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Strategic Change

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In pursuit of change: managerial constructions of strategic intent

- *This article examines how managers conceptualize change-directed strategic intent using a metaphoric approach.*
- *Managers draw on experience and intuition as well as rational evaluation to construct intent, which can be captured holistically via expressive action metaphors. Several of these are drawn from the strategy literature.*
- *Two managers are presented as case examples. A few significant metaphors appear to characterize their respective intents for strategic change. Both similarities and contrasts emerge, suggesting the merit of analysing strategic intent in this way.*
- *Managers should try to be aware of their guiding metaphors and the impact of these on colleagues. Potent metaphors, especially ones that encode the personal priorities of senior managers, can become taken for granted, difficult to change and ultimately inappropriate.*
- *A dominant metaphor can be highly motivating but possibly dysfunctional too. Conversely, multiple*

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metaphors may result in ambiguity and confused priorities for action. Ways of coping with these dilemmas are suggested.

- *Metaphors of intent need exposing and exploring in open debate to achieve widespread commitment. Therefore, change agents should encourage colleagues to explore new metaphors collectively and to interpret their nuances in order to create imaginative, counter-intuitive and particularized prescriptions for effective and advantageous strategic change.*

Summary

Senior managers espouse strategic change as the means to organizational survival and future success. However, they can differ markedly in how they construct the intent that underpins and shapes strategic change. This article considers some of the forms in which managers may conceptualize their change-directed intent. Two contrasting cases are explored, concluding with some implications for managing strategic change more effectively.

Introduction

> *I've got thirty years of experience working in organizations ... things are going on all of the time and certain strands ... trigger something ... One would have to get into the nature of the brain ... a sense that something is out of kilter or will not quite match up if you don't get hold of it and handle it.*
> (Professor Jones, head of a university department)

Here, a senior manager acknowledges the mental processes that anticipate and construct change-producing actions. He expresses a belief in experience and intuition as aids to sense-making. They contribute to his interpretation of what his organization has to do to succeed in an uncertain and thus problematic environment. His outlook is consistent with two of Rajagopalan and Spreitzer's (1997) three lenses on strategic change: *cognition* (change grounded in core beliefs, knowledge structures and interpretive processes) and *learning* (change that draws on relevant experience, interaction with and feedback from the environment within and beyond the organization).

More generally, there is evidence that, although external actors including competitors and regulators may seem to *impose* change, the key drivers are generally managerial perceptions of opportunity or relative weakness and threat (Hendry *et al.*, 1993). Managers *construct* the priorities for, and parameters of, strategic change, notably, though not exclusively, at the more senior levels of the organization.

> *Managers construct the priorities for, and parameters of, strategic change*

In familiar terms, strategic change episodes are the outcomes of senior managers' conceptions and expressions of strategic vision and intent (Hamel and Prahalad, 1989). This is the case despite vision and intent being difficult to establish realistically and unambiguously (Beaver, 2000). Change sentiments often germinate in a 'single brain', stimulated by a managerial commitment to organizational sustainability that prompts the reframing of intent (Bartunek, 1988). Later, these conceptions crystallize into concrete proposals for action as a result of multiple conversations among the active agenda formers (Hickson *et al*., 1986; Dutton and Duncan, 1987; Crossan *et al*., 1999).

To anticipate *what* to change, and *why*, *when* and *how best* to do so, individuals reconstruct their sense of organizational reality and then consider the future implications. Envisioned changes often focus on concerns that can be made tangible, such as felt needs to enhance products or services, implement more efficient business processes, offer a better service to one's customers and so on. In what terms do those responsible for the performance and standing of an organization conceive the *intent* underlying such strategic changes?

Here, underlying intent is identified with Strebel's (1994) concept of path selection, rather than Hamel and Prahalad's (1989) ambitious prescription for global dominance: *intent is treated as being synonymous with the means envisioned for achieving favourable outcomes*, the path or route rather than the destination *per se*. It will be argued that, in its essential character, intent can be conceived and captured in quite parsimonious, holistic terms by means of expressive action metaphors. This idea is illustrated using two case examples, senior managers who will be referred to by the pseudonyms Smith and Jones. A review then follows of some implications for managing strategic change more effectively.

Thinking about strategic intent

Shared assumptions about strategy and change tend to guide and constrain actors in systematic ways and influence how their organizations develop in practice (Spender, 1989; Huff, 1990). Since the acquired mental models of senior managers are influential in anticipating and shaping change (Barr and Huff, 1997; Boeker, 1997), it is appropriate to investigate how they construct strategic intent. In what form do they synthesize their (partially intuitive) assumptions? How might others capture their conceptions of intent comprehensively, yet economically?

