

# Advancing sustainable business through discourse: a conceptual framework

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – *The purpose of this paper is to explore the relationship between individuals' discursive practices and organizational-level strategic change with respect to sustainability strategy.*

**Design/methodology/approach** – *The approach taken integrates Hart's natural resource-based view of the firm with discourse theory.*

**Findings** – *A conceptual model of the relationship between discursive practices and strategic change is proposed.*

**Research limitations/implications** – *The paper's model serves as a foundation on which future empirical research on the effectiveness of specific discursive practices can be conducted.*

**Originality/value** – *Much of strategy research is notable for the absence of discussion on human actors and actions. The paper helps to fill this gap, contributing to existing scholarship by examining the micro-foundations of sustainability strategy through the fundamental role of individuals' discursive practices.*

**Keywords** *Strategy, Sustainability, Discourse, Strategic change, Discursive practices*

**Paper type** *Research paper*

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Increasing scholarly interest in discourse is reflective of a "linguistic turn" (Fairclough, 1992, p. 2) in the social sciences, in which the role of language has become more prominent. Discourse is, stated succinctly, language in use (Jaworski and Coupland, 1999). Within management scholarship, an emerging body of research has begun to analyze strategists' discursive practices (Maitlis and Lawrence, 2003; Mantere, 2008; Rouleau, 2005; Samra-Fredericks, 2003; Sillince *et al.*, 2012).

Organizational commitment to sustainable business practices is an important strategic outcome that can be facilitated by discursive practices. In seeking to understand how sustainability is developed and maintained in organizations, it is necessary to acknowledge that organizations may pursue a range of sustainability strategies. As Hart's natural resource-based view of the firm (Hart, 1995, 1997; Hart and Dowell, 2011) has suggested, such strategies can be described on the basis of organizational focus (internal or external) and time horizon (current or future). This conceptualization identifies four strategies associated with sustainability:

1. pollution prevention (internal focus, current horizon);
2. product stewardship (external focus, current horizon);
3. clean technology (internal focus, future horizon); and
4. base-of-the-pyramid strategies (external focus, future horizon).

Although the natural resource-based view of the firm holds significant promise for both practitioners and scholars, there is a compelling need for further research. Given the ability of discourse to influence changes in sustainability strategies, it is imperative that

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researchers examine the relationship between individuals' discursive practices and organizational-level strategic change with respect to sustainability strategy. The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to extend theory by proposing a conceptual model of this relationship. The paper builds on discourse theory to suggest that strategic change, defined in the context of the natural resource-based view of the firm, will be associated with distinct discursive practices used by organizational members. It is further argued that the relationship between discursive practices and strategic change will be moderated by top management's functional background. This research contributes to existing scholarship by examining the micro-foundations of sustainability strategy through the fundamental role of individuals' discursive practices.

The following pages integrate discourse theory with the natural resource-based view of the firm. In so doing, a conceptual model of the relationship between discursive practices and strategic change in sustainability is developed. The paper closes with suggestions for future research and implications for practitioners.

### Theory development

Discourse is constitutive. That is, discourse does not simply reflect an objective social reality; rather, it actively constitutes, or constructs, society along different dimensions (Fairclough, 1992). Stated differently, discourses "do not just describe things; they do things" (Potter and Wetherell, 1987, p. 6). In this sense, a discourse analysis can be viewed as being consistent with the social constructionist tradition, in which social reality is constructed and sustained through social practices (Berger and Luckmann, 1966).

When considering the characteristics of strategic change embodied by the natural resource-based view of the firm, it becomes evident that the meanings of these areas are, in fact, socially constructed. The discursive practices used by organizational members serve to construct these meanings. Discourse analysis, therefore, offers an appropriate theoretical grounding to explore the relationship between discursive practices and strategic change in sustainability.

