MIDDLE MANAGERS AND STRATEGY: MICRODYNAMICS OF INCLUSION

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This paper examines the role of middle management in strategic processes in bureaucratic organizations. There is evidence of extensive dissatisfaction among middle managers, who often perceive that they are excluded from strategic processes. This exclusion is de-energizing, inefficient, and in the end, expensive. Although an element of exclusion is probably inevitable, the extent to which it occurs varies across organizations. This suggests that both exclusion and its consequences can be alleviated. An application of microsociological theory to this problem focuses attention on discrete communications about strategic generalities between superior and subordinate. This paper argues that middle managers may either be excluded or included in such 'strategic conversations', but inclusion does not guarantee satisfaction. When included they may emerge energized or de-energized around strategic issues, depending on several important factors. Finally, the paper discusses the implications of these dynamics for more macro level processes, in particular, strategy as allocation of resources and strategy as interpretative schema. A set of propositions as to the likelihood of increasing or decreasing feelings of inclusion and motivation, and of sustaining such feelings over time, concludes this discussion.

INTRODUCTION

The ability of any organizaiton to be cohesive depends on the structure and quality of its communication system. The daily life of organizations in patterned around communication events or habits; the quality of life often informed by how those communication events are experienced by the actors themselves (Deutsch, 1966). An important aspect of strategic activity, at the level of the firm, is its role as an interpretative schema or signification system. As such it is essentially a communicative activity (Chaffee, 1985; Cummings, 1983; Nonaka, 1988). At the macro level it may be viewed as 'a pattern in a stream of actions' (Mintzberg and McHugh, 1985), a communication to researchers, industry analysts, and other industry players who take a long-range view of the organization's activities. At the micro level it involves the procurement, production, synthesis, manipulation, and diffusion of infor-

mation in such a way as to give meaning, purpose, and direction to an organization (Daft and Weick, 1984; Guth, 1976; Pfeffer, 1981).

This paper focuses on one subset of communication habits and experiences central to the integration of all organizations: those of middle-level managers in their encounters with the strategic decision-making systems of their organizations. In spite of its importance, the role of middle management in the strategic process in large bureaucratic organizations is neither theoretical nor empirically mapped. This paper examines the relationship between the structure of communication events at the micro level, and the decrease or increase in energy experienced by middle managers around strategic processes. Drawing on micro-sociological theory on interaction rituals (particularly that of Collins, 1981), we will develop the concept of strategic conversation, which we define as verbal interactions within superior–subordinate dyads focusing on strategic

generalities. Our objective is to explore three seemingly related issues: (1) feelings of inclusion and exclusion experienced by middle managers around strategic issues, (2) the ways in which the dynamics and structure of such conversations might potentially affect levels of energy among middle managers in relation to strategic initiatives, and (3) the relationship between the dynamics of strategic conversations and more macro processes of sense-making and allocation of resources within the organization.

The word 'conversation' rather than 'decision' is used intentionally. This study does not consider questions about the loci of strategy decisions. Instead the focus of this paper is on the communications between senior and middle-level management that precedes, accompanies, and follows actual strategy decisions.

STRATEGY AND THE MIDDLE-LEVEL MANAGER

Middle managers have not been an object of intensive investigation by researchers in strategic studies. Particularly in the context of large, bureaucratic organizations, middle-level managers have traditionally been seen as suppliers of information and consumers of decisions made by the top-level managers, or the strategic apex, of the organization (Thompson, 1967). Despite the fact that theoreticians have equated sense-making with organizing in general (Weick, 1979; Ransom, Hinings, and Greenwood, 1980), and have argued that the negotiation and interpretation involved in sense-making is a crucial aspect of organizational learning (Hedberg, 1981), strategic sense-making has by and large been treated as the responsibility of top management alone. It is upper management who ought to 'bring together and interpret information for the system as a whole' (Daft and Weick, 1984: 285).

This perspective is supported analytically by pointing out that too much equivocality in information impedes action; hence it is functional for top managers to reduce equivocality so that middle managers may act on clear instructions. It is also viewed as functional to limit the decision-making body so as to keep the process from becoming unwieldy (Thompson, 1967). Finally, the fact that in most bureaucratic organizations top managers 'naturally' assume the responsibility

for scanning the environment, and that seldom, below the top management level, is information pertaining to organization in general widely shared (Leifer and Delberg, 1978; Aguilar, 1967) lends empirical support for this analysis. The hidden assumption is that if such a division of strategic tasks is prevalent, it must be for the organizational good; top managers' goals and values are taken as unproblematic. In accord with these assumptions 'strategic planning systems continue to be designed as top-down planning systems with bottom-up information flows' (Shrivastava, 1986: 369). And despite the fact that a growing amount of empirical evidence indicates that middle managers can play a key role in initiating strategic change (Burgelman, 1983a,b,c; Van Cauwenbergh and Cool, 1982; Nonaka, 1988), middle managers continue to be accorded a support role in most normative models of strategy (Shrivastava, 1986).

Such assumptions and models, however rational, have resulted in an empirical and conceptual gap in understanding why some strategies are implemented and others are not, as well as of what middle management's role actually is in this process. What's more, a compelling body of empirical evidence suggests that, while theorists and top managers may agree on the appropriate role of middle managers in strategic processes, the middle managers themselves have a distinctly different view.

