

Enhancing inductive strategizing through sensemaking and scenario thinking

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Abstract

This paper provides a theoretical examination of the roles of sensemaking and scenario thinking in enhancing inductive strategizing. Research into strategy and sensemaking has resulted in the concept of sensegiving, however, it is suggested that the notion of sensegiving is a misnomer as sense cannot be given. Strategizing at the periphery of organisations is identified as an inductive act in sharp contrast to more deductive strategy making that takes place at the corporate centre. Individual acts of strategizing are seen to involve sensemaking. The use of scenarios integrates uncertainty and ambiguity into the strategic conversation. Drawing insights from previous scholarship, the author argues that by refocusing scenarios from seeking to influence managers' decision making to enabling sensemaking during inductive strategizing, wise organisations can prepare themselves for what futures are created.

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Introduction

Organisations today face an increasingly complex, dynamic and ambiguous environment. Social, technical and political variables are interacting in confusing and unpredictable ways defying conventional empirical analysis. This profound uncertainty calls for a rethinking of: what constitutes organisational knowledge, what strategic insight means, how such insight is constructed and communicated, and, the role of the individual and group in making sense of their constructed worlds. One challenge facing organisations is to learn to acknowledge the ambiguous nature of their existence rather than deny it, and to prepare for and manage uncertainty and equivocality. By realising this challenge, wise organisations are able to construct meaningful social systems securing their future strategic health (Brown & Starkey, 2000).

The use of scenarios and practice of scenario thinking is one approach designed to integrate the inherent unpredictability of the future into strategic study. Through this perspective, plausible alternatives of the future are constructed as narratives with the aim of providing a framework within which individuals are free to test their assumptions, and organisations to “wind tunnel” (van der Heijden, 1996 p. 57) key decisions of strategic importance.

The role of sensemaking in individual, group and organisational behaviour represents an attempt to understand how actors seek to construct meaning out of historical acts. The study of sensemaking indicates it to be a social act ultimately resulting in an individually interpreted world, whereby the actor locates him/herself within a constructed reality (Weber & Manning, 2001). When faced with confusing and contradictory signals an individual’s ability to make sense can collapse. A collapse in sensemaking can result in a loss of meaning (Weick, 1993; 1995) and when an individual’s world is no longer meaningful the decision making capacity of that individual becomes severely limited and limiting.

The purpose of this conceptual paper is to construct a deeper understanding of the potential roles of scenarios and sensemaking as enablers of strategic thought and action. The paper begins by examining the current literature that links strategy and sensemaking. It then explores recent research into how individuals engage in crafting strategy, and contrasts strategy making at the corporate centre with how new strategic insights are created at the periphery of the organisation. The significance of strategy making at the margins being largely inductive is discussed in relation to the role of the manager/strategist, sensemaking and the future role of scenarios. The paper concludes by suggesting how scenario construction can support inductive strategizing through enabling sensemaking of the future.

Strategy, sensegiving and sensemaking

Strategy

The relationship between the organisation and its environment is a continually evolving dynamic phenomena subject to constant unpredictable change. Schneider (1997) sees the interaction of the organisation with its environment as constituting strategy. Steinthorsson and Söderholm (2002) explore this relationship and argue that an organisation doesn’t adapt to its environment, nor is it simply embedded within it. Rather, an organisation lives in co-existence with its environment and co-creates its unique relationship with it. In their view, “strategic management is constituted of both enactment (of the environment) and embeddedness (of the organisation)” (2002 p. 243). They conclude strategic management processes are acts of multi-contextual sensemaking aimed at coping with the great variety of uncertainties and ambiguities organisations encounter (Steinthorsson & Söderholm, 2002).