In seeking to understand discursive practices and, in turn, the relationship between discursive practices and strategic change, it is useful to envision three circuits: activity, performativity and connectivity (Hardy *et al.*, 2000). First, in the circuit of activity, individuals use discursive practices to manage meanings in support of their intentions. These practices include the creation and dissemination of spoken or written texts, which include the use of narratives, rhetoric, metaphors and symbols. The ultimate goal of these discursive practices is to build support for a particular concept. Second, in the circuit of performativity, the circuit of activity engages others within the organization. This engagement occurs when the concepts evoked through discursive practices resonate with others. Third, the circuit of connectivity occurs when discursive practices take hold within the organization; that is, when the concepts resonate as intended with others in the circuit of performativity, future organizational discourse is shaped by these concepts, thereby laying the groundwork for strategic change (Hardy *et al.*, 2000).

Examples from the strategy literature serve to clarify these somewhat abstract concepts. In an exploration of an organization's strategic decision to invest and develop a core competence in IT, Samra-Fredericks (2003) analyzes the discursive practices of one strategist deemed to be persuasive. She reveals evidence of metaphor-use, including an invocation to dramatic action to avoid being "frozen in time" (Samra-Fredericks, 2003, p. 164), to succinctly articulate complex forms of knowledge in a circuit of activity. This effective metaphor-use engaged with other strategists within the organization in a circuit of performativity during interactions such as face-to-face meetings. Subsequent organizational decisions and outcomes, including the allocation of financial and human

resources to develop IT competence, provided support for the notion that the strategist's discursive practices had taken hold within the organization in a circuit of connectivity.

Analyzing strategy talk on airline alliances, [Vaara et al. \(2004\)](#) identify several discursive practices, including problematization of traditional strategies. The construction of a problem can be seen as a rhetorical device that builds support for ideas presented as solutions in a circuit of activity. In the context of building support for airline alliances, the circuit of performativity often involved press releases from and interviews by top management that problematized "old-fashioned" ([Vaara et al., 2004](#), p. 13) strategies, presenting alliances as a necessary response to globalization. Organizational decisions to ultimately enact alliances provide evidence that these discursive practices took hold, constituting a circuit of connectivity.

Such examples illustrate the ability of discursive practices to influence strategic change. The following sections elaborate on these concepts in an examination of the sustainability strategies associated with the natural resource-based view of the firm.

### *Pollution prevention*

[Hart \(1995\)](#) argues that there is a sequential logic to the natural resource-based view's four sustainability strategies. Without first implementing a pollution prevention strategy, it may not be possible to successfully implement product stewardship, clean technology or base-of-the-pyramid strategies. Accordingly, it is useful to first consider pollution prevention. As organizational members seek to garner support for strategic change toward a strategy of pollution prevention, it is useful to reflect on the underlying characteristics of pollution prevention. Whereas pollution control, akin to [Buysse and Verbeke's \(2003\)](#) reactive environmental strategy, simply involves cleaning up waste after it has been generated, pollution prevention entails the minimization or elimination of waste prior to its creation. Relative to firms solely adopting traditional control strategies, firms with more proactive business strategies would be expected to embrace such a preventive approach ([Aragon-Correa, 1998](#)). A pollution prevention strategy entails a largely internal focus, centered on the exercise and development of internal capabilities and technologies. It involves a near-term time horizon, in which process changes can be enacted relatively quickly and corresponding benefits can be gained without significant delay. The analogy of total quality management ([Hart, 1995, 1997; Porter and van der Linde, 1995](#)) is helpful, in that the continuous improvement mindset underlying total quality management is shared by pollution prevention. A pollution prevention strategy views pollution as waste, whose elimination enhances organizational efficiency. There are potentially significant economic benefits to be realized through strategic change toward pollution prevention, as increased efficiency and productivity boost profit ([Hart, 1995, 1997](#)). [Table I](#) illustrates the key dimensions of a pollution prevention strategy, along with the dimensions of the other sustainability strategies associated with the natural resource-based view of the firm.