One approach recognizes the importance of holistic abstractions in strategic thinking and communication achieved via the medium of metaphor. Oswick and Grant (1996) advocate metaphors as useful research devices, to illuminate descriptively and as analytical 'lenses'.[1] Metaphors encode subjectively coherent impressions, syntheses or *gestalts* of personal and collective sense-making in ambiguous circumstances (McCaskey, 1982; Boland and Greenberg, 1988; Perren and Atkin, 2000).

In organizations, as in life generally, metaphoric thinking exerts a potent, galvanizing influence on subjective, human actors (Pettigrew, 1979; Lakoff and Johnson, 1980). The analogical and mythical qualities of metaphors help to simplify complex realities. A metaphor provides a kind of template that shapes understandings and actions. A classic example is the military *metaphor of encirclement*, the 'animating dream' attributed to Komatsu in its longstanding struggle for supremacy over Caterpillar (Hamel and Prahalad, 1989). Here, the encirclement that Komatsu managers envisioned was presumably not so much a physical manoeuvre as an expression of its intent to constrain the freedom of its main adversary to respond to the changing needs of the world-wide market.

The analogical and mythical qualities of metaphors help to simplify complex realities

[1] However, Pinder and Bourgeois (1982) and Tsoukas (1993) express reservations over their analytical value.

Strong metaphors facilitate some insights and marginalize others. For instance, evolution and metamorphosis evoke insights into organizational change akin to the development and possibly the ultimate demise of a living organism. Reinforced by rhetoric (Finstad, 1998), metaphors legitimize assumptions that become taken for granted, thereby rendered beyond question.

Particular metaphors are not right or wrong in any absolute sense, only differently illuminating in a given situation. For example, Mangham and Overington (1987) chose to treat organizations as theatres and organizational behaviours as performances. Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) used a sporting metaphor to style Japanese new product development as team rugby. Metaphoric treatments also encourage typologies, such as Morgan's (1986) eight images of organization, including strategic change as flux and transformation. Dunford and Palmer (1996) categorized organizational 'downsizing' using the root metaphors of horticulture (e.g. pruning), medicine (treatment) and violence (attack, combat). Mintzberg *et al.* (1998) offered 10 metaphors to characterise strategic management processes.

The act of typing highlights distinctions among organizational phenomena, even though qualities attributed to one metaphor-type may feature in other types. Horticultural pruning implies intent similar to that of a medical intervention and certainly entails a kind of violence! Organizations-as-organisms prompt insights different from organizations-as-brains, yet all higher-level organisms have brains and hence some capacity for 'brainy' behaviours. These interpretive overlaps are both strengths and shortcomings of metaphoric thinking.

The basic proposition here is that a few significant metaphors inform and guide managers' outlooks regarding their intent for strategic change. Implicitly or otherwise, metaphors then inform the translation of intent into commensurate actions. The form that a metaphor takes may be generalized or may be rendered specific or idiosyncratic by circumstance (Perren and Atkin, 2000). Further, it is suggested that various root metaphors of intent can be detected in the strategy literature. No list of such metaphors would be exhaustive, though some ways of thinking occur so regularly that they may well characterize the thinking of many managers. For example:

- ***Responding*** (perspectives on intent that emphasize a felt need to adapt to circumstances). Typical metaphors: *Jumping on the bandwagon; Capitalizing on opportunities; Countering threats; Improvising*.
- ***Initiating*** (perspectives that emphasize being proactive and being first to realise future potentialities). Typical metaphors: *Pioneering; Winning the game; Revolutionizing*.
- ***Repatterning*** (perspectives that emphasise the reconfiguration of existing assets and business processes and the restructuring of relationships and networks). Typical metaphors: *Reforming; Reconstructing; Rejuvenating*.
- ***Accumulating*** (perspectives that emphasize increasing asset stocks, physical or intangible, including facilities, equipment, inventories, market positions, know-how and reputation). Typical metaphors: *Building; Growing; Investing; Extending*.
- ***Learning*** (perspectives that emphasize organizational development by experiencing, interacting with, and reflecting on new situations with the potential to enable new insights).[2] Typical metaphors: *Experimenting; Coping; Muddling through*.