Sensegiving

Attempts to integrate sensemaking into strategy have resulted in the notion of ‘sensegiving’ (Dunford & Jones, 2000; Ericson, 2001; Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Hill & Levenhagen, 1995). The act of sensegiving is seen as the process whereby a manager seeks to influence and gain support for his/her construct of reality, which itself has been the result of sensemaking acts (Ericson, 2001; Hill & Levenhagen, 1995). Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991) present a model of sensemaking and sensegiving as a sequential and reciprocal cycle. Within this model; a manager establishes a vision as a representation of an initial act of sensemaking, this is then communicated to organisational actors who, through engagement with the vision, seek to make sense of it. Achievement of the vision requires acts based upon the sense made by actors who attempt to influence its realised form. These acts are seen as sensegiving feedback activities to the manager, who in turn modifies the original vision as a further act of sensemaking, and continues in an ongoing cycle of sensegiving and sensemaking (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). But can sense be given?

Rather than an act of sensegiving, what has been described is more akin to an hegemonic narrative discourse, where a vision created by a privileged and legitimised source of power is used to present a view of the future, whose aim is - in part - to suppress other alternative and potentially competing or contradictory visions (Ng & De Cock, 2002). Attempts at sensegiving can trap individuals within single-loop skillsets and mental models, (Snell, 2002 p. 566) which dull the scanning capacities of organisational actors. Competing views within individuals seeking to make sense of the same phenomena are often overwhelmed by voices that are more privileged than others (Brown, 2000). Sensemaking has always been a power effect, with the introduction of sensegiving its power element is brought to the fore and legitimised.

Sensemaking

Although sensemaking is a social process, the sense made by an individual is intimately linked to his or her experience and the mental models held. The role of the individual and how that person’s values, emotions, identities, interests and sense of well-being influence the creation of strategy has not been comprehensively researched (Knights & Morgan, 1991; Watson, 2003). Recent interest has arisen amongst researchers around the notion of strategizing; how, when and where strategy occurs, rather than what strategy is produced (Balogun, Huff & Johnson, 2003). Strategy at the micro rather than macro level. The study of strategizing holds that understanding the activities of managers at a micro level will help us to understand how day-to-day practices create strategy (Balogun, *et al.* 2003; Johnson, Melin & Whittington, 2003). Within this focus, the role of the individual in the strategizing process is of critical importance. Further, the increasing need for strategic innovation refocuses attention on lower level managers and those at the periphery of the organisation rather than those at the centre. It is at these margins that flexible value constellations are created from which new strategic insight is more likely to emerge (Johnson, *et al.* 2003; Ramirez & Wallin, 2000).

Deductive and inductive strategizing

Although an analysis of micro strategizing could be undertaken from an activity-based view, which would focus on “understanding of the myriad, micro activities that make-up strategy and strategizing in practice” (Johnson, *et al.* 2003 pp. 3-4), this section will discuss the work of Regnér (2003) and his proposition of inductive and deductive strategy making, and its relationship to sensemaking and scenarios. Regnér’s (2003) study, combining a single in-depth case with multiple retrospective case studies, found that a stark difference occurred in how strategy was created at the corporate centre to how it was constructed away from the centre, at the margins of the organisation. The methodologies employed by managers represent different conceptions of knowledge generation and application, and have significant consequences for how we view strategy and strategizing.

Deductive strategizing

Regnér observed macro strategy formulation at the centre as an essentially deductive act where strategy making in corporate and divisional management, “can be portrayed as industry and

exploitation focused, including a deductive reasoning and an emphasis on the current knowledge structure.” (2003 p. 71) This approach sees strategy as establishing fit with the external environment through structured planning, analysis, formal reports and intelligence, and observance of routine patterns of behaviour (Regnér, 2003). Deductive strategy making emphasises current and traditional sources of knowledge in attempting to improve and perfect the existing strategy (Regnér, 2003). A deductive approach suggests an ideal strategy exists external to the organisation, and it is the role of the strategic planner to discover it and implement plans to exploit its benefits. One of the key elements the deductive approach discounts, is the role of the individual in strategy making and how his/her sensemaking of the knowledge and information acquired influence the strategizing process.