The characteristics of pollution prevention – internal focus, current time horizon and efficiency benefits – suggest optimal associated discursive practices. The concept of interpretative repertoires, a key component of discourse analysis, helps to shed light on these practices. Interpretative repertoires are, in the words of social psychologists [Potter and Wetherell \(1987, p. 149\)](#), "recurrently used systems of terms used for characterizing

**Table I** Sustainability strategies

<i>Time horizon</i>	<i>Organizational focus</i>	
	<i>Internal</i>	<i>External</i>
Future	Clean technology	Base of the pyramid
Current	Pollution prevention	Product stewardship

Source: Adapted from [Hart \(1995, 1997\)](#), [Hart and Dowell \(2011\)](#)

and evaluating actions, events and other phenomena". Importantly, interpretative repertoires function as resources that can be drawn on for sensemaking (Livesey, 2001). Dutton and Ashford (1993) argue that issues framed as having higher payoff and having the ability to be resolved by top management will receive greater management attention. Language use that uses an interpretative repertoire of efficiency facilitates such a framing and is congruent with strategic change toward pollution prevention. Organizational members that seek to advance such change would be expected to be most successful, therefore, when embracing rhetorical aspects of this repertoire, such as equating existing levels of pollution generation with waste and inefficiencies. The use of the "pollution as waste" metaphor may be particularly powerful, insofar as it helps to create a vivid and resonant symbol for the organization's decision-makers. This metaphor forges a strong link between pollution prevention and profit and helps to craft a compelling narrative: as pollution is prevented, inefficiencies are removed from operations, productivity rises and shareholder value ultimately increases. This logic is supported by empirical evidence that pollution prevention is positively related to financial and manufacturing performance (Hart and Ahuja, 1996; King and Lenox, 2002; Klassen and Whybark, 1999).

### *Product stewardship*

Both pollution prevention and product stewardship involve a current time horizon. But while pollution prevention involves a largely internal focus for the firm, product stewardship requires that firms actively engage with external stakeholders and consider the complete life-cycle impact of their products. Major changes in product and process design are often necessary to achieve this goal. By incorporating the interests of relevant stakeholders in product and process design, the firm may benefit by securing legitimacy (Hart, 1997). Such changes in the practices of athletic footwear producer Nike, for example, along with the company's framing of its practices (Waller and Conaway, 2011), helped to preserve the company's legitimacy. Legitimacy has been defined as a "generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions" (Suchman, 1995, p. 574), and is at the heart of theoretical explanations of organizational responsiveness to societal norms (Meyer and Rowan, 1977; DiMaggio and Powell, 1983).

Taken together, the external focus, current time horizon and legitimating benefits of product stewardship suggest that discursive practices highlighting legitimacy would be optimal. Examples of such practices would draw on interpretative repertoires of legitimation, a motivation that prior research has linked to ecological responsiveness (Bansal and Roth, 2000). Recurrently used terms that constitute such a repertoire might include "reputation" and "character": narratives could be crafted that portray product stewardship as a means to strengthen the reputation or character of the organization. Another recurring term of particular relevance would be "consensus": organizational members might choose to emphasize societal consensus on the desirability of product stewardship. Given that greater individual attention is devoted to issues of higher moral consensus (Morris and McDonald, 1995), an emphasis on consensus is a logical discursive practice in pursuit of organizational support for product stewardship.

### *Clean technology*

Relative to pollution prevention and product stewardship, a clean technology strategy entails a longer-term time horizon. Clean technology involves the development of disruptive and sustainable technologies; commitment to solar and wind technologies, and development of hybrid and electric power systems for vehicles, are consistent with this strategy. As with pollution prevention, a clean technology strategy entails a largely internal focus (Hart, 1997). Given longer-term payoffs for investments in clean technology and corporate mindsets that tend to discourage such investments, there is significant structural resistance to corporate adoption of clean technology strategies (Hart and Milstein, 2003).