[2] The learning metaphor is undeniably salient in some organizations, but it will not be discussed in detail here because it is clearly a hybrid metaphor. First, it combines the accumulation of new knowledge with the repatterning of current knowledge. Second, as Senge (1990) observes, it encompasses both generative (initiating) and adaptive (responding) behaviours.

- ***Embedding*** (perspectives that emphasize assimilating or institutionalising desirable new practices and postures). Typical metaphors: *Locking in; Internalizing; Taking on board*.

Paradoxically, when managers respond constructively to crises the result may be longer-term strategic benefits

Strategic intent conceived as *responding*

A desire to be responsive suggests a belief in opportunistic actions that enable the organization to adapt to events and contingencies. Responsiveness prompted by feedback on performance directs attention to the adjustment of established routines (Nelson and Winter, 1982): typically first-order, adaptive change. No matter how conservative, few organizations are immune to change prompted by external pressures and from the internal community of interests (Brown and Duguid, 1991; Burgelman, 1991). Responsiveness finds echoes in Mintzberg *et al.*'s (1998) 'environmental school of strategy'.

From an evolutionary perspective (Aldrich, 1999), intent to adapt in a timely, reactive-defensive fashion can be organizationally appropriate as well as an intuitive logic of strategic change. An 'early-follower' who emulates the pioneering changes of a 'first mover' is pursuing a rational change strategy. The follower hopes to avoid the pioneer's mistakes and reduce the risks of entering an attractive, but adolescent market. Emulation allows it to apply and refine its existing skills. Physical and intellectual proximity to innovation leaders facilitates emulation (Spender, 1998). Managers who adopt this approach are more likely to be present-orientated than future-orientated and prefer incremental, transactional change to radical, transformational change (Brown and Eisenhardt, 1997; West and Meyer, 1997).

However, when current performance satisfies prevailing expectations, responsive intent may be suppressed. Change carries perceived risks, so organizations tend toward inertia and respond slowly to contingencies (Greve, 1998; Markides, 1998), until performance downturns prompt perceptions of crisis (Barker and Mone, 1998). **Paradoxically, however, when managers respond constructively to crises the result may be longer-term strategic benefits, including new collective skills** (Grinyer and Spender, 1979; Meyer, 1982).

Strategic intent conceived as *initiating*

Many managers reject a philosophy of responding to events and competitive initiatives as being inadequate for long-run survival, let alone high performance. They anticipate sustained success from proactive, initiating behaviour. According to Huy (1998), these managers combine rationality with intuition and intellectual and emotional capabilities. Their organizations ally receptivity to new ideas with capacities to mobilize resources, and they reflect critically on outcomes. Thus, they sustain change that is ongoing yet often radical.

Proactive strategic intent is often linked with innovation, engendering new capabilities in the firm (e.g. Hamel and Prahalad, 1989; Markides, 1998). Managers who conceive intent in terms of initiating change accord priority to *probing the future* (Brown and Eisenhardt, 1997). They link envisioned futures to the firm's current capabilities. Their innovation teams contain a balance of future-orientated and present-orientated personnel, and the firms generally have clear structures to counterbalance informal behaviours.

When managers associate strategic intent with initiating behaviour, they typically foster *cultures that encourage curiosity and innovation* (Baden-Fuller and Stopford, 1994; Brown and Eisenhardt, 1997; O'Reilly and Tushman, 1997). Innovation necessitates multiple initiatives, hence the possibility of costly, redundant mistakes and the risk (but not fear) of failure (Nonaka, 1990; Sitkin, 1996). This prompts other metaphors, namely gambling and playing poker — placing informed and sometimes multiple corporate bets on untested technologies, as when IBM managers 'bet the company' on the System 360 computer in the 1960s (Mills and Friesen, 1996, pp. 30, 99).

Entrepreneurship is often associated with initiating behaviour. The popular image is of heroic champions, single-minded individuals whose capacity to stimulate change derives from a creative, pioneering vision allied to courage and determination in the face of adversity (Nayak and Ketteringham, 1986; Wesley and Mintzberg, 1989). Initiating managers are often also associated with the imagery of aggression and conflict (e.g. Hinterhuber and Levin, 1995).