Inductive strategizing

Deductive strategy making at the centre assumes the objectivity of the individual, in contrast with how strategy making at the periphery or micro level by individual managers is constructed. Here, crafting strategy is described as an essentially inductive and subjective process; which is externally and exploration oriented and where actors engage in efforts to generate and establish new organisational knowledge structures (Regnér, 2003). At the periphery, managers as strategists were observed to interact with a variety of external sources - some from within the same industry, others from entirely different industries and contexts - in a concerted effort to identify, connect with and assimilate knowledge into novel strategic insight (Regnér, 2003). The acts individuals undertook to achieve this were seen to involve “trial and error, informal contacts and noticing, experiments and heuristics” (Regnér, 2003 p. 77), resulting in these managers being described as “hands-on guys” (2003 p. 67). The appropriateness of such inductive approaches for developing and progressing strategic insight were seen to be particularly important where the external environment is characterised as complex and ambiguous (Regnér, 2003). Regnér (2003) concludes by suggesting that his research calls into question the traditional view of new strategic development; as formed in the centre and communicated to the periphery for implementation, as not representing what actually happens. What was observed was the opposite; new strategy making at the margins that had little to do with the corporate strategy developed at the centre. Although Regnér (2003) rejects the temptation to advocate for a more inductive approach to be adopted at the corporate centre, he does call for strategy to be crafted at the periphery, and then deductively refined and improved at the centre.

Regnér’s (2003) work surrounding deductive and inductive strategy carries important implications. Whilst his findings support Schneider’s (1997 p. 94) assertion that “many psychologists and management scholars agree that the environment is not an objective reality...(but) socially constructed”, he shies away from an outright call for a totally inductive approach to strategy. His (2003) research echoes that which focuses on strategizing and on how strategies evolve inside organisations placing emphasis on what is actually done, rather than what is planned (Ericson, 2001). The following section will discuss the affects of Regnér’s (2003) on: how the individual manager as strategist is perceived; the role of sensemaking in inductive strategy making; and how scenarios contribute to strategy creation at the periphery.

Strategist as bricoleur

Viewing strategy making at the periphery as an act of induction challenges the traditional deductive-based notion of strategist as analyst and planner. Due to its ‘hands-on’, ‘trial-and-error’ description the act of strategy making can be seen as an act of bricolage, and the strategist as bricoleur. A bricoleur is someone who uses a variety of methods and whatever is at hand to construct meaningful strategy (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). The bricolage is the strategy that results from the bricoleur’s methods (Brown & Jones, 2000). A bricoleur uses skills, knowledge, instinct and interpretation to craft an understanding of the world within which actions are meaningful but temporary. The strategist as bricoleur recognises the need to continually scan the environment for signs of change that requires modification of his/her strategic outlook and intelligence. The skills honed through formal data gathering and analysis are now applied to much less formal and messier sources of intelligence, where the art and craft of the bricoleur becomes one of synthesizing diverse cues to gain insight. Although a bricoleur uses conversation and social interaction to fashion strategy, using the principles of

verisimilitude (Brown & Jones, 2000) associated with induction, the bricolage produced will be an individual construct subject to multiple interpretations.

Sensemaking and inductive strategizing

It can be seen that 'hands-on' managers' attempts to make sense of their worlds involve acts of engagement with their external environment. As sensemaking is claimed to be a retrospective act, (Weick, 1995) it is suggested that it can only begin once the sensemaker has interacted with their external environment. This enactment inevitably affects the environment, thus, the manager at the periphery creates the external environment he/she is seeking to understand as much as that environment creates him/her (Weick, 1995). Following this enactment, the manager through his/her contacts with external actors, internal colleagues and others, proceeds to interpret the extracted cues from the environment through a social process of talk, discourse and conversation (Weick, 1995). This ongoing process leads to sense being constructed through social interaction and narrative discourse. Once a manager has constructed a world that is sensible, he/she is able to craft strategy in ways that make sense in this world (Gephart, 1997).