Nonetheless, the depletion of fossil fuels, combined with the continuing adverse environmental effects of fossil fuel consumption, can be expected to generate increasing demands for clean technology in the coming years. This trend suggests that companies who commit to strategic change toward clean technology will be positioned to develop strong innovation capabilities that hold the potential to yield sustained competitive advantage.

Discursive practices oriented toward garnering support for a clean technology strategy should consider interpretative repertoires centered on innovation. An interpretative repertoire of innovation would emphasize the desirability of technological advancement and stress the potential for proprietary technology to secure competitive advantage. In addition to “innovation” itself, associated recurrently used terms of this repertoire would logically include “technology”, “knowledge” and “capabilities”. As such, it becomes evident that there is significant theoretical grounding for clean technology within the resource-based view of the firm (Wernerfelt, 1984; Barney, 1991). By extension, there is also theoretical grounding for clean technology within the resource-based view’s so-called “spin-off perspectives” (Barney *et al.*, 2011, p. 1303), including the knowledge-based view (Grant, 1996) and dynamic capabilities (Teece *et al.*, 1997).

However, the relatively small volume of empirical research on the outcomes of adoption of clean technology strategies (Hart and Dowell, 2011) suggests that organizational members may be challenged to successfully use discursive practices. In the cases of pollution prevention and product stewardship, interpretative repertoires can be strengthened by empirical evidence of benefits. Given the relative absence of such empirical evidence for clean technology, it may be helpful for organizational members to supplement interpretative repertoires with techniques of intertextual representation (Bazerman, 2004). Intertextuality involves the explicit or implicit borrowing of texts from different contexts (Bakhtin *et al.*, 1986; Fairclough, 1992). Texts become re-actualized, in effect, by repetition and reference (Livsey, 2002). Relevant techniques of intertextual representation might include direct quotations from authorities such as consultants and from market research firms that have quantified future demand for innovative clean technologies. Direct quotation might be supplemented with a second intertextual technique, the evaluation of invoked voices (Bazerman, 2004), which involves the characterizations of the sources of any borrowed texts. For example, a cited report authored by a consulting firm would be supplemented by the organizational member’s characterization of the firm itself as credible.

### *Base of the pyramid*

A base-of-the-pyramid strategy involves the ability of firms to meet the unmet needs of the world’s poor (Hart and Dowell, 2011). Thus, there is a strong emphasis on the social dimension of sustainability. Nonetheless, a base-of-the-pyramid strategy requires that the social dimension be addressed in concert with the natural environment. In other words, unmet needs are addressed in a manner that minimizes adverse impact to the environment. This strategy entails an external focus and longer-term time horizon. As with clean technology, corporate mindsets serve as impediments to the realization of the strategy. Specifically, most companies fail to see the world’s poor as a major source of profit potential (Hart and Milstein, 2003). But the relative dearth of companies seeking to meet the needs of the poor creates attractive opportunities for significant revenue growth among firms that choose to compete in this area.

Given the obstacles to the realization of this strategy, successful discursive practices must be selected carefully and should encompass both interpretative repertoires and intertextuality. Repertoires of growth would characterize a base of the pyramid strategy in the context of the sheer numbers of those living at the base of the economic pyramid; the metaphor of the pyramid is useful in itself as a symbol that dramatizes the magnitude of potential customers whose needs are currently unmet. Approximately 1.4 billion people live

on \$3 to 5 per day, 1.6 billion live on \$1 to 3 per day and 1 billion live on <\$1 per day (Rangan *et al.*, 2011). An emphasis on magnitude is helpful both as an indicator of vast revenue potential and as an indicator of the extent of positive social consequences resulting from successful execution of the strategy. Prior research suggests that organizational decision-makers will be more receptive to issues seen as having high-magnitude consequences (Flannery and May, 2000).