Extensive surveys of middle managers, conducted by the American Management Association, first in 1967 (Kay, 1974) and then in 1983 (Breen, 1983) indicate that middle managers have long been dissatisfied with the quality of their communication with top management. As well as criticizing the level of information available, the middle managers in the 1974 study criticize top management for being unresponsive. In 1983 they complain that top management is dishonest, has little real interest in middle managers, and fails to prepare them for advancement. In short, they see in the poor communications a lack of involvement on the part of top management, a failure of two-way influence and exclusion from the processes and procedures to which middle managers need at least observational practice if they are to advance. The 1974 study concludes that

There appears to be built-in conflict between the role of top executives and the role of middle

managers, particularly relating to the sharing of authority. The role of top management traditionally has been one of decision and policy making. There is little or no evidence at this point to indicate management is willing to share more of this influence with middle managers (Kay, 1974: 21).

Even more explicitly, middle-level managers expected to administer some sort of employee participation or involvement scheme, expressed frustration at their exclusion from similar participation in and access to strategic processes (Levine, 1986). Middle managers seem to experience resentment about the 'tight control' which top management keeps on the strategic agenda (Kelley, 1976), a situation particularly prevalent in large bureaucratic organizations, but evident even in innovative organizations (Donaldson, 1985; Burgelman, 1983a,b,c).

It is uncertain whether this tight control is rational and in the organization's interests, or whether it is essentially political, having more to do with status and control needs of top management than with organizational efficiency (Shrivastava, 1986; Bourgeouis and Bodwin, 1984). However, it is clear that middle managements' resentment of this tight control has deleterious effects on organizational responsiveness. Middle managers can impede the implementation process if they do not perceive it as being in their interests to cooperate (Guth and MacMillan, 1986), and they respond in organizationally dysfunctional ways to perceived powerlessness (Izreali, 1975). On the other hand, when this group is permitted to exert influence the result may be a more responsive, innovative organization (Schlit, 1987; Ofner, 1985). At the very least, communications improve, as does conflict resolution (Mazzolini, 1978).

How to involve middle managers remains more problematic. Formal planning procedures are often actively avoided by middle-level managers who mistrust top management motives for initiating the procedure, and who fear failure and exposure if they participate (Lyles and Lenz, 1982: 114). Further, the effects of formal participation in strategic decision-making are mixed (Locke and Schweiger, 1979). Indeed, formal participation may result in incremental, disjointed, and parochial strategies (Guth, 1976) and is much less predictive of innovation and responsiveness than elite, top management values (Hage and Dewar, 1973).

Large bureaucratic organizations are therefore faced with something of a dilemma: exclusion of middle managers from the process of setting the strategic agenda results in demotivation; inclusion, on the other hand, may result in inefficiency. Resolving this dilemma requires a greater conceptual understanding of the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion, their link to energy and motivation.

While little work has been done in the management field around these issues, the work of radical microsociologists, such as Randall Collins, is directly applicable. Collins' theory of interaction rituals is particularly appropriate for interpreting the patterns of disaffection around strategic issues observed among middle managers, as well as suggesting a resolution.

STRATEGIC CONVERSATIONS: A MICROSITUATIONAL THEORY

Microsociologists such as Goffman (1967), Garfinkle (1967) and Cicorel (1975) have long contended that the only truly empirical grounding for social processes lies in micro events. According to these theorists, the notion of organization is a reification. Organizations do not exist and cannot be imbued with action potential: all organizations are in fact only a series of interlocking routines, habituated action patterns that bring the same people together around the same activities in the same time and places (Giddens, 1984). Similarly the argument can be extended to the concept of strategy. It is certainly possible, at times highly desirable, to consider strategy at the macro level as an aggregate of actions, transactions, recipes, positions, designs, plans, or interpretations. However, strategy can only be empirically grounded in the discrete action or decision routines of a variety of actors. The challenge remains which micro-level phenomena represent the ideal empirical site for studying these action or decision routines, and how these routines may be conceptually linked to macro-level data concepts on strategic positioning, transactions, or configurations.

Collins (1981) argues that the most basic or elemental unit for situating the routines that make up organizational life is conversation. Conversations are discrete, observable events which contain all the elements of social structure. First, they represent a highly ritualistic exchange

of rights and obligations. In order to engage in a conversation at all, actors need to agree on certain reciprocities of form if not of content (Goffman, 1967; Hochschild, 1979; Collins, 1981). Second, conversations contain elements of authority: if they occur between superior and subordinate they potentially enact formal structures of domination. Third, participants must share certain cultural vocabularies or resources for a conversation to occur at all. These resources are as much emblematic as instrumental; they permit participants to sustain the conversation and enact their solidarity.

As micro events, conversations 'enact' the three elements of social structure: normative structures (legitimation), authority structures (domination), and structures of signification (Giddens, 1984). But participation in conversations also represents a membership ritual. While all organization is composed of routines, an individual's participation is strictly bounded. Each person interacts with a finite number of people in a finite number of places in a finite number of activities. Routines, people, places, and activities cluster into coalitions, each making specific claims to the property (the spaces and things to which their routines are attached) and authority (the power to determine access to this property). These coalitions are empirically observable through sets of interlocking conversations, linked through their participants into interaction chains. Admission into one conversation has implications for admission into a particular chain and hence a particular coalition.

It is in this context that the specific *content* of the conversation takes on importance. According to Collins, different types of coalitions are characterized by different conversational content. More specifically, '*generalized*' talk, that which applies to 'events abstracted from specifics', is often associated with status group membership, a horizontal or lateral coalition. Vertical coalitions, on the other hand, are often characterized by conversations which have a '*particularized*' content, such as tactics, instructions, gossip. These conversations are concerned with reproducing property and authority relationships and might be illustrated by vertically organized functional groupings.