When the intent to initiate change creates valued outcomes such as productive new assets and collaborative networks, proactive firms create the key events to which others have to respond. Though innovation does not always create the future as the instigators envision, an initiating approach increases collective expertise and experience as the firm recruits and trains specialists, builds interdisciplinary teams and encourages action-learning projects (Revans, 1980; Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995; Burgoyne and Jackson, 1997).[3]

Strategic intent conceived as *repatterning*

Repatterning implies intent to configure differently what the firm presently is, does and 'knows'. Several studies (e.g. Miles *et al.*, 1978; Freyssenet *et al.*, 1998) posit distinctive patterns or configurations of strategy, organizational characteristics and environmental characteristics. When managers conceive an attractive new pattern or recognize one elsewhere, understandably their intent can be to reconfigure their organization accordingly.

This perspective on strategic intent suggests the metaphor of change as (re)design — of strategy, structure and style or culture. Repatterning could imply either a minor shift or a major transformation (Doz and Thanheiser, 1993). In its extreme, if controversial, form (Donaldson, 1996; Miller, 1986), the argument is that only a finite number of stable 'strategic states' are feasible, so that successful strategic intent equates with infrequent, radical transitions between two feasible states.

An emphasis on structural repatterning seeks to reconfigure organizational units, internal linkages, external relationships and/or alliances to achieve more effective communities of practice (Faulkner, 1995; Hagstrom and Hedlund, 1998; Teece, 1998). Managers also seek to change the pattern of their firms' technologies and innovation-design 'architectures', their resource deployments and routines and/or their collective know-how (Henderson and Clark, 1990; Kogut and Zander, 1992; Galunic and Rodan, 1998).

Though repatterning constitutes change, it does not follow that the firm is pursuing an irreversible path or trajectory. So managers who make structural changes to improve the organization's fit with its environment may subsequently revert to a former structure. Thus, in principle, repatterning can equate with cyclical change.

Strategic intent conceived as *accumulating*

Strategic intent may equate with asset accumulation, increasing the net worth of the organization and enhancing its competitive position through the scale or scope of its activities. Managers who express intent in

[3] Hence the link between initiating and generative learning. For example, Fruin (1997) describes how Toshiba collaborated with Visa International to create a novel 'Supersmart card' in the mid 1980s. Though the partners did not commercialise the card as originally conceived, the liaison enabled Toshiba to develop a range of technologies with considerable future potential.

these terms legitimize actions to acquire, store and exploit scarce, hard-to-replicate (and hence valuable) assets including knowledge (Dierickx and Cool, 1989; Kay, 1993; Spender, 1996).

Motives for linking strategic change to asset accumulation differ significantly. Intent to accumulate may be with specific applications in mind. Successful leveraging of current assets leads to new products or market positions that create enhanced assets for the future. Alternatively, managers may adopt a serendipitous, curiosity-driven approach with little prior thought to the possible uses of the new assets. Firms may accumulate technological assets in domains managers regard definitively as theirs, either to achieve advantage or using a *just in case* strategic logic. They may also accumulate and defend intellectual property by patent applications, principally to deny competitors access to new markets and technologies.

Although manifesting its own controversies (Morden, 1997), *recent thinking has advocated forms of strategic intent that exploit core competences whilst subcontracting non-core activities*, drawing on

Recent thinking has advocated forms of strategic intent that exploit core competences

the theory of resource-based advantage. In this model, managerial intent is to combine the accumulation particularly of *intangible* assets such as specialist knowledge and network positions with, in effect, the negative accumulation of *tangible* assets and non-expert staff. This conception envisions the firm of the future as a dedicated information and communication centre. Whilst this may be appropriate for knowledge-intensive firms such as consultancies, it poses questions for all managers about the protection of intangible, community-specific knowledge, especially if collective knowledge is viewed as transient flux rather than tradable commodity (Blackler, 1995).

Given that firms appropriate intellectual property from each other by recruiting key staff opportunistically, organization-specific knowledge inevitably leaks away over time. Worse still, knowledge erodes through *adaptive inertia* (Leonard-Barton, 1992), especially when it is 'sticky' — difficult to circulate around the firm, hence hard to deploy (Von Hippel, 1998) and likely to be overlooked or forgotten (Engestrom *et al.*, 1990). That said, just as organizations dispose of obsolete equipment, they must also eliminate redundant knowledge (or 'exnovate' as Clark and Staunton (1989) called this activity).

Strategic intent conceived as *embedding*

It is a widespread view that strategic change is effective when it produces a non-reversible shift from a less to a more desirable state. So managers' intent may reflect a felt need to reject the *status quo* in favour of a new orthodoxy. They want to institutionalize positive change by embedding new practices in amended organizational routines and cultures.

