consuming these texts (Grant, Hardy, Oswick, & Putnam, 2004, p. 3). Discourses can be studied at different levels ranging from a detailed focus on micro- and meso-discourse studied in local situations (i.e., individual and sub-unit), to a contextual system of grand and mega discourse (i.e., organizational and supra-organizational) (Alvessson & Kärreman, 2000). These levels are not distinct, rather the micro-level sub-unit activities need to be contextualized within a macro-level of supra-organizational discourses (Grant & Hardy, 2003). In terms of strategic actions, Hardy, Palmer, and Phillips (2000, p. 1228) further argue that ''if we want to explain how discourses operate, we must examine the broader context in order to ascertain the scope it provides for action, as well as the limits it places on action''. With a suitable example, Alvesson and Kärreman (2000, p. 1133) describe discourse on a supra-organizational level: ''Discourse may refer to/constitute organizational reality, for example dominating language use about corporate culture''. The micro-level sub-unit ethnographic data discussed in the empirical parts of this paper consequently need to be situated dialogically to the macro-level supra-organizational discourse of ''corporate culture'' or ''organizational culture'' that enable the strategic cultural change to take place in the organization. The dominant macro-discourse on ''organizational culture'' that management in the case draws upon and uses to make sense of the world is briefly described below before addressing useful literature on contested changes.

''Organizational culture'' is perhaps not as fashionable in academia as it once was, even so, it is an institutionalized concept for researchers making sense of organizations (Riad, 2005, 2007) and still a popular rationale for changing organizations (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2007; Scheeres & Rhodes, 2006). In line with the early normative and functionalist studies of organizational culture (Deal & Kennedy, 1982; Kotter & Heskett, 1992; Peters & Waterman, 1982), the view of organizational culture that prevails in practice and practice oriented literature is the view that a homogenous culture that is strong and/or contingently fits the environment benefits the organization (e.g., Beer & Nohria, 2000; Kampas, 2003; Sparrow, 2001; Wilderom, Glunk, & Maslowski, 2000). The idea behind strategically changing the culture is simple and persuasive: ''when the culture is aligned with the needs of the market, it can enable very high levels of organizational performance'' (Kampas, 2003, p. 41). To be sure, the possibilities of strategically changing culture and the functionalist idea of culture have been widely contested in the literature (for a recent review see Martin, Frost, & O'Neill, 2006), but this debate is outside the scope of this article.

Our aim is not to enter the *general* debate of how to change, define or conceptualize culture. Instead, we are interested in understanding the *particular* organizational processes surrounding the attempt to homogenize two departments within an organization. The culture change programme comes with a range of assumptions regarding organizations (Broadfoot, Deetz, & Anderson, 2004). Thus, rather than investigating the discursive contests surrounding the concept of ''culture'', our interest is in the contestations initiated by the cultural change strategy. We focus upon how organizational members made discursive sense of the culture change strategy, not how they made sense of ''culture''. By