Because very few firms have committed to a base-of-the-pyramid strategy, organizational members promoting the strategy should also consider intertextuality in the development of their discursive practices. One intertextual technique that may be effective involves indirect quotation (Bazerman, 2004). Specifically, paraphrases of case study research, which constitute the majority of research on the base of the pyramid (Hart and Dowell, 2011), seem warranted. Direct quotations of studies that cite the projected growth of developing economies, and of the populations of the associated nations' citizens, may also be effective in forging the association with growth potential.

### *The moderating role of top management team background*

The previous arguments suggest direct relationships between discursive practices and strategic change. In addition, given that organizations are, in a large part, reflections of top management (Finkelstein *et al.*, 2009; Hambrick and Mason, 1984), it is important to consider the moderating role that the backgrounds of top management teams may exert. Executive cognitions, values and perceptions influence strategic choice (Carpenter *et al.*, 2004). Managerial characteristics such as functional experience may serve as proxies for underlying differences in cognitions, values and perceptions, which are difficult to measure (Carpenter *et al.*, 2004; Hambrick and Mason, 1984). Indeed, top management's functional experience has been empirically linked with strategic choice (Herrman and Datta, 2006). Given the important insights that an upper-echelons perspective may offer with respect to strategic change in sustainability, the following paragraphs discuss the potential influence of top managers' functional track.

As Hambrick and Mason (1984) argue, throughput functions such as production, process engineering and accounting share an underlying logic of efficiency improvement. Efficiency-focused strategic changes have been found to occur in organizations whose top managers have more throughput function experience (Strandholm *et al.*, 2004). As noted earlier, improved efficiency is a primary benefit of a pollution prevention strategy. Insofar as the circuit of performativity includes the creation of resonance with top managers, throughput function experience has implications for the success of discursive practices. Specifically, we would anticipate that the concept of the association between efficiency and pollution prevention, evoked through discursive practices, will achieve greater resonance among top managers with more extensive throughput function experience. This logic is consistent with arguments that issue selling will be more successful when top management possesses expertise relevant to the issue domain (Dutton and Ashford, 1993).

Peripheral functions such as law and finance are, as Hambrick and Mason (1984, p. 199) state, "not integrally involved with the organization's core activities". Top managers with such backgrounds have been suggested to gravitate toward administrative complexity and unrelated diversification (Hambrick and Mason, 1984). Jensen and Zajac's (2004) finding that finance CEOs were associated with unrelated diversification supports this contention. Given that those with peripheral function experience may be somewhat removed from core internal processes and practices, and may have an affinity for thoroughness of planning systems, it is reasonable to believe that managers with such backgrounds may be especially interested in seeking legitimacy through the inclusion of external stakeholder interests. Product stewardship offers benefits of greater legitimacy through a more thorough consideration of stakeholder interests. Thus, I would expect that the link between

legitimacy and product stewardship would be more apparent to top management with backgrounds in peripheral functions.

The concerns of output functions such as sales and marketing include the search for new products and markets to enable growth (Hambrick and Mason, 1984). In this manner, output functions bear a future orientation indicative of two strategies associated with the natural resource-based view of the firm: clean technology and base of the pyramid. Innovation and growth, primary benefits of clean technology and base-of-the-pyramid strategies, respectively, are of inherent interest to top management with output function backgrounds. Indeed, CEO experience in output functions has been found to be positively related to R&D spending (Barker and Mueller, 2002). The association of innovation and growth with longer-term time horizon sustainability strategies would therefore appear more explicit to top management with experience in output functions.