In essence the argument draws on Lewin's (1947) model of unfreezing a situation, acting to change it and then refreezing it. Whilst research has examined the obstacles to change, comparatively little has been done to establish the factors that affect the sustainability of particular changes. Addressing the demands made by the context of change, such as competitive actions, is presumably significant. For change to be sustainable it must be also consistent with the organization's self-identity and external image (Dutton and Dukerich, 1991; Fox-Wolfgramm *et al.*, 1998). **In other words, *the intent to embed new routines requires attitudinal and cultural change*** (Baden-Fuller and Stopford, 1994).

Following claims that strategic change should be continuous rather than episodic to ensure survival (Peters, 1987; Brown and Eisenhardt, 1997), an intent to embed new attitudes and practices suggests an inappropriately static view of strategic change. Yet the embedding metaphor captures a widely held belief that one must protect beneficial change against a reversion to obsolete, dysfunctional behaviours.

Contrasting outlooks on strategic change: two illustrations

Attention is now directed to examine the outlooks of two general managers in comparatively large, multi-activity organizations. Their organizational units had historically performed well, but senior managers now considered that they needed performance improvements.

Smith is Chief Executive of a food-processing firm, part of a multinational corporation. Jones is head of a department of business administration in a British university. Both individuals are employees of long standing in their respective organizations and had previously been in charge of specialist functional activities. When appointed, they were comparatively close to retirement.

Strategic intent in a manufacturing business

Although profitable, corporate managers perceived Smith's business to be underperforming financially. They thought also that it lacked product quality and was less innovative than customers expected. They felt it needed to improve customer service significantly to maintain or grow share in a dynamic marketplace.

Smith appeared to conceive change intent quite autocratically:

> *We have a vision of where we are going ... managers take notes of what I'm saying and they go and percolate it through the business ... getting the vision to everybody and for them to understand it ...*

He articulated intent in terms of *initiating behaviours* allied to the *accumulation and repatterning* of assets. Most immediately, he intended to build new facilities:

> *I've got a big new factory [under construction] ... to a green field site in order to radically change production methods and double factory capacity ... £XX million is a lot of money.*

The firm's initiating behaviour would also focus on product innovation:

> *This business has got to invest in [new products]. We've got to put the innovation back ... We should have invested in [a named growth area] a long time ago [to] give us uniqueness ... so competitors struggle against us.*

But change also implied the need to react to perceived short-term opportunities and to drive hard for results. There was a

> *... big opportunity ... to bring in business, very quick reaction ... lot's of creativity and opportunity. You obviously get the frustration ... you want action today, a week is no good. Unless somebody drives hard for it to happen, it doesn't happen. We're famous for it!*

Smith expressed intent to *accumulate new skills* and eliminate marginal or redundant ones:

> *We're putting management skills in the factory ... investing in and bringing in more innovative people. People have opportunities to move into one of the growth areas. You have to breed people who are going to do it [get results]. Somebody working here was technically good but in the wrong role. We didn't*

need him and I said, he'll have to go ... take him out.

Repatterning entailed *reorganizing processes* and *restructuring*:

I had a two-day meeting with the senior managers [discussing] long-term issues and how we're going to structure ... [it] is a complicated business ... in five or six different market sectors. We are product-based ... and we are going to move to a market-based structure. It's [a] commitment to restructure in a particular way to get a result ... [though] there's no certainty that it will succeed.

Strategic intent in a university department

Senior university managers believed that Jones' department had under-performed in its research activities, though its teaching was well regarded. The financial position had become problematic because competition for students was fierce and the Funding Council constrained undergraduate numbers, whilst limited marketing had restricted the intake of postgraduate students.

Jones' intent for strategic change can be summarized in terms of accumulating, reconfiguring and responding to emergent circumstances. His urgent, primary aim was to *accumulate peer credibility* for the department's research, the level of which was a

... running concern ... [I have to] get this department in a position where it doesn't have to feel apologetic about its research standing. Research reputation has enormous ramifications ... in the university, credibility with students, etc.

Similarly, Jones saw the need to *accumulate a financial surplus*:

The finances [were] ... a joke within the University. [Our] credibility with the Vice Chancellor and fellow heads of department is enormously raised now we've got thousands of pounds of new research money, light years from where we were a couple of years ago.

Jones had various priorities for *organizational repatterning*. One was to coordinate research initiatives more effectively:

Individuals [are] flying in rough formation ... [they] more or less head the same way... You can attempt to stamp some directions on where you want to go, but it's difficult in a collegiate enterprise where hierarchical control is limited. My job is to correct a lot of personal and selfish agendas into some sort of organizational agenda.