Collins implies that an individual may be deliberately excluded from a particular conversation, even if s/he understands the proprieties and the cultural vocabulary. Successful conversation also requires a mutual willingness or emotional proclivity to attempt to produce solidarity. And this may not occur. A conscious awareness exists that inclusion in a given conversation implies inclusion in a coalition, and some vested interests in limiting that inclusion. A given person may be willing to include another in a vertical coalition and hence in a particularized conversation, but be unwilling to include them in a horizontal coalition and hence in a generalized conversation. In short, an understanding of the norms, authority patterns, and culture of a given organization may be a *necessary* precursor of full inclusion in a given conversation, but it is not *sufficient*. Inclusion is also dependent on the proclivity of coalition members to sustain solidarity with a given member or to admit a new member.

According to Collins, whether an individual is readily admitted depends in part on his/her perceived social worth; and social worth, in turn, is an artifact of that individual's past successes in negotiating membership rituals. The first element of success is admission to the conversation at all. Having been successfully admitted to a conversation, the individual must then negotiate a particular status in the conversation. Any conversation may be mutually determined (co-determined) or it may be dominated by one or the other of the participants. If one person dominates s/he will emerge from the conversation energized at the expense of the dominated individual, who will be de-energized. This outcome will not only influence the likelihood of action resulting from the conversation, but will also determine the likelihood of the individuals dominating the next conversation into which s/he enters. An individual may be trapped in a downward spiral of demoralization or an upward spiral of energization. Greatly demoralized or sufficiently de-energized individuals have less chance of successfully negotiating admission into new coalitions and more chance of being expelled from old coalitions, since their social worth is perceived to be low.

While the process of domination and submission is clearly crucial to our concern, this aspect of the theory seems difficult to ground empirically. Collins suggests that in order to dominate a conversation an individual must either 'set the emotional tone' and/or 'evoke cultural reality.'

The former is particularly problematic as it is unclear whether it refers to intensity of emotion expressed or which emotion is chosen as appropriate. Emotional intensity in conversations seems as likely to be evidence of loss of control as of dominance. Secondly, the theory seems to imply a connection between emotional and cultural dominance, but their exact relationship remains unclear. What is 'cultural reality'?

Hochschild (1983) has added nuance to Collins' description of the processes of conversational domination. She argues that for most individuals emotion is a complex matter. As socialized individuals we do not simply feel, rather we *work* to arrange our emotions according to the 'feeling rules,' which tell us how we *ought* to feel. These in turn are determined by 'framing rules,' which define the cultural context of feeling. So, for example, Hochschild suggests, a working woman today who leaves her child at a day-care centre and feels guilty will actively work to reduce her feelings of guilt. This is because she is responsive to framing rules: that women today have a right to work outside the home. These framing rules are in turn determined by ideological context of the women's liberation movement. Hence there is a hierarchy of rules which individuals bring to any interaction: ideology→framing rules→feeling rules.

Hochschild's elaborations make it easier to understand how one partner in a conversation may dominate another in terms of emotional tone and cultural reality. If we equate 'setting the emotional tone' with 'setting the feeling rule' we realize that it is not so much the emotion itself or the display of emotion which determines domination; rather it is *who* invokes *which* feeling rule. If a participant makes a claim as to his or her right to feel certain things ˙or the other's obligation to feel certain things, and the other accedes to these claims, the participant may be said to dominate in the area of emotion. If, on the other hand, instead of focusing on rights and obligations in the area of feelings a participant focuses on the frame, s/he will demand recognition of a more general interpretation of cultural realities. Of course, Hochschild's hierarchy suggests that the two, framing and feeling, are intimately related, and that framing, in a sense, is hierarchically superior to feelings. Nonetheless it might be possible to dominate in one area (feeling) while failing to dominate in the other

(framing). Returning to the example, if a woman feels guilty, her husband may argue she should not feel guilty. She may accede to his emotional domination, but perhaps not to his framing rule, e.g. 'boys are tough; it's good for them to learn to be independent.' She may instead dominate that aspect of the conversation by insisting 'boys need attention, but I have to think of my needs too.' He may accept, at least tacitly, her framing rule because it implies the same feeling rule as his. They may never explicitly evoke the ideological context, for on that level they may be considerably at odds. Having both dominated some aspect of the conversation, they may both emerge energized. This would appear to correspond to what Collins calls 'co-determination'—a situation in which neither party in a conversation clearly dominates, but both dominate some aspect.

In sum, what we have elaborated here is a microsituational theory of conversations. Following Collins, with modifications from Hochschild, we suggest that the macro-level concepts be grounded in the dynamics of interaction in discrete conversations. These are the building blocks for coalitions which claim rights to property and authority, and for the ideologies which give significance or meaning to those claims. The dynamics of such conversations represent the enactment, at a micro level of all three elements of structure (domination, legitimation and signification). Exclusion from such conversation means exclusion from the coalitions which embody organizational routines and hence action. Domination or co-determination of such conversations produces the energy required for both organizational maintenance and change.

MIDDLE MANAGERS AND STRATEGIC CONVERSATION

Let us now revisit the issue of middle management dissatisfaction from a micro-dynamics perspective. First, the theory suggests that we must look at the specific, micro-level interactions between superior and subordinate, for an understanding of the actual origin of the feelings of exclusion and the presence and absence of energy around strategic initiatives. We will term these interactions *strategic conversations*.