Sensemaking is a social construction and therefore subject to multiple interpretations (Berger & Luckman, 1967). What is constructed through social discourse is an individual world where a manager locates him/herself, and where an individual's self-concept influences how he/she acts within it (Weick, 1995). An individual's sense of self, and need to defend and preserve his/her self-esteem can result in rejecting important cues that could challenge his/her existing identity (Brown & Starkey, 2000). This results in behaviour that is meaningful within the individual's socially constructed world, but could be viewed as problematic by others in whose world such behaviour is perceived as counter-intuitive. Our constructed worlds are real to us, but to be useful to others they need to be viewed as plausible, coherent and reasonable. For this to be achieved, the manager needs to be aware of how he/she contributes to this world, therefore, wise individuals need to become self-reflexive and aware of how his/her own acts of construction and reconstruction are manifest in crafting strategy (Brown & Starkey, 2000).

It is difficult to see how sense can be given, the belief that it can objectifies sense and assumes it can be captured and passed-on to a passive recipient. An actor can seek to influence the sense others make, but that suggests persuasion rather than reciprocal sensegiving and sensemaking. Rather than undertaking acts aimed at sensegiving, an alternative course of action would be for organisations to focus on enabling and enhancing individuals' sensemaking capacities. If sensemaking is a natural act that managers at the periphery engage in during their inductive attempts to create new strategic opportunities, organisations would be wise to encourage and develop their sensemaking abilities.

Weick advises organisational leaders to cultivate four abilities that advance sensemaking capacities, these are; improvisation, wisdom, respectful interaction and communication (1995; 1996). A manager operating at the periphery of an organisation experiments through trial and error to develop an intuitive understanding of phenomena encountered. Through these ongoing acts, what may appear chaotic becomes sensible, thus allowing effective decision making to take place. At an organisational level, an enhanced capacity for sensemaking would enable meaning to be constructed, deconstructed and reconstructed, as an effective response to create order in times of chaos and stress (Ericson, 2001). Wise people and wise organisations realise that absolute knowledge is unattainable and that full understanding of phenomena or an external environment is not possible. They acknowledge the inevitable ambiguity and inherent uncertainty in their lives, allowing them to avoid falling into the trap of misplaced overconfidence; while at the same time, avoiding restrictive over-caution resulting from a sense of helplessness paralysing an ability to act. Paradoxically then, wisdom improves confidence and increases doubt, resulting in greater learning and adaptation. Respectful interaction has three imperatives: "Respect the reports of others and be willing to base beliefs and actions on them (trust); report so that others may use your observations in coming to valid beliefs (honesty), and respect your own perceptions and beliefs and integrate them with the reports of others without depreciating them or yourself (self-respect)" (Weick, 1996 p. 148). If trust, honesty and self-respect

collapses, organisation unity crumbles, resulting in a disregard for others and a wider purpose, and concentration solely on short term individual needs. The resulting fragmentation and sub-optimisation inevitably affect sensemaking's social element, which relies upon an on-going dialogue between actors. Communication through conversation and storytelling is a generative practice through which reality is experienced and individuals constitute and reconstitute themselves, rather than a tool used for representing and transmitting people's understanding or knowledge (Brown & Jones, 2000; Ford & Ford, 1995). When crafting strategy, the strategic conversation is said by van der Heijden (1996) to turn it from a science into an art.

Scenarios and inductive strategizing

The use of scenarios as a strategic approach for business was brought to most peoples' attention through Pierre Wack's two articles (1985a; 1985b) describing Royal Dutch/Shell's use of scenarios during the 1970s and '80s. He (1985a; 1985b) identified the primary role of scenarios as influencing managers' decision making. A 'windtunnelling' metaphor is frequently used (e.g., Goodwin & Wright, 2001; van der Heijden, 1996) to demonstrate how scenarios can be used to test alternative strategic decision options. Miller and Waller (2003) see scenarios as a tool for facilitating decision making under conditions of uncertainty by incorporating environmental ambiguity into strategic development. The relationship between scenarios and organisational decision making has been comprehensively analysed by van der Heijden, Bradfield, Burt, Cairns and Wright (2002). Van der Heijden, *et al.* (2002) note that organisations have well-rehearsed and familiar decision making routines that are followed with little conscious thought. They suggest that one of the significant benefits of using scenarios is that they provide a vehicle for mental experimentation through formulating strategic options and examining their consequences in a range of plausible future environments, leading to increased confidence in organisational decision making (2002, p. 143). However, Goodwin and Wright (2001) have identified limitations in the use of scenarios as decision making tools. They feel many scenario approaches see decision making carried out informally leading to inferior strategies being selected (Goodwin & Wright, 2001). They suggest integrating scenarios with multiattribute value modelling to create a more robust decision making process that is; formal, documented and defensible (Goodwin & Wright, 2001 p. 14).