Whilst he could not radically change the pattern of human resources in terms of departmental headcount, Jones still saw possibilities for qualitative changes:

I might decide that a group ought to disband. If somebody is going to go [retire] in the next couple of years, can I accelerate that process? Rather than making an appointment in [a tired] area, I might decide to go for somebody who's going to bring something [new] in.

Accordingly, he had initiated the inward transfer of several active, high-profile researchers from other institutions. His intent was also to *repattern relationships*:

Nothing happens until there's a set of relationships. Some [are] productive and some not. I have a super research relationship with XXXX. I try and develop that kind of relationship with other people.

and of relations with peers elsewhere in the university:

I had to start from where we were and then say, well, this is where I think we can get to, but we need your support.

Jones strongly emphasized the positive aspects of *reacting and improvising*:

> *The notion that somehow you can take charge of events [is] extraordinary, really, it only occurs in books. I don't think [my] department gets to grips with anything ... some positive people get on with things ... [Ideas] from one discussion get picked up in another, worked on by other people, hundreds [of] interactions ... constant iteration, revaluation and modification. I'm ... into the fluidity and flexibility of negotiating and improvising through events ... a valuable attribute ... not something to be regretted or knocked on the head.*

This pragmatic, responsive intent for changing is illustrated with regard to external assessments of the department's teaching and research quality. Initially he was not convinced that his department should strive for an *Excellent* teaching rating:

> *We debated whether we should put any effort into it ... signals from the top were ambivalent.*

But, on reflection:

> *My feeling was ... [that] just getting* Satisfactory *or* Unsatisfactory *could be a really horrendous thing in the context of where we were.*

So he told staff unequivocally that they **had** to get an *Excellent* rating, which they subsequently did.

Regarding an impending Research Assessment Exercise (RAE), Jones was again inclined to initiate:

> *Are we likely to make it through the RAE next year? I thought it would be a good idea ... [to organize] a trial run at University level ... It will achieve a visibility which confronts the rhetoric I'm getting from some people [who] construct a fantasy about what they are doing.*

A summary comparison of the managers

The main idea expressed in Smith's cameo account of change is that of ***taking the initiative***. Important initiatives include product innovation, investing in new assets and skills and restructuring the firm closer to the needs of major clients. Nor was he blind to the need to become more responsive to short-term opportunities. Thus, his intent is multi-stranded and the various strands intertwine.

In contrast, Jones' account emphasizes *ad hoc*, improvised responses to emergent circumstances such as the budget deficit and external quality assessments. His strategic intent can be summarized as (i) to accumulate intangible assets, notably credibility and enhanced reputation beyond the department and (ii) the repatterning of personnel deployments and research relationships into a more productive and broadly cohesive direction.

Smith and Jones both acknowledge the importance of building collective skills by recruiting and, where necessary, removing staff. Jones had attracted active researchers to the department, imposing no conditions on areas of expertise, beyond the need to combine excellence in teaching and research.

Smith's intent implies well-coordinated initiatives that he is prepared to impose on the firm. His firm commissions new facilities infrequently, so one may infer that he aims to embed durable, best-practice routines. Jones espouses a more reactive, quasi-collegiate approach, though he articulates no specific vision of the future. Nor does he offer evidence that he envisions permanent change arising from his intent. On the contrary, his account stresses fluidity and limited coordination in response to events.

Smith and Jones express their respective intents to various metaphors suggested by the strategy literature

To summarize, Smith and Jones express their respective intents in terms that one can relate to various metaphors suggested by the strategy literature. Smith is concerned with taking initiatives, complemented by some short-term opportunism. His colleagues described a man whose personal mission was to make a major, visible difference. Jones claims to improvise in response to external pressures, though this is tempered by implicit, longer-term aims, notably a desire to establish his department as a front-ranking teaching and research organization. Jones' colleagues typically described him as an improviser and fixer.

Some implications for managing strategic change

Whilst sweeping generalizations from two cases would be unwise, some pertinent observations can be made. First, it has proved possible to characterize the two managers' declared intents with a combination of the root metaphors previously reviewed. In some respects their 'intent profiles' are quite similar, yet they convey qualitatively distinct impressions of how they want to make their organizational units more effective. Therefore, analysing intent using the metaphor approach can highlight both similarities and differences.