## Discussion and conclusion

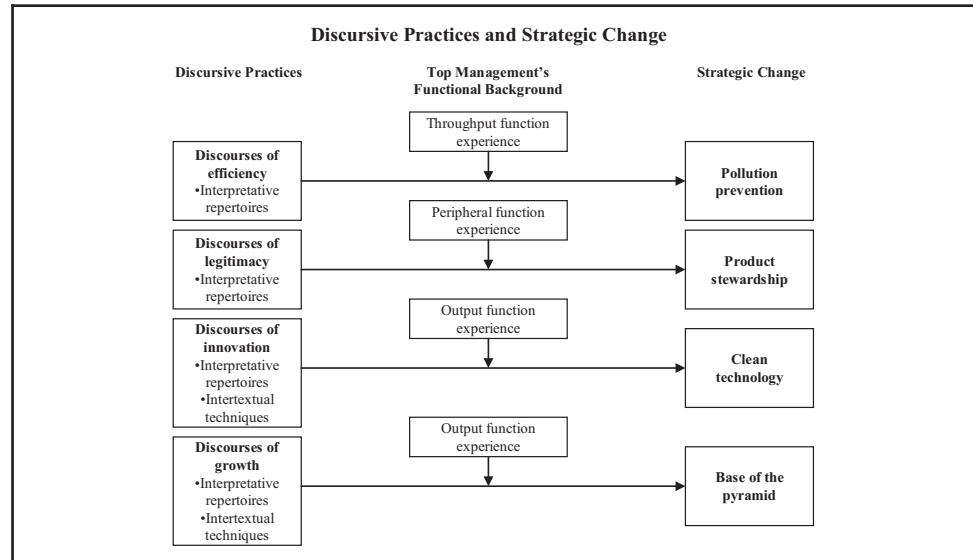
This paper developed theory regarding the relationship between individuals' discursive practices and the organizational process of strategic change concerning sustainability strategy. Different discursive practices, including the use of narratives, rhetoric, metaphors and symbols, were argued to be associated with strategic change toward different sustainability strategies associated with the natural resource-based view of the firm. Various interpretative repertoires and intertextual techniques, collectively labeled discourses, were suggested to be associated with strategic change toward pollution prevention, product stewardship, clean technology or base-of-the-pyramid strategies.

Specifically, the paper proposed a number of direct and moderated relationships between discursive practices and strategic change. First, rhetorical aspects of an interpretative repertoire of efficiency, collectively termed discourses of efficiency, were suggested to be associated with strategic change toward pollution prevention. Second, elements of an interpretative repertoire of legitimacy, termed discourses of legitimacy, were proposed to be associated with strategic change toward product stewardship. Third, a repertoire of innovation in concert with intertextual techniques (discourses of innovation) were argued to be associated with strategic change toward clean technology. Fourth, a repertoire of growth in combination with intertextual techniques (discourses of growth) was posited to be associated with strategic change toward a base-of-the-pyramid strategy.

It was then suggested that each of these relationships would be moderated by the functional background of the organization's top management. The relationship between discourses of efficiency and pollution prevention was said to be moderated by top management's throughput function experience. Management's peripheral function experience was argued to moderate the relationship between discourses of legitimacy and product stewardship. And management's output function experience was suggested to moderate the relationship between discourses of innovation and clean technology, as well as the relationship between discourses of growth and base-of-the-pyramid strategies. A summary of the paper's conceptual model is presented in Figure 1.

This model's applicability varies according to the process by which strategy is formulated. The role of top management and organizational members differs according to the underlying type of strategy-making process (Hart, 1992). A command style of process, for example, maximizes the role of top management while minimizing the role of organizational members (Hart, 1992). Given that the discursive practices of organizational members can be understood to have limited impact on strategic change under a command system, the model does not apply to organizations using this style. In the context of Hart's (1992) process framework, the model applies instead, to varying degrees, to symbolic, rational, transactive and generative modes of strategy-making. Thus, the limited boundaries of this model are defined by these strategy-making modes.