Secondly, it suggests that we need to look at three distinct but related dimensions of such conversations: (1) the dynamics of inclusion vs. exclusion in discrete conversations, (2) the dynamics of domination vs. submission within discrete conversations, and (3) the relationship between such conversations, their outcomes, and the larger contexts of coalitions and ideology in which they are embedded. The remainder of this paper will examine each of these dimensions in turn, with the goal of deriving a set of propositions regarding the causes of middle managers' feelings of exclusion, inclusion, and energization. In the course of the examination I will draw on three detailed examples of strategic conversations between subordinates and superiors. These examples are drawn from transcribed interviews, conducted by the author, with middle managers in a large multi-divisional manufacturing company. They represent retrospective accounts of the superior–subordinate interactions around strategic issues, from the point of view of the subordinate. While they are purely illustrative and do not represent evidence of an empirical nature, they are included here as a useful means of grounding Collins' concepts and further illuminating the applicability of such concepts for the study of disaffection at the middle management level.

Exclusion vs. inclusion

A microsituational approach suggests that middle managers who feel excluded from strategic processes in their organizations are experiencing exclusion from *particular kinds* of conversations with their superiors. As content, strategy-making discussions would seem to correspond to a 'generalized' topic. Strategy is a meaning generating activity concerned with integrating and interpreting information. As such it is abstracted from specific tactics, policies, or operational procedures while being intimately concerned with relating these into an overall pattern.

While middle managers, as I have noted, are often involved in tactical or 'particular' maneuvers, from an information point of view these may be seen as syntactical, i.e. representing discrete, isolated instructions whose place in the overall pattern is not, inherently, apparent. A holistic perspective which addresses the 'actual meaning of information' (Nonaka, 1988: 58) is,

in practice, reserved for upper management. While theoretically it is possible for such 'creation of meaning' to occur at any level of the organization, a microstructural view of superior–subordinate relationships suggests a powerful impediment to such an occurrence. For if discussion of strategic generalities is emblematic of membership in a top management coalition, then admission into such generalized discussions would be carefully controlled in the interests of boundary maintenance. Such admission would imply admission into a status coalition and would be carefully controlled. Take the following example.

Example 1

A young woman working with the marketing department of a large multidivisional appliance manufacturer was generally seen as having high potential and had moved up quickly in the organization. When asked about how strategy was made in her organization and whether she felt that strategic goals were clearly communicated she responded as follows:

> The President has these dinners where his direct reports report to the direct reports so to speak. My boss is included, but I have never been invited to one of those meetings where everyone rubs shoulders. Here I am doing research and trying to determine the direction of my department and I'm not included in the meetings where these strategic things are discussed. For awhile my boss claimed that they were going to start having communication meetings. That sounded good to me but in practice it never actually happened. That made me angry! I wish he wouldn't dangle these grand illusions in front of me if he's not going to deliver them.
>
> It's not just a question of power access. I feel that by not giving me the necessary information they mishandle my effectiveness. If I'm playing in a small game, my view vis-à-vis that game is small. If they give me a picture of a bigger world, I play a bigger game. Access is part of it.
>
> Take the example of the financial performance of the company. They have these staff meetings where they review with department heads the financial results of the year. I don't get to go to those meetings but when I asked my boss about it he gives me a copy of the figures which is about two inches thick. And I do take them home and read them. But just looking at the numbers doesn't give me the insights. It doesn't give me the total picture. I don't know how they

are interpreting those numbers. I take the numbers and read them and try to spot problem areas and then I ask if my interpretations are correct. But it is kind of humiliating to have to go and beg for this kind of information. It makes me feel angry. It makes me feel like shit, like I'm playing in a small world. Requests for information are always brushed off. So I don't have a feeling of ownership and pride. I feel like I've put in a good performance, why don't I deserve to have that information? Why don't I deserve to be party to that inner circle?

This instance nicely reveals the relationship between feelings of exclusion and demoralization, as well as the relationship between that exclusion and participation in coalitions. By being prevented from attending certain meetings and participating in certain conversations, this middle manager feels she is excluded from the 'inner circle,' a status-linked coalition. She identifies the authority and property implications of this ('it's not only a question of power . . . they mishandle my effectiveness . . . I'm playing in a small game') as well as the key content attributes of the conversations she wishes to have. She is searching for strategic generalities, the 'total picture,' which makes sense of the specific, particular decisions which are passed on to her as a member of a functional group ('I don't know how they are interpreting those numbers' . . . 'I don't know if my interpretations are correct').

This example also illustrates the emotional implications of such failed membership rituals. This manager describes not so much the dynamics of a conversation with her boss as the absence of such a conversation. She states her own feeling rules ('I deserve to have that information . . . I have the right to know . . . (I should but) I don't feel pride and ownership') and framing rules ('I've put in a good performance . . . Here I am doing research and trying to determine the direction of my department'). Her boss, however, will not entertain these definitions, much less allow her to dominate. He 'brushes off' her requests; she has to 'beg' for information. He doesn't acknowledge her claim to the right to feel pride and ownership and the result is that she 'feels like shit.' According to Collins' criteria this manager is excluded from strategic conversation on all three counts: (1) there are no formal conventions or proprieties (such as the promised communications sessions) recognized by both parties, (2) there is no mutual commitment or

solidarity around having the conversation, and (3) there is no agreement on significance, meaning or cultural frame for the data because the superior does not share his interpretations or framing rules. In this example the subordinate perceives the exclusion to be deliberate (an integrated view of various functional or divisional concerns, produced by the interaction at the strategic apex of functional and/or divisional heads as well as the CEO's incremental attempts to respond to those concerns (Quinn, 1978). It is precisely this integrated view which is missing when divisional or functional strategies and criteria are passed down to middle management for 'implementation'.)