Second, on this evidence, one may hypothesize that the particular operating environment shapes strategic intent less than one might suppose. This may be because contexts are becoming increasingly convergent. Food manufacturing is a competitive business-to-business environment where good customer service, product and process knowledge and innovation are major sources of advantage. Yet UK and European Union health and safety directives are subjecting the sector to increased regulation. Meanwhile, higher education is already a highly regulated, knowledge-intensive environment whose primary outputs are research findings and graduates. However, the application of expert knowledge in a virtuous cycle of departmental investment, revenue generation and growth is now widely regarded as key formula for viability.

What matters most is the construction that senior managers put on the known 'facts' of a situation and the intent they derive from this interpretation. Differences of intent between Smith and Jones appear to reflect both personal and circumstantial priorities. Smith emphasizes tangible asset accumulation (products and facilities), whereas intangibles, (notably reputation) are the key issues for Jones. Both individuals take account of financial imperatives and are concerned with stakeholder influences and attitudes: external image and reputation, the impact of external regulation, the views of senior corporate managers and, to a lesser degree, those of peers and subordinates.

Given that senior managers construct strategic intent from the influences they associate with the organization's most salient stakeholders, one should recognize that the managers themselves are part of this group. Intent is shaped significantly by personal aspirations as managers seek to fulfil their personal drives and biases, albeit judiciously disguised. Both Smith and Jones may be aiming for favourable treatment as they approach retirement. More significantly, perhaps, one of Smith's colleagues likened him to a former French President, championing a prestige construction project to cement his place in organizational history. Jones, too, perceived his own reputation to be intimately linked to the continued success and future reputation of his department.

Moreover, if personal priorities significantly influence organizational intent and the consequent direction of strategic change, senior managers' colleagues must understand the implicit, experiential models or templates that inform their thinking. They need to 'unpack' the concentrated meanings that are encoded in apparently coherent and well-integrated metaphoric expressions of intent.

Of course, the metaphors in use are not necessarily as colourful or idiosyncratic as those voiced by highly expressive managers like Sir John Harvey-Jones (Perren and Atkin, 2000). Nor is their apparent coherence always rationally justified. How, for example, can it make sense for even a resourceful, small company to articulate the strategic intent to encircle its much larger, dominant rival? Such imagery would clearly fail objective tests of feasibility. Yet highly motivated subscribers to this potent image overlooked its internal contradictions to great effect in the years that followed.

Ohmae (1983), Hamel and Prahalad (1989) and others have attributed highly focused expressions of strategic intent to many oriental business leaders, including Soichiro Honda, Masaru Ibuka and Akio Morita of Sony, Lee Kun-Hee of Samsung and An Wang (Wang Computer). In fact, successful Western leaders can be similarly characterized (e.g. Gordon Moore and Andy Grove of Intel, Michael Edwardes during his tenure at British Leyland, Ingar Kamprad of IKEA and Anita Roddick of Body Shop).

However, the danger is that what begins as a visionary focus may become obsessionally dysfunctional, leading to ill-considered actions that end in a reverse, even a disaster (as befell Wang). Consider how global merger and acquisition activity has escalated in recent years. Large businesses implement strategic change whose intent is seemingly informed by an unshakeable belief in the merits of increased scale and scope. This intent legitimizes the accumulation and agglomeration of both replicative and complementary assets. One thinks of Amazon, BMW, Glaxo, Granada, Pearson, Preussag, Time-Warner, Vodaphone and Wal-Mart, to name but a few. Already, some of their initiatives have proved ill judged, whilst informed commentators question the wisdom of some others.

> *The danger is that what begins as a visionary focus may become obsessionally dysfunctional*

Yet, in theory, a dominant metaphor of intent is not inimical to others, since one aspect of a rich metaphor can be a quality of inclusiveness. It may also be helpful to think of metaphors as microscopes of differing powers, all potentially relevant to an examination of the same issue or phenomenon. In many organizations, multiple templates co-exist (e.g. initiating and responding), with both harmonious and conflicting implications. Still, if multiple images of intent co-exist, how can senior managers prevent undue ambivalence, competing priorities and confusion?

One way would be to associate concurrent metaphors consciously with different domains of activity. A firm can be responsive in one market sector whilst seeking to initiate change in another. It may choose to repattern in one organizational unit as it accumulates in another. Another solution is to amend the relative salience of strong metaphors over time. When Smith and Jones hunt *opportunistically* for new business, good students or research income in the shorter term, these actions are not necessarily inconsistent with an intent to adopt a more deliberate, planned approach in the longer term. Either way, this highlights the need for well-balanced managerial thinking, envisioning intent as a combination of conventional and novel assumptions and the integration of visionary and present-orientated people in these processes.