**Figure 1** Discursive practices and strategic change



In conceptualizing the relationship between discursive practices and strategic change, this paper suggests issues that may serve as a basis for future research. One issue concerns the ability of rhetoric to influence strategic change. Prior research has identified the rhetorical strategies that organizations have used to legitimate outcomes such as plant closures (Erkama and Vaara, 2010), diffusion of new managerial practices (Green, 2004) and adoption of new organizational forms (Suddaby and Greenwood, 2005). The question of how rhetorical strategies influence the adoption of sustainability strategies, however, has been largely unexamined. This paper suggests that the examination of this question, as well as of rhetoric's ability to influence other aspects of strategic change, may constitute productive areas for future research.

A further issue that future research may consider concerns potential interactions that may influence strategic change. This paper identified top management's background as one factor that would be expected to impact the relationship between discursive practices and strategic change. Additional variables would be expected to interact with discursive practices to influence the likelihood of strategic change. For example, revenue growth may represent one such variable; discourses of growth might be expected to be more likely to influence strategic change toward the base-of-the-pyramid strategies among firms characterized by low growth, as the imperative to find new avenues for growth is heightened. Future research should seek to identify other such variables that may influence the relationship between discourse and strategic change.

An additional area for future research is the exploration of multiple types of discourse in influencing strategic change. This paper proposed a number of direct relationships between distinct discursive practices and strategic change toward different sustainability strategies. Unexamined, however, was the question of the effect that the simultaneous or sequential use of multiple discourses – such as those of efficiency and growth – may have on strategic change. Given the path-dependent nature of the sustainability strategies associated with the natural resource-based view, the issue of sequencing of multiple discourses may be of particular interest in future research.

Although this paper's theoretical arguments have not yet been empirically tested, initial implications for practitioners can be offered. The paper's arguments build upon the fundamental recognition that strategizing is a discursive process (Barry and Elmes, 1997; Gioia and Thomas, 1996). As such, practitioners should be mindful that their



linguistic choices have profound impacts on their ability to influence strategic change in sustainability. Narratives, rhetoric, metaphors and symbols can be used to generate support for strategic change. When the concepts evoked through discursive practices resonate with others, such support is most likely to be achieved. Specifically, the most successful discursive practices will seek to forge a clear connection between perceived organizational benefits and strategic change toward a given area of sustainability. For example, practitioners seeking to advance strategic change toward clean technology would be well-advised to emphasize the ability for proprietary technology to secure competitive advantage. Furthermore, practitioners advancing clean technology should be mindful that organizational benefits may be perceived as somewhat ambiguous, given the relative absence of empirical evidence. It is therefore essential that practitioners' discursive practices include quotations from authorities such as consultants and market researchers who have quantified the demand for clean technologies.

Practitioners should further be cognizant of the contexts that may affect the likelihood of success of various discursive practices. This paper suggests that top management's functional background is an important context that may affect the relationship between discursive practices and strategic change. Practitioners should therefore be guided by an understanding of the extent of top management's background in throughput, output and peripheral functions when selecting and deploying discursive practices in pursuit of strategic change in sustainability. For instance, practitioners using discourses of growth in advancing a base-of-the-pyramid strategy should recognize that their chances of success will be greatest within organizations whose top managers hold significant output function experience. Alternatively, practitioners invoking discourses of legitimacy in promoting product stewardship can expect to meet with the most success in organizations whose top management holds peripheral functional experience.

Much of strategy research is notable for the absence of discussion of human actors and actions (Jarzabkowski *et al.*, 2007; Jarzabkowski and Paul Spee, 2009; Johnson *et al.*, 2007). An examination of discourse helps fill this gap by foregrounding human actors, actions and interactions. Sustainability is developed and maintained in organizations through human actors, actions and interactions; as such, discourse holds the potential to generate significant insights into sustainable business practices. This paper suggested that different discursive practices would be associated with strategic change, defined in the context of the natural resource-based view of the firm. These relationships, it was suggested, would be moderated by top management's functional backgrounds. It is hoped that this research will generate increased scholarly interest in the ability of discursive practices to influence strategic change.

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