Clearly, these are issues of power and status as well as of efficiency. To the extent that the organization treats strategy-making as an elite activity, top managers will be more resistant to including middle managers in strategic conversations. This is logical from their point of view. Only middle managers whom they are personally grooming for succession, and hence for admission to their status group, 'need' to be admitted to such conversations. To allow more general access to such conversations, and moreover to allow subordinates to dominate or even co-determine such conversations, may threaten the boundaries of the status group to which top managers belong. In addition, to relinquish dominance may be perceived as a personal failure to uphold office. This perception is only aggravated by defining the ability to 'think strategically' as innate (see *Business Week*, 1984; Jacques, 1986) as well as a prerequisite for admission into the top ranks of business organizations. By this definition, subordinates are incapable of entering effectively into strategic conversation. Exclusion is hence justified, strategic activity becomes a status symbol, and symbolic politics prevent inclusion of middle managers even in the interests of championing innovation.

This problem might be somewhat alleviated by the establishment of horizontal coalitions at the middle management level. Such groups might allow for a partial recreation of strategic context by allowing middle managers to 'interpret' their own functional/divisional tactics from an integrated perspective. In organizations which are extremely status-conscious such structures may support responsiveness even in the absence of dyadic strategic conversations between subordi-

nates and superiors. In themselves, however, such horizontal groupings do not provide the scope for 'questioning the strategic context' (Burgelman, 1983a,b,c) or two-way influence (Mohram, 1987) which middle managers need to be innovators. Such structures are best used in conjunction with dyadic interchanges in which superiors can allow subordinates some latitude for domination, without perceived loss of control.

Domination vs. submission

The following two examples illustrate the dynamics of domination vs. submission within discrete conversations between subordinate and superior.

Example 2

Ned B., a middle manager, felt that he had been relatively successful in introducing innovation and change. Hired shortly after his company had merged with another appliance manufacturer, this manager felt that his outsider viewpoint helped him to overcome sometimes divergent viewpoints of long-standing members of the two parent companies. One such issue had to do with using the name of the newly merged company (Manufacturing Inc.) over the brand names which had been associated with the products produced by the two separate parent companies. As a sales strategy, Manufacturing Inc. continued to use the original brand names. As an organizational strategy, and from a customer service viewpoint, it appeared to Ned (as well as to others) that it would be much more rational to use the name Manufacturing Inc. Ned's direct superior disagreed however, as the following anecdote illustrates:

> My boss was very against using the Manufacturing Inc. name in our advertising. He was adamant for five years. There was no explanation for it, and n rationale. Recently I was doing a show and the whole audience was dealers. So underneath the sign I had up I indicated that this was Manufacturing Inc. My manager came up to me and ordered me to take down the sign because it said Manufacturing Inc. So I really lost my temper and I said to him, 'Look, all the audience out there are our dealers and they know we are Manufacturing Inc. This is illogical.' And he turned around and said to me 'It's not the question of using the name or not. I just don't want them to take the easy way out. I want them to think through the process and

decide how to present themselves and why . . . decide who they are.' He said he perceived the managers from one of the founding companies as prone to take the easy way out and he felt that they hadn't planned it out and thought out who they wanted to be. In this particular example, I was the person who made things improve. I was put into the organization and I didn't belong to either parent company A or parent company B. I wasn't thought of as one of the crazies from company A, but here I was questioning my boss who was a real company B type. And for the first time he opens up, he essentially gave the ball to me. I was hired by him and yet I challenged him. . . . So I went back and produced a report this thick . . . I really did my homework and they couldn't argue because I beat them at their own game.

Example 3

One of the functions most plagued by perceived inconsistencies was the consumer service organization. The future of this department was clearly in question and the uncertainty manifested itself to middle managers in terms of what they saw as paradoxical requests to trim their operations to the bare bones in terms of manpower and simultaneously to grow the business. Several middle managers in this department had become quite apathetic in response to this dilemma, but one middle manager, Jerry H., had had quite a different response. Like Ned, Jerry felt he could talk to his boss, that he was connected and not excluded. He mulled over the paradox of growth versus cutbacks and described the following initiative.

> Personally, I feel that opening franchise stores would be a good idea and maybe even eventually franchising technicians. If we franchise the stores we would immediately improve our bottom line drastically because we would have to cut a number of salaried people. In the long run, the cost base gets lower and stays there. Six months ago I talked to my division head about this and he said that franchising was only an option you looked at when you were resource poor. But then last month I got to thinking that it seemed to me the retrenchment process could be seen as a resource scarcity . . . we were scarce in people. So I did the calculations to see how it would look if we went to a franchise system and I could tell the V.P. was impressed with my logic. He's taken up the idea with the CEO. I enjoy working with him [the department head]. He's a very communicative kind of guy.

Both these examples are in stark contrast to Example 1 in that the managers describe interactions with superiors which make them feel both included and energized. Given Collins' theory, we would expect to find evidence that both middle managers also succeeded in at least partially dominating the conversation. The question remains how.

In both examples a similar pattern of interaction may be observed. The subordinate perceives a paradox: in one case 'how can we have an identity as one company if we represent ourselves to the world as two companies' (associated with the brand names); in the other case 'how can we grow the business and simultaneously cut costs.' These paradoxes result in the subordinate taking an initiative. The initiative is rejected by the superior, but is treated as a legitimate question. In response the superior reveals his own interpretation of the situation. This confidence on the part of the superior instills confidence in the subordinate, who now sees the resolution of the paradox as a challenge. The subordinate comes up with a new way to define the situation which is accepted by the superior who acts to further champion the idea. The dynamic is as follows: paradox → initiative by the subordinate → revelation by superior → challenge to subordinate → innovative response by subordinate → acceptance and championing by superior.