Goodwin and Wright's (2001) proposal is aimed implicitly at strategy making at the centre, where their more formal, documented and defensible actions would fit with a more deductive approach (Regnér, 2003). However, they would have little affect on managers at the periphery who create strategy through acts of induction (Regnér, 2003). To facilitate and enable managers at the periphery, the primary role of scenarios would need to shift from influencing decision making to enhancing individual and group sensemaking capacities. This raises the possibility of sensemaking of the future, where the unexpected becomes expectable, (Brown, 2000) and where - to comply with sensemaking's retrospective nature - managers project themselves even further into the future than where the scenarios are located, to reflect and make sense of how these futures came about (Boland, 1984). Through this futuring activity managers are able to confront their feelings about changes in values and skills, and question previously unchallenged assumptions, enhancing social interaction and the strategic conversation (Boland, 1984). Weick (1993; 1995) calls for organisations to refocus from decision making to sensemaking, as decisions are taken once sense has been made. Ineffective and wrongheaded strategy can arise from good decision making because deficient individual sensemaking has created a world that has rejected important cues and signals (Weick, 1993). Scenarios focused on sensemaking would have the practical benefit of providing managers at the periphery with a greater capacity to make sense of their future environments by incorporating uncertainty and the unexpected into their mental models. Scenario thinking should reduce the likelihood that important cues challenging deeply held assumptions are dismissed, as the unexpected and unthinkable are actively pursued. Enhancing sensemaking capacities would see individuals, groups and organisations become resilient under a variety of possible futures increasing their self-confidence without this tipping over into over-confidence (Weick, 1996). Further, it would support the ongoing creation of the "self-reflexive and wise organisation", (Brown & Starkey, 2000 p. 103) and stimulate and maintain the strategic conversation (van der Heijden, 1996).

Conclusion

An organisation populated by individuals who are engaged in an ongoing process of encountering and understanding their external environment, and who use this new knowledge to create strategy is clearly developing its capacity to create its own future. Sensemaking and scenario thinking can enhance an inductive approach to understanding the complexity, dynamic and ambiguous nature of organisational life. Successful organisations of the future will be those whose members feel an intimate connection with the external forces that influence their future. Wise individuals recognise a complete empirical understanding of these forces is unachievable, what is required is an acknowledgement of their existence and a willingness to work with uncertainty and ambiguity to develop an understanding of the business environment greater than that of their competitors (van der Heijden, *et al.* 2002).

This paper has discussed how inductive strategizing at the periphery of an organisation contrasts with and challenges how strategy is formed at the corporate centre (Regnér, 2003). It is suggested that managers at the periphery engage in acts of sensemaking during this inductive process in order to make sense of the cues they encounter. These acts of sensemaking are concerned with finding small details that fit together and flesh out hunches to create meaningful worlds where sensible decisions can be taken (Weick, 1995 p. 133). Scenarios and scenario thinking could provide a further channel to facilitate this. However, the focus of scenarios would need to change from that of individual and group decision making to sensemaking. In cognitive terms, decisions are taken once sense is made; (Ingvar, 1985) to improve strategic decision making sensemaking processes prior to the decision need to be focused upon. Sensemaking of the future can be enhanced by addressing Weick's (1995) four abilities within a scenario framework. Through this approach, strategizing at the periphery can be improved through individuals developing their capacity to assimilate divergent and often contradictory messages into a coherent form. Inductive strategizing is above all an act of interpretation, the ability to; improvise, develop wisdom, respectfully interact and communicate, (Weick, 1995) are vital skills to aid this. Meaningful interpretations "are often seen as critical to the success and even the survival of organisations, mainly because of their implications for influencing action alternatives and subsequent outcomes" (Thomas, Clark & Gioia, 1993 p. 240).

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