The senior manager who aspires to be an effective change agent is wise, therefore, to influence collective organiza-

tional intent via a thoughtful, well-balanced portfolio of modes and possibilities.

This raises the crucial issue of communication. Perren and Atkin (2000) claim that when individuals accept and share a common metaphor they are more likely to produce coherent, well-directed actions. Failure to agree, by no means uncommon among senior personnel (Kakabadse, 2000), generates inertia or counterproductive actions.

However, it can be difficult for subordinates to question or challenge a senior manager who articulates intent with potent, idiosyncratic images and authoritative rhetoric, even though that intent might objectively be considered inconsistent with the organization's resources, competences or identity. Indeed, subordinates who challenge established metaphors of intent are frequently regarded as dissident. Nonetheless, expressions of intent based on extreme, partially articulated or unquestioned assumptions need to be subjected to honest and open critique.

A more subtle risk for the organization is that collective thinking inevitably converges over time, so that no one remains able to revisit long-standing, entrenched assumptions. The organization good is well served by senior managers who deliberately engineer challenges, advancing fresh, new metaphors to legitimize and spearhead the challenge. Even when the primary metaphor is not open to question, the prudent senior manager should establish that colleagues interpret it intelligently. ***The practical implications of the encirclement metaphor, for example, are far less obvious in the market place than on the battlefield.***

In specific circumstances, such as the quasi-collegiate environment of university departments and other professional organizations, the prospects for constructive change are especially bleak if strategic intent cannot be openly discussed. In such circumstances it is surely appropriate, even vital, for professional staff at all levels to devote adequate time and energy to explore the implications and critique the assumptions they associate with the prevailing metaphors of intent. Colleagues who simply ignore the differing outlooks of their peers, senior managers or partners cannot be said to serve the organization well.

Although debate does not guarantee enhanced understanding and collective agreement, it would seem to be the only way to reduce ambiguity and enhance widespread commitment to change. The interested parties need interactive conversations to achieve what Crossan *et al.* (1999) refer to as an upgrading of the collective schema. To adapt Shotter (1993, p. 157), *an effective change manager is a conversational author who argues persuasively for a 'landscape' of next possible actions pregnant with metaphoric potential.*

Conclusions

Managers want their organizations to be successful and sustainable. The route to this goal implies continuing, significant, *strategic change*. The intent of change can be conceived in many different ways. From a process perspective, managers should realize that characteristic ways of thinking inform their understanding of strategic intent and assist or hinder their change actions. The inference is that they should share their assumptions with significant others through conversation and debate, as suggested by, for example, Von Krogh and Roos (1996).

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he present article proposes that it can be helpful to articulate and explore intent via the exchange and adoption of appropriate metaphors. Evoked metaphors may be specific, local and of interest primarily to those involved. Nonetheless, change agents with a wider perspective may also try to evoke metaphors of intent that encompass, yet transcend the particularities of the current circumstances.

Change processes enact a putative intent or direction for change, rather than being ends in themselves. Metaphors make these intentions or directions seem more real in the minds of those involved. Therefore, management teams should explore the differences implicit in competing metaphors. If accumulation is their dominant metaphor of intent with respect to tangible assets, it is a small but potentially erroneous step to apply it unthinkingly to the costly accumulation of intangible assets such as knowledge, reputation and brand image. When the dominant metaphor legitimizes networking and external relationships rather than ownership to gain satisfactory access to physical assets, firms may be tempted to do the same with regard to knowledge assets. In either case, the extension from one domain to another is a step that merits critical attention.

For managers and researchers alike, the use of metaphors presents an opportunity to conceive, examine and communicate strategic intent in richer, more insightful terms, whilst allowing scope to explore and interpret nuances. Given imperfect understanding of the links between conceptions of intent, change actions and outcomes, it is suggested that effective strategic change requires individuals to explore and trade metaphors of intent constructively and then to 'travel hopefully' as they implement the actions that follow from their agreed perspectives.

Clearly it must be a matter of judgement whether the greater business risk is to promote a strong but potentially narrow-minded, exclusive metaphor or to encourage inclusiveness by promoting multiple metaphors and tolerating the ambiguity that may consequently arise.

Either way, the challenge is for managers to use stimulating metaphoric imagery to go beyond what they presently take for granted and to conceive imaginative, counter-intuitive and contextual appropriate prescriptions for strategic change that add value and create long-term advantage for the firm.

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