Obviously, neither subordinate nor superior completely dominates this interchange. Which participant dominates which element is of interest. In Example 2 the manager makes a feeling claim, implying a feeling rule, in this case 'I have the right to be angry.' By responding through explanation the superior implicitly submits to this feeling rule. However, he does not submit to the framing rule. The subordinate frames the problem as one of illogicality (i.e. I have a right to feel angry (feeling rule) when confronted by illogical policies (framing rule)). The superior frames it differently: people aren't taking initiative in a thorough consideration of a logic of self-presentation. In this counter-framing the superior does not so much refute the framing rule of the subordinate as offer an additional framing rule (you have the right to feel angry (feeling rule) because other people have not taken initiative and applied themselves to solving the problem (framing rule)). Implicit in this juxtaposition is a third framing rule which acts as a challenge

(therefore you have the right to feel angry if you are prepared to take initiative and do a thorough job). Working with his own framing rule (this policy is illogical) and the superior's framing rules (it is the responsibility of my subordinates to take responsibility and offer a thorough proposal), the subordinate takes action. The result is a proposal, thorough and well researched, which addresses the illogical policy.

In Example 3 the feeling rule is not as clear. The only mention of feeling is the reference to the superior being impressed by the subordinate's initiative. If we take this as a feeling rule (the superior ought to feel impressed), then the dynamic appears much the same as that in Example 2. The subordinate feels that the superior ought to be impressed by his scheme to transform the companies' consumer outlets into franchises. He invokes the framing rule that the scheme 'improves the bottom line . . . the cost base gets lower and stays there.' By countering with an alternating framing rule, 'franchise is an option to consider only in situations of resource scarcity,' the superior does not *deny* the feeling rule, that superiors ought to feel impressed by initiatives of subordinates, but he suggests that he ought to feel impressed only if that initiative meets *his* frame for the business, i.e. resource scarcity. Again, the subordinate takes both frames ('franchises improve bottom line and cuts costs' and 'franchises are an option linked to resource scarcity'), and literally *reframes* the problem so that it meets both framing criteria. The superior then submits dutifully to the feeling rule and is impressed.

In both these cases, therefore, the subordinate dominates in terms of feeling rules whereas the superior dominates in terms of framing rules. Even in terms of framing rules, however, the superior does not *disallow* the framing rule of the subordinate. They do not claim, for example, that the policy is not illogical (in Example 2) or that cutting costs and improving bottom line is not important (in Example 3). They merely present their own framing rule and insist that it has priority over the framing rule of the subordinate. In finding a solution the subordinate is free to use his own framing rule, but only so long as it is ultimately framed within the superior's framing rule. Hence a hierarchy of framing rules is established with the superiors being of a higher order than the subordinates. Therefore the

superior ultimately dominates the conversation, so enacting his formal status as superior, but allows the subordinate considerable degrees of freedom, particularly in setting feeling rules, but also in expressing framing rules. Through the process the subordinate gains access to the criteria or intepretations which the superior uses to assess strategic initiatives (which in the context of these examples appear to be synonymous with framing rules). The subordinate is also permitted to change subtly the framing rule by wedding it to his own framing rule.

The above two examples suggest that when superiors enter into strategic conversation with subordinates, and the result is increased energy on the part of the subordinate, the superior allows the subordinate to dominate or at least co-determine some aspect of the conversation. This is achieved through a process of negotiation, the superior exposing or articulating his or her framing rules and allowing subordinates to express their own framing rules. The subordinate ultimately is given the responsibility of synthesizing the framing rules, overcoming paradox, and creating new meaning. This may not be the only pattern of domination which occurs in strategic conversations, but the examples help to illuminate ways in which the emotional tone and the cultural frame may be co-determined, in such a way that the subordinate and the superior are energized and the superior does not experience a loss of control.

The above three examples have helped to ground Collins' theory and suggest its applicability to the problem of integrating middle management. Inclusion vs. exclusion and domination vs. submission are two separate but related dimensions. To be excluded is also to experience the ultimate domination, and hence is in itself demoralizing, as in the case of Example 1. To be included and be permitted to dominate is theoretically energizing and should give positive results, as in Examples 2 and 3. It is also theoretically possible to be excluded from generalized discussions of strategy and nonetheless experience oneself as dominant within one's own coalitions. However, the energy generated would be unlikely to be attached to the strategic ends of the organization as these do not represent the basis of such conversations; energy might instead go into political activity or empire-building in an attempt to gain more access to authority and property. Finally, it should be possible to be included in a generalized discussion, but to be persistently dominated. This would presumably result in some demoralization, unless the dominated individual was sufficiently committed to the same ideology, framing rules, and feeling rules of his or her superior so as to relinquish private or separate opinions. In such cases, individuals may become stimulated while still submissive. This may be the case in situations where the subordinate attributes 'charismatic' powers to his or her superior.

The discussion of these two separate dimensions can be summarized in a typology of middle management responses (see Table 1). The 'empowered' cell represents those middle managers, such as the two described in Examples 2 and 3, who experience both inclusion and some level of domination within strategic conversations with superiors. The 'apathetic' cell represents those managers who are excluded and therefore ultimately dominated. The 'political' cell represents those middle managers excluded from a top-status coalition, who build power bases within functional area coalitions, and 'obedient' are those middle managers who are included but who are unwilling or unable to take initiative, or to dominate or reframe issues in any way. The last three cells correspond to Izreali's (1975) three dysfunctional responses to powerlessness. None of the three represents ideal responses for an organization. However, complaints about exclusion and demotivation are more likely to come from 'political' and/or 'powerless' middle managers than from those who are 'obedient'.

Coalitions and ideologies

This discussion illuminates the kinds of dynamics that are likely to produce feelings of inclusion

Table 1. Middle managers' response to strategic initiatives based on their relationship to strategic conversation and their role within such conversations

Role within strategic conversations	Relationship to strategic conversations	
	Included	Excluded
Dominant/co-dominant	Empowered	Political
Submissive	Obedient	Apathetic

and stimulation around strategic issues among middle managers. However, these microdynamics are embedded in a larger context. For Collins the coalitions, reflected by interaction chains, represent the context, and for Hochschild the context is the ideology in which the feeling and framing rules are located. To understand the link between the microdynamics of strategic conversations and the macrodynamics of strategic process, these two contexts must be considered.

Ideology

Hochschild (1979) suggests that all framing rules are ultimately embedded in ideologies. As noted earlier, different ideologies may coexist, but to the extent that this is the case, negotiation on framing rules probably becomes more difficult. For example, if all members of an organization agree that the organization should be fundamentally collegial, it will be simple to frame feelings of outrage at being excluded from important conversations. If, however, some people believe that an organization should be hierarchical and some feel it should be collegial, competition will be fierce to frame the feelings of outrage accordingly, or even to establish feeling rules controlling such expressions of outrage in the first place. By analogy, top managers who share with their middle managers the belief that middle managers have a valuable role in the strategic process, or who see strategy as driven by organizational initiative as opposed to market demand, will have an easier time engaging middle managers in conversation than top managers who feel otherwise. Assuming that middle managers feel the same way, they will have less trouble negotiating over framing and feeling rules within the conversation. The ideologically driven organization, where one ideology is clearly identified and shared by all members, may have little difficulty in the short run sustaining energy in all members, because all members will feel included, and framing and feeling rules will be experienced as co-determined.

On the other hand, the illustrations in Examples 2 and 3 suggest that some misunderstanding is perhaps synergistic. The innovations suggested by the subordinates in these examples depend in part on their effort to synthesize the disparate framing rules with which they were presented. Ideologically driven organizations, by suppressing awareness of such differences, or indeed by eliminating such differences, may in the long run sacrifice such innovative potential and responsiveness (Bartunek, 1984; McCall and Kaplan, 1985: 27). Whether in the long run this will result in a decrease in energy among middle managers is unclear, although the onset of routinization in such 'charismatic organizations' suggests that this may be inevitable (Weber, 1922; see also Hochschild's (1983) detailed study of Delta Airlines, where ideologies were carefully and fully 'grounded' in 'feeling rules' which were then reinforced continually in an effort to ensure compliance).

In conclusion, viewing strategic conversations as embedded in organizational ideologies suggests how the micro-dynamics of such conversatior.s simultaneously enact and create strategy as an interpretive system. A number of theorists specifically equate strategy-making with ideologies (Brunnson, 1985). They argue that strategy justifies the exercise of organizational authority and property claims (Shrivastava, 1986), retrospectively generates meaning (Starbuck, 1985), interprets environments to organizational members (Chaffee, 1985; Cummings, 1983) and provides justification for change (Pettigrew, 1987; Zucker, 1987). An understanding of the dynamics of strategic conversation gives us a way to conceptualize how such strategic ideologies, through the mechanism of framing rules and feeling rules, act to guide discourse around strategic initiatives, and produce the energy needed to fuel activity. It also shows how spirited negotiation over such framing and feeling rules, allowing co-determination of conversational outcomes, may simultaneously signal the breakdown of ideology and stimulate the creation of new meaning and purpose (Jonsson and Lundin, 1977; Nonaka, 1988). When middle managers get access to framing rules of superiors they are able to negotiate and potentially alter those rules. Each alteration has implications for the web of meaning which sustains organizational activity. As framing rules are redefined, so is ideology; as policies are redefined so is organizational strategy in its dimension as interpretative schema.

Several issues remain unresolved. For example, when does clarity in organizational ideology cease to be energy-producing and become, instead, stultifying? Conversely, how important are strategic inconsistencies in facilitating change? It is

Table 2. Relationship between strategic ideology and energy outcomes of strategic conversations

Strategic ideology clear, uniform, authoritative	Strategic ideology vague, fragmented, lacking authority	
Increased likelihood of strategic conversations occurring	Decreased likelihood of strategic conversations occurring	
Increased ease of co-determination framing and feeling accepted by all	Increased struggle for domination: framing and feeling rules open to negotiation	
Mutual stimulation energy creation	Suppression of diversity: false unity de-energization	Energy and synergy through resolution of inconsistencies, negotiation
Reinforcement of existing ideology	Gradual erosion of authority of strategic ideology	Change, renewal of strategic ideology

possible that the answer lies in whether the dynamics of strategic conversation suppress or encourage diversity of opinion, given that such diversity exists in the first place. Table 2 suggests a possible model. This issue, however, is highly complex and demands further investigation.

Coalitions

When it comes to the issue of the relationship between conversations and coalitions, our examples fail to illustrate how middle managers' initiatives are carried into top management conversations. Here the overall configuration of coalitions within organizations becomes important. Conversation may represent ritual membership and also produce feelings of inclusion and energy; the latter feelings, however, are sustained by the strength of the coalition. In many organizations one function or division may represent a 'star' coalition with greater access to organizational property and greater influence in the management committee. It would be logical to assume that if a representative of a 'weak' interaction chain and that of a 'strong' interaction chain each make competing claims, the strong

representative is likely to dominate. If this pattern is repeated, a dominance hierarchy of coalitions is produced.

How is this experienced by middle managers? We propose that middle managers who are included in and allowed some dominance in *dominant* coalitions will not only be energized but also capable of sustaining energy over long periods of time, as their domination would ultimately be rewarded by real access to property and authority. In contrast, middle managers who are included and allowed some dominance in weak coalitions may temporarily experience stimulation and inclusion. If, however, the coalition is short-circuited, i.e. the top managers associated with that coalition are unable to influence corporate strategy, then this stimulation would be transitory and the middle manager would either (a) try to change his or her coalition, (b) become political in an effort to displace the top manager in his or her own coalition, or (c) become demotivated, even if included. A subordinate who is included in a dominant coalition, but is rarely in a dominant position in discrete conversations, may draw some positive energy and perceived worth from his or her membership in the coalition, but is unlikely over the long run to sustain this energy, or to negotiate admission into a new coalition. Such a subordinate, one dependent on coalition 'charity' so to speak, is subject to expulsion without warning and will likely move to a powerless position when and if the expulsion occurs (see Table 3).

Thus embedding the dynamics of specific strategic conversations within the larger pattern

Table 3. Middle managers' (MLM) response to strategic initiatives based on their role within strategic conversations and the status of their coalition in the overall organization

Position of MLMs in strategic conversation	Position of MLM's coalition in organization	
	Dominant	Submissive
Dominant/co-dominant	Empowered	Temporarily empowered → political
Submissive	Temporarily empowered → obedient	Powerless

of coalitions helps to conceptually ground the notion of organizational responsiveness and its relation to patterns of strategic decisions, particularly those pertaining to the allocation of resources. As coalitions are made up of interaction chains it should be theoretically possible to track strategic initiatives through such chains, and relate the outcomes of specific conversations to patterns of resource allocation at the macro level. Changes in the dynamics of such conversations (both in terms of *who* is included and dominates discrete conversations and in terms of changes in *which* coalition dominates the organization) should affect the subsequent allocation of resources. In addition, the power balance *between* coalitions may be a useful predictor of responsiveness. As energy created at the level of the individual middle manager must be sustained by a coalition with access to property and authority, a balance between elite groups is clearly desirable. Allowing one or two coalitions to dominate the organization may inhibit responsiveness (Pascale, 1987), even in those organizations sensitive to the microdynamics of inclusion.

CONCLUSIONS AND PROPOSITIONS

In closing I suggest three groups of propositions about the conditions under which middle managers are likely to experience exclusion, inclusion, and sustained energy around strategic issues.

1. Expressions of felt exclusion by middle managers are likely to increase to the extent that:
   (a) top managers resist entering into strategic conversations with their subordinates;
   (b) 'general' strategic discussion (as opposed to tactical discussions) are formally linked to membership in the top status group;
   (c) no formal or informal mechanism exists in the organization which allows middle managers to converse cross-functionally around strategic issues;
   (d) no one clear ideological perspective dominates, ideology is implicit and rarely articulated or competing ideologies prevail.

2. Middle managers will feel included and energized about strategic issues to the extent that:
   (a) middle managers are permitted to dominate either the feeling or the framing rules in a strategic conversation and/or are granted access to the framing rules of the superior;
   (b) 'general' strategic discussions are not formally linked to membership in top status groups;
   (c) formal or informal mechanisms exist to sustain horizontal status groups at the middle management level, allowing middle managers to converse cross functionally around strategic issues;
   (d) the organization is ideologically driven, i.e. a single ideology is clearly articulated and widely shared.

3. Middle managers who participate in strategic conversation and are permitted some dominance in these discussions will be more likely to *sustain* high energy levels around strategic issues to the extent that:
   (a) there is a balance of elites within the organization, i.e. there is not a hierarchy of coalitions;
   (b) the organization is *not* ideologically driven, i.e. negotiation around framing rules is possible, due to presence of competing sets of such rules and ideological perspectives within the organization.

One caution is in order, here. While this study suggests that the energy for strategic actions (on the part of middle managers) is grounded in strategic conversations, the actual link between conversation and action routine needs to be carefully and deliberately mapped. While it is intuitively appealing to assume that the energy generated in strategic conversations is transformed by the individual actors into implementation routines, this has yet to be established and requires further research.

In addition to testing the above propositions, then, future research should focus on: (1) testing the relationship between positive outcomes in strategic conversations (high energy levels) and strategic action; (2) tracing strategic initiatives through interaction chains to empirically establish the link between strategic conversations and

changes in structures of domination (resources allocation) and signification (ideologies or interpretation schemes); (3) exploring the relationship between strong ideologies and (a) the likelihood of strategic conversations occurring and (b) the likelihood of such conversations resulting in sustained motivation among middle managers.

In conclusion, middle managers want to be included in strategic conversations for two reasons. They want access to powerful coalitions within the organization and they want access to organizational sense-making. To the extent that the discussion of strategic generalities is not linked to membership in the top status group, and to the extent that there is a power balance between functional coalitions, the desire for admission to such conversations based on purely political motivations may diminish. The desire for inclusion in strategic conversations for purposes of sense-making is likely to persist. Sense cannot be injected in others in a unidirectional process of communication; it is apprehended only through discourse and response.

Strategic conversations, as a process of negotiation, allow for the recombination of information, the mediation of inconsistencies and the co-invention of meaning. If 'man is an animal hanging in webs of significance he himself has spun', as Clifford Geertz argues (1973: 5), then the difference in experience between receiving a directive without access to the framing rules which underlie that directive, and entering into a strategic conversation where frames are open to negotiation would be kin to the difference between being the fly caught in the web and the spider who spins the web. If organizations want a middle management group that is responsive, as opposed to paralyzed, we need greater sensitivity to how meaning is made in organizations and how to include middle management as actors in that